



God Expects

The one true God is just; He expects His people to demonstrate their faith through right living.

ISAIAH 58:1-12

We laugh when a friend tells us to drive at the speed limit when we know he rarely does. We may give a puzzled look when a sister who rarely helps clean up after a meal directs others to do so. We might even be angered if our neighbor tells us how to mow our grass yet his yard is the least kept on the block. We know hypocrisy when we see it. Yet being hypocritical is one thing humans have in common, one way or another. The prophet Isaiah revealed God is always consistent and does not put up with spiritual hypocrisy in His people.

Why are people so upset with the hypocrisies of others and yet so seemingly blind to their own hypocrisies?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ISAIAH 58:1–60:22

This section begins with God’s condemnation of Israel’s hypocrisy. The Lord saw through the veneer of false piety and recognized meaningless rituals. None of these meant anything when accompanied by insincerity. Religious formalism is as offensive to God as idolatry. Fasting that pleases God involves emulating the character of God in one’s life. Therefore, God told the people of Israel they needed to help those who could not help themselves. Only then would God respond to their prayers (Isa. 58:1-12). Additionally, the people disregarded the Lord on the Sabbath and did whatever they wanted. If His people would honor Him and delight in Him, then they would receive His blessings (58:13-14).

God was able and more than willing to save Israel. God was not the problem. What separated the people of Israel from God was their constant rebellion and sin. The Lord would not tolerate their violence, bloodshed, dishonesty, and injustice. They were constantly thinking of ways to sin. No matter how much they tried, they could not hide their sin from God. Isaiah acknowledged God’s indictment of Israel and lamented the depraved condition of his people. He humbly confessed how the nation rebelled against God and harmed their neighbors. In response to Isaiah’s confession, God promised to repay the nations for their offenses against His people and would come to them as their Redeemer and save them. He would put His Spirit on them and His words in their mouth as an eternal covenant with His people (59:1-21).

In the future, Israel would become a light to the nations and a blessing to the nations, just as God promised Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). The nations would use their resources to help rebuild Zion as an expression of God’s compassion and justice. The Lord would be Jerusalem’s everlasting light, peace, and salvation. Its inhabitants would be righteous and possess the land forever (60:1-22).

As you read Isaiah 58:1-12, identify phrases that point to hypocritical worship and that point to true worship of God. Why is religious hypocrisy so offensive to God?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

TRUE STATE (ISA. 58:1-5)

¹ “Cry out loudly, don’t hold back! Raise your voice like a trumpet. Tell my people their transgression and the house of Jacob their sins. ² They seek me day after day and delight to know my ways, like a nation that does what is right and does not abandon the justice of their God. They ask me for righteous judgments; they delight in the nearness of God.” ³ “Why have we fasted, but you have not seen? We have denied ourselves, but you haven’t noticed!” “Look, you do as you please on the day of your fast, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ You fast with contention and strife to strike viciously with your fist. You cannot fast as you do today, hoping to make your voice heard on high. ⁵ Will the fast I choose be like this: A day for a person to deny himself, to bow his head like a reed, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the LORD?”

VERSE 1

The way for God’s people to be reconciled to Him is by true repentance and renewed faithfulness. God was able and willing to forgive and restore those who had strayed from Him. His desire was for them to repent by turning away from their sin and turning back to Him. Note that He referred to them as *my people*, indicating His covenant relationship with them is still in place. Therefore, it was imperative that Israel hear Isaiah as he proclaimed God’s message. God told Isaiah to *cry out loudly* and not to *hold back*, to raise his *voice like a trumpet* so that all of His people could hear the message. Messengers often used a ram’s horn to get the attention of the community. In order for them to repent of their sins, Israel needed to know what their sins were. This was an expression of God’s grace.

God’s confrontation of His people with their sins was His way of giving them one more opportunity to return to Him and experience His forgiveness. Isaiah had already told Israel that God was waiting to show them mercy and compassion (Isa. 30:18). Instead of being quick to punish, this verse displays God’s incredible patience with sinners and His desire for them to repent. God’s desire is to show mercy, not to execute judgment.

VERSE 2

The people looked like they were devoted to the Lord. The Lord said they were seeking Him every day. The word *me* in the first phrase is emphatic in Hebrew. It is literally, “Me—day after day you seek!” The word *seek* carries with it the idea of devotion. What is more, they delighted to know God’s *ways*. In other words, they acted as if they wanted to know and do God’s will for their lives. In reality, they were unrighteous and had abandoned the Lord’s compassionate ways of justice. They acted like a godly nation when in actuality they were not a godly nation. God saw through their hypocrisy. Outward religious activities are no substitute for inward devotion and faith. It is impossible to be right with God and not be doing the right things. On the other hand, it is possible to be involved in the right kinds of activities and still not be right with God.

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VERSES 3-4

Verse 3 begins a dialogue between His people and God. It contains their hypocritical complaint against the Lord and His response to them. They complained because God did not appear to pay attention to their fasting. They fasted, hoping God would do something for them, but He did nothing.

What is apparent is these people were fasting—denying themselves of food—in an attempt to manipulate God. They placed more confidence in what they did than in the Lord. It was not about them serving God but about God serving them. They thought that because of their religious piety and sacrifice God owed them. God did take notice of their fasting but was not pleased with what He saw.

In verse 4, God reiterated that the people’s behavior did not correspond to what fasting should have involved. Instead, they fought with one another, hoping to get their own way. All that their fasting really accomplished was to make them irritable and contentious with others. They failed to understand that their relationship with God and their relationship with others were related. Therefore, God said there was no way they could act like they were acting and expect Him to listen to their prayers. The Lord would not pay attention to the fasting and prayers of such people.

Displays of devotion in one area do not cancel out demonstrations of deviance from God’s ways in another.

Why are insincere acts of worship offensive to God? How does ritual worship apart from obedience leave worshipers empty and disillusioned?

VERSE 5

In verse 5, God used rhetorical questions to show the people they really had no concept of who God is if they thought He would be pleased with their actions. The first question was, “Is the fasting I just described the kind of fasting I would approve of?” Of course not! The second question follows up on the first: “Is the purpose of fasting really just to bow down one’s head like a reed and lie down in sackcloth and ashes?” This question did not express disapproval of fasting or the actions involved in an appropriate fast. What it addressed was the symbolic meaning of these things. They were symbolic of humility and one’s dependence on God. Just because one goes through the motions does not guarantee one is pleasing God in the process. These actions are pleasing to God only when what is in one’s heart corresponds to these outward expressions. Furthermore, what is in one’s heart will reveal itself in how one relates to others.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Bible depicts three forms of fasting. A normal fast consisted of totally refraining from food (Luke 4:1-2). An absolute fast involved abstinence from both food and water (Ezra 10:6). This type often lasted no more than three days (Esth. 4:16; Acts 9:8-9). A partial fast entailed a restricted diet instead of total abstinence (Dan. 1:8-16; 10:3).

TRUE WORSHIP (ISA. 58:6-10)

⁶ Isn’t this the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to

bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will appear like the dawn, and your recovery will come quickly. Your righteousness will go before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard. ⁹ At that time, when you call, the LORD will answer; when you cry out, he will say, 'Here I am.' If you get rid of the yoke among you, the finger-pointing and malicious speaking, ¹⁰ and if you offer yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted one, then your light will shine in the darkness, and your night will be like noonday.

VERSES 6-7

Isaiah presented more rhetorical questions, but these are emphatic statements meant to communicate what is acceptable fasting to God. Acceptable fasting and worship involves total devotion to the Lord, accompanied by caring for others. This is what Jesus taught when He replied to questions asking which commandment in the law is the most important. Jesus answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31).

KEY DOCTRINE: *Christian and Social Order*

We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick (Matt. 25:35-40).

Therefore, true fasting involves opposing any wrongdoing that oppresses and abuses others. It not only means liberating others from bondage but also doing what it takes to ensure the oppression never happens again. It means fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves instead of fighting for oneself, as the people of Israel were doing. (See v. 4.) It consists of getting involved in the community and representing the One who is known for delivering people out of bondage. It is illustrating physically what God has done both physically and spiritually for His people. Furthermore, true devotion and worship involves giving food to the hungry,

providing shelter for the homeless, clothing those who are in need of clothes, and at the same time caring for those in one's own family. It is imitating the God who has done all of these things both materially and spiritually for His people, pointing others to Him.

BIBLE SKILL: *Examine cross references.*

Use a study Bible to identify cross references listed for Isaiah 58:6-7. Read the passages listed, making notes about what you discover. How do the passages you read connect to Isaiah 58:6-7? How do these passages help you better understand what Isaiah was proclaiming?

VERSES 8-10

If the people's fasting looked like what God just described, then they would be a light shining forth for others to see. Their exemplary acts would reflect well on them and glorify God. Moreover, the undesirable consequences of their sin would come to a quick end. Instead of having a humiliating reputation before the nations, a new reputation would go before them: the *righteousness* of God. Just as the Lord went before His people and at the same time followed them to protect them as a *rear guard* when He delivered them from Egypt, He would once again do the same for His people.

There would be even more benefits to those who fought to liberate people in bondage and who committed themselves to feeding the hungry and helping those in need. First, when they cried out to God, God would hear and answer them. God hears and answers the prayers of those who have turned away from their sinful ways and put their trust in Him. Faith in God is demonstrated by obeying His Word. The beginning point of serving others is having a real relationship with God and maintaining intimate fellowship with Him. When believers do this, they will be a *light* that scatters the *darkness*. The noonday sun will replace the darkness of the past.

If there is such tremendous blessing when people obey God, then why are people so reluctant to do so?

TRUE SATISFACTION (ISA. 58:11-12)

¹¹ The LORD will always lead you, satisfy you in a parched land, and strengthen your bones. You will be like a watered garden and like a spring whose water never runs dry. ¹² Some of you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will restore the foundations laid long ago; you will be called the repairer of broken walls, the restorer of streets where people live.

VERSES 11-12

Isaiah explained that God would lead, satisfy, and strengthen His obedient people; these were the ones who would enjoy God's blessings. His message looked forward to the day when the people of God would be able to return home from Babylonian exile. Even though they would return to a city in ruins, God would satisfy them like a well-watered garden and a refreshing spring that would never run dry. Water was the most important resource in the region. No water meant no life. But here is the promise of life.

Not only would God restore the people but also the city of Jerusalem. They should not be discouraged when they returned to the city in ruins. Some of them would restore the *foundations*, some would repair the *broken walls*, such as those in Nehemiah's day, and some would restore the *streets* of the city. God's chosen holy city and God's chosen holy people would no longer be a reproach to the nations. Instead, they would be restored and glorify the Lord.

How do these verses demonstrate how God can change a life or situation in ruin into something beautiful?
