

The Millennium Forecast

The Book of Isaiah

Text

Isaiah 58:1-14

Topic

The LORD exposes the bad motives of the Jews in observing the religious rituals of fasting & the Sabbath

Title

"Bad Religion"

The majority of us have either heard someone say, or we have said to someone, "Christianity is not a *religion*, it's a _____."

It is a relationship with Jesus Christ the living God who rose from the dead and is alive forevermore.

When we say, "Christianity isn't a religion," we mean that our own good works and observance of rites & rituals, diets & days, feasts & fasts, *cannot save us*.

Religion, however, is not always a bad thing.

Don't take my word for it. In his NT letter, James says, "Pure and undefiled **religion** before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:26-27).

In our text the LORD mentions two religious practices: Sabbath keeping and fasting. He uses them as examples:

- In verse thirteen the LORD encouraged the Jews to “call **the Sabbath** a delight.” *That’s pure religion!*
- In verse four the LORD called them out, saying, “Indeed you **fast** for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness...” *That’s bad religion!*

Let’s not throw religion out with the holy water.

I’ll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Selfishness & Bad Religion Go Together**, and **#2 Self-lessness & Pure Religion Go Together**.

Let’s take a look at selfishness (58:1-5)

Isa 58:1 “Cry aloud, spare not; Lift up your voice like a trumpet; Tell My people their transgression, And the house of Jacob their sins.

I’m guessing that Isaiah would “cry aloud” in the Temple. “Trumpet” blasts were important ways to communicate. When he spoke it was as if a trumpet were sounding throughout the city.

His messages would mostly be about the “transgression” and “sins” of God’s people. It was a difficult season to be a prophet.

Have you ever been in a time when it seemed it was always winter but never Christmas?

Until fairly recently, believers received their teaching from the local church they attended. Now you can listen to or watch literally millions of Bible studies. That’s great! But I wonder if we have we lost a sense of God having a peculiar message for us?

Isa 58:2 Yet they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways, As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God.

They seem praiseworthy. But it was all external.

Isa 58:3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ *they say*, ‘and You have not seen? *Why* have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?’

Their fasting was altogether selfish.

When they said the LORD had “not seen,” nor had He taken “notice,” they meant that whatever it was they were fasting for had not been granted.

This is ground zero for bad religion. **It isn't relational.** God is not Father or Friend. He is a fulfillment center who delivers blessings when I do religious works.

I object to anything that creates distance between a believer & Jesus. Jesus didn't die on the Cross so I could pray to saints. Or to shroud things in mystery.

Isa 58:3 ...“In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers.

Isa 58:4 Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as *you do* this day, To make your voice heard on high.

In a word, they were being ugly. Jesus says of fasting that we should “anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father” (Matthew 6:17-18).

Isa 58:5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

On top of everything else, **God had not asked them to fast.** It was their own idea, carried out with their own rules. Things can seem spiritual, and yet be totally devoid of God. Likewise things that are simple can be filled with the presence of God.

Isaiah's audience was the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. They were pagan-loving, idol-worshipping, child-murdering, sex perverts.

You don't fast for sin; you forsake it in repentance.

We've been praying for revival these many years. That's great, but we should realize something. It is always accompanied by repentance *among believers*. One commentator wrote, “Any study of revival will demonstrate the unbreakable connection between revival and repentance.”

The LORD asked them an insightful question: “Would you call this a fast... acceptable... to the LORD?” God believed that they had a capacity to examine themselves and come to a correct conclusion.

Several verses in the NT could be cited, but one should suffice. "But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Galatians 6:4).

What are we looking for when we examine ourselves? Let's call it the *Doctrine of Decreasing Discipleship*. It is based on comments made by Jesus & by John the Baptist:

- Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist..." (Matthew 11:11).
- John the Baptist said, "[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).
- Jesus said, "But he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he."

If John was "the greatest," and if any believer in Jesus after him is "greater," than we, too, must *increase* Jesus by *decreasing* more & more.

There is a lot of talk about decreasing our so-called 'carbon footprint.' What we truly need to decrease is our 'carnal footprint.'

Richard Baxter wrote, "Men would sooner believe that the Gospel is from Heaven, if they saw more such effects of it upon the hearts and lives of those who profess it. The world is better able to read the nature of religion in a man's life than in the Bible."

Ask the Lord how you can "decrease" in your life

Let's take a look at self-lessness in the remaining verses (58:6-14)

Isa 58:6 *"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?*

Isa 58:7 *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?*

Jesus did all these things in His First Coming. He is the example of the purest religion.

Jesus, the Second Person of the Tri-une God - very God of very God - was virgin-born a human. He was fully God and fully man. For more than 30yrs He set aside the

voluntary use of His deity to obey His Father as a man by the leading of God the Holy Spirit.

That's as far as we need to go to be reminded that Jesus "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross."

God becoming man to die as our substitute... that is the self-lessness we are to imitate.

If someone were to ask you, "What is fasting? you most likely would answer that it is depriving yourself from food in order to spend serious alone time with God.

In verse seven, the LORD said, "Is [fasting] not to share your bread with the hungry?"

I don't think I've ever thought of fasting that way. I think of it as depriving *myself* of my food. I don't think of it as sharing food with hungry people.

This isn't 'pay-it-forward.' That is rich people helping other rich people in a line of cars waiting to get burnt coffee-flavored beverages at a Starbucks. Pure fasting has to be costly - a genuine deprivation. And it doesn't need to involve money, although it often does because that is the commodity we most understand.

Isa 58:8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

This is a description of a procession or a pilgrimage. It is probably poetry to describe the processions of Jews who will return to Jerusalem after the 70yrs of captivity in Babylon. It would be a fresh start for the Jews to reinstate the rites & rituals of their religion as commanded by the LORD. Could also be looking farther, to the pilgrimages in the Millennial Kingdom.

Devotionally it describes a person or a people who were in the Kingdom of Darkness. They suddenly are transferred from darkness into light. They are healed, spiritually; they are declared righteous & walk in righteousness. If they go on that way, no enemy can penetrate the "rear guard."

Isa 58:9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' "If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

Isa 58:10 *If* you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall *be* as the noonday.

"Pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness" are what people do who compare themselves to others and conclude they are better. They like to heap burdens on people that they cannot bear. They won't lift so much as a finger to help.

Pure religion is never like that. Jesus said His burden was light because He would yoke with us and carry the load.

We should always be thinking of ways to lessen, to lighten the load people carry. We can apply this to believers & unbelievers:

- Instead of insisting that believers must do more praying, more giving, more fasting... We emphasize what the Lord has done for us.
- Unbelievers have a sense that coming to God is hard, that it involves rituals and rules keeping that most find impossible. Is that grace? Is that salvation by grace through faith?

One of our guys texted me, "I'm trying hard to be saved by grace." It was tongue-in-cheek, a satire. Grace, by definition, isn't about how hard I try.

I submit to you that we sometimes **do** communicate that grace involves a lot of effort. You wouldn't believe what some churches require of new converts before they will 'accept' them.

Isa 58:11 The LORD will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Are you tired of watering your lawn? Then paint your grass green. It's a real thing. But it's only on the surface. Don't settle for the surface in your walk with Jesus. Ask Him how you can make your roots go deeper.

Isa 58:12 Those from among you Shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

Isaiah looks ahead and sees the Babylonians invading Judah. It will leave the city and the Temple and the wall in ruins. This is a great promise to the future generation that returns from captivity to rebuild.

There are a lot of television shows featuring repairs and restorations. They're always fantastic. But they're nothing compared to what God has promised to do in your life. Isa 58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, *From* doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy *day* of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking *your own* words, Isa 58:14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The Sabbath is more than the weekly day of rest. The land was to celebrate a Sabbath every seventh year. No crops were to be planted. Judah had ignored the land-Sabbath for 490yrs. They blew it off, so God kept them out of the land until they had 'repaid' the 70 years they owed Him!

Keeping the Sabbath was good religion. It wasn't 'made' to deteriorate into a religious ritual. It was 'made' for man to delight in the LORD.

The Jewish authorities made it bad by heaping rule after rule after rule. It got ridiculous.

Jesus was accused of violating the Sabbath. Insane, right? As God, Jesus had instituted the Sabbath. If anyone knew how to 'keep' it, it was Him in His incarnation. His general principle for keeping the Sabbath was, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

"I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, It is anyone's guess what "riding on the high hills" means. Some translate it, "soaring over the high hills." If Disney ever opens in Jerusalem...

"And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father." The mention of "Jacob" is encouraging. The northern 12 tribes had been conquered by the Assyrians. Were they lost forever? Nope, and that is why the LORD calls them "Jacob." He was father of the 12 tribes. This is a promise that the LORD will keep His promises to Israel nationally.

Christians are always in a hurry to criticize the Law of God. Since it cannot be kept by mere mortals, we only see it as condemnation. King David thought otherwise:

- In Psalm 19 David sang that the Law was “perfect, “sure,” “right,” and “clean.”
- He sang about it “converting the soul,” “making wise the simple,” and “rejoicing the heart.”

If the Law is so great, why don't **we** observe the Sabbath? The Sabbath was given to one nation, to Israel. It was a sign of the special covenant between them and God.¹ The Sabbath was *never* given to any other nation.

Justin Martyr (AD150) was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John. Justin wrote a treatise called, *Dialog with Trypho the Jew*. After mentioning Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah, Melchizedek, and Abraham, he wrote, “Moreover, all those righteous men already mentioned, **though they kept no Sabbaths**, were pleasing to God; and after them Abraham with all his descendants until Moses... And you [Jews] were commanded to keep Sabbaths, that you might retain the memorial of God.”

I know what you're wondering. What did Tertullian have to say in AD200?

Therefore, since God originated Adam uncircumcised, and inobservant of the Sabbath, consequently his offspring also, Abel, offering Him sacrifices, uncircumcised and inobservant of the Sabbath, was by Him commended... Noah also, uncircumcised - yes, and inobservant of the Sabbath - God freed from the deluge. For Enoch, too, most righteous man, uncircumcised and inobservant of the Sabbath, He translated from this world...²

This is exactly how bad religion gets started. Someone comes along and insists that we **must do something**, like keep the Sabbath.

Geno pointed out to me that a number of churches are practicing some kind of 'breath' before Bible study. Some call it “Meditative Breathwork.”

I call it weird. It seems harmless enough - even helpful. It suggests subtly then more strongly that you can only be truly spiritual if you master these techniques.

¹ Deuteronomy 4:8; 5:3,15; Exodus 34:27; 31:13,16,17; Ezekiel 20:10-12; Nehemiah 9:13,14

² *An Answer to the Jews* 2:10; 4:1, Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3, page 153

“Let us keep on coming boldly [or breathy?] to the throne of grace, so that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Christianity is a relationship whose fruit is pure religion.