

"What God Really Wants" Isaiah 58

Introduction

- In just a few minutes we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. But before we do so I want to look at an indictment of Evangelicalism that is Isaiah 58. I appreciate the heritage that's been passed on to me very much. We have so much to be thankful for as Evangelicals. There is a lot good in our tradition. We take our faith in God seriously. God is real. He's personal. And he really does change lives if we just come to him by faith. We take the Bible seriously. These pages really are the living and active words of God. They are Truth. And they point us to the way the truth and the life, Jesus Christ. We are gospel centered. We recognize that Christ crucified, dead, buried and raised is the best news in the world. And people need to hear this news. And so we have a rich history of missions. We have a rich history of preaching. So many great preachers come from our tradition. And we love to worship.
- But as I read Isaiah 58 I get concerned because my tradition sounds an awful lot like the religion described in Isaiah 58. Isaiah's audience is Evangelical to the core. Eugene Peterson translates [verse 2](#) by saying *they're busy, busy, busy at worship, and love studying all about me*. That's us. That's me. That's evangelical Christianity. That's you. Isaiah says his audience, they're a people who pray. Look at the end of [verse 2](#). *They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them*. That's us. We long for God's presence. We ask God to answer our prayers. What verses 1-5 describe is model religion.¹ Look at [verse 2](#). Its God centered. [Verse 2a](#). There's a priority on truth and on the commands of God, [verse 2b](#). They even fast. [Verse 3](#). Self-denial. In other words, they're devoted, they're committed, they're devout, they're religious. They are just like we are. If you'll notice in the middle of [verse 3](#), they've even made it a point to humble themselves.
- And yet something is terribly wrong. There is a fatal flaw in this religion. Back to [verse 1](#). *"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.* Outward appearances are not what they seem. All is not well with Isaiah's audience or with us. God tells Isaiah, he says go to this people of mine. Declare to them their rebellion and sin. Shout it to them. Shake them out of their doldrums. Like a piercing trumpet blast blaring in their ears, like a fog horn in the ear hole, shout to them what's wrong. They're rebellious. We're rebellious. As John Oswalt says, "Who are the rebels and sinners? They are the people who seek God every day!"² [Verse 2](#), *day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways*. That's us. Daily devotionals. Eager and hungry for the Word. Seekers of God. Christian radio. Weekly bible studies. Preachers on the radio. Sermons on our mp3 players. Stacks and stacks of Christian books on our shelves. That's not what God wants.

¹ Motyer, p. 360.

² Oswalt, p. 496.

- God questions his people in [verse 5](#). *Is this the kind of fast I have chosen?* In other words is this the kind of outward expression of religion I really want? And the obvious answer is no. No. God says the kind of religion that has just been described in [verses 1-5](#), this so-called model religion is no better than a bunch of reeds swaying in the wind. *Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?* I want you to picture a bunch of cattails, row after row, pew after pew of religious reeds swaying, nodding in worship Sunday after Sunday because that's what reeds do. Sway in the wind. Isaiah seems to be saying that all of their religiosity was nothing more than religious conformity.³
- The danger for us is that the evangelical culture is now mainstream. It's normal. It's accepted. And the evangelical culture says this is what Christians do, this is how they talk, this is how they act, this is what they read, this is how they worship, this is what they listen to and we slip into that culture and the lingo and the books and the sermons and the lifestyle and the schedule and the worship and outwardly we conform to the picture of a good Evangelical. And we go through the motions because all of this has been engrained in us. And Isaiah says we are nothing more than reeds nodding in the wind going through religious motions.⁴ Are you a religious reed nodding in the wind?

Transition

God wants something different. He doesn't want your conformity. What God really wants is described in [verses 6-14](#). *Pay attention to what I say, listen closely to my words.*⁵

- *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. 12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. 13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, 14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will*

³ Motyer, p. 361.

⁴ Motyer, p. 361.

⁵ Proverbs 4:20

cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

- We wonder why our prayers go unanswered. We wonder where God is. We wonder why God does not show up, why God does not break in; the very same things Isaiah's audience wondered about. [Verse 3](#). *'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'* And here's the answer. Here's why. We spend our selves for ourselves instead of for others. Instead of religious conformity, of just going through the motions so that God can get us what we want God wants us to spend ourselves for others, for those in need, for those weaker than we are.⁶ And if we do that the promises are absolutely amazing. If your religion causes you to spend yourself for those in need then [verse 8](#), *then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.* If your religion causes you to spend yourself for those in need then [verses 10-11](#), *your night will become like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.*
- Are you in need of a fresh beginning—a new dawn? Are you in need of personal restoration—your wounds healed? Are you in need of strength and security—a protective guard? Are you in need of hearing from God?⁷ Are you in need of joy? Then spend yourself for the homeless, for the poor, for the vagrant, for those who suffer unjustly. Spend yourself for the weak, for the oppressed, for the hungry. Spend yourself for those in need and God will show up. In the words of [Watchman Nee](#), "I have never met a soul who has set out to satisfy the Lord and has not been satisfied himself."⁸ This is what God really wants. There's something wrong with our religion. We think we know what God wants. And we're mistaken.

Conclusion

- *The Hunger Artist* is a short story by [Franz Kafka](#). It's the story about a professional faster, an entertainer who sits in a cage and starves himself in public so that passersby can ooh and aah. The story is profound and shocking for the simple reason that times change, professional fasting goes out of style and yet because of pride the artist continues his public fasts—more resolved than ever to prove himself. The story tragically ends with the hunger artist continuing his fast in a little corner of a traveling circus that no one ever visits.
- Kafka writes, "Many more days went by, however, and that too came to an end. An overseer's eye fell on the cage one day and asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage should be left standing there unused with dirty straw inside it; nobody knew until one man, helped out by the notice board, remembered the hunger artist. They poked into the straw with sticks and found him in it. 'Are you still fasting?' asked the overseer. 'When on earth do you mean to stop?' 'Forgive me, everybody,'

⁶ Oswalt, p. 502.

⁷ Motyer, p. 362.

⁸ Watchman Nee, *Leadership*, Vol. 9, no. 3

whispered the hunger artist; only the overseer, who had his ear to the bars, understood him. 'Of course,' said the overseer, and tapped his forehead with a finger to let the attendants know what state the man was in, 'we forgive you.' 'I always wanted you to admire my fasting,' said the hunger artist. 'We do admire it,' said the overseer, affably. 'But you shouldn't admire it,' said the hunger artist. 'Well then, we don't admire it,' said the overseer, 'but why shouldn't we admire it?' 'Because I have to fast, I can't help it,' said the hunger artist."⁹ Moments later he dies. They clear out his cage, bury the hunger artist straw and all, and replace him with a panther. Life goes on; no one ever gives a second thought to the existence of the hunger artist.

- Isaiah 58 reminds us that we are the hunger artists. We think we know what God wants when in reality our selfish, religious show keeps us locked up and starves us to death. May we see the tragedy of our sin and rebellion.

⁹ *The Short Story: 50 Masterpieces*, edited by Ellen C. Wynn, p. 333-342.