

## Real Religion

*Cry aloud; do not hold back;  
lift up your voice like a trumpet;  
declare to my people their transgression,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.*

*Isaiah 58:1(ESV)*

Yes, yes, let's hear all about the sins of the Israelites. At least when I'm feeling down on myself, I can go back and read about all the awful things they did and feel better. That is, until I read the rest of **Isaiah 58** and begin to feel like Isaiah might be writing to me and not the Israelites.

The truly interesting part is God began by saying really good things about the Israelites: "Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways" (**Isaiah 58:2**, ESV). Further, they turned to God for righteous judgment and they delighted to draw near to God (**Isaiah 58:2**).

But the Israelites had a problem. Their religious observances didn't seem to be doing them any good. They cried out to God, "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" (**Isaiah 58:3**, ESV). The Israelites were doing religious things. They were maintaining the pattern of worship. However, God was seemingly ignoring it. He was not blessing them or protecting them. Rather, He was giving them up to judgment.

In **Isaiah 58:3-5**, God explained why. Yes, the people were getting the forms right, but they were missing the purpose. They were going through religious motions, but they were not letting God change their hearts. Instead, while they fasted, they were still seeking their own pleasure or pursuing their own business. Though they seemingly humbled themselves before God, they exalted themselves over their workers, oppressing them. Additionally, though they fasted, they seemed to think that gave them permission to fuss and feud with each other. While they were going through some of the right religious motions, they were not actually allowing God to change them on the inside.

Do we ever do this? Do we ever make sure we go through the right motions? Do we make sure we attend a church with the right name, meeting on the right day, participating in the right activities, but not be changed on the inside? Surely this can be a problem, because even Paul had to advise the Galatian Christians to refrain from biting and devouring one another (**Galatians 5:15**). What good does "going to church" and "maintaining the pattern" do us if we can't get along with our brethren?

If God had simply stopped there in **Isaiah 58**, I think I might have kept reading unscathed. However, in **Isaiah 58:6-12**, God explained what kind of fast he was really looking for. He didn't want them to simply go a few days a week without food. He said that the kind of "fasting" He wanted was for the Israelites to give up wickedness. Then He described what kind of things He actually wanted them to do. Free the oppressed. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. That is, He didn't want the Israelites simply to give up food for a day each week. Rather, He wanted them to give up themselves to help others: "...if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted..." (**Isaiah 58:10**).

Sure, these Israelites were "going to church," if you will; but they were not helping other people. They were stuck within themselves. They misunderstood that religious fasting and Sabbath-keeping were not intended as ends unto themselves. Rather, these were spiritual exercises meant to help them become humble, not just before God, but in the presence of others. What about us? Do we ever view getting the "acts of worship," the pattern of the church's work, and the congregational organization right as ends unto themselves? Do we neglect to see that these spiritual exercises are actually meant to help us accomplish our individual spiritual growth, humility, and service?

No doubt, some will say, "But Edwin, this is the Old Testament. This isn't about us." I don't intend to suggest that this passage applies to us directly. However, I can't help but see that God is still concerned with this kind of "fasting" in the New Covenant, perhaps even more so. After all, what is pure and undefiled religion? According to **James 1:27**, it isn't dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's about the pattern of congregational worship and work. No, pure and undefiled religion is to be personally unspotted from the world and to help orphans and widows. I can't help but see that God is still concerned with this kind of "fasting" when I read of Jesus' picture of judgment in **Matthew 25:31-46**. What divided the sheep from the goats in that picture? Was it the name of the congregation they attended? Was it how often and when they took the Lord's Supper? Was it the way they worshipped God? Was it the organization of their congregations? No. The distinction between sheep and goats was whether or not they were hospitable, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned.

In **Titus 2:11-14**, Paul explained that God did not bestow His grace on us simply to get us to heaven one day. Rather, He gave us His grace in order to set apart a people zealous for good works. When I read this passage, my usual thought is

about all the good works I do in maintaining the congregational purity. But there is a passage where Paul actually gives more detail and essentially says, “Here are the kinds of things I’m talking about when I mention being set apart and equipped for good works.” In **I Timothy 5:10**, Paul talked about a widow having a reputation for good works and then said, “...if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted...” (ESV).

To tell you the truth, **Isaiah 58** scares me a little bit. It says I can get the religious rituals right, but if I don’t allow those to change me into a spiritually-minded servant and sacrificer, I am still going to receive God’s judgment. God isn’t trying to see how well we can jump through ritualistic hoops. He wants to change us into a special people that do good works in service to others. That is the kind of fasting God really wants.