

Forward In True Worship
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A very popular chapter in the Bible is Isaiah 58. It is often referred to as the “fasting chapter” because it has a lot to say about fasting. But fasting is only small part of the message of Isaiah 58. The overall message is about worship.

We are in a sermon series called Forward and my message today is Forward in True Worship.

I say true worship because as we will see, the people of Israel were fasting and worshipping God their way and not God’s way. In reality, they weren’t worshipping God at all. So, God sent His prophet Isaiah to confront them and explain to them what true worship is.

Isaiah 58:1 says it this way: *Say it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet.*

God didn’t tell Isaiah to go easy on them. He didn’t sugar coat what He wanted to say. He spoke loud and direct.

The phrase “raise your voice like a trumpet” speaks about “heralds” or “criers” as they were called, who would go through the streets and shout God’s message of repentance like a trumpet to get people’s attention.

And here’s what God said in Isaiah 58:1-2:

Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek Me out; they seem eager to know My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask Me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

Outwardly the people seemed eager to know God. They were seeking God and wanted to know His ways. From all appearances they seemed devoted to God. They even continued public worship with sacrifices in the temple. Their priests and prophets knew the laws and religious requirements and they were SO careful about not violating any of the commands pertaining to the rites of religion. But their worship was an empty ritual.

Outwardly they were doing all the right things. While at the same time they were full of ungodliness. From all outward indications they were true worshippers BUT God says inwardly they were rebellious, and in sin...and they didn’t ever realize it. They were doing it their way instead of God’s way and it wasn’t working.

Imagine this –

Say you own a diesel car, and you go to the gas station and without realizing it you fill your gas tank with regular gasoline. From all indications the gas tank looks full. You totally expect to get in your car and drive to wherever you plan to go. Only, you have a major problem - You put the wrong gas in the tank. Guess what? You aren't going anywhere. You must put the right gas in the tank if you want to move forward.

The same is true of worship. We will not move forward if we put the wrong gas in the gas tank. Then we sit there wondering why we aren't getting anywhere.

The Israelites didn't even know how far from God they were. They had a form of godliness but no power. Outwardly they claimed to be something they were not inwardly. That's the definition of hypocrisy. It's behavior that doesn't line up with who we are on the inside. They were just going through the motions and doing what the law required.

Could it be that some of us don't even know how far from God we are? Could it be that we come to church or listen to the online services, we love to sing worship songs and even lift our hands in worship, we enjoy the sermons and feel good about belonging to a church, we even tithe and fast and serve.

But are we really true worshippers? Do we really delight in God as He is...His holiness, His truth, His ways? You see just because we find pleasure in worship or a good sermon...we must not think that means we are true worshippers.

Sure, we love all the scriptures that promise blessings and offer to give us our best life now – and that's good. But do we equally love the passages that ask for sacrifice, dying to self, laying down our desires to do God's will, laying down our lives for others?

When Pastor Joe and I accepted the call to pastor... I had no idea how hard it would be. I was so clueless.

I really thought I would do anything or give up anything for God.

Until we gave up our beautiful house for a dumpy rent house.

Until our income was cut in half.

Until we cashed in our retirement so we could get by.

Until our car was repossessed.

Until we saw how hurtful people could be.

Until we saw that some of our dreams weren't happening as fast as we thought.

Until the pain and disappointment just kept coming.

Then I realized, I had a choice. I could be angry and disappointed, or I could offer up a sacrifice of praise and go forward in worship even in the midst of suffering. I chose to go forward, and I always will.

There comes a time in all our lives when we must decide if we come to church only to get something or also to give something to God and others.

Do we mostly pray to God when we need help, when we need wisdom or direction, or healing or protection or blessings?

Listen, I'm not saying we shouldn't pray for these things. I'm asking if that is pretty much our motivation for seeking God. Are we mostly concerned about what we can get from God and not what we can give? Do we think we are true worshipers when we were not?

The Israelites thought they were true worshippers. But there was one big indicator that they weren't. God wasn't answering their prayers. Listen to verse 3:

"Why have we fasted," they say, "and You have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed?"

Basically, they were saying "God, we've worshipped you as we've prayed every day, drawn near to you, fasted, humbled ourselves but you're not answering our prayers."

They really thought they were going forward in true worship. The only reason they even questioned what they were doing was because God wasn't answering their prayers.

They were so blinded to their religiosity that they just didn't understand. They believed they were doing their part so they couldn't figure out why God wasn't doing His part. So, God's about to tell them. Verses 3-4 give God's response.

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

I'm telling you this is a breakthrough passage. The truth found here and in Isaiah 58 explains why many of our prayers aren't answered and our efforts with God are not working.

Here it is: Their fasting and their worship did not change their poor relationship with others. They wanted a vertical relationship with God without a horizontal relationship with others. As a result, God did not hear their prayers.

Even when they fasted, they still treated their workers poorly, they quarreled, had strife, and hit each other.

Come on now. They weren't going forward in worship because they didn't have a sincere heart of love for God or others. Their hearts, not just their heads, needed to bow before the Lord and others.

Isaiah 29:13 says:

The Lord says: "These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is made up only of rules taught by men."

They had replaced relationship with rituals with and true heartfelt worship with outward acts. But God was more interested in their heartfelt relationships than their empty rituals. We see this truth in Matthew 5:23-24 when Jesus said:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Do you get this? God is saying, "Don't even worship Me until you make things right with others."

Here's the truth. Our relationships with others affect our relationship with God. If we treat others badly and don't make things right, we can't expect to go forward in worship.

True worship is does not just happen on Sunday – it's all week long!

True worship is not just about the way we sing or shout – it's also about the way we live.

True worship is not just about loving God – it's also about loving people!

Many who seem humble in God's house, are mean and prideful in their own house. We fight and quarrel with others and treat our spouses and children with disrespect and neglect.

We can't forgive those who have hurt us, so we hurt them back.

We are uncaring and unloving.

We argue, quarrel, judge others, and are easily offended.

We dishonor our leaders both in God's house and in the White house.

Then we think our worship is acceptable to God. In reality, loving others is more acceptable to God than all the fasting or worshipping in the world done by people who lack love for others. Galatians 5:6 says:

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Think about that. God is saying there is only one thing that counts. Without love nothing else counts. God is saying - don't even bother to worship until you're right with your brother.

That doesn't mean we should stop fasting or worshipping. It means we should get right with others and then we can go forward with true worship. The rest of Isaiah 58 tells us exactly how to do that.

The people of Israel wanted God to do something for them, but they didn't want to

do anything for others. The truth is, if you want to bring heaven down, first you must step up to help others. Isaiah 58:6 says:

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?

This is the first thing God required to be true worshipers. The idea here is that they had to undo any injustices or cruelty to others. If they had done anything contrary to the laws of God or Moses, they had to make it right. Then the oppressed would go free. Oppressed here means broken, or to crack in pieces. The King James versions translates this Hebrew word as: break, bruise, crush, discourage, oppress, struggle together.

So, if you want to truly worship God... then you must make it right if you've wronged or hurt someone. This is true fasting; this is true worship.

When we hurt others, it can cause so much brokenness. But when we confess it brings healing. Yes, that means humbling our-selves and apologizing. It goes like this: I'm sorry, I was wrong, please forgive me. This is what moving forward in true worship looks like. Then verse 7 tells us what else to do.

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?

This is pretty self-explanatory:
 If someone is hungry, then feed them.
 If they are homeless, give them shelter.
 If they need clothes, then clothe them.

But the word "poor" adds further insight. It means depressed, in mind or circumstances. So, true fasting and worship also means ministering to those who are depressed in their soul.

I saw this story on TV about an ER trauma nurse that called herself the dancing nurse. She said her mission was to spread happiness to hurting people. Church, we are the ER trauma center for the world! So, when was the last time you spread some happiness the hurting?

I also found it interesting that God says don't turn away from your own flesh and blood. I thought that would mean their biological family, and it does. But it also means the family of God – in those days fellow Israelites, suffering Israelites – for us today brethren in Christ.

God is calling our brothers and sisters in Christ our flesh and blood. And moving forward in true worship means to care for them.

So, after God describes what true worship and fasting is, Isaiah 58:8-12 tells us what happens when we are true worshippers.

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.

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, 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. 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. 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.

Here it is.

When we truly worship and fast - God does not delay. As sure as the morning light appears out of the darkest night, so will our healing come.

God's righteousness will go before us to prepare the way and His glorious presence and power will protect us from behind. Before God did not hear our prayers, now he hears and answers. God Almighty says to us "Here am I."

Then even in the darkness of affliction comes the light of comfort. In the heat of trials, He guides us like a shepherd guides His sheep. He gives us water for our thirsty souls...not an occasional drink but a continual spring that never fails.

Instead of scarcity we have plenty. Instead of weakness He strengthens us. Just like the ruins of Jerusalem were re-built, so will God rebuild and restore the ruins of our lives for generations. He will repair the waste places and the broken-down walls of our lives.

These are the blessings promised for the true worshiper of God. However, there is one more requirement, and one more blessing found in verses 13-14:

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, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will 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.

True worshipers keep the Sabbath. We don't argue with people about which day of the week that is. We just believe you need a day set aside to rest and worship.

Instead of doing whatever they please, true worshippers do what pleases God.

They take delight in going to church and don't consider it a burden or obligation.

God promises that when we do these things - then our joy will be full. We will ride on the heights, which means God will protect us and keep us from danger. We will feast on the inheritance of Jacob which means we will be blessed - God will withhold no good thing from us.

Listen – this is not just an Old Testament teaching. Hebrews 13:15-16 says:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess His name.

We usually stop there – thinking that the sacrifice of praise is just a vocal thing. But this passage goes on to say:

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

The sacrifice of praise is not just giving glory to God in tough times. It is also giving to others when they are in a tough time!

I like the way the Message says it:

God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship — a different kind of “sacrifice” — that take place in the kitchen and workplace and on the streets.

So – let's move forward in true worship today!

Let's worship in spirit and truth.

Let's worship by expressing our love for God and our love for people!

Let's worship on Sunday and every other day by the way we live and give.

Let's offer a sacrifice of praise with our lips and our lives!

In fact, let's stand and give Him a sacrifice of praise right now!!!