

## A Call to Be Free

The questions that God's word puts before us this morning are these two questions: 1) What does it mean to be truly godly? And, 2) Is it possible to be very religious and (at the same time) fail to be godly?

Today's Scripture passage from Isaiah 58 portrays the Israelites as very religious people. Examples of their religiosity are found in verses 2 and 3: *"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways . . . They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'"*

What Isaiah sees is a nation of people who are indeed quite religious. They seek God. They pray good prayers. They even humble themselves with fasting. At first glance anyone looking at these people from the outside, seeing their religious fervor, would conclude that they must be a godly people.

But looks can be deceiving. There are abundant clues in Isaiah 58 that Israel's religious observances do not translate into godliness. We notice the word "seem" in verse 2; the people "**seem** eager to know My ways," "**seem** eager for God to come near them."

Verse 3 reports that the people's fasting and prayer routines are not effective. Verse 4 explains why: *"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."* In other words, the people's religious act of fasting didn't make them more godly; it just made them cranky and quarrelsome.

In verse 5, God asks His people this rhetorical question: *"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"* The obvious answer to this question is "no." Looking and even acting religious is not enough. God wants something deeper, something more.

Thus, in verses 6, 7 and 9 we read these words: *"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? Is*

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*it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? . . . "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."*

We are reminded here of James 1:27, that says, *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."*

One of the things I remember from our first trip to Disney World was walking down a street of houses and other buildings that were used in Disney movies. These were not real houses or buildings, only the front facades. They looked like real houses and other buildings from the street but they had no real substance. They could not be lived in or used for businesses. They were only useful to portray the fantasy worlds offered in the movies and on television.

Religiosity without godliness is a similar sham. **Going through religious motions without godly actions neither satisfies our souls nor pleases God. It is only an empty shell.**

Before we leave Isaiah 58, there is something else we need very much to see. This passage reveals where God's joy, healing, blessing, answered prayer and sure protection are to be experienced. To those who *"share their food with the hungry, provide the poor wanderer with shelter, see the naked, and clothe them, and do not to turn away from their own flesh and blood"* Isaiah 58:8-9 promise: *"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."*

For those who *"spend themselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,"* Isaiah 58:10 says, *"light will rise in the darkness, and (their) night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide (them) always; He will satisfy (their) needs . . . and*

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*strengthen (their) frame. (They) will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."*

Do you ever wonder why so many Christians have so little joy in Christ? Do you ever wonder why so many prayers seem to go unanswered or why we don't see more miracles like those reported in the book of Acts? Do you ever wonder why the faith of many is so weak and they feel insecure in their salvation? Isaiah 58 shows us the way forward. When we trust in the Lord to the degree that we do what He tells us we should be doing, all of His promises will be fulfilled in and among us. It is the lack of doing His will that condemns us to a mediocre and largely ineffective Christianity. We must pray for the will and for the guts to do the things He commands. **Then the doors of Heaven will be opened and God will breathe down His blessings.**

As we turn attention to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16, we discover that the words of Jesus and the words of Isaiah are wholly in agreement. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus says to His disciples:

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."*

From the chemical and scientific standpoint what Jesus suggests here is not literally possible and perhaps that's the point. For, on the one hand, salt to be anything except salt is absurd. Real salt, NaCl, will always be salty as long as the compound remains intact. On the other hand, once acted upon by water or some other chemical, NaCl can be broken down or diluted to the extent that its taste and preservative qualities are diminished. Furthermore, the common, impure, salt of the ancient world could have the NaCl totally washed away while leaving behind a white powdery residue. This white residue would still look like salt but would no longer be salt or salty. As Jesus said, it would be *"good for nothing except to be trampled underfoot."*

The implication of Jesus' words are clear; Christians who act religious without doing Christ-like things are just kidding themselves and trying to fool God. But, God is not fooled, nor is He to be fooled with. Faith without corresponding works is dead and deadly to our souls and to our churches.

Matthew 5:14-16 explain the same idea in more detail: *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

The question raised here is what does it mean for us to let our light shine before men? We often take this to mean that we should not be timid when it comes to preaching the gospel. We should be bold and forward in telling others about Christ. We should be ready in season and out of season or at the drop of a hat to share our Christian testimonies. And, for sure, there are other passages of Scripture that affirm this to be true, but this passage isn't one of them.

Matthew 5:14-16 isn't about talking at all. Here, Jesus is all about doing. Notice again what He says in verse 16: *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see”* (not hear but see)? To see our wagging tongues? No! *“that they may see your (our) good deeds and glorify your (our) Father in heaven.”*

Good deeds here are not to be confused with temple, synagogue, or church worship. This has nothing to do with going through the motions of religion. Rather, what Jesus is talking about are the same things Isaiah is talking about. Godly good deeds are practical acts of love that bring the flavor of Christ into the everyday lives of other people.

The only way to be true salt and light to our world in the way Jesus calls us to be salt and light is for us to do the sacrificial work of helping the poor, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, seeking justice for the oppressed, showing hospitality to strangers, and binding up the physical, and especially the psychic, wounds of the afflicted. It's also to offer Christ's forgiveness to those weighed down with shame. Christ calls us not to condemn people who have sinned but to do all we can do to redeem them.

The bottom line to today's message is that we need to find ways to put our faith into action. But with that being said, I have to go back to last week's message and remind us that we can't do it by ourselves. Do you know what I felt when I read Isaiah 58 and Matthew 5 in the light of Isaiah 58? I felt a load of guilt. I found it very heavy and depressing

because I know for a fact that I'm not wired to spend myself on behalf of the hungry and to satisfy the needs of the oppressed. Maybe there are a few rare individuals in this world who are wired that way, who naturally take no thought for themselves and willingly pour their lives out for others. But truth be told, I'm not nearly there yet. And, if anybody thinks I am, you better take me down off that pedestal now before it falls over from the weight of reality.

The “Call to Freedom” in the title of today's message is a call to freedom from this dilemma of knowing what Christ calls us to do and be and realizing that we do not have it ourselves to do and be these things. Freedom from this dilemma is found in Christ. Jesus said, *“Without me you can do nothing,”* which means with Him, we can do anything! In fact, that's exactly what Paul says in Philippians 4:13: He says, *“I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me.”*

The heaviness and guilt we feel when we encounter the good but impossibly difficult word of God is not meant to drive us to despair; rather, it is meant to drive us to Christ so that in union with Christ we might be transformed into persons reborn into His likeness. I John 4:16-17 put it like this: *“And we have come to know and believe the love that God has for us. God is love; whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in him. In this way, love has been perfected among us, so that we may have confidence on the day of judgment; for in this world we are just like Him.”*

You see, the real challenge is not for us to transform ourselves into godly people; that is impossible. The real challenge is for us to believe in Christ to the extent that we allow His love to conquer our shame and cast out our fear. It is His love alone that will bring us to that time when we finally surrender our wills to His and discover the freedom and power of allowing Him to love and minister to others through us. To be all that we are meant to be we must be conquered by His love. And, to be conquered by His love is to be truly free.

## The Fourth Street Church of God [4thstcog.com](http://4thstcog.com)

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**Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-16**

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