

## Religion v. Relationship - Isaiah 58

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I went on a holiday in 2002 with a couple of friends to LA. One friend was petrified of flying. She not only had her finger nails buried in her husbands arm in fear but also in mine. We landed safely. We then had to get a taxi to our motel. This was more dangerous than the flight.

Not sure what things you did this week that might have been dangerous but I'm sure you didn't realise that coming to church this morning was the most dangerous thing you could do.

Why? Because coming to church this morning could mean you are condemned by God. Religious activity that is done as a show and not out of response to God is false. Isaiah condemns this in Chapter 58. God wants relationship not religious activity.

In Isaiah 56-66 we learn how to live as we wait for Christ's return. God's people have the promises of God. They had the start of the promises but not the fulfilment. So for us we have the promises of Jesus and we live in the last days as wait for the fulfilment of those promises when Jesus returns.

### 1. Sin exposed

#### Read: 1

God is saying God's people have sinned. They have rebelled. *What is the sin? False religion.* Fasting is the issue. Fasting is not eating to be free to focus on God. It is dangerous because they gave the impression of being all spiritual. See v.2 'They *seem* eager to know my ways..' The activity itself isn't wrong it is the attitude behind that is wrong.

See v.3. They are doing it so God does something for them. Like we say: "Jesus I've been going to church, Growth Group and saying my prayers everyday so get me through this."

We can do the same by role playing in church. Praying. Reading our Bibles. Going to church. Doing religious activity out of self righteousness. Religious activity that is done to make God do something for you. It is fake. It is superstitious. It gives the impression of being spiritual but it is not. It was necessary then and now to expose the sin of the people.

And if it's not bad enough that they think they can manipulate God with their religion they are also angry with him for not acting. It is not about relationship with God but about religion. Seeking their interest. They are religious fakes. God condemns religious fakes. He hates hypocrites.

Growing up near the beach our cars would rust. I had two VW beetles. We would patch up the rust but eventually it would come through. It was only a superficial fix of the problem to make it look good on the outside. False religion is superficial to make us look on the outside.

Jesus is constantly attacking this. You see it in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector. Two men go to church to pray but the one who does more religious activity goes home condemned. He is the one who is offering what he does to God so God accepts him. He is self righteous. The tax collector offered nothing to God but knows he needs mercy from God.

God hates self righteousness. God hates it so much that people who live like this will be condemned in hell. Like to them so he is saying to us if we are doing this we are sinning. Take a look at yourself. What do you need to look for?

So when is religion false?

### 2. Religion is false when it is self righteous.

#### Read: 4-5

The Israelites think God cares for outward action; not eating, bowed heads and lying in sackcloth and ashes. Their religion is not genuine and that is seen in their actions to others. It is merely external and leads to oppression and fighting. It is for show. It is to win God. It is using like they use people in oppressing for their gain. You can do whatever to your body or some activity to look religious but it means nothing to God if it is not done in response to God.

*The Israelites were in this together.* That was part of the problem. Once a year there was a day of fasting on the Day of Atonement. It would have been so easy to be caught up in the hype and show. This is not an individual on their own in the quietness of their own home fasting out of devotion to God. This was everyone together where everyone could see you. They wanted to be together so they would look better and pat each other on the back. They were being exclusive to other nations. They were not being other person centred. They were only ever thinking about themselves.

I know some of you would love us at church to do organise more events so we could do more together. Do more for us. There is plenty of time for us to be together. If not just ring a few people up and get together. What we need to do as a church is get out there. To start doing good to others. Will we be a church that is doing our Christian thing together all the time? Or will we be out there doing good to those who don't yet know Jesus? Would those in our lives be any worse off if we weren't around? Is our community better because we are in it? Do we come to church to be just to be served and what we can get or do we come and go to serve others?

Isaiah includes another condition here that is worth mentioning.

Look at v.9

Do you point the finger in accusation? Are you guilty of malicious talk? Slander, gossip, complaining, whinging, back biting, divisive talk. We need to repent and as Aussies we have tendency to this because we are live in such wealth. This kind of talk is evidence of being self centred and not other person centred. I'm sure it wouldn't be hard to think of the last conversation you had where you complained about something or spoke badly of someone. Stop it God says.

*In the Tour de France 8 out of 9 cyclists in a team ride for 1. You see it in the flats when the domestique goes back for the water bottles. You see it when they climb the mountains when they ride on the front and then drop off so their one rider can win. They don't ride out their own self interest but for another.*

False religion is living for your interest instead of for others. When we are not living our lives for others we are guilty of false religion.

You could turn up as a visitor and think this is a good church. There is singing, friendly people, prayer, Bible reading and preaching. God may not. He would want to leave in the car with us to see what we said to each other about church when we left. He would want to leave with us and live with us for the week. To see if we were doing good. To see if we went home and fought with our wives or constantly yelled at our kids. Whether we lied at school. Robbed the boss of time. Were generous to themselves and never to others. Not only did they Israelites live for themselves but that included living in isolation and exclusion. Not opening their lives to others and warmly welcoming as God is.

God would want to see if we were role playing Christians when we met on Sundays. The Christian activity we are doing to please could be the very thing that brings us under God's condemnation. You could be here this morning doing all the activities we are doing and complaining about each one. Or thinking about what was wrong with it. You can do all the trappings of church and then go away and by your words and behaviour display it was all a show and a waste of time.

*How do you know when an activity is done out of relationship?*

### **3. True religion**

#### **Read: 6**

Religion is genuine when it is matched with a life of compassion and justice. Where there is genuine repentance ie turning away from living so you receive and living so you give. It is about being other person centred.

**Read v.7**

True religion is turning from a life of self indulgence and greed to a life of generosity to others especially the poor. It is not about going to church or reading your Bible or saying your prayers everyday. Although they are essential and important. James 1:27 says: *“Religion that our God and Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.”* Loving those in need. Working for justice in the world.

The call for the Sabbath in v. 13 like a call for true fasting is a call for a changed heart showing in changed behaviour. I won't go into this today as I did last week. See article up the back.

*When a developer buys land they build a Display home. The display home is to be a model home so that people buy into the development.* Church life is to be a model home of loving our neighbours so they that others want to buy in. So people think if that is what it means I want to be part of it.

22 000 children die everyday due to poverty. Half the children in the world live in poverty. Almost half the world — over three billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day. It is so easy to switch off to the needs because they seem overwhelming but we can help one at a time. The needs are not just overseas. We can also help in our own backyard. Paul in Galatians 5:10 says “let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Have you done that this week? What are you planning this week to do good to the people around you? True religion is going without so others don't. It is seen when those who have give to those who don't. Why? Because this is the Christian message. The Servant in Isaiah frees from bondage. He now speaks to us who know his freedom and asks – how are we using our freedom? Is it to free others? Jesus gave up what he had to give to us who don't. He became poor so we might become rich. There are some of us are downwardly mobile but many of us are upwardly mobile. The standard of lives has tended to improve rather than get worse. Jesus is downwardly mobile.

My friend who is the minister at Noosa Anglican recently told me that someone was winding up their business and gave the proceeds to His church to employ another minister. This is what they had been specifically praying for. Mark, the minister then received a cheque in the mail for \$160 000.

When was the last time you downsized so you could give? Or is only a case that you have upsized? Do we ever plan and work towards how we might give more? Or is it a case that we only planning our next holiday? Next weekend away? Next comfort purchase. There is nothing wrong with getting new things or having a holiday but why not plan to save to give for the good of others.

It doesn't just have to be financial giving. Some of us don't have much money but we do have a lot of time. Especially if you are retired. Actually even if you are not retired. Many of Australia's culturally icons have run off the back of people volunteering. Surf Life Saving. Scouts. Girl Guides. Lions Club. Rotary. Sporting Clubs. Run by people who are no less busy than we are. Most people who have no real reason to volunteer. We have the greatest reason to volunteer in service of others. Think about how you could invest your time and volunteer somewhere to help those in need.

**4. You will have a vital relationship with God****Read it: 8-9**

True religion brings true blessing. Real Relationship brings rich reward. When you live out your relationships with God being other person centred then the satisfaction and joy you are seeking will be yours. God offers light; healing, answered prayer in v.9. His presence. v.11 – guidance, protection and God sustaining you. v.14 Joy.

Now that Gods people have relationship with him they are to live in relationship with him by living out their new life with him. All the good we do is not to win God's attention but out of a heartfelt response to his goodness to us. Our loving response to God must be so deep that is overflows in compassion and justice to others especially those who are weaker.