

False Religion Isaiah 58

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost/ 21st August 2022

Isaiah 58 was written by a community of prophets who wrote in the tradition of Isaiah, not by Isaiah himself. The Isaiah of chapters 40-66 was written to God's people during their time in captivity in Babylon, written by and for a people in exile, far from home, while they prepared for the return. They anticipate a return once the Babylonian Empire finally falls (which it did in 536 BCE). Before returning home, as they return home, the people need to be clear about who they are as God's people. Change is required. We find here a call to the people to confess their sins and prepare their hearts for liberation and for life post-exile. And they need to relearn something at the heart of their experience with the Living God: the enduring link between worship and justice, the vital link between worship and service, between worship and action. To forget this is to practice false religion, false worship.

In chapter 58, God confronts Israel—and through Israel confronts the *church*. God says to Isaiah, “Shout out. Do not hold back (Is. 58:1)!” What follows is a searing condemnation of false worship and false religion. No one comes out unscathed. It's a profound statement on the nature and purpose of true worship, which connects what happens in the sanctuary with how we live in society—whether that sanctuary is located in a church or in one's living room as you watch the service on livestream.

Sometimes pastors hear church members say, “I don't get anything out of worship.” Isaiah might say in reply, “What are you putting into worship?” We don't worship God to get something out of it—or out of God. We don't worship God so that God, in turn, does something for us. We don't go to worship to curry God's favor to help us when we need or want something. The worship of God is always an end itself, never a means to an end. The focus upon God as the object of our praise will, then, inevitably shape our lives and how we serve and act. It's why we can't sever what goes on in the sanctuary from how we live outside it. *If your worship isn't deepening your commitment to care for the needs of your neighbors, the needs of strangers, or anyone in need, if your worship isn't growing a more generous heart, a more expansive life and deeper joy, then something is seriously wrong with your worship life.*

It couldn't be clearer. God commands Isaiah, “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God” (58:1-2). God's people say they want to know and serve God but reject God's will. They think their nation is righteous and doing God's will, but they need to wake up.

Next, God (through Isaiah) echoes the people's complaint in verse 3. (Note the quotations in the text.) “Why do we fast, but you do not see?” In other words, they ask, “*Why do we bother with worship, God, if you ignore us? Why do we practice our piety if you're not going to listen to us?*” “Why [should we] humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

God replies in verse 3b and blasts them: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?” All you do, God says, is boast about yourselves, focus on yourselves. God asks, “Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?” (Isaiah 58:5). God says, *Why do you go about being so mournful, joyless, and preoccupied with yourselves?* God asks, “Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?”

Instead, God says in verse 6, “Is not this the fast,” that is, the *worship or piety*, “that I choose”—here it comes, these sweet words of life, the way of true religion. “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” *Every yoke! Break every yoke!* Once removed, you have to shatter it so that no one else suffers. I’m reminded of something that German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) once said, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” God asks, “Is it not” this the fast I desire, “to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Is. 58:6-7).

You see, *this* is the worship or religious expression that God desires. *This* is what worship is all about, what worship does—it enables us to be advocates for the oppressed, the broken and bound, the hungry and homeless, and it breaks open our hearts. We’re called to break the yokes of oppression without becoming ourselves yokes of oppression! If our hearts are still closed, cold, selfish, and bitter, and still turned inward after worshipping the Living God, something is seriously wrong.

What happens when God’s people practice true worship, true religion? Isaiah says, in verses 8 and 9, “*Then* your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. *Then* you shall call, and the LORD will answer; [then] you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.” *Then* you will have God’s attention because God will know your heart is in the right place. *Then* God will show up!

For this—*this* is what Yahweh asks of us! There’s absolutely no room for debate or argument on this matter. And still, many Christians object and say the gospel—God’s good news—has nothing to do with social justice. (I don’t get it.) *This* is what Yahweh asks of us, verse 9b, “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, *then* your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” *Then*—only then.

Isaiah tells us how the world will be transformed, in verses 11 and 12: “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” What a beautiful image.

Healing. Watered gardens. People are fed and cared for. Streets—the public square—are restored so that people can live safely and securely. That’s what God wants *for* us. This is what God wants *us* to want—to want with our hearts. This is what God expects from the church in any age, in any nation. And this is what God expects from governments, from those in power, who have a responsibility to care for all of God’s children.¹

Then Isaiah goes on to say in verse 13, “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 58:13-14).

If we trample the sabbath, neglect true worship, selfishly insist on our way and ignore the heart of God, then don’t be surprised if society unravels all around us. If religion isn’t feeding the needs of God’s people, isn’t calling us to life, isn’t breaking yokes of oppression, then our worship is false. If we’re not helping people blossom and flourish, really *live*—and not only Christians and Jews, but Christians and Jews and Muslims, people of every religion and none—then our religion is false. As John Calvin (1509-1564) knew, one of the tests of a good society is how it takes care of its poor. Calvin was adamant about this in his ministry in Geneva. One of the tests of a good society is how it takes care of the vulnerable.² We are called, therefore, to form and reform social structures so that the structures of society allow people to thrive.

True worship leads to justice, to acts of love, mercy, and peace. Acts of mercy and justice lead us back into the sanctuary to offer praise and gratitude to God. Back and forth. Worship calls forth service, which leads us back to worship. Worship calls for justice, which leads us back to worship. Back and forth—all to the glory of God!

In 2004, the General Council of the [World Communion of Reformed Churches](#) met in Accra, Ghana. A global communion of Reformed churches from around the globe, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Delegates visited the Elmina and Cape Coast castles along the West African coast. In the seventeenth century, these castles were places where captured Africans were kept shackled before being shipped away and sold into slavery. When the delegates climbed up the steps of Elmina’s women’s dungeon, to their surprise they came upon a Reformed (Calvinist or Presbyterian) chapel. Over the entrance were inscribed these words: “The Lord has chosen Zion” (Psalm 132:13). The delegates were shocked, horrified, aghast. “For two centuries, people who considered themselves among the Lord’s ‘chosen’ had worshiped and prayed in this place while directly beneath them human beings were chained in misery.” “On this trade in humans as commodities, the wealth in Europe was built. Through their labor, sweat, suffering, intelligence, and creativity, the wealth of the Americas was developed.”³ The worship that went on in that chapel was divorced, dissociated from what was going on underneath in dungeon. Unless our worship leads us toward greater acts of mercy and enables human flourishing, it’s not of God—it might even be demonic and enable the demonic.

We might ask, how could they have been so morally and spiritually blind? Be careful here. As Calvin knew, it's easy for us to become very blind. Where are we similarly blind today? We can pay lip service to the importance of worship or lament the decline in worship attendance or we might look with envy to megachurches packing crowds into their sanctuaries; however, worship attendance is no guarantee that the gospel is being preached and lived out in the world. Many white Christians in the South and the North filled their sanctuaries in the 1950s and 1960s yet never offered a word of encouragement to black Christians struggling for their rights as American citizens, fighting to be treated with decency and dignity. Many white churches never advocated on behalf of their black siblings, never risked anything for them, and never put their *bodies* on the line for the sake of the health of the body of Christ.⁴ The church at that time, preferring to avoid conflict—as if conflict avoidance and playing “nice” are synonymous with faithful discipleship—failed to make the connection between worship and justice, between worship and action, between worship and love embodied in society. Some churches did make the connection, to be sure, but not all—certainly not enough. The church is always tempted to do the same—we love to play it safe and avoid anything controversial.

This week, the church lost a bright shining light whose words have enlightened and inspired generations of Christians, particularly ministers and pastors. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, was 96. David Brooks wrote a beautiful [tribute](#) to him in *The New York Times* this week.⁵ Buechner had a profound impact on my life and helped me discern my sense of call. I turned to his beautiful book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, he offers a lexicon of words that we often hear in the church—such as “cross,” “grace,” “evil,” “predestination,” “righteousness,” “idolatry,” and “vocation.” It's a marvelous book. This is part of his definition of worship: “Such phrases like Worship Service or Service of Worship are tautologies. To worship God *means* to serve God.”⁶ That pretty much says it all. To worship God *means* to serve God.

¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), especially Book IV, chapter XX: On the Church and State; Spiritual and Civil government; The function and Authority of Civil Rulers; The Nature of Civil Laws; and The Christian Attitude Toward the State.

² William Stacy Johnson in *John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 117.

³ Recounted by Johnson, 125.

⁴ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

⁵ David Brooks, “The Man Who Found His Inner Depths,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/opinion/columnists/frederick-buechner-inner-depths.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 97-98.