

## Isaiah ch 58

### Living for God on Monday

#### **We cannot be distinctively Christian & worship God, in the private safety of Sunday church**

What the world needs, in these days of declining morals, is for the people of God to be *distinctively Christian*. We need to show people what it means to *worship* God; to honour him, live his way, and give him the respect he deserves. And we need to show them how living this way is actually the best: best for ourselves, our families, society, and even the whole world.

So how are we going to do that? How are we going to be distinctively Christian, and show the world how to worship God?

Tell you what. Let's go into a building where no-one can see us. And sing songs that no-one else sings. And hear some wild-haired Sri Lankan immigrant rant for a few minutes. Then we'll go have a cup of tea and chat and feel good about ourselves. Because we've worshiped God. And the world will see how Christian we are.

#### **The danger of creating a secular-sacred division & resultant ritualistic hypocrisy**

##### ***God was angry with his people***

Believe it or not, that's kind of what God's people were doing.

Isaiah 58:1 says:

1 "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

God was angry with his people. Through the prophet, God is shouting at them, telling them they've turned their back on him.

What were they doing? Not turning up at church on Sunday? (Well, it would have been the synagogue on Saturday... but you get the idea)

##### ***Because the people were very religious***

No – the opposite. They were really, really religious.

Is 58:2-3a:

2 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. 3a 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

The people were seeking God.

Last week, from chapter 55, we saw how God wants people to look for him, to seek him.

Well, the people are doing that: they're seeking God, looking for him. And they're serious about it: they're fasting and praying, and humbling themselves. In verse 5 it talks about sackcloth and ashes – that means the people were admitting they were wrong, confessing their sins.

So what's the problem? They're seeking God, and they're serious about it. Why is God still angry with them?

***But in ordinary life, they were abusing each other***

Because their Godliness stayed in church. Ordinary life was very different.

Is 58:3b-5:

3b Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. 4a Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.

4b You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

The problem wasn't their religiousness. The problem was the rest of the time.

They were exploiting each other (verse 3b). And fighting (verse 4a).

***A false secular-sacred division necessarily leads to ritualistic hypocrisy***

And this is what happens when we, the people of God, live in two worlds.

First, there's the Godly world. That's what we do at church on Sunday. And maybe during the week, when we go to Bible study or something. That world operates according to God's rules. So we're all friendly and happy and kind. And serious about our religion. And listen intently to the guy and the front. And nod wisely as he talks about living for God.

And then there's the real world. Monday to Friday. Which operates by the ordinary rules of the world.

I mean, come on Kamal, we have to be practical here. I'm not exploiting my workers. Times are tough. There's a world recession, in case you didn't notice.

And what do you mean, fighting? It's a competitive world out here. We have to be aggressive to survive. You don't realise 'coz you're happily closeted away in your religious world, having cups of tea and biscuits with dear old ladies. But out here, in the real world – we have to work hard. I'm not exploiting my workers. They're a bunch of bludgers! They have to earn their pay!

See what's happened?

Because we operate in these two worlds – the Godly world, which operates by God’s rules; and the *real* world, which operates by worldly rules – we **lock God up in church**. God has **nothing to say to us** on Monday. He becomes **irrelevant** to the real world.

And church becomes our fun, relaxing Sunday social. Where we escape from all the rubbish and hardship of the real world. And relax and hang out with nice people, that we get on with – people just like us.

This is what people Judah & Jerusalem did. That’s what the church has battled with for two thousand years. And it’s what we’ll do. If we’re not careful.

### ***God demands worship in all of ordinary life***

God demands to be let out of church. He demands to rule all life.

And today’s passage gives us three areas where he rules Monday to Saturday.

### **Be distinctive by caring for those who don’t deserve it**

First: we need to care for those who are trapped in trouble.

Is 58:6-7:

6 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? 7 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?

### ***The law of Moses commanded generosity to poor Israelites***

God always wanted his people to care for poor & needy among them.

Deuteronomy 15:11:

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land.

God’s land was fertile. No-one had to be poor.

So if they were poor, it could be their own fault. They could have been lazy. Or stupid: didn’t sow the right seed, or at the right time, or something.

Doesn’t matter, says God. Help them anyway.

Or it might not be their fault. They might be widows, with no family. Back on those days, with no security, they would have been destitute.

The focus is on God’s people, the Jews. That’s why verse 7 says “your own flesh and blood.”

Nowadays, God’s people are not defined by ethnicity. The church, the people of God, come from all nations. So we need to look after our church members. We talk a lot about

following Jesus, being loyal to him; we will be judged by how well we look after Joan. And Ronda. And other needy people like them.

### ***Jesus cared for undeserving, poor sinners***

We shouldn't be surprised. Because this is what **Jesus** came to do.

Jesus came to care for poor **sinners**.

If we turn away from God, we cut ourselves off from the one who owns everything! We become poor, destitute!

It doesn't matter how much worldly wealth we have. If we don't have Jesus, then we have **nothing**. All our money, our houses, our cars, our iPads, iPods, i-everything-else... they don't mean a thing. They'll all crumble to dust eventually. And anyway, none of them really belong to us. They all belong to God. He loans them to us, to see what we'll do with them.

Have you come to Jesus? Have you given up your earthly wealth, to follow him? Never mind your earthly houses; are you looking forward to mansions in heaven?

### ***We care for undeserving, needy people, as we're able***

If we have, then let's be **like Jesus**. Let's care for the people around us – **especially** those who **don't deserve it**.

The family members who've hurt us. The people at school or work who are rude to us. The non-Christians who laugh at us.

It's easy to cut them off. Ignore them. And then, when they get in trouble, to laugh at them.

Is that what Jesus did? When he saw us in trouble, in danger of God's punishment – did he laugh and point his finger at us and say: "suffer!"

No, of course not. That's when he cared for us – when we were at our worst, at our most needy. He gave us everything – he gave his life for us, and a promise of eternal life with him forever.

If that's what Jesus did – for people who didn't deserve it – then the least we can do is be kind, and bear with, the idiots around us.

### ***We speak words that reconcile, not words of war***

And the way we can do that is through our **speech**. This is the second way God rules us Monday to Saturday: in the way we use our mouths, in our words, our speech.

### ***The power of words***

Is 58:9b-10:

9b If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves on 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.

You know that saying, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me”?

That’s ***complete rubbish!***

Words matter! Words are powerful!

Words can ***build***. “I’m here for you”. Or those amazingly powerful three syllables: “I love you.” Those words can make us feel safe and protected. They can make us feel like the most important person in the world.

Words can ***heal***. Another three powerful syllables: “I’m sorry”. That can undo years of hurt – a lifetime of pain. Bring a whole family back together.

Words can ***kill***. And ***silence*** can kill too. If we’re angry with someone, it’s easy to cut them off. Give them the cold shoulder.

That’s why Jesus treats words so seriously.

In Matt 12:37, Jesus says:

... by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

In the verse just before, Jesus says God will judge “every careless word”. Don’t be fooled, friends. Words matter. To God, and to each other.

### ***The Jews were using words to kill***

The people were using their words to ***kill***. That’s what it says at the end of verse 9: “the pointing finger and malicious talk”.

And that’s so normal, isn’t it? What do we do when someone upsets us? We shout at them. Or if we can’t – because they’re our boss, or our dad or something – then we whinge and gossip.

God will understand. I’m surrounded by idiots. I need to let off some steam. Besides, everybody does it.

### ***Jesus is God’s life-giving, relationship building word***

Jesus is so different.

Jesus ***is*** God’s word. In the flesh. That’s what we celebrate at Christmas: God’s final communication of himself to us, to humanity.

And Jesus, as God’s word, came to give life.

Think about it. If anyone could have whinged about being misunderstood, not appreciated, and taken for granted, it’d be Jesus. If anyone could complain about being surrounded by idiots, it’d be Jesus. The religious leaders twisted his words and tried to use it against him. He healed ten lepers; only one came back to say thank you. One of his own followers handed him over to his enemies. And the others ran away.

So – does Jesus gossip, whinge & backstab? Of course not. “Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they do.”

### ***We are to be Christ-like life-speakers***

As people who follow Jesus, God calls us to use our words to **bring life**.

How do we speak? Are we different to world around us? Or just like them? **Especially** when things go wrong; **especially** when we’re hurt and disappointed.

Do we swear, gossip, whinge and backstab?

Or do we try and say kind, encouraging things to everyone?

Even when we’ve been genuinely hurt. We don’t have to ignore it; we can say to someone “look, I don’t know if you realise – but you really hurt me when you said such-and-such”.

But we can say it in a way that puts them at **ease**. That assures them that we’re **not** angry with them – that they’re **already forgiven**. And because they’re already forgiven, they can admit they did wrong to us, without fear of getting punished.

Isn’t that what Jesus does for us?

### **Every day is holy**

We can only do this if we treat every day as holy. And this is the third principle: live every day God’s way, not our own.

Is 58:13-14:

13 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 honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, 14 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.

### ***Being publicly, unashamedly Godly***

The point of these couple of verses is to be obviously, unapologetically, publicly Godly.

This is the Old Testament. Isaiah’s talking to the Jews, to God’s people. So God frames this public Godliness in terms of keeping his law – obeying the Sabbath.

Jesus fulfils the Old Testament law for us. We don’t have to keep the Sabbath in quite the same way.

For us, in these New Testament times, **every** day is holy. God wants us to live **his** way, every day. So that people **see** what it means to honour God.

### ***We need to testify***

But to do that, we're going to have to open our mouths and **spea**k. We're going to have to **tell** people about the Jesus who makes us holy. In whose name we're doing all these nice things.

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says:

... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds...

... and tell everyone what a nice person you are.

That's not what it says, is it?

... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

If we don't tell them **why** we're doing all these good deeds, we could accidently send people to **hell**.

Because they'll see us being good. And think: "look at those good little Christians. To be friends with God, I have to be a good person".

So they'll be good. And ignore Jesus' death on the cross.

And get judged by God.

Because it doesn't matter how good we are. We can never be good enough for God.

That's why we need Jesus.

And that's why we need to tell people about him. About the one, in whose name, we live such good lives Monday to Saturday.

### **Return to Zion – the heavenly Jerusalem**

God promised to restore his people to the promised land. And to his city, Jerusalem.

Is 58:8-9a:

8 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. 9a Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

Is 58:11-12:

11 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. 12 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.

### ***The hope of return from exile***

Remember who Isaiah's talking to. This part of his prophecy is directed to people in exile. They're away from Judah, away from Jerusalem. Babylon's conquered them.

Basically, God's promising a new exodus. A new journey, back through the desert, to the promised land, to rebuild Jerusalem.

***The hope of a new creation gives us strength for Godliness now***

In the New Testament, this becomes a promise about a whole new creation, the heavenly Jerusalem. Christ taking us to the new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness.

This is the only thing that'll keep us going.

Why bother doing all this? Being kind to people who don't deserve it? Saying nice things to wicked people? Forgiving our enemies?

Because living with Jesus forever will make it all worthwhile.

We don't earn heaven by being Godly. Only Jesus gives us the right to live with God forever.

But, because we're confident that heaven is our home, we can bear with all the hardship that comes with living for God. The hope of glory gives us courage and patience, to be kind and generous, to stupid, undeserving people.

**Conclusion: living for God on Monday**

God will not be locked in church! He demands to rule our whole life.

What the world needs, in these days of declining morals, is for the people of God to be ***distinctively Christian***. To worship God. In ***all*** of life, ***all*** of our days, Monday to Sunday, 24-7-365.

And living for God, worshiping him, involves caring for those in trouble. And speaking words of love and care, even when people don't deserve it. And publicly declaring that we're doing it all in Jesus' name. Even when it's difficult; ***especially*** when difficult.

***That...*** is what it means to live for God on Monday.

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Sunday 25 Nov 2012