

Deception or Delight

Isaiah 58-59

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In Isaiah 58 and 59, there is a much more serious and deadly disconnect. God's people seemed to be connected to God, but in reality, they weren't. They were wondering why Yahweh was not listening to their prayers.

They had a deadly problem. They were going through the motions of their worship and spiritual disciplines and saying all the right things in worship. Then the next day, they would curse and swear against one another and use all of their wealth for their own selfish desires. They were claiming to love God and their neighbor, but they were neglecting the most vulnerable in their community, the orphans and widows.

Bottom line: They were not practicing biblical social justice. There was a deadly disconnect in their hearts and minds. They knew how to look religious and pious, but in their hearts, there was no change.

Isaiah 58:13-14 tells us that the people *wanted to delight* in the Lord, but there was a deadly disconnect in their relationship with God. Look in vv. 13-14:

¹³ *"If you keep from desecrating the Sabbath,
from doing whatever you want 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,
seeking your own pleasure, or talking business;
¹⁴ then you will delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride over the heights of the land,
and let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob."
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

In other words, they would go to church and talk about God a little, worship a little, pray a little, and sing a little but as soon as they could, they would turn the conversation to business and their own selfish pursuits. They wanted to delight in the Lord, but they just couldn't change. They continued to violate the day they were supposed to worship God.

Here is the main point: *The Lord exposes our deadly deception in order to lead us to true delight and satisfaction in our Savior, Jesus Christ.*

I have three hooks to help us hang our thoughts on this morning as we walk through the text: *The Problem, The Prayer, and The Promise.*

I. The Problem (Isaiah 58:1-8; 59:1-8)

Did you ever play pretend games with your kids? I did. When we lived in Texas, we had a swimming pool. During the summer, Mac always wanted to play Pokémon in the pool. We were always pretending we were some kind of water Pokémon, and then we would splash each other. I only knew two or three Pokémon, so I just called out their names and then splashed him in the face. So, now you know what's wrong with Mac. I splashed him in the face a lot when he was eight years old.

Here is the deal, in these passages, God's people were pretending. They were pretending everything was okay, but it was not. However, you can pretend with God but He does not play. It is a deadly game to pretend with God. He won't play it, but He will allow you to play it, and you always lose in the end.

They had a serious problem. In Isaiah 58:1, the Lord tells Isaiah not to hold back about confronting the people with their sin. He was to preach it like he was blowing a trumpet. The Lord called him to shout their sin out loud.

That sounds pretty harsh to our modern ears. However, God is on a mission to save His people, and bringing the problem of their sin to light is the first step. It is painful, but in the long run, it is a good thing. If you have ever desired to return to God and have had trouble changing your ways, being broken over your sin is where you start.

The problem is that many of us are talented at pretending. We are good at telling ourselves we are fine, but in reality, we are broken inside.

Verse 2 says they sought the Lord daily. They seemed to delight in His ways. They seemed to desire to know God's ways. They fasted and practiced self-denial. They were going through the motions and checking all the boxes, but God was not having any of it. He was not listening to their prayers.

Why? Because their fasting was fake. They weren't practicing spiritual disciplines but were really practicing spiritual deception. They claimed to love God and His ways; then they would display their disobedience of not truly loving God by not loving others and especially those in need.

Specifically, God called out the employers among God's people. He said that they showed they didn't truly love God by the way they treated their employees. Listen to vv. 3-4:

³ *"Why have we fasted, but you have not seen?
We have denied ourselves, but you haven't noticed!"
"Look, you do as you please on the day of your fast,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴ You fast with contention and strife
to strike viciously with your fist.
You cannot fast as you do today,
hoping to make your voice heard on high.*

Yet, most certainly, this was not limited to employers. The principle here was their hypocrisy that everyone practiced. James, the Lord's brother, writes in James 3:9-12:

*With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth.
My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way. ¹¹ Does a spring pour out sweet and bitter water from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a saltwater spring yield fresh water.*

Isaiah and James confront us with the way people worship on Sunday and live like an enemy of God the rest of the week.

Then Isaiah gets to the heart of the problem in Isaiah 59:12-13:

*For our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
¹³ transgression and deception against the Lord,
turning away from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering lying words from the heart.*

Bottom line: The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. You can bet where there is sin; there is a heart problem.

Just how bad is our heart problem? Isaiah 59:3-8 tells us that to pretend to love and worship God but then neglect the needs of the most vulnerable and needy but make sure our own needs are abundantly met which *is like wearing clothes made of cobwebs and practicing poisonous piety.*

James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, says it this way. He says that this kind of religion is defiled religion. James 1:27 says:

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

So, if pure and undefiled religion loves the widow, the orphan, and those most vulnerable, then polluted and defiled religion is neglecting them.

God is saying to us that if we don't love the poor, the widow, the orphan, the needy, and the hungry, then we don't love Him. We may go through the motions of worship and check all the boxes, but we don't have a

relationship with Him. Bottom line: Scripture teaches us that the way we treat the poor and needy tells us where our hearts are.

Pastor Ray Ortlund, Jr. is right when he says:

If our Christianity, however sincere, doesn't move us to make our world a better place, it's not only unhelpful to others; it's unacceptable to the Lord.¹

Finally, Isaiah 59:2 is blunt when it identifies our problem. Isaiah says:

*But your iniquities are separating you
from your God, and your sins have
hidden his face from you
so that he does not listen.*

This is the heart of our problem. Our sins have separated us from God, and there is nothing we can do to fix it. We were born into this world separated from God by our sin, and the fact that we sin only validates and compounds the problem. Our sin and separation from God are evidenced by the problem of the heart.

Now the question is: Is there any hope to change our condition and change our hearts? How do we resolve this problem of being separated from God? This leads us to our second point—Prayer.

II. The Prayer (Isaiah 58:9-10; 59:9-13)

Isaiah tells us how to turn to God in Isaiah 58:9-10 and 59:9-13.

*⁹At that time, when you call, the Lord will answer;
when you cry out, he will say, 'Here I am.'
If you get rid of the yoke among you,
the finger-pointing and malicious speaking,
¹⁰and if you offer yourself to the hungry,
and satisfy the afflicted one,
then your light will shine in the darkness,
and your night will be like noonday.*

Isaiah tells us to call out to the Lord in prayer and truly repent. This prayer is a prayer to admit our sin, quit our sin, and begin to truly love God and others.

Did you notice the sin in v. 9? [*Finger-pointing and malicious talk*] These people were not only neglecting the most vulnerable, but they were gossiping, blaming others, and criticizing others. *The imagery here is means to inflict wounds with our words.* They were slowly killing one another with their words. It had to be a painful sight.

Isaiah tells us what we should do in Isaiah 59:9-13. Notice how Isaiah includes himself with his sinful people. There is a change in the pronouns from “*their*” and “*they*” to “*us*” and “*we*.”

Obviously, Isaiah had not been doing the things the people had been doing, but he humbled himself and owned it with his people. Listen to his words in vv. 12-13 and let them be an example to us for how to confess our sin:

*¹²For our transgressions have multiplied before you,
and our sins testify against us.
For our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
¹³transgression and deception against the Lord,
turning away from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering lying words from the heart.*

Here is our problem. When we are confronted with our sin, our tendency is self-righteous defensiveness. No one wants to own their sin. Yet, for renewal and revival to begin in our hearts, we must own our sin. We must pray to God and confess our sin to Him.

¹ Ray Ortlund, Jr. *Preaching the Word: Isaiah*, 387.

It's like this: I remember when I was a young man, and I had been living a rebellious life. I had tried to stop living that way several times, but over and over, I failed until I got to the place Isaiah is talking about in this text—the bottom. Have you ever hit bottom in your life? It is a good place to be.

And much like Isaiah describes, I realized I was separated from God by my sin, and what I needed was to own it, confess it and turn from my sin and to Jesus in genuine worship. I had to stop all my little self-improvement plans and pitiful attempts to cover my sin with self-righteous cobwebs.

What I needed was a change of heart, but I could not do that. Only Jesus can change the heart. What you and I need is a Savior who is not separated from God by sin. We need God, Himself to reconcile us to Himself. We need a Savior who is also holy, perfect, righteous, and will fight the battles that we cannot fight. We must call on Him to save us and change us from the heart. This leads us to our last point—the Promise.

III. The Promise (Isaiah 58:11-14; 59:16-21)

In this last point, see what God does to save us. He surveys the world and our lives, and He is not surprised (for God is never surprised), but He is incensed.

In Isaiah 59:14-15, He sees that *His people are refusing to practice justice and righteousness. Those things were missing in their government, in their society, and in their community. Not only were truth and justice missing, those who tried to practice them were put down, and their lives were ruined.* It was a sad state. It was a hopeless place to be.

Finally, in v. 16, He sees that no one is shocked at these developments and that no one is interceding by calling on Him to help them. So, when God saw their plight, He acted, and He did to bring salvation to His people. Look in vv. 17-20:

¹⁷ *He put on righteousness as body armor,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and he wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.*

¹⁸ *So he will repay according to their deeds:
fury to his enemies, retribution to his foes,
and he will repay the coasts and islands.*

¹⁹ *They will fear the name of the Lord in the west
and his glory in the east;
for he will come like a rushing stream
driven by the wind of the Lord.*

²⁰ *“The Redeemer will come to Zion,
and to those in Jacob who turn from transgression.”*

This is the Lord's declaration.

Here is what we know, God promised to save His people. Then in the New Testament, we learn that He came in the person of Jesus, our Warrior King, to do for us what we couldn't do and wouldn't do—love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves.

Our Warrior King didn't fight flesh and blood. He dressed in the breastplate of righteousness and a helmet of salvation. He fought sin and the spiritual forces of evil and defeated them by laying down His life for our sin against Him. Then our Champion on the cross rose from the dead victorious.

Jesus, our Champion, will save those who turn from their sin in repentance and faith in Him, but those who refuse to trust Him will be left on their own. Those who reject Jesus will get to go their own way and, in the end, be repaid according to their deeds.

Bottom line: Here is the difference between these two groups. One group is repaid according to their own deeds of self-righteousness. In the end, they will stand before Almighty God clothed in cobwebs of self-righteousness because they practiced poisonous piety. These will not stand in the final judgment but will be burned up like chaff.

However, those who trust in Jesus will be repaid according to Jesus' deeds of righteousness, perfection, holiness, and sinlessness. God will see them in the same way He sees Jesus. God will treat them the same what He treats Jesus. God will love them the same way He loves Jesus.

This is the promise to those who repent and believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Isaiah 58:11-12 and 14 will become true for you and me:

¹¹ *The Lord will always lead you,
satisfy you in a parched land,
and strengthen your bones.
You will be like a watered garden
and like a spring whose water never runs dry.
¹² Some of you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
you will restore the foundations laid long ago;
you will be called the repairer of broken walls,
the restorer of streets where people live . . .
¹⁴ then you will delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride over the heights of the land,
and let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

These three verses are filled with beautiful promises for those who turn to Jesus. Verse 11 begins by saying, “*The Lord will . . .*” *He will do it, but what will He do?*

He will *satisfy you, strengthen you, water your life and make it eternally fruitful.* This life can suck the life out of us, but those who trust in Jesus are filled with His Holy Spirit. His Spirit is an eternal source of *satisfaction and joy* in this hard world in which we live.

Jesus created this well of the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We don’t have to trudge up the hill with our buckets of self-righteousness and pour them into the well. The Spirit is the water of life that overflows in our hearts, causing us to live lives of true worship for God. It is a life of deep wellspring of joy even in the darkest of nights in this world.

But then notice this strange phrase in the verse, “*God will strengthen your ‘bones.’*” It is not referring to your physical body though it could in some verses. However, in this particular verse, the Hebrew word “*bones*” is a metaphor. It refers to the foundation of your life. Just like our bones are the foundational structure of our body so God will be the foundation of our lives when we belong to Him.

Next, we will be a *watered garden that never runs dry.* This means that those who belong to Jesus will be filled with God’s Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit of God. Jesus tells us in John 4:14,

Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

If you have never drank from the well of Jesus, turn to Him in faith today, and let Him satisfy your heart.

Next, Isaiah 58:12 tells us that those who trust in Jesus will *rebuild, restore, and will be called restorers.* This is an amazing promise for those who trust in Christ. Their lives will be *rebuilt* and *restored* by the Spirit of God.

In John 3, Jesus calls this kind of restoration—being born again. Those who trust in Christ are given new lives and second chances. Then they take the new life they are given and begin to help others rebuild their lives, and they help them turn to Jesus.

Finally, Isaiah 58:14 ends where we began. Isaiah 58:14a says:

“Then you shall take delight in the Lord.”

We end this sermon where we began, learning that our ultimate desire is to delight in God. Satisfaction, happiness, and delight are what we really want in life.

The problem is we seek satisfaction, happiness, and delight in everything but God. What we learn is that when we turn to Jesus, we realize that Jesus is the delight we have been seeking the whole time.

Friends, if we will turn to Jesus in faith, He will lead us through the wilderness of this world to our heavenly home. Let’s make this journey together. Let’s walk together to the glory of Zion.

If you have never trusted in Jesus, won’t you turn to Him today? He is truly the desire of your heart.