WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

A Guide for Preaching and Teaching Biblical Ethics

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.
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Ethics is not a distinctively Christian enterprise, for Paul argued that even pagans, who show no outward knowledge of the law, demonstrate that the work of the law has been written on their hearts (Rom. 2:14–15). One’s perspective, or world/life view, provides the starting point for all ethics. Thus one’s ethical actions could begin from a humanistic, Islamic, Buddhist, or atheistic frame of thinking, as well as a biblical one.

The Use of the Bible for Ethical Decisions

A biblical ethic begins with the light of Scripture: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105). Thus for Christians, biblical ethics is the reflection on human acts and conduct from the perspective given to us in Holy Scripture from our Lord. Though it contains sixty-six books written by some forty human authors, the Bible itself speaks of this compilation as one book (John 10:35; 17:12; 1 Tim. 5:18). The apostle Paul claimed that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and train-
ing in righteousness, so that the [person] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17)—including such works as ethical and moral living that are pleasing to our Lord.

But just how does a person use Scripture in making or evaluating ethical decisions? Scripture is the “norm” (a word coming from the Latin word norma, which originally meant “a carpenter’s square,” a tool that determined whether a corner or line was square and straight) we can use to show that an action or a decision is right or wrong, just or unjust. Scripture can be used in four different ways in this connection; it can act (1) as a guide, (2) as a guard, (3) as a compass, and (4) as a principle. Accordingly, guides point out the route we should take, while guards warn us against wrong decisions or paths. Compasses help us gain our orientation, and principles gather the abstract ideas that encapsulate a number of examples found in Scripture.

Our knowledge, then, with which to evaluate ethical issues is gathered from Scripture. It is our only authoritative source for hearing God’s direction for acting properly and justly. But we must also use our understanding, as well as our hearts and consciences, in applying that word of God for action. There is the understanding we have received at our birth, often called common sense. But we also have an erroneous understanding due to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the result of our own sin. Fortunately, there is also the third understanding, by which we are led in a proper way using the light of Scripture. The Psalmist rightly cried out, “Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart” (Ps. 119:34).

The Complexity of Life

Life, however, can get very complicated, as we are reminded daily through our newspapers, television newscasts, and stories of human tragedies around the globe. For example, in the postelection violence that erupted in Kenya, Africa, in 2007, an eyewitness described how he dashed in and out of a crowded church building in Kenya that had been set ablaze by the insurgents. The eyewitness, on his last dash into the flaming church to rescue a few more, heard a cry for help that came from the burning inferno, “Uncle! Save me uncle, save me!” These were the pleas of the rescuer’s young nephew trapped in the
burning church building. In a moment of hesitation, the man looked at the flames, perhaps thought of his own family he had to care for, and decided he could not make one more charge into the building to rescue his dying nephew. Should he have attempted to rescue his nephew, even if it endangered his own life, or should he have recalled his obligation to provide for his own immediate family as a prior commitment over that of saving another life? How does one decide what to do in situations such as these that are so filled with opposing demands? Which action takes precedence over another when they seem to conflict or when they place opposite demands on us? Not all ethical situations in life involve such contrary and conflicting ethical absolutes as this story (between saving a life and providing continuing care for one’s family), but in every situation, we daily must make decisions that either reflect well on what our Lord has taught us or reflect badly on our obedience to God’s word.

Is the Bible Useful for Twenty-First-Century Ethics?

All of this raises questions for the believer: How applicable is the Bible’s moral standard in our own day, especially as the moral and ethical dilemmas seem to be getting more and more complicated? Is biblical truth still the valid measure for what is right, wrong, good, just, and fair? Is the character of God still the basis for affirming that there is an ethical absolute in the universe, or must we go (as in the hymn “Break Thou the Bread of Life”) “beyond the sacred page” in order to meet the new demands made on us?

These questions, and a whole series of others like them, are raised by Bible-believing Christians as often as they are raised by secular citizens around the globe trying to make their way ethically and morally in the twenty-first century. Sadly, in all too many situations, we who teach, preach, and lead in the church have offered, at best, a minimal amount of help from the Scriptures. If we do not live by bread alone, as Scripture reminds us, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3), then there is a serious need for instruction from Scripture at the lay and pastoral level in order that we might offer help to meet the challenges of our day ethically, doctrinally, and morally. We must help God’s people to see where the dilemmas they are facing stand as discussed in fact or in principle in Scripture. Too many teachers and preachers, not to mention parents and other caregivers, shy away from
helping others understand the Word of God for making moral decisions in life because they believe ethics is too complicated and too personal, or they are just unaware of the biblical teaching. They think it will engender division, because people’s minds are already made up as to what they will do or not do. And if they haven’t made up their minds already, pretty soon they will, and they surely don’t want anyone telling them that God’s word says differently!

But will those excuses and realities pass the test of the final day when we stand before the Lord? For too long now we have given all too little guidance from the lectern, pulpit, and home. This must change—or we who should have taught will be directly responsible to our Lord for our society’s moral decay because of our failure to let God have his say on all the current matters of ethics and morals that afflict our culture so directly. Even ignorance of God’s Word is no excuse for not doing what is right! (Prov. 24:12).

The Importance of Biblical Ethical Teaching Texts

Because of the urgent need for sound biblical ethics, I have attempted to combine insights from my study and teaching on the ethics of the Old and New Testament with some of the key teaching passages in the Bible. I have provided expositional outlines and the authoritative teaching-blocks from God’s word as possible primers of the pump, as it were, for shaping living that is pleasing to God. It is my hope that these helps can be translated into a series of Bible studies, such as elective college or adult Bible studies, in-home Bible studies, and studies used in the educational program of the church, Christian college, or seminary. They may even end up as a series of messages that will demonstrate that the Bible is able to help us where the rubber meets the road, that is, in the tough ethical and moral decisions of real life. If it is too risky to do a series of Sunday morning messages, then what about a Sunday evening set of messages, or a special week of meetings on these themes by the pastoral staff, possibly with some help from outsiders? The important issue that must not be lost is that these messages must be expositions on the word of God. Service clubs like Kiwanis, Elks, Lions, and other civic organizations can highlight and analyze societal ills, but what is needed is a demonstration of the power of the word of God as the only possible source that stands a ghost of a chance at impacting and changing these problems.
How Does God Expect Us to Live? (Psalm 15)

What better place to introduce this series of studies than Psalm 15:1–5, a veritable summary of those who have fixed their lodging place and solid confidence in the Lord God? In the preceding psalms, David described the intensity of evil in his day, which does not seem to be all that different from our own day, for in Psalm 12:8 he advised, “The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men [and women].” But over against the corrupted humanity of that day, and ours, God was seeking out “the company of the righteous” (Ps. 14:5). In the face of a blatant atheism that sassily challenged, “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1), accompanied by a “corrupt” lifestyle and “vile deeds” (Ps. 14:1c), God was still bent on presenting to that culture, as in our day, a people who were conformed to his will and held together by God himself, rather than by the spirit of the age in which they lived.

Psalm 15 is a wisdom psalm that has three parts, with the middle part presenting a tenfold structure on the moral conditions God is seeking. The structure is as follows:

I. The Question (15:1)
   What does God expect of us if we are to live in his blessed presence?

II. The Tenfold Set of Moral Conditions as the Proper Response (15:2–5a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Conditions</th>
<th>Negative Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Living blamelessly</td>
<td>4. No slander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Doing what is right</td>
<td>5. No wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Speaking the truth</td>
<td>6. No reproach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Despises hardened sinners</td>
<td>8. No usury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Keeps his promises</td>
<td>10. No bribery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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III. The Promise (15:5b)
   All who do these things shall never be shaken!

When David asks the question about qualifications for living and dwelling in God’s holy presence in his tabernacle and on his holy
hill in Zion, one might have expected a list of ritual requirements for such an entrance to worshiping and living for God. Instead, there were ten conditions, not developed as commands that were parallel to the Ten Commandments, but easy enough that a young person could tick them off on their ten fingers in recalling their substance and import. Even though there were no prohibitions against dishonoring one’s parents, divorce, stealing, or murder, this list had much in common with that in Psalm 24 and Isaiah 33:15, which, though shorter, contained some guidelines that were similar along with others that were different:

**Psalm 24:4**

1. Has clean hands
2. Has a pure heart
3. No worship of idols
4. No falsehood = idolatry

**Isaiah 33:15**

1. Lives righteously
2. Speaks what is right
3. Rejects gain from extortion
4. Doesn’t accept bribes
5. Shuts his ears to murder plots
6. Shuts his eyes to evil plots

It is fair to say, then, that what David places in front of us are some godly examples and representations of wise living to the glory of God. Even though all of the Decalogue is not represented, it would appear that an absolute standard that is based on the character of God stands behind this tenfold list in Psalm 15. Therefore, since that list was given in a day “when the foundations [were] being destroyed” (Ps. 11:3), so similar to our own troubled times, the ten conditions of Psalm 15 are worth examining for our own edification as well.

**A Godly Lifestyle**

First up in this list is the one “whose walk is blameless” (Ps. 15:2). This does not mean that the godly person must be perfect to enjoy the presence of God but that his or her “lifestyle” (our modern equivalent for the Hebrew concept of “walk”) must be marked by “integrity,” for the Hebrew word tamim signals a moral way of life. To render this word as “blameless” may focus too much on the negative aspect, for it implies wholeness and soundness. Even prior to the arrival of the
law under Moses, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8 NKJV), as did Abraham (Gen. 17:1). These men of God aspired to making integrity the goal and mark of their lives.

The outward mark of integrity toward God is strengthened by the fact that this person “does what is righteous” (Ps. 15:2b). And that in turn has an inward aspect as well, for this one “speaks the truth from [the] heart” (v. 2c). The wise person is one who expresses what is in the very core of their being by the speech that proceeds from the center of their innermost self. All three of the activities mentioned here are in the Hebrew text in participial forms in Psalm 15: “walking/living,” “doing,” and “speaking,” just as a similar triad appears in Psalm 1:1, in which the three actions also form a figure of speech known as a hendiatris, that is, one total idea of practicing the presence of God by calling on all three aspects of life. As Franz Delitzsch summarized it, “We have three characteristics here: a spotless walk, conduct ordered according to God’s will, and a truth-loving mode of thought.”

An Ungodly Lifestyle

The preceding three positive conditions are followed by three negative acts that the person dwelling in the presence of God does not commit. First of all, such a person does not “gossip,” or “has no slander on his tongue” (v. 3). The unusual verb (Hebrew, ragal) has the meaning in the intensive stem “to spy out,” in the sense of “going around” to spread things abroad. But the meaning of avoiding slander and gossip seems established well enough to be retained here (cf. 2 Sam. 19:27). Therefore, just as the first three positive conditions called for wholeness and soundness in one’s character, now a negative condition calls for restraint in one’s vocabulary. That concept is brought out further in the second and third negative conditions in verse 3. The wise person purposefully does not lay traps for his friend or neighbor. He just plain refuses to give credence to evil reports about others. In fact, the Hebrew text makes a little word play on the word for “neighbor” (reaʾ) and the word for “wrong/evil” (raʾah). That is matched by a third negative where this righteous person “casts no slur on his fellow [person].” Here too, unnecessarily raking up anything of a negative nature just to load (Hebrew, nasa) reproach on someone is to be rejected summarily.

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Over against the wise actions of those who walk with God is the “rejected” or “scorned/vile” person who is characterized by the evil deeds that he or she does. This is not the occasional practitioner of evil but one who is determined to do evil and as a consequence earns the scorn of the man or woman who “honors those who fear the Lord” and “keeps his oath/promise even when it hurts” (v. 4b–c).

This sense of integrity and honor does not mean that such rash promises as those of Jepthah (Judg. 11:31, 34–39) or Herod (Matt. 14:6–11) must be kept to the detriment of innocent people. It is possible to beg for release from such improperly thought-out oaths, as in Proverbs 6:1–5 and Leviticus 27:1–33. But for valid promises and vows, wise persons remain loyal to their word (Eccles. 5:1–7; Matt. 5:33–37).

Usury—that is, charging a high rate of interest in such a way as to extort money from a brother’s misfortune—is roundly condemned in Scripture. The Law and the Prophets returned to this topic frequently (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:37; Deut. 23:20; Ezek. 18:8). The passage here (Ps. 15:5a) objects to charging a poor person an exorbitant rate of interest instead of helping the individual with loans of money at no interest. If charging interest in general were being condemned here, then Matthew 25:27 (which allows it) would not make sense; so this has nothing to do with modern forms of commercial trading and charging interest—so long as it is not exorbitant. Instead it is aimed at those who loan money at interest to avoid offering help to a brother free of charge, an act of mercy that Scripture requires. The well-to-do must not take advantage of the poor, nor must they thwart justice by offering a bribe in court (Exod. 23:8; Deut. 16:19). Again, while the word for bribery can also mean any kind of compensation, what is being decried here is accepting compensation from the hungry or discriminating against the poor in favor of the well-to-do or the influential.

Those heeding the injunctions found in these ten commands will find a solid sense of security, for the one “who does these things will never be moved/shaken” (Ps. 15:5b). That is the promise of God. That person may experience adversity, but God’s affirmation is that he or she will never be shaken or moved from the love of God. Was this not the emphasis Jesus gave in his Sermon on the Mount? Accordingly, the ethical system does not stand apart from the Lord himself, but it is grounded in the theological teaching of the Scriptures.
Conclusions

1. God is now calling you and me to live without blame, to do what is right, and to speak the truth. We need to respond to him if we are going to stand in his holy presence one day in the future.

2. God is calling you and me to stop all forms of slander against everyone, to do no wrong, and to live without reproach. We can trust our Lord to help us rise to these challenges, for he is able to help us refrain from doing any of these three things.

3. You and I need to keep our promises as we avoid the social company of hardened sinners.

4. You and I should not avoid giving our money to the poor by using our money for reprehensible forms of bribery. God can help us to act differently even in such matters as these.

Bibliography


**Discussion Questions**

1. If society changes, are we as believers not also obligated to modify our actions to some degree to fit in with society? If that is so, how can we keep to such high standards as God sets?
2. If Jesus approved of charging a fair rate of interest, what is so wrong with usury?
3. If we all sin daily, how can we approach a holy God in worship knowing our hands, hearts, and bodies are already unclean? What can make us clean again?
4. How important is the Old Testament for understanding what a believer must be and do and how he or she must act toward others?
It is estimated that in 2003, twelve million children became orphans in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on that continent. It is likewise estimated that sixteen thousand children die of hunger-related complications each day—one death every five seconds. Moreover, in 2004, an estimated one billion people earned less than the subsistence level. ¹

The Christian Response to the Disenfranchised

Tender, loving care toward those in the throes of poverty and oppression and those who were recently widowed, deprived, or orphaned.
are repeatedly identified as the real hallmarks of the Christian church down through the centuries. Thus, to cite an early example, when the Athenian philosopher Aristides was summoned to defend his fellow believers in front of the Emperor Hadrian in AD 125, he testified as follows: “[We] love one another. The widow’s needs are not ignored, and [we] rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has, gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting.”

That same Christian influence can be traced historically through the life of the church as believers placed a priority on bringing the little children to Jesus (Mark 10:14) and providing care for the fatherless (Deut. 26:12). Christians, for example, influenced the legal protection of children in the Roman Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries. The reformer Zwingli transformed several monasteries in Switzerland into orphanages. And another Christian statesman, Ashley Cooper, led the fight against child labor practices in Britain in the nineteenth century.

No less significant was the Christians’ concern for those who were economically deprived, those individuals who were also the focus of specific provisions contained in the Mosaic law (Exod. 23:11; Lev. 14:11; 19:10). While these persons were not to receive favoritism just because they were poor (Lev. 19:15), neither were they to be avoided and overlooked by the rest of God’s people or by society itself. When they were exploited, their cry to God for help (Ps. 34:6) was often answered by those who showed a helping hand to them by the grace and mercy of God (Ps. 41:1; Prov. 14:21).

Usually the word poverty is used for those who are “income-deficient.” Three definitions are used to show what we mean by “income-deficient”: (1) those who live below the “poverty line,” an “absolute” minimum income needed for an urban family of four to “get by”; (2) those whose income is below 50 percent of the national median income of all workers, and (3) those who possess the smallest percent of a “share of the national income.” Regardless of which of these three definitions is used, the “poor” still represent “an island of deprivation in a sea of affluence.”

Add to this group in the poverty level the class of the orphans, the widows, and those who are subjected to all forms of injustice and tyranny as a result of direct oppression, and the need for the Christian ethic of help and a call for action by believers is all the more dramatic. The Bible constantly calls for social justice (e.g.,
Exod. 3:9; Deut. 23:15–16; 24:14; Ps. 10:17–18; Jer. 7:5–7; Amos 4:1; Ezek. 45:8; James 2:5–7). In the divine scheme of things, God demanded rulers and those in leadership to exercise fairness, justice, and oversight to make sure that what was right was done for all their citizens and followers. But no less responsible for strong resistance to oppression and help for the poor were God’s people vis-à-vis the whole fabric of society itself. No person or group was to use its power to exploit another (Deut. 16:18–20; Ps. 82:1–4; Prov. 21:15; Amos 5:7–15). Accordingly, the cry of the poor and the fatherless was clear; most people agreed on the need to end all oppression and injustice. How to attack such problems, however, was a point of disagreement. In many instances, what was needed was the phrase used on the original Great Seal of the United States: “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”

The biblical way to tackle these ills in our American society and around the world is first of all to examine one or more of the great teaching passages on this problem. One of the best for our purposes is found in Isaiah 58:1–12. While at first the passage seems to address another issue more directly (the problem of religious ritualism and formalism, or to be more accurate, phony spirituality), this text goes on to give one of the most explicit directives to believers who wished to demonstrate the reality of their professed faith by fighting oppression and poverty and by taking responsibility for the needs of the poor, the orphan, the widow, and those in society who had been disenfranchised and deprived of loving concern.

The Social Responsibilities of God’s Family

The Christian ethical action proposed to help remedy some of these ills can be found in Isaiah 58:1–12, one of the great teaching texts of the Bible on this issue:

Text: Isaiah 58:1–12
Title: “The Social Responsibilities of God’s Family”
Focal Point: verse 6, “Is this not 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?”
Homiletical Keyword: Responsibilities
Interrogative: What are the social responsibilities of God’s family in bringing the love of God to answer the cries of the oppressed, the poor, the widow, or the orphan?

Outline:
I. We must stop our religious pretensions (58:1–2)
   A. To correct habits
   B. To correct doctrines
   C. To correct practices
   D. To correct wishes
   E. To correct liturgies
II. We must allow God to expose our shallowness (58:3–5)
   A. Our wool-gathering on religious days
   B. Our irritability on religious days
   C. Our devising oppressive tactics on religious days
   D. Our pretense at piety on religious days
III. We must respond to our Lord’s redirecting of our service (58:6–12)
   A. To loosen all unjust bonds
   B. To relinquish all fraudulent contracts
   C. To release the crushed
   D. To break every yoke
   E. To share our bread
   F. To shelter the homeless
   G. To clothe the naked
   H. To assist our own needy relatives

There is no question that the primary responsibility of believers of the living God is to spread the good news of the gospel. But that gospel—centered on the Messiah’s death, burial, and resurrection as the grounds for all who would come by faith to trust him—is the same gospel that carries the corollary of our social responsibilities as well. It is to this corollary that we now turn in this Scripture passage.

I. We Must Stop Our Religious Pretensions (Isa. 58:1–2)

God commanded the prophet Isaiah to raise his voice to threaten divine action against all religious hypocrites and phony pietists, who pridefully hoped to gain favor and esteem from God because they...
were so correct in their outward ritualistic forms of worship, to the disregard of matters of neighborly love and concern for the needy. Therefore, God directed the prophet to reprove these religionists as severely as possible with a loud voice that would sound like a trumpet blaring out an alarm that something was out of kilter with those who pretended such devout piety. These phonies must be dragged into the light, since their values were more than slightly distorted. The alarm must be sounded vehemently, for the consciences of these people had been lulled to sleep, and awakening them to action required more than the usual sort of gentle talk. All bases for excuses must be removed from these sorts of people who seemed to have a ready answer for any type of charge.

In their own eyes they had (1) correct habits, for did they not “seek [God] out” “day after day” (v. 2a)? They also alleged that they had (2) correct doctrines, for they were “eager to know [God’s] ways” (v. 2b)—or so it seemed to them. They also judged they were “a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God” (v. 2c–d); that is, they felt they had (3) correct practices. Add to that pretense the fact that they felt that they had “ask[ed God] for just decisions” (v. 2e); therefore, they felt they also had (4) correct wishes. Finally, they felt theirs were the (5) correct liturgies, for “they seem[ed] eager for God to come near [usually a liturgical term, “to draw near” or “come closer”] to them” (vv. 2–3). Their assumption was that their outward performance in their services at the temple had appeased God so that he had to show his favor toward them. They appeared to be saying: “We just love the temple services. We would never miss an opportunity to hold another fast (or meeting) before our God!” What else could God wish from them? But it was all for show. Moreover, it was selective in its areas of service without involving evidence of any social ministries to those hurting physically.

But our Lord had only authorized one day of fasting in the Bible: the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), Yom Kippur. On their own, the people had later added four other times of fasting to remember the tragic events of the siege and fall of Jerusalem, as Zechariah 7–8 informs us. What the other fasts mentioned in Isaiah were all about, who knows? Given these additions (and others like them), they wanted to know if God hadn’t indeed been impressed by their religious fervor and liturgical formalism. Surely God had seen all the times when they denied themselves food and water; surely he had seen all their expensive sacrifices, and without a doubt he had witnessed their long
prayers. For all this, they felt entirely self-satisfied. Likewise, God must have been extremely proud to have worshipers such as them, wouldn’t you think?

But God had not viewed all of their efforts in the same light as these worshipers had. The prophet was to remind Israel of its “rebellion” and “the house of Jacob [of] their sins” (v. 1). That is why the prophet had to sound out his message louder in his clarion call, to show them and to show us what was wrong with what outwardly seemed to be so commendable.

II. We Must Allow God to Expose Our Shallowness (Isa. 58:3–5)

The question of Isaiah’s audience was twofold: (1) “Why have we fasted . . . and you [Lord] have not seen it?” and (2) “Why have we humbled ourselves and you [Lord] have not noticed?” (v. 3). God was supposed to be grateful and fully impressed by such ardor and devotion to himself and the worship of his person. So what was wrong?

Their attitudes and the state of their hearts had exposed the motives of all the hard work they had put into their worship of God. Not only had they fasted in order (falsely) to atone for their sins, such as cheating and robbing others (cf. Jer. 7:9–11), but even during the time of their fasting they were contriving ways to improperly gain control of property that was not rightfully theirs. Instead of focusing on God and their need for repentance and change, they were busy thinking about how they could pull off other business schemes that would enrich their pockets to the disadvantage of the poor and the disenfranchised. It was necessary, then, for the prophet to bring up the injunctions of the second tablet of the law of God to help them see that what was being done in the temple was more show than it was real substance.

It is verses 3b–4 that exposed the shallowness of their liturgies in worship. Did not this congregation do as they pleased (v. 3c) even on the day of their fasting? It was not a day for concentrating on God and their sin, but one of having quiet times to reflect on how to be more aggressive in their businesses. Was that not enough to expose the emptiness of their formalism? Did that not show that their hearts were not pure and that they were not living rightly or abstaining from deceit and injustice? How could such double-standard living be
the basis for God’s acceptance of any or all of their proposed fasts (v. 5)? It was not, in fact, what God wanted, and it was not what their neighbors needed either.

The only thing that happened on their fast days was that they grew irritable and quarrelsome. They were pugnacious and ready to start a fight at the drop of a hat. So how could they expect their voices to be heard in prayer with all of that going on (v. 4d)? Of course God could see that they walked around with their heads bowed down and their backs bent over like a bunch of reeds in pretended humility. Sure, God could see that they were “lying on sackcloth and ashes” (v. 5d), but the question remained: “is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD” (v. 5e–f)?

The lack of purity from the heart and the lack of concern for others polluted all their efforts at serving and worshiping God. The link between fasting and all acts of helping was that both required doing without something; it meant restricting their lives, as we must also restrict our rights and our desires for the sake of others. But it was easier to limit that restriction to their days of fasting, even if they were self-imposed, than to reach out to others in need of help.

III. We Must Respond to Our Lord’s Redirecting of Our Service (Isa. 58:6–12)

If Isaiah’s audience was so hidebound on fasting, then here was another kind of fast that God was now proposing. It was a type of “fast” that was accompanied by love for other mortals. These too were acts of self-denial, but they called for positive actions: (1) “loose the chains of injustice,” (2) “untie the cords of the yoke,” (3) “set the oppressed free,” and (4) “break every yoke” (v. 6).

Over against the people’s sole, but false, dependence on cultic or ritualistic behavior, God calls for a practical rearrangement of their priorities. All four verbs of verse 6 call for some type of liberation from all sorts of “hard bargains,” “perverted judgment,” and economic or political “treachery.” Any or all of these attempts to render some form of liberation and release from the metaphorical “yoke”—a heavy wooden device that went around an animal’s neck (e.g., an ox’s neck) and could be attached to the tongue of an implement that the animal was to pull, such as a plow or a wagon. The yoke was a metaphor for
all the improperly imposed burdens that had been put over the necks of those who were poor, oppressed, widowed, or orphaned.

But there were more ways of showing what real religion was like. That encouragement is recorded in verse 7. It is not enough to say that we have never injured our neighbor in any way. Neighbor-love also calls for an active work on our part to meet the needs of the poor and the oppressed. The act of denying ourselves food for the sake of a fast seems hollow when (1) we show little or no regard for those going hungry around us (vv. 7, 10). Moreover, what about (2) the presence of the homeless in our midst? And what about (3) those poorly clothed? And it is not always a case of going into the inner city to find those who are starved, homeless, or naked; what about (4) our own relatives—our “own flesh and blood” (v. 7d) who often are just as deprived, yet left abandoned despite our possessions? Sometimes it seems easier to try to help some unknown person on skid row or in the tenements of the inner city than to help our own Uncle Louie, the tragic person in our own family!

With a surprising shift from these suggested eight duties for helping others in verses 6–7, there come seven promises in verses 8–12 (interrupted in verses 9c–10b once again with four more conditions). Instead of the earned favor that the people were seeking through their cultic formalism, God promises favor only for those who seek to follow God’s agenda for heeding his ways (v. 2a). He will give that group of believers an incredibly rich assortment of blessings: light, healing, guidance/protection, and his very own presence (vv. 8–9).

First of all, our “light will break forth like the dawn” (v. 8a), our Lord promised. That is, the light within and around us will burst forth like the sunrise itself. In contrast to the wrath of God, his love is called “light,” because God’s love is able to flood over and stamp out the darkness of our pessimistic times and general outlook. A quiet and cheerful life lived in the love of God was much to be preferred over the wild trouble of the upsetting entanglements of life. Moreover, sudden recovery would come to those “sick” of all the hurry and bustle of life. It is as if new skin were stretched over the wounds and the infections of life healed. The very stress factor that so frequently is injurious to our health will be relieved and the pressure will be lifted when life is lived in the way God ordered it to be lived (v. 8b). And what is more, “righteousness” itself will go before us, and the very presence of God (his “glory”) will protect us as our “rear guard” (v. 8c–d). The imagery here is that of the wilderness march.
of the Israelites years ago under Moses, where there was a “pillar of cloud by day” that became a “pillar of fire by night” (Exod. 13:21–22; 14:19–20) that went before the nation. In like manner, God himself (here called the very essence of the quality of being “in-the-right,” i.e., “righteousness”) will give the individual and group the guidance that is needed, as he walks in our vanguard and rear guard, that is, before and behind us. Thus, when Israel was diligent in performing works of compassionate love, it was like an army that had righteousness for its leader and guide and that also left in its train evidences of the presence of God (“glory” of God, coming from the Hebrew verbal root “to be heavy,” i.e., the sheer weight or gravity of God’s presence in all of his majesty and power).

The fourth promise is most amazing. For those who act compassionately toward those in need, God will answer their prayers (v. 9a–b). Usually it is said when God calls mortals, we should best respond with “Here am I!” But surprisingly, God promises that under these conditions, when we mortals cry out to him in prayer, after attending to the needs of those around us, he, God, will answer this time with, “Here am I!” (v. 9b). What a marvelous promise! It is as if God responds to our prayers with something like, “Did you call out to me? I am ready to act on your behalf right now.”

But it is important to remember the conditions for such sensational promises of God to which, before the other three promises are announced, the prophet returns to remind us of three more forms of behavior and conditions that we must comply with. The first two conditions are negative and the third is positive. First of all, remember that we must “do away with the yoke of oppression” (v. 9c). In addition to what we have already said about this metaphor of the “yoke,” we can add that this word “yoke” points to all the annoyances and irritants directed toward the poor and the afflicted as described in verse 6. In this second case a new aspect is added: we must do away “with the pointing of the finger and malicious talk” (v. 9d). This no doubt is a reference to all forms of mockery, contempt, false accusation, spreading of vicious rumors, and the like. The poor and the oppressed must no longer be the objects of highbrow scorn or contempt, or be the brunt of our jokes or snide contrasts between them and us. They too are made in the image of God and are deserving of our respect, love, and help.

The third condition is put in a positive form: we must “spend [our] selves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed.”
(v. 10a–b). Therefore, instead of making ourselves hungry at our self-proclaimed spiritual fasts, what about alleviating the hunger of those who are starving? This passage calls once again for action on behalf of all the oppressed, and again, the action is directed away from the self and toward others. First Corinthians 13:3 in effect says, “If I give all my goods to the poor and have not love—forget it” (cf. 1 John 3:17).

With these three further reminders of the conditions God sets as the proper prelude to all sincere and devout worship of himself, he returns to three more promises in the set of seven found in this passage. Once again our “light will rise in the darkness” (v. 10c). Present darkness and adversities will give way to the glorious light of God’s presence on our pathway and lives, as promised already in verse 8a. The sixth promise about the Lord’s guidance and satisfaction (v. 11) describes more fully and emphatically the promise made in verse 8c–d. God’s promise of his guidance rejuvenates and invigorates all the days of our lives. How could it be less? For “in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

The seventh and final promise (v. 12) assures rebuilding and restoration of the deserted ruins. Even our bones, which previously trembled and shook because of the sorrows and guilt that were causing a wasting away of our frames (Job 4:14; Ps. 31:11; Jer. 23:9), will now be strengthened (v. 11c). God’s grace is greater than all our sin. He can restore years that the locusts have swallowed up. But what is called for is a response of obedience and a love that comes from God.

Conclusions

1. A religion that has self-gratification as its main purpose is a false and vain religion. It just will not fit the task of bringing glory to God nor will it meet our own needs to be fulfilled and happy in the service of God.
2. What pleases God is not our own pleasure but doing what he has commanded us in his Word. We do not live by bread alone or by any other form of competing substitutes offered ostensibly to God, but only by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
3. The church of our Lord Jesus dare not remain silent on the issues of the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, or the oppressed. Nor dare we to imagine that the government must now carry...
this responsibility, and thus we are let “off the hook.” If we’ve taken this route, perhaps that is why we do not seem to bask in the love/light of God, why we have little or no healing for the soul or the body, why we find little or no guidance personally or corporately, and why we find that our prayers go unanswered.

4. This emphasis on the poor, the oppressed, and the orphan is not a “social gospel” that only shows acts of neighborly kindness to those who are hurting; it must also be accompanied with salvation in Christ—along with soap and soup, as the Salvation Army slogan goes. Society cannot be redeemed, but individuals can be redeemed. There are social laws, but no social gospel.

5. Our social responsibilities are large, but the same Lord who called us to announce the gospel will be with us to help the hurting as well.

Bibliography


Discussion Questions

1. What is my main purpose as a believer?
2. What value do I put on the Word of God by the way I actually use it in my daily life?
3. Do I want my prayers to be answered? Do I wish God would give me guidance more frequently and meaningfully? To what degree is my lack in these areas attributable to the very omissions mentioned in this passage?
4. Do I and my church exhibit a good balance between the gospel of salvation and help to those who are hurting?