

## Ritual for Self or Delight in the Lord? – Isaiah 58

**Introduction** – Some people wrongly think that the God of the Old Testament was only interested in externals and that it was Jesus who changed things to an internal heart-religion. But Jesus was quoting Isaiah when He said, “*These people draw near to me with their mouth...but their heart is far from Me*” (Matt 15:8, Isaiah 29:13). This admonishment shows up again here in Isaiah 58. People are tempted to check off their boxes of rituals (fasting, or devotions, or tithing, or Bible knowledge, or church-attendance, or Sabbath keeping) and point to those for proof that they deserve God’s attention or salvation or favor. Rituals have not been given to us by God so that we might be more self-absorbed with our own self-justification. They are to be outward manifestations of a contrite and humble spirit that is looking away from self while delighting in God and His merciful ways.

**The Word to the Preacher** (v1) – The LORD seems to ramp it up in His exhortation to Isaiah to “preach it” here on this point. He is not to speak calmly nor is he to speak privately. This sounds similar to Paul’s hard words to Peter and to the Galatians who were tempted to be holy by means of their fleshly keeping of ceremonial laws (Gal 1:6-9, 2:11-13). These are religious types who “*according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers...and be turned aside to fables*” (2 Tim 4:3-4).

**The Complaint** (vv2-3a) – These “rebels” are people who seek God every day, who afflict their souls with fastings and have long Bible studies. But God seems to have taken no notice (they will quickly learn that is not true at all). Now pause here for a moment and consider if you have ever thought this of yourself and God: look what I have done and how little He has responded to me? What’s His problem?

**The Truth** (vv3b-5) – While they are fasting, yet they are “*seeking their own pleasure*” (v3b, ESV). This was made even clearer by Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees’ fasting (Matt 6:16-18). God hates religious activity done to show oneself off. They are like those who scrupulously tithed even to the spices in their cupboards but had no qualms about putting a widow out on the streets (Matt 23:23, Luke 20:47).

**True Fast and True Piety** (vv6-12) – The people’s vision of fasting was not God’s vision. God seems to say, “Do you want your prayers answered? How about being the answer to the prayers of others? Do you want to hear the Lord say, ‘Here I am’? How about being the person who says ‘Here I am’ to someone in need?” Fasting is to be less about denying oneself and more about providing for someone else. So as we fast, what must accompany, and completely overshadow, any biblical refraining from food? We must bring freedom to the oppressed, loosing the bonds of wickedness (v6). We must share with hungry, poor, and naked (v7). We must see the manifestation of healing and the glory of the Lord as our security (v8). We will see the Lord pleased to answer our prayers and we will have nothing to do with wicked speaking, pointing at others (v9). We will be a people extending ourselves to the afflicted (v10).

**Cultural Transformers** (vv10b-12) – Faithful religious piety transforms cultures. James said, “*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world*” (James 1:27). We become a light to the world of what it is to really live before God and in community (v10b). We will experience and lead the world as those guided by the Lord (v11). We must be the most content and satisfied people – satisfied in the Lord (v11). Our lives will be fragrant, like well-watered gardens (v11), and like a spring of water, overflowing with refreshment for others (John 4:13-14). Unbelief is the basis of ruined civilization. Faith in the Resurrected Jesus Christ will be the basis of repairing and restoring a culture (v12).

**True Sabbath Feasting** (vv13-14) – The Sabbath was never intended to be a “got-to” day, nor a day of fasting. It was always to be a “get-to” day, full of feasting, rest, fellowship, and worship of the One Who had satisfied our hearts and lives. Jesus hated the stingy fickleness of the Pharisee-mindset towards Sabbath-keeping (Luke 6:1-11). “*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27). Instead of thinking about being Sabbath-keepers, Jesus would have us learn what it means to be Sabbath-givers, “*not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words.*” Give yourself away and you will find yourself delighting in the Lord, riding on the high hills of the earth, and fed with the heritage of Jacob your father. Jesus said, “*Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it*” (Luke 17:33).

**True Religion** – Old and New Testament alike, God instructs us to humble ourselves, acknowledge our sinfulness and look to Him alone for mercy. Jesus Christ is that mercy. Raised to new life in Jesus, our worship of Him is a constant denial of self – by delighting in Him. “*God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him*” – John Piper.