

## Thirsting for Just and Compassionate Action

Let's turn together to Isaiah 58. I thought that I was sharing the last message in the series *Thirsting for God* two weeks ago, but I felt the Lord putting two more messages on my heart. Actually, I hope to do more than just share two more messages on our thirst for God. I want to invite us to dream with faith together about what God can do through us as a church. I pray the Lord stir a vision in us for what He has called and equipped us to do together for the kingdom of God. How He wants to use you and me – us together – to make a difference in this world. With that in mind I want to give you an idea of where we'll be going over the next month:

- This morning we're going to be looking at the importance of active ministry to the poor and oppressed in a message I've entitled *Thirsting for Just and Compassionate Action*
- Next week we are going to end the series where we began – our thirst for God's presence and power -*Thirsting for God's Spirit*
- Matt Slack will be with us on the last Sunday of July
- Then in August I want to continue our dreaming together by returning to a series we did last summer called *On Mission*, but this series will be called *On Mission Together* as we focus on how with God's help we can do more together than we could ever do alone.

So let's pray and then jump into Isa. 58.

### Isa. 58:1-5

Isaiah was a prophet who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, and he was sent by God to call Judah to repent of their sins and return to the Lord. In chapter 58 God sends Isaiah to confront Judah about how the sin of hypocrisy was contaminating their religious life.

### Religion that doesn't affect our relationships

As far as the Jews were concerned they were doing everything right but God wasn't blessing it. They were seeking God every day; they loved learning about God's ways, and delighted in drawing near to God, they even fasted! But for all they're doing, God just doesn't seem to be noticing. Rather than God rewarding them, He seems to be opposing them. They aren't experiencing God's blessing, they feel spiritually dry, and their enemies are gaining on them. They know there's a problem between them and God, and they're pretty sure the problem isn't on their end.

*Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? (vs. 3)*

**ILL:** When Janice and I had only been married for about a year, we moved into a new apartment and I remember one night we went to the mall to pick out a new answering machine. We found one that I thought was pretty cool – it was a good brand name and had some sweet bells and whistles on it – so I hooked it up and looked forward to never missing an important phone message again. But after a few days it was obvious something was wrong. When I'd play back the messages, it would be cutting in and out, so that I couldn't hear the message. Sometimes I didn't even know who it was who called. I was so disappointed that this machine wasn't working, so I took it back to the mall, but because I liked the particular model and because I figured I just got a bad one, I just exchanged it for the same model.

But when I got it home, it did the same thing. So now I'm frustrated that this thing is wasting my time, unhappy that this supposedly reliable brand is turning out junk, and annoyed that I have to go all the way to the mall again to exchange it. After venting a little on the mystified salesman, I returned it for a completely different brand and model. But when I got it home, it did the same thing. Now it began to dawn on me that the problem wasn't the answering machine, and sure enough, it turned out to be a faulty connection in the phone lines that ran to our apartment. The lines that ran under our sidewalk and to the apartment were rotting. So they had to rip up the sidewalk and replace the rotting lines.

The Jews have a bad connection with God – but the problem isn't with God, and it isn't with their fasting or seeking God or delighting in God's ways or any of the religious activities that they are engaged in. Those are all good things! The problem is that there is a rotting connection at another point in their relationship with God, and it has to do with how they are treating other people.

- *In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure (NIV- you do as you please), and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and fight and to hit with a wicked fist. (vs 3-4)*

They were doing all the right religious things, but their religion wasn't affecting their relationships. They were exploiting the people who worked for them. They were fighting and quarreling with each other, even while they were professing their love for God. And God is saying, listen, as long as you fight and exploit and oppress and deny justice to the people around you, your religious activities are worthless to me!

They had compartmentalized their religious activities from the rest of their lives. On Sunday's they were extolling God, on Monday's they were exploiting people. They had become blind to their hypocrisy. They professed love for God, but there is no love of justice. No love of compassion. And so it's no big thing for them to mistreat the people around them. The problem with their connection with God was their connection with the people around them was bad.

God cares about our relationships with the people around us. If you run roughshod over the guy who works for you, or you're lining your pocket at the expense of someone else, God sees that and it's going to block your relationship with Him. Peter writes to husbands and tells them "live with your wives in an understanding way...so that your prayers may not be hindered." (1 Peter 3:7). In other words, men, if we treat our wives harshly or unkindly, our connection with God will be disrupted. God wants our religion to affect our relationships. But it goes further than just doing right in our personal relationships. God goes on to describe the kind of religious activities that please Him.

### **Genuine worship of God will include just and compassionate action on behalf of the needy**

*"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" vv. 6-7*

God tells them that worship that pleases His heart not only *doesn't* abuse and exploit people, it doesn't ignore the plight of those who are being abused and exploited. Social justice isn't the heart of the gospel – the heart of the gospel deals with our eternal condition not our temporary social condition - but it would be wrong to think the social condition of the needy and oppressed is not important to God. We see throughout scripture that God cares about those who are hurting and oppressed.

*Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him. (Proverbs 14:31 ESV)*

*Therefore they have become great and rich; they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of evil; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? Declares the Lord (Jeremiah 5:28-29 ESV)*

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. James 1:27*

But it's in Jesus' ministry see the heart of God most clearly displayed. Jesus' mission was to come and die on the cross for our sins, but on his way to the cross, he fed the hungry, healed the sick, freed the oppressed, and reached out to the outcast and the marginalized with love and acceptance. He met the throngs right where they were and met their needs, while never losing sight of their and our greatest need – to be reconciled back to God. The church needs to do that as well.

### **How is the church to help the poor?**

This subject of helping the poor and needy raises some difficult questions. How exactly is the church supposed to do it in an effective way? We live in a society where there are many safety nets for the poor (which is a good thing), but along with those safety nets are often unintended consequences: disincentives to find work, a growing sense of entitlement, and the potential to take advantage of the system.

Over the 20 years that I have pastored, this has been a dilemma for me and I have seen many people come to the church asking for help, and rarely has it ever felt like what we did was actually a good investment.

- One day at Lamb's Chapel a mom came in asking for \$20 so she could go to the store to pick up prescription for her sick child. We had a policy that we didn't give out money, so I said, let's go there right now, follow me in your car. She said, no that's ok, you don't have to do that, I just need \$20. I said, I can't give you the money but I am happy to go there with you. No, but can you just give me \$10. I said no. She asked, can I use your phone and phone book? Sure. She called the church down the road to ask if she could borrow \$20 from them.
- So many times as I've given, sinking feeling that it is throwing money away – accomplishing nothing and not really helping in a genuine or lasting way.
- But questions go deeper than that. When it comes to poverty, there are many who believe that a lot of what we do makes us feel better but only hurts the person we give to more. It reinforces the poverty mentality in them.

I am not prepared to give comprehensive answers to these questions this morning and it would take more time than we have. I think every church needs to ask God for a specific way to be involved – just like every church needs to have a specific way to be involved in world missions. We can't do everything, and we don't want to throw money at a problem and just make it worse (but make us feel better about ourselves), but we do need to ask God what part we can play. But let me share a couple thoughts, and also recommend a book called *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert:

#### *1. The poor are dear to God's heart*

Prov. 19:17 says *Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord and He will repay him for his deed.*

It's not very often we can have God in our debt, but when we give to the poor God says we are lending to Him. God cares about the poor and needy. We must never look at the poor as somehow inferior to us; we must never have a condescending attitude towards the less well off.

It's interesting that in verse 9 God says, *If you take away...the pointing of the finger...* In context I don't think this is speaking of accusation, I think it is speaking of a demeaning attitude. When we wag our finger in someone's face, it's a gesture of disrespect, of demeaning and belittling.

Part of poverty's crushing blow is to strip a person of his or her dignity. They think themselves incapable of anything more, and if we don't see them as dear to God's heart and treat them with dignity and respect we will reinforce that crippling sense of inability and poverty. We will also be guilty of the sin of pride, because what do we have that we did not receive? Ultimately, we are all spiritually poor and in need of the Lord's rescue. So we should be thankful that the poor are dear to God's heart

## 2. *We need to empower the needy, not marginalize them*

Much charity, whether it be international or local, has the unintended effect of marginalizing the poor rather than developing and empowering them. A church in Florida began to recognize this and the Lord helped them to change their approach and that changed everything.

Initially they opened up a food pantry that gave out boxes of food to needy people but first required them to listen to a short devotional delivered by someone they had no relationship with. That sounds good and many of us might applaud that approach as combining practical help with spiritual help. But after a while they saw that it was having very little lasting effect on the lives of the needy. It was providing relief but not development. And the recipients were just tuning the devotional out – the fact is we all know how to tune someone out that hasn't earned the right to our attention. So this church decided to move to a more empowering dynamic. Rather than talking at the recipients of the food, they broke into small groups comprised of a mix of recipients and church members and the members would then try to help the recipients to discover their gifts and abilities. Here is what one of the church members wrote:

*Rather than trying to "fix" them, we are engaging in relationships with them. In the process, we are finding out how impoverished we are and how much we need them to see our own spiritual poverty.*<sup>1</sup>

A lot of charity tries to come in and fix the problem by meeting the need. But this reinforces their sense that they are incapable of helping themselves and need someone else to give things to them. It reinforces a poverty mentality. Rather than trying to fix them, we should seek to engage in relationships with them. Helping, yes, but helping them to develop the God-given abilities and skills they have so that they can not only provide for themselves but add their unique contributions to society.

One of the things I appreciate about Compassion Int. is that it not only provides materially for needy children, but it provides education and Bible teaching as well. It deals with the whole person and seeks to equip these young children to break the cycle they were born into.

## 3. *God calls us to action, but we need to be ok with only having faith for small steps at first*

The thrust of these verses is to take action. What kind of fasting pleases God? The kind that undoes straps of bondage, frees the oppressed, deals justice to the one getting exploited, and shares with the less advantaged. Action. But God doesn't quantify it – "this much pleases my heart". He is pointing them in a direction – and for a church that is filled with people already doing a lot of other things and not really knowing how to get involved, we need to go forward with the faith God gives us and if that means small steps at first, then we need to be ok with that. The point isn't that we feel so guilty that we bite off more than we can chew and it all comes crashing down. The point is that our hearts are moved toward just and compassionate action, even if it starts small. From the book *When Helping Hurts*:

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<sup>1</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, pg. 138

*We are the richest people ever to walk the face of the earth. Period. Yet, most of us live as though there is nothing terribly wrong in the world. We attend our kids soccer games, pursue our careers, and take beach vacations while 40% of the world's inhabitants struggle just to eat every day...We do not necessarily need to feel guilty about our wealth. But we do need to get up every morning with a deep sense that something is terribly wrong with the world and yearn and strive to do something about it. There is simply not enough yearning and striving going on.*<sup>2</sup>

Here's where I want to ask you to dream a little with me. That in the coming years, we grow in our action towards the needy, the oppressed, the hurting. Like in our missions direction, we don't want to be helter skelter. Not everyone will do everything – but that as a local church we dream of more than just making our lives better, we dream of making a difference in the lives of needy people in meaningful, empowering ways. It might start with just helping one family. Or one poor child. Or one specific way of helping. But that we yearn and strive and dream about being God's instruments of aid to the needy. Not instead of the gospel, but as a part of the gospel, just as our Lord Jesus did.

### **The “then’s” of God**

Verse 8 then begins what I call the “then’s” of God; God's promises to His people if we will take just and compassionate action on behalf of the needy:

***Then** shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
**Then** you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'  
If you take away the yoke from your midst,  
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,  
if you pour yourself out for the hungry  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
**then** shall your light rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be as the noonday.  
And the LORD will guide you continually  
and satisfy your desire in scorched places  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters do not fail.  
And 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 dwell in. (Isaiah 58:8-12 ESV)*

Remember the Jews are asking why they're doing all the right religious things but God doesn't seem to be noticing, doesn't seem to be blessing. Here God says, He will pour out all those blessings they are longing for if they will stop seeking blessing and start pouring themselves out to be a blessing to others.

If they become a light for others, their light will break forth like the dawn. If they will work to bring healing, their healing will come. If they spend themselves for the hungry, they will be satisfied and if they water others they will be well-watered.

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, pg. 28

Thirsting for God  
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July 6, 2014

The Lord will be with them, and they will be builders and repairers and restorers of generations to come. I believe these “then’s” of God are still available to us today and that this is a dream worth dreaming. Let’s talk to God about it.

### **I Surrender All**

This message interrupts our comfort zone – but with something better. Let’s surrender our lives to be used by Jesus to make a difference in this world.