

Isaiah 58 (NRSV)

¹ Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³ “Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

A rhetorical question or sarcasm.

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

The sincere, honest answer.

Thong: a strip of leather or hide.

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 them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

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

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your 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 live in.

¹³If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests 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,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

The sabbath is an act of piety, but
also an act of justice.

¹⁴then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Sermon on Isaiah 58 by John R. Collins — Draft 5 of Thursday, February 18, 2020

UPSET: One of the ways we know that God still speaks through the Bible is by the power with which it's words can still strike us. That happened to me with this passage.

DEEPENING: Back from Babylon, but with the temple only a shell of it's former self most of the city still in ruins. The people practice acts of piety, but they are not getting the results they want.

[Section by section.]

A metaphor from my own life: trying to open the church door with the house key.

God is not responding to their pious acts, because they are using the wrong key.

God promises that if the people work for justice [all-inclusive], God will work for them.

It looks transactional: not you scratch God's back and God will scratch yours,

but rather you look after the poor and the oppressed and God will look after you.

And if that's the conclusion you draw, that's not the worst way to live your life.

GOSPEL: But I don't think it's transactional—I think it's consequential. I think rather it's something God built into the core of how the universe operates; you plant weeds, you get weeds, you plant wheat, you get wheat.

SUDDEN SHIFT: The only real path to peace and prosperity is justice. Citigroup released a study that concluded that America could have been \$16 trillion richer if not for the persistence of racial inequality from 2000 to 2020.

UNPACKING: This message is for all of us collectively and individually.

There is something for each and every one of us to do. Even though we have different interests, different core concerns, different ways that we prefer to work for justice.

I have firm beliefs about the ways in which we should work for justice, but I don't have any special qualifications to say my way of working for justice is right and yours is wrong. So I can't give you an economic model or a political platform and say here, do this.

What I can say for certain is that we are called to work for justice.

We need to figure out the way we believe that can best be done, and then do it. Amen.

Source Materials

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