



Sermon Transcript September 30, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People For God and For Others Isaiah 58:1-14

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 30, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 58:1-14

¹ “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³ ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ “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? ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

¹³ “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Introduction

When we come to Isaiah 58, we find a group of worshipers who are frustrated with God. They are frustrated with God because God is not coming through for them the way they expect God to come through for them. What adds to their frustration is that they feel like they are doing everything they are supposed to be doing, and still it seems like God doesn't see or acknowledge all that they are doing. So they are frustrated with God. Are you a frustrated worshiper this morning?

Let's remind ourselves where we are in the book of Isaiah. We are in the third part of the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66. It is a section that describes for us what it looks like to be a servant of God in this world. Isaiah kind of reads like one of Paul's letters. Often Paul will spend the first part of his letter telling us about God's grace and who we are in Christ. For example, in Romans 1-11 Paul details for us the gospel, the good news of God's grace and the forgiveness of sin given freely to us in Jesus. We read in Romans 3:22 of a righteousness that is given to us "*through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*" But then in Romans 12, Paul makes a transition and he tells us how we ought to live in light of God's grace. He introduces the rest of the book by saying, "*by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*" He follows the same pattern in Ephesians. For the first three chapters he talks about the marvelous grace of God to sinners like us. It is here where we read, "*For by grace are you saved through faith.*" But then in Ephesians 4-6 he tells us how we are to live in light of that grace. He begins in Ephesians 4 with the same sense of urgency we find in Romans 12, "*I . . . urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*"

This is exactly how the third part of Isaiah begins. In the second portion of Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55, we learn about the coming "Servant" of God who will atone for the sins of the people through his death. It is here we learn that through the Servant, God's salvation shall reach the nations. This section ends in Isaiah 55 with a wonderful invitation to receive God's grace. And so Isaiah 56-66 begins the third section of Isaiah by telling us how to live once we have received God's grace and have become part of his covenant people. And so this entire section begins much like Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 begins. He says to those who have tasted of the grace of God, "*Keep justice and do righteousness.*" Now that you are servants of God in this world by the grace of God, you are to reflect the character of God in this world by the way you treat others, especially those weaker than you. "*Keep justice and do righteousness.*"

But what did we discover last week about the people of God? They weren't "keeping

justice and doing righteousness.” They weren’t walking in a manner worthy of their calling. Their leaders were “blind watchmen” who failed to shepherd God’s people. And the people were not worshiping God with all of their hearts. They were likened to an idolatrous people, worshiping idols instead of the living God. Consequently, by the way they were living, they were not being the light to the world God called them to be. So he ends Isaiah 57 by telling them what kind of people God can use to be his people in this world. In Isaiah 57:15 he says, *“I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.”* It sounds like Micah 6:8, *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* It is the humble and contrite whom God uses to be his servants in this world. Humble before God and humble towards others.

That is exactly what makes these worshipers in Isaiah 58 frustrated with God. As far as they are concerned, they are being humble and contrite. Look at how they are described in verses 2-3, *“Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, . . . they delight to draw near to God.”* Then in verse 3, we discover that they regularly deny themselves by fasting. What more can they do? It is almost like they are challenging what God said about the humble and the contrite in Isaiah 57. With a measure of protest they said in verse 3, *“Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”*

These worshipers reduced what it meant to humble yourself down to keeping religious ritual. They fasted. Clearly this ritual was humbling in and of itself. You had to deny yourself. It often involved repentance. The only fast prescribed in the Old Testament was for the observance of the Day of Atonement and in describing the observance of this day in Leviticus 16:29 it says that the worshiper should *“afflict yourself.”* Indeed the ritual is humbling. But there is obviously something seriously wrong with how they are going about practicing this ritual. It is quite obvious, in verse 1, that God is not pleased with their observance of these rituals. He says to the prophet, *“Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.”* To put it in our words, these people are coming to church, they put money in the plate and they stand when everyone stands, they sing when everyone sings, they bow their heads when everyone bows their heads, they say “Amen” when the pastor closes the service with “and all God’s people said . . . Amen.” And yet something is amiss. Something is missing in their observance of this ritual. Could it be that what is missing for them, could be missing for us? Could it be that we are here practicing the outward ritual of worship and we are not even worshiping God?

What you are going to discover this morning is that the problem is not with ritual. We

all have religious rituals we observe. Coming here on Sunday morning to worship and to listen to the Word of God is a ritual. Rather, the issue here is about how we approach religious rituals. Why are you here this morning? Is your focus this morning on yourself? Is it on what you like and what you don't like about this morning? Is it on who is reaching out to you and who is not reaching out to you? Or, is your focus on God this morning? Is your focus on who you are reaching out to? The issue in this passage is the difference between "self-pleasing ritual" and "God-pleasing ritual." John Oswalt summarizes the teaching of this passage by saying that "worship is always for God and for others."¹ We are here this morning to surrender ourselves to God. We are here this morning to give ourselves to others. These rituals are designed to help us turn our hearts to God and others and help us to be God's servant in this world.

Self-Pleasing Rituals

In what sense was the practice of their religious rituals self-pleasing? In what way were they putting themselves above God? In what ways were they putting themselves above others? When he says in verse 3, "*Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,*" he is basically saying that they are doing it for their own benefit. How so?

You can see the self-pleasing way they were approaching God through their rituals by the frustration they express in verse 3. "*Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?*" Their complaint reveals their motivation. They think that by fasting and by denying themselves, they then obligate God to do something for them. They feel that, after all they have done, God owes them. They were expecting that God would fix something for them or change something for them because they, after all, fasted and repented and prayed and daily sought God. But now they are asking what good is all this religious ritual if God doesn't come through for them. Their motive for observing religious rituals was self-serving. It was a self-pleasing approach to religion and ritual.

I am afraid this is the motive for a lot of people when it comes to practicing religion and observing rituals. It operates under the faulty notion that we can earn God's favor through our religious practices. That is the whole point of the gospel. We can't earn any favor before God. There is no amount of religious activity we can do that obligates God to us. In Romans 11, Paul asks, "*who has ever given to God that God should repay him?*" Who has ever put God in a position that now God is obligated or owes them something? The answer is "no one." Therefore, when it comes to observing religious ritual, we do not observe these rituals to curry favor from God.

So when I fast or when I come to church and participate in this weekly ritual, I am not doing it to get something from God. I am not doing it expecting God to do something in return because I have now obligated Him through my keeping of some ritual. I have heard people say, "I tried Christianity but it didn't work." Often that means, God didn't come through for me the way I wanted Him to. I even hear Christians say, "I do daily devotions because I have found that when I do them I have a better day." In other words, "they work for me." When I hear that, I want to ask, "who is the object of your worship?" Does that mean then, if "they don't work on a certain day," you will no longer find them to be a useful ritual? Who are you doing your devotions for? What happens if you do them on a given day and you have a bad day? Is it enough to say that you met with God today. Is God enough?

There is a great passage in the book of Zechariah. It is the next to last book in the Old Testament. He is a minor prophet who is writing to the people of Israel after they returned from their exile in Babylon. So here they are, after 70 years in captivity, back in their home land. They come knocking on Zechariah's door in Zechariah 7 with a very interesting question. It is a question that has to do with the observance of the ritual of fasting and the nature of their question reveals their motive and their heart. They ask him, in Zechariah 7:3, whether or not they should keep fasting in the fifth month like they did every year while they were in captivity in Babylon. In other words, now that we are back in the land, do we have to keep fasting on the fifth month. Starting in verse 4 we read, *"Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me you fasted?"* That is a great question. It is the question that distinguishes between ritual that pleases God and ritual that doesn't please God. It seems the reason they fasted for those seventy years was to get God to get them back in the land. But now that they are back in the land they feel that they no longer need to fast. God is asking what their motive was in observing their ritual. Were they fasting for themselves or for God? Is it enough for you to simply meet with God?

What is your motive for being here this morning? What is your motive for singing and for praying and for participating in corporate worship? Are you hoping to gain some kind of blessing from God because you give Him an hour of your time on Sunday morning? I mean, the roads are empty this morning. Not many people in New England go to church. Your sacrifice this morning must count for something in God's eyes! Or are you genuinely here because God is the object of all your worship? Is your worship this morning motivated by the sheer wonder and awe over the fact that God has been gracious to you through Jesus, and you already have God's favor through faith? When

God is the center of your ritual, then God is pleased. Oswalt said this about repentance, which was a part of the ritual of fasting. “Repentance is not for the purpose of getting God to do anything: it’s an expression of the conviction that my ways are wrong and God’s ways are right, whether he does anything for me or not.”²

There is a second way in which this self-pleasing motive behind the keeping of their rituals is on display. It has to deal with the other end of the ritual. What happens once the ritual is over? What difference is there in a person’s life once the ritual has been observed? After all this religious activity, does it impact the way you treat others?

Look what it says, starting at the end of verse 3. *“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.”* So, in other words, they go down to the church and do all their religious things; but when they get in their cars to go home, nothing changes at home. Nothing changes at work. Nothing changes in how they treat people and care for those in need. So, in reality, all you have is a bunch of religious activity that misses the point altogether. John Oswalt summarizes it this way, “God says, I don’t care if you stop eating or not. But what I would like to see you doing is stop oppressing your workers. I would like to see you stop engaging in behavior that is contrary to my behavior.”³ If your religious activity doesn’t lead to greater love for God and greater love for others, then it is hollow activity.

There is a famous sermon with the familiar tag line, “It’s Friday, but Sunday is coming.” Friday is the day Jesus died on the cross and His followers thought it was all over. Sunday, however, is the day of the resurrection and speaks to the promise of the power of God’s kingdom. It is Friday. . . . but Sunday is coming! I think we need a new sermon. Here is the new sermon. “It is Sunday . . . but Monday is coming!” “It is Sunday . . . but Monday is coming!” In other words, if Sunday doesn’t impact Monday, then you might want to evaluate how you are practicing Sunday. In verse 5, Isaiah says, *“Is such the fast I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?”* In other words, is that it? Just go through the ritual and that is somehow pleasing to God?

This summer we looked at James 1:26-27 and the definition of pure religion. He says, *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 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.” In other words, if the ritual isn’t causing you to think of others, it is a hollow and empty and cumbersome ritual. Notice how Isaiah picks up on this theme in verse 6, *“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? 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”* Then at the end of verse 9 he adds, *“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.”* Basically he is saying, that if you want to deprive yourself don’t stop with food, deprive yourself for the sake of the one in need.

The four verbs in verse 6 have to do with liberation. He says *“to loose the bonds . . . to undo the straps . . . to let the oppressed go free . . . to break every yoke.”* So here we are, people who have been set free because of the work of “the Servant—Jesus.” So our religious activity ought to include and lead us to spreading that freedom in all of our relationships. The phrase that has caused me to stop and reflect is when Isaiah says, *“if you pour yourself out for the hungry.”* Here they were “pouring themselves out by fasting.” That takes effort and sacrifice. But the fast that God delights in is pouring ourselves out for the hungry. I think that is broad enough to include the one who is in need and the one who is without Christ. As we apply hospitality to this conversation, I have had to ask myself what it looks like to “pour myself out for those living around me.” Paul captures the tenacity by which we give of ourselves, by saying of himself at the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:6, *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering.”* His life was a “pouring out” of himself for God and for others. If our ritual doesn’t lead us to pouring ourselves out for others, we are missing the point altogether.

God-Pleasing Ritual

This leaves us asking, “What does God-pleasing ritual look like?” First of all, this is not a passage that is anti-ritual. In fact, the curious thing about this passage is that the solution to their problem is the observing of ritual. In verse 13 he encourages them to not turn their foot away from keeping the Sabbath, but rather to *“call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable.”* That word “*delight*” is an important word and it is used often in verses 2-3 and 13-14. It is translated several ways in our passage this morning. It can be translated with the word “*desire, delight or pleasure.*” So the problem with their ritual at the beginning of the passage, in verse 3, is that *in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure.*” But in delighting in the Sabbath, in verse 14, he is actually calling them to *take delight in the LORD.*” God is to be their focus.

It is so easy for us to take any religious ritual and lose sight of God being the focus of it. Take the ritual of prayer, for example. It is my judgment that we often see prayer as a means to an end. We pray to get God to do something for us. The question often asked is this, "Does prayer change things?" It is my judgment that the often the implication of this question is whether or not my prayer changes the mind of God to do for me whatever it is that I want him to do for me. I believe prayer changes things. Most importantly, if God is my focus in prayer, it is designed to change me. It is through prayer I learn to trust God. It is through prayer I surrender to God. It is through prayer I align my heart with the purposes of God. It is through prayer that I gain the strength to forgive and the power to resist temptation. That is why the ritual of praying the Lord's Prayer is important. It calibrates our hearts around loving God and people.

There was something unique in the Old Testament about the ritual of Sabbath-keeping. By ceasing from their labor one day a week, they were taking their eyes off of themselves and putting their trust in God to provide for their needs. It was a day for them to stop and to remember that God is their Creator and so he will provide for them. It was a day for them to stop and remember that God is their Redeemer and he has made covenant with them and therefore "*his steadfast love endures forever.*" In that way, the day became a gift to them, something they were to jealously guard because it reminded them of what really matters in life and what doesn't matter. It reminded them of what lasts and what passes away. It was a day that shaped them and shaped their hearts.

When it comes to literally keeping the Sabbath the way it is prescribed for us in the Old Testament, something changed with the coming of Jesus. It is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament and Jesus declared himself to be our rest when he says in Matthew 11:28, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give your rest.*" Obviously, since very early in the church we have been meeting on Sunday and not on Saturday. We call it the Lord's Day, a day that refers to the resurrection of Jesus. So something clearly changed with the coming of Jesus with regards to the command to keep the Sabbath.

My concern, however, is with this freedom we have in Christ regarding one day over another, is that there seems to be a devaluing of the weekly ritual of coming together on a Sunday morning to worship God. Much like the keeping of the Sabbath, during this day we cease from our activity and we come and remember that God is our Creator and so he will provide for us. Much like the keeping of the Sabbath, during this day, we come and remember that God is our Redeemer in Christ and so "*his steadfast love endures forever.*" In 1 Timothy 4, Paul gives instructions to Timothy in what to do when they come together for public worship and the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to

not neglect coming together as some are in the habit of doing.

Why? Why is it important for us to observe this weekly ritual of coming together for worship? It is because through this ritual our hearts are shaped towards God. James K. A. Smith wrote a book called *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. In this book he raises the question of how our hearts are drawn to love God. It is his argument that it is the practice of weekly corporate Christian worship that trains our hearts to love God. He says, “The orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of our habits of desire. Learning to love (God) takes practice.”⁴

I think of Psalm 73 where the worshiper is overcome by all that he sees in the world and he wonders where God is in all that is going on in the world and in his life. And then the turning point in the Psalms happens in verse 17 when he says, “*until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*” Through this weekly ritual, our hearts are recalibrated to God and it helps silence all the other messages that our culture is giving us and these messages shape us. Oswalt puts it this way. “Is the ritual of my ‘Sabbath-keeping’ focused on me or is my living and the religious expression of my living, leading me out of myself, to God—out of my issues, out of my conditions, out of my wants and desires to God’s conditions, wants and desires?”⁵

This is why I am concerned over the fact that regular church attendance now means coming 2.5 Sundays a month. I don’t say this out of some legalistic guilt trip to lay on you this morning. But rather, I say this because I know my own heart and it needs to constantly be recalibrated around a heart for God and a heart for others. Because left to myself, I am prone to think of myself. Do you want your kids to develop a heart for God? Don’t underestimate the power of the habit of weekly gathering with God’s people to worship God. They need to see other adults who stand and sing with conviction that God is indeed faithful and trustworthy. In doing so, you are not just discipling them for today. Through this ritual, you are discipling them for tomorrow. Through the habit of ritual, you are calibrating their hearts towards God and towards others.

There are four times the word “*then*” is mentioned in this passage. If we come to these rituals with God as our focus “*then*” there are certain things we can expect God to do in us. Consider one of the “*then*” statements in this passage. You find it in verse 10. “*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.*” When God is your focus for being here this morning, you will be like a watered garden that sustains the droughts of life and you will become a rich supply of gifts to

share with others; and those gifts will become a delight and encouragement to others. That is because God's light is shining through you. Lets be honest this morning. How many Sunday mornings have you said, "I don't want to go to church this morning." But you came. You gave yourself to this ritual and God recalibrated your heart and gave you strength to sustain you in whatever life is throwing at you.

Conclusion

What does this have to do with hospitality? I was pleasantly caught off guard when Rosaria Butterfield said this in her book on hospitality. She said the we "are not little isolated agents of grace, running our own 'random acts of kindness' campaign. No, he gave us his bride—his church—to which we who believe are called to make a covenant of membership, to become a family, to be both set apart from and missionally placed in this world . . . to draw others who do not yet know the pricey love of God into our homes, families and churches."⁶

When God is the focus of your ritual, Isaiah says in verse 12, "*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.*" In other words, we become agents of healing in a broken world when God is the focus of our ritual.

May our ritual this morning be pleasing to God. May God shape our hearts towards him and towards others as a result of our time here this morning.

¹John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 509

²Ibid., 497

³John Oswalt Isaiah Bible Study: Isaiah 58-59; 66 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9no-09sm2co>

⁴James K. A. Smith *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2016) 25

⁵Oswalt, Isaiah 58-59; 66

⁶Rosaria Butterfield *The Gospel Comes with A House Key* ((Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) Kindle Reader, Location 369

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What role did church and religious ritual play in your formative years? Looking back, what did you appreciate about it and/or what do you wish was different?
2. What is your current attitude towards religious rituals? What are the pros and cons?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 58:1-5. What do you think these worshipers were guilty of and how easy do you think it is for us to be guilty of the very same things? What does it really mean “to humble yourself” before God?
5. Read Isaiah 58:6-7 and 9b-10. What does this tell you about the essence of true religion? (see also James 1:26-27) How do you think our religious rituals help us “pour ourselves out” for others?
6. Read Isaiah 58:8, 10b-12 and 14. Consider the results of making God our focus when observing our rituals. How does God shape our hearts through ritual? What statements in these verses stand out to you?
7. Read Isaiah 58:13. What are ways you can make sure that your observance of the weekly ritual of Sunday morning worship is focused on God? How has this weekly ritual shaped your faith and calibrated your heart towards God and others?



Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you want to do this week in light of your discussion?
9. What steps do you want to take to “pour yourself out for others?”