Vain Religion

"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins."
Isaiah 58:1

Preliminary reading: Isaiah 1; Isaiah 58; II Timothy 3:1 – 4:5.

Introduction:

1. We live in the perilous times of the last days – when an effeminate and compromising brand of Christianity is the greatest threat to the worship of God, the survival of churches, and the success of saints (II Tim 3:1 – 4:5).
2. Isaiah saw the same form of godliness without any power (or authority) in his day, and he preached against it.
3. We must examine ourselves and measure our faith and religion by personal righteousness from the heart.

Outline of Isaiah 58:

1. Isaiah called to expose Israel's religion (1-2).
2. The vanity of their ritualistic religion (3-5).
3. God's definition of true religion (6-7).
4. The blessings for sincere revival (8-12).
5. Summary of same regarding Sabbath (13-14).

58:1 God called Isaiah to the work of warning His church against their ritualistic religion.

A. The description here totally defies seeker sensitive types so popular today in mega-churches.
B. Some say, "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar," but who wants flies!
C. There is no time for sweet, polished, genteel discussions or storytelling! CRY ALOUD!
D. The practice of seeker sensitive churches is to keep the pastor quiet and the rock-n-roll loud!
E. There is no time to tiptoe around to avoid offending the sensitive or weak! SPARE NOT!
F. The whole philosophy of seeker sensitive churches is to spare everything but serial killers!
G. The whole practice of seeker sensitive churches is that everything is a matter of liberty.
H. There is no time for speech and oratory drills! LIFT UP THY VOICE LIKE A TRUMPET!
I. Can you name a man in the word of God that practiced giving speeches to preach the truth?
J. Where is Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, and brother Paul?
K. What is right content? SHOW GOD'S PEOPLE THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS AND SINS!
L. John and Jesus both illustrated this call to the ministry, if you can read Matthew 3-7 wisely.
M. God's minister is a warrior against hearers, not a cheerleader in a social club (II Cor 10:4-6).
N. It is one thing to preach against the world's sins; it is another to preach against God's people!
O. Churches resent endure sound doctrine; they want entertainers to scratch ears (II Tim 4:3-4).
P. Isaiah had encountered and condemned the preaching of popular content (Isaiah 30:8-11).

58:2 The people had wonderful rituals and activities with a good attitude in their religious form.

A. God indicts His people for impressive pretences to loving Him and seeking righteousness.
B. The four statements are sarcastic and condemning, shown by two metaphors in the middle.
C. They sought, delighted, asked, and approached like a righteous nation, but they were not one.
D. They kept up their daily religious exercises, such as the evening and morning sacrifices.
E. Reader! Do not trust in your daily reading, prayers, or devotions, if holiness is compromised.
F. They took pleasure in hearing God's word preached and delighted in its beauty and power.
G. Reader! Do not praise the preacher or the sermon, unless you crave the righteousness of both.
H. They gave every impression of being a nation that wanted to follow God's righteousness.
I. Reader! Do not accept or flatter America and its self-proclaimed status as a Christian nation.
J. They kept up the outward show that they were concerned about perpetuating his ordinances.

K. Reader! Take no assurance or comfort in keeping up the traditions of worshipping God.
L. They approach God and appeal to Him for wisdom in exercising wise judgment in the land.
M. Reader! Our nation hypocritically opens federal and state Congresses with prayer for justice.
N. They are excited to get together on Sundays to worship God and fellowship with the saints.
O. Reader! Do not dress, smile, or sing for Sunday worship without craving and doing holiness.

58:3 <u>These hypocrites blamed God for lack of response, and He explained why He would not</u>.
A. God acknowledged that they knew they were not getting the appropriate response from Him.
B. Their appeal was to the outward observance of ordinances – particularly fasting and praying.
C. His answer was clear: their outward observance was contradicted by their actual practice.
D. While denying themselves a few calories and outward pleasures, their hearts were full of sin.
E. The true fast accepted by God includes a great deal of soul affliction (James 4:6-10).

58:4 <u>The LORD condemned their fasting and rejected their prayers due to carnal goals of both</u>.
A. When you pray to consume anything upon your own lusts, you will not be heard (James 4:3).
B. They were personally filled with strife, contention, debate, and vengeance against others.

58:5 <u>They had fasting down pat from an external form of afflicting themselves ritualistically</u>.
A. But the holy God did not care for the good form, as He did the spirit and actions of holiness.
B. Though they were fasting to please God, He had never ordained merely an external ritual.
C. These motions were far more reverent than any worship in our land, but it was vain to God.

58:6 <u>God spiritually defined a fast as personal and practical righteousness in just contracts</u>.
A. The LORD contrasted their ritualistic fasting to His specific demand for personal holiness.
B. The four phrases are issues of unjust and severe economic contracts and dealings with others.
C. Israel, by covetous greed for gain, could persecute each other (Neh 5:10-12; Jer 34:8-11).
D. If you truly want to please the Lord and obtain His presence and blessing – lighten contracts!
E. Bearing one another's burdens is fulfilling the law of Christ and securing His favor (Gal 6:2).
F. Here is a cry for mercy in dealings, for you should compromise where you can for others.
G. There is also a sense in loosing men from the bands and burdens of false religion (Matt 23:4).

58:7 <u>God spiritually defined a fast as charitable and merciful treatment of those in trouble</u>.
A. The LORD contrasted their ritualistic fasting to His specific demand for personal holiness.
B. The four phrases are issues of personal charity toward those in need of necessary assistance.
C. Israel, by hardhearted insensitivity, could deprive each other (Nehemiah 5:10-12).
D. If you truly want to please the Lord and obtain His presence and blessing – help the poor!
E. "Hide not thyself from thine own flesh" is a warning about family (Matt 15:4-6; I Tim 5:8).

58:8 <u>God promised great and precious blessings to surround those that fast in righteousness</u>.
A. Light breaking forth is a metaphor of gladness, prosperity, and youth, as in a sunrise (Job 11:17; 33:30; Ps 36:9; 37:6; 56:13; 97:11; 112:4; Prov 4:18; Hos 6:3; Mal 4:2).
B. Health of body, soul, and spirit are the general results of pursuing personal righteousness.
C. "Thy righteousness shall go before thee" is God's acceptance and blessing of your plans and actions (Ps 112:1-10; Acts 10:4,31,34-35; II Cor 9:8-11; James 4:13-15).
D. God's glory will cover your rear – rearward for rereward – in protection (Ex 14:19; Is 52:12).

58:9 <u>Personal righteousness beyond hypocritical ritualism will bring God's personal presence</u>.

A. What a blessing! To have the great Jehovah at your call! To have Him ready by your prayers!
B. The LORD Jehovah is near and ready to help those who obey Him (Psalm 46:1; 145:18).
C. On what basis is this great blessing? By a personal commitment to righteousness (Ps 101:2).
D. Every sensible child of God craves God's presence more than anything else. Choose His fast!
E. The second half of the verse begins the next condition for further blessings (Isaiah 58:9b-12).
F. Where are you forcing another to bear his own burden, when you could remove the yoke?
G. The putting forth of the middle finger has an offensive sense that fits the context and history, for the Greeks in 423 B.C. wrote about it, and the Romans called it the "indecent finger."
H. Speaking vanity is profitless and worthless, but in this context also violent and oppressive.

58:10 <u>The Lord adds further acts of righteousness to obtain further blessings for true religion</u>.

A. Drawing out your soul is having bowels of compassion for those suffering and in need (Deut 15:7-10; Ps 41:1; Pr 14:31; 28:27; Acts 2:44-45; I Tim 6:17-19; I John 3:17).
B. "Satisfy the afflicted soul" is to provide necessities for the comfort and pleasure of the poor.
C. The light out of obscurity and darkness as the noonday are metaphors describing the blessing, favor, gladness, and prosperity, similar to what we saw before (58:8; Ps 36:9).
D. Compare how we describe difficult times … dark, dismal, stormy, death, night, and cloudy.
E. Compare how we describe prosperous times … light, bright, shining, glowing, brilliant, etc.

58:11 <u>The blessings of the Lord for personal righteousness are listed in precious splendor</u>.

A. The Lord shall guide thee continually. Can you think of a greater blessing? There is none!
B. The meek, those who submit to God's word, will He lead (Psalm 25:9; 48:14; 73:24).
C. The soul can be in drought two ways – literal and figurative (Ps 42:1-2; 63:1-8; 143:6).
D. Jesus offered water of life to satisfy thirsty souls (John 4:10-15; 7:37-39; Rev 21:6; 22:17).
E. Regardless of the F.D.A. and A.M.A., fat is good, surely in spirit (Ps 36:8; 63:5-6; Is 25:6).
F. Prosperity of the righteous is compared to a spring-fed garden (Ps 1:1-3; 23:2; Jer 31:12).

58:12 <u>The blessings of the Lord for personal righteousness are extended to their descendants</u>.

A. The prophet Isaiah implied Israel's and Judah's desolation by armies of Assyria and Babylon.
B. However, the spiritual house of David was desolate and rebuilt by Gentiles (Acts 15:13-18).
C. "They that shall be of thee" are the descendants of those dedicated to personal righteousness.
D. The "waste places" and "foundations of many generations" are lost things of God (Is 61:4).
E. The generation that chooses the righteousness of God is honored with two wonderful titles.
F. Moses stood in the breach for Israel, as did four other men (Ps 106:23; Jer 15:1; Ezek 14:14).
G. We are in a great conflict for the apostolic faith of our fathers (Jude 1:3). Who will stand up?
H. We are in perilous times (II Timothy 3:1 – 4:5). Who will restore the old paths (Jer 6:16-17)?
I. Where are men who will end the collapse of Christianity and repair the breach (Ps 78:1-8)?

58:13 <u>The Lord laid down the condition of practicing internal righteousness on His Sabbath Day</u>.

A. The Sabbath was the focal point of the Jewish week, as God required total rest as He had.
B. "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath" is eliminating your personal activities and seeking your own pleasure in the service and worship of God.
C. The synecdoche or metonym of "foot" can be found in other places in Scripture (Eccl 5:1).
D. The Sabbath was holy – a day consecrated and set apart to the Lord – denying their pleasure.
E. There is a great difference between showing up to Sunday services and calling it a delight, the holy of the LORD, and honourable! Let this difference be shown in our hearts and lives.
F. True dedication to God and His worship is rejecting our own ways, preferences, and words.
G. Do you willingly, even cheerfully, sacrifice your ways, thoughts, and words for His worship?

58:14 <u>The LORD promised great blessing for lifting worship from ritualism to spiritual affection</u>.

A. The "if … then" construction opening this verse indicates that delighting in God is the result.
B. There is absolutely no greater joy or pleasure in life than communion and pleasure with God.
C. By exalting His things, as the Sabbath (58:13), with joy and zeal, we approach unto God.
D. And the blessed God will reveal Himself to such a man for his personal delight in the LORD.
E. The reward is in kind: the more you delight in God and His things, the more delight He gives.
F. Riding on the high places of the earth indicates prosperity, safety, victory (Deut 32:13-14).
G. The good life, the abundant life, is for those will commit their lives to personal righteousness.
H. Being fed with the heritage of Jacob is the great blessings he enjoyed (Is 1:19; Gen 32:10).
I. The mouth of the LORD hath spoken it - you may count on these conditions and promises.

<u>Conclusion:</u>

1. Ritualism is not the sole property of Jews and Catholics: we default to it and hypocrisy without any effort.
2. No matter how good our external worship might be, the Lord of heaven is measuring our hearts and holiness.
3. The situation is clear: we live in perilous times of compromise, yet personal righteousness has great reward.

<u>For further study</u>:

1. The sermon outline, "Perilous Times," which provides a short and simple overview of Paul's prophecy in II Timothy 3.
2. The sermon outline, "Contemporary Christianity," reviews all the inventions and innovations of most modern churches.