

# Removing the Mask of Hypocrisy

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thanks, Jackie. Good morning, everyone. Good morning, everyone here and everyone who's watching at home. If you have a Bible, like Martin said, please turn to Isaiah chapter 58.

If you don't, please keep your service sheets open as we look at this chapter together. And same for people at home, if you've got access to the internet, which I'm sure you have if you're watching, please just look up the chapter as we look at it together.

But let's start with a moment of prayer. Father, as we sit under your word for the next few minutes, we pray that you would soften our hearts and open our ears.

Please help us to hear your message for us, but also to embrace it. And through your Holy Spirit, please help it to just sink in to every core of our being and transform our lives.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So a friend of mine had one of those pictures on the wall. There's actually a quote, you know the ones I mean.

[ 1 : 04 ] And it read, How we spend our day is, of course, how we spend our lives. Now, usually those things can be quite naff, but I remember thinking, that was actually quite good.

And ultimately, it leads us to respond by thinking, what we do now, the things we care about, the actions we take, what we invest our time in day to day, will in the end work to summarize how we've used the life we've been given.

In our passage today, God says, these people have been getting it all wrong. Living their lives in ways that are displeasing to him.

But the people of chapter 58 do not realize there is anything wrong. So I'm going to make two points this morning. And the first one is, God exposes the darkness of injustice.

The way God works in the world, we call it providence. And John Piper's new book, he defines that word as how God is not only seeing, but doing.

[ 2 : 10 ] He doesn't look on from a distance, but causes everything by his fatherly hand. In his seeing, he acts. And from the beginning, when he sees something wrong, he acts to put it right.

And a huge part of this means speaking to his people and telling them to do what is right. See the final words of the chapter? The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

God sees and he acts. And so often this means speaking to his people. The problem is that so often in history, people think they have listened and acted in ways they think is in accordance to God's instructions.

When in fact, they've got it completely wrong. In our passage, that's exactly what we have. People who think they've followed God's instructions for justice, to do what is right.

But God has a very exposing and challenging word for them. The people of our passage thinks they've followed the instructions of chapter 56.

[ 3 : 12 ] Martin began our series in Isaiah in this chapter a couple of weeks ago. Let me remind you of the opening verses. It should come up on the screen. Chapter 56. Maintain justice.

Maintain justice and do what is right. For my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. Blessed is the one who does this, the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil.

The people have looked at these instructions as a checklist. Maintain justice. Tick. Do what is right. Done. Sabbath.

Love it. Keep hands from doing evil. About time. And in their minds, as you see in verse 2 of chapter 56, this means they will be blessed.

Great. But no. Nothing. Nothing. So if we go back to chapter 58, look at verse 3. They have not received their blessing, and now they basically file a complaint with God.

[ 4 : 18 ] They submit their questions. Why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed? Clearly, God has missed their good religious acts.

They are sort of saying, we know this is awkward, God, but we have ticked all the boxes, and you have actually failed to send out your blessing. We have done our part, so how does God respond to this?

Well, look at verse 2. As if. Look with me at verse 2. These are not your pagan, anti-God, atheistic folk.

These people are religious. They seem very keen. Regulars at church. They read the Bible every day. They look kosher. But God sees right through it and says they have actually forsaken his commands.

Verse 2 is how God responds, but notice it's not the answer he gives them. His answer is what we read in verse 1. God gets hold of Isaiah's prophet, his messenger, and says, go to the people.

[ 5 : 38 ] And verse 1, shout it aloud. Do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sin.

Declare their rebellion and sin. What an answer to the people's questions and complaints about God. It's a bit like that embarrassing moment when you've had a go at someone because they've done you wrong, but then turns out it was your fault.

Maybe you've complained to a company for not sending out the item you've ordered, but actually the payment didn't go through because you haven't got any money. So what's happened?

What have these people done wrong? Well, you might be tempted to think or imagine they've got some dark secret they've been trying to hide. But actually it's the way in which they've been doing God's instructions.

That is the problem. God said, let's run through this checklist you have. Look with me at the section from the end of verse 3 to verse 5. Yes, you have performed the religious activity of fasting, God says.

[ 6 : 45 ] Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists.

Why is spiritual discipline or acts of worship leading you to punch someone in the face? God sees right through their checklist of completed tasks in the name of religion and completely exposes the darkness of their injustice.

And it really is dark. They're masking their sinful behavior and actions of injustice with religious acts. These are not people who have slipped up and now face up to their mistakes seeking forgiveness from God and the people they've hurt.

No, these are people who are complaining that oppressing people and punching people in the face is not leaving them blessed. Why are they doing this? Well, I think they want to use the religious checklist to compensate their sinful behavior.

They want to use worship as a tool to be considered worthy in the eyes of God. And for God, this is absolutely hypocritical. It's pure hypocrisy.

[ 8 : 00 ] When it comes to fasting, God explains, this is what I meant it for. Verse 6. To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke. To set the oppressed free and break every yoke.

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter? When you see the naked, to clothe them and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood.

God meant fasting as a way to move people to break injustice, not cause more of it. As an opportunity and a space in our lives to see what is true and what is good and be moved to do something about what is wrong and bad.

God really does expose the darkness of the people's injustice. They think it's about performing the tasks, ticking them off the list, and that's how they follow God's instructions.

And so they very much expect to be blessed. But when they receive nothing for their efforts, they complain to God that he has not noticed that they are keeping his commandments.

[ 9 : 07 ] And they think, are we just doing this for no reason? This is a very challenging message for us. I mean, God picks out fasting, but it could be anything. Any good thing could become a mask for hiding our sin.

It could become a way of, you know, just feeling good about ourselves, just ticking it off the list. It could be doing our daily Bible readings, preaching from the front, serving on tech, being on music,

going to prayer meetings, even coming to church on a Sunday.

These are all good things, but meaningless if they are just a mask for hiding a soul darkened by unrepented sin and rebellion to God.

The things we do are meaningless if they're just a mask. Hypocrisy is a brutal word and quite frightening. And so we can sometimes forget about how the start of hypocrisy can be very subtle. It can start out as a small seed within our lives, but when it does, the longer it's left, the more damaging it will be for ourselves and for others as well.

[10:19] It's subtle because you can genuinely believe what you're doing is right and good. The items of their checklist, all of God's commandments, are, of course, good things.

But look at the fruit of their practices. Does love blossom from their worship and spiritual disciplines? No. Only injustice, oppression, pain and darkness.

Because they've been doing them for the wrong reasons. And I think we should always be asking ourselves the question, what is the reason for our doing of any spiritual practice? Why am I spending my time doing this?

Ultimately, as we see in this passage, God may see what we've been doing very differently. These people set out to be blessed by following God's instructions to maintain justice and do what is right. But God saw the darkness of injustice. Now, you might be sitting there with the question, why does God command his people to live in worship in a way that leads to justice?

[11:22] I mean, it's great that he does, but why? Well, I think what is at the heart of the issue in chapter 58, in this passage, is that the people think their checklist of good deeds will put them on good grounds with God.

They hold up their checklist as an atonement for any sin, and so assume they will therefore be able to draw nearer to God, that God will accept them, will listen to them, hear their prayers and heal them.

God says, you hold up this checklist as an atonement for sin, as if. Look at the fruit of your acts, and you'll see how unworthy they are.

How could you possibly think these fruitless acts of worship that result in oppression leave you enjoying the presence of God in your life? So, to my second point, God provides the light of salvation.

At this point, you might be tempted to think, okay, so God cares more about sin than he does social justice. And you may already think that about the church.

[12:29] Well, let's think about that for a second. Now, I'm sure all of us, when we hear the word injustice, we will all have particular areas that we think of first. Perhaps it's gender equality, homophobia, perhaps it's tackling racism, xenophobia, the list goes on.

And it's such a worthy, critical, urgent thing to be fighting against all these injustices. But the thing is, they all fall under the heading of sin.

There was no injustice in God's created world before sin entered it. But it did. Sin entered the world. It created pain, suffering, death, slavery, inequality, injustice.

But God is just. He cares deeply about justice. He saw what was wrong, and he decided to put it right by offering salvation. For two reasons.

Firstly, because God is infinitely good and infinitely just. And so he wants to see his world restored. But secondly, because it means he can, as he always wanted, dwell with his people.

[13:40] He wants to draw near to us, to speak with us, listen to us, to heal us. God wants to get rid of the gap that sits between him and his people.

So yes, God cares about justice, to the point that he offers a solution to all injustice. Once God's people were slaves in Egypt, living as an oppressed people, facing down the barrel of injustice. God saw what was wrong, and he longed to put it right. God is just, and because of that, he offered salvation. And so he led his people out of slavery. He guarded them, he went ahead of them, and he led them to a land where they could live with freedom, with justice, and most importantly, with him.

And God gave them many instructions involving social responsibility, so they would continually remember this movement, from life under injustice, to a life in a land of justice, by God's salvation. And so as his people, in the land he provided, provided he wanted them to be like a light, obviously set apart by their lives of justice and goodness, so that all people would see the glory and the goodness of God's salvation, and seek it for themselves, living closely and intimately with God.

[ 15 : 05 ] Being the light of salvation in the world was the task set before the people of Israel, the people in our passage, and being the light was meant to be representative of the beautiful gift they had received in being God's saved people.

And God has always been very clear about what that involved. We see this from the several if-you's, the imperatives in our passage, that are followed by the words, then your, and then you. Follow with me from the middle of verse 9. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with pointing finger and malicious talk, if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in darkness and your night will become like the noon day. Then go down to verse 13. If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight, if you honour it by not going your own way and doing as you please, then you will find joy in the Lord, ride in triumph on the heights of the land, feast on the inheritance.

God wants the people he has saved from sin, taken out of a life in justice, to live a life of justice, to be the freed and rescued people, to be a light to all nations and to welcome them to be part of God's saved people.

[ 16 : 38 ] And the beautiful design for being God's shining light of hope in the world is that God keeps that light burning. Look at the end of verse 11. You will be like a watered garden.

John Piper puts it like this. He says, it's not just a watering ministry, but a watered ministry. God asks his people to pour themselves out for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, but they in turn will be like a well-watered garden.

Now, you would just hope that the people God is addressing back in verse 1 were actually taking this seriously. You would want them to be thinking, okay, if we follow God's commandments but out of authentic worship, gratefully remembering his salvation, living selflessly, being his light in the world, then God will lead us to rich blessings.

Then he will hear our prayers, accept us, heal us, lead us into a land of justice and blessing. God wanted his saved people to be like a lighthouse, a beacon of hope to the world in the dark ocean of injustice, to restore the injustice of the world by bringing them to him so he could save them and dwell with them, but that's not what the people have been doing.

So how did the people in our passage respond? Well, you'll have to wait until next week as we continue our preaching series. But what we don't have to wait for is deciding how we're going to respond.

[ 18 : 17 ] Have we properly realized yet that no act of worship, no good deed, no checklist deals with the problem of sin? That's what God is saying in this passage.

From the mouth of the Lord, I see your checklist, but have you acknowledged your sin? Surely there is only one way for us today to respond, giving our life to Christ, who will himself transform our world and worship, leading not to just blessing today, but eternal blessing.

When the Son, Jesus Christ, perfect in obedience and without sin, was lifted on a cross to be put to death, salvation was made possible for anyone who would just simply go to him.

The injustice and the sin that people could just not keep themselves clean from, it was all dealt with at the cross. No more need for any guilt or any shame, for the followers of Jesus need only remain in his love.

In John 15, Jesus explains this, If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

[ 19 : 33 ] Jesus, if you like, is the checklist. In him, we are able to draw nearer to God. In him, God will accept us, God will listen to us. In him, God will hear our prayers and heal us.

God will lead us to triumphant and feast on the inheritance in the new creation. the glorious promised future for God's people. And yes, we are still a light to all the nations.

Yes, we are called to live as saved people who love each other by seeing to justice, sharing food with the hungry, providing shelter and clothing, acting selflessly, worshipping God authentically. We are still called to be all these things. But we need not fear that our light is failing. Jesus is the lighthouse and we all abide in him.

He is the beacon of hope that we hold up to the world and say, don't look at us, we are unworthy sinners. Look at Jesus. He is the hope in a world of injustice.

[ 20 : 41 ] Through him, people can all be saved, all draw near to God, all be heard, all be healed, and look forward to a glorious future. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word and the way you speak to us and we even thank you for the way it deeply challenges us and we pray that your Holy Spirit would be working within us this week as we go out and we pray that your spirit would change us, that it would transform us, but it would also, yeah, just help us to be assured and confident in the cross, assured and confident in our King as we look to the hope of the glorious future that we have in him.  
And in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.