

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 28, Isa. 58-59

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This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number 28, Isaiah chapters 58 and 59.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for this evening. We thank you again for your word. We thank you again for your spirit.

We thank you that you have given us your light to shine upon our path. And we pray that you will help us to recognize what that light is pointing out of good and of ill and that you'll help us to learn, to receive, to apply, and to live. In your name, we pray, Amen.

We're looking at chapters 58 and 59 tonight and they are part of this section that I have called Righteousness, the Character of Servanthood. By the way, there are some former study guide sheets back on the little counter back there.

And in particular, there are several of the first lessons with an outline and background, and so forth. So, if you need to fill out your collection, check it out there. Otherwise, they go in the trash.

So be aware of that. So that's chapters 56 to 66. Last week, I pointed out to you that it appears that these chapters are arranged as a chiasm.

A chiasm is a parallel structure. So, you have A, B, C, D, E, D', C', B', and A'. So this last section parallels this first section.

The second sections parallel each other, the third each other, the fourth each other, and the fifth stands alone by itself at the apex of the triangle, the top of the ladder. A reason for doing this is if you didn't have this section, you might miss the point. Why is God doing what he is doing, as we'll see tonight in chapter 59, verses 16 to 21, and 63, 1 to 6? Why is the light shining as a result of the Messiah's work? Ah, it is in order that the world might know.

So, we don't lose focus on what this is all about, what this is in aid of. We also don't lose focus on the problem. How can God's light shine out to a lost world, given the fact that in and of ourselves, we are incapable of being righteous? And again, that point is made again.

Don't believe that you in yourself can be a righteous person. It's a gift, a gift from God, but it's a necessary gift. Don't believe that simply because you can't, it doesn't matter.

No, God has in fact done his work on our behalf in order that his light can shine out of us and can shine to the world. So, we're looking, we looked last week at chapters 56 and 57, this opening section on righteous foreigners, and then the first statement about the unrighteous Judeans. We're continuing tonight then to talk about 58 and 59, the rest of part B and part C. Next week, we're going to cover all of this, 63 through 66, because in many ways it's repetitive of what we've already talked about.

Then on our last night, we'll come back and talk about chapters 60 through 62, the climax of the process. Okay, so tonight, chapters 58 and 59. 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, yet they seek me daily, they 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.

Now what's the problem here? Hypocrisy, Mel says, their heart condition. So what are they doing outwardly? All right, they're talking the talk, but they're not walking the walk. The forms of religion, they seek me daily, they delight to know my ways, they ask of me righteous judgment, they delight to draw near to God.

Well, what pastor wouldn't want to have a church full of those people? All right, all right. Okay, they're not really worshiping God, they're not really seeking him for himself. Mm-hmm, I think that's all right, but I see those words and they concern me.

I seek the Lord daily, I delight to know his ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the mishpat of their God. We've talked about this many times. Say it again, the word mishpat can be translated as order.

Oh, I carried off the marker. Often translated justice, or judgment, or judgments, and all of those are correct, there's nothing wrong with them, but it's just not big enough. God's divine order for life, God's divine order for existence, and that involves legal justice, but it involves more than that.

So in order, I think, to answer the question, how are they forsaking the mishpat of God? We have to go on to the next verses. Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we afflicted ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Why are they fasting? According to those two sentences. They want to get God's attention, don't they? We want you to see that we have fasted we want you to take knowledge of the fact that we've afflicted ourselves.

They are doing to get. Exactly. I mentioned in the background that the Bible is kind of ambivalent about fasting.

There's only one place that it is commanded, and that is on the day of atonement. When you are supposed to afflict yourself, and interesting that that's the word that's used, it's not, they don't have a, there's no Hebrew word that means fast, it's afflict yourself. They are supposed to afflict themselves in repentance for all of the unintentional sins they've committed during the previous year.

So, it is an act of sorrow. It's an act of repentance. It's an act of regret.

In Joel 1.13, it's not commanded but it's urged again as an expression of national repentance. A locust plague has come down upon them, and they're urged to repent and to fast, excuse me, to repent and fast. Nehemiah fasted and prayed when he heard the horrible news that the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins after a hundred years.

So, when fasting is done, it is always intended to be an expression of repentance. But I think much of the time, fasting is practiced in order to get something out of God. In the demon-possessed man, after they came down from the mountain, the mountain of transfiguration, the disciples are trying to cast out the demon and they can't do it.

Jesus does, and afterward they say, why couldn't we cast him out? Interestingly, there is a textual problem. The King James says this kind only comes out by fasting and prayer. The oldest manuscripts say this kind only comes out by prayer.

Now, I think I know why fasting got into later manuscripts because clearly Jesus is not talking about a one-time prayer meeting. Maybe the disciples didn't pray the first time they tried to cast the demon out. I guarantee you they prayed the second time they tried to cast him out.

I think what Jesus is saying is this kind only comes out as a result of an enduring spiritual life, and spiritual strength. And I think fasting then comes into later manuscripts to make that point clear, that this is something that has to be over time. And so I think that's what's going on in that passage, but it's an interesting one.

So we get a key about their fasting in the next verses. Now, my question is, do you think that's really why they fasted, in order to quarrel and fight and hit with a wicked fist? What's going on here? What's he talking about? Conflict within the church? Possibly. But notice he says, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers.

Because I have been super religious, therefore I can do with my workers whatever I want. Oh, I think it does. I think they do feel they're close to God.

And Isaiah is saying, no you're not. Well, I think one possibility is that we've got Semitic hyperbole here. That in fact you are being unkind to your workers, and Isaiah says that's like having a fistfight with them.

Again, he's, I think, maybe going to extremes to try to make his point. You're fasting in order that you can mistreat your workers and feel okay about it. In fact, what you're fasting for is to fight with people.

I think that's what's going on here. That he is expressing the true outcome of their fasting in very extreme kinds of language. I gave up more chocolate than you did.

Exactly. Exactly. I think that's exactly the point, and he's using this strong language to try to make that point clear.

And I think that goes back then to verse 2. As if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the mishpat of their God. Well, the divine order of God is we live our whole lives as a reflection of him. Not just our religious life, but our whole life.

And I think that's the point then that's being made in those first two verses is, oh yes, they are seeking God. They want to have a wonderful religious experience. What's the matter with you? Why can't you clean the house better than this? God says you don't see the connection, do you? It seems this is sort of like the rich ruler who was going off and he left the talents with individual workers and then he went off and we don't know what he went off to do.

Maybe it was to retreat and fast and whatnot. And he comes back and some people had worked and some people hadn't worked and some people knew that they weren't doing anything. Some people were partying.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes. You know here we're also in fasting and it's sort of affecting yourself.

In doing that, real fasting allows God's love to do the work to others and therefore fasting really is an act of God's love. It allows it to come out. You're not involved in it at all.

Your nature is suppressed with fasting and therefore your acts become really acts of love. Yes, yes, yes. I think there's some truth in that.

I think the key point is this thing, fasting is an expression of repentance and you folks are clearly not repenting of anything. You're just trying to get God to bless you. And because you're trying to manipulate God, it's okay to manipulate the people who work for you.

Could this go back to the concept of their birthright? Mm-hmm. And God's people and you know, here I am. Yep.

And so what to everything else? Yes, yes. I'm a good Jew and God has delivered us from captivity because we're Jews, not for any other reason. And I'm going to practice my Jewish religion and God says, you've missed the whole point, haven't you? David? Is this kind of like a freedom thing? Sure.

Or similar? Sure. And when did Phariseeism begin? Well, we don't know for sure. You know, we've got this 400 years between Malachi and Matthew, and more than that, Matthew is probably about 65 or 70 AD, but between the Old and the New Testament, between Malachi and the coming of Christ.

We know a little bit about the political situation, which was pretty horrendous. In the last 100 years or 150 years, they had a kingdom, but it was an incredibly corrupt kingdom and the priesthood was equally corrupt. Assassinations, buying and selling the priesthood, the whole everything.

During this time, and it's probably during the last 150 years from 150 BC until the time of Christ, we're told that there were as many as 80 different sects of Judaism. Sort of like how many political parties are there in France? And it's sort of the same deal. Every 10 people have their own sect.

Well, the dominant sect, well, maybe I shouldn't say that. The three dominant sects were the Sadducees, who were basically the elite. They were the ones who were running the show.

The high priests were part of the Sadducees and the Pharisees, I'll say more about that in a minute, and the Zealots. The Zealots were a political group who were determined to wipe out the Romans and restore the kingdom that they had had, which kingdom was such a mess that both parties invited the Romans to come in and help them out, which the Romans were happy to do. But, you know, here we are.

You don't understand how the Romans got here, do you? But we're going to get rid of them. So, you've got those three are probably the largest three groups. And interestingly, you've got at least one of them in the disciples, Simon the Zealot.

But the Pharisees are saying, and again, I'm confident that Jesus was all over them because they were so close to the kingdom. Jesus has very little to say to the Sadducees. These are the power elite who are using religion for their own purposes, never mind them.

But the Pharisees, Jesus is all over them. And you remember that 3,000 Pharisees were converted in the early days of Acts. So, these are people who are saying, we understand why we went into captivity.

We went into captivity because we broke the law. Well, we're not going to do that anymore. We are going to keep God's law.

We're going to keep it perfectly, even down to tithing the herbs in our cupboards. There's a sense in which Jesus says, that's all well and good. But you're simply using that to puff yourselves.

Remember Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple? I thank God that I am not as this tax collector. So yes, what's going on with the Pharisees is this same sort of thing 400 years later. So what kind of a fact does God want? Verse five.

Well, and then verse six, he basically says what he doesn't want in verse five. He wants it to be about others. Yes.

Yeah. Matthew 25. Yes.

Yes. If you want to stop eating, fine. Give your food to the hungry.

What? Why would I do that? If you want to stop doing something, stop beating up your workers. Yes. The whole purpose is others.

Fasting tends to focus on me. And you remember Jesus talked about fasting. And when he said, you know, you fast and you put black on your cheeks so they look hollow and you really look hungry.

And people say, oh my, isn't he righteous? Jesus says, if you're going to fast, go into a closet, and don't let anybody know what you're doing. This isn't about you. But again, I would want to say genuine fasting in the Bible is about repentance.

So, it hasn't rained for three months. Well, let's call a fast. So, God, we're not going to eat for, for, for two days.

So, you got to send us rain. God says, why? Well, we're afflicting ourselves. Well, that's nice.

Why are you doing that? Well, to get you to send rain. Possible that God is not sending rain because we are so oppressive of the poor around us. Oh no, God, we're afflicting ourselves to make you do what we want.

God says if you want to afflict yourself, afflict yourself for the sake of others. Not in order to get something out of me. So.

Loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the straps of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke, share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. When you see the naked cover him, do not hide yourself from your own flesh. Now you get the feeling that Jesus has been reading Isaiah.

When did we see you naked? When did we see you in prison? When did we see you hungry? Now, why is the right treatment of others, especially those weaker than we, so important to Yahweh? And why is this such a big deal? The reason why he came for all of us? Okay, the downtrodden are an expression of our sin. You can't separate the two. You can't separate a love from God and a love from others.

They go hand in hand. If you're not going to love other people, and take care of the poor and the oppressed, then how can you truly say that you love God? Okay, I agree with you 100%. I'd like to push it though.

Why is love for others so important to God? Why is it inseparable? Are we made in his image? Relationships? Pardon? The first commandment? Well, I guess this kind of goes along with that, but Jesus said that what we do unto others, we do also unto him. Yes, yes, and I want to know why. Why is my treating somebody kindly doing something for Jesus? He seems to have this tendency to identify himself with the poorest, and so what we do to them, we are doing to him.

All right, all right. He loved us first. I'm still going to push you.

Why does he identify himself with the poorest? The poorest have no power. They don't have anything to give. Yes, yes, I think that's it.

They can't pay you back. This is free. This is grace, and God is all about grace.

If I do something for you, you can and will pay me back, and God says, where's the merit in that? But when we do things for those who cannot pay us back, we are demonstrating the grace of God, and God is all about grace. So when we do that, according to verse 8, what will happen? Let's list them. What happens number one? Light.

Yes. Light will shine out of us. Healing.

All right, what else? Righteousness. You will be right. He'll hear.

He'll hear. Well, that's what we do. What he does for us is, and he picks this up again in 10b 11, and 12.

He will guide you. He'll make your bones strong. You'll be like a watered garden.

The ruins will be rebuilt. You'll be called a repairer of the breach, a restorer of the streets. Yeah.

Precisely, precisely. When you try to manipulate God to get him to meet your needs, it's not going to work. He will not be manipulated.

But when you lay aside your needs and seek to meet the needs of others, God says, here, cat. So, all these things that they are longing for, they're crying out for, and we're going to ee next week in 63 through 64 especially, they're really, they're really on God. God, why aren't you? You know, here we are.

We're back in the land, and the prophets have made all these promises. Where are you? What are you doing? Why aren't you blessing us? And God says, you don't get it, do you? It is when you live out my righteous life that you receive as a gift all these things you've been trying to manipulate God to get. But God... Seek first the kingdom.

Yeah. Yeah. Dale.

I'm going to give. Yeah. And I think God sort of grins at that.

And I think he says, if you'll do what I want you to do, even for less than the best motives, I'm for you. And I think probably all of us have experienced that in our lives. When we have, when we have indeed been faithful, maybe not for the best motives, but nevertheless, we were really going out for others.

God's willing to meet us halfway. I can't say God, but there comes a time when doing for others as opposed to for yourself becomes a struggle, and that's the test. Uh-huh.

Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Gene is saying that there comes a time when we really have to ask, am I doing this for others or am I doing it for myself? And that's, that's a test. And God brings that time. Yeah.

Yeah. So, I think that's, that's still a vitally important question. Am I really doing this for the love of God? And, and this goes back to something that, again, I hope might sound vaguely familiar to you.

Genesis chapter two and Genesis chapter three. I need wisdom. I need beauty.

I need pleasure. My friend, the snake says, God doesn't want to give them to me, and in many ways, the great crisis of life is to surrender my needs into God's hand. And to say, the best things in life that I get for myself are deadly, and the least things that I get from Yahweh are endless blessings.

This is where the battle has to be fought for every one of us. Lord Jesus, I surrender my needs into your hands, and I allow you to meet them your way. Now, again, much of the time, he's going to use our abilities.

He's going to use our gifts. But everything is changed when we say, Lord Jesus, let's do it your way. And I won't run ahead of you.

I'll, and again, maybe this is marginally familiar to you, I'll wait for your way. And that's what Genesis chapter 12 is all about. There is nothing spiritual about a piece of land, especially under your fingernails.

There is nothing spiritual about a baby, especially with a full diaper at two in the morning. And reputation, we're supposed to give that up, aren't we? But God comes to Abraham and says, Abraham, I know what you want. Would you let me give you those things? And all the angels held their breath.

All of time and eternity hung on a pinpoint at that moment. Will he say yes? Will he allow God to meet his needs? Or will he say, no, no, I can meet my needs better than you can. I'm afraid of you.

I don't trust you. You're not for me. My friend, the snake has told me all this.

And Abraham said, okay. And all the angels went, he did it. He did it.

There's hope. There's hope. So, a long, long answer, but critically important to the whole biblical message.

Who supplies my needs? Yes? I'm still a little bothered. What is true righteousness? Job was a righteous man. Everything was taken from him.

He didn't understand why. He had no expectation that he was going to get anything back. And yet he said, even if God kills me, I will trust him.

No expectation that God was going to do anything other than kill me. He'd already done everything else to me. And yet he trusted God.

He remained a righteous man. I'm not sure that I will obey God so God will take care of me. I'm not sure that that's really a righteous way to live.

Oh, no. No. And if I'm implying that, I don't want to.

I want to say, God, you determine what my needs are, and you fulfill them your way. And if you determine that all I need is nothing, and to die, that's better than my saying, no, I'm going to take care of it myself. Thank you.

Thank you. Yes, yes, yes. I do not want to say, yes, we obey God in order for him to meet our needs.

No, I'm saying we surrender our needs into God's hands, allow him to decide what our real needs are, and fulfill them in his way. Yes. Thank you.

Thank you. So, all of that coming out of your question, Dale. Yes, I think that if indeed in the end I am simply seeing the poor as a means to the end of my blessing, I'm not seeing them as God sees them.

God sees people as ends, not means. And you and I have to see them that way, too. But, God is, as I've said it in various ways, God has very little pride.

He'll often take us on the most questionable of bases. He doesn't plan to leave us there. But, you know, I think the classic example of that is Jacob.

Good grief. This guy's a crook. Double-died crook.

Lays his head on a rock out in the middle of the wilderness, and God shows up and says, Jacob, I want to bless you. It's a good thing I wasn't God at that moment. Jacob wouldn't have woken up the next morning.

But, God says, Jacob, I'm willing to take you on any basis. To start with, to start with, those who go to the Nicholasville church may hear more of this in a couple of weeks. Okay.

Ay yi yi. Now, look at verses 13 and 14. He says, quit fasting and start doing what? Keeping the Sabbath.

Wait a minute. Why would they be more likely to fast than to keep the Sabbath? Okay. I think that's the right answer.

She thinks they were making money on the Sabbath. Yes. Sabbath-keeping was real deprivation.

If you quit working on the Sabbath, that's one-seventh of your income down the drain. So, it's very interesting. Throughout the prophets, you find them attacking sacrifices, ritual worship, and demanding Sabbath-keeping.

Because to keep the Sabbath is genuinely costly. And, I think it's very interesting that these two, which one would think are quite similar, are in fact treated very oppositely. All right.

Let's push on. Chapter 59, verses 1 through 15a, some of the bleakest, bleakest passages in the whole Bible. The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, nor his ear dull that it cannot hear.

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he doesn't hear. Your hands are defiled with blood.

Your fingers with iniquity. Your lips have spoken lies. Your tongue mutters wickedness.

No one errs suit justly. No one goes to law honestly. They rely on empty pleas.

They speak lies. They conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. Wow.

But we're God's people. So, it doesn't matter how we live. We're the elect.

They hatch adder's eggs. They weave the spider's web. He who eats their eggs dies.

From one that is crushed, a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing. Men will not cover themselves with what they make.

Their works are works of iniquity. And deeds of violence are in their hands. Wow.

That's an ugly list. Yes. Yes.

Again, some of you know how I feel about television. How many billions are spent in TV production? And what is produced? They hatch adder's eggs. They weave the spider's web.

He who eats their eggs dies. From one that is crushed, a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing.

Men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity. And deeds of violence are in their hands.

Wow. What is being produced? With this huge, huge expenditure of time and energy and money? I'll leave that. Their feet run to evil.

They are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity. Desolation and destruction are on their highways.

The way of shalom they do not know. There is no mishpat, justice, in their paths. They have made their roads crooked.

No one who treads on them knows shalom. Therefore, mishpat, justice, is far from us. Righteousness doesn't overtake us.

We hope for light and behold darkness. For brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind.

We grope like those who have no eyes. We stumble at noon as in twilight. Among those in full vigor, we're like dead men.

We all growl like bears. We moan and moan like doves. We hope for mishpat, justice, but there is none.

For salvation, but it's far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you. Our sins testify against us.

Our transgressions are with us. We know our iniquities. Transgressing and denying the Lord.

Turning back from following our God. Speaking oppression and revolt. Conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.

Justice is turned back. Righteousness stands afar off. Truth has stumbled in the public squares.

Uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking. He who departs from evil makes himself a prey.

Whoa. Inability to do righteousness. Here's what we're called to be.

Here's what we are required to be. Here's what the world needs. And we're not doing it.

Now, I think God did this on purpose. Right in the middle of the verse. Verse 15.

You shift gears. The Lord saw it. And it displeased him.

That there was no justice. He saw that there was no man. Wondered that there was no one to intercede.

Then his own arm brought him salvation. And his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate.

A helmet of salvation on his head. Paul was reading Isaiah, wasn't he? He put on garments of vengeance for clothing. He wrapped himself in a zeal as a cloak.

According to their deeds, so will he repay. Wrath to his adversaries. Repayment to his enemies.

To the coastlands, he'll render repayment. So they'll fear the name of the Lord from the west. His glory from the rising of the sun.

He'll come like a rushing stream that the wind of the Lord drives. A redeemer will come to Zion. To those in Jacob who do what? Repent of their rebellion.

Their transgression. So, we are unable to be righteous. There is no light in us.

There is no healing in us. There is no righteousness in us. There is no justice in us.

God doesn't hear our cries. What's to be done? And what's the answer here? The redeemer. The Messiah.

The warrior. Righteousness as his breastplate. Helmet of salvation on his head.

Garments of vengeance for clothing. In other words, righteousness is required. Somebody read chapter 56, verse 1, nice and loud.

Do righteousness. Keep justice. No ifs, no ands, no buts.

Why? Because I'm coming. And I'm going to display my righteousness. Righteousness is required.

So that the world may know. We, speaking as the Judeans, can't produce righteousness. The warrior comes.

Now, who's he fighting? They're back from captivity. They're back from Babylon. Who's he fighting? What's the enemy of these people? Their sins.

Yes. The warrior comes to defeat their sins and enable them to be righteous. They've got to repent of their own attempts to be righteous in themselves and allow him to do it in them.

And it's no accident that chapter 60 begins, Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. There is no one who can do this for them. No one can do this by themselves.

But he comes to do it. Now, one last thing and I'll let you go here. Look at verse 16.

What is it that brings salvation? His own arm. All right? Now let's go back to chapter 53. Verse 1. Yeah, and you're ahead of me.

Who has believed what they heard from us? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Yes. There in 53, it's a spindly little thing. Seems helpless.

Now, here in 59, it is a 27-inch bicep. Now it's the warrior who's come. There in 53, God, in his weakness, takes the sin of the world into himself and gives back love.

Now, as he comes to attack sin in us, he comes as the warrior to enable us to be these things that he expects. This is where, unfortunately, evangelical theology has gotten off the track in much of North America. And that is, no, we can't be righteous and we're never expected to be righteous because God looks at us through Jesus-colored glasses and thinks we're righteous even when we aren't.

And I want to say that's not biblical. Does God declare us innocent on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice? Yes, he does. Bless his holy name.

And does he expect us to continue in sin so that grace may abound? It's fun to see all the different ways that translators try to get Paul's point if they're in Romans chapter 6. God forbid. May it never be. Let it not be so.

I think a really contemporary version would say, no way, man. Of course not. Yes, he declares us innocent on the basis of the cross all the sin.

This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number 28, Isaiah chapters 58 and 59.