



Sunday 18 October

JUSTICE

reset



A whole-hearted, and/both kind of life!

Do you remember the Old El Paso ad with the slogan 'por que no los dos'? A family is sitting around arguing over whether they have burritos or tacos and a girl asks, can't we just have both?

It's a great question.

I'm a real both/and kind of guy. I find that whenever people are arguing over an either/or situation, both sides are wrong. In my education degree we had to study the 'nature or nurture' debate. People give their whole lives to working out whether we are determined by our genes or shaped by our upbringing. In my opinion, por que no los dos?

T20 cricket or test cricket? Why not have both...

Hymns or modern worship? Do we really have to choose?

I want to have my cake and eat it too!

Well I think it's important that we keep this in mind today as we examine Isaiah 58. For, as the people of God, we are called to worship *and* justice. It is not an either/or - it's a both/and. We are going to look at a group of people that got this horribly wrong. They were too focused on worship and missed the mark when it came to actually doing: making a difference, being agents for change in the world.

Before we dive into the passage we should consider the context. Isaiah 58 is written to the community that has returned to Israel after the exile. In Deuteronomy 30 God promised that if the exiled community show their devotion to Him, God will return them to the land and restore their blessings: their power, their influence, their fortunes.

Land and blessings. That was what they were expecting to happen. This was their hope.

It reminds me of one Christmas as a child. I was obsessed with cricket and all I wanted was a Slazenger V800 bat. I was pretty sure I was going to get one. My parents had dropped hints. I'd certainly dropped hints. I was full of hope and anticipation that morning.

I remember getting up, and instead of a present waiting for me there was a clue, a riddle. It was a treasure hunt. So as you can imagine now I absolutely knew what was coming at the end. So riddle by riddle I made my way through this treasure hunt, bristling with anticipation; knowing, absolutely certain, of what was coming.

Can you imagine my surprise when at the end of the clues I found - a miniature version of the V800.

I was gutted. Sure it was technically what I wanted. But it was nothing like I had hoped for.

This helps me glimpse what this community felt. See, they were back in the land, but they were poor and under foreign control - a shadow of what they used to be. They kind of got what they hoped for - but it was nothing like what they expected - it was a miniature version of restoration, a partial fulfilment.

So how did they respond to this situation?

They tried to prove their devotion to God. They wanted to show Him how serious they were. They engaged in regular fasts to cry out for restoration and to display that they were repentant and devoted. They did this so that God would finally restore them.

To re-iterate Scott's image, they were trying to show God that He was their hub and not just one of their spokes.

Oh and by the way, I am sure you'll be happy to know I got the bat I wanted - but only after my parents had their fun.

Let's turn to Isaiah 58. If you don't have your Bibles, pause this to grab them!

We see from verse 1 that this is a message from God to be communicated to Israel. God says, *"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."* We can tell immediately that God is not pleased.

Verse 2 continues: *"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near."* What strikes me is that this is not the sort of behaviour we would call 'rebellion'. In fact, to outsiders, this looks like a healthy community. They appear enthusiastic about worship. They apparently want to know God's ways. They are asking for justice and desiring God to come near.

This community appears to be very pious and devoted to God. We might say that they're doing all the right things. If Isaiah was written in our day he may have said, 'For day after day they seek me out, they read the Bible each morning, they come to church each Sunday, they give a percentage of their income to church, they pray for justice, they sing songs about my presence...'

These are all good things to do but, as we will see, God sees the heart of this community and He can see that their devotion is shallow, their motivation is selfish, and the hub of their life is something else other than God.

Moving on we see that the people have an accusation for God. *"Why have we fasted," they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?'"* They believed that if they repented enough, fasted enough, prayed enough, showed all the outward signs of humility, that God would completely restore them.

Here we come to the evidence of God's claim that they are in rebellion - the problem here is their **motivation**.

Why are they fasting? Is it out of obedience and submission to God? Is it out of gratitude for all that he has done? No, it's to twist His arm. It's to get something. It's to manipulate Him into blessing them.

Sure, they may be doing the right things, but God doesn't want the right things done for the wrong reason.

Now it's God's turn to accuse them. God replies: *"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists."* I hope we are all starting to see how something is wrong, how they've missed the point, how they've replaced a 24/7 lifestyle of devotion to God for mere moments of outward worship.

They do as they please. These words are critical. They're trying to worship God but live their own way, do as they see fit, set the course of their own life.

In a sense they are trying to prove their devotion through their worship life, their fasting; while the lives they are living show that they really are devoted to themselves.

They're fasting because they want something. They're exploiting their workers. They're quarrelling with those around them. This is not the fruit of a life devoted to God.

God will not have a bar of this. He says, *"You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."*

This community has confused worship with devotion, fasting with obedience. They've taken part of what it means to be God's people and made it the whole thing.

Verse 5 makes this all really clear for us. God asks them, *"Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"*

Again, we get the sense that this community appeared to be doing the right things. Humbling themselves, bowing their head in reverence, lying in sackcloth and ashes to represent externally their humility before God.

I think there's something to consider here.

If you watched them worship, they appeared devout; but if you looked at their whole life it was obvious that they weren't.

If someone examined our lives, the totality of our lives, would it be clear that God was at the centre?

I don't have a work life, a social life, a family life, a financial life, and a spiritual life. If I am a disciple of Jesus then I have one life – being His follower at work, with my friends, among my family, in my finances and at church. That's holistic discipleship and it is the very thing this community are being accused of not having.

God rejects worship when it's for what we can get, and when it's ticking a box in one part of our life.

So where does this leave these people? Clearly God is not happy with what they are doing, but what does He want them to do. If we keep reading, that becomes really clear for us.

In verses 6-7, God says *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the chords 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?"*

These are some of the richest verses on justice in the whole Bible.

God is saying to this community: if you want to fast from something – fast from injustice. If you want to stop doing something – stop oppressing the poor! If you're going to stop eating – give your food away! If you want to wear humble clothes – give your other clothes to the naked.

This is the worship God wants!

God's not all that interested in our worship if we're not all that interested in the poor.

I know that sounds shocking but it's a theme right through Scripture. Read Amos or Micah or Jesus or James.

God's Word is clear that worship without justice is meaningless to God.

But so is justice without worship. This is a both/and, not an either/or.

In Matthew 23:23-4 Jesus says to Israel's leaders of the day, *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."*

Jesus criticises them for worship without justice; BUT he makes it clear that they should be doing both!

Doing justice is such a pure way to serve God: it shows more clearly than our words ever could that God is at the centre of our lives; not ourselves, or anything else.

Doing justice shows that we are obedient to God: because commands to care for the poor and the marginalised are scattered throughout the entire Bible.

Doing justice shows that we are devoted to God's mission: because we sacrifice our own comfort, our own wealth, our own time, to be agents of His project to make the world right.

Doing justice shows that we trust God: it is a statement that I am so convinced that God will provide for my needs that I can provide for the needs of others.

Doing justice shows that we are devoted to others: that we see our neighbours in the image of God and are moved with compassion by their needs.

Friends, I can't think of a better way to follow Jesus. He said that all the law is summed up in two commands: love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and love your neighbour as yourself. What better way to do that than to live a life of justice. Isaiah goes on to say that we are to spend ourselves on behalf of the poor. What a beautiful image.

This passage speaks to me so clearly about both Reset and Justice. If Reset is about making devotion to God characteristic of who we are, then I don't think it can be separated from being people who do Justice. At least not according to Isaiah.

There are some really clear principles here in this passage that I think we can take to heart:

Firstly, I think this passage shows us that we can't be a community of worship and not a community of justice. This passage talks about fasting, but really we can substitute that for any of our worship life – our quiet time, our church attendance, our tithe, our singing – none of this is wrong, but it is an incomplete picture of the Christian life.

James 1:27 tells us, *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."*

Sometimes we can be very focused on not being polluted by the world, but miss the call to justice: to care for the poor and vulnerable.

Secondly, I think that this passage shows us that we can't long for God's justice without being doers of justice.

We read in verse 2 that this community were asking God for justice, but they weren't committed to bringing justice.

There are many people across the church globally and in the world that are committed to the idea of justice – that cry out for justice, that advocate for justice on social media – but that aren't actually working for justice in a meaningful way. Church, let's not stop praying for justice, for *the world just as it ought to be*, as Scott defined it last week; but let's equally be people who do justice – people that work hard to restore the world to the way it ought to be.

Thirdly, I think this passage shows us that we can't kid ourselves that religious activity excuses us from contributing to injustice.

This community in Isaiah were doing this in a very visible and obvious way. They were out fasting while their workers were being exploited.

I don't know about you, but I don't visibly create injustice in quite the same way. You can't see slave labour being worked to the bone in my backyard.

But as a society we have become really good at hiding injustice and I contribute to injustice in so many ways. The plastic I consume is so destructive to communities in ways that I can't see. The carbon dioxide that I emit contributes to climate injustice which we know disproportionately affects the poorest on the planet. The clothes I wear contribute to slave labour and sweat shops in other parts of the world. I am unjustly wealthy – in the top 1% of global income and education. It may not be as obvious or visible for me as it was for this community, but I am just as culpable and complicit in injustice – and I cannot kid myself that my religiosity makes it okay.

I know that this all sounds like doom and gloom – but we can't possibly fix a problem that we're unwilling to acknowledge.

Still, I am not left discouraged but full of hope.

The problem is overwhelming, but the gospel is the answer.

I don't mean this in a cliché way. I'm not trying to be glib. I'm an optimist, but I'm also too pragmatic to be that trite.

The gospel is the message that God is in the business of changing hearts.

At the end of the day all injustice comes from a selfish heart and something other than God at the centre of our lives. Whether the injustice is the result of racism, pride, or overconsumption - that's a heart issue.

Only a community of disciples is positioned to address the injustices of the world. Only a community of disciples is being systematically and thoroughly *renewed through Jesus, for Jesus and with Jesus*. Only a community of disciples have the power of the Holy Spirit at work, reshaping us into the image of Christ, taking away our selfishness, our pride, and our fear of lack.

We can't do this in our own strength - it is the grace of God at work, through the activity of the Spirit in our hearts, that changes us and makes us people of justice.

And we have a couple of ways for you to position yourself to allow the Spirit to be working on you this fortnight.

We are inviting the whole church to spend time reading and re-reading the **Sermon on the Mount**. This is a potent passage that shapes us - that challenges our values, priorities and intentions.

As Small Groups we are also going to be practising **See Think Feel**. This is an activity that allows the Spirit to shape the way we see people.

We are not going to become people of justice without God's grace. His grace means both that I am forgiven when I haven't lived this way **and** that I am empowered to do better through the Spirit at work in me. So let's do what we can to open ourselves to the working of His grace in our life as we are renewed by Him, through Him and for Him.