

Title: Isaiah Session 28: Righteousness, the Character of Servanthood (Isaiah Chapters 58 and 59)

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Session: Session 28

Source: *Biblicalelearning.org* by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Fasting, Sabbath, Hypocrisy, Repentance, Iniquity, Mishpat, Redeemer, Grace, Warrior, John Oswalt

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 58 and 59, which are part of the larger chiastic structure of chapters 56 to 66 focusing on righteousness as the character of servanthood. The session exposes the hypocrisy of Judah's empty religious rituals, particularly how self-serving fasting and superficial Sabbath-keeping fail to align with God's true divine order (mishpat) of loving justice for others. Dr. Oswalt details the bleak reality of human inability to produce righteousness independently, pointing to the dramatic arrival of the divine Warrior-Redeemer who defeats sin to enable true holiness. Ultimately, the lecture refutes the theological premise that God demands no actual righteousness from His people, highlighting that Christ's sacrifice both pardons believers and empowers them to walk in practical, transformed righteousness.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Framework of Chapters 56–66

A. Opening and Prayer

1. Thanksgiving for the Word, the Spirit, and the light shining upon our path to reveal both good and ill.
2. Request for divine help to learn, receive, apply, and live out God's truths.

B. Structural Placement: Righteousness as the Character of Servanthood

1. Bounded within the final division of the book, spanning chapters 56 to 66.
2. Review of study guides and background materials outlining the final section of the book.

C. The Chiastic Structure of Chapters 56–66

1. Parallel structures nested as A-B-C-D-E-D'-C'-B'-A', connecting first and last elements in pairs.
2. Chapter 61 stands alone at the apex of the chiasm (E), showcasing the anointed Messiah preaching good news.
3. The theological purpose of the chiasm: maintaining focus on the climax of the Messiah's work and preventing the reader from losing sight of the goal of enabling righteousness.

4. Presenting the foundational problem: how to shine God's light to a lost world given human inability to be righteous.
5. Focus of the current lecture: Chapters 58 and 59, representing the rest of parts B and C of the structure.

II. Chapter 58: Hypocrisy, True Fasting, and Costly Sabbath-Keeping

A. The Illusion of Righteousness and Hypocrisy (Verses 1–2)

1. Direct command to cry aloud, lift up the voice like a trumpet, and declare the sins and transgressions of Jacob.
2. Hollow religious practices: seeking God daily, delighting to know His ways, and asking for righteous judgments.
3. Heart reality: talking the talk without walking the walk, seeking personal delight rather than true relationship with God.
4. Forsaking Mishpat: failing to live according to God's all-encompassing divine order for existence (which spans legal justice, moral equity, and life design).

B. The Manipulation of Empty Fasting (Verses 3–4)

1. The exiles' grievance: complaining that God ignores their fasting and self-inflicted afflictions.
2. The biblical baseline for fasting: explicitly commanded only on the Day of Atonement to afflict oneself in repentance for unintentional sins.
3. Fasting in times of national crisis: used as an expression of repentance (e.g., locust plagues in Joel, Nehemiah mourning Jerusalem's walls).
4. Hypocritical mechanics: fasting to seek personal pleasure, oppress workers, and generate internal conflict ("hitting with a wicked fist").
5. Sarcastic Semitic hyperbole: Isaiah highlighting that they fast to fight and mistreat others while feeling super-religious.

C. Defining the True Fast: Active Grace for Others (Verses 5–12)

1. God rejects superficial physical gestures (bowing the head like a reed, spreading sackcloth and ashes) as an acceptable fast.
2. True fasting defined: loosing bonds of wickedness, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, housing the homeless poor, and covering the naked.
3. Inseparable union: loving God and loving others are completely intertwined; treating weaker members with kindness is treated as done to God Himself.
4. Grace at the center: showing love to those who cannot pay us back reflects the pure, unmerited grace of God.
5. Promised outcomes of active obedience: light will break forth like the dawn, healing will spring up, righteousness will go before, and God will guide continually.
6. Reversing self-reliance: surrendering personal needs into God's hands to let Him fulfill them His way rather than trying to manipulate Him.

7. The model of Abraham: choosing to let God supply his needs in Genesis 12 rather than listening to the snake's lies in Genesis 3.

D. Costly Sabbath-Keeping over Easy Rituals (Verses 13–14)

1. Transition of instruction: quit hypocritical fasting and start keeping the Sabbath.
2. Financial reality of the Sabbath: ceasing work on the Sabbath represents an actual, costly deprivation of one-seventh of one's income.
3. Prophetic preference: prophets repeatedly attack mechanical sacrifices and easy fasting while demanding Sabbath-keeping because the latter is genuinely costly.

III. Chapter 59: The Separation of Sin and the Intervention of the Warrior-Redeemer

A. The Bleak Catalog of Societal Iniquity (Verses 1–15a)

1. Refuting divine weakness: God's hand is not shortened and His ear is not dull; human iniquities have built a separation wall.
2. Severe moral decay: hands defiled with blood, lips speaking lies, unjust courts, and conceiving mischief to give birth to iniquity.
3. Hollow outcomes: hatching adder's eggs and weaving spider webs that cannot serve as clothing (wasting immense energy on what is ultimately useless and toxic).
4. Physical and social consequences: groping for the wall like the blind, stumbling at noon as in twilight, growling like bears, and moaning like doves.
5. Total collapse of public integrity: justice is turned back, righteousness stands far off, and truth has stumbled in the public square.
6. The high cost of righteousness: he who departs from evil makes himself a helpless prey.

B. The Sovereign Turn: Arrival of the Divine Warrior (Verses 15b–21)

1. Changing gears: God sees the complete lack of justice and wonders that there is no human advocate to intercede.
2. Divine self-sufficiency: His own sovereign arm brings salvation and His righteousness upholds Him.
3. The Warrior's Armor: putting on a breastplate of righteousness, a helmet of salvation, garments of vengeance, and zeal as a cloak (which Paul later references in the New Testament).
4. Executing repayment: rendering wrath to His adversaries and repayment to the coastlands so they will fear His name.
5. The goal of the Warrior: defeating His people's sins to enable actual righteousness, bringing a Redeemer to Zion for those who repent of their rebellion.
6. Symmetrical contrast of the "Arm": in Chapter 53 the arm is weak and despised, taking sin into Himself; in Chapter 59 it is a 27-inch bicep acting with sovereign strength to defeat sin in us.

C. Contemporary Theological Application

1. Correcting modern errors: refuting the popular belief that believers are never expected to be righteous because God looks through "Jesus-colored glasses."

2. The double reality of grace: God indeed declares us innocent on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, but He fully expects and enables us to live transformed, righteous lives.