

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 28, 6-min. Video Overview

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, let's dive right into this explainer by confronting a massive, kind of uncomfortable illusion. You know those people who look perfectly religious on the outside but absolutely lack any true devotion on the inside? Yeah, we see it all the time. People talking to talk but totally failing to walk the walk.

Well, this isn't just some minor character flaw. It's a deeply dangerous spiritual condition. And the prophet Isaiah confronted it head-on.

In Dr. John Oswalt's lecture on this text, he highlights how these folks were just absolute masters of performance. I mean, they had the language down, they had the look perfected, but the core? Completely hollow. So to understand their massive failure, we really have to grasp this concept of mishpat.

Now, while it's often just translated as justice in English, Dr. Oswalt points out that it's so much bigger than just legal fairness or following a set of rules. Mishpat actually means the divine order. It's the way God intended the whole world to work.

And we're meant to reflect this divine order in literally every single part of our lives. It's not about checking religious boxes. It's about whether your entire existence, like how you treat your family, your employees, the stranger on the street, actually aligns with God's character.

And the people of Isaiah's time, they were completely forsaking this underlying order. And that brings us to the core of today's explainer, unpacking Dr. John Oswalt's deeply moving lecture on Isaiah chapters 58 and 59, titled Hypocrisy, Depravity, and the Divine Warrior. It's a fascinating study taking us on a profound journey from the depths of human hypocrisy straight down into absolute depravity and culminating in an epic cosmic rescue mission.

Here's our roadmap for today. We're going to start with the illusion of righteousness, then uncover the truth about fasting, look at God's grace for the powerless, face the pretty bleak reality of human failure, and finally witness the dramatic arrival of the divine warrior. All right, section one, the illusion of righteousness.

Let's examine these Judeans who honestly seemed like the absolute ideal congregation. Seriously, any leader would look at them and think, wow, they've got it all together. The passage tells us they sought God daily and delighted to know his ways.

They were showing up, offering sacrifices, going to the just going through all the proper religious motions. But you know what? It was a complete facade. They desperately wanted this wonderful religious experience, that emotional high of feeling close to God.

But they had absolutely zero desire to change how they actually lived on a random Tuesday morning or how they treated the people right in front of them. It was a religion of pure convenience, totally disconnected from real life. Which brings us to a specific religious practice they completely corrupted.

Section two, the truth about fasting. The contrast here is just brilliantly jarring. They were doing what we could call manipulative fasting.

They literally thought, hey, if I skip lunch, God owes me a favor. They were starving themselves as a transaction, basically trying to twist God's arm into giving them whatever they wanted. And the sheer irony here, while they were supposedly doing this super spiritual fast, they were simultaneously quarreling, fighting, and oppressing their own workers.

It's absurd, right? True fasting in the biblical context isn't some hunger strike to get your way. It's a true expression of deep sorrow and genuine repentance. It's about aligning your heart with God, not forcing God to align with you.

Dr. Oswalt points out a terrifying logic here that takes root in the human heart. If your entire religious life is built on trying to manipulate God, treating the creator of the universe like some cosmic vending machine where you insert a fast and pull out a blessing, well then you're inevitably going to abuse the people under your power. Why? Because if God is just a means to an end for you, then other human beings will just be a means to an end too.

Your workers, your family, your neighbors, they all just become tools for your own selfish advancement. So if fasting isn't about twisting God's arm to make it rain or get blessings, we move to section three, grace for the powerless. What does God actually want from us? In chapter 58, God actually tells the people that the true fast he desires is for them to loose the bonds of wickedness, share their bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor right into their houses.

Which honestly begs a crucial, almost paradoxical question. If God is this infinite cosmic being, why does he care so deeply about whether or not we share a sandwich with a hungry person? The answer Dr. Oswalt gives is just absolutely beautiful. When you care for someone who has zero capacity to pay you back, you are perfectly mirroring God.

Think about our modern hyper-transactional world for a second. We do things to network, to get ahead, to build a brand, right? But the poorest of the poor, they have no power, no leverage, nothing to offer you in return. So doing good for them is pure, unmerited grace.

And God is all about grace. By loving the powerless, you're stepping right out of the transactional economy of the world and physically demonstrating the very heart of God. And look at the incredible result.

When you actually lay aside your own selfish, manipulative needs to meet the needs of others, God promises these abundant blessings as a sheer gift. He says your light will break forth. Your healing will spring up speedily.

He's going to guide you continually and make your bones strong like a watered garden. Emphasize this: all those things they were trying to violently force out of God through their fake transactional fasting, they're actually given freely the very moment we surrender our needs to him and pour out our lives for others. But here's the agitation, and it brings us to section four, the reality of human failure.

Can humanity actually pull this off on its own? When we turn to chapter 59, we are plunged into some of the absolute bleakest text in the entire Bible. The prophet lists out the grim reality of our human condition. And the truth is, it's not that God's arm is too short to save us or that his ear is too deaf to hear.

The problem is us. Our iniquities have created a massive, unbridgeable separation between God and us. We simply cannot produce that pure grace on our own.

Oswald highlights this visceral, disturbing imagery to prove a point. And honestly, it gets wonderfully weird here. The text says humanity is busy hatching adder's eggs and weaving spider's webs.

Think about how completely useless and toxic that is. I mean, you can't wear a spiderweb, and you definitely do not want to hatch a venomous snake. It means everything we produce on our own is either dangerous or totally futile.

We're described as groping for the wall like blind men at noon, just stumbling around in broad daylight. We growl like bears. We moan like doves.

We are fundamentally incapable of producing true righteousness. We're just lost in the dark. And the tragedy peaks right here.

Despite knowing exactly what is required of us, we fail so completely that Isaiah describes justice vanishing and truth literally falling flat on its face in the public square. Uprightness can't even enter the city limits. Humanity is totally bankrupt, completely unable to live out God's divine order, no matter how hard we try.

But just when all hope is entirely lost, we reach our climax in section five. The divine warrior arrives. God looks down, sees that there is no justice, and sees that there isn't a single human being who can intervene.

Seeing that there was literally no one to intercede, God takes matters into his own hands. He physically gears up for battle. He throws on righteousness like a breastplate, sets a helmet of salvation on his head, and wraps himself in garments of vengeance and zeal as a cloak.

Fun fact, by the way, this exact passage is the original inspiration for the famous armor of God imagery that the apostle Paul uses way later in the New Testament. If humanity can't produce righteousness, God himself is coming down to display it. Dr. Oswald draws an incredible contrast here that you really have to see.

Back in Isaiah 53, the arm of the Lord was revealed in total weakness. A spindly, suffering servant taking the sin of the world upon himself. But here, in chapter 59, that same arm is suddenly described like a 27-inch bicep.

This is the superhero-like arrival of the warrior, fully loaded and ready to conquer. But this raises a really fascinating question. The Judeans were already freed from captivity in Babylon, right? Their political enemies were largely out of the picture.

So who exactly is this powerhouse warrior arriving to destroy? And this is the massive paradigm shift. The ultimate enemy isn't a foreign army. The enemy is the very thing separating them from God.

The warrior arrives to eradicate the sin inside his own people. He comes to kill their sin and do for them what they could absolutely never do alone. They have to stop their miserable transactional attempts to be righteous in themselves and instead allow the divine warrior to defeat the sin within them.

Dr. Oswalt brings this all together by showing us it's actually a two-part rescue. Yes, God declares us innocent on the basis of the cross. That's justification.

He wipes the slate clean. But it doesn't stop there. He doesn't just leave us in our dysfunction.

By his spirit, he comes to actively produce that missing righteousness within us. That's sanctification. He gives us the power to actually live out that divine order, that mishpat, so that his light can finally truly shine out to the world through us.

So the absolutely crucial point to take away from this entire explainer is this single penetrating question about your own heart. Are you going to keep exhausting yourself, putting on a religious show in a desperate attempt to manipulate God, or will you step aside, surrender, and let the divine warrior fight the battle for you, allowing him to produce true righteousness in your life? Let that question really sit with you today. Thanks so much for joining this explainer.