

Dec 19th 2010: Gifts Pleasing to God: Isaiah 58:1-12

When I was at the combined churches time of prayer recently I heard this passage read as a pre-cursor to one of the prayer times, and as I listened I knew that **this Scripture contains a** message that Christians **need to hear again** and again, and especially at Christmas time.

You see in this chapter we find Isaiah being instructed to declare in a very loud voice **exactly what God thought** about the religious acts of the children of Israel at that time, and it is **not good news**.

They thought that they were **doing real well** and that **God was letting** them down by not blessing them as they thought He should. **That they** were **fulfilling their side** of the relationship by what they did, but God was not fulfilling His responsibility to bless them in return.

Look at what they say in Isaiah 58:3

***'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'***

Whereas what God says to them is that **'even though** you come across as a people eager for me to come near you; **a nation** that has not forsaken my commands and daily seeks me out—**you in fact show** by the very things you do in an attempt to please me, that you have **no idea** concerning **what I really want from you**.

You do a lot of external stuff in my name, like fasting, but **then you blow** it by the way you behave away from the Temple, and even at times in my Temple.

You don't share my heart. You don't know what I truly desire from you.'

Today, people in general still have **no real idea of** what God wants from them. **That becomes obvious** at such times as Christmas.

They may have some understanding of **what they want** from God, and basically that comes down to the gifts of life freely given without any demands in return. **Rather like a divine Santa Clause** who passes out things like good health and happiness to all and sundry, but can't be trusted to always get it right.

But as far as God wanting something from them; well that's another matter.

When a person becomes a Christian however, that view of God **changes radically**. Through some circumstance, message, word, or intervention, God the Spirit convicts us of personal wrongdoing against God.

Suddenly it becomes apparent to us that we **human beings** have mucked up our world and our lives **by failing to live up** to the perfect standards that a perfect God justly demands—**and we've got** no one to blame but ourselves.

What's more we find we are each accountable for all the rotten things we have ever done or thought, & that God **owes** us nothing except judgment.

Then follows the understanding of the miracle of God becoming man, and taking all **the punishment** we deserve upon Himself in order that we could **be forgiven** and drawn into a whole new relationship of love with **Him for eternity**.

And it is this that overwhelms us with gratitude and gives us this desire to worship Him, serve Him, and to live each day in a way that pleases Him. **And as we learn more** about God from His Word, so the Spirit of God within teaches us about the things we can do that **give God Joy**.

Now there were times in the Old Testament history of God's people when they **not only knew** what God desired of them but also sought earnestly to do such. But the period covered by **Isaiah 58 was not such a time.**

They had become very satisfied with religious procedures that did not come from the heart or affect the way they responded to those around them. **Hear what God** says about their '**religiousness**' as expressed in a modern paraphrase of 58:3b-5

You wonder why the LORD pays no attention when you go without eating and act humble. But on those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves and abuse your workers.⁴ You even get angry and ready to fight. No wonder God won't listen to your prayers!⁵ Do you think the LORD wants you to give up eating and to act as humble as a bent-over bush? Or to dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes? Is this really what he wants on a day of worship?

Now the reference to fasting, (the going without food as an act of worship), that is mentioned here, **happened** as a National thing for the Jews on one specific occasion every year. **The Day of Atonement.**

That was the day when the whole nation came before God and presented in the holy place within the Temple, the blood of the offering that would cover their sins. **The fasting on that day** was to give them the chance to see their wrongdoing and **put it right before God** as they came to Him for cleansing.

But by Isaiah's time this was far **from the case.** They saw their fasting as an **instrument** they could use to get **God's attention.** It wasn't a time for self searching, recommitment, thanksgiving, but an **opportunity** to **gain approval and blessing from the Almighty.**

We can see how easily it could have happened, for we suffer from the **same danger.** Our worship on a Sunday or on a special occasion like Christmas, **can become a duty we** do if we are not careful, rather than an act of love and adoration.

Our attitude and behavior **outside of church** can too easily become very different to that we reveal on a Sunday. **It had definitely** become like that for those Israelites.

So God sets out a list of some of the **behaviours He wants** and some of the ones He doesn't want, and in so doing **He gives us an insight** into His heart. **A strong reminder for** us too of what pleases Him. **Of the gifts He loves to receive from us at a sacred time such as Christmas.**

So look with me at Isaiah 58:6 ***"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"***

God delights in us when we make a stand for justice. When we reach out in some way to help the oppressed. **Our part may** be to pray or to give or to speak or to go. **But it all begins** in our hearts.
Can we truly say that we have a heart for justice.

Then we come to Isaiah 58:7
***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?***

There is no surprises here. We know that God **cares for the poor** and the homeless and calls us to do the same. **The hampers** here are just part of what He calls us to do, and **I thank the Lord that** here at Craigie we do seek to take this desire of God seriously.

But what we mustn't miss here is the mention of our own flesh and blood. One version says: ***"and don't turn away your relatives"***. Another talks about: ***"being available to your own families."***

Then in the second part of v9 God mentions a behavior He wanted them to cease from: ***"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,***

We can all work out what the pointing finger refers to. How quickly **we are judgmental** of others. **And malicious talk is** another word for critical gossip.

When we seek to change these behaviours because we want to please God He blesses us in so many remarkable ways. **The rest** of the chapter points that out. **There** is even a special blessing for us Aussies in v11

***The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.***

But there is one blessing that we can **aim to become for others**, as we once **again seek to please the heart** of God as His people during this Christmas season. **It's found in the second half of v12:-**

***you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.***

I believe we can change that just a little to make it a **title** that we should **aim for as a group of people** who belong to Jesus. **That we**, working together, **in submission to the power and leading of God**, become known in this area **because of our love and ministry as:-**

Restorers of broken families, lives, homes, hearts, for such is a pleasing gift for us to offer to our Heavenly Father.

