

Religion God's Way **Isaiah 58: 1 – 14**

Our sermon text this morning is Isaiah 58. We're going to look at the whole chapter, Isaiah 58, verses 1 to 14. Before that reading, we'll pray. Please join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we ask and we pray that you would now bless your word to your people. We pray that we would be given ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey. I ask that you would help me as I speak. I ask you would help me to speak the words that you want spoken, that I would preach according to your will and according to your word. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 58, starting our reading from verse 1: ¹ '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. ² Yet they seek me daily and 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. ³ "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, "Here I am." If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. ¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

¹³ 'If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'" Amen. May God bless His word to us.

In Mark chapter 12, when asked what is the first and the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, It is to "love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength." And then He gave a second commandment, which He said is like unto it: "And to love your neighbor as yourself." And only a fool would ever try to separate those two commandments.

To be a true worshiper of the living God is to be a person who can see the created image of the living God in the people who are around us. Why is it that Scripture sets a distinction between humanity, or mankind, and all of creation? Why is it murder to slaughter a man, but it's not murder to slaughter an ox? The answer is that the man bears the image of God. The man bears the created image of God, and to attack that image is counted as attacking God Himself.

What's the basis of all morality, of all truly good laws? The basis is that people—man, woman, child—bear the image of God, that people are created as an image of God, and that that image of God should not be assaulted. You're not going to find the basis of law in evolution. You're not going to find the basis of law in telling people that the reason you should honor other people is that they're clever monkeys like you, that they're blessed chemical reactions like yourself.

Let's be honest. If the theory of evolution were taken as a basis of morality, well, how does the theory of evolution work? The weak are to die that the strong may live. The theory of evolution does not make anything good or bad. According to the theory of evolution, there's nothing other than survival—the survival of the fittest. And the fittest are those who don't die. So according to the theory of evolution, you can't establish anything like morality. You can't define anything that's right or wrong. And that's why you'll find that those people who are high-profile atheists will often say things like, "Right and wrong is only situational. It's only according to the majority opinion at any given time."

The prophet in Scripture was someone who took that law of God concerning how a person should live in the midst of other people, and applied the law to the people to whom he was speaking. The prophet fulfilled the role of a prosecuting lawyer. The prophet basically would come to the people and say, "God's law says *this*; meanwhile, you are doing *that*. Do you really think that you can escape the coming judgment, as you shake your fist in the face of God?" That was the main role of a prophet, and that's what we find the prophet Isaiah doing today.

Obviously, Isaiah chapter 58 comes immediately after what we call Isaiah chapter 57, and I want us to read in Isaiah 57, from verse 14 to the end of the chapter. Isaiah 57, verse 14: "And it shall be said, 'Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way.'¹⁵ For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'¹⁶ For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made.¹⁷ Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart.¹⁸ I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners,¹⁹ creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,' says the LORD, 'and I will heal him.'²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.²¹ There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'"

Notice in Isaiah 57, looking at verse 15: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'"

God knows that those whom He is addressing through Isaiah are lawbreakers. He knows that they are all unrighteous, that no one has any claim of righteousness in the sight of God. And God even explains. Look at Isaiah 57, verse 17: “Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. ¹⁸ I have seen his ways.”

Isaiah is being used to send forth that call to faith and repentance. Looking again at Isaiah 58, verse 1, God speaking through Isaiah—we could even say, God, giving an instruction to Isaiah: “¹ ‘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.’” There’s the instruction to the prophet. “Declare to them their transgression. Declare to them their sins. Now what are the sins that Isaiah is to deal with particularly? Well, it’s the sin of religious hypocrisy. It’s the sin of doing your righteous deeds in the sight of mankind. It’s the sin of seeking the praise of men, rather than the glory and the honor that comes from obedience to God.

Reading on into verse 2, God says “they seek me daily and 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 never forget, there’s a certain amount of irony there. From Isaiah chapter 1, we noticed that God had said to His people, “I hate your convocations. I hate your gatherings in my name. They’re false. They’re shallow. You’re hypocrites. You claim to be worshipers of the living God, but you are not.” And we’re getting very much a similar message all over again.

God is saying through Isaiah, “Yeah, sure, you say your prayers. You go through the routines. You do the things that look like obedience.” They’re even bold enough to ask of God, looking at the end there of verse 2, they ask of God “righteous judgments.” Righteous judgments.

Think about it. Think about it honestly, my friends, if you were to truly come into the presence of God, would you be asking for righteous judgment? Or would you be asking for mercy? If you ask God for righteous judgment, what are you going to get for your troubles? If God judges you righteously, if God judges me righteously, what do I get? Smoked, burned—you’ve got it right. Condemned.

My friends, I actually don’t want righteous judgment from God, because I have no righteousness to show God. I want mercy. I want God to be merciful. I want God to look upon me and to forgive my sins. Only a fool, only a fool is going to draw near to God and ask of God, “God, bring me some righteous judgment. Bring me justice! I want justice!”

You know, God has been merciful from the very beginning—Adam and Eve. They eat of the forbidden fruit. What was the commandment? What was the promise? “Eat of the forbidden fruit and on the day that you eat of it, you will die. Dying, you will die,” is the way we could interpret that phrase in the Bible. And yet, they didn’t die. They died eventually, but God did not put them to death at that moment. He could’ve. It would’ve been just. That was what He had warned them. “Eat of the fruit, and in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.”

But no, God preserved them. He clothed them. He slaughtered an animal. He covered their nakedness. He judged the serpent who had deceived Eve, and He makes promises in that judgment. What was the promise? “There will be born a seed of the woman, who will crush the head of the serpent.” A merciful promise. So even as God came to judge them, He made a promise of coming salvation.

If Adam and Eve got justice—“God, bring us your justice!”—you and I wouldn’t be here today. None would have been saved. Justice would have been obliteration at that moment—finished, gone! And what claim have any of us got on God’s justice? The answer? We know the truth, or we should know the truth—we have none. We have no claim of justice. We have no righteousness of our own.

Looking at Isaiah 58, verse 3, they continue to moan and complain—this is the people to whom Isaiah speaks—“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” “Why? Why? Why, God? Why don’t you hear our prayers? We’re good. Surely, we’re good. We’re better than the people around us.”

That’s always the way people think—“We’re better than the people around us.” Ask someone in their sins, and they’ll say, “Look, I’m not the worst person down here. There’s always someone worse than me. You know, there are twenty people doing this, and I do it less than nineteen others. Surely, surely I’m okay. I’m not the worst. I’m not the worst.”

You know, you get your school exam marks back—I don’t know if they still do exams in schools, they don’t seem to want to teach anyone anything, but going back to when I was in school and the quiz results come out—I knew pretty much every quiz that I wasn’t going to be the top of the class, but I didn’t want to be in the bottom ten. If I wasn’t in the bottom ten, I was sort of happy, you know?

And that’s the way people like to imagine God is with sinners. “I’m not the worst. I’m not the worst, and if I’m not the worst, why aren’t you answering my prayers? I humble myself in your presence, God.” Imagine that—boasting of your humility. Boasting of your humility! What’s that joke we used to hear? “You know, I’m perfect. And humility is my second greatest asset.” Well that’s these people—“We’ve humbled ourselves!” My friends, the person who’s truly humble isn’t proud of humbling themselves. The person who’s truly humble makes no claim. “I’m a sinner. I need your forgiveness.” Remember the prayer of the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And that was all he said. He wasn’t even willing to look towards the temple. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Yet these people, they’re like the Pharisee. “We humbled ourselves. We cut the tithe in everything we own, and we say prayers every day. And everybody knows that I’m righteous. Why aren’t you hearing my prayers?” That’s their complaint. That’s their complaint against God. “We’ve got all the externals.” But here, God’s answer comes in the second half of verse 3 and onwards. “In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.” So on this day of fast, in some way or other, even as they are fasting, they are oppressing their workers.

Now we don't know how they were oppressing their workers. Are they perhaps trying to force their workers to fast when they fast? Well, that would be fairly foolish. That would be wicked, trying to force someone else to be as righteous as you imagine yourself to be. Or perhaps it's simply the fact that their dealings with their employees are dishonest. They don't pay the wages when the wages are due, they don't pay the going rate. One way or another, even as they are fasting, they're fasting for their own pleasures, they're oppressing their workers. Verse 4 tells us that they're fasting to win arguments. "You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist."

You know, when it comes to Reformed theology, there's what is often called the "cage stage." You've probably heard of it. Someone gets to the point where they've suddenly come to understand things in the Scripture. They've suddenly started to understand some theology. They've suddenly had their eyes opened to things of which they were once ignorant, and all they want to do is win arguments. All they want to do is confront people. All they want to do is make sure that everybody understands, "I've got the system. I know it."

I remember the last time I met one of those guys, I ended up walking backwards across the room as he was walking towards me, and he's into me, into me, into me. I mean, the spit was spraying from his mouth, and it was a horrible sight. And you know, it was obvious he'd only picked these things up in the last month. I said nothing. It wasn't worth trying to answer the guy. But, you know, they're fasting to win their own arguments.

Why did God appoint a fast? What was God's purpose for fasting? Well, in the Old Testament, God only appointed one fast. We'll find it in Leviticus chapter 16. Just turn to Leviticus chapter 16. God appointed one fast that was to do with the Day of Atonement, the day of sacrifice for the sins of the nation. Looking at Leviticus chapter 16 and verse 29:

“²⁹ And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. ³⁰ ... you shall afflict yourselves.”

That affliction was a fast. That was the only fast that was commanded in Scripture, and it was to do with the humbling of yourself and the confession of sins. Looking at verse 30: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins." The fast was appointed as a means of humbling yourself, of afflicting yourself, of laying yourself, as it were, before God, and saying, "I deserve your judgment. If you were to judge me, God, if you were to destroy me at this moment, I deserve it. It is what I have earned." And that's the only fast that was appointed in the law.

In Isaiah, it's speaking to people who are fasting to win arguments; fasting to appear to be righteous; fasting to try and make sure—look at the end of Isaiah 58, verse 4—"Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high." They're imagining that fasting is nothing other than like plugging in an amplifier—making themselves louder. "God will hear my prayer because I'm fasting." It's the martial amp of the prayer system, as far as they're concerned. "God will hear my prayer."

Isaiah 58, verse 5, God asks the question, “Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?”

Now what’s the point here? Sackcloth and ashes are symbolic of repentance in the Old Testament, but the problem here is, this person is not repentant. They’re simply spreading sackcloth and ashes to put on a religious show. The sackcloth and ashes, when they come from a repentant heart, are surely acceptable in the sight of God. But Sir Hypocrite sees the genuinely repentant person in sackcloth and ashes, and thinks, “Oh. Oh, that’s the way—that’s the way a religious person does it. That’s the way you do it. That’s the way you get God’s favor. I’m going to do it. I’ll copy them. I’ll do it their way.” And God says, “It’s just a show. This is not acceptable to me. I don’t want this kind of religious observance. It means nothing to me.”

Reading on from Isaiah 58:6: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

A genuine fast is not concerned with what you get out of it. A genuine fast, from verse 6, is concerned in the first instance with dealing with sin—“to loose the bond of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.” Now that’s a picture of sin. The idea is here that you are fasting and praying concerning sin. You could be praying and fasting concerning your own sin, you could be praying and fasting concerning the sins of others. You’re praying concerning sin.

In every instance, a Christian ought always to be praying concerning their own sin, concerning our own wickedness, concerning the sin to be found in our own heart. In the second instance, verse 7, “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” It’s to seek opportunity to do good to your fellow man. Obviously, if you’re not eating bread, you’ve got bread to share. You should be caring for people. You’re to fast and pray concerning sin and repentance, and you’re to fast and pray concerning the opportunity to do good to your fellow man, to love your neighbor as yourself, to be one who cares for the poor in the land.

And then look at the promises that we get concerning a true fast. Verse 8: “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.”

A fast that is approved of God, a fast that is a fast of affliction and repentance, a fast that is concerning for other people, and your desire to honor the image of God around you, is a fast that makes your prayer be heard. Think back to what God says. He says at the end of verse 4, “Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.”

But then, speaking of a genuine fast, or a true fast, God says, “Here I am.” Verse 9: “Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’” “Here I am.” God will hear. God will hear our prayer.

Let’s keep reading through our chapter. Isaiah 58, verse 11: “And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. ¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”

Keep reading: “¹³ ‘If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

A very shallow reading of this chapter would tell us that we’ve basically got a checklist here—If you do these things, other things will happen. A very shallow reading of this would confirm, for example, something like the prosperity gospel—“If you believe this, if you say the right prayer, if you do this, everything will go your way. Your bank account will be fat, the money will roll in, you’ll get a nice car, a nice wife, a nice husband—whatever it is—a nice house. Everything will go your way.” But that’s a very foolish and shallow way to read the passage.

What God is speaking of is the fact that He desires to see true heartfelt repentance, true heartfelt conviction of sin. Worshiping God is not going through a formula. It’s not going through a week-by-week cycle of doing whatever it is you think that religious people ought to do. It’s actually surrendering your heart to God.

Remember I started us off with the two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. You won’t get the second without the first. How can that be? Surely a person could do good to their fellow man without necessarily being a Christian. Well, I don’t deny that. Of course a person can do good to their fellow man without necessarily being a Christian. Of course. We all know that that’s a fact.

But here’s the thing: What’s the greatest good you can do for your fellow man? What’s the greatest good you can do for somebody? If the Scripture is true, if this revelation that we have from God is true, if God is who He says He is, if God is like He says He is, if God is holy, if every person upon this earth will at some point face God, will face God in judgment—if God is who He says He is, what’s the very best thing that you can do for your fellow man? You can warn them of the coming judgment. You can teach them about salvation, which is to be found in Jesus Christ.

If you give a person a blanket and a meal, that is certainly a good thing. I’m not saying it’s not a good thing. But that person, in the end, faces God. Never forget this. That person in the end will come before the judgment seat of God. And just as we as Christians know that we have no righteousness of our own, neither do they. We are saved by grace, and if they are to be saved, they are to be saved by grace.

So, yeah, sure, love your neighbor as yourself. Do good for your neighbor at every opportunity. Do good for anyone that you can do good for. But I'm telling you that if you try to do that apart from the gospel, you're not doing them any long-term good. You give a person a loaf of bread, the next day they need a loaf of bread. If you give them the means of living, they'll make their own bread. The trouble with all the world is not poverty. The trouble with all the world is separation from God.

Just cheating a little bit, looking ahead to Isaiah 59, verse 2, we read: "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God. And that is the state in which we find all of humanity.

So how is it, then, that we can love the Lord our God and we can love our neighbor as ourself? Well, everything that we do must be done in a worshipful way. Everything that we do must be done according to the commandment of God. You give them the physical food that they need, and you give the spiritual food that they need even as you're giving them the physical food.

What do they need? They need Jesus. This whole world, everyone you meet, they need salvation in Christ. They don't need to be told that there's nothing to worry about. They don't need to be told that God is the happy hippie up in the sky, and however you are or whatever you're like, He's going to take you. They don't need to be told lies—that everyone who dies is justified; that all who go on to the next world are going on to a better life. I'm sorry, but it's a lie. They don't need people who call themselves Christians to sugarcoat the pathway to hell. That's not love. That is neither loving the Lord your God and giving Him the glory, nor is it loving your neighbor as yourself. You can't do the one without the other.

Do you see the point I'm trying to make? You can't love your neighbor as yourself if you don't love the Lord your God, because everything that you do must spring from a heart that worships. It must spring from loving God and wanting Him to be glorified. And that's the only motivation for works that stands in the presence of God.

There's no point carrying a check-list, my friends—"I've done A, B, C, D, and E. Aren't I good? I've done it. And I haven't done F, G, H, I, and J. I have done this, and I haven't done that. I must be good. I must be saved. I must be a Christian." Really? Really? There's a lot of things a lot of people haven't done, and there's a lot of things a lot of people have done.

My friends, if a person could work their way into salvation through doing and not doing, why in the world did Jesus come into this earth? Why in the world did the Son of God take upon Himself flesh? Why in the world did He have to be crucified and die?

Think of it. If it was just a matter of work, if it was just a matter of knowing the right and knowing the wrong, and doing the right and not doing the wrong—if that's what salvation was, well then, Jesus didn't need to go to the cross. He needed to walk the earth, He needed to deliver the Sermon on the Mount, and then He needed to get into a chariot of fire and ride off up to heaven saying, "I told you how to do it. Follow me, and all will be well. Bye-bye." And that's all that would've been necessary.

Jesus went to the cross, my friends. He died. He, as a man, died. His human nature was crucified, slaughtered, humiliated. He died. He died as though He were a sinner. He died as though He were you or I. He died the death that we deserve. He died as though He were the one who sinned against God. He died as though He were the one that hated God. Scripture tells us that He died in our place. He died bearing the burden of our sins. He died for us.

And here's the thing. Scripture tells us that, theologically speaking, there's this "double imputation." What's that? What's "imputation," first of all? Imputation in scriptural terms is an accounting term. "Impute"—you move a number from one column to another column, you balance the books. You've imputed. You owed someone a thousand dollars, but at the same time as you owed him a thousand dollars, you gave him a thousand dollars worth of produce. He balances the books. He says, "Ah, I got that, he owed that—balanced. Zero. Imputation made."

Okay, "double imputation"—Jesus received our sins. They were imputed to Him as though He committed the sins of all who are saved. He received the price of sin. All who put their faith in Christ, seeking the forgiveness of sins, they also get an imputation. They also get something calculated as theirs. They get His righteousness calculated as theirs. They get hidden in Christ. They get hidden under His righteousness.

In other words, God looks at Jesus upon the cross and says, "You are a sinner. You are dying the death of all the sinners who are ever going to be saved," and He looks at those who are saved and says, "You are as righteous as my Son Jesus. You have been cleansed. I declare that you are righteous in my sight." Justification. Justification, received through faith alone. And the faith itself is not a work, it's a gift of God. Faith is nothing other than the empty hand, grasping the gift of God.

The sinner justified is also the sinner who receives the gift of God's Holy Spirit—the sinner who is enlivened, the sinner who is made Christlike. Justification speaks only of status before God. What's your status before God before justification, or your status in the sight of God before justification? You're a sinner. What's your status in the sight of God after justification? You're righteous.

Sanctification. What's sanctification? It's to be made holy. It's to be made Christlike. It's to be made righteous. You're given the gift of the Holy Spirit that you may do the works of Jesus. "Greater works than these," as Jesus says in the gospel of John. What's the greater work? It's the sharing of the gospel. You're made righteous. It's an ongoing process. The Holy Spirit works in us, He works through us, He's transforming us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, until that day where we meet Him face to face, and we'll be made like Him.

Now, there's a magnificent thing, and I'm almost not sure what it means. How can I be like Jesus? I don't know, but Scripture tells me it's coming. What a blessing. What a blessing. Those people who are justified, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, those people who have been marked off as God's people, they're the people who *can* love the Lord their God.

Now our love for God will never in this life be perfect. The commandment is "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength." And we never keep the commandment. But

God is gracious and merciful, my friends. He forgives us. Not one day of our lives will we ever at the end of that day say, “Well, today I did it. Today I really loved the Lord our God the way I should.” But God is gracious. God accepts us. God loves us in Christ. Remember, Christ’s righteousness is counted as our righteousness.

What does it look like to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? It looks like an innocent man dying on a cross. He’s the only one who ever did, and they killed Him. But His righteous love is counted as our righteous love, and we through the power of the Holy Spirit are being made more Christlike, that we can love the Lord our God. And we are being made godly in the sight of God in our very lives.

How do you love your neighbor as yourself? Well, it starts from loving God. You see the image of God in the person around you. Turn to the book of Genesis, chapter 9. We’ll start at verse 5, God speaking to Noah after the flood: ““And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ⁶ Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. ⁷ And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”” Notice there the basis of all justice. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

Why should you love your neighbor as yourself? Because God made your neighbor in His own image. Why should you not practice religious hypocrisy, but actually care about what happens to the people around you? Because God made your neighbor in His own image. Why should you be humble and truly repentant, even as you fast and seek to please God? Because God made you in His own image, and we are sinners who have broken the commandments of God.

Our God is the living God, and He’s given the gift of life. He wants His people to live. We’re born dying, we know that. We’re born in sin. But through Christ, He gives the gift of life, and that life is eternal life. But that life is to be lived out, my friends. We’re to live that life. We’re to live as Christ in the world—speaking the truth, doing good, being a people of prayer, being a faithful people, being an obedient people. I’m not saying that to live as Christ means we’re to do the miracles that Christ did. After all, none of us is actually the Son of God, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin. He was who He was. We are who we are. We’re the saved children of sinners, going right back to the first sinner, Adam himself.

But even so, being born again by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, we are to be Christ-like and obedient. And then this religion that we practice, this Christianity that we practice, will be practiced God’s way. We will grow in our love for God, and we will show love for our neighbor. We will do the things which God commands.

Hypocrisy does no one any good. The person who practices it gains nothing from it—absolutely nothing. Do you think God’s fooled? Scripture tells us it’s God who looks upon the hearts of men. It’s God who judges the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. God knows. It may fool some people, it may fool a lot of people. But what’s the value of that, in eternity? We’re here for a limited span. We’re in this world for a limited span. Then we go to God. All go to God. All return to God. All must face God for judgment.

My friends, we don't want to be asking God for justice. We want to be counting on God's mercy. And the only way you can count on God's mercy is through faith in Christ. It doesn't come any other way. It doesn't come from works. It doesn't come from any particular religious act or deed. It comes through the forgiveness of sins, which is the freely given gift of God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And so my advice to all is, put your faith in Christ. Trust in Him. Seek forgiveness in His name. Repent of your sins in His name. And then you will find that you do do the deeds that are acceptable in the sight of God, through Christ—not because we're sinless, not because we're righteous, but because Christ died for us. We will love our neighbor. We will love one another as Christ has loved us. We'll obey that new commandment, which is in many ways the old commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. But my friends, empty religion is of absolutely no value. It's a complete waste of time. God is not fooled, and God is no fool. Seek forgiveness in Jesus' name. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we do thank you and praise you that you speak to us from your word, and that you reveal things to us from Scripture that we would not know, had you not spoken. Father, we pray that we would be true worshipers, that we would be worshipers in spirit and in truth, that we would be faithful and obedient, that we would be lovers of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, and that we would truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Father in heaven, we ask that as the week goes by, we would do good by our fellow man, that we would honor you by honoring the image of God to be found in all of those around us. All of these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.