

Business as Usual

by Bill Moller (a sermon transcript -Isaiah 58:1-14)

Author Philip Yancey once wrote a piece for *Christianity Today* magazine. In it he told about a time when he and his wife visited Yellowstone National Park. Of course, a highlight of the trip was seeing Old Faithful. Yancey noted that there were tourists all around with cameras trained on the famous hole in the ground, and a large digital clock counted down the minutes until the next eruption. He and his wife decided to pass the time waiting in the dining room of the Old Faithful Inn, which overlooked the geyser. When the clock reached one minute they rushed to the windows, along with all the other diners, to see the big, wet event. At that moment Yancey noticed that all the busboys and waiters seized that opportunity to clear tables and refill water glasses, never even looking out the huge windows to witness the natural wonder. Old Faithful had grown entirely too familiar, it had lost its power to impress.



Few things are more quickly taken for granted than God's faithfulness, but few (if any) things are more important. God deserves our undivided attention, as well as our praise and wonder.

The title of today's message, *Business as Usual*, in case you didn't realize, is tongue-in-cheek. The church is not a business, and there is nothing "usual" about the Creator of the universe.

Allow me to share the Isaiah 58 passage from *The Message* paraphrase.

(to read [Isaiah 58](#) click link)

According to Eugene Peterson we are to REFUSE to let the Sabbath be "Business as Usual". Our

conduct on the Sabbath should NEVER be "Business as Usual". The Sabbath should never lose its ability to impress, like Old Faithful.

Some of you may recall that the Sabbath correlates to the 7th day of the Creation Story. For six days God worked, and on the 7th day God stop working. You may also be aware that the 4th Commandment clearly told the Israelites that they are to keep the Sabbath - "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God."

The Hebrew word for Sabbath is Shabbat, which means "to cease". So, on the 7th day God "ceased" work. We tend to use the term "rest", but I like "cease" better. One day in seven we are supposed to "cease" work - we are to stop doing... Business as Usual.

Apparently God's chosen people, the Jews, didn't quite understand what God had in mind. Isaiah 58 opens with a rather forceful command from God to Isaiah. He was to "Shout it aloud, do not hold back." His voice was to blast like a trumpet. God had a message for the Jews and it was to be heard! I image Isaiah standing in Jerusalem crying out his message to all in earshot. The twisted part of my personality pictures Sam Kinison the comedian playing Isaiah in a movie version of this story. You remember Sam Kinison, right. He used to scream everything he said.

Hey! Listen up! You're doing things all wrong. That's not how God said you should Fast! That's not how you should spend your Sabbath!

To help Isaiah with his message, God lists what was being done wrong, and then tells him how the

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people should behave.

Have you ever said to yourself, “I wish God would send a clear message to me. That way I’d know what I’m supposed to do.”

Hello! Try reading Isaiah 58 a few times. God’s message is pretty clear.

Let’s take a closer look, at what God is saying in this passage?

From the opening verses God exposes an apparent contradiction in the way the Jews are behaving, some might say God exposes the hypocrisy of their actions.

In verse 2 there are a couple of terms that are very telling.

“as if” and “seems”

*² 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 them.*

God is saying: Things are not what they appear to be, and two examples follow:

The people fast, but they want to be seen fasting.

The people humble themselves, but they want to be noticed for being humble.

But it gets worse. Though they FAST – a perfectly good practice designed to help one focus on God – their conduct is selfish, they exploit workers, and they end their fast quarreling with people. God wants them to know that that is not how it works.

Plus, while they are acting this way they were putting on a show. They got dressed in sackcloth

and ashes. Can you image this scene? Picture Pastor Andy decides to fast one Sunday. Then, he puts on a black suit – like one you would wear to a funeral. All morning he’s walking around moping while arguing with his parishioners, and barking out instructions to Earle. Finally he takes the cake – literally – and goes home with it - so he can enjoy on Monday, when the fast is over.

Pretty crazy, eh? How did the Jews get so confused about how to behave?

It happens slowly, over time.



I believe it was the late Mike Yaconelli, an author and Youth Specialties minister, who told a story about a conversation he had with a farmer. The farmer was bringing a cow back into the pasture that had wandered off and made its way down the road and into his neighbor’s field. Yaconelli asked, how does a cow get so far away from home? The farmer replied, “Well, she doesn’t start off thinking ‘I’m gonna walk way over there and see what that field looks like.’ No she starts nibbling at the grass near the barn. Then she sees a

patch a few yards away that looks appetizing. Next she spots a section near the fence, and then a tuft down by the gate. After that she heads for another patch just past the gate. Slowly, over time, she has wandered across the road and ends up in somebody else’s field.”

Hopefully, the farmer finds the cow before it’s too late, and leads her back home, to safety. God is doing just that with this message through Isaiah, but there is a caveat. God says, “don’t expect to be heard in Heaven, when you’re acting like that. God will lead us home, but our selfish prayers may not be heard.

After that warning, just in case we don’t realize what we SHOULD be doing, God explains:

*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?
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?*

Let's look at the contrast between what happens when you act with wrong motives vs. following the ways the Lord suggests. Rather than not being heard, this is the result:

*8 Then your light will break forth
like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly
appear;
then your righteousness will go
before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be
your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and
the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will
say: Here am I.*

Okay, here's what the kind of Fast God chooses looks like:

Loose the chains of injustice
Untie the cords of the yoke
Set the oppressed free
Break every yoke
Share your food with the hungry
Provide the poor wanderer with shelter
Clothe the naked
Do not turn away from your own flesh and blood

Then God says, if you do that, the result is:

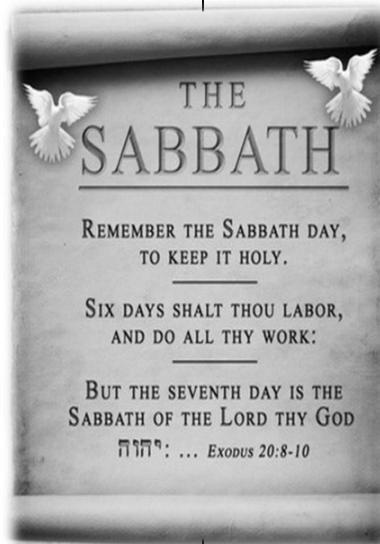
Your light will break forth – God will be able to use you effectively
Healing will quickly appear – God will relieve your afflictions (not necessarily take them away, however, but begin healing them)

Righteousness will go before you – God's snowplow will clear a path before you
Glory of the Lord will be your rear guard – God's got your back
You will call on the Lord, and he will say: Here am I. – that's very different than what was said before.

That is a very clear message!

But, just in case we didn't catch what God said the first time, Isaiah is given a second round. God restates the message using slightly different descriptions. But, the point of verse 9-12 is the same as verses 6-9. Change your ways. Stop focusing on self and start looking outward. If we take care of others, God will take care of us. No more selfish "Business as Usual"!

I began this message talking about Sabbath, but God started with Fasting. It isn't until verse 13 – the second to last verse of the chapter – that God introduces the Sabbath as the focus of the discussion. What's with that? You would think Sabbath would be a priority to God, and the message would lead with that topic, wouldn't you?



Starting in verse 13 we read:

*13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the Lord's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle
words,*

That sounds to me like the same description God gave for Fasting.

Keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
From doing as you please on my holy day

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Call the Sabbath a delight and honorable
Not going you own way and doing as you please
Not speaking idle words

Could it be that keeping the Sabbath IS
a form of fasting – fasting from all
work, fasting from a self-serving
attitude, fasting from “Business as
Usual”?

And what does God say will happen if
you keep the Sabbath in the way
suggested?

*14 then you will find your joy in
the Lord,
and I will cause you to ride in
triumph on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of
your father Jacob.”*

You will find joy in the Lord

You will ride in triumph

You will feast on the inheritance of your father
Jacob

Remember God is speaking through Isaiah to the
Jews in Jerusalem. These people are the
descendants of Jacob. God is promising an

inheritance to the children of the tribes of Israel.

So, you might ask: “What does this mean to me? I’m
not a Jew.”



Jump ahead about 800 years - from
Isaiah’s time to the first century AD –
and shift locations from Jerusalem to
Rome where the Apostle Paul writes
his letter to the church in Rome. In
chapter 8 of the book of Romans he
writes:

“For those who are led by the Spirit of
God are the children of God. The
Spirit you received does not make you
slaves, so that you live in fear
again; rather, the Spirit you received
brought about your adoption... Now if
we are children, then we are heirs—

heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...”

We are heirs. We, as Christians, indwelled by the
Holy Spirit and adopted as children of God - share
in the inheritance Isaiah is shouting about.

And just in case we forgot who was telling us all
this, it’s not Bill Moller. It’s not Isaiah. We can
reread the closing of the passage... For the mouth of
the Lord has spoken.

Let’s pray!