

"What Does It Take For Our Light To Shine In a World Where Some Can't Breathe"

Right up until Saturday Morning I was planning on continuing The Sermon on the Mount. Today is my 45th wedding anniversary. I was going to deal with Jesus' words on the sacredness of marriage. But the discussions I've had with people all week about the death of George Floyd, the riots and the peaceful protest, all moved me to take a different approach. I believe God was leading me to this. I doubt I need to do a lot of introduction to stir up some interest in the issue before us.

I would like to clarify what I will and will not do in this message.

First, what I will not do: I'm not going to try to get into the details of specific events that have unfolded since the death of George Floyd. Were the protestors in this or that particular situation violent or peaceful? Were the police justified or overreacting? Was the media reporting fair or biased? Like you, I want to answers to my questions but it isn't always easy to get all the answers in a balanced way. So, at least for the most part, I don't plan to argue for one side of any specific story. That is not what I will do in this message.

Second, what I will do: I don't usually do this but I am going to tell you what I hope to accomplish by God's grace. I hope to do three things. I think these are three things with which we should all agree.

- 1. I want to challenge you to humbly consider that we may have areas of blindness when it comes to caring for the hurting.*
- 2. I want to call you to live and move relentlessly in the direction of love and compassion.*
- 3. I want to encourage you to have great hope in God that fallen people can be the means through the light shines in a dark world.*

Some of you are not going to like it that I am saying anything at all. Others are not going to like because I am not saying enough or not saying everything you think I need to say.

But, we don't have to cover, everything. Let's focus on three things in **Isaiah 58** that can move us in a good direction.

First

I. WE SHOULD HUMBLY CONSIDER THAT WE MAY HAVE AREAS OF BLINDNESS WHEN IT COMES TO CARING FOR THE HURTING.

In **Isaiah 58:1** Isaiah is told by God to “*Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet*”. Why? Because his people are comfortable in their religion but blind to the cries of the hurting. In **verse 2** he says they are acting *as if – as if they were a nation that did righteousness*. In **verse 3** the people ask God, “*Why have we fasted, and you see it not?*” God answers that they were busy being religious but oblivious to people in need. He puts it positively in **verses 6-7** when he gives them a list of things to do to care for the hurting. He says, *let the oppressed go free, feed the hungry*. God says: “*If you do not care for the needs of people, you do not understand my heart and you are not as close to me as you think.*” You are blind and deaf.

Here’s the thing we especially need to see from this Scripture:

A. It is possible to be failing at compassion but to be completely unaware of it.

That’s one of the great messages of the prophets. That’s why verse one says, *lift up your voice like a trumpet*. They thought they were righteous. They didn’t feel as if their failure to show compassion was a significant spiritual deficit. They were sure they were fine. They weren’t. The prophet called to awaken them to what they do not see.

Throughout the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus is dealing with the similar reality that what the Pharisees thought they knew already was blinding them to the truth about what God wanted for them. They supported each other in that blindness. Later in the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus uses their example to speak to us all; In **Matthew 7:5** Jesus says *You hypocrite first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye*.

The Bible talks about this universal tendency so often, so emphatically that everyone one of us should take to heart the danger of bias and blindness keeping us from seeing what we should see. Whatever your ethnicity and your life-experience we all have a tendency to a bias that blinds us. We favor ourselves. We favor our tribe. We are often ruled by our emotions, our quick reactions, or our incomplete knowledge.

In an interesting mix of Metaphors the Bible teaches us...

B. One way to address spiritual blindness is to work on being a better listener.

Listen first to God. Then also make it a priority to listen to other people and especially to hurting people. **Proverbs 21:13** says, *Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.* **James 1:19** *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* The Bible does not encourage us to be spineless or confused or unable to come to a conclusion but it cautions us against a dismissive, condescension toward other perspectives and calls us to examine ourselves, to listen to God and with that to also listen to others.

One of the dangers in this present situation is that we have the ability to arrange our lives so that we don't have to hear other voices much less listen. We can stay in our own bubble listening only to those who support and reinforce what we want to believe and already believe. The verses that tell us to listen are not calling us to only expose ourselves to and listen to the people saying the same things we already think so as to only harden us more and more in our present perspectives. Our doctrine of human sinfulness, *total depravity*, means not only our choices are affected by sin but our perceptions are colored by our sin and our bias. Don't reinforce your biases challenge them.

Listening can be challenging, confusing, frustrating but we have to listen. By all means hold firmly to your Biblical convictions. But strive also and especially to understand others who share your core convictions but have different perspectives on how those convictions relate to our present situation. Would you commit to try to be a better listener, to better understand others, not just to shut them down or prove them wrong but to first be sure you have taken the log out of your own eye and listened with care and compassion and a desire first of all not to be understood, but to understand?

So this is the first point, We should humbly consider we may have areas of blindness when it comes to caring for the hurting. Because of that we should work hard listen to God and to listen to others. Here's the second point.

II. WE SHOULD SEEK TO LIVE AND MOVE RELENTLESSLY IN THE DIRECTION OF LOVE AND COMPASSION.

Beginning in **verse 6** God through the prophet lists multiple ways to care for the hurting. The point is that these are all examples of ways to reflect our commitment to God. They all have to do with practical acts of compassion. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls us to be the light of the world. Here in **Isaiah 58**, verse **10** says, *If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted then shall your light rise in the darkness.*

A. When we hear the cries of the afflicted our first response should be compassion.

It's often important to get the facts right. Sometimes it's hard to do that. Sometimes we get so caught up trying we miss something more basic which is this fact. God calls us to respond to hurt with compassion. Even if we disagree on some things we can agree on that. What if the world scrolled through our Facebook posts, and listened to what we said and Lord willing watched what we did and were impressed with the depth of our compassion? What if they said, the Christians I know, some are more sympathetic to the incredibly difficult job law enforcement is being asked to do and some are more sympathetic to the passionate cries the protestors are asking us to hear, but all of them seem full of compassion for the hurting in this world?

B. Compassion doesn't require anyone to call evil good.

Isaiah 5:20 says, *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!* We should *never* justify looting, rioting, the tragic murder of David Dorn the retired police captain fatally shot by looters in St. Louis. Evil is evil. Of course we should not excuse, police brutality or injustice either. I am not saying these things are all equivalent – just that both statements are true. Love and compassion may not bring us into agreement on every issue but it will put us all on the same path.

Is there oppression in America? Did you watch the video of the death of George Floyd's? Can you understand how, coming on the heels of several recent events involving the deaths of unarmed black people in our nation that had a traumatic and tragic impact on the hearts of black people. I believe we live in a great country with some great history but also some not at all good history. We have great

potential but we also have deep problems. I do not agree with those who think America is irredeemably evil – far from it – but slavery is oppression and centuries of slavery followed by decades of discrimination leaves an impact.

As Christians who believe in human sinfulness are we going to claim that in our recent history racism has gone away entirely? I have read some pretty interesting arguments that our culture is actually less racist than at any previous time in American history. ¹ Let's imagine that is true. I hope it is. Does that mean there is now no injustice or trauma due to the racism that remains? There is no more work to do

There was an article in a conservative website that was titled *Speech is not Violence and Violence is not Speech* and it was a good article. In the comments section a black man wrote in. He said he appreciated the nuance of the post and wished there were more places to sustain reasoned discussion. But he wants to share a question with the author. He asked, what if racism doesn't have to be systemic to have a pretty strong disproportionate impact on the people who are on the wrong side of the stick? He asked this, if systemic racism deeply harmed 50% of the Black population is that a big problem or a small problem? I guess point of view would matter because it would only impact 6% of the US population, but to that Black population, it's a pretty big deal.

Then he shared this more personal story.

I say this as a conservative Black man who loved to read the Weekly Standard and considers himself a Burkean conservative. I am a Harvard graduate and an MBA and I have been detained by police more than a dozen times, including 3 times with officers drawing guns to my head. Every peer I know has a similar experience. Is this systemic racism? I don't know any white friends who have been violently detained by police. I don't believe that any of the individual officers had malice in their hearts when they did this, but it does feel like the laws and customs of policing have led us to a place where someone like me is assaulted by the state." ²

Does he have a complaint to share? Does he have a genuine lament to lift to the Lord? How would you respond to him with compassion if he were your friend? What if the same thing happened to a man who did not have his resume – a man who had little but his own human, made-in-the-image-of-God dignity? How would you show compassion?

Would you launch into an argument with him? Would you share a video from a black conservative with a different perspective to cancel out his lament? I hope not.

I will speak personally for a moment about one small way I understand the application of Isaiah for my life in the present climate. I do not believe it would be wise or compassionate if I were to minimize the hurt and trauma our black brothers and sisters, and other minorities have experienced. I do not believe my speech would be seasoned with grace (as Colossians puts it) or words spoken wisely and in season (as Proverbs puts it) if I were to correct a brother and sister for the particular phrase used when they voice their heartfelt longing to know that their lives matter also.

I am stung by the scathing words of Jesus. In **Matthew 23:23-24** He said *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”*²⁴ *You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!*

You may disagree with some of what I have said or what you think I have inferred, or what you have felt when I did not say everything you think I should have said. Okay. If you do not agree with my application what is yours? Where and about what kind of oppression will you respond with compassion? Do that. Start there. Love and compassion will not bring us into agreement on every issue but it will put us all on the same path. The Bible calls us to love all people of every race because God does. **Psalm 145:9** *The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.* Look for ways to build bridges, listen, listen carefully, advocate for justice, do so peacefully, work with people different than you to serve and care for others in Christ name. **Revelation 7:9-10** *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

I said there were three main points. These first two begin in a small way to answer the question from the title for this message: *What does it take for our light to shine in a world where some can't breathe?*

1st. We should humbly consider we may have areas of blindness when it comes to caring for the hurting.

2nd. We should seek to live and move relentlessly in the direction of love and compassion.

So simple. It seems that we could all agree on this. It seems that it would cost so little and begin to gain so much. What might we learn? Someone says, "But WHAT about the rioters?" If we had a church full of rioters we would need to focus our rebuke on them. That's not us.

Here's the third point – it is very short but super important.

III. WE SHOULD HAVE GREAT HOPE IN GOD THAT EVEN FALLEN PEOPLE CAN BE THE MEANS THROUGH WHICH HIS LIGHT SHINES IN A DARK WORLD.

Verses 8 and 10: *Then (that is when the spiritual reality in your heart result in practical compassion for others and especially the oppressed) Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily. Verse 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.*

Notice, the motivation to do good and to be light in the world does not come from just feeling guilty. Guilt doesn't change us deeply. So *where do we find the motivation to be the light?* It comes from a conviction in our minds and hearts. Isaiah points us beyond guilt to God In **verse 11** He says: *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.*

CONCLUSION

God is worthy of our hope and love. The evidence of that is what he has done for all of us.

The imagery of the gospel is embedded in the whole Bible. Look again at **Isaiah 58:10**, *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.* In whose life is that verse most clearly seen if not in Jesus? He poured himself out for the spiritually hungry and God raised him from the dead in power and glory. We don't deserve or earn the mercy that saves us from God's righteous judgment and gives us eternal life. We receive it by grace, God's undeserved favor and love. Christ died to pay for our sin and sinfulness. He paid what we owed. If you turn to Christ and Lord and

trust in, you are unbelievably rich. You have an imperishable inheritance beyond any calculating stored up for you in heaven forever. In Christ you are given so much, so graciously. Let your light shine. Let your light shine.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Father in heaven, God of all comfort. Forgive us our many flaws and faults and help us to become a people in whom the light shines brightly. Show us where we have areas of blindness when it comes to caring for the hurting. Enable us to live and move relentlessly in the direction of love and compassion. Empower us with great hope that through your grace even fallen people can be the means through which his light shines in a dark world. In Jesus' Amen.

¹ <https://humanprogress.org/sub?sid=253&cid=98>

² <https://qfile.thedispatch.com/p/speech-is-not-violence-and-violence> For some insight into what he means by “Burkean conservatism” consider this: <http://www.theburkeanconservative.com/about.html>