

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. And for a few weeks, we will look at the specific areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today. Last week we looked at Israel’s injustice. This week’s accusation can be summed up in one powerful verse:

Isaiah 29:13 - The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.”

The second sin that Isaiah confronts the Israelites of is empty worship. Outward ritual without genuine heart-level devotion. Performative religion. May the Lord shine His light in our hearts and reveal any way we need to repent of our empty worship or performative religion today.

There are three ways that we see this type of performative religion, empty worship, heartless ritual show up in the Bible and often in our lives today.

1) Religious works

1) Going to church

Remember last week’s passage:

Isaiah 1:10-17 - Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ “The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ¹² When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, **this trampling of my courts**? ¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. ¹⁴ Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer, I

hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, **I am not listening.** Your hands are full of blood! ¹⁶ Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. ¹⁷ Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

God is confronting the Israelites not only about their injustice, but about their empty worship. They are going through the motions, praying and offering sacrifices. But they are not listening, and they are not repenting, and they are not obeying. They are trusting in the form, acting out the ritual, but their hearts are far from God.

I remember being at a wedding up in front as part of the wedding party and hearing someone ask the priest as they received the Eucharist, “does this count?” As if God were taking attendance and they would not need to come back to church on Sunday because they had made an appearance and taken the Eucharist on Saturday.

God has similar things to say about other religious works:

2) Fasting

Isaiah 58:3–9 – “‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for **people to humble themselves**? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 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**? 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.”

3) Giving

Matthew 6:1–4 - “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

4) Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8 - “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

5) Circumcision & Baptism

Jeremiah 9:25–26 - “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—²⁶ Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.”

6) Repentance

Joel 2:12–13 - “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”

What about quiet times? Prayer time? Be careful not to do your religious works in a way that shows you are trusting in the form and thinking God is impressed, rather than bringing your heart to Him. God is not taking attendance. He is not impressed by your religious rituals. He is after your heart.

2) Religious heritage

Matthew 3:7–11 - But when [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up **children for Abraham**. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John 3:1–8 - Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s **womb to be born!**” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Your natural birth counts for nothing. You must be born of God. God has no grandchildren. You must become a child of God.

3) Religious superstition

1 Samuel 4:1–11 - And Samuel’s word came to all Israel. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ² The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today **before the Philistines?** Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.” ⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. ⁵ When the ark of the Lord’s covenant

came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that **the ground shook**.

⁶ Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, “What’s all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?” When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid. “A god has come into the camp,” they said. “Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ We’re doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. ⁹ **Be strong, Philistines!** Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!” ¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. ¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Jeremiah 7:1–11 - This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message: ‘Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. ³ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. ⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. ⁹ Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.”’

Don’t trust in crosses or rosaries or church buildings or any other religious artifact as though it were imbued with supernatural powers. That is superstition. The only reason the temple or ark was important was because of God’s presence; when God removed His presence, they were meaningless and without power.

What matters to God?

God is after your heart

1 Samuel 16:7 - But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider [Eliab’s] appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the

things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Acts 13:22 – “After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’”

God is looking for a heart that responds in worship and obedience to Him, hearts that are humble and committed to Him.

2 Chronicles 16:9 – “For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 - Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Psalms 119:10–11 - I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. ¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Matthew 5:8 - Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Matthew 22:37–40 - Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

For those who do not know God and do not have a heart-level relationship with Him:

Ezekiel 36:26–27 - I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

And for those who need to repent of devoting their heart elsewhere:

Psalms 51:10–12 - Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Come in genuine confession, repentance, obedience, worship. Think of Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well.

John 4:19–26 - “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for **salvation is from the Jews**. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” ²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Worship in spirit – with the heart. And worship in truth – according to who He is and what He has said. This will look different for each person. Some might dance and lift their voice. Others might sit quietly or even kneel. Some might sing with all their heart. Some might listen, meditating on the words and considering their meaning. Anything can become a meaningless ritual or form. But God is after the heart.

Come before Him with your whole heart, praying this prayer today:

Psalms 139:23–24 - Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.