

To HUMBLE Us (Isa 58.1-2)

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“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4.6). Humility is the first grace He gives. O come, then, blessed humility! But nothing is more unnatural for us sinners. At first we have no idea how sinful we are and our pride is conspicuous. When conscience and Scripture conspire to expose our depravity, we are forced to admit it and then feel proud of the admission. Then, when we begin to conform outwardly to God’s standard, forget it!

What is humility but owning our vileness constantly? True and deep humility *stays* low before God, even when repenting and believing. The most humble know their pride and welcome reproofs since they judge them to be richly-deserved. “The best of God’s people have abhorred themselves. Like the spire of a steeple, we are least at the highest” (Thomas Manton).

No sinners are more offensive to God than religious ones. The most arrogant hypocrites are hiding among the most orthodox and zealous believers, because this is most likely place to satisfy their craving for reputation.

We need the searchlight of God’s convicting word, penetrating our inmost recesses. Nowhere is it more indispensable than in a good church.

God hates our religion without righteousness.

For our safety, we need this driven into our hearts with great power!

A CHARGE TO THE PROPHET (v. 1)

A “charge” is a duty solemnly entrusted with strong overtones of accountability, as in 1 Tim 4.1-2. Here is a charge from Yahweh to Isaiah, and in principle, to all preachers. Forcefulness of imperative verbs. Not optional but obligatory. The book of Isaiah illustrates his faithfulness to obey; it is filled with matter that meets these requirements. Likewise with any and every faithful Christian preacher today. Little or no judgment preaching exposes a false teacher—and there are many. But what disturbs me the most is that / have not preached judgment as much or as faithfully as I ought. O Lord, have mercy!

Make Yourself Heard (v. 1ab). 1a-b → manner of preaching; 1c-d → content.

“Cry aloud.” LXX → “cry out with strength.” “Aloud” is “with the throat” (mg.). Sense of “cry” (Heb., “call”) is not weep but shout. “Shout it aloud” (NIV), like a town crier proclaiming news from the king at the city gates. Church history has a rich heritage of outdoor preaching (e.g., Whitefield). Yet the literal sense yields to the figurative → boldness and zeal: “lionheartedness.” Much of Isaiah’s ministry was silent in writing but all had to be fiercely faithful, the kind of ministry that may not be believed or appreciated but cannot be ignored. Like clanging alarm clock in a library despite the raised eyebrows.

Not a call for extroverts but for God-fearing, compassionate men. Natural disposition will not carry anyone through persecution to final reward. Some of the most faithful preachers have been naturally timid men (e.g., Exod 4.10).

The preacher must throw himself, with all the abandon of a perfect, self-emptying faith and a self-consuming zeal, into his work for the salvation of men. Hearty, heroic, compassionate, fearless martyrs must the men be who take hold of and shape a generation for God. If they be timid time servers, place seekers, if they be men pleasers or men fearers, if their faith has a weak hold on God or his Word, if their denial be broken by any phase of self or the world, they cannot take hold of the Church nor the world for God (Bounds, Power of Prayer).

“Spare not,” or, “do not hold back.” Against temptation to tone it down, soften the message, exchange frankness for niceness. “Mere advice or friendly counsel [will not suffice] to awaken drowsy consciences” (Simeon, in loc.).

He must be vehement and in good earnest herein, must *cry aloud, and not spare*, not spare *them* (not touch them with his reproofs as if he were afraid of hurting them, but search the wound to the bottom, lay it bare to the bone), not spare *himself or his own pains*, but cry as loud as he can; though he spend his strength and waste his spirits, though he get their ill-will by it and get himself into an ill name, *yet he must not spare* (Matthew Henry, in loc.).

John the Baptist reproved Herod with power to execute (Mark 6.17-18).

“Lift up thy voice like a trumpet.” John Knox: “I love to blow my Master’s trumpet.” “I assure you the voice of this one man, John Knox, is able in one hour to put more life in us than five hundred trumpets continually blasting in our ears” (English Ambassador Thomas Randolph to Sir William Cecil in 1561). “His force came from his unshaken belief that he had been called to serve the kirk by God and was God’s chosen prophet.”

“Trumpet,” Heb. “shofar,” ram’s horn, used by a man on a watchtower warning of approaching enemy troops—a grave responsibility (Ezek 33.1-9). Here the threat is God’s impending wrath (Joel 2.1). Unless we are brought to know our sins clearly, confess our sins willingly, and feel our sins deeply, we will not be convinced that severe punishment is coming.

Show My People Their Sins (v. 1cd). From *manner* to *content* of preaching.

“Shew my people their transgression, / And the house of Jacob their sins.”

⇒ The main audience: “my people” uses a word meaning “kinsmen;” here, those who belong to God by covenant, the redeemed, the chosen. “The house [Heb. can mean “temple”] of Jacob,” i.e., Israel, the people on earth more than anyone else where God’s glory was supposed to dwell! Today this text especially addresses “the visible church,” i.e., us.

It easier to condemn outsiders if we flatter insiders. False prophets have been doing it from ancient times. But “judgment must begin at the house of God” (1 Pet 4.17; cf. Amos 3.1-8). See how Micaiah stood against 400 false prophets, Ahab’s only true friend among them (1 Kgs 22.6-8)!

⇒ The main subject, “their transgression” (open rebellion against God), “their sins” (missing a mark or a way, offenses against a moral standard).

“Show” = “declare.” This is the misery of preaching. No joy in it. It provokes resentment, criticism, sometimes open persecution. No preacher has ever been more faithful along these lines than Jesus Christ. His fearless ministry of convicting sinners led to His crucifixion for them. He is our Exemplar. See how Paul followed Him (2 Cor 12.15). O, pray for me to be fearlessly faithful! And pray for yourselves to prize a faithful ministry.

A CHARGE AGAINST THE PEOPLE (v. 2)

“Charge” is also an accusation (transgression/sins in v. 1, specifics in 3-4).

- 1) They accuse God of indifference to fasting/humbling themselves (ESV). They thought He owed them something for this, as a *quid pro quo*. They imagined that godliness was a means of gain (1 Tim 6.5). Empty religion sees God as needy and ourselves as worthy, when the truth is vice versa.
- 2) Even while fasting, they continued selfish oppression of their laborers. A religious day off for the employer was just another day of exploitation for the employee (Motyer, in loc.). “Pleasure” juxtaposed with “labors” or “griefs, pains” (Heb.; cf. Jas 5.4-5). The have’s enriched themselves on the backs of the have-not’s, all while thinking of themselves as “God’s people.” A stinging indictment of materialism—*using* people and *loving* things (reverse this).
- 3) They were characterized by quarreling, fighting, hitting with wicked fists (ESV). Where is unclear (home, market, Temple)—perhaps all. What is more egregiously ungodly than this? Yet some abusers keep carrying on with a form of religious worship. Remember the Pharisees were ringleaders in the crucifixion of Christ, blind to the outrageous incongruity (John 16.2).

“In the 1989 NAE survey of pastors’ wives, 24 (of 600) reported spouse abuse. This number is probably low because many equate abuse only with bruises and broken bones.”¹ I counseled a pastor about a deacon who struck his own wife on the face. Sometimes crimes like this go on in the homes of ordinary church members, too. Many women cover bruises with makeup.

Accusing God, oppressing workers, physical violence—all bad enough, but this passage stresses that the worst thing was their hypocrisy, their persisting in a form of godliness while effectively denying its power to make true lovers of God and neighbor (2 Tim 3.5).

God’s complaints: 3 couplets [a-b, c-d, e-f] in an obvious chiasmic pattern:

[a] Yet they seek me daily
[b] And delight to know my ways,
[c] As a nation that did righteousness,
[d] And forsook not the ordinance of their God:
[e] They ask of me the ordinances of justice;
[f] They take delight in approaching to God.

The irreligious react wickedly to this passage by reveling in the denunciation of *religious* hypocrites. “Yes, hypocrites are so evil, and I’m no hypocrite!”

Hypocrites may be worse than pagans, but both are hell-bound. How can the openly profane glory in their superiority? Without at least the appearance of seeking God daily with delight, eagerness to know God’s Word, and caring about your testimony as a Christian, how can you have *any assurance* of salvation? Yet the appearance of these things is without a sincere heart and a reformed life is worse than useless, making one a “holier than thou” and a “smoke in God’s nose” (Isa 65.5).

Only Pretending God’s Worship (2a, f)

True worship amounts to *seeking/approaching* God, the verbs used here. When sincere it is *daily/delightful*, persistent and pleasurable. God is the grand object of true piety: “they seek ME daily, take delight in approaching to GOD.” God is the energy, enjoyment, and end of all acceptable worship.

The problem here is the colossal pretense; they were only “playing church,” like some of us used to do as little kids, going through the motions for fun. In a word, the difference is *sincerity*. These sinners were neither heretics or innovators. Their creed was orthodox; their form was Scriptural. All that was missing was *the heart*—and that ruined everything!

How can you judge yourself? Are you really craving fellowship with God? Are you seeking Him in private, not just in public? Do you pray He will draw near to you as you draw near to Him (Jas 4.8)? Are you mortifying your remaining sins all week long in the fear of God? *Guilty* unless you can honestly say yes.

Only Pondering God’s Word (2b, e)

Object moves from God to His Word (“my ways, the ordinances of justice”), i.e., Scripture. The activity is “knowing/asking.” Intensified again by “delight.”

Biblical revelation is not knowable any other way than by Bible intake in one form or another, but especially by preaching. A wicked mysticism downplays or denigrates knowing Scripture in favor of “inner light from the Spirit,” but these sinners were more like rationalists, intellectually curious but having no desire for spiritual illumination and practical application. They “heard” Scripture like the deaf, completely unmotivated and unreformed. They never had any intention of changing!

When was the last time you were moved both emotionally and practically from your contact with God’s Word? This would be a brand new experience for many professing Christians! Spiritual growth proves spiritual life.

Only Parading as God’s People (2c, d)

To deserve a reputation for belonging to the Lord, a people must “do righteousness” (obey Scripture) and “forsake it not” (perseverance). Not a momentary burst of faith but persistence in trials is the revealing crucible (1 Pet 1.7). “As if they were a nation that did righteousness,” and etc. (ESV). They aimed for the *respect* without the righteousness. The truly godly aim for *righteousness*; the honor comes later as the Father’s reward (Matt 6.1-4).

Test your motive. Would you please God even if men are displeased? (Gal 1.10). Anything less is religion without righteousness; God hates it. Amen.

¹ <http://www.ccel.us/hearttoheart.ch7.html>, accessed 5 Jan 2013.