

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 1, 2016**

A WAKE UP CALL

Isaiah 58:1-12

Setting aside our study of Romans for a week, I invite you to turn with me this morning to the Old Testament Book of the prophet Isaiah – Isaiah 58:1-12. As I hope you will see, there is a specific reason I have chosen to focus on this text from the Bible today. Let us give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God’s holy Word.

* * * * *

As the brochure in your bulletin today indicates, the 65th annual National Day of Prayer is this Thursday, May 5. The theme for this year’s observance is expressed in these three words: *Wake Up America*. It strikes me that these three words can have different meanings, or at least different emphases, depending on what punctuation, if any, is used. For example, if you insert a comma before *America* so that it reads *Wake Up, America*, it becomes a plea to our nation – to the American people – to wake up to the reality of the gravity not only of the political challenges we face, both domestic and international, but also of the rampant and virulent moral, spiritual, and social dis-ease afflicting our nation. *Wake Up, America* (with a comma) is a message to our nation’s leaders and to the American people as a whole to recognize that not all is well with us, and a call to turn with humble and sincere hearts to the one true and living God to whom all nations, governments, and peoples are accountable. Before it is too late. Before we receive the full measure of God’s just judgment upon us as a nation.

If there is no punctuation, *Wake Up America* becomes a call to the church, to followers of the Lord Jesus Christ here in metro DC and all across this land, to do our part through prayer and witness and social involvement, by being the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16), to wake up the people of our nation to our desperate need for God and His mercy and grace. To wake up America to our need for a new great awakening, a revival of authentic Christian faith and a renewal of social righteousness to spread across our land from sea to shining sea. Or perhaps *Wake Up America* is to be understood as the content of our prayer for our nation itself, asking the Lord to wake us up to our perilous condition, notwithstanding our material prosperity, political prestige, and military power. “O God, wake up America” seems a timely and appropriate prayer to pray.

The theme verse for this year’s National Day of Prayer comes from the first half of Isaiah 58:1. There the Lord says to Isaiah:

Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.

In *The Message* paraphrase it says:

Shout! A full-throated shout!
Hold nothing back – a trumpet-blast shout!

When played by a skilled trumpeter (like Karl Mailand or Jim Feurtado) a trumpet blast can be extremely effective in getting your attention. The prophet's shout is meant to get the attention of the people, to let them know that God has a message for them.

The message Isaiah is to shout is summarized in the second half of verse 1:

Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Jacob their sins.

Or, as it says in *The Message*:

Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,
face my family Jacob with their sins!

What's going on here? Obviously, God is not pleased with the heart-condition of His people. They see themselves as a pious people who perform their religious rituals *religiously*, and so they believe themselves to be deserving of God's favor and blessing. But God sees things differently. God sees through their outward religiosity to their hearts. He sees through their fasting and other acts of piety to the lack of justice, compassion, and righteousness in their public conduct and relationships with others.

Notice what we have here: The theme verse for our National Day of Prayer observance comes from a passage of Scripture that is ostensibly about fasting, not prayer. The main message of this passage, though, goes beyond the spiritual discipline of fasting to an impassioned call for social justice or social righteousness in the lives of God's people.

If you are for any reason uncomfortable with the language of "social justice" or "social righteousness" in the current political climate, please know that a commitment to social justice does not make one a socialist. You don't have to be a socialist to be committed to social justice. In fact, much of what is advocated in the name of socialism is not necessarily just or healthy for society. If you are a Christian, though, a society that is just, righteous, and compassionate ought to matter to you, because it matters to God.

The problem God was so exercised about here in Isaiah 58 was the false piety of the people of Israel. Call it religious tokenism. They were playing a game with God. Their religiosity was just role-playing. Their religion was shallow. Yes, they invoked the name of God in their religious practices. Yes, they took part in the various rituals of the Jewish religion. But, in too many instances, they were just going through the motions. And they were doing it for the wrong reason(s). They fasted, they prayed, they humbled themselves and deprived themselves as leverage to get God's cooperation and blessing, as a kind of *quid pro quo*: We're doing this for You so that You will do this for us or give us what we want. They

engaged in fasts and other religious activities not to express their love or gratitude or devotion to God, but to try to manipulate God for their selfish purposes. As if anyone can really manipulate God.

What is the right reason for fasting, for choosing to deprive ourselves of food or drink or something else we need or value? One author describes it this way: “Fasting makes me vulnerable and reminds me of my frailty. It reminds me ... that if I am not fed I will die. Standing before God hungry, I suddenly know who I am. I am one who is poor, called to be rich in a way the world does not understand. I am one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God. I am one who is hungry, called to taste all the goodness that can be mine in Christ” (Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels*, 36). It is not about commending yourself to God. It is not about trying to impress God or other people with your religious devotion. Maybe there are some people you can impress, but there is no way you are going to impress God.

Is there a message in Isaiah 58 for us? A message for America? A message for the church in America? I think there is. Consider what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3 about what life – what *people* – will be like “in the last days.” They “will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power” (3:1-5). A *form* of godliness. But no *power*. Are these not the days in which we live? Only God knows how long “the last days” will be, but surely we are in them.

It is the easiest thing in the world for us to complain and criticize and point fingers at the individuals or groups or institutions we think are culpable for what ails us as a nation. In truth, there are lots of villains who bear a measure of responsibility for the problems that plague America. But this message is not intended to be a rant against American society or the people and institutions that are leading us down the wrong path. We are wrong when we think the problem is exclusively “out there” in the world and not at all “in here” among us. Because it is in the church, too. In *us*.

In Isaiah 58, God is speaking not to the world in general but to His people Israel. As followers of Christ, we are His people today. So we must take this message from His word to heart and apply it to our lives today. God is not saying that there is anything wrong with fasting. Far from it. If done in the right way and for the right reason(s), it can be a spiritually enriching experience that honors God. The same is certainly true of observances like the National Day of Prayer. What God is saying, though, is that outward observances such as these are of little or no value if we do neglect weightier matters of righteousness such as justice, mercy, faithfulness, kindness, and compassion to others (cf. Matthew 23:23).

If our faith in Christ is merely a private matter and makes no earthly difference in how we live, if it has little or no effect on what we value or how we treat others, especially if our conduct contradicts what we say we believe, you can be sure that God takes no pleasure in our religious rituals, whether it is church attendance or fasting or participating in public prayer observances. What God takes pleasure in, as we see in Isaiah 58:3-12, is the kind of faith that

is fleshed out in working to care for the needy, to combat injustice, poverty, hunger, racism, oppression, homelessness, abuse of power, greed, violence, false ideas, and the sexual anarchy that is destroying millions of lives. We're not immune to falling under the influence of any of these things. And, in the name of Jesus, we can't just pass the buck to someone else.

You and I have a holy calling and responsibility to pursue not only a life of personal righteousness, but social righteousness as well. We have a holy calling and responsibility to pursue justice (tempered by mercy) in every segment of society. We have a holy calling and responsibility to promote, work and pray for the renewal and reformation of our society in ways that bring pleasure to God and bless people. We have a holy calling and responsibility to promote Christian values in society, but we must – we *must* – make sure we do it in Christian ways. In ways consistent with the gospel.

Should you participate in events like the National Day of Prayer for the United States of America? It depends, I suppose, on what you want to pray for America. If your prayer is rooted in selfish motives and does not come from a heart surrendered to God's purposes for this nation, don't do it. Sometimes our prayers for our country are born of self-centeredness, pride, or feelings of superiority. These are sins of which we need to repent. If you want to participate in the National Day of Prayer in order to show off how religious or patriotic you are, maybe you should reconsider your motives and draw near to the Lord instead with a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17).

In reality, every day should be a National Day of Prayer for our nation and leaders, for the institutions of our society and the American people. There is never a time when we do not stand in the need of prayer as a nation. If we ever think otherwise, we deceive ourselves. There is never a time when it is not time to pray for America.

So, yes, join with millions of your fellow Americans to pray for our country on the National Day of Prayer this Thursday. We will have an informal prayer service here in the Sanctuary at 7:30 PM on Thursday which I encourage you to attend, if you are able, so that we can join our hearts and voices together in prayer for America. Understand, though, that your attendance or non-attendance is not a test to show how pious you are.

Whether or not you can come on Thursday evening, I urge you to pray daily for this land we love. Do not pray only that God will bless America (as He has done so abundantly to this day). Pray that America will bless God. Pray that we the people will reflect the heart of God in the actions and policies of our government and in our public life in society.

But let's not stop there. Our prayers will be empty rituals, like the fasts of the people in Isaiah's day, if we don't translate our prayers and faith into a concern for others that drives us to seek justice for all, especially the poor and marginalized, to champion the rights and well-being of those who are mistreated or oppressed (including Christians who are finding the culture to be an increasingly unwelcoming place), and to move out from the safety of our comfort zone to incarnate both the truth and love of Jesus as we offer help and hope to those who need it.

This is the kind of fasting God desires. This is the kind of fasting that pleases God. If you need it, let this be a wake-up call to you. Let it be a wake-up call to us all. Lord, let it be so. Amen.