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Epiphany 5 • Isaiah 58:3–9a • February 9, 2014

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Homiletical Helps on LSB Series A—First Lesson

Epiphany 5 • Isaiah 58:3–9a • February 9, 2014

Who is Really Deceived by our Apparent Goodness?

Isaiah makes the case that it is not through empty externals that we please God, but with the sacrifice of our priorities for the needs of others. Here we must frame the text in terms of the question of sanctification for the believer. It is not that works justify, but they do affect how our lives in Christ go forward. The attitude of our lives toward God and his word, as reflected in how we treat others in our lives, certainly has an effect on how our requests to God are heard. Having been saved by Christ, even our external deeds are crucified with him, being sanctified with him at the cross.

Textual Considerations

Verse 3: Isaiah begins with a question we all ask, “Why is this not working?” After all, fasting should be pleasing to the Lord, so why am I not getting my way? God would have us not treat others badly. He would have us love our neighbors as ourselves.

Verse 4: Fighting and brawling are also condemned in the New Testament—the fruit of this kind of fasting is to not be heard.

Verse 5: The external appearance of fasting is not what God desires and will result in an unacceptable fast.

Verse 6: A rhetorical question arises and is answered that we should be loosing, freeing, breaking the yoke of oppression—especially man’s greatest oppression—the bondage to sin.

Verse 7: More concrete examples are given: sharing our food, sheltering the wanderer, clothing the naked, not being reviled when people are down and out.

Verse 8: The result—your light will break forth like the dawn, you will be healed (of your calloused hearts initially), and you will be protected by both righteousness before you and the glory of the Lord behind.

Verse 9: And your prayers for help will be answered and you will be heard (how God chooses to respond is another question).

Preceding context: These verses fall into a context of awful behavior on the part of God’s people. Sacrifices of children, gross idolatry, and other atrocities are the themes of chapter 57. But there is also a message of hope for those who, instead of polluting themselves, have remained humble before the Lord. The appearance is good, but the heart is sick.

Law/Gospel polarity: Here we find the issue of the hardened heart and its fruit—in this case contempt for the neighbor. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we say in the Lord’s Prayer. We need to repent. When we find ourselves in these circumstances the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s word of forgiveness and brings us to repentance and a restored relationship with Christ. Through his atoning sacrifice we are freed from our bondage to sin—he breaks the

yoke that binds us fulfilling this passage—and through his resurrection our new Adam arises to love the neighbor in the power and authority God provides.

Two Kinds of Righteousness: We receive both our attitude of repentance and forgiveness of sins from Christ. This then empowers us to love the neighbor in a proper and God pleasing way—not through appearances of love, but by making small but real sacrifices in our lives and so, also in matters of externals, being crucified with Christ.

Biblical Examples: James 2:14ff does a good job of describing empty faith and faith filled with Christ’s love for us. We cannot just tell those in need, “be warmed and fed” and do nothing about it. In Matthew 6:19–21 we read that if we store up for ourselves treasures on earth, our hearts will be there also. There is also the story of the unjust steward from Luke 16 in which he reduces all of his master’s debtor’s debt, so that they will welcome him into their homes.

Conclusion: God knows the heart and its intentions. When we put up an appearance of righteousness without attendant love manifesting itself in deeds for the neighbor, we only fool ourselves and, in the end, indicate that our own situation is already ruined by our hardness of heart.