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Acceptable Worship

Isaiah 58

John D. Rockefeller, the millionaire founder of Standard Oil Company is remembered today through the philanthropic foundation that bears his name. What is not so often remembered is that he was a deeply pious man, attending a Baptist church regularly. While his life demonstrated personal piety and his public charity is well known, his religion had little effect on his business practices. His fortune was built on practices that a careful reading of Isaiah 58 calls into question. A few examples: his workforce (like that of most of the major companies) was paid exploitative wages, had no recourse if they were injured on the job (the U.S. had one of the world's highest rates of job-related injuries and deaths of any industrializing country) and had an average workweek of 60-70 hours. He made secret agreements with railroads to get discounts on shipping his oil; he used price wars and sabotage to undercut small oil refineries and force them to sell to him so that within twenty years he controlled all of the oil industry.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Choose two or three examples of leaders (public figures) who attend church but behave unethically toward their employees or those for whom they are responsible. Discuss why this happens, thinking especially of the underlying cultural and social values that support such behavior.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. When have you ever felt an issue in your life was holding you back from worship?

During the time of Isaiah, people were being exploited in employment, the poor were being mistreated, and people were even taking advantage of their own neighbors and relatives. But these atrocities were excused or overlooked beneath a veil of supposed religious practices. In this passage, God challenges the people to see justice as the essence of true worship. *Read Isaiah 58.*

1. What was the prophet supposed to tell the people (v. 1)?

Why would God make such a strong challenge?

2. Based on this chapter, how would you describe the people in Israel at that time?

How were their problems similar to ones you see occurring today?

3. What questions did the people ask God (v. 3)?

Have you ever asked God a similar question? Explain.

4. How was God's answer (vv. 3-4) different from what the people probably expected?

5. What does God's answer reveal about the importance of justice?

6. What is the connection between justice and worship (vv. 6-8)?

7. What areas of injustice have you been overlooking or avoiding?

What is holding you back?

8. What promises did God give if the people would return to right fasting (vv. 8-12)?

9. What wrongs do you see in your own worship and fasting?

10. In what ways might God's promises apply to us today when we have acceptable worship?

11. What actions should you take to begin dealing with those injustices?

Pray through your answers to the last several questions. Ask God what action he wants you to take as a result of your study.

Now or Later

Read the following quotes and reflect on the distortions we find in our historical records. What effect does it have on our perceptions of current events? What difference might there be if more people remembered our history—both the good and the bad?

In his text *A Peoples' History of the United States* (Harper Colophon Books, 1980), Howard Zinn writes history not as it is often written by the “winners,” but utilizing the traditional sources, he relates the history of the oppressed. He begins his book with the story of Columbus. When Columbus came to the “New World” he reported about the Indians:

They . . . brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned. . . . They do not bear arms and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. . . . They would make fine servants. . . . With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.
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