

Sermon material based on Isaiah 58: Social Action

Introduction

These notes are intended to be used as part of a sermon slot in a church service. They work best if used in conjunction with particular social action projects that your church knows of. You can use the notes below to explain why Christians should engage in social action.

The Christian call to social action

Read Isaiah 58

Actions as well as words

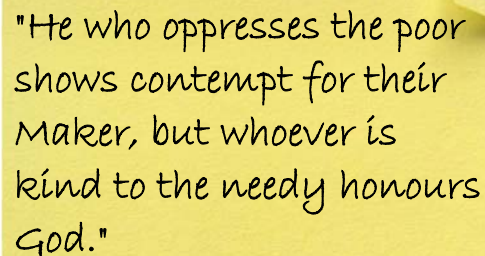
Chapter 58 of Isaiah gives us an inspirational picture of the true worship that God desires from all those who follow him. It is nestled right at the heart of a feisty section of Isaiah's writings tackling the themes of salvation, judgement, redemption and the coming glory of the Lord. Indeed, worship is at the heart of the gospel message – it reveals our passionate response to God and is perhaps the closest we get to heaven this side of eternity. In this part of Isaiah, you get the impression that God really doesn't want us to miss the point about how he wants us to respond to his love!

v 3 God challenges any hypocrisy and makes it clear that he isn't happy with the appearance of worship if our lives don't match up (v 3).

vv 3 – 4 There is no room for exploitation of workers, quarrelling and striking each other in the true fasting that God calls us to.

The book of James makes it clear that *"Faith without deeds is dead"* (James 2: 26) and indeed Jesus himself challenges the hypocrisy of the Pharisees when he says, *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean."* (Matt 23: 27)

God has little time for pretence or 'going through the motions'. People might be easy to fool, but the God who looks at the heart is not so easily conned.



"He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God."

Proverbs 14: 31

The gospel is not just a set of theological principles that we agree with and seek to convince others of, but rather a living truth which must invade every area of our lives. As people of integrity, our calling is to bring the love of Jesus to all that we meet and whose lives we affect - through what we say, what we do, what we buy and how we use our time.

Social action is part of our calling to witness, and it is often through meeting the physical needs of others that we can show them how God can meet their spiritual needs as well. Much of Jesus' ministry, alongside teaching and preaching, involved healing the sick, feeding those who were hungry and reaching out to the people on the very margins of society.

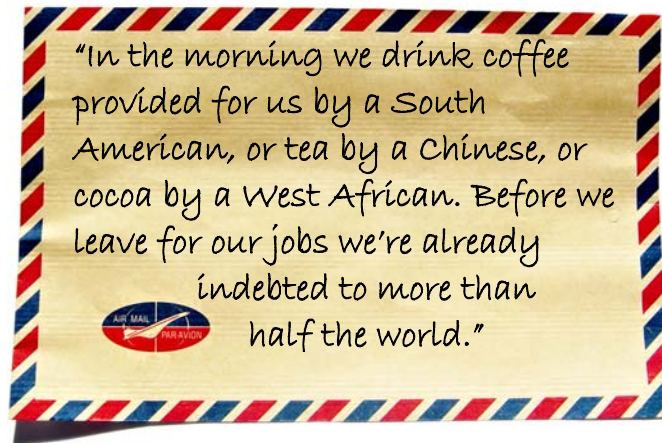
The body of Christ reaching the needy

God interacts with us on a very personal level and calls us by name to have an intimate relationship with him for eternity. However, he also calls us to live in community with other believers, each bringing our gifts and skills to serve and encourage others (1 Cor 14). We have a corporate response to God as well as personal and private responses.

The Body of Christ is, and always has been, a powerful force for good in the world. We are not insignificant individuals, and we really can make a difference. There are many examples of the church as a dynamic community bringing about social change (for instance, William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement). Working together we can put our faith into action and change our culture – government, supermarkets, companies.

[Mention some of the specific ways that your church can get involved in social action. You may want to give out leaflets, run an activity or talk more about a particular project.]

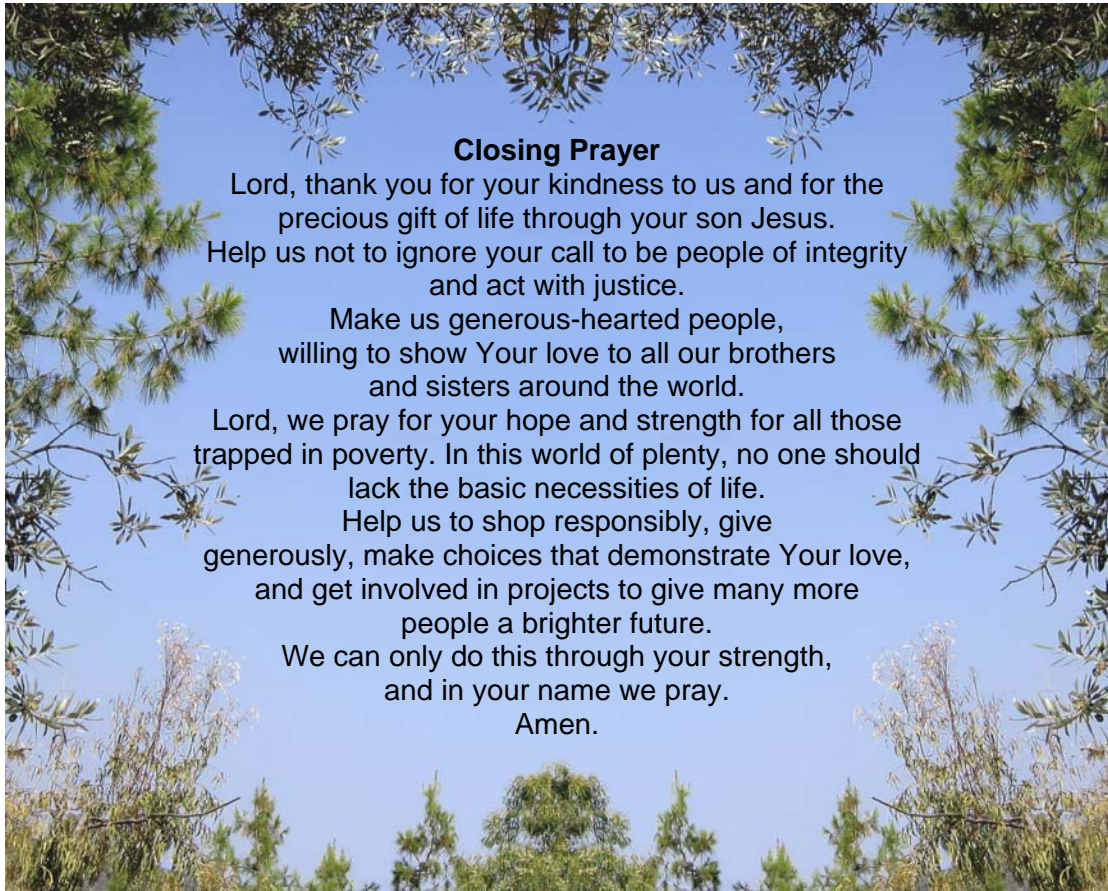
Most of us live busy, pressured lives and it can be hard to see how we can make any real difference to people living in poverty thousands of miles away. However, with modern communications, tourism, trade and multi-national companies, the world is getting smaller and the choices we make have a profound impact on people and communities all over the globe. Martin Luther King once said:



The question is not whether our actions affect other people – the fact is they do. As Christians, the challenge is to make choices that enable people all over the world to have the same freedoms and privileges that we enjoy. It's a huge responsibility, but also a huge privilege. How amazing that we really can make a difference and that we can bring God's love in a tangible way to those who desperately need it!

"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

James 2: 15 - 16



Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you for your kindness to us and for the precious gift of life through your son Jesus. Help us not to ignore your call to be people of integrity and act with justice.

Make us generous-hearted people, willing to show Your love to all our brothers and sisters around the world.

Lord, we pray for your hope and strength for all those trapped in poverty. In this world of plenty, no one should lack the basic necessities of life.

Help us to shop responsibly, give generously, make choices that demonstrate Your love, and get involved in projects to give many more people a brighter future.

We can only do this through your strength, and in your name we pray.

Amen.

Anne Witton, March 2007