The ancient prophets of God could have told her as much; and our reading from Isaiah 58 is a case in point. The members of the community in Judah were religious enough; they regularly fasted as an act of devotion. But they also complained that God did not give them enough credit for their pious actions. The prophet Isaiah tells them why: “Yes, you go without food for a few hours, but you also oppress your workers and squabble with one another. That is not a true fast! The fast the Lord desires should result in a loosening of the bonds of injustice, an end to oppression, and a sharing of bread with the hungry and shelter with the homeless” (my rendition of verses 4-5).

One of the things that makes it hard for middle-class Americans to have much interest in helping the poor is an abiding conviction, sometimes unstated, that the poverty of the poor is their own fault — that if they just had some gumption, they could pick themselves up by their bootstraps, get a better job, and climb out of their impoverished situation. That may be true for some, but what we often fail to realize is that for many, there are no bootstraps, that the system is actively working to keep them down, and that poverty is a far more complex issue than can be solved by gumption.

That, we suspect, is part of what Jesus meant when he said, “The poor are always with you” (Matthew 26:11). The poor are always with us because poverty is a problem with no easy or complete solution. And the jobs available to those starting at the bottom of the social scale seldom pay enough to break the cycle of poverty. What’s more, the poor tend to be invisible to us because they do not live in our neighborhoods, eat in our restaurants, appear in our television shows, or capture our imagination the way the successful, rich, and famous do.

In our text, the prophet calls out the disconnect between worshiping God and doing the will of God. The prophet’s audience kept the forms of religion, they did all the right things; but not the substance of it, they failed to turn their beliefs into genuine deeds. They did not put their faith into practice in a way that fostered genuine transformation.

Today, we call this sort of disconnect “**compartmentalization**.” We allow various aspects of our lives to have their own principles of behavior, principles that sometimes conflict with our values in other areas of life. Compartmentalization is a psychiatric term defined as taking things that are properly related and putting them in separate cubicles in our minds, so they do not rub up against each other and cause friction, pain, stress, or tension.

We compartmentalize, often without thinking about it. There are people who work for world peace but allow their brokers to invest funds in armaments companies. There are people who sing in the choir on Sunday but are ruthless in business meetings on Monday. There are environmentalists who drive gas-guzzlers. There are parents who preach healthy living to their children but practice unhealthy habits themselves. There are Christians who say, “God loves everybody” but they still harbor deep prejudice against people of a different color or race or gender identity. There are disciples who sing, “All to Jesus I Surrender,” but who hold a few things back from God.

We might imagine the prophet’s audience protesting, “But *this* is worship of God and *that* is life; the same rules don’t apply!” Friends, that is a false claim! The same rules apply in both realms. What we do in church for the glory of God, must carry over into our relationships and business dealings in life. Compartmentalization is also a spiritual problem.

In psychiatry, the opposite of compartmentalization is “**integration**,” which means pulling the various aspects of our lives together so that we are working as a unified whole. The word integration comes from the noun “integer,” a mathematical term for whole numbers (as opposed to fractions). “Integrity” comes from the same root word. Those same words apply to our faith. Recall that Jesus said the great commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” That is the integration of our whole selves! Where God is concerned, we cannot fracture our minds from our hearts, or compartmentalize our souls from our strength.

No one sets out to isolate their faith from the other facets of life. Sometimes it just happens; compartmentalization is a defense mechanism that helps isolate conflicting thoughts and feelings to spare us some emotional pain. Integration is not nearly as comfortable or as easy as compartmentalization. It can be difficult to reconcile our behavior at work or at play with our spiritual and moral values. That process can create internal stress, at least until we resolve the issue by letting Christ fully into the formerly walled-off places.

But if integration causes discomfort, compartmentalization causes its own kind of distress. Some compartments develop because of wrongdoing or because of an issue we do not want to face. We put those matters in a separate room; we lock it up and put a “no entry” sign on the door. The wrongdoing is inside because we do not want to admit that it is wrong; but holding the door to that secret room shut breeds guilt, and guilt can spawn symptoms that can upset our whole lives. On balance, whether speaking of our mental, emotional, or spiritual health, we are better to tear down the compartment walls that fracture our whole, integrated selves.

A public figure once made a speech about conservation and the environment. He ended by saying, “I now call upon the Christian part of myself.…” Really? Is Christianity just one part of ourselves? Perhaps the speaker meant that statement as a transition to acknowledge that his faith shaped his environmental views. I hope so! But taken at face value, his words sound like internal compartmentalization. He had his public life, and he had his faith, and the two might never meet. Committing ourselves to Jesus means that we *do not* divide ourselves into Christian and non-Christian parts. We operate in a culture that is no longer overtly Christian, and some of us work in jobs that require honoring the rules of church-state separation; but Christ belongs in every part of our life.

In the end, this can be a subject of our prayers, and in that regard, the words of the intensely devotional hymn, “Dear Jesus, in whose life I see,” will serve us well:

Dear Jesus, in whose life I see, All that I would, but fail to be,

Let Thy clear light forever shine, To shame and guide this life of mine.

Though what I dream and what I do, In my weak days are always two,

Help me, oppressed by things undone, O Thou whose deeds and dreams were one!

Prayer: God of righteousness and justice, we pray for your mercy. Isaiah’s words strike like a double-edged sword, a piercing light into our darkened lives. Our rebellion is exposed. Sunday after Sunday, we claim to seek after God; yet we continue to serve our own interests, and blindly oppress our neighbors. We pray that in your mercy, O Lord, you will go before us, preparing our eyes and ears to contemplate our lives, so that we may discover the victims hidden from us and repent of our sins. Then, as your prophet declares, we may begin to see how your *“light shall break forth from our midst like the dawn,”* and your healing hands will work through ours.  Hold us in your grace, O God, that we may practice piety that bears witness to the justice of your holy embrace with which you hold the whole world. Amen.

**Sources:**

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* Tanner, Michael D. “A Libertarian Perspective on the Modern American Welfare State.” *Libertarianism*, May 16, 2019, www.libertarianism.org/columns/libertarian-perspective-modern-american-welfare-state. Retrieved July 14, 2022.
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**Integrated Faith**

Sunday, February 5, 2023 [Isaiah 58:1-12](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+58%3a1-9a+(9b-12)&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Bonnie Kristian, a columnist at *Christianity Today*, wrote that public reaction to the pandemic caused her to have a more positive view of social welfare as a means of helping the poor. That might not sound like a surprising statement, but in her case, it was, because politically, Kristian declares herself to be a libertarian. Individual freedom is a key principle for libertarians who advocate minimal state intervention in the free market and the private lives of citizens. When it comes to welfare, libertarians generally believe that private charity is the best way to help the poor because it avoids the shortcomings of government programs and therefore reduces poverty and the number of impoverished people. That, in turn, libertarians say, benefits all of us. Thus, for Kristian to declare that she is taking a more positive view of social welfare is a significant shift in perspective.

Kristian is also a seminary-educated Christian, and in her article, she included a summary of biblical passages from both testaments that teach “God cares for the poor and expects his people to do likewise until the redemption of creation is possible.” Kristian wrote, “the Bible doesn’t settle how, exactly, Christians should relieve material poverty — especially in a context like ours,” where, she believes, “a midsize welfare state stands willing and able to forestall the extreme privation of other times and places. Scripture doesn’t explicitly answer the question of [the] individual versus government role in alleviating poverty that divides American Christians.”

What led her to go “soft on welfare,” (Kristian’s words), were views she heard voiced or demonstrated during the pandemic, which caused her to become “pessimistic about whether a nation in which most profess Christianity would act like Christ if given this chance [and to become] more convinced of our selfishness and oblivion toward the common good.”

All of this led Kristian to conclude: “After surveying two years of pandemic life, plus the growing political bitterness of several years before, I’m no longer confident we’d voluntarily sacrifice our time and funds for one another *en masse* and long-term in that no-more-welfare hypothetical.” Kristian’s column declares that government welfare is needed because, left to our own devices, not enough of us — including we who identify as followers of Jesus — are sufficiently charitable in the long run to make welfare unnecessary.