

January 22, 2023

"God Promises Light"  
Lesson 4

Isaiah 58:6-10

**Intro**

Today's lesson is the third in this unit study from Isaiah. The passage today deals with fasting, but not from the same view as we might usually think.

Fasting is essentially a form of self-denial. At its best, fasting reminds us that we are totally dependent on God for all things, including the food we eat. It is a way of leaving the common elements of this world behind to focus on our relationship with God. But as with all spiritual practices, it can also become an empty spiritual ritual. Jesus warns his listeners in Matthew 6 that they shouldn't fast "like the hypocrites" who put on sad, disfigured faces so people will know they are fasting. They are looking to appear spiritual so they can gain people's praise. In Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, He has the Pharisee saying proudly, "I fast twice a week" in his prayer to God about his own holiness.

In the first verses of Isaiah 58, the people then point to their fasts as a sign of their humility (58:3). But God responds by pointing out that their fasts are in appearance only, and have led to exploitation and violence (58:3-4). In verse 5, He asks them, "Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" Our verses today show us what God Himself defines as acceptable in connection to a fast.

**Read Isaiah 58:6-10**

1. vs. 6: In vs. 6 and 7, God uses and question and answer format

He begins both verses with "Is not this..."

He follows that up with the examples of fasting behaviors He finds acceptable

God is rebuking the people here, so his examples are things they must not be doing

We tend to think of fasts as times we avoid bad practices

God indicates the good actions He wants His people to take during their fasts

1) "To loose the chains of injustice"

Two kinds of injustice are possible here

First, that the people are treating others unjustly on a daily basis

Second, injustice as any sinful habit that binds (chains)

Sin can entrap and chain us

We are called to work with God in loosing those chains

In ourselves and in others

People need to repent of sinfulness before God can bless them

2) "and untie the cords of the yoke"

The word yoke here is also translated as "heavy burdens"

God's kind of fasting makes things lighter on those who are burdened

Many times the burdens came from following some religious laws over those concerned with justice and mercy

(See Matthew 23:4 and Luke 11:37-54)

3) “to set the oppressed free”

This language is similar to that of the Year of Jubilee

Slaves were emancipated and family lands returned

Jubilee only happened every 50 years

This verse seems to suggest a continual freeing or Jubilee

This idea also connects back to the exodus

Israel was freed from an oppressor

For this reason, they were to treat a foreigner kindly (Lev. 19:34)

Zechariah 7:10 gives some categories of oppressed people

the widow, the fatherless, the alien, the poor

4) “and break every yoke?”

A yoke sometimes refers to being controlled by an invading nation

The people are “under the yoke” of that nation

This suggests oppression and compelled obedience

Farm animals also are yoked so they can do their work

However, yoking people suggests that they are less than human

If so, they can be treated like animals, not people

But God commanded that even animals get rest (Ex. 20:10, Deut. 5:14)

God cares for people made in His image even more than the animals

Treating people even worse than animals fails to see God’s care for people

God’s answer? “Break every yoke”

Destroy anything that demeans or oppresses a human being

2. vs. 7: God continues with His idea of what actions constitute an appropriate fast

--“to share your food with the hungry”

--“to provide the poor wanderer with shelter”

--“when you see the naked, to clothe them”

All of these remind us of Jesus’ words in Matt. 25:31-46

“What you have done to the least of these, you have done to Me”

We show love for God by loving those made in His image

We are saved by faith—

We show the fruit of the Spirit and our faith by the works of our hands

We think of our families as a sure place of support and love

These people are told “not to turn away from your own flesh and blood”

This would be the worst example of not offering the help that is needed

In a community where families don’t care for one another, what hope does a widow or an alien have?

3. vs. 8: The verse begins with “then”

Even though the previous 2 verses were questions, they are telling the people what to do

If they will do the things God asks in vs. 6-7, “then” vs. 8-10 are what will happen

“Then your light will break forth like the dawn”

Light in scripture is usually connected with right conduct

It means having nothing to hide because one is walking as God desires

If the people of Israel walk in righteousness (and us too), here's what happens

“Your light will break forth like the dawn”

Our lives will show Christ to the world as we become more like Him

We get rid of selfishness and hypocrisy (like vs. 6-7)

“and your healing will appear”

There are at least 3 levels of healing that this could refer to

Spiritual healing as people confess and repent and follow God

Physical healing as worries and fears disappear

Social healing

God's body, the church, lives in right relationship with each other

God's body cares for the most vulnerable, healing their lives

“then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard”

The context suggests that both phrases are referring to God and His actions

God will protect and guide His people from in front and from behind them

This is the same as in the Exodus, when God lead the people with a cloud of fire

#### 4. vs. 9a: Another “then” starts vs. 9

If the people act in ways that God desires, “then” this is how He will respond

“Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say:

Here am I.”

God's “light”, His presence, will be with the people who choose to obey Him

He will answer them when they call on Him

He will be with them as they cry for help from Him

#### 5. vs. 9b-10: God indicates there is a condition to be fulfilled for the people's light to shine in the world

“**If** you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and **if** you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, **then** your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

“If's” always indicate a condition: if this, then that

God reminds His people to do away with ungodly behaviors and to act in ways He expects

Do away with oppression, the pointing finger / malicious talk

The pointing finger was accusatory and intended to put another down

In their world as well as ours, the middle finger was often used for this

Spend yourself for the hungry and the oppressed

If the people will act as God asks, then He will bless them

Their light (His righteousness and their favor from it) will rise and be seen by others

It will be contrasted with the unkind deeds of the world; the difference will be obvious

Application: Isaiah's words indicate that God doesn't want a temporary absence from food, but a spiritual hunger that leads to righteous behavior. We might want to consider two things about our spiritual lives in this area. First, do I go through any kind of ritualistic motions regularly, instead of allowing my heart to really be turned toward God during that practice? Second, what kind of "fast" might I need to undertake to align myself with the type of fasting God desires, as shown in today's passage?

A just a caring community will consider the "hungry" in all the ways Isaiah defined: food, clothing, and housing. It's impossible for any one person to meet every need in the community; this does not excuse us from striving to meet the needs we are aware of.

Prayer: Father God, forgive us where we have engaged in fasting as a ritual instead of as a way to connect more closely to You. Give us hearts that seek a lifelong "fast" from sin and also one that brings us into greater obedience to You. Help our actions to be ones that show love to the needy and the oppressed, that we might be lights in this world. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, Amen.