



## "More Than Religion" (Isaiah 58)

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### PERPLEXING THOUGHTS

- \* They are fasting, calling out to God, but God does not seem to notice.

### THE PROBLEM

\* They were observing religious practices (including fasting), but they had not humbled their hearts before the Lord. The same thing was happening in Jesus day.

\* Matthew 15: 7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 8 "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

- \* Prov.4: 23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

\* The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and meticulously tithed, yet their hearts were not right with God.

\* It's a terrible thing to become caught in religious routine that ignores the true condition of one's heart. But it has happened time and time again in Israel's history.

\* In the days of the prophet Haggai, when tough times hit, the people pulled back from investing in the work of the Lord, but they did not neglect taking care of themselves. As they continued their religious routine in life, they failed to realize that the monies they were now greedily and faithlessly hoarding was mysteriously disappearing (see Haggai 1:9-11).

\* Even in times of providential blessing, like in Nehemiah's ministry, the people failed. Neh.6:15-16 tells us that they completed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in 52 days, because "this work had been done with the help of our God. After the wall is restored, the people begin to make commitments to restore practices that pleased the Lord (Neh.10:31, 35, 39b). But when Nehemiah returns to the king of Babylon to report on his mission in Jerusalem, the people in Jerusalem quickly resort back to their old ways (Neh.13:10-11a, 19-21).

\* In the days of Malachi, Israel was still going through their religious routines, but their hearts were far from the Lord (Malachi 1:8-9/Deut.15:21; Malachi 2:13-16a; 3:7-12).

\* What we see from these examples is that it is possible to continue religious practices & ignore the need for a genuine change of heart. Isa.58 tells us that they were voluntarily fasting, expecting God to answer their prayers. But there were heart issues that needed to be addressed. Because of this, even a serious religious practice like fasting did not secure God's ear to their prayers.

## THE PURPOSE OF FASTING

\* Sometimes fasting is very "natural." A crisis in life can cause someone to fast, even involuntarily - you just can't eat (II Sam.1:12). I don't know if you are aware of this, but the only biblical command for Israel to fast was on the Day of Atonement. Other times of fasting was voluntary, and for a variety of reasons (see I Sam.7:3-6a; II Sam.12:16; Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh.1:1-4; Acts 13:3).

\* The overall purpose of fasting is to deny my flesh & focus on the Lord. Every time I fast, I am reminded of how potent my flesh is. It continually cries out, "FEED ME!" It is very interesting to me that what Satan used to entice man into his first sin was food. Gen.3: 6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye...When fasting, food looks a lot more pleasing than normal.

\* As I deny my flesh and focus on the Lord, the fruit of fasting should be a life that reflects self denial and sacrifice for the Lord. Practically speaking, this will be manifest in my concern for others above my concern for self. And that is where the Israelites failed in Isa.58, and repeatedly throughout history.

## THE PRIVILEGE WE HAVE AS A CHURCH

### A. Fast This Wednesday

\* Some who have fasted before may want to fast longer than one day. I would suggest for those who have never fasted, perhaps do a partial fast Monday and Tuesday by skipping one main meal. Some may choose to drink only water during your fast, while others may add juice. I do not recommend Soda, but that's really between you and the Lord.

### B. The Focus Of Our Fasting & Prayer

1. To deny self
2. To examine our hearts
3. For God to hear our prayers (because our hearts are right with Him, not simply because we are fasting).

## THE PARTICULARS THAT NEEDED TO CHANGE (Isa.58)

### A. A Change Of Heart

\* See Isa.57:15; 66:2b

\* Psalm 51: 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

## B. A Change In Life

### 1. Loose chains of injustice, break yokes, relieve oppression

\* When we have it in our power to right a wrong committed against someone, we do it.

\* A yoke is a burden, and oppression is being weighed down. So, when we have it in our power to lighten or remove someone's burden, or lift their spirits, we do it.

\* Illus: Gene Menge's car, and the men who got together to pay the repair bill. What a burden was lifted off of me!

### 2. Providing food, clothing, and shelter to those in need

\* See Deut.24:19-21

### 3. Not turning away from our own family

\* See Mark 7:9-13; the religious leaders of Jesus' day were so greedy for money, they encouraged people to give gifts to the temple and taught that those gifts were more important than helping their father & mother in time of need. Now, some in our day have taken this to mean that I should take care of my family over giving to the Lord through the church. But Jesus was not saying this at all. He was saying that neither should have been neglected.

\* Matthew 23: 23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. *You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.*

\* These hypocritical, greedy religious leaders were taking advantage of people by teaching them that offerings to the temple was what God was most pleased with, even if it meant not helping their family in times of personal need.

### 4. Live a life of love (58:9b)

\* This is contrasted with "the pointing finger and malicious talk."

### 5. Keep the Sabbath

\* Get rid of greed

\* Israel's history is full of violating the Sabbath by continuing their business ventures on that day. The root of this sin was greed, as well as a lack of faith.

## THE PROMISE

1. God will hear my prayer (v.9)

\* After a day of fasting this Wednesday, some of our prayers that have up to this point gone unanswered may be answered.

2. My life will be a light for the Lord (v.8a)

3. Healing (v.8b)

\* Primarily spiritual healing, but could include physical healing

4. Guidance from the Lord (v.11a)

5. Needs met (v.11b)

6. Strength (v.11c)

7. As a church we will gain a reputation of repairing and restoring what the enemy had ruined.

8. Joy (v.14a)

## A PRACTICAL NOTE

A. We Should Do These Things Personally

\* Anyone in your life right now that you could help financially, legally, personally (encouragement, take them to lunch or dinner)...

B. We Should Do These Things Corporately

\* Honoring the Lord with our wealth, corporate alms (Special Needs), Men of Arms, Women of Heart, Downtown Outreach (including the DOC), Projects to help ministries like Haven of Rest, etc.

## CONCLUSION

\* Some of us may be caught in a religious routine, and to get out of means to humble ourselves, deny self, and reach out to others in very practical ways...

\* I invite you to join us this week, every morning Monday - Friday from 7:00 - 7:45 a.m. And Wednesday, fast the day with us, and come together Wednesday evening for a time of worship & prayer. We will be praying for one another as well, so bring your needs...