

Pentwater Bible Church

Isaiah Message 128

September 19, 2021



The Temptations of Christ by Botticelli Cir 1481-1482

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Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Isaiah
One-Hundred-Twenty-Eight
Godly Fasting
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Isaiah 58:6–14

⁶Is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? ⁸Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of Jehovah shall be thy rearward. ⁹Then shalt thou call, and Jehovah will answer; thou shalt cry, and he will say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking wickedly;

¹⁰and if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul: then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thine obscurity be as the noonday; ¹¹and Jehovah will guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in dry places, and make strong thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. ¹²And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places; thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

¹³If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, and the holy of Jehovah honorable; and shalt honor it, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: ¹⁴then shalt thou delight thyself in Jehovah; and I will make thee to ride upon the high places of the earth; and I will feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it (ASV, 1901)

GOD'S IDEA OF THE RITUAL OF FASTING

Isaiah 58:6–7

⁶Is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh (ASV, 1901).

The Lord looks at the ritual of fasting and tells the people through Isaiah that a true fast has nothing to do with denying one's self food. It has to do with actually just doing the will of God in obedience to His commands. One can dispense with the ritual and get on with actually doing something of

merit instead of a showy display of an act of care. The Lord Jesus condemned the pharisees for this during His first advent.

Matthew 6:1–2;16–18

¹Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. ²When therefore thou doest alms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward.¹⁶Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may be seen of men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward. ¹⁷But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face; ¹⁸that thou be not seen of men to fast, but of thy Father who is in secret: and thy Father, who seeth in secret, shall recompense thee (ASV, 1901).

They were engaging in fasting to prove how religious they were. They also thought to use it as a device for making God do our will. Isaiah calls on his hearers to express their relationship to God in a way that is much more practical which will accomplish something good. If they want to deprive themselves, let them do it for the sake of the oppressed, the needy, and the helpless, not for the sake of their own piousness. God's nature is to give Himself away to those who can never repay Him. There is no clearer evidence of the presence of God in a person's life than a replication of that same behavior.

Isaiah here depicts in figurative language the actions that will actually characterize those who truly fast. These cover the whole range of attitude toward those oppressed. If one has oppressed another in any way, He will remove that oppression and set free the one whom He has harmed. Indeed, unless there is a true love of God in the heart, there can in reality be no true service to those who are oppressed. One cannot even rightly diagnose the ills of mankind unless he has first learned their true nature from the Lord. The genuine setting free of those whom we have wrongly oppressed only occurs when our own hearts are filled with God's love.

God says to clarify what is important to Him "*Is not this the fast that I have chosen*"? The first clause signifies a sharing of one's own food with those that have nothing. Clothing is almost as important as food which are the bare essentials of life. The afflicted, even the homeless, are to be provided with the shelter of a home. Today many missions are available for the homeless such as the Salvation Army. The reference is evidently to those who because of oppression or victimization are homeless. Likewise, when one sees another naked, he is to provide covering for him. And he is especially not to hide himself from his own flesh, that is his own family in which case God says he is worse than an unbeliever (Genesis 29:14; 37:27; II Samuel 5:1; I Timothy 5:9). God also says that it is inappropriate to refuse to act humanely toward any who are genuinely in need. Love toward all men is a hallmark of those who belong to the Lord, and this love will manifest itself in a true concern for their welfare.

Rightful fasting must be not merely outward, but inward. Unless fasting has a genuine a spiritual objective it is absolutely worthless. Its natural spiritual associated actions are:

1. Repentance (1 Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 9:1, 2; Joel 2:12, 13; Jonah 2:5–10)

2. Prayer (Daniel 9:3; Joel 2:17)
3. Almsgiving, and other acts of charity and mercy towards our fellow-men.

To neglect such acts, and to regard the mere efficacy of the action of fasting as having any spiritual efficacy, is a dangerous delusion, and this is like the heresy of Montanism. This is the belief that the Bible is either insufficient or incomplete, and that new revelation from God is being regularly provided hence here new information arising during the fast.

Three types of fast are generally recognized: normal, in which there is no intake of food for a prescribed period of time. Sometimes there may be an intake of liquids; partial, in which the diet is limited, though some food is allowed; and absolute, in which there is a total abstinence from food and liquids in all forms.

In Isaiah's day the fast was regarded as an act of self-renunciation designed to defer God's wrath and move Him to act in gracious disposition toward the nation. In times of emergency, the people fasted to persuade God to spare them from impending calamity (Judges 20:26; I Samuel 7:6; I Kings 21:9; II Chronicles 20:3; Jeremiah 36:6, 9). Genuine fasting was done in the hope that God would free them from trouble (II Samuel 12:16–20; 1 Kings 21:27; Psalm 35:13; 69:10). Fasting was associated with prayer to add emphasis of sincerity that God would answer the prayers (Ezra 8:21; Nehemiah 1:4; Jeremiah 14:12). Throughout the Old Testament fasting is associated with a mournful attitude of petitioning God to aid the supplicant.

Regular fasts were usually for one day, morning to evening, with food permitted at night (Judges 20:26; I Samuel 14:24; II Samuel 1:12), although there are reports of longer fasts, such as Mordecai's call for a 3-day fast (night and day specified Esther 4:16) and the 7-day fast at Saul's death (I Samuel 31:13; II Samuel 3:35). Among special fasts were Moses' 40 days on Mt Sinai (Exodus 34:28) and Daniel's 3-week fast prior to receiving visions (Daniel 9:3; 10:3, 12). As we can see here in Isaiah chapter 58 God is charging the Israelites that their fasting was abused. Instead of a sincere act of self-renunciation and submission to God, fasting became an empty ritual in which a pretense of piety was presented as a public image. Hence, the prophets cry out against the callousness of such hypocrisy. Jeremiah records God denouncing their false fasts.

Jeremiah 14:12

¹²When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt-offering and meal-offering, I will not accept them; but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence (ASV, 1901).

GENUINE OBEDIENCE RESULTS

Isaiah 58:8–9

⁸Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of Jehovah shall be thy rearward. ⁹Then shalt thou call, and Jehovah will answer; thou shalt cry, and he will say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking wickedly (ASV, 1901).

This points to the time when the glorious change will have occurred and God's people will do those things in obedience to Him as He described. First God says that by obedience He will immediately answer their requests. The light of day follows the darkness of night. Then as daylight suddenly breaks forth, replacing the night, so will break the people's *light*, which is their joy of answered prayer through genuine fasting. The word healing signifies the healing of a wound, or the restoration of something. This healing is compared to a plant that quickly sprouts forth. In these two clauses the emphasis falls upon light and life and the rapidity of their appearance.

Righteousness and *the glory of the Lord* are intended as parallel poetic expressions. The *righteousness* of the people is their Lord Himself (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; Isaiah 54:17). The *glory of the Lord* is His declarative glory manifested in His works, as the Lord Himself in glorious manifestation. As in the wilderness He preceded the nation Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire, so now He brings up the rear of their march into newness of life. Therefore, the redeemed are surrounded by the divine protection. He in whom their righteousness is found precedes them, and His glory is their *rear guard*.

Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shalt answer, which means that a spirit of grace and supplication will be poured out upon the people of God, and then they will then pray without a false fast. They will call upon the Lord in sincerity and truth, with faith in a sincere fervency; and the Lord will hear and answer them. As a result, He will abundantly bestow His favors on them. Then they will have no reason to complain. God only answers the call of His people after they have turned from their evil ways and repented. If God showered blessings upon us while we continued to sin, we should take His blessings for granted and cease to pray for them. It is after we have awakened from the deadness of our sin that in time of need, we call out to God. Finally, God says that He will restore fellowship with them if they refrain from three interrelated oppressive practices.

1. A yoke of oppression
2. Pointing the finger
3. Wicked talk.

The yoke that oppresses should be removed so that there will be no legal or social obligation on people who are unjust or oppressive (slavery, financial, or social obligations). "By pointing" the finger at someone (Proverbs 6:13; Isaiah 57:4) or "speaking evil" in everyday life or in a courtroom setting, one can threaten or mock someone else and put them in a difficult oppressive situation.

GOD'S GUIDANCE PROMISED THROUGH OBEDIENCE TO HIM

Isaiah 58:10–12

¹⁰and if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul: then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thine obscurity be as the noonday; ¹¹and Jehovah will guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in dry places, and make strong thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. ¹²And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places; thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

Here God presents two interrelated positive acts that He encourages:

1. The “pouring out” of your soul for the hungry
2. The satisfying of the soul of the poor, afflicted person.

This is not just to give food to the hungry. Instead, God now expects them to give themselves (lit “your soul”) to the hungry, implying a much deeper commitment of the heart and a much broader access than just a loaf of bread. The measure of success is when the “soul” of the afflicted person is satisfied; therefore, one is not to hide or ignore physical needs, but have a serious heartfelt desire to help. Now the Lord again provides His response to obedience.

Then shall thy light rise in obscurity. That is, it will be as if the cheerful light of the sun should rise amidst the shades of midnight. The sense is, that their calamities and trials would be suddenly succeeded by the bright and cheerful light of prosperity. The Lord will go before you and will lead you always. *And satisfy thy soul in drought.* The word rendered ‘drought’ (Hebrew *tschtschlat*) means *dry places* which are places exposed to the intense heat of a burning sun and parched up for a lack of moisture. The idea is, that God would provide for them as if in such places copious rains were to fall, or refreshing fountains to burst forth. *And make fat thy bones.* ‘Shall renew thy strength.’ The idea is that of vigorous prosperity, and of strength Job expresses a similar idea of a strong man dying (Job 21:24).

God promises to His people that ruin and destruction are not the end result for the fallen human race. Since the Fall humans are deeply sinful, and that sin destroys everything it touches. Nevertheless, God is stronger than our sin, and He gives us the power through salvation to restore and renew what was destroyed. He also promises that some from Israel itself will be the rebuilders. It was their sin that destroyed the city of Jerusalem, it will be their righteousness through the grace of God that will rebuild it. God always gives us the dignity of being involved in putting back together what we have broken. We cannot do it apart from Him, but He will not do it apart from us. The nation and, indeed, the race will be restored through the gentle insistence of God’s grace and the faithful ministries of a host of people of whom Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi are only the obvious prophets and spiritual leaders.

BEHAVIOR PLEASING TO GOD

Isaiah 58:13–14

¹³If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, and the holy of Jehovah honorable; and shalt honor it, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: ¹⁴then shalt thou delight thyself in Jehovah; and I will make thee to ride upon the high places of the earth; and I will feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it (ASV, 1901)

The point of this chapter is not merely about fasting but about what kinds of behavior please God. Is our religion for our “pleasure” or for keeping God’s commandments, that is the issue. Fasting is only one aspect of the larger question, as is Sabbath keeping.

In this light God speaks in conclusion about the placing of religious ceremony (including fasting) in its proper perspective. Why do we engage in these ceremonies? To curry favor with God? To further our own ends, whatever those may be? Are we are engaging in these practices to further our desires and not His? The point is that one should never engage in religious ceremony to further one's own desires as opposed to God's. One should engage in these ceremonies, whatever they may be, for the sole purpose of bringing oneself obediently to the presence of God, where once again one may express joyous surrender to Him for the achievement of His purposes. Just as a Christian Church service is to learn His ways not to be a spectator of some entertainment.

Of all the ceremonies cited, the Sabbath is the one perhaps best suited as an example to the purpose just described. Here the Israelis ceased their work to realize that it is God who supplies all their needs, not themselves.

A cup of cold water given to a person in need is given in the name of compassionate humanity, instead of the name of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:34–46; Mark 9:41). It is easy for the unintended or misguided to do good for personal reasons which become a device for the manipulation of God for one's own ends. But when the two are kept inseparably linked, one can remember that worship is always for God and others, and one will not forget that all genuinely ethical behavior is finally an expression of worship to the faithful God. We should do what He command in obedience for Him not for any personal benefit.

Earlier in this chapter God through Isaiah spoke of a people who found no delight in the Lord. All of their religion seemed in vain. In the ensuing verses God has told them through the prophet what the problem is: they have made the gratification of their desires the most important thing in their lives. Their religion has been for the purpose of self-gratification. Which is why that satisfying the needs of others had a very low priority for them. It is also little wonder that they had no sense of fellowship with the God who gives Himself away to the powerless. Thus, God has said that if they will surrender their desires to Him, and let their ethical behavior and their ceremonial behavior be dominated by dying to self, they will find Him, they will experience the exaltation of being used by Him, and they will enjoy all the benefits of the inheritance of Jacob their father. All this is sealed with the solemn assurance of the sure word of God out of the mouth of God. Here is the golden key of all biblical revelation: those who give themselves away find themselves; those who relinquish the personal throne receive the crown

Next message: THE TRAGEDY OF SIN

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