

"The Fast We Choose"

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Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

³"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. ¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58:1-12)

When it comes right down to it, the act of fasting is a rejection of the normal order of things. According to the laws of nature, human beings must eat to survive. The rhythms of our lives largely revolve around meals, and when we fast we disrupt those rhythms. The hope is that such a disruption will open us to an awareness of an even deeper necessity -- a need that is more easily lost in the din of everyday living. Fasting is a way to cut through the normalcy of life and remind us that we need God.¹

In the traditions of Jewish faith, fasting operates in two basic ways. The first is to cleanse and restore a relationship that has been tarnished by sin. When King David finally confronts his sinful relationship with Bathsheba, he begins his repentance with a fast (2 Samuel 12). Jewish brides and grooms fast on their wedding day to atone for their sins and purify themselves before they take their vows. If the Torah is ever dropped and hits the ground, the entire congregation fasts as an act of penance. On *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, all members of the community fast in order to deny themselves, "afflict" their souls, and ask for forgiveness for their misdeeds and moral failures. A fast recognizes sinfulness, inflicts a form of self-denial, and seeks to appease God and turn God away from the punishments that we justly deserve.²

¹ "Fasting in the Old Testament and Ancient Judaism," <https://bible.org/seriespage/chapter-1-fasting-old-testament-and-ancient-judaism-mourning-repentance-and-prayer-hope-g>, February 3, 2017.

² "Fasting and Feasting in Three Traditions: Judaism - Christianity - Islam," Ed. by Kevin Corn <http://eip.uindy.edu/crossings/publications/Interfaith%20Conversations-1.pdf>, p. 5.

There is, however, a second side of fasting. The ancient discipline did not just look back upon bad acts with regret. It also looked ahead to future duties and responsibilities. This was the fast of the prophets, the one which viewed self-denial as a way to awaken and energize the proper ethics and behavior of God's people. This kind of fasting is another kind of disruption, another way to reject the normal order of things. It recognizes that proper worship is not just about getting our souls right with God. It is about orienting ourselves to do right by God in our daily living.

In this morning's passage, we hear that the Hebrews were fasting just like scripture said they should. They fasted on all the right holidays. They fasted for the right amount of time. But something was off. For some reason, fasting was not connecting them to God the way they thought it should. In fact, God did not seem to be responding to their fasting at all. Their fast was supposed to help them find God, but they could not see him, could not sense him, could not find him anywhere. *"Why do we fast, but you do not see?"* they asked. *"Why are we humbling ourselves when you do not notice?"*

According to Isaiah, this was happening because the people were making two critical errors in their fasting. The first was they thought that fasting was all they really needed to do. They were going through the motions of what fasting required, but beyond that, they just went about their day as usual. The way scripture says it is that on their fast days they "served their own interest," but a better translation might be that on fast days "it was business as usual."³

When I was first learning to drive a car, I did what many teens do. I assumed it was mostly about mastering the physical motions. I figured out which pedal was the gas and which was the brake. I learned how to put the car in drive and reverse. I found the lever that turned on the windshield wipers and the one that controlled the turn signal. I got all that down pat and I figured I was good to go. The day after I got my license I was driving some friends somewhere in my mom's station wagon. I can't remember where we are going, but I remember the exact intersection where we were -- Cornwallis and Kirkpatrick in Greensboro. I needed to turn left, and I tried to zip between two oncoming cars. I overestimated the distance between those two cars by a lot, so when I turned -- let's just say that everyone in the car voiced some concern the choice I had made. We made it unscathed, but not by much. As a new driver, I hadn't really thought about all the things that were involved with safe, responsible driving. I hadn't appreciated that there was an art to watching for potential hazards, maintaining a safe following distance, slowing down around curves, or making left turns on two-way roads. I hadn't realized that driving required constant interpretation and re-interpretation of your surroundings. At the time, I was much more interested in the normal business of being a teenager: talking to friends; working the radio; and trying to look as cool as possible at every possible moment. As I squeaked through that harrowing left turn, I realized there was more to this driving thing than I had really appreciated before.

So, the first error the Israelites made was to focus on fasting to the exclusion of everything else. They lost sight of the fact that fasting was not an end in itself. It was meant to create space and focus for other disciplines -- prayer, scripture reading, confession and self-reflection. It was meant to be a doorway not to hunger but to spiritual transformation. It would be like us thinking that all we needed to do in the life of faith was show up to church on Sunday morning. If all we did was come here on the Lord's Day to sit in the pew, just to use that hour thinking of all the things we needed to get done that week, then we would be missing the entire point. Eventually, we would begin to wonder why that practice was leaving us so empty.

³"Elliot's Commentary for English Readers," <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/isaiah/58-3.htm>.

It was the second mistake the Israelites made, however, that really got God's attention. In all those other things they were doing and thinking about, the people had forgotten the needs of others. Fasting was not reminding them of their obligations to help the orphan, the widow and the stranger. In fact, they were actually using their fasting time to abuse and take advantage of other people. They were oppressing their workers, quarrelling, fighting, striking with wicked fists. They were certainly not doing the things that God wanted them to do. Sure they were lying around in sackcloth and ashes, going through the motions of obedience humility, but God knew that nothing else in their lives really showed either obedience or humility.

"I don't care a lick about the sackcloth and ashes," God says. "What I really want from you is to 'to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free... to share your bread with the hungry... [to] bring the homeless poor into your house... to clothe the naked and bind up the brokenhearted... to care for people who need help, whoever they may be and wherever they may be.'" The people are fasting, but they are still thinking only about themselves, and that is not the kind of fast that God wants from us.

In the end, an act of worship -- be it fasting, praying, singing, studying or serving -- is about God. It is about offering to God what we owe to God. But it is also about us. It is something that is supposed to change us, mold us, and transform us into something that is closer to God's image. Isaiah reminds us that, with every spiritual discipline, there is a good way to know whether it is working. If the act does not draw us closer to others -- if it does not create in us a heart that wants to serve, wants to help, and wants to honor others, then we are not doing it right. Our God wants good things for us. God wants to draw each of us closer in purity and goodness. But God is also concerned about the world beyond us. When people are hungry, God is concerned. When people don't have medicine, God is concerned. When people are stuck in dangerous situations, God is concerned. And God wants us to be concerned as well.

"Fasting is all well and good," God says. "But this is what I really want: open your heart to people who need your help. If you can do that, when you do that, then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and you will never again have any trouble finding me."

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**