



Isaiah 58:3-9a

Epiphany 5, February 8, 2026
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'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

It's weird to talk about fasting on a day like today. Today being Super Bowl Sunday, "fasting" isn't likely on the mind of very many Americans at all. This is one of those "food days" of the year, in fact, it's the *second* biggest food day of the year, right behind Thanksgiving. Today, Americans will consume 1.48 billion chicken wings, enough wings to encircle the planet three times. That's to go along with an estimated 12.5 million pizzas and 325 million gallons of beer. No, none of us are likely thinking too much about fasting today. In fact, unless you practice Intermittent Fasting, you likely don't think very much about fasting at all!

You *might* be aware that fasting has something to do with Lent, of which we are right on the doorstep. Lent is a 40-day period of time leading up to Good Friday. *40* days because it serves to mirror Jesus' 40 days spent in the wilderness, fasting and praying and resisting temptation. Historically, the Church has practiced fasting during Lent in remembrance of Jesus' 40-day fast. The *ancient* practice involved eating only one meal per day around sunset, meat and other animal products being excluded from the meals, and no food at all on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Of course, nowadays when people fast during Lent, it looks a little bit different. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are still the major fast days, but now that just means people will only eat one full meal and two smaller meals on those holy days. And the Fridays of Lent are reserved only for fried fish. The practice originated with a method for directing hearts to the Lord and His Word, but I think, by and large, the good purpose of fasting for Lent has generally been lost in most cases.

Now, fasting *can* be a good practice, just like going to church or reading your Bible or praying. But problems can arise, and those problems arise from within us. We can take something like fasting or praying and turn them into things that we are doing *for God* to try to *get* something from God. And that's where we run into the problems the Children of Israel were facing.

Our text opens with the people of God raising a complaint to God. *"Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?"* They were fasting, foregoing food for a time, but by their complaint they show that they were going about it for all the wrong reasons. What they were seeking to accomplish by their fast was that God would look at what

they were doing for Him and would be moved to do what they wanted Him to do. So, even while they were denying themselves food, in reality, they were just serving themselves. It was all about *them*.

And God makes that clear in His response: ***“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.”*** It was all an attempt to bend God toward their own self-serving will, often against their own neighbors.

And this is nothing else other than idolatry! Offering prayers, doing worship, fasting *not* to glorify God but to serve our own ends, trying to manipulate God into supplying what we want from Him—that’s just plain old rotten idolatry. Because that approach would make *us* the center of the relationship, not God. That puts us at the center, and places God on the periphery, and treats God as the servant only there to serve at our beck and call whenever we would descend from our throne to call upon Him.

And so, this fast of the people of Israel was simply not being done in faith. God describes it in this way, ***“[Bowing] down his head like a reed, and [spreading] sackcloth and ashes under him.”*** A reed was a good way to describe them, because a reed is hollow on the interior. There’s all this stuff on the outside, but it’s hollow on the inside. In their worship of the Lord, it looked good on the outside, but they were lacking on the *inside*. It’s like what God had said earlier in Isaiah, ***“This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.”*** (Isaiah 29:13)

And the evidence of their lack of faith abounded. Because *if* they believed, if they trusted in Jehovah God for forgiveness, then that faith would *necessarily* show itself in the way they treated others! John writes, ***“If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”*** (1 John 4:20) If their approach to God was done in faith, they would naturally be doing any number of the things that God describes in these verses: loosing the bonds of wickedness, letting the oppressed go free. As they were fasting from food themselves, they would be giving their unused food to the hungry; as they clothed themselves in sackcloth, they would be using their clothes to clothe their brothers who were naked.

But love for their neighbor never entered their minds, just as love for God wasn’t a part of the picture. It was love for self, serving self, taking care of self. And so, as they ask why God isn’t listening, the LORD pronounces His judgment: ***“Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.”*** He wasn’t going to be listening to that type of prayer at all.

Now, like I said at the outset, we’re not likely thinking about fasting as much as the people of Israel were, especially on Super Bowl Sunday. But could you think of any way that we might fall into those same idolatrous ideas with any of our own practices? Any way in which we make ourselves the center, just trying to convince God to do as we please? We *could* do this with prayer. Neglecting to pray *most* of the time and only thinking of doing it when we really *need* something from God. We could do this with our *worship*, doing it to simply to try to stay on God’s good side. We could do it with our offerings, feeling guilty over sin and giving a little bit more on a given Sunday to try to “make it up” to God.

We could find ourselves in any sort of painful situation, determine in our mind that God is punishing us for something, and then dedicate ourselves to prayer or devotion for a time in order to get back

into God's good graces. And all of this would be *idolatry*! And not just because we're making ourselves and our desires the focal point of the worship, but also because we'd be turning *God* into an idol. Not believing in His Word and trusting in His promises to be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, faithful in forgiveness—but instead imagining Him to be unmerciful and unforgiving, needing to be appeased, able to be bought for an extra \$20 in the plate.

God says of this type of worship: "***Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. . . Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?***" But even when the Lord corrects us, as He does here, we could continue our misunderstanding. We could mistakenly believe that we don't win God over by fasting, we win God over by doing kind works for other people—clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, breaking every yoke. But even there, we're still trying to get God to do what we want.

When we do that, when we treat God like an idol, when we treat God like a means to an end, when we think of the things that we are doing for God as being of primary importance—what we're really asking is that God judge us based on those actions and those thoughts and those words and those prayers and those fasts. And if that is the basis of God's judgment, we will be found wanting.

So, let's start again. You are a sinner. I am a sinner. There is nothing that we can do to contribute to our salvation. There is nothing that you can do to make God prefer you over anyone else. The only hope that you ever had of being saved, is that God would intervene. And that was a very good hope to have. Because He *has* intervened. He has done what you could not do for yourself.

You see, God calls upon us to love our neighbors in all these ways described in our text, because this is the way in which *God loves us*. Jesus came to a world of self-centered sinners like us and "***Loose[d] the bonds of wickedness, [undid] the straps of the yoke... let the oppressed go free, and [broke] every yoke.***" He did this when He took those burdens of guilt and sin that make you feel like you need to make it up to God, and He took it all upon His shoulders, and made it up to God in our place. He "***[Shared His] bread with the hungry and [brought] the homeless poor into [His] house,***" by reserving us a seat at the eternal banquet and made us a room in His heavenly home. He saw us "***naked***" and exposed in our sins and covered us with His robes of righteousness. He did not "***hide [Himself] from [His] own flesh,***" but took on our flesh, showed Himself to us while walking in our flesh, and then was raised up in the flesh for all the world to see, crucified upon the cross of Calvary.

And He still does not hide from you, His own flesh and blood. We will never need to complain to the Lord that He's not listening, for because of Jesus, when you call upon the LORD, "***The LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'***"

And so, this is why our theme is **Fasting** not for God, but **BECAUSE of God**. Because of God, because of what Christ has done for us, because of His mercy poured out for sinners like us—we don't have to try to "make it up" to God. Christ has already done that for us. We don't need to try to bend God's will towards us, because His good will for you already and will always be eternal life with Him in heaven. We don't have to figure out ways to try and get on God's good side, for the LORD has already made His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you, He has lifted up His countenance upon you, and looking at you, He has pronounced, "***Peace.***"

Keep these things on your heart. Ponder these things in your mind. And then, when you pray, don't do it to try to earn some favor with God, do it *because* you have favor with God. Pray to God *because* you, a sinner, have been forgiven and have access to a holy God through Jesus your Savior. And when you worship, don't do it thinking that you're doing something *for* God, do it because here God comes to bless you with His mercy and grace. And then, go out from here and serve your neighbor. And when you do that, do it simply because Jesus loved you and gave Himself for you.

With that approach, serving by faith, it will be true what God says near the end of our text, "***Then shall your light break forth like the dawn.***" This is very similar to what Jesus said in our Gospel reading, "***You are the light of the world. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***" (Matthew 5:14, 16)

It's interesting that there Jesus calls *us* the light of the world, since in John's gospel, Jesus says, "***I am the light of the world.***" (John 8:12) Jesus is the light of the world, but then He says *we* are the light of the world, and that *seems* contradictory. But it's not. Because when we are serving our neighbor *because of* Jesus, then it is really Christ's light shining out *through* us. And people will notice when your service towards others is not done to serve yourself but rather done *because* of Jesus. People will notice the difference that Jesus' light makes. And they, we pray that they will "***see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***"

This is what we are called to be doing. So, let your light shine, *because* of Jesus. Worship, *because* of Jesus. Pray, *because* of Jesus. And if you are thinking of fasting in some way this Lent, let it be because of Jesus. May God help us, in Jesus' saving name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.