

A Heart for Piety | Isaiah 58:1-9a

"Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements; they delight to draw near to God.

'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. 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. 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?"

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? 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 hide yourself from your own flesh? 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. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"

INTRODUCTION

In the series, 30 Rock, there is an episode where Jack Donaghy, played by Alec Baldwin, is in a negotiation with his ex-wife. And in this exchange, he's taking everything that they once shared from love letters to antiques to rare art exhibits. Willingly, she is letting everything go, signing off on everything so that their relationship can come to an end. And finally, Jack Donaghy says that he wants their full stake in the Arby's franchise that they bought and she yells, "Oh, Johnny, you know I love my big beef and cheddar!"

What is it that you can't live without? To be frank, as Americans, we're not accustomed to easily giving up whatever it is that we can't live without – as Texans, we can't imagine giving up what we've been consumed by, if we can identify it to begin with.

Today is the start of the season of Lent, kicked off by Ash Wednesday and if you're new to Storehouse McAllen, then not only may this be something of an odd service, but perhaps the spiritual discipline of fasting is not too far off either. This is our fifth year observing the start of the season through our Ash Wednesday service and so before we dive into our text, I wish to provide you with five reasons as to why we observe the season of Lent and Ash Wednesday –

The Season of Lent and Ash Wednesday

A. Five reasons we observe the season of Lent and Ash Wednesday:

1. To intentionally fix time on the life of Jesus in the story of our redemption;
 - a. The season of lent is part of the church calendar which was first started in the 4th century and the purpose of the church calendar was to focus on specific seasons of the life, ministry, and death of the Lord Jesus (i.e. Advent, Easter, etc.)
 - b. Lent observes the time in Jesus' life where He fasted for 40 days in the wilderness shortly after being commissioned into His public ministry after His baptism –
 - c. In the wilderness, Jesus not only fasts but fights the temptation of Satan; in the wilderness Jesus, ultimately, prepares Himself for the start of His ministry which ultimately leads us to His death on the cross –
 - d. As a result, let me be clear – Jesus is alive and well and is seated at the right hand of the Father...
2. To consider the condition of our hearts –
 - a. Secondly, we observe the season of lent as an intentional time to consider the condition of our hearts – that is, where are our hearts really at; what has ruled and reigned our hearts apart from Jesus; the weariness in our hearts caused over the last few seasons we've had to endure –
 - b. Are there idols? Weariness? Bitterness?
 - c. Examining the condition of our hearts is consistent with the teaching of Scripture – it is the honesty that we have a hard time with –
3. To consider our mortality –
 - a. Third, we observe this time to consider our mortality. Death is something that we often try to avoid thinking about yet for the last two years, not many have gone unaffected by the reality of death –
 - b. The Bible tells us that we were made from dust and to dust we will return. Therefore, is there any hope in the face of death? (i.e. the purpose of the ashes)
 - c. Of course there is! Jesus has conquered death through His resurrection so the dust does not have to the end for those who belong to Jesus will enter into glory with death serving simply as a vehicle –
4. To encourage spiritual disciplines –
 - a. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is odd to many, but taught and practiced regularly throughout Scripture;
 - b. Fasting, interestingly enough, is something we ought to pay attention to – it's referenced more times than baptism!
 - c. The season of Lent is accompanied by fasting (more on that in a bit)
5. To proclaim the need for a Savior in our city –
 - a. We observe the season of Lent because it's this reminder that we have been given the best news! Christians get to rejoice because this is simply an observance, an examination of our hearts, and this is not the end – Jesus will return!

Therefore, to that end, let us dive into the text and here's my hope for tonight as we examine Isaiah 58 and what God says about fasting – fasting reveals the gluttony of our hearts and our need to be satisfied in the Bread of life, that is, Jesus.

PRAYER

A Need for Piety

Isaiah 58 is the most extensive chapter in the Bible on fasting and what we're going to see is how fasting reveals the gluttony of our hearts and our need to be satisfied in the Bread of life – that is, Jesus.

In order to do this properly, I want to define two things for our time so that we're on the same page. I want to define fasting and piety.

1. Fasting

- a. Abstaining (I would add, voluntarily) from food for a period of time; intentionally fixing our attention on the person and work of Jesus –
 - i. Fasting is normative –
 1. As mentioned earlier, fasting is something that Jesus personally did and taught his disciples. Apart from the pages of Scripture, fasting is something that is deeply rooted in the history of the church (we'll talk about why we should fast toward the end of our time);
 - ii. Fasting is private –
 1. Fasting is something that isn't to be showcased arrogantly as many do to come across as more spiritual than others or for the sake of "likes" on social media. It is a spiritual discipline that is between the individual and God.
 2. Should there be anyone who knows about our fasting, it's only because they need to know or because we decided to share what God is revealing and teaching us –
 - iii. Fasting can be occasional –
 1. Fasting is occasional in the sense that it can be a part of a season (i.e. Lent) or not eating a meal. It can be once a month, once a year, or on special occasions – the Bible doesn't give the full prescription.
 - a. "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:16-18)

2. Piety

Secondly, we need to look at this fancy word, "piety." It's not a word that we often use anymore, but it's a helpful one –

- a. Faithful commitment to God in all of life; devotion –
 - i. Piety is a life of devotion – that's a better way of saying it. A life of devotion – not simply in our prayer or Bible reading, but in everything that we do. In short, our devotion, that is our life, is a reflection of our doctrine, what we believe.
 - ii. Fasting helps produce piety because the purpose of fasting is to long for God; to know Jesus better; to grow in our faith...

3. Summary

- a. Fasting and piety SHOULD go hand-in-hand. They should be funny sounding only in pronunciation, but not in practice.
- b. As Christians, we must practice piety – not to come across as holier than thou (that would be pride), but to both increase our dependence on God and enjoy God in our life. How does fasting help? When we fast, we all of the sudden recognize all of our appetites and it's not just food and that's a good indicator that we have been satisfied by something or someone other than the Lord Jesus –
- c. In fasting, as our hearts are revealed, our treasure is revealed.

TRANSITION: Fasting is a spiritual discipline for a heart that longs and hungers for God.

A Displaced and False Piety

And we finally arrived at our text! As mentioned earlier, Isaiah 58 is the most extensive chapter on fasting from the Bible. Here, we have God speaking to Israel through the Prophet Isaiah. And at this point, Israel has been fasting so that they would hear from God and be recognized by Him in their fasting. In this chapter, we see God respond by holding a mirror up to Israel's heart.

1. The knowledge of sin (v.1)

- a. In the process of their fast, God says that He wants His people's sin to be revealed, to be known –
- b. And in God's assessment of Israel, we learn that Israel wouldn't disagree with God on this, but then God reveals their hypocrisy

2. Israel's Hypocrisy

- a. The act of fasting (v. 3a)
 - i. Israel is fasting. They're participating in this spiritual discipline; externally, they've checked off the box, are doing the right thing, and God exposes their hypocrisy –
- b. A heart displaced in fasting (v. 2)
 - i. I want you to look at a few words in this verse because it's important to understand how they're being said:
 1. Me & Delight: these are words that are written emphatically and sarcastically
 2. Judgment & Righteousness
 - a. Judgment, here, is not condemnation, but assessment. Israel has been fasting therefore they feel God should not only respond to them, but see things the way they see things – but that's not how it works;
 - b. Righteousness – “as if” they do good deeds – that is, their righteousness that they preach is really a hypocritical way of living.
- c. Israel fasts – they practice their “faith” externally, their emotions are mechanical and insincere. Internally, their hearts do not seek after God, His ways, or after His truth. They're looking to use God AND they're the ones who are offended (v.3). This is a false piety – and the danger of piety.
- d. One who lives their devotion out to the Lord on paper – to look a certain way and to have God in their pocket. This is pride, legalism, and dangerous.

3. Wrong Reasons to Fast

- a. Going through the motions;
 - i. Israel exercised the right spiritual discipline (fasting), but they went through the motions. On the surface, they're on “fire” for God, but beneath, their hearts were selfish and they wanted their desires satisfied by something other than God –
 - ii. Are you going through the motions? Are you afraid to be honest?
- b. False humility or punishment (Paying for sins!)
 - i. Israel demonstrates a false humility (v.3). They wanted attention, not transformation. They were entitled, not humbled.
- c. Seeing God as a genie;
 - i. Israel sees God, not as Yahweh or Creator, but as someone in their pocket. Is God in your pocket? That's a very dangerous place for you to be, friends.

TRANSITION: Fasting requires a heart that is humbled by the goodness of God; one that longs for God; not the attention of those around you or your entitlement.

A Humble and True Piety

In the following verses, we examine God's response to Israel's hypocrisy and mechanics. This is where God holds the mirror up to Israel and in turn, through the Spirit, where He holds a mirror up to us –

1. A mirror held up to Israel (v.3b-5)

- a. God exposes what is really occurring with Israel:
 - i. Their own pleasure (false humility);
 - ii. Oppression (mistreatment of others);
 - iii. Fight one another (the church, division, and dissension)
 - iv. Sackcloth and ashes – they have a knowledge of sin, but that doesn't lead to repentance;
- b. Church:
 - i. When you fast – or pursue godliness – is there anything underneath that? Not sure? Consider fasting and may God reveal it to you.
 - ii. But God doesn't leave them there – just like He doesn't leave us hanging. As a good Father, he demonstrates compassion – reminding them of what pleases Him –

2. Fasting that pleases God

In verses 6-8, God provides 6 principles of fasting followed by a reward. For the sake of our time, I'm going to condense those six into two categories. Additionally, I'll provide some reasons as to why we should consider fasting – this season or throughout the Christian life.

a. Worship (v. 6)

- i. In verse 6, we see that fasting is directly linked to worship in that God exposes idols, what we can't live without, what we've given ourselves to, sin that has been a yoke for us – (CF. 1)

1. "If you are aware of your sin, you are aware of it only because you have been visited by amazing grace. Don't resist that awareness. To see sin clearly is a sure sign of God's grace. Be thankful." (Paul Tripp)

b. Mercy (v.7)

- i. Secondly, fasting is directly linked to our devotion – in other words the discipline may be a private affair with the Lord, but it doesn't mean that we neglect others; it is not void of obedience (this is what Israel got wrong!)

1. "God will not allow us to compartmentalize fasting from the rest of our lives. The spiritual disciplines do not stand alone. The Lord will not bless the practice of any spiritual discipline, including fasting, when we disregard His word regarding relationships with people." (Donald Whitney)

- c. Seeking God (v.2)
 - i. Fasting is to long for God; to know Jesus better; to deepen our faith and relationship with Him – earnestly, this is what it is intended for (Israel missed this!)
- d. Guidance;
 - i. A good reason is for God to give you guidance; perhaps clarity; perhaps sound judgment – you’re not always going to have an answer, but you’ll be sober-minded enough to make the best decision;
 - 1. “Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.” (Judges 20:26)
- e. Confession and repentance
 - i. As with the first reason – our hearts have been exposed, our sin has been made known – and it has been made known to us by His grace. Therefore, let us not simply admit our sin, but confess it and that it would lead to a life of repentance and transformation!
 - 1. “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” (Joel 2:12-13)
- f. Strengthening in prayer
 - i. Prayer helps us depend on God because in prayer, we don’t simply commune with God, we are relying on Him to shape us; to lean on His understanding; to meditate upon His ways; in short, to be satisfied by Him alone –
 - 1. “So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.” (Ezra 8:23)

TRANSITION: Fasting pleases God because it is directly connected to worship and mercy.

FINAL THOUGHTS (v.8)

And so, what is the reward of this kind of fasting? READ v. 8-9a. The Lord hears our prayers; the Lord makes Himself available to the broken hearted and the weary; we will cry out and the Lord will say “Here I am.”

The reward? The presence of God in this life – and God has best demonstrated this through Jesus entering into our world that is filled with vanity and frustration, dying in our place and for our sin, resurrecting on the third day conquering sin, Satan, and hell so that we might be redeemed, forgiven, new, and here the words, “here I am.”

If you belong to Jesus, you do so because of grace through faith – not because you’ve earned righteousness before God. Fasting is for the heart that already belongs to God and simply put,

misses Him and longs for His return. The blood of Jesus has redeemed you and in your forgiveness and newness, you have intimate access to the Father.

Whether you observe the season of Lent or not; get an ash on your forehead or not – fasting is a spiritual discipline that draws us near to God in prayer and dependence; resetting our thinking to create an awareness of our sin and God's grace; recentering our attention in that this will one day no longer be necessary because we will be feasting with Jesus in glory!

Christian: I know you're tired; weary; and often your hunger goes unsatisfied – fix your eyes on Jesus tonight; come before Him tired and weary and He will give you rest.

Non Christian: This is all tradition – what's important is whether or not you know Jesus. Apart from Jesus, you do not have a newness of life, but in Jesus he offers you the grace of His salvation through faith and repentance.

Church: fasting – reveals the gluttony of our hearts and our need to be satisfied in Jesus.

Benediction | Isaiah 25:6

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.