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“Then Your Light Shall Break Forth Like the Dawn” — Isaiah 58 (A Sermon)

STUART. L. LOVE

SEEKING GOD’S ATTENTION

This evening marks the close of Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, a fast of 40 working days before Easter suggested by the 40 days’ fasts of Moses, Elijah, and especially Jesus. Millions throughout the world begin on Ash Wednesday a period of penitence and mourning that prepares their lives for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. All the faithful are exhorted to approach the altar before the beginning of the Mass, and there the priest, dipping his thumb into ashes that have been previously blessed, marks the forehead of each with the sign of the cross, saying the words: “Remember ... that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.”

That’s tonight. Now imagine another scene approximately 2,500 years ago. God’s people have gathered to mourn and to fast. Apparently, their beloved city and Temple remain in ruins (Isa 58:12). Their heads are bowed. They wear sackcloth and sit in ashes. They’ve done this for about 70 years—every year in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months. They grieve and remember the day when Jerusalem was besieged, the city was captured, the city and temple were burned, and Gedaliah their governor was assassinated (Zech 7:5, 8:19; Jeremiah 40-41). They fast over the greatest tragedy of Israel’s national life—the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

They’ve fasted for so long! Perhaps their patience runs thin, or perhaps their disillusionment grows out of hand:

You promised, Lord, that when we passed through the waters that you’d be with us, that when we walked through the fire we wouldn’t be burned. You told us that we were precious in your sight and that you loved us. You promised to redeem us. WHERE ARE YOU, LORD?” There seem to be so many obstacles in the way of rebuilding the Temple and the beloved city. WHERE ARE YOU, LORD?

They ask the Lord through Zechariah, “Should [we] mourn and practice abstinence ... for so many years” (7:3)? In our passage they ask the Lord, “*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*” They want God’s attention but it’s not happening.

I asked a group of fellow Christians at Pepperdine, “What are ways we seek God’s attention to no avail? Their answers are insightful. We don’t get God’s attention ...

When we focus on our worthiness or noble works;
When we build monuments (buildings) to our own vanity;
When we add up good deeds thinking that somehow this gives us leverage with God;
When we seek God to bless us in self-benefiting ways;
When we think we must in some way catch God’s eye—in worship, in what we’re doing;
When we try to dazzle God by the expressiveness of our voices, the work of our hands, and the eloquence of our preaching;

When we fail to demonstrate our love for God or our love for neighbors
 When we do not treat others as we would like to be treated, or show mercy, or forgive;
 When we make war rather than peace; and
 When we help ourselves but don't help others.

The Psalmist exclaims, "*If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened*" (66:18).

Our worship or the practice of the spiritual disciplines may be acceptable to God; it can lead to the transformation of our lives, or ... it may be unavailing, an abomination to God! There is righteous and unrighteous worship, false and true worship, a spiritual service in which God delights and a self-serving, self-deluding "service" that is an affront to a holy and righteous God! AND THE DIFFERENCE TURNS GREATLY ON THE CHARACTER OF OUR LIVES!

THEN AND TODAY

The people of God in our passage not only fast but they also punctiliously keep the Sabbath.

But the Lord *doesn't see* their fasting. He doesn't *honor* their Sabbath keeping. He *does see* that they pursue their own interests, oppress their workers, quarrel and fight, and strike one another with wicked fists. He *does see* how they trample the Sabbath.

Now, all of this is "easy" for us to see, but does not Isaiah warn us as well?! REMEMBER ... THE WORD OF GOD HAS A MOST PERTURBING WAY OF DISREGARDING DATES AND OF MAKING TRUTH CONTEMPORARY.

So, tonight, the Lord is using two preachers, the prophet and me, to address our lives concerning righteous and unrighteous worship. This is a serious matter. It involves the morality of the way we live and serve God. We can't take this message casually! It is urgent! In the end, when we call upon the Lord will he answer, "Here I am?" "Will our light break forth like the dawn?"

How does this ancient sermon speak to us? It speaks to us through (1) the fast that the Lord rejects; (2) the fast that God chooses; (3) the Sabbath that delights the Lord; and (4) the rewards God promises those who worship him in righteousness.

THE FAST THAT THE LORD REJECTS

The question God's people ask, "*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*" can be put another way, "We pray; we sacrifice; why doesn't it *work*?" And that's the test of pragmatism!

God's people fast—but they do not seek the fruit God desires. The Lord asks in Zechariah, "... was it for me that you fasted" (7:6)? No!

The Lord in our text exclaims, "**Look!**" "You serve your own interests on your fast day and oppress all your workers." "**Look!**" "You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist" (2b-4)!

Put another way, "When you fast your heads are bowed to the ground. Quit looking down! **LOOK UP AND AROUND!** When you bow your heads like a bulrush you serve yourselves! **Look up and around** at the massive disconnect between your fasting and the social integrity of your lives." **Look up and around** and see your fellow human beings who need your help!"

Let's be clear—fasting based on mourning, penitence, and humility is not wrong. That's **good**. Going to church is not wrong! Worship that inspires and provides spiritual refuge is not wrong. That's **good!**

But when we try to leverage the Lord, that is, when we say, "We've fasted, but you haven't kept your end of the bargain"—that's **not good**.

We can't put God under obligation to deliver us from our calamities or to restore our fortunes. Such disillusionment betrays our selfishness! When we put God on the block and he doesn't live up to our expectations, we then doubt God's reliability. That's **not good!**

We can't clothe our worship with the language and acts of "religious legitimacy" **expecting** that God will bless us in self-benefiting ways. That's **not good!**

Such worship lacks power for daily living! God is surely as interested in issues of peace, mercy, and justice as he is in church attendance, "acts" of worship, and baptism.

Our pursuit of the spiritual disciplines cannot compensate for a disregard for the moral demands of God in social relationships. The practice of mercy and justice is also a spiritual discipline that validates our prayer, gives power to our preaching, and brings social significance to our observance of the Lord's Supper!

Brevard Childs puts his finger on the problem, "**salvation and justice must coexist.**" Put another way, "**There is no salvation without justice.**" So, what is the fast the Lord chooses?

THE FAST THAT THE LORD CHOOSES

Listen to Isaiah's astounding language! And as you do, let's lift up our bowed heads and look into the faces of the suffering—let's see the eyes of those who mourn.

1. "to loose the bonds of injustice"—This is Isaiah, but doesn't it sound like Jesus?
2. "to undo the thongs of the yoke"—This is Isaiah, but doesn't it sound like Jesus?
3. "to let the oppressed go free"—This is Isaiah, but doesn't it sound like Jesus?
4. "to break every yoke"—This is Isaiah, but doesn't it sound like Jesus?

It sounds like Jesus because it is Jesus—at the outset of his ministry at the synagogue service in Nazareth—"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18; see Isa 58:6).

Think of it! On the one hand, Jesus' ministry is like a wedding—and wedding guests don't fast while the bridegroom is with them, do they (Mark 2:19)?

But at a deeper level, following Isaiah, Jesus' entire ministry is the fast that God chooses—not sackcloth and ashes but setting free the oppressed and breaking the bonds of injustice. We cannot separate Jesus' passion from his ministry, his atoning death from his ministry. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ... the poor have good news brought to them" (Matt 11:4-5). That's his ministry; that's the fast in which the Lord delights. Every deed of Jesus tied to his proclamation of the Kingdom of God demonstrates the fast that the Lord chooses!

And if it's his fast, it's our fast as well. When we deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow Jesus, we join Jesus in the mission of his ministry. We say with Jesus, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*, he has anointed *us* to bring good news to the poor. He has sent *us* to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

But Isaiah isn't through. Listen again. What is the fast the Lord chooses? It is

5. "to share your bread with the hungry"
6. "to bring the homeless poor into your houses"
7. "when you see the naked, to cover them"
8. "not to hide yourself from your own kin"

This echoes Jesus, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:34-36).

Now, we're talking about spiritual transformation! Let me remind us of two positive examples from our own Restoration heritage!

Listen to David Lipscomb:

Let us realize that every helpless, needy one of our brethren is the personification of Christ to us appealing for help. ... We must sacrifice our luxuries, our comforts, our wealth and pride, to relieve our brother's distresses, just as Christ sacrificed his honors, glories and possessions in heaven, to help poor fallen man on earth.

Concerning the poor, Lipscomb advised,

Visit them in their homes, learn to appreciate their trials and difficulties ... No class or persons will be more benefited by your conversation or association ... Christ associated with and made himself one of the poor. His servants should act as he did.

In 1873 a cholera epidemic struck Nashville. Richard Hughes in his book, *Reclaiming a Heritage*, states, "During the month of June alone, almost 500 people died. Blacks were especially hard hit." Lipscomb went into houses where the epidemic had struck. He cleaned and fed the victims. He urged churches in Nashville to follow his example:

It is a time that should call out the full courage and energy of the church in looking after the needy. Every individual, black or white, that dies from neglect and want of proper food and nursing, is a reproach to the professors of the Christian religion in the vicinity of Nashville.¹

Listen to the remarkable work of one congregation between the years of 1925 to 1945, the Central Church of Christ in Nashville. From its beginning with 12 families in 1925, it placed a dual emphasis on evangelism and benevolence.

The ministry of evangelism included daily preaching at noon on WLAC, weekly visitation teams, and the distribution of literature and Bibles. The church supported 12 missionaries.

The ministry of benevolence included medical and dental classes; general education classes in P.E., music, personal hygiene, dietetics, and health; and, of course, classes in the Bible. The ministry of benevolence provided daycare; money to pay rent, to bury loved ones, to find work, to put clothing on naked backs; food for the hungry; and coal to keep warm.

The ministry of benevolence provided noon meals for the homeless, job placement assistance, and housing for women and eventually men. During a five-year span, 1925-1930, the church served 56,000 meals and lodged 3,222 people.

And by 1941 the church grew from 45 to 1,200 members. The *Nashville Banner* wrote, "Central Church facilities remain open practically the entire day and night, and emergency welfare calls are given close attention, regardless of the hour." (207) By 1945 Central Church had baptized 8,000 persons—a little more than one person a day. WHY? Because the church believed that practical Christianity

Authenticates the Restoration Plea,
Includes meeting physical and spiritual needs,
Gives glory to God,
Serves all of humanity, and
Is motivated by love.

The legacy of these two examples reaches us tonight: Camp Shiloh in the 1960s and 1970s; the past work of Ira North and the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville; the work of Harold Shank and the Highland Street Church of Christ in Memphis; the Christian Service Center in Abilene, a work of the

University Church of Christ; the labor of Larry James with Dallas Central Ministries (now expanded, I believe, to Austin and San Antonio); and the Urban Ministries Conferences begun in 1990 in Dallas that today has led to the establishment of over 75 urban ministries. Other examples could be mentioned. But we have only touched the hem of the garment!

The kingdom of God is opposed to the kingdom of sin. Isaiah and Jesus criticized Israel's sacrifices. Isaiah and Jesus upheld righteousness, mercy, and justice. We are in the business of affirming the divine worth of life and personality that includes the restoration and fulfillment of the least of those who are members of God's family and creation.

Let me challenge us this evening.

When is the last time you heard a sermon on the care of the poor?

Has the care of the poor ever been a religious education curriculum topic in your church?

What would happen if in planning your church budget next year you decided, "This year the care of the poor is going to be the most important priority in our budget?"

What would happen if your church ministry systems affirmed: "This year the care of the poor is going to stand side by side with evangelism and missions in our service to God in Christ?"

"But isn't this the social gospel?" No, this is the wholeness of the gospel. The gospel liberates us from our sins and brings good news to the poor. "The Son of man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." I'm told that the loss of a single tooth from the arch of the mouth of a child may spoil the symmetrical development of the skull and produce malformations in a child's development. Everything must be in balance—the whole gospel for the whole world!

This isn't over whether we are Democrats or Republicans or whether we're for government welfare or faith-based ministries. No! Isaiah and Jesus are challenging us as to whether we are pleasing to God and a blessing to the nations!

TAKING DELIGHT IN THE LORD BY HONORING THE SABBATH

But then our text does something that seems strange—it unites fasting to Sabbath observance. On the surface this may sound odd. But I believe all of Isaiah 58 fits together! But *how* are the two connected?

They go together because God gave the Sabbath to serve humankind, that is, to provide mercy through rest. Listen to the language of Deut 5:12-15. The observance of the Sabbath served as a rest for the sake of a family's sons and daughters, male and female slaves, oxen and donkeys, livestock, resident aliens, so that "your male and female slave" may **rest**.

This theme is even more evident in the observance of the sabbatical year. Every 7th year, Israel's law called for the relief of Israel's poor by allowing debts to lapse. WHY? BECAUSE THERE SHOULD BE "NO ONE IN NEED AMONG YOU" (Deut 15:4).

So, we "take delight in the Lord's Day" when we fast as God chooses, that is, when we share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our homes. The holy day of the Lord is honored when we DO NOT go our own ways, serve our own interests, or pursue our own affairs (Isa 58:13).

Does that not coincide with Jesus? Jesus affirmed, "*The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.*" For Jesus the Sabbath is about human mercy and rest! Listen! In Matthew's gospel, before Jesus declares that the "Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath," he quotes Hosea, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (12:7-8).

Should not the Lord's Day, the day when we remember and celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus, be the day when we affirm God's healing and saving rule over all of his creation?

So, we honor God on the Lord's Day when we extend rest to the weary, compassion for the poor, release from the burden of toil; when we give strength to the faint-hearted, hope to the afflicted, and freedom from oppression; when we cease from our strivings and our work and the busy-ness of our lives to make room for our wives, our husbands, our children and for our God. Then our Sabbath becomes the fast that the Lord chooses!

THE REWARDS OF KEEPING GOD'S FAST AND SABBATH

Have you noticed that the "ifs" of our text are followed by a number of "thens?" "If you remove the yoke from among you" "then your light shall rise in the darkness ..."

Now it's time for us to be renewed by God's promises for his people who worship righteously. The Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear (Isa 59:1)!

When we honor the Sabbath and make it the Lord's delight, then we will take delight in the Lord, and the Lord "will make [us] ride upon the heights of the earth ..."

When we let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our homes, and cover the naked with clothing and do not hide ourselves from our fellow human beings in need

...

Then our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up quickly.

Then our God who is our vindicator shall go before us, and his glory shall be our rear guard.

Then the Lord shall guide us continually, he will satisfy our needs in parched places, he'll make our bones strong, and we'll be like a watered garden, like a spring of water.

Then the ancient ruins of our lives will be rebuilt, and we'll rise up and become foundations for the sake of others for many generations.

Then we'll repair the breaches of our world, and we'll restore the pathways of lives in need! Yes, our light shall break forth like the dawn!

Then when we call, the Lord will answer, when we cry out for help, our God will say, "Here I am."

And let us all say, **Amen!**

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END NOTE

- 1 R. Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage*, (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 2002), 76.

