

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/22/95 PM
Isaiah 58:1-12 "Proper Attitudes in Fasting"

Intro: By and large, the subject of fasting is foreign to most of us. Such was not the case in times past. Fasting played an important role in the founding of America. The Pilgrims fasted the day before they left the Mayflower, in order to seek God's guidance as they sought to establish a city in the new world. Many of the settlers in colonial America fasted. Town councils in many New England villages called the entire population to fast when they faced a crisis (Jerry Falwell, Fasting: What the Bible Teaches, 8).

I have not run across very much written material on the subject of fasting. Jerry Falwell wrote book on fasting back in the early 1980's. He observes (8), "Throughout history, great men sought the power and blessing of God while fasting. Luther, Calvin, and Knox fasted. Jonathan Edwards fasted for twenty-two hours prior to preaching his famous sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.'" And, "Evangelist Charles Finney often stopped revival meetings when he sensed the heart of the audience was cold. He immediately called for fasting and prayer. When God began to warm the hearts of his hearers, Finney continued the meeting."

During the early days of our nation, Congress proclaimed three national fasts. Presidents John Adams and James Madison each called on all Americans to fast. So did Abraham Lincoln on three occasions during the crisis of the Civil War (Whitney, 154). Although there is no biblical warrant for what he did, it is said that John Wesley would not ordain a man to the Methodist ministry who did not regularly fast every Wednesday and Friday (ibid).

Why does fasting seem so out of place to us? In part, it's related to the way we view anything that takes "discipline." Jay Adams has observed (in Godliness Through Discipline), "The word discipline has disappeared from our minds, our mouths, our pulpits, and our culture. We hardly know what discipline means in modern American society. And yet, there is no other way to attain godliness; discipline is the path to godliness."

Fasting is an act of discipline. Unfortunately, the propaganda we receive from commercials would have us believe that if we don't have 3 meals a day, and plenty of snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. Someone might say, "Won't fasting destroy healthy body tissue?" The fact is, that while the human body can survive only a short time without air or water, it can go for many days without food before starvation begins.

Last week, we began a series, "Fasting in an Age of Feasting." Why such a series? For one reason, because the Bible has so much to say about fasting.

Let's do a little Bible survey in order to uncover biblical incidents of fasting. Look for 4 things: the names of people who fasted, the biblical text, the occasion of their fast, and any related activities associated with their fasting (i.e. prayer, wearing sackcloth, etc.).

People who Fasted in the Bible

Who?

Where?

Occasion?

Related activities?

Moses	Deut 9:18	Confess people's sin	Fell down; 40 days, No food/water
Israelites at Mizpah	1 Samuel 7	Sin	Confession
David	2 Samuel 12:15	Baby dying	Refused food; wept and lay on ground
Ahab	1 Kgs 21:27	Judgment coming	Tore clothes; sackcloth; humbled
Nehemiah	Neh 1:4	Jerusalem Condition	Wept & prayed
Israelites	Nehemiah 9	Sin	Sackcloth, dust on heads; confession
David	Psalms 35:13	Enemies after him	Prayer; sackcloth; humbled
Daniel	Daniel 9:3	Sin & captivity	Prayer,
sackcloth			
Israel in Joel's day	Joel 2:12	Sin	Weeping & mourning
Ninevites	Jonah 3	Judgment coming	Sackcloth; sat in dust; No eating or drinking for man or beast
Anna	Luke 2:37	Awaiting Messiah	Worshiped & prayed
Jesus	Matthew 4	Wilderness	Quote Scripture
Church at Antioch	Acts 13:2	Needed direction	Worshiped & prayed
Paul & Barnabas	Acts 14:23	Choosing elders	Prayer

Even a casual glance at the above Scriptures points out the following about fasting. One, fasting is important. Two, biblical fasting is more than merely refraining from food. There is a spiritual motivation, often related to a time of crisis or need. Three, fasting is frequently accompanied by other activities of spiritual discipline (prayer, worship, acts of humility). This relates to what we learned last week from Jesus words in Matthew 6 (see transparency, for review). Jesus emphasized the importance of fasting.

Review: (last week Matthew 6)

Now that we've established the biblical importance of fasting, we're ready to address a very key issue--attitudes. Fasting must be done with pure and proper attitudes or it will be a futile activity. What attitudes does God commend in fasting? To find out, let's turn to Isaiah 58. Isa 58 is an example of people who were fasting, but with the wrong attitudes.

Proposition: In Isaiah 58:1-12, we'll see two types of fasting, with the difference between the two having to do with "attitudes." Following this examination, we'll identify three important lessons related to fasting.

I. The Kind of Fasting God Disapproves (1-5)

A. What was true of the people at first glance? (1-3a)

1. They were zealous (2).
2. They seemed biblical (2).
3. They seemed godly (2).
4. They fasted with fervor (3, 5).

- B. What was true of the people behind the scenes? (3b-4)
 - 1. They lived for personal pleasure, not for God (3b).
 - 2. They exploited people (3b).
 - 3. They were trying to cover up sin (4).
- II. The Kind of Fasting God Approves (6-12)
 - A. What activities accompany proper fasting? (6-7)
 - 1. Loose the chains of injustice.
 - 2. Undo heavy burdens.
 - 3. Let the oppressed go free.
 - 4. Break every yoke.
 - 5. Share food with the hungry.
 - 6. Provide the poor with shelter.
 - 7. Clothe the naked.
 - B. What are the results of proper fasting? (8-12)
 - 1. You will experience the glory of God (8).
 - 2. You will call, and God will answer (9).
 - 3. God will guide you (11).

Practical Lessons about Proper Attitudes in Fasting:

- 1. Fasting doesn't replace my other God-given responsibilities (see Zech 7:1-14).
- 2. The attitude I exhibit when I fast should be seen in every other area of my life.
 - a. God is #1 to me.
 - b. My #1 aim in life is to know and please Him.
 - c. I will not be controlled by "things," but will use "things" to honor Him and help others.
- 3. Fasting should be marked by confession of sin (see 1 Sam 7:5-6; Dan 9:3-6).

I. The Kind of Fasting God Disapproves (1-5)

Isaiah ministered in the 8th century B.C. In his book, he preached a message of both judgment (ch 1-39) and hope (ch 40-66). The final nine chapters of Isaiah focus on restoration and the glory of the last days. But first, Isaiah had to address some areas that were out of whack in Israel. One related to fasting. His people fasted, but something was amiss (READ vv 1-3).

At first glance, the people looked impressive...

A. What was true of the people at first glance? (1-3a)

Notice 4 characteristics in the first three verses...

1. *They were zealous* (2).

The text says, "They seek me daily."

2. *They seemed biblical* (2).

V 2 reads, "And delight to know my ways, and did righteousness."

3. *They seemed godly* (2).

V 2 continues, "And forsook not the ordinance of their God." In fact, notice the compliment at the end of v 2, "They take delight in approaching God."

4. *They fasted with fervor* (3, 5).

The people ask a series of questions in v 3, "Why have we fasted, and thou seest us not? Why have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?" In v 5, we catch the sense of the fervor of their fasting. There was personal soul affliction (not approached casually). They bowed their heads like a bulrush. They wore sackcloth and spread ashes.

Don't miss this. These people were zealous in their religious activity. Yet never forget this. Religious fervor is no substitute for real godliness. The real question is...

B. What was true of the people behind the scenes? (3b-4)

The people were guilty of three sins...

1. They lived for personal pleasure, not for God (3b).

V 3b "Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure." Fasting is supposed to be a time when we get our eyes off of ourselves. But, as the NIV puts it, when these people fasted, they "did as they pleased."

2. They exploited people (3b).

The KJV says, "You exact all your labors." The NIV uses the word "exploited." In other words, at the same time they were fasting, they were taking advantage of other people. Their fasting was little more than a mechanical ritual, an empty practice. In fact, it was actually a smokescreen.

3. They were trying to cover up sin (4).

What kind of sin? V 4 "Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite the fist of wickedness." Herbert Wolf suggests what may have been happening (230), "Employers were forcing their employees to work harder, perhaps to make sure that fasting did not hinder production. The lack of food made people temperamental and resulted in quarreling and fighting. How could this sort of behavior win the favor of the Lord? Outwardly the Israelites were bent over in prayer...but they did not exhibit genuine humility."

What's the bottom line of such action? We find out at the end of v 4 (NIV), "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."

One of the Puritan pastor-writers, Thomas Boston, said (in Whitney, 163), "In vain will ye fast, and pretend to be humbled for our sins, and make confession of them, if our love of sin be not turned into hatred; our liking of it into loathing; and our cleaving to it, into a longing to be rid of it; with full purpose to resist the motions of it in our heart, and the outbreakings thereof in our life; and if we turn not unto God as our rightful Lord and Master, and return to our duty again."

Before we fast, we need to take a reality check. Ask yourself, "Does my life support my religious activity? When I fast, my aim is to take my eyes off of myself and put them on God. Is that same aim apparent in the way I've been treating other people?"

II. The Kind of Fasting God Approves (6-12)

Consider two questions...

A. What activities accompany proper fasting? (6-7)

Notice the list of rhetorical questions God poses in vv 6-7. Here we find out the kind of fasting that pleases God.

1. Loose the chains of injustice.

2. *Undo heavy burdens.*
3. *Let the oppressed go free.*
4. *Break every yoke.*
5. *Share food with the hungry.*
6. *Provide the poor with shelter.*
7. *Clothe the naked.*

Fasting costs a person. Fasting involves self-denial. I have to deny myself to give up a meal. It takes the same kind of self-denial to loose the chains of injustice, to get involved helping helpless people. Notice that the kind of fasting that pleases God is not just giving up a meal, but sharing that meal with the hungry.

These seven activities are costly. They will cost us our time, our money, maybe even our reputation (Someone may criticize us, "What are you doing spending time with people like THAT?!"). But if we're willing to pay the price by doing these activities, it shows we really mean business with God when we fast. Caring for needs is what true righteousness is all about.

We may think, "But if I get involved undoing burdens, and letting the oppressed go free, and sharing food, I'll lose money!" And Isaiah says, "Maybe, but you'll also gain God's favor!"

B. What are the results of proper fasting? (8-12)

That's what the next section explains. Isaiah told his people, "You're entitled to three results when you fast the way God desires..."

1. *You will experience the glory of God (8).*
2. *You will call, and God will answer (9).*
3. *God will guide you (11).*

See what happens? When we fast properly, it's as if we are inviting God to get involved in our lives. And He does! He loves to show His glory and greatness in the lives of people who humble themselves before Him.

So what lessons can we learn about proper attitudes in fasting? We can learn from Israel's failure the following...

Practical Lessons about Proper Attitudes in Fasting:

1. *Fasting doesn't replace my other God-given responsibilities (see Zech 7:1-14).*

Fasting doesn't earn "brownie points" with God. Fasting is not like "extra credit" that we can use to make up for bad work in other areas of our lives. That's the error Zechariah's people clung to, and here's what God said (Zech 7:4-9), "When you fasted...did you at all fast to Me?" What was their problem? They refused to pay attention to God in other areas (11), namely when it came to social justice (9).

2. *The attitude I exhibit when I fast should be seen in every other area of my life.*

When we fast, here's what we're saying (which ought to be our perspective in every area of our lives)

- a. God is #1 to me.
- b. My #1 aim in life is to know and please Him.
- c. I will not be controlled by "things," but will use "things" to honor Him and help others.

3. *Fasting should be marked by confession of sin (see 1 Sam 7:5-6; Dan 9:3-6).*
The Israelites missed this in Isaiah's day. We must not.