

Bible Studies

Isaiah 58



Read Isaiah 58

This is a passage that talks about fasting and how to fast effectively. However it seems that Isaiah is using fasting as an example, to show the difference between an outward conformity to God and a true living faith in Him.



What is the difference?

Is this a danger Christians face today?

Can you think of some examples?

In the first verse, God calls on Isaiah to reprimand the people for their sin,

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

But what is their sin? *Day after day they seek me out;
They seem eager to know my ways,
They ask me for just decisions.
They seem eager for God to come near them.
They even fast.*

What's the problem?

All this is good, it may even describe many of us. What was wrong with their approach to God? They did it;

*as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.*

What does the 'as if' mean in this verse? What does it imply?

All their seeking God was a facade, because in their actions they were in rebellion against Him. They seemed to think that as long as they did their religious duty, they could organise the rest of their lives as they liked. They had a form of godliness, but there was no reality and no power in it. 2 Timothy 3v5



What are the dangers in this kind of a façade?

Do people today still do this?

Verse 3, tells us about their motives in fasting,

*'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
'Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'*

What was their attitude towards fasting?

It seems their fasting was designed to twist Gods arm.

Is this a valid attitude to have towards fasting? Matthew 6v16-18

The link between fasting and humbling yourself is valid, in fact it is one of the major reasons why we fast. But to humble yourself and then desire that it be recognised that you are humble, is closer to pride than humility!



Can you fool God with a front?

Can you twist God's arm by your actions?



What did the people do that was so offensive to God? v3b - 4a

What was the result? v4b cf Psalm 66v18.

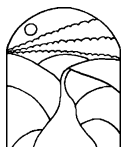
Fasting and sinning, seem a pointless combination, cherishing sin and asking God for guidance equally futile. (Cherish is a key word here, it means love, hide and harbour, if in recognising our inability to deal with sin we sincerely cry out to God, He will certainly help us.)



Read verse 5,

Does it seem that your attitude in fasting is more important than the mechanics of how you fast?

Does, "Only a day for a man to humble himself," suggest that fasting should have an on going effect, especially regarding our attitude to God?





What kind of fasting has God chosen? v6-7

How can we practice this kind of fasting?

Does this mean that we no longer need to fast physically?

No, this does this mean we no longer have to fast physically by denying ourselves food, if we give to the poor. Jesus said *-When you fast* not, if you fast. Mat 6v17. It does show us that God's chosen way to fast, require a right attitude to God **and** a right attitude to other people **and** doing His will, not doing as we please (ie sinning).

Can you divorce your relationship with God and the way you treat others?

Our faith is not a esoteric exercise between God and us, it has to be seen in the way we treat the people around us. You cannot just be concerned with your spiritual relationship with God and forget you obligations to the other people.

What will be the result of this new attitude towards God?

Your will break forth like the dawn,

Your will quickly appear;

Your will go before you,

The will be your rear guard.

You will call, and the LORD will ; you will cry for help,

He will say: .

What do you think this says about the reason we often have difficulty hearing God's voice? Cf Romans 12v2



Verse 9b-12 and 13-14, give two further sets of conditions and promises.

*"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then....."*

What kind of oppression was Isaiah worried about in his day?

What do you think the pointing 'finger and malicious' talk are?

How is this relevant to us, particularly in our circle of friends and family?

The phrase, 'spend *yourself*' is very graphic, Paul spent himself on behalf of the Gospel Philippians 2v17. Today's society is always looking for a return, as Christians we should look for what we can give, not what we can receive. In return God will guide us, meet our needs and strengthen our bodies (lit bones.) make us flourish and give us a legacy.

Is it OK to forget God as long as you care for the people around you?

This has been a big danger for parts of the Church, they get so involved in care for the community (social Gospel) that they forget the worship of God, they leave their first love. Our service flows from our relationship with God. Both are needed. If the first of these two sections speaks about our responsibility to the oppressed the second speaks of our obligation to God.



*"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable,
and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please
or speaking idle words, then ..."*

This group of conditions centre around the Lord's Day. Notice however that both sets of conditions have something to say about our conversation!

The Jews of Jesus day (and today) had a very legalistic view of keeping the Sabbath holy. Jesus saw it as a gift to man, Mark 2v27, a day to do good, Mat 12v12, a day to enjoy yourself and God. Paul talks of all days as equal; Romans 14v5, Col 2v16. It seems that Isaiah steers away from all the rules about keeping the Sabbath and concentrates on our attitude, it should be our delight, something we honour.

Bearing this in mind how do we fulfil these requirements?



The result of this is that *you will find your joy in the LORD*, be blessed and receive the inheritance God has planned for you.

The mouth of the LORD has spoken.