

“Cry out loudly,^[a] don't hold back!

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Tell my people their transgression
and the house of Jacob their sins.

²They seek me day after day
and delight to know my ways,
like a nation that does what is right
and does not abandon the justice of their God.

They ask me for righteous judgments;
they delight in the nearness of God.”

³“Why have we fasted, but you have not seen?

We have denied ourselves, but you haven't noticed!”^[b]

“Look, you do as you please on the day of your fast,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴You fast with contention and strife
to strike viciously with your fist.
You cannot fast as you do today,
hoping to make your voice heard on high.

⁵Will the fast I choose be like this:
A day for a person to deny himself,
to bow his head like a reed,
and to spread out sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶Isn't this the fast I choose:
To break the chains of wickedness,
to untie the ropes of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free,
and to tear off every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
to bring the poor and homeless into your house,
to clothe the naked when you see him,
and not to ignore your own flesh and blood?^[c]

⁸Then your light will appear like the dawn,
and your recovery will come quickly.
Your righteousness will go before you,
and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

⁹At that time, when you call, the LORD will answer;
when you cry out, he will say, 'Here I am.'

Hangry

I've never been a good faster. It's not that I don't know how to fast, I just don't want to fast. But let's just say I've thought about it once or twice, even recently. I had a teacher in high school who fasted the full forty days of lent. He ate nothing but honey, lettuce, and water. I admired the ability to abstain from food for long periods of time. But I've never thought, “I can do that.” Because I don't think I can. I suffer from this thing called, “Need for

food.” When I don’t have food I get grumpy. I make poor decisions. I’m only interested in food. Nothing would get done. There is a word used to describe such a situation made famous by a candy bar. It’s called, “Hangry.” You’re not yourself when you’re hungry,” and that’s true even for God’s People Israel.

Isaiah says to God’s people, “You’re hangry and for no purpose.” *“You fast with contention and strife to strike viciously with your fist.”* They’re fasting and fighting with each other at the same time. They were fasting in order to manipulate the almighty God. It’s like they’re dangling their food in front of God trying to get him to go where they lead him. Isaiah has to explain to them, “That’s not how fasting works.” Fasting isn’t the divine carrot on the stick. It doesn’t manipulate or control God. Fasting doesn’t make you more holy, in fact it may make you hangry. God doesn’t need you to abstain from food. It’s of no benefit to him.

There are many things that God doesn’t need. He doesn’t need our fasting, our offerings, our praises. It’s not as if we could earn God’s favor or forgiveness we already have that in his Son. It’s not the outward appearances that God is concerned with, it’s the motivation of our heart. Trying to earn that through fasting, may only leave you hangry.

Israel doesn’t get it. They complain, *“Why have we fasted, but you have not seen? We have denied ourselves, but you haven’t noticed!”* It’s as if they expect God to pay attention to them because they are denying themselves food. Where did they get the idea that “If I withhold something good from myself – God will love me”? God doesn’t command fasting in the Old Testament. It’s simply assumed that people will fast at some point. During suffering or calamity, during time of need, and sometimes you just don’t want to eat. But nowhere is fasting seen as something we do for God. Their real motive for fasting is revealed when their fasting does not leverage God’s blessing. They only wanted to manipulate God to serve their own interests. Isaiah condemns such practices, but he does not condemn fasting. Isaiah speaks of a proper fast but first he questions what that will look like.

Will the fast I choose be like this: A day for a person to deny himself, to bow his head like a reed, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the LORD? Is a fast something imposed on a person like wind on a reed? A reed can’t bow on its own. It must be bent by an outward force. Is fasting forced on a person? If it’s not done in willing humility before God – why are you bothering? Is it a time to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Go all yard sale, spread out, before all, the fact that you are fasting so you may be seen by men. If it’s not done in repentance, then it isn’t proper. If it’s done to impress God, then he isn’t interested.

They’re not fasting properly. *“You do as you please on the day of your fast.” “You fast with contention and strife to strike viciously with your fist.”* They’re trying to look godly and pious but instead they take their hanger out on others. They are coming to blows with one another. They’ll deny themselves food and if they suffer – they want anyone around them to suffer as well. They think what they are doing is kosher and they don’t even realize how sinful it is. If they want God’s favor and attention Isaiah instructs them to seek justice, show mercy and love to your fellowman. But as long as you act like out in hanger, God will not come near, and your voice will not be heard on high.

Most of us probably haven’t fasted for a long time (if you have you’re better than I am because you haven’t made it obvious), unless there was a medical procedure that mandated it. But we’ll probably agree, “Fasting is good.” It’s beneficial to our health. Fasting is growing in popularity even extending to other aspects of life. We’ll fast from technology. We’ll fast from media. Many ways better for it. There are many health benefits and I’m sure I could use some fasting after the holidays. But this fasting and all fasting is only beneficial for one person, that’s the person fasting. So why bother? It is our natural opinion of the law that says we must do something in order to try and win God’s favor and it doesn’t matter what you call it.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure who can endure it?”* Look at heart, our motives. We are sinners too. We are capable of horrific things like mistreating our neighbor – the homeless. When I

look at the motives of my heart for helping the homeless with a ride – is it not to move them along? When I feed them is it not because I want them on my side?

Maybe it's not fasting that we boast about before God, maybe it's your offering. We may think that our offerings given to God will in some way leverage God's ear and accomplish what we desire. We may think that our mere attendance of church can manipulate God. Or maybe it's with our worship, our hymns, our devotional reading, and our piety. But all of these things are beneficial to us or others. That's like saying, "I'm so godly, I'm so pious..." every time you walk by the gas station sushi. It's for your good that you don't eat it.

God allows us to participate in his kingdom. He allows us to be a part with our offerings. Offerings are beneficial to you, to me, and the community around you. He allows us an opportunity to give back a small portion of what he has given to us to support the church. Our Church attendance once again is God's work for you, *Gottesdienst* – God's Service, as he sends his spirit out in the preaching of his Word and reminds us of the forgiveness of sins freely won for us. Fasting does not please the Lord – but there is nothing wrong with it.

In fact there is a fast that God calls for in Isaiah 58. *Isn't this the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood?* Isaiah calls for Israel to take a fast from sin. Set yourself and others free from sin. Help those struggling with their sin to escape the oppressive yoke. There is a fast that can be beneficial to others - Maybe you will fast and not have a meal so that you can share with those who are hungry. Maybe you'll bring the poor and homeless into your own house, clothe the naked, and take care of your own family. These are all things that God says are seen and rewarded by our father in heaven. He sees and he comes near.

He sees them – not as a problem. But he sees them, their problems, and instead of looking away he comes near. Our Father in heaven comes near to those who are helpless and gives to those who cannot repay. This is what he has done for his people Israel. This is what he has done for all people through his Son. There is no way for us to repay this gift but he still came. He came down to people who didn't deserve him. Jesus then fasted for us and in our place. He fasted for forty days in the desert in order to cloth us with his righteousness. He brought us into his home, making us family. He has fed us with his body and blood. This is the self-denial of our God for others. He denied himself not only food but his very life so that we might live. He then creates a new nature within us. He came to save.

What would God have us do? The kind of fast that God desires? – A fast from sin. A restoration of justice and mercy. God expect us to take care of our family and to love our neighbor. These things are rewarded by our father in heaven. He hears our prayers. He rushes to our aid like Samuel when he served in the temple and responded to the Lord with the very same words, "*Here I am.*" *He goes to work for us.* Again Isaiah writes, *Then your light will appear like the dawn, and your recovery will come quickly. Your righteousness will go before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.*

Having been forgiven, having been provided for, how can we not love and provide for others? You'll get burned, but God can give you more. God has called us to care for our own flesh and blood, our immediate family and our brothers and sisters in Christ. But it won't be done in order to earn favor with God. It's not that our works justify, but they do affect how our lives in Christ move forward.

Christians still fast for many different reasons. Some fast on Sundays when we celebrate Lord's Supper in order to save time and not rush around Sunday morning. They do so because it frees up time, "Thinking about what to cook, cooking, eating, and cleaning." The hunger pangs serve as a constant call to repent and pray. I'm not saying, "You better fast. In fact I think it would be a terrible idea for some of you to fast." Depending on the number of midnight snacks, you already do fast. That's why we call the first meal of the day, "Breakfast." You break the fast

Isaiah 58:1-9a

5th Sunday after the Epiphany

February 9, 2020

from the previous evening. Breaking our nighttime fast with a feast of God's Word reminds us that our life isn't sustained by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God.

That is meal we shouldn't fast from for long. In fact we should make our neighbors, friends, and family hungry for more. It is the best gift we can give them. It isn't our money, goods, food, although we do that as well – the best gift we have is Christ. Fasting should be a benefit to your neighbor. There are still some in society that regularly fast and it's not because they want to. It's because they have to. Some people set aside eating for a day simply so they can feed their children or save their money in order to send them to school.

You don't have to do that. Some day we might have to. Until then we give thanks to God for the gifts he brings, the opportunities he provides, and the ability he has given us to help. And I'll gladly eat what he provides in service to you and others. It isn't good to be hangry when God has given you all things (even life itself) through his Son.