

AN ENCOURAGING WORD FOR TROUBLING TIMES #152 (by Rev. Dr. Alice Wolfe, 2/17/21) “What Kind of Fast Does God Desire?”

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent—the 40 days before Easter, not counting Sundays. Throughout the centuries, many Christians have fasted during the season of Lent. Some fast certain foods or one or more meals each week. Some fast from candy, junk food, pop, or alcohol that they want (or need) to cut out of their diet. Some fast from social media, TV, movies, internet, or other things. Some fast by giving away something each day—to help others and simply their own lives. Some fast from sins or bad habits they want/need to eradicate from their lives. Any of these can be a meaningful way to focus more on God and grow closer to him. However, any of these can also become an empty ritual.

Many years ago, when the Israelites' fasting became an empty ritual, God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah to encourage and challenge them to fast in the way he wants:

'We have fasted before you!' they say. 'Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don't even notice it!' "I will tell you why!" I respond. "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD? (Isaiah 58:3-5, NLT)

God made it clear that he didn't want their empty rituals. Note the type of fast God wants:

"No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help." (Isaiah 58:6-7, NLT)

Do you notice a difference? In Isa. 58:3-5, the Israelites wonder why God isn't noticing or responding to their fasting. God explains that even though they went through the motions of fasting, they focused on themselves and left God out of their fasting and their lives. Their continued quarreling, fighting, and oppressing others proved it. They weren't living the life of love God called them to live.

Therefore, in the Isa. 58:6-7, God explains the kind of fasting he wants: Live a life of love by helping others in need. What kind of fasting is that? That is fasting from living a self-focused life so we can live a God-focused life. When we focus on God and let Jesus be the Lord of our lives, he helps us love others as God loves us, see others in need as God sees us, and have compassion on and help others as God has compassion on and helps us. Jesus the Christ, God in the flesh, demonstrated this in his own life; he came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mat. 28:20). How is God calling you to fast, love, serve, and help others this Lent?



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