

FASTING -- THE FALSE AND THE TRUE
Isaiah 58

Intro: The chapter begins the last section of chapters 40-66.

— The problem here is the same that we saw in ch. 1, and again in ch. 29, v. 13, and v. 14,

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

When people get away from the Lord in their hearts, they will do all that they can to maintain the outward expressions of obedience to God. People who care nothing about doctrine will fight to the last to maintain the form of worship.

Paul spoke of this in writing to Timothy about the last days:

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away (2 Tim. 3:5).

— How out of place it seems to talk even about the "form of godliness" after listing all of the sins mentioned in vv. 2-4!

Of all of the things which accompanied at least some of the feast days, fasting was to express the greatest devotion to God. A person who fasted appeared to be giving up his own enjoyment of food in order to delight himself in the Lord. See v. 14.

But here we need to remember what the Law taught, and what our Lord made clear during His ministry on earth. He was asked what was the greatest commandment in the Law--just for one commandment! BUT HE RESPONDED WITH TWO! What He was teaching was that the two are one, that they cannot be separated. You cannot truly love God unless it causes you to love your neighbor also. Cf. Matt. 22:34-40. The Lord concluded also with a statement which deserves a lot of thought:

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

— When a person gets out of fellowship with the Lord, he does not want to be discovered, and so he continues to carry on with the outward observances as before. He continues to go to church. He gives to the Lord. He maintains the "form." But his relationship with the people of God undergoes a change, and so does his treatment of people generally. Thus, when you see that a professing Christian is not treating people as he should,

he is broadcasting the fact that there is something terribly wrong in his relationship with God.

Now this is the picture that we have here.

- Judah's heart was not right with the Lord. They were treating each other wrongly. BUT, IF YOU SAW WHAT WAS TAKING PLACE ON THEIR DAYS OF FASTING, YOU WOULD NEVER THINK THAT ANYTHING WAS WRONG.

But here is where we need the words which the Lord spoke to Samuel when he had gone to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the new king of Israel. Samuel thought that Eliab must be the one because he was tall and he was handsome. Maybe he was dark, too, but the Scriptures do not say that he was. But here are the Lord's words:

Look not on his countenance,
or on the height of his stature;
because I have refused him:
for the Lord seeth not as man seeth;
for man looketh on the outward appearance,
but the Lord looketh on the heart.

This is 1 Sam. 16:7.

We make tragic mistakes when we forget this!

- In Isaiah's day things were fine outwardly, but inwardly they were as bad as they could be. The people appeared to be treating God as they should, but they were mistreating each other.

A prophet can make himself very unpopular by ministering to people who are like this, but that was Isaiah's job!

Now let us look at our chapter. There are four things here:

- 1) The Reproof by the Prophet (vv. 1, 2).
- 2) The Reaction of the People (v. 3a).
- 3) The Response from the Lord (vv. 3b-7).
- 4) The Rewards to the Faithful (vv. 8-14).

I. THE REPROOF BY THE PROPHET (Isa. 58:1, 2).

The words in verse 1 mean that Isaiah was to do two things:

- 1) He was to make public in his loudest voice the sins of the people.
- 2) He was to find the strongest language in which to present his message.

- He was to call what they were doing, "transgression" and "sins." They were nothing less than this.

Verse 2 shows their hypocrisy. Nothing could please God more than the things mentioned in verse 2, but when their

hearts were wrong, none of these things were actually true.

II. THE REACTION OF THE PEOPLE (Isa. 58:3a).

Not much space is given to the people because, however long they might protest, this is what it amounted to.

They wanted the Lord to see their fasting, and He did! But He also saw a lot of other things that they did not want Him to see.

III. THE RESPONSE FROM THE LORD (Isa. 58:3b-7).

The Lord notes three things:

A. What the people were doing (vv. 3b, 4).

It seems from the Lord's words that they were fasting, trying to please God, so as to have the liberty to treat their fellow countrymen any evil way they wanted to treat them!

B. The Lord's first series of questions (v. 5).

These are to bring out what a fast is not!

The fasting does not end with just the outward observance.

C. The Lord's second series of questions (vv. 6, 7).

This does not mean that they did not do the things which were mentioned in v. 5, but it means that true worship of God prepares us and inclines us to do that which will make life easier and more enjoyable for those who do not have what we are able to give them.

We cannot purchase from God by our worship of Him the right to take advantage of each other. And the person who does so is nothing but a hypocrite!

Finally, the Lord does a most gracious thing. And we find that the Lord does this throughout the Scriptures--in the OT and in the NT. Could I use the word, enticement? I think I can. HE ENTICES US TO BE OBEDIENT BY GIVING US A LOT OF PROMISES AS A REWARD.

Paul told Timothy this:

For bodily exercise profiteth little:
but godliness is profitable unto all things,
having promise of the life that now is,
and of that which is to come (1 Tim. 4:8).

So godliness is profitable NOW. It brings its blessings and rewards NOW, as well as hereafter!

The word entice has become a word with bad connotations. It is usually used with the idea of seducing someone, deceiving them for evil purposes. We say that Potiphar's wife sought to entice Joseph to sin--and that is the proper use of the word in one way. But it also has a good side. The dictionary gives as its first meaning, To draw on by exciting hope or desire, to attract. God seeks to attract us to obedience by giving us His promises of blessing.

So let us notice . . .

IV. THE REWARDS TO THE FAITHFUL (Isa. 58:8-14).

A. The first reward, or promises (v. 8).

This is the promise of spiritual health through restored fellowship with God. This always comes first.

B. The second reward, or promise (v. 9a).

Notice that they are all introduced by the word, "then."
See vv. 8, 9, 10, 14.

This is the promise of answered prayer.

Remember what the Psalmist wrote in Psa. 66:18,
If I regard iniquity in my heart,
the Lord will not hear me.

C. The third reward, or promise (vv. 9b-12).

The conditions are repeated here so the people will not forget, and then the Lord actually gave a bundle of rewards, or promises. Note what they are.

1. Testimony (v. 10).

This is very similar to the first reward, and shows the result which follows restored fellowship with God. They will not only pretend to be the people of God, distinct from all other people, but they will actually be what they profess to be.

2. Guidance and satisfaction (v. 11).

The Lord does not just guide us as to where we should go, but especially as to what we should be. This is where there is great satisfaction and contentment.

3. The work of restoration (v. 12).

What they were doing was tearing everything apart. If they did things God's way, then there would be reformation and revival.

But this is not all.

D. The fourth reward, or promise (vv. 13, 14).

With the people of Israel, the way they observed the Sabbath, if it were done from the heart, expressed their delight in the Lord. To honor Him, to do His will, to please Him, to speak His words, is what it means to delight ourselves in Him.

When this is done, then the whole earth will experience the blessing of God, and the Lord will feed them with the heritage of Jacob their father.

Their assurance that the Lord will do it: "for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

What is this but millennial blessing, which will issue, as Isaiah was the first to reveal, in a new heaven and a new earth under the eternal blessing of the Lord.

The Lord never loses sight of eternity.

Concl: Could any chapter possible demonstrate with greater clarity the amazing grace of God?

God would have been justified in casting off His people forever if it had not been for the fact that He had committed Himself to His people in an unconditional way--just as He has to us. He sometimes may even have to judge His people with physical death, but He will never let us go!

What about our lives? What about our fellowship with the Lord? Is our outward behavior just an act, with little or no reality? Do we feel like we are justifying ungodly behavior during the week because we are faithful in attending church at least once a week?

May the Lord search our hearts. And listen as I close to those most important words of Solomon found in Prov. 4:23,

Keep thy heart with all diligence;
for out of it are the issues of life.

David also said,
Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts;
and in the hidden part thou shalt make me
to know wisdom.