

Growth Hour Discussion Guide

9/15/2019

Isaiah 58

Engage

Questions to get us talking:

- Read Isaiah 58.
- Our passage starts with an exhortation for God's prophet to cry out in declaration that God's people are in sin. Share a time when you had to give a criticism to someone else (family member, friend, neighbor, coworker or employee). How did you feel leading up to the conversation, and what was the result?

Apply

Questions to bring it home:

- What seems to be the main point of Isaiah 58? What is God concerned about for His people?
- In what ways are God's people not honoring their 'fast' (v. 4-5)?
 - Isn't humbling oneself a good thing? Isn't 'bowing one's head' a good thing? Why are these things a problem for Israel?
- What does God offer as a true fast (v. 6-7)?
- What does God say will happen then (v. 8-12)?
- Why do you think there is a discussion of the Sabbath to finish off this passage?
- What does it mean to 'keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day?' (NIV).
- What changes are you being prompted to make in your life as a result of this passage?

Study

To be prepared for the discussion:

As a general overview:

The Purpose and Meaning of Fasting (Isa. 58:1–14)

The prophet in this chapter condemns the shallowness of performing religious functions such as worship and fasting without an accompanying ethical concern for your fellowman. Like Amos

and Micah, Isaiah insists that God's supreme concern is for justice, mercy, and humility rather than perfunctory religious acts.

The passage begins with God's summoning the prophet to make a proclamation to the house of Jacob concerning their sins. But the people are hard to convince for they say they delight in approaching God (v. 2).

This leads the prophet to a discussion of the contrast between a true and false fast. Verses 6–8 provide a profound interpretation of a true fast.

In the concluding verses 13–14, God reminds his people that his promise of his presence and power is conditional upon the practice of high ethical conduct in their personal and community life.

Truth for today -- Repeatedly in the New Testament, Jesus took great pains to differentiate between a religion of the spirit and a religion of rule and regulations. In his parable of the new patch on an old garment in Luke 5:36, he was clearly disassociating himself and his followers from the legalistic and joyless religion of the Pharisees. Far too often the gospel has been presented in terms of what we are required to do rather than what we are released to become. The result is that God has become a cosmic policeman, checking our faults and tabulating our failures. In his discussion of the meaning of true fasting Isaiah like Christ is telling us that real religion is a religion of the spirit, that evidences itself not only in our relationship with God but also in our relationship with our fellowmen.¹

Also:

1. THE RESTORATION TO COME BY GOD'S INITIATIVE (CHAPS. 58–60)

a. *Obedience required (chap. 58)*

(1) The reminder of the people's sins.

58:1–2. God called for heralds to go about telling the nation of **their rebellion** (*peša'*, "transgressions," from *pāša'*, "to transgress"; see comments on 1:2; also cf. 1:5; 53:5, 8; 59:13) and **sins. Like a trumpet** used to get people's attention, the heralds were to **shout**. Outwardly the people seemed **eager** to want **to know** God and for **God to be near them**.

(2) The concern of the people.

58:3a. The people voiced their concern that they were in difficulty though they seemed to be doing what the Law required. They **fasted** and **humbled** themselves, but they feared that God had not **seen it** or **noticed**. Apparently they thought that by going through the "motions" of religion (without any inward reality of faith) they would be blessed.

(3) The response of the Lord (58:3b–14). The Lord responded by pointing out that He was more interested in their obedience than their rituals. Unfortunately they, like many people, had confused rituals with relationship, outward acts with true obedience.

58:3b–5. Their fasts did not alter their poor relationship with others. They were disregarding other peoples' needs by exploiting their employees (cf. Deut. 24:14–15; Jas 5:1–6) and by

¹ Carter, J. E., & McLeod, P. (1972). [Isaiah](#). In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The teacher's Bible commentary* (pp. 424–425). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

quarreling and fighting. Therefore their prayers would not **be heard**, for their kind of **fasting** was not what the Lord accepted. Their hearts, not just their **heads**, needed to bow before **the LORD**.

58:6–7. **Fasting** was to encourage a person to respond positively to God's commands. In the Old Testament only one fast was commanded—the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31). Only after the fall of Jerusalem were fast days instituted (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19). Ironically on the other hand many *specific* commands were *not* being followed. So the Lord reminded the people that they should be just (Isa. 58:6) and openhanded with those in need -- **the hungry** (cf. v. 10), **the poor ... the naked** (v. 7). The Israelites were to consider themselves members of one family who at one time had been slaves in Egypt. Therefore they were not to neglect each other. When someone shared with one in need, it was a reminder that everything he owned belonged to the Lord.

58:8–12. If the people had inner **righteousness** (revealed in outward acts of justice and mercy, vv. 6–7), **then ... the LORD** would bless them (cf. Deut. 28:1–14) with **light** (often a picture of blessing; cf. Isa. 58:10), **healing** (spiritual restoration), righteousness (high standards), protection from trouble, and answered prayer (vv. 8–9a). If they would **do away with ... oppression** and gossip and would help others in need (cf. v. 7), then the Lord would bless them (give them **light**; cf. v. 8). He would give guidance, satisfaction, strength, fertility (**like a spring**), and physical restoration (rebuilding the **ruins**).

58:13–14. **Sabbath** observance was a barometer of one's faithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. comments on 56:4–6). By following the rules for **the Sabbath** a person acknowledged the importance of worshiping God and showed that he depended on God to bless him materially for that time he took off from work. By putting God first and not seeking to do as he wished, a person would have **joy**, not only in spiritual salvation (**ride on the heights**) but also in prosperity (**feast on the inheritance**). All this was certain because **the LORD has spoken** (cf. 1:20; 40:5).²

² Martin, J. A. (1985). [Isaiah](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 1113–1114). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.