

Tonight we are looking at God’s criticism of the religious practices of the house of Jacob.

The special focus is on fasting and Sabbath-keeping.

Fasting and Sabbath-keeping were proper expressions of true piety,  
but only when used in faith.

Piety is a word that has fallen on hard times.

“Oh, aren’t you pious!” is generally a sarcastic retort.

It is often associated with a “holier than thou” attitude.

And there is a reason for that.

Piety refers to religious practice.

And there are many hypocrites who focus on the external aspects of religious practice.

They look good on the outside,

but inside they are “whitewashed tombs”—they are filled with death.

External religious practice must never be divorced from that which gives its life:

namely, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But that doesn’t mean that external religious practice is worthless!

Rather, God’s point is that the external and the internal need to be properly aligned!

And that happens when Christ is at the heart of both.

Last time we saw that 56:1-8 opens with three declarations from Yahweh

56:9-12 contains the word of the blind watchmen

57:1-13 contains the word of you mockers

57:14 then contains the word of the true prophet

and 57:15-21 follows with three more statements from Yahweh

Chapter 58 then gives the seventh word from the LORD—

the promise of the future inheritance to those who trust in the LORD.

“For the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (58:14)

Chapter 59 contains the eighth word from Yahweh.

If the seventh word contains the promise of Sabbath rest,

the eighth in chapter 59 contains the fulfillment of that promise.

So tonight we are looking at the promise of the Eschatological Sabbath.

### **1. The Call to Repentance (v1)**

*“Cry aloud; do not hold back;*

*lift up your voice like a trumpet;*

*declare to my people their transgression,*

*to the house of Jacob their sins.*

In verse 1, the Word of God goes forth to convict of sin.

The voice like a trumpet summons the people to come and hear what God is saying.

And notice here that God addresses his people corporately.

Undoubtedly there were faithful Israelites who were not personally guilty of these sins.

We need to distinguish between individual sin and corporate sin –  
as well as individual and corporate judgment.

At the final judgment you will be judged according to what *you* have done.

(And any part you have played in the corporate sins of your people).

But during your lifetime, you will often be judged

according to the communal sins of your people!

In Jeremiah we hear about the righteous remnant that existed in his day.

Were they spared from the destruction of Jerusalem?

No.

It doesn't matter that Jeremiah was innocent –

he still suffered the afflictions of losing everything and going into exile.

In the same way, the corporate sin of enslaving Africans

(in which many took part on four continents!)

resulted in the catastrophic judgment of the Civil War.

Many who were innocent suffered grievously.

In our own day, there are many corporate sins that plague our nation:

Abortion, racism, pornography, materialism and consumerism –

(we'll have a chance to think more about these in the morning service  
as we go through the Ten Commandments).

But the judgment that comes against corporate sin has corporate effects!

I don't claim to know exactly what proportion each corporate sin plays  
in God's providence!

But if there is corporate sin in a community –

then those are the reasons why God brings judgment on them!

Is eastern California the worst region in California?

Is that why they are burning to the ground?

No.

But I think that you can see a correlation between the sin of a people

and the judgment that comes upon them!

If we are poor stewards of the land – if we misuse creation for our own selfish gain –

then the creation itself will come back to bite us!

But I bring this up, because corporate and individual –  
singular and plural –  
will play a crucial role in our text tonight.  
The Hebrew reader would see it immediately.  
The English reader has to watch more carefully –  
because we don't distinguish between "you" singular and "you" plural.

But keep watching – because if you look carefully,  
you will see it even before I call attention to it!

In verses 2-4, God calls attention to the *problem* with Israel's fasting and prayer.

**2. The Problem with Israel's Fasting and Prayer: A Problem with Delight (v2-4)**

<sup>2</sup> *Yet they seek me daily  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that did righteousness  
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments;  
they delight to draw near to God.*

The problem with Israel's practice of fasting and Sabbath-keeping  
was that they did not understand the connection between piety and ethics.

And the connection is found in *what we delight in*.

After all, when you read verse 2, you would think that everything is fine!

*They delight to know my ways...  
They delight to draw near to God...*

They are seeking the LORD – they are not forsaking the judgments of God –  
so how is there a problem?!

It's a problem that has often afflicted the church.

My dissertation was written on Old School Presbyterianism –  
from 1837-1861.

So I've read a lot about slavery written by slaveholders –  
as well as the arguments about how to go about ending slavery.

Isaiah's words apply well to them.  
And – I fear – Isaiah's words apply well to us!

They think that if you perform all the right religious acts,  
if you fast when you are supposed to and keep Sabbath,  
and bring your sacrifices at all the right times,  
then God will bless you, right?

Aren't you tempted to think the same way?

If you go to church, give ten per cent, read your bible, pray every day –  
then God will bless you, right?

No.

Because the practice of piety (the first four commandments)  
cannot be divorced from ethics (the last six commandments).  
You cannot love God without loving your neighbor. (58:3-4)

<sup>3</sup> *Why have we fasted, and you see it not?  
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?  
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,<sup>[a]</sup>  
and oppress all your workers.*

<sup>4</sup> *Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to hit with a wicked fist.  
Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.*

Righteousness, as God points out in the following verses –  
is all about “taking away the yoke” – taking away corruption and wickedness –  
pouring out yourself for the hungry and satisfying the desire of the afflicted.

We tend to think that obeying God means *not doing the bad things* –  
so we try not to get mad at people, we try not to lust, we try not to covet or gossip...

But God's commands are all-encompassing!  
They meet us not only in our individual private lives,  
but also in our corporate communal lives!

If you believe that there is not a single square inch in all of creation  
of which Jesus does not say, “This is mine”! –  
then you must also say that the institutions and structures of society  
must practice righteousness corporately – and not just individually.

### **3. Proper Fasting Means Sharing Your Bread with the Hungry (v5-7)**

<sup>5</sup> *Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a person to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call this a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the LORD?*

I should point out that the only fast required in the OT was the Day of Atonement.

All Israel was to join together in a public and corporate fast on that day.  
It was designed as an outward sign of repentance,  
as all Israel confessed their sins.

But there were many other occasions of fasting:

- Judges 20:26 After the sin of Benjamin, God still did not give the Benjamites into the hand of Israel for two days, so on the third day, all Israel fasted and asked God's blessing upon their armies in bringing righteousness to Israel, and destroying sin from their midst.
- 1 Samuel 7 Israel repented of its apostasy and calls a day of prayer and fasting as they seek God's forgiveness
- 1 Samuel 31-2 Samuel 1 David fasted for Saul and Jonathan and all the house of Israel, after their slaughter by the Philistines
- 2 Samuel 12 David fasted and prayed for his son, asking God to have mercy after his sin with Bathsheba
- 1 Kings 21 Ahab repented with prayer and fasting—and God heard his prayer
- Esther 4 Mordecai and the Jews fasted on behalf of Esther as she prepares to go before the king
- Ezra 8 The Exiles fasted before leaving Babylon for Jerusalem, entrusting themselves to God's care (refusing the guard that the king had offered)
- Nehemiah 1 Nehemiah fasted as a part of his confession of the sins of Israel and his prayer for God's mercy upon the Restored Exiles

So while there was only one annual fast required in the law,  
Israel would hold occasional fasts  
where they would humble themselves and seek God's blessing.  
The outward practice of fasting was to deprive yourself of the comforts of life.  
When you fast, you abstain from food.

(Throughout history, the church has always made provision  
for children, the elderly, and those who cannot safely abstain entirely from food.  
Such persons should eat the minimum in quantity and quality of food  
that they may safely consume.  
So if you need to eat, just have bread and water (or vegetables and water  
for those on low-carb diets!)

Likewise people would wear sackcloth—a rough cloth that did not feel comfortable.  
The point is to deprive yourself of worldly comforts in order to draw your attention to God.  
But as with all outward actions, there is a danger in fasting.  
Because when fasting becomes merely a religious practice,  
when it is detached from ethics,  
(in other words, when it is detached from a faith that works by love)

fasting becomes hypocrisy.  
Because if you engage in all of these outward acts,  
with your piety is directed toward God only,  
then your piety is not directed toward God at all!  
Because what are you trying to do?  
You are fasting and praying and pleading with God....  
For what?  
For yourself?!

How DARE you!  
While you are fasting—depriving yourself of worldly comforts—  
your brother, who is made in the image of God,  
is hungry, naked, and alone.  
He doesn't have those comforts to begin with!  
So as you're making this pious show out of "devotion" to God  
(see, there is some validity to the sarcastic use of "pious"!)  
you are demonstrating that you don't love your neighbor.

And so in response to Israel's fasts, God declares 58:6-7.

*<sup>6</sup> "Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed<sup>[b]</sup> go free,  
and to break every yoke?"*

*<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*

Outward conformity in religious practice is meaningless!

Note the structural parallel between 5a and 6a

Which fast does God choose?

Is it this? or is it that?

The fast that God has chosen is the fast that strives to create a just society.

Verse 6 emphasizes the structural side:

"To loose the bonds of wickedness,

To undo the straps of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free

And to break every yoke"

Fasting—depriving yourself of the comforts of this life—

cannot be divorced from paying attention to the fact

that some folk do not have such comforts at all!

And so verse 7 turns to the personal side.

You must be personally active in this:  
To share your bread with the hungry  
To bring the homeless poor into your house;  
To cover the naked  
And not to hide from your own flesh, when they are in need.  
The fast that God has chosen shatters our man-made barrier  
between religion and ethics.  
True fasting and true Sabbath-keeping  
are not simply the practices of personal, private religion.  
They are the corporate acts of the people of God.

How do we do this?

How do we put this into practice?

Many of you will recall that as the moderator of the Great Lakes Presbytery last year,  
I called for a day of prayer and fasting back at the beginning of the pandemic.

And Alan Strange told us a few weeks ago –  
that our sister denomination, the OPC, had a day of prayer and fasting last month  
for the national evils that we face.

It may seem odd, in light of God’s scathing rebuke of Israel for their false fasting,  
to call for a day of prayer and fasting!

But notice that the problem with Israel’s fasts is that they think that fasting  
will win them favor from God – apart from *doing righteousness*.

Fasting – *instead of obedience* – is pointless!

Fasting is useful for humbling ourselves and seeking the face of God,  
but if our fasting is not connected with loving our neighbor,  
then it is not truly God’s face that we seek.

How can we show the love and justice of God to those around us?

Our days of prayer and fasting should not be a day of selfishness  
where we say “bless us, O God! Please bless us!”

No, the fast that God calls for is a fast that prompts us to love and good deeds.

And when we fast in a manner that is pleasing to God.

When our piety is conjoined with righteous living,  
(Verses 8-9a).

#### **4. The Results of Proper Fasting (v8-12)**

##### **a. Light, Healing, Righteousness, and the Glory of the LORD (v8-10)**

<sup>8</sup> Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

*you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'*  
*If you take away the yoke from your midst,*  
*the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*  
<sup>10</sup>*if you pour yourself out for the hungry*  
*and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,*  
*then shall your light rise in the darkness*  
*and your gloom be as the noonday.*

What is righteousness?

Righteousness has to do with how we structure our community.  
It can be as simple as how you organize your home life –  
or your business life – or your civic engagement.

As I engage with the historic preservation community in South Bend,  
I am very interested in how historic renovation can be joined together  
with affordable housing.  
Poor people – by definition – do not have connections.  
They are at the mercy of those in power.

And Christians should always use their influence and connections for the benefit of the poor.

And Isaiah says that if you do justice and love mercy,  
then God will hear you when you pray and fast!  
An outward show of pious living will get you nowhere with God.  
There must be a heart that loves the living and true God,  
and therefore manifests that love in the service of others.

This morning we saw the importance of giving rest to others  
as a central theme in what the Sabbath is all about.

And in this seventh word—the sabbath word—God calls his people to give rest to others.  
“To pour yourself out for the hungry,  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted.”

But notice what will happen then:  
the one who does this will restore Zion (read 11-12).

Listen to this!

**b. The LORD Will Guide You – a Well-Watered Garden – Ancient Ruins  
Rebuilt and Restored (v11-12)**

<sup>11</sup>*And the LORD will guide you continually*  
*and satisfy your desire in scorched places*  
*and make your bones strong;*  
*and you shall be like a watered garden,*  
*like a spring of water,*



*whose waters do not fail.*  
<sup>12</sup> *And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to dwell in.*

You will be like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.  
What does that remind you of?  
Psalm 1.

You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

By this time, the English reader should be getting suspicious.  
Of course, the Hebrew reader saw it coming back in verse 7.  
Because in verses 1-4, the “you” is plural,  
but in verses 5-14, the “you” is singular!

You (plural) have fasted in a way that is an abomination.

But if you (singular) will fast in a manner that is pleasing to me,  
if you will bring justice to the oppressed  
and pour yourself out for the hungry and afflicted,  
then you shall be like a well watered garden.

The only way that rest will come to the people of God,  
is if there is one who delights in doing God’s will on the Sabbath.

Now, the Sabbath was not a fast, but a feast.

A fast day was a day of repentance and asking God for mercy,  
the Sabbath was a day of rejoicing in God’s provision,  
both in creation and redemption.

This seventh word of Isaiah 56-59 calls attention to the Sabbath day,  
as the day of delight—a day of rejoicing in God’s provision.

But there is a measure of uncertainty here.

The seventh word provides a conditional situation:

##### **5. Delighting in the Sabbath – Delighting in the LORD (v13-14)**

<sup>13</sup> *“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure<sup>[c]</sup> on my holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
or seeking your own pleasure,<sup>[d]</sup> or talking idly,<sup>[e]</sup>  
<sup>14</sup> then you shall take delight in the LORD,*

*and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;<sup>[1]</sup>  
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

Now, Isaiah probably did not use the singular here in order to apply it only to the Messiah.  
The distinction between the plural and the singular  
is to distinguish between the wicked and the righteous remnant.  
But there is no doubt that God inspired the singular “you” with the Messiah in view.

Because it is only when Jesus observed the Sabbath in the way that God commanded,  
that righteousness came to the people of God.

And you may be thinking of how Jesus observed the Sabbath in his life.  
And that is true.

Jesus’ Sabbath-observance was indeed holy.

But I am referring especially to Jesus’ holy Sabbath-observance on that final Sabbath.  
That final Shabbat when he rested in the grave.

Jesus went to the cross on the day of Preparation for the Sabbath.

He called the Sabbath a delight.

A day when he would say, “not my will, but yours be done.”

He spent that final Sabbath giving eternal rest for his people.

And on the first day of the new Creation,

he arose from the dead, and God made him to ride on the heights of the earth,  
he exalted him to the his right hand, and gave hi the heritage of his father, Jacob.

Our Sabbath-keeping, then, is done in imitation of Christ.

We must always keep in view the fact that Jesus is the one  
who fulfilled the fourth commandment.

He is the one who brought this seventh word of Isaiah to completion.

(And as we’ll see next week, he does this through fulfilling the eighth word!)

The fourth commandment has certainly been transformed in Jesus Christ.

We now gather on the first day of the week in order to worship him  
and to anticipate our eternal rest.

But Isaiah’s way of describing the day as a day for God’s words and works  
is very useful for us as well.

Often when I hear people complain about the stricter observance of the Lord’s Day,  
what they are really saying is, “I want to be selfish on Sunday.”

I want to seek my own pleasure.

I have no interest in coming up with a list of proscribed activities for Sunday.

But I greatly desire to see MCPC delight in the Sabbath.

–to spend the whole day in doing the Lord’s deeds and speaking his words.

In this way the Lord’s Day does indeed become the pattern for all of life.

The true piety of Christian Sabbath-keeping overflows into the other six-days,  
so that our whole life is lived with our eyes fixed upon our glorious Savior