

SERIES: "SERIOUSLY SERVING" Part 1 - "REAL FASTING" (Isaiah 58)

(Introduction) Today we are beginning a new series with a focus upon serving God and others. We have allowed all the challenges of last year to impact ministries of the church and individual Christians in much too negative ways. **It is time for us to get back to "SERIOUSLY SERVING."**

A theme verse of this series is 1 John 3:18 - "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." We, as children of God, are to not just love with words...we are to demonstrate our love...prove our love, both for God and others, through our deeds.

As we begin this new focus upon serving God and others, we are going to be looking at **Isaiah 58**...so turn there in your Bibles. The title of today's message is **"REAL FASTING."** In Isaiah 58, *God tells Isaiah to cry about like a trumpet and declare the sins of the Jews for only having an external form of religion, and not truly seeking God with their hearts. The people were practicing outward displays of religion, like fasting, but were living lives that were disobedient to God. They had an outward form of religion, but their outward form of religion did not impact they way the treated others, and did not motivate them to serve God.*

The application for us in our day is this: Our relationship to God should be real, heart felt, leading to repentance and obedience to God, resulting in our right relationships to others and ministry toward others.

We are going to read through Isaiah 58 as we go through today's message, instead of reading all the chapter at one time. So open your Bible and follow along as we consider this topic of **"REAL FASTING"** and how such religious practices should motivate us to **"seriously serve"** God and others. Notice **three Biblical truths** about real fasting...

1. REAL FASTING IS NOT ABOUT YOU AND WHAT YOU WANT GOD TO DO!

Isaiah 58:1-5 - 1 "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. **2** 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. **3** '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, and oppress all your workers. **4** 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. **5** 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? **ESV**

The Jews seemed to have made fasting into some type of spiritual formula for gaining God's favor or blessing! They acted like they were seeking God. They were acting like a people that actually did righteousness and obeyed God. They were acting like they were delighted to draw near to God. **THEY WOULD DO THINGS LIKE FAST...BUT WHEN GOD DID NOT RESPOND AS THEY THOUGHT HE SHOULD, THEY ACCUSED GOD OF NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR FASTS OR THEIR PRETENDED HUMILITY. NOTICE GOD TELLS ISIAH TO CRY OUT LOUD, TO NOT HOLD BACK, BUT BE LIKE A TRUMPET, DECLARING THESE ACTIONS BY GOD'S PEOPLE BEING A TRANSGRESSION! THEIR OUTWARD FORM OF RELIGION WAS A SIN AS FAR AS GOD WAS CONCERNED! JESUS speaks of this outward motivation of religion - **Matthew 6:16-18** - 16 "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. **ESV****

So God replies and tells them they were using their fasts for their own pleasure. And while they were going through the outward motions of fasting, *they were at the same time mistreating others. They were oppressing their employees or servants and making them work on a day of fasting. Their fasting was not affecting their relationships with others...instead they were quarreling and fighting.* Their outward display of religious activities **WAS NOT AFFECTING THE WAY THEY LIVED THEIR LIVES...THE WAY THEY RESPONDED TOWARD GOD OR OTHERS! SO GOD TELLS THEM A MERE OUTWARD SHOW OF RELIGION, LIKE FASTING, WILL NOT MAKE THEIR PRAYERS HEARD!** The Jews that Isaiah is addressing, thought a fast was simply taking a day

to humble themselves outwardly, bowing their heads, wearing sackcloth and ashes as though they were mourning...thinking that would gain the attention of God!

WHAT THESE JEWS FAILED TO REALIZE IS THAT REAL FASTING IS NOT ABOUT WHAT THE PERSON FASTING WANTS, OR ABOUT WHAT THE PERSON FASTING WANTS GOD TO DO! REAL FASTING IS ABOUT GOD...ABOUT BEING MORE SENSITIVE TO HIS WILL AND HIS WORSHIP! REAL FASTING IS ABOUT REPENTANCE AND ABOUT BEING MOTIVATED TO SERVE GOD AND OTHERS. WE MUST REALIZE THE SAME THING AS CHRISTIANS. GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN JUST SOME OUTWARD SHOW OF RELIGION...WHETHER IT BE FASTING, ATTENDING CHURCH...GIVING...TAKING THE LORD'S SUPPER...WHATEVER ELSE YOU WANT TO ADD! GOD IS INTERESTED ABOUT HIS PEOPLE HAVE A REAL INNER RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, THAT LEADS TO AUTHENTIC WORKS OF SERVICE AND MINISTRY TOWARD OTHERS...

2. REAL FASTING SHOULD **PROVOKE MINISTRY TOWARD OTHERS.**

Isaiah 58:6-7; 9b-10 - 6 "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 go free, and to break every yoke? 7 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? ... 9b If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 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. **ESV**

GOD WANTS OUR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES TO PROVOKE US TO MINISTER TO OTHERS! GOD WANTS US TO SERVE OTHERS.... GOD'S CHOSEN FAST IS ONE THAT MAKES YOU THINK OF OTHERS IN NEED...AND THEN TAKE ACTION TO HELP OTHERS! But before we can become beneficial in ministry to others, WE NEED TO LOOSE THE BONDS OF WICKEDNESS IN OUR OWN LIVES! THEN WE NEED TO HELP LOSSE THE BONDS OF WICKEDNESS IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS! We need to undo yokes we have placed upon others...our attempts to control them or limit them. We need to help oppressed people be free! We need to SEE THE NEEDS OF OTHERS, AS GOD SEES THEM...AND THEN TAKE STEPS TO MEET THEIR NEEDS!

As you place yourself under the yoke of fasting, think about those who are in bondage to sin, and be moved to help set them free! As you are willingly oppressing yourself during a fast, think about those who are oppressed all the time and take steps to set them free! As you do without food...remember those who are hungry and be motivated to feed them! As you set in your comfortable home during your fast...consider those who are always homeless...and take steps to provide shelter for them. As you fast and have time to think about your blessed life, your clothed body, you closets full of clothing...decide to provide clothing for those in need. CONSIDER YOUR FLESH...AND RECOGNIZE OTHERS ARE PART OF THE SAME HUMAN FAMILY, AND STOP HIDING YOURSELF FROM THEM AND THEIR NEEDS! SERVE EACH OTHER AND STOP NEGLECTING EACH OTHER IS THE MESSAGE FROM GOD!

STOP POINTING YOUR FINGER, AS THOUGH OTHERS DESERVE THEIR LOT IN LIFE...OR AS THOUGH SOMEONE ELSE OTHER THAN YOU SHOULD TAKE RESPONSIBILITY TO MINISTER TO THEM...AND YOU SERVE THEM INSTEAD! INSTEAD OF SPEAKING WICKEDNESS...SPEAK WORDS OF KINDNESS AND COMPASSION! POUR YOURSELF OUT FOR THE HUNGRY AND THE AFFLICTED!!! THEN...THEN...YOUR LIGHT SHALL SHINE IN THE DARKNESS...AND WHAT YOU PERCEIVE AS "YOUR GLOOM" WILL BE CHANGED AS DRAMATICALLY AS THE NOONDAY SUN...BECAUSE YOUR FOCUS HAS CHANGED TO SERVING OTHERS...INSTEAD OF HAVING A PERSONAL PITY PARTY! YOUR PREVIOUS OUTWARD FORM OF RELIGION IS NOW A REAL PRACTICED RELIGION TOWARD GOD AND OTHERS!

3. REAL FASTING, FOCUSED UPON GOD AND HIS PURPOSES, **INVITES GOD'S BLESSING!**

After God had Isaiah to "trumpet" the sins of the people, especially their sin of reliance upon a mere formal observance of ritual and ceremony, while their hearts were actually far from God... now God through Isaiah begins to make promises of real God-given blessings in their lives. If they would cease the

mere outward show of religion and begin to minister to others and serve them...God promises His blessings in response to "real fasting."

- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS CAUSES A POSITIVE IMPACT.** v8a - "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,..."
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS BRINGS ABOUT HEALING IN THE LAND.** v8b - "...and your healing shall spring up speedily;...". (Healing represents spiritual restoration)
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS DISPLAYS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GOD'S GLORY.** v8c - "...your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS OPENS THE DOOR TO ANSWERED PRAYERS.** v9a - "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS PROVOKES GOD'S GUIDANCE.** v11 - "And the Lord will guide you continually..."
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS PROVIDES SATISFACTION AND RENEWAL.** v11b-12a - 11b "...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. 12a And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; ..."
- **MINISTRY TO OTHERS IMPACTS FUTURE GENERATIONS.** v12b - "...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."
- **PUTTING GOD FIRST ACTIVATES GREAT POSITIVE CHANGES...**
 - **Real Delight in God.** v13-14a - 13 "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure 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, or talking idly; 14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,..." (Note: Honoring the Sabbath in the Old Testament was a sign of both faithfulness to God and trusting in His provision!) (Real delight, true joy, is found in honoring God)
 - **Experiencing God's help.** v14b - "...and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;..."
 - **Having the heritage God desires.** v14c - "...I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,..."
 - **The promise of God.** v14d - "...for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

(Conclusion) God is much more interested in real repentance and obedience than He is in people going through the "motions" or religious activity! You can fast all you want, but if your motives are wrong, your results will be wrong. **Regrettably, there are many people today who are just interested in outward displays of religion, but not concerned about the inward condition of their heart and their real relationship with God or others. People assume by going through the activity or motions of religion, without any inward reality of faith, that they will be blessed. Whether it is fasting, tithing, attending church, or doing some other ministry...if you are making it about you...instead of about God and others...you have missed what real religion is all about! GOD WANTS MORE THAN A RITUAL OR CEREMONY! GOD WANTS YOU! HE WANTS YOUR HEART...YOUR AUTHENTIC LOVE OF HIM...AND THEN HE WANTS TO USE YOU TO BLESS OTHERS! REAL RELIGION...A REAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD...IS FOCUSED UPON GOD AND OTHERS...NOT WHAT YOU CAN GET OUT OF IT!**