

A Fast for Waters That Do Not Fail (Part 2)

by John Piper

John Piper emphasizes that true fasting involves genuine care for others and an active fight against personal sin as outlined in Isaiah 58.

Duration: 37:31

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:16-18

Topics: "True Fasting", "Compassionate Living"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of treating people with kindness and compassion as a reflection of one's true devotion to God. He highlights the hypocrisy of fasting for religious purposes while mistreating others on a daily basis. The speaker refers to Isaiah 58:6-9, which outlines the true meaning of fasting according to God's desires. This includes feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and clothing the naked. The sermon concludes with a call to action, urging listeners to seek God's wisdom in discovering how to practice true fasting in their own lives.

Transcript

This morning, Pastor John will be preaching from Isaiah chapter 58. And so I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles to Isaiah 58. And if you don't have a Bible with you, there's a Bible in the pew rack in front of you.

And it's found on page 884. Isaiah 58, we'll read verses 6 to 12. Is this not the fast which I choose? To loosen the bonds of wickedness.

To undo the bands of the yoke. And to let the oppressed go free. And break every yoke.

Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry? And bring the homeless poor into the house? When you see the naked, to cover him. And not to hide yourself from your own flesh. Then your light will break out like the dawn.

And your recovery will speedily spring forth. And your righteousness will go before you. The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer. You will cry, and he will say, here I am. If you remove the yoke from your midst.

The pointing of the finger. And the speaking wickedness. And if you give yourself to the hungry.

And satisfy the desire of the afflicted. Then your light will rise in darkness. And your gloom will become like midday.

And the Lord will continually guide you. And satisfy your desire in scorched places. And give strength to your bones.

And you will be like a watered garden. And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. And those among you will rebuild the ancient ruins.

You will raise up the age old foundations. And you will be called the repairer of the breach. The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

What we saw last week in the first five verses. We'll do a little review here. What we saw last week.

Was that the way you treat people on Monday. Is the test of the authenticity of your fasting on Sunday. That was last week's sermon.

That God tests us not just in the moment of the religious act or discipline. But later on Monday in how you treat people. Verse three.

Why have we fasted and thou dost not see? They're complaining that they're fasting for something. And God isn't watching. And God answers them at the end of verse three.

Behold on the day of your fast you find your desire. That is they indulge themselves in some other way. They go without food and they're finding some other desire they're preoccupied with.

And you drive hard all your workers. And in verse five God says is that the fast that I choose? Answer no. That's an unacceptable fast.

He even makes fun of it. Verse five he says. Is it for bowing one's head like a reed? In other words the gestures of this self-inflicted fast are no more spiritually significant than a bent reed in the swamp.

God's not impressed with what's going on in these people's worship life. Now why? What's wrong with their fasting? Why is it not acceptable? And what's wrong with it is this. Their fasting was leaving their sin untouched.

Their fasting was leaving their sin untouched. In fact it was concealing it. Covering it.

Providing a veneer so nobody would notice it. From which I infer that the only authentic fasting is fasting which includes an attack spiritually on your sin. Your own sin.

Your sin. Not America. But my sin.

The only authentic praying is a praying that includes an attack. A praying against my sin. The only authentic worship.

What's the thing here going on? The only authentic worship is worship that includes at least the implicit resistance and attack spiritually on my sin. And if I try to leave a pocket of sin in my life. Untouched.

Unresisted. Unattacked. While I go over here and I fast about other things.

God's gonna come to me and he's gonna say that's the fast I want. Attack that. You leave this off.

In fact the way he says this is really remarkable in these verses. And you gotta know Hebrew to see this. I'm sorry I don't usually do this.

Pull rank and say to recognize this in English. No English translations that I know of bring out the two-word connection between verse 5 and verse 10. So I'll just point it out and you can decide whether to believe me or not.

In verse 5 he says that these people are fasting and the NASB says humbling themselves. And other translations just as accurately say afflicting themselves. So what fasting is here is an afflicting of themselves with hunger.

So you got religious people who are well-to-do. They got employees on Monday and they're driving them hard. And they are afflicting themselves with hunger.

Verse 10 he takes these two words hungry and afflicted. He says if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted then your light's gonna go up. When I saw that I thought hmm, hmm, hmm.

So here's some people, some well-to-do people in synagogue and they are hungry. And they're afflicting themselves by voluntarily fasting. And crying out to God for everything except justice for their workers.

And here they're workers who don't have enough food and live in shacks and are oppressed and with a heavy yoke on them. And they're hungry and afflicted. So you got hungry and afflicted and here you got hungry and afflicted.

And what God is saying with this irony is I'm not listening to this hunger and this affliction. Because if you want to take some food and not put it in your mouth, the fast that I choose is that you put it in their mouths. That's what he's saying.

The fact that it's not going into your mouth on Sunday and you feel afflicted and your head's bent down like a reed does not impress me. Because on Monday you don't go to your refrigerator for these folks, you go to your whip. He even says they beat with a fist.

And so God, with this use of language and this irony, says, I do know that there are some afflicted and hungry people down there. I know that. But it's not you I'm looking at.

In fact, I want you to forget about that and do a frontal assault on the sin in your life which involves them. It's a pretty powerful indictment that the Lord gives here. The fast that I choose is not that you religiously make yourselves hungry, but that you make them less hungry.

That's the fast that I choose. If you want to fight sin by taking your bread away from your mouth, put it in their mouth. And then I'll approve your fasting.

When we're living in sin, when you've got a pocket of sin in your life, God comes and he says, the fast that I choose is not the covering of that sin with a religious veneer, but that you cut off your hand if you have to, to attack that sin. Gouge out your eye. You do whatever you have to do to attack the sin of injustice and

hard-heartedness in your life.

Now, that's verses 1 to 5. Today, in 6 to 12, there's some glorious promises, 14 of them as a matter of fact. And the fast is the condition laid down for receiving those promises. And as we move into these promises, I want to hold up a little yellow sheet here.

See these? I told you some stories last week about people whose lives were turned around by Isaiah 58. I had another story. Phoebe Dawson was here in the first service who is responsible for so much of the adoption connection in this church.

And saving babies from abortion and putting them in good Christian homes. And she said to my wife, tell him that Isaiah 58 was the birthplace of my ministry. This is a little card from 11 years ago.

Steering, Satisfaction, Strength, Spring that I gave to David and Faith Yeager when they went out for the first time from us, from Isaiah 58, 11. And Bob Hamlet made some of these. And if you want one to put in your wallet, you can get it from him out there on the information table.

And Bob himself, who's one of the most active people around here, said that at two points in his life, when he made a vocational change to work with Bread for the Hungry, and when he came to Minneapolis to minister here, it was these verses that he printed up from Isaiah 58, 6 to 9 that turned his life. God has used this chapter amazingly. You just hear more and more stories.

And I believe he's appointed to move and touch Bethlehem on this weekend. You can get either of those from Bob out at the information table after the service. Let's look at these verses quickly here.

What's going on in verses 6 to 12 is the promise of reward to those who fast the way they're supposed to fast. Jesus, remember, said, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. These are some of those rewards.

First, let's look at the description of the fasting itself. There must be 13 components to this fasting here. If you fast like this, then you will get these 14 promises.

Now, let me preface this by warning you against a misunderstanding. How easy it would be, and we're just primed, our trigger is made, a hair trigger to do this, because of a theology that's abroad in America and because of the human heart. Namely, as soon as we hear an, if you do this, God will do this, to hear legalism.

Whoa, that's the old covenant, man. We don't talk like that. Christians don't talk like that.

If you do this, then God does this. If-then sentences are legal sentences. Gospel sentences don't have if-then sentences.

Now, if you've been around long enough, you know I don't believe that. And I don't believe that's biblical. We have an if-then sentence here.

We got about 14 ifs and 13 thens in this paragraph. If you do this, God will do this. There is another way to understand if-then sentences than legalism.

You're not going to earn anything from the God of Isaiah. You're not going to negotiate at all with the God of Isaiah. He is sovereign, free, absolutely gracious.

If he gives anything graciously, it's free. If he gives anything to his people, it's free. The only good gift we get from him is something free.

You don't barter with God, you don't merit anything from God, you don't deserve anything from God. It says in Isaiah 30, 15, Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, In repentance and rest you will be saved. Rest, not work.

In repentance and rest you will be saved. In quietness and trust is your strength. The strength to do the kind of fasting described in these 13 components in this chapter does not come from ourselves and therefore can result in no boasting and no negotiating.

It comes from God and therefore results in rest and trust. So let me give you the distinctions that we're learning around this church. Don't see a job description here between an employer and employee.

With 13 things and you do them and you punch your clock at the end of the day and you hand it to your employer and say, you owe me that, you owe me this much wage. You're the employer, I'm the employee, I put in my time, you pay up. If you have that concept of the if-then sentence, you will be a legalist.

Change the image into a doctor and a patient and this is a prescription for how to get well from the wretched disease of hypocrisy. And the doctor not only gives the prescription but he gives the strength to perform it. And then the issue becomes trust.

Do you trust him? Do you trust him for the power? Do you trust him for the wisdom? Do you trust him this is a good way of life? Do you trust him that power flows this way? And if you trust him, the power comes and you walk and you never claim any boasting, you never claim any deserving, you never claim any negotiating or any merit. Everything is free. We are walking by faith in future grace as we've been studying for 13 weeks on Wednesday night.

So I want to get that picture out of your mind of a job description here, thinking you could earn anything by doing this kind of fasting. So let's go to it as a fasting regimen that a doctor has prescribed to us. We are desperately, hellishly sick and we will get well if we trust him and obey out of trust.

Verse 6, is not this the fast that I choose? Number one, loosen the bonds of the wicked, of wickedness, the bonds of wickedness. Number two, undo the bands of the yoke. Number three, let the oppressed go free.

Number four, break every yoke. Number five, is it not to divide your bread with the hungry? Number six, bring the homeless into your house. Number seven, when you see the naked, to cover him.

Number eight, do not hide yourself from your own flesh. And then he breaks off and he goes into the promises. If you do that, you get these promises.

But I want to go ahead and finish the list of what the fast looks like by dropping down to the middle of verse 10 and then we'll come back to the promises. Number nine, if you remove the yoke from your midst. Ten, if you remove the pointing of the finger.

Eleven, if you remove the speaking of wickedness. Twelve, if you give yourself to the hungry. Thirteen, if you satisfy the desire of the afflicted.

That's the doctor's prescription. Fast like that. Fast like that.

And trust your doctor and you will be able and you will get well and the promises of this text will come and will be yours. Now, as I thought about those 13 components, let's boil them down. They fall into seven categories.

Let me repeat them for you and say a word about them. Number one, first category. When you fast the way God wants you to fast, you are called to lift the burden of bondage off of other people.

Five of these 13 are in that category. Number one, beginning of verse six, loosen the bonds of wickedness. Two, undo the bands of yoke.

Three, let the oppressed go free. Four, break every yoke. And then the next one is in verse nine.

If you remove the yoke from your midst. Bonds, bands, yoke, oppression, yoke, yoke. Here's the point.

Christians are to live to lift burdens, not add to burdens. Jesus said to the lawyers in Luke 11, 46, Woe to you, lawyers. You weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

So what Jesus is calling people to, what Isaiah or God through Isaiah is calling people to, is don't be a burden adder, especially to the poor. Be a burden lifter. Lift the yoke.

Take off the yoke. Lift the burden. Remove the oppression.

Do what you can do. And right there, as I said during the welcome, it is not easy to know how to do that. Nobody's claiming, and I'm not giving a prescription for how to do that right now.

I'm beckoning us to join in the quest of discovery for how God in his wisdom wants this done in our day, in America and around the world. Number two, that's the first category. Number two, in this fasting, we are to feed the hungry.

Verse seven, is this not the fast to divide your bread with the hungry? Number three, is this not the fasting? Verse seven again, bring the homeless poor into the house. Four, is this not the fasting? Verse seven again, when you see the naked, cover him. Five, in this fasting, God has called us to be sympathetic behind all of these things.

Sympathetic. I see that in verse seven where it says, do not hide yourself from your own flesh. Now, that might mean your own family, might mean your own Jewish compatriots, if you live in that culture.

But I wonder if it isn't bigger than that. I wonder if it might not also mean your own fellow flesh-wearing humans. And the reason I think that might be it is because in Hebrews 13.3, the writer says, remember the prisoners as though in prison with them and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves are also in the body.

Hmm, what kind of logic is that? Remember prisoners because you've got a body. Get it? What is he appealing to there? He's appealing to a holy empathy or sympathy that if you see another person, they got flesh like you got, you know what it's like to be hurt. You know what it's like to be in prison, hut, cut, burn, bang, shin, hit, beat up.

You can, that's easy to imagine. So here's another person and you see it happening. They share your flesh.

And he says, if you've got the spirit of Jesus, you're going to be drawn in there and not abandon, not hide yourself. Ooh, ooh, I don't want to be around that. Cover it with fasting, cover it with prayer, cover it with worship.

Ooh, ooh. He says, you won't do that. You won't hide yourself from your own flesh, from those who share the flesh that you have.

You will move in on it and do what Jesus said, namely, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Number six, in this fasting, we are called to put away gestures and words that show raw contempt for other people. This is really, this is, this is earthy, folks.

Look at verse nine. Remove, if you remove and drop down, the pointing of the finger. The Hebrew word is the sending of the finger.

That means don't ever, don't ever give anybody the finger. That's what it means. I read several commentaries.

This is a crude gesture. Don't send your finger. Don't ever do that.

Don't ever treat people with contempt through coarse gestures. And the next phrase is, don't do it with your words either. Remove the speaking of wickedness.

So he's referring to communicating contempt through, through gesture and communicating contempt through language. And he's saying, don't add to anybody's burden, even if they cut you off in the traffic and even if they shoot it to you. Don't ever respond like that.

Ever. Just put that out of your hand and put it out of your mind to do any kind of gesture that would communicate contempt for other human beings. Seventh and finally in this fasting, we are called not just to give food, but to give ourselves, literally our souls here in verse 10.

If you give your soul, literally your nephesh, your soul to the hungry and satisfy the desire, literally the soul, you give your soul and you satisfy the soul. It's frustrating that when English translations can bring out parallels like that, that they don't do it. If you give your soul to the hungry and satisfy the soul of the afflicted, that's the last component.

In other words, ministry to the poor is not merely lobbing a relief bomb over the wall. It is going through the door with your soul, with your life. Something more has to happen.

That's one reason government's never going to solve the problem of the poor. And we won't either, of course, if we learn how to do it from the government. Go to the Bible and ask how Isaiah did it and how Jesus did it.

If you give your self, soul to the hungry and satisfy the soul, not just the stomach of the afflicted. Now come the promises. Let's move into the promises.

What will God do if we fast like that? Number one. If we fast like this, the darkness in our life will become light. Verse eight.

Then your light will break out like the dawn. Similarly, verse 10. Then your light will rise in the darkness and your gloom will become like the noon day.

So I ask you this morning, how's the light factor in your life? How's the gloom factor? Are you gloomy? Is our church gloomy? Is your Sunday school class gloomy? Is your small group under a cloud of gloom right now? Maybe you go back to your small group next Sunday night and say, if there's a cast of gloom over our small group, maybe we should find some project for the hungry. That's what this text says. If you want the clouds to go back over you, start pouring out your life for other people.

Maybe you're way too ingrown as a small group or as a family. Maybe your family's just gotten all ingrown. Nobody ever comes over.

You don't know any of your neighbors. There's no family ministry whatsoever. You wonder why there's a cloud over the family.

I wonder. Take this and think hard about the gloom and light factor in your life and see whether there's a prescription here. Not a job description to earn anything, but a doctor's prescription for a physician who loves you and wants you free.

He wants light on you, and he knows the path that leads to light. Number two, if we follow this fasting, there will be physical strengthening. Verse 8, your recovery will speedily spring forth.

Verse 11, he will give strength to your bones. I wonder, have you ever thought this? You know, the Bible says some people get sick and die because they abuse the Lord's Supper. Here's another surprising one.

I wonder how much weakness, how many ailments there might be in our church. Just ailments. Allergies, shoulder aches, psychological aches.

I wonder how much might be there because we're not pouring ourselves out for the poor the way this text might be calling us to. It's just a possibility. This text says if you give yourself to the poor, your bones are going to get stronger.

And your recovery will come speedily. Think about it. Pray about it.

Number three, if we follow this fasting, God will be in front of us. I love this one. This is my favorite one.

God will be in front of us with righteousness and he'll be behind us with his glory and he'll be right on top of us with his presence. Let me show you where I get this. Verse 8, your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

So you've got God and his righteousness in front of us and you've got God and his glory behind us. And then comes verse 9. Then you will call and the Lord will answer. You will cry and he will say, Here I am.

So here's my picture of what's going on here. Here I am walking through life and if I pour my life out for the poor, God says I'm going to be in front of you with righteousness. I'm imputing it to you, vindicating you, elevating it in front of you.

I'm going to be there in front of you as your front guard. I'm going to be with my glory back here behind you. Nobody's going to sneak up without my knowing about it and there's going to be just a big light all around you here.

And this is the image I have for this other one. We've all been in classes, grown up in classes and they call the roll. Piper, here.

Smith, here. Stellar, here. Michael, here.

God, here. That's what it says here. Whenever you say God, he says here.

You see that? That's right there in verse 9. You will call and the Lord will answer. You will cry and he will say here. There's no time in your life when you say God, he'll just say here.

Here. He's never way over there. He says here.

That's a glorious thing because I say that a lot. God, here. Don't worry.

You thought I was gone, didn't you? I'm right here. Although, the text says he'll be there for you if you give yourself to the poor. You try to live in sin.

You try to go on treating people with injustice. You try to go on letting the pocket of undealt with sin in your life go on. God will say my promise was conditional on your trusting me to be your doctor and tell you how to live.

And if you ignore me and say no thank you, I know how to run my life and treat my employees and deal with the poor, bug off. You say God, he'll say here. And that's a scary thing to hear when you say God.

Number four, if we follow this fasting, he will guide us continually. Verse 11, and the Lord will continually guide you. That's precious for us on the Master Planning Team right now.

We so much want to be guided by the Lord. Oh, how we want to be guided by the Lord. Let's pick up that stuff and learn with us out there.

Have you ever thought, this worries me because I'm always checking myself, wondering about my ministry style and if I'm doing the pastorate the way the Bible wants me to be doing the pastorate. Have you ever thought that confusion in your life, confusion, uncertainty, which way to go, might be owing to the fact that you're not generally directed in the right way, like toward the poor. Seems like he's saying if you get your life oriented in some way onto the poor, in that big orientation, I love to come.

I just love to come with guidance. I love to come and fulfill Psalm 32.8. I will instruct you and guide you in the way that you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Here, here, I'm here. Go that way, that way, that way. And I just wonder sometimes if in our comfortable middle class ignoring of the poor, God just might let us get all confused about what life is and how to do things, how to run a church, and how to handle our money, and how to eat, and how to do marriage, and how to rear kids, and just confusion everywhere.

Because he's saying, look, you just haven't set yourself to do what I told you to do here, namely care for the poor. You start caring for the poor, I come in with answers to all kinds of questions that you've been puzzled about over these last years. Number five, if we follow this fasting, He will satisfy our soul.

Verse 11, He will satisfy your desire, literally, again, your soul in scorched places. Now, here at Bethlehem, I hope those who've been around for a while know that I believe, and I think the Bible teaches, that God is the one who satisfies our soul. God is the satisfaction of the soul.

The soul was made for God. But, second statement of Christian hedonism, that satisfaction in God comes to consummation when it expands to embrace other people. We know that? If you try to make it a dead-end street and say, ha, I've got God, fold your legs like a Buddha and sit down there like this, a God in me, we've got it, I am so satisfied, it will not last long.

It will not last long. It will go bad quick. Because God made you not as a, how can I think of the German word? Sackgasse.

What's the English word? Cul-de-sac. Not as a cul-de-sac, but as a channel, a thoroughfare, a broker, pipe. If you don't channel this satisfaction that God pours in, it stops being satisfaction.

He means to be known. He means to be shared. He means for His life to be poured out.

He means for your satisfied soul to get next to another soul so that the satisfaction just rubs all over it. That's the way satisfaction comes to and remains in its fullness. Number six, God will make you a watered garden and spring that does not fail.

Verse 11, You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. So we all know this, that the practical, paradoxical, spiritual truth of the Christian life is the more you give, the more you have. The more you give your life, the more life you have.

The more God you give, the more God you get. And it works right on down to money, I believe. John 7, 38, He who believes in me, Jesus says, believes.

It's a faith issue. This is an underlining my doctor's prescription faith paradigm rather than employer-employee-earn paradigm. If you believe in me, believe in me, as the Scripture says, namely Isaiah 58, 11, From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.

But this he spoke of the Holy Spirit, whom those who were believing on him were to receive. The Spirit is the answer to that watering. He waters down, and once he lands inside, he starts becoming a spring so that we flow over, which is just another way of saying we become a conduit of his grace.

The Holy Spirit is a spring of water when you release him onto other people, especially the poor. Finally, we're done. If we follow this fasting, if we give ourselves to the poor, God will restore the ruins.

I wonder what you think of when you hear that. God will restore the ruins. Anything ruined in your life, in our church? Do you think of half a dozen things that you wish weren't broke in your relationships or your marriage or our church or a ministry? Let's read it.

It's verse 12. Those from among you, now this is all the result of giving yourself to the poor. So this is a question now about whether Bethlehem between now and 2000 is hearing a call from the Lord in Isaiah 58 so that the ruins will be repaired.

Okay, that's what the text is about, how to repair the ruins. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins. You will raise up the age-old foundations.

You will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell. So my plea to you as I close is trust your physician, okay? Trust your physician. Believe that his doctor's prescription of the fast of 13 components is a magnificent way to live.

It is a light burden and an easy yoke because he's the great burden lifter. Trust him and follow him in it. You will get light.

You will get healing. You will get guidance. You will get refreshment.

You will get restoration. You will get resourcefulness. And best of all, you get God in front and God behind and God's in here.

I'm here. And that's what I want more than anything at Bethlehem. I'd like us in every worship service to be able to say God and he says here.

And when you go home and you get in your car and say God, he says here. And you get in a conversation with your wife and it's tough and you say God, he says here. And you go to the poor wherever they are and you say God, I'm inadequate and he says here.

Let's pray. Lord, I thank you so much that you're a God of grace that comes back to us again and again and you're ready to pick up with anybody, anybody, any hypocrite, any wicked person, any unbeliever right now at this moment. You're ready to move in and pick up with them where they are if they would just turn and say God, I need you.

I'm just a sheep. I'm just a child. I'm just a sinner.

I've got no hope in myself. I need forgiveness and I need guidance and I need light and I need restoration and I want to be a fountain and not a continually absorbent broken cistern. So Lord God, I pray that you would come and minister to us as a church and apply all these things to us for your great namesake through your great Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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