"The Reasons Why God Does not Honor Fasting."
Isaiah 58: 1-5
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(All Scripture quoted from the NIV Bible unless otherwise noted)

I. Historical Background and Biblical Context

In the Old Testament, every Israelite was called to fast on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27–28). This was a sign of humbling and repentance before God as they sought His forgiveness for their sins. Moses fasted from food and water in two back-to-back fasts, lasting a total of eighty days while he was meeting with God on Mt. Sinai and receiving divine revelation (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9–10:10). Times of national emergency or disaster were reasons for the whole nation to seek God's help through fasting and prayer. Esther called all the Jews to fast to prevent their impending destruction (Esth. 4:16). God graciously answered. When King Jehoshaphat was told that a vast army was marching toward Judah to attack, he "set his face to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah" (2 Chron. 20:3). God answered with an extraordinary deliverance.

Jesus Himself fasted for forty days in preparation for His public ministry and for the ability to overcome the devil's temptations to derail it (Matt. 4:1–11). Jesus clearly expected that His followers would fast (Matt. 9:14–15) and said that if they did so with proper motives, God would see and reward them (Matt. 6:16–18), just as He rewards those who pray with proper motives (Matt. 6:5–6).

It has been evidenced many times throughout biblical history and in many of our own lives that God does in fact honor fasting. However, God does not honor the "What" but he does honor the "Why".

II. "Fasting that God Does not Honor"

1. <u>v. 1</u>.

In chapter 40, the Lord had charged Isaiah with comforting the people, but this chapter begins with the Lord charging him to speak to His people with a language that does not lend itself to comforting or flattering them. God sees their sin and as a righteous and holy Father, He is not pleased. Instead, strong words and phrases used such as "don't hold back, raise your voice like a trumpet and declare", give an indication that Isaiah is to speak as if scolding his people. It appears that the Lord is insisting that he not be concerned with hurting feelings, but with bringing their sin to light, giving warning of the fatal consequences of it and challenging them to change their ways. This is serious business!

2. <u>v. 2</u>.

They approach God in prayer as if they practice justice and righteousness: ***"Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of their God***". But this passage states clearly, they are not such a people.

This passage shows that the people have what one might describe as a **"form of godliness"**. Their worship of God is superficial. Their desire to know and adhere to God's commands is superficial. In reality they have not been obedient to the commands of God. Therefore, they have turned away from God. They in fact are being hypocritical regarding true worship of and obedience to God, though they may not recognize it as such. Sure, they are performing many of the duties ascribed to them. And it is obvious that to themselves they are doing all of the right things, but they are not doing the things right. Their motives are not that they wish to please God, but an attempt to manipulate God. God cannot and will not be manipulated. I say again, God sees their sin. In Isiah 57:18, the Lord declares that He has seen their ways, but will heal them. Often times, healing does not come until pain is felt.

Let's translate this into 2026. They go to church regularly; they pray while they are there; they love to hear good preaching; they contend to be in their element; they desire God's judgement, but for the other person and not themselves. The obedience is not aligned with their motives. When the church service ends, so does the righteousness and the obedience to the commands of God. But when trouble comes, the pain of it will often re-direct them to the Lord.

3. <u>v. 3</u>.

Ever since Isaiah 40:27 Israel has been complaining, ***"My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God".*** Israel believes a great injustice has been done to them by Babylon. They had been held captive by foreign oppressors. Their city is in ruins. Their temple is destroyed. They have been abandoned by God. But they insist they are entitled to the Lord moving on their behalf. They expect God to move on their behalf because of their fasting and prayer, but they remain in their conundrum due to non-adherence to the demands of a God-directed and commanded fast.

Israel complains that God has deprived them of justice. God responds by demanding Israel to stop depriving those around them of justice and righteousness! Even though Israel has been attentive to the ritual ordinances of the Law, they have completely neglected the ethical demands of it. The people believe *they* are the victims, when in fact they are the victimizers. Fasting, when done properly, is not a means of earning favor from God; it is a means of spiritual transformation.

4. v. 4.

Although they believe they are seeking God through their fasts, they forget that Isaiah had earlier clearly instructed that they were to ***"seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).*** To truly "seek the LORD" is to seek justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed. They are willing to entrust their rituals and prayers to God, but not extend their faith commitment to the social and economic spheres of their lives. Because of their social and economic sins, they remain in darkness.

5. v. 5.

Fasting is an attempt to align one's priorities to the will of God. It is time of spiritual growth and connection to God the Father ***(strengthening and shoring up relationship with our God)***. That growth and connection is exemplified in our adhering to the call to care for those less fortunate than our selves. A true God-honored fast requires the rejection of our personal desires for the benefit of serving and providing for others. It is not an outward show of our supposed commitment to God, but an inward desire to sacrifice ourselves for the unhoused, the widows, orphans and down trodden of our communities. Isaiah is calling for a fast, not from food, but from affluence, indifference, and privilege so that the community of faith might live in harmony with God, who ***"lives in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15).***

It is responsibility of each of us to call out sin as sin. But we must be mindful that to do we must do so as God requires, we must do it out of love and a desire for restoration rather than judgment.

III. Questions to ponder:

According to verses 1-3, why was God rejecting the people's fasting and worship? How might we fall into the same trap of going through religious motions while ignoring, heart-level obedience?

In what ways does God's definition of a "true fast" challenge the way we prioritize our time and resources?

How can you practically "share your bread with the hungry" and "cover the naked" in your community today?