

True Fasting

No religious fervor or pious life can earn the blessings only God can give by grace. Every human work, even the most noble and noteworthy, is flawed. When confronted with the harsh demands of God's holy law, the human spirit can only make one of two false choices. Either the soul deflects the harsh demands of God's law and becomes self-righteous, or the soul abandons all hope and turns to despair. God, of course, supplies the only true alternative - Christ has suffered what human sin deserved and achieved forgiveness and deliverance from the consequences of sin. The people described in our First Reading today from Isaiah 58 chose the first of the two false choices. They believed that they could do what God demands and God would reward them for their goodness and their devout fasting. But such people did not understand themselves. They did not know that their righteousness was only a sham and hypocritical. God corrected them here.

God demands perfect obedience; no human can comply. The people had taken pride in their fasting, but as devout as their fasting may have appeared, it was not sincere. They still retained the desire to exploit their works. They did as they pleased, not as the Lord demanded. Their fasting ended in quarrels, strife, and brawling. These hearts and lives had not been changed by the worship of the Lord. No compassion, generosity, humility, or love marked their lives. They remained combative, arrogant, selfish, and greedy. Yet they imagined that God would reward them for their religious fasting and devotion.

By nature we are all combative, arrogant, selfish, and greedy. These are fruits of the sinful nature for which the Servant of God suffered and died. God wants to transform human hearts so that they are loving, humble, generous, and kind. That transformation comes only when the Spirit works within and one believes in the God of grace. But sadly, even after we believe, we retain our sinful nature and so often fall into quarrels, strife, and greed. Our transformation will not be complete until we enter the glory of heaven. Here on earth we struggle against the tendencies of our own sinful nature and wrestle sometimes hard and long to do as God desires. When we fail, we turn to God for forgiveness and find in His love and grace the strength to continue the fight against the sin within.

These people rejected God's grace. They abandoned what God had told them about the Servant and were trying instead to earn God's blessings by their fasting. That's impossible. So God revealed their hypocrisy. Without Christ, God accepts no human effort (Hebrews 11:6), no matter how good it appears. With Christ, human effort comes to the favourable attention of God, who forgives the failings and sins. God sees the blood of His own Son instead of the stain of the believer's sin. Then, by virtue of His love for sinners in Christ, God empowers His faithful to persist in their struggle against sin and in their efforts to live as He desires. The people to whom Isaiah was speaking had no concept of God's grace in the Servant, Christ.

Praise God that our salvation has been obtained not by our own efforts, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! Being baptised into His death and resurrection, washed of all our sins, eternal life awaits us!