

PLEASE GOD
FIFTH SUN. AFTER EPIPHANY

ISA 58:3-9a
FEB 5, 2017

- 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?
- 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?
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

The question is, do you always get what you want from God,
and if not, why not? But if you do, why is that?

A mother going into grocery store with two young children
tells them to be patient and well behaved
and she may buy them a treat.

When they see the cookie aisle, they start shouting
We want cookies for a treat! Buy some cookies!
But mom doesn't turn down that aisle
So they start whining and pleading, please! Please!
because they know you are supposed to say that word.
And they begin to fuss louder and louder.

Do you think that should get them the promised treat?
What if instead they are calm and polite?
What if one helps keep the other entertained?

Suppose they do get cookies? Is it because of what they did?
Not really, it is because mom promised & purchased them.
This is like what Isaiah is telling Israelites
and us about what pleases God.

WE WANT GOD TO PLEASE DO WHAT WE WANT
WE SHOULD WANT TO DO WHAT PLEASES GOD
GOD DOES FOR OTHERS WHAT PLEASES HIM

WE WANT GOD TO PLEASE DO WHAT WE WANT

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Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

Have you ever been so upset or so emotional in another way
that you have lost your appetite?

How we feel emotionally can make a difference in
how we feel physically and how we act.

This is what fasting is about. It is behavior that goes with prayer
like folding hands or bowing heads,

that physically expresses something to God,

Especially with prayers of repentance, it is a way of saying,
God this makes me feel awful. I am empty inside.

Nothing else matters to me but you.

But it is easy to say things we don't really mean.

We can say please in a whiny, unpleasing way.

We can say thank you insincerely: Thanks a lot!

Isaiah says they didn't really mean their fasting & bowing.

It was just a lie, as if God couldn't see through it.

Or it worked the other way around, their fasting
led to feeling bad. They were crabby & short tempered.

Instead of really denying their own pleasures,
their workers ended up paying the price.
Throughout the history of church, people have made up
all sorts of rituals that they imagine will appease God,
although God himself never instructed or asked for them.
None are worth as much as simply doing what God says.
God did tell Israel to fast on the day of atonement,
not as a righteous act but an act acknowledging
their lack of righteousness and need for God's grace.
But Isaiah says their fasting was more like a temper tantrum,
like trying to hold one's breath until turning blue,
not the kind of thing that makes God want to bless.
And Isaiah says fasting is not just to be a one day thing
like going to church on Sunday.
Our worship can be an expression of spiritual emptiness
with a desire for God to make a difference in our life,
but it is worthless if we don't really want to change.
All the all behaviors that are part of our worship,
standing, kneeling, bowing, singing, etc.,
are appropriate behavior for expressing ourselves to God
only if they go along with the behavior of obedience
including obeying God's will that we love others.

WE SHOULD WANT TO DO WHAT PLEASES GOD

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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?

What do you suppose they were asking from God when fasting?

Maybe they wanted God to make Israel great again
by freeing them from their enemies and giving security
along with food, clothing and shelter.

Isn't this something God wants people to have?

If so, then not just us but others should have it too.

So a truly sincere prayers, will be expressed in actions
by doing what helps everyone be
free from being trapped in trouble & mistreatment
fed instead of hungry, housed instead of homeless

If there are people around us who are oppressed & burdened,
especially if our neighbors are homeless, hungry or naked,
or if our having what we want comes at the expense
of others being kept in poverty or misery,
then we should repent and show it with our actions.
and not just ignore it while going through motions of worship.
Genuine fasting can include giving up food or other things
not just to do it but to give them to those who need it.
Meanwhile, Isaiah reminds the Israelites,
not depriving their own family members.
Why does God want us to have good behavior?
It is not because it somehow benefits God
or because it makes a difference in how God treats us.
It is because God wants to make a difference in us
and because it pleases him for us to do
what makes a difference for others.

This is why...

GOD DOES FOR OTHERS WHAT PLEASES HIM

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Today's Gospel reminds us God wants our behavior
to make a difference in the world, like salt and light,
not just a difference in people's physical lives,
but a difference in their spiritual lives.

When righteousness leads us to do what we do
the glory of the Lord follows in its wake.

Our behavior is not just to be saying something to God
but to be saying something to others about our God,
to be good works that give the glory to him,

This happens when it is obvious to us and to others
that the only way we can do good is what God does for us,
that he is speedily healing us.

Since God is truly pleased when we care for others,
God is pleased to first do it himself.

In the next chapter, Isaiah says, "The LORD saw it,
and it displeased him that there was no justice.

He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.

Does the Lord call when we answer? Yes he does.

Is this because we have done the things Isaiah listed?

No, not exactly, but one of us has. That one is Jesus.

Jesus humbled himself to become one of us.

Jesus does not turn away from us because he has
made himself our own flesh and blood.

Jesus fasted and prayed and kept the whole law for us.

Jesus loosed the bonds of our wickedness, freed us from sin
and from being oppressed by the devil by forgiving us.

Jesus fed the hungry & feeds us with his own body & blood.

Jesus clothed our shameful nakedness by covering us
with his own righteousness.

Jesus brings us homeless wanderers
into his own home in heaven.

When we truly believe this, we express it in our behavior
by how we treat others.

What does it take for God to hear and answer our prayers?

Question is not what we have to do to get our way with God
but whether God is getting his way with us.

This is why we sincerely do what we do in worship

to express our emptiness and hunger for God.

This is why we express our devotion to God

by behavior that does for others what he does for us.

When we say "Please God"

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It may sometimes seem he is not paying attention to us
but we are the ones who need to pay attention to him.

WE SHOULD WANT TO DO WHAT PLEASES GOD

which is showing our faith in our behavior toward others.

We continue to fall short in this, but

GOD DOES FOR OTHERS WHAT PLEASES HIM

God does hear our prayers and help us needy people
because it pleases him to do it for Jesus' sake

so that our lights shine in a way that gives glory to him
now and forever.