WHAT IS TRUE RELIGION?

ISAIAH 58:1-12

Isaiah

- Old testament prophet
- About 2,800 years ago

WHAT IS FASTING?

A deliberate act by a person or community to abstain from food for a definite period of time in response to an event or upcoming event – to ask God for mercy or spiritual strength or discernment or preparation for ministry.

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)

Although our faith is personal, it is never private!

Our Christian response to the social well-being of the poor finds its roots in our worship response to God.

WHAT IS TRUE RELIGION?

- What God rejects
- Why God is concerned for the poor and the oppressed
- What God desires as true religion

WHAT GOD REJECTS

- Those who seek him daily and seem eager to know his ways (v2)

- Those who ask him for just decisions (v2)

- Those who seem eager for God to come near them (v2)

WHAT GOD REJECTS

- Those who fasted and humbled themselves (v3)
- Those who bow their heads like a reed and lie in sackcloth and ashes (v5)

For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, **_as if_** they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. (Isaiah 58:2)

WHAT GOD REJECTS

1) God rejects the prayers of those who have the outward form of piety but do not carry out the moral actions that ought to be consistent with their faith in God.

WHAT GOD REJECTS

2) God rejects those who use religious practices as a manipulative tool to extract blessings from him.

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. (Isaiah 58:3)

"but how easily the perverse human mind begins to think that it is the pursuance of the form that will produce the result. That is what has happened here, as is apparent in these questions...(to be cont'd)

…But repentance is not for the purpose of getting God to do anything. It is an expression of the conviction that my ways are wrong and God's ways are right, whether he does anything for me or not." (John Oswalt)

You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high (Isaiah 58:4)

When the focus is turned from self to the Other in our worship, we will see the others in our society.

- Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. (Exodus 22:22)
- Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. (Exodus 23:6)

But during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. (Exodus 23:11)

WHY GOD IS CONCERNED FOR THE POOR

- Land is allocated to every tribe and family

- A special year is set aside to cancel all debts, to set free Israelite servants and to restore the land to the original owners

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

WHY GOD IS CONCERNED FOR THE POOR

- Creator and provider
  - He desires abundant fullness for his creation

WHY GOD IS CONCERNED FOR THE POOR

- He wants humanity to flourish and thrive
  - When sanctity and dignity of life not respected, God would respond
  - Poverty is an offense to God's intention for creation!

WHY GOD IS CONCERNED FOR THE POOR

- He cares for our physical well-being
  - Garments for Adam and Eve
  - Land flowing with milk and honey

"Consumerism ironically betrays our detachment with material goods, our seemingly constant dissatisfaction with them" (Roland Chia)

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28)

WHAT IS TRUE RELIGION?

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter —

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,

with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,

then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:8-10)

THIS IS WHAT INEQUALITY LOOKS LIKE

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MIINDSETS TOWARDS POOR

#1: The poor make bad choices e.g. spend money on televisions

#2: They have different values and mindsets especially with respect to work ethics and parenting

#3: Children from low-income families have an equal chance through education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do we, when we help the low-income families, think of them as people receiving help and us as people giving help, or do we see them as gifts for whom we are accountable to God?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have we ever thought that perhaps it is by our decisions and actions that the poor are further disadvantaged and not because we are naturally better than them?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do we know any poor people? If not, why? Do we allow our children to mix with children from neighbourhood schools or normal streams? Do we think they are a bad influence for our children? Do we avoid people of certain housing status because we are afraid that they may harm or trouble or taint us?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do we think domestic helpers and foreign workers deserve lower quality food and amenities?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do we use our positions of power to exploit those who depend on us? For those of us who are bosses or in higher management, do we tighten our appraisal and HR policies for profits while ignoring the potential costs on our employees?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do we take advantage or use emotionally-abusive words on those who serve us, who are less powerful than us?