



## Sermon, Sunday June 9, 2024 “True Fasting”

**SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 58:1-8** <sup>1</sup>Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side. <sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup>You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? <sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>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 them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? <sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you;

### Introduction: Israel's Disorder After the Exile

Today is the third Sunday after Pentecost. To understand today's text, we must know the situation of the time. 537 BC is the year when the Israelites returned to their hometown after being taken captive in Babylon. They lived in captivity in Babylon for approximately 50 years.

After Jerusalem fell to Babylon, the nobles of Israel were taken to Babylon, and the rest of the people remained in Jerusalem. The people left behind in Jerusalem suffered greatly, but the nobles who were taken captive to Babylon lived relatively more prosperously and freely than those left behind in Jerusalem. However, the 50 years of living without a nation were a time of suffering for all the Israelites.

After the fall of Babylon, the captive Israelites were liberated according to the edict of King Cyrus of the Persian Empire. After returning from exile, the Israelites worked hard to rebuild the temple and restore their identity, but the overall situation of Israel, which was in disorder, did not change.

### Body: What is true fasting (piety)?

Even in the eyes of Isaiah, who wrote today's text, Israeli society seemed chaotic and disorderly. In today's text, Isaiah warns Israel's 'corrupt society' by teaching what true fasting is. Through today's text, we can see how meaningless the fasting was for the Israelites at the time of Isaiah.

In fact, fasting became an important pious ritual in Israel after they were taken into Babylonian captivity. The Israelites wanted to overcome the pain of losing their country through fasting. So even after the end of the captivity, fasting was accepted as an important tradition by the Israelites. However, fasting mentioned in today's text does not just mean skipping meals, but also refers to all religious and pious lifestyles.



Worship, prayer, and reading the Bible for our devotional life are important ways of life that focus us on our relationship with God. This kind of pious life is necessary for us to live as Christians. We can maintain our spiritual sensitivity by practicing this kind of pious life in our daily lives. However, there are things we need to be careful about in maintaining a godly life. That is, our devotional life can be distorted.

Today's text shows how fasting (pious life) at the time could be distorted. First, the Israelites complain that God does not see them fasting. Second, the Israelites do not fast on days when they should fast, but instead enjoy making money or having fun.

Isaiah tells us to stop immediately because this kind of fasting (pious life) is not pleasing to God. So, in the second half of verse 5 of today's text, Isaiah says, "Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?". This verse expresses the pretense of fasting to show others how pious they are.

Now, Isaiah tells us what kind of fasting God likes. Isaiah 58:6-7 says: **"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 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 them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"**. Verse 10 continues, **"If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."**

In this way, Isaiah clearly states what fasting (pious life) is pleasing to God. It is about caring for those who have been wronged, the oppressed, and the poor and lonely.

In fact, the marginalized people that Isaiah refers to in today's text are not the nobles of Israel who were taken captive to Babylon and lived in relative comfort, but the people who remained in the land of Israel and suffered after the fall of Jerusalem. These people have always been socially underprivileged, both during the time of captivity and in the era after their return. Isaiah tells us to take care of them and treat them like human beings. Isaiah says that doing this is fasting that pleases God and practicing justice.

There are two thoughts that come to mind when we listen to Isaiah's words above. First, with the hope that the world will become more just, we must pray and live a practical life for this purpose. Second, we think of ourselves as very weak in the face of society's structural evil.

In general, many people compromise with themselves and moderately help those in difficult situations. We also make reasonable efforts to eliminate structural evils in society. Like this, it is difficult for people to completely sacrifice everything for the love of their neighbors.

As you know, there are many people around us who need help more than we can handle. We cannot blindly help these people, and we must not live our lives ignoring them. Like this, ordinary people living in the world want justice and peace to overflow in the world, but they also try to live by compromising with reality. Would it be wrong if we lived in such an ambiguous position?

Please think again about Isaiah's words in today's text. In today's text, Isaiah tells us to offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted and clothe the naked. This is a very challenging word that awakens our religious conscience. Now, Prophet Isaiah is calling for the reform of Israel's society, which has been sluggish since the captivity.

The Israelites considered it very important to keep the Sabbath to remember that God created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7th and that Israel was liberated from Egypt. However, Israel's Sabbath system was often misused depending on the times.

Isaiah 58:13 describes this situation as follows: **"If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the**



**Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs.”**

In fact, after the return of captivity, Israel, especially those living in Jerusalem, did not consider keeping the Sabbath a big deal for the sake of making money. The above verse is a warning from Isaiah about the attitude of such people. Isaiah tells us to keep the Sabbath law and not to travel, make money, or consult on that day.

However, as we all know, implementing social reform is not an easy task. Because, even if an individual's conscience is good, people are influenced by the social environment. Therefore, social reform requires a good system as well as a good conscience of individuals.

The ancient prophets of Israel also knew this. So, the Israelites prepare an institutional mechanism to live according to the Lord's will. It is the law. And the most important of the laws is keeping the Sabbath. Although we did not read it today, there is a verse at the end of Isaiah chapter 58 that emphasizes keeping the Sabbath.

Do you understand the prophet Isaiah's words about emphasizing the Sabbath as meaning that we must keep the Sabbath no matter what? If you think that way, you are misunderstanding the meaning of the prophet Isaiah. If we think that way, that is legalistic thinking.

Jesus said, **‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’** Now Isaiah is warning the people of Jerusalem who are so absorbed in making money that they forget the Lord. The point of the prophet Isaiah's verse, **“If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day”** is not about the Sabbath, but about own interests.

In this verse, the reason people do not keep the Sabbath is to make own interests. Of course, just because you don't keep the Sabbath doesn't mean you will be ruined right away. However, those who sell their souls to make money are bound to fail.

This means that people who only care about money ignore social justice and peace. Such a society only values people based on their money and social status and does not respect them as people themselves. Therefore, such people set out to make money by denying even the minimum institution of the Sabbath. The central message of the prophet Isaiah is that this kind of society will be destroyed.

## **Conclusion: The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! Now let's summarize today's message. Our denomination has a very beautiful religious tradition. It is using the 'means of grace' emphasized by Pastor John Wesley (reading, meditating, and studying the Bible, prayer, fasting, participation in regular worship, healthy living, evangelism, and participation in the sacraments) for spiritual growth. Personally, this means practicing good deeds, and communally, it means pursuing social justice and eliminating oppression and discrimination.

This is the same as the intention of the prophet Isaiah, who warned against the hypocritical pious life (fasting) of the Israelites after the captivity and tried to achieve justice pleasing to God through the proper practice of the Sabbath system.

We must be wary of neglecting our efforts to practice piety and of turning our practice of piety into a hypocritical one. Also, we must not forget the meaning of Jesus' words, **‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’** And we must always remember that the true owner of the Sabbath is Jesus. If we do not forget this, the world we live in will become a more just place.

