

Welcome

As a teenager, I felt deeply that I didn't belong anywhere (which I know is not a unique experience). I had two major spaces where I was around a lot of other teens - school of course, and my youth group. I went to a church of about 1,000, so the youth group had something like 150-200 kids.

One Summer, they split us into small groups and did a contest where we could earn points for various good activities - attending the Wednesday evening youth worship gathering, service projects and - get this - reading chapters in the Bible. I think we got like 10 points per chapter.

Now, this was clutch for me because I *love* reading. I do now and I did then. And I'm a *fast* reader. So I went home that first week and read all of Genesis and Exodus and even half of Leviticus.

Leviticus y'all.

I showed up the following Wednesday with just over 100 chapters. My youth pastor didn't believe me, so he quizzed me on what I'd read. When I passed, he awarded 1,000 points to my team. We skyrocketed into first place and for an hour or so, I was a hero.

I read a *lot* of the Bible that summer. But I don't need to tell you that all that scripture didn't *do* much for me, do I? This spiritual practice - reading scripture - was really more about me achieving a false sense of acceptance and belonging than it was creating space for the Holy Spirit to conform my story to the story of Jesus.

For the last couple of weeks, we've been looking at the purpose of religious practices for God's people. What role do religious practices play in the life of faith? How do we keep from doing them to assuage some insecurity or cover over some wound in our own lives? How do we keep spiritual practices centered on forming us as God's people?

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany, a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. We are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

We met Isaiah's Servant, that ideal human who perfectly embodies God's call on us. We saw that God calls us to be faithful, not effective. And we saw how the Servant stands with the marginalized because that's where God is.

Last week, we began a two-week exploration of the nature of worship. We saw that, in the prophet Micah's day, while the people were flooding the Temple to worship, they were not living out God's teachings.

Today, we're going to pick up on that same theme. Whereas last week, we spent more time investigating the justice piece of it. And to do that, we're going to head to [Isaiah 58](#).

Turn with us to [Isaiah 58](#).

[Timeline 1] You might remember from last week that Micah prophesied at the end of the 8th century BCE. This section of Isaiah was written after God's people returned from Exile, so sometime at the end of the sixth century. In other words, what we're about to read comes around two hundred years after Micah's courtroom prophesy of last week.

I want to point that out because you might think these two prophets were addressing the exact same group of people! Let's read together:

“Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don't be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins!

Yet they act so pious! They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God.

They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me.

‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don't even notice it!’ -- Isaiah 58:1–3 (NLT)

Do you hear that? They complain - we're showing up to the Temple! We're fasting! We're fasting so hard! Why don't you even care??

Last week, Micah observed that the problem is that when we do ‘religious’ things - like going to church or a spiritual practice like fasting in order to make God happy, which is another way of saying that we’re trying to earn God’s favor.

God doesn’t *need* our worship. It’s not an exchange like it is in pagan religion.

The purpose of worship is to shape us into the people of God. So let’s listen to what God says in response to the people’s complaint:

“I will tell you why!” I respond. “It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers.

What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling?

This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? -- Isaiah 58:3–5 (NLT)

I love this. God says basically, “What kind of God do you think I am, that what I primarily want in life is for you to put on a costume and a performance?”

What matters most to God is not the sort of performance we put on one day a week. It’s not rituals for the sake of rituals.

No, what God cares about is that we’re becoming the people God created us to be.

What matters to God is whether you’re participating in the household of God (which is the whole world).

Song

I love that none of the prophets are vague about what God expects. In pushing God’s people away from religion as ritual (and toward religion as authentic transformation), they say again and again what God really wants.

Let’s listen. Remember, earlier God said

“It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? -- Isaiah 58:3-4 (NLT)

The prophet goes on to continue to be specific:

No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. -- Isaiah 58:6-7 (NLT)

Do you hear that? Reform unjust prison systems.

Improve working conditions for employees.

Free those who are oppressed.

Feed the hungry and house the unhoused.

These are all movements that at one time or another, God's people have been deeply involved in.

There have always been people who want to divorce our obligations to each other from our obligations to God.

But when Jesus was asked what the single most important commandment was, he gave us two: Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbors the same way we love ourselves.

Jesus himself refused to differentiate between loving God and loving each other. For him, they're the same thing.

So what about things like worship and fasting? If they're not to please God, then why do we bother? Why should gathering for worship be a priority for us?

Because God gives us these practices to shape us.

Worship helps to shape us as God's people - away from the practices and beliefs of the culture around us and toward God's way.

So too the spiritual practices we pursue - like prayer, meditation, fasting, giving - all these are designed to shape us, to make us available to God, to make us look more like Jesus.

Take fasting. Fasting is choosing to give up something important to us, even necessary to us. Food is most common, but we're coming up on Lent in just a couple of weeks, and during the Lenten fast, we give up anything from meat to social media to naps.

The point is to say no to our desires so that we can learn to rely more fully on Jesus. God didn't create us to starve sometimes. And God doesn't *need* us to fast.

Fasting is a practice our spiritual ancestors learned helped us focus on being God's people. Ironically, by saying No to ourselves, we open that self up to the world around us.

Friends, over the last two weeks, we've seen that again and again, God's people get God mixed up with the powers of our world. We treat God like a cosmic vending machine or a cruel judge. We expect God to work like an employer.

God's people have always had this struggle. So we end up doing things we think make God happy - religious things - and we forget that what God really wants is for us to be a people who is kind, generous, gentle and peace-making. A people who work for the good of everyone, not just the good of our own families.

That's what real religion is all about. And it's the kind of church God calls us all to be part of.

Communion + Examen

We come to the table not to please God but to make ourselves available to be formed into the image of Jesus!

What religious rituals have I engaged in in the last week?

Have I done them to earn God's approval or out of a desire to be present to God?

What has kept me from spiritual practices in the last week?

How can I choose to be present to God in the week ahead?

Assignment + Blessing

Invitation to Lenten Fast (2 weeks to consider!)

Because:

"Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.

Then when you call, the Lord will answer. ‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply. “Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble.

Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring.

Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes. -- Isaiah 58:8–12 (NLT)