

## Isaiah 58:5-9a

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? <sup>6</sup> "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? <sup>7</sup> 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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

Dear Fellow Believers:

One of the things people are buzzing about these days is “fake news.” It seems to me that the real news is hard enough to handle without having to deal with fake news. But as we know, the national media rarely just *report* the news, they often seek to *make* the news by creating controversy. This, of course, affects their bottom line. The more they stir things up, the more money comes their way.

However, even worse than fake news is fake Christianity. The word “fake” is a euphemism for the word “lies.” Fake or counterfeit money is worthless. Fake or counterfeit Christianity is worthless too...just a pack of lies.

Isaiah's words help us evaluate and appreciate: ***“This is the One True Faith”*** (I) ***It rests on a right relationship with God, not rituals,*** and (II) ***It reaches out in love to those in need to glorify the Lord.***

## I

Every few years we have a pictorial directory done at St. Paul's. Every time we do it's amazing to see the changes that take place in our families. But having these family pictures taken raises an interesting question: *If Jesus had a family photograph taken, would I be in it?*

My first reaction is, *“Of course I'd be in it! Why wouldn't I be?”* But listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 12:50, ***“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*** That makes me swallow hard, because I know for sure that I don't always ***“do the will of the Father in heaven.”*** I just admitted to God that I don't always do his will when I confessed my sins a few minutes ago. The truth is, by nature, none of us should be in Jesus' family picture.

Now, some of the Israelites in Isaiah's day figured that out too. They knew they weren't perfect enough to always do God's will. So they figured they would do something to try to remedy that problem and get on God's good side: they fasted -- abstained from eating for a period of time (usually a day). It became a huge ritual and show. They considered giving up a few meals a big sacrifice on their part. They figured that the “suffering” they endured while fasting obligated God to reward them. *“Look at me, Lord! I've been good! I've sacrificed for you!”*

But their fasting didn't stop their quarreling and bickering. It didn't stop their greed and envy and dishonesty or stop them from taking advantage of the weakest members of their society like the poor and disabled or widowed. Their religion was a sham! They had equated ritual with faith. And that can never be.

We can never perform enough rituals -- whether it's fasting or saying our prayers or coming to worship every week -- to get us even one step closer to heaven. Rituals do not make us more acceptable or less acceptable in God's sight. No human effort or act, no matter how good and wonderful it appears, is accepted by God as payment for sins (filthy rags). Only the perfect efforts of Jesus can do that. Everything we do is stained with sin. Nothing that Jesus did was ever stained with sin. Therefore, only one thing saves: Jesus' perfect life and his innocent death to remove our filthy sins from God's record. This and this alone *gives us a right relationship with God that qualifies us for heaven*. That's the only way we can be in Jesus' family picture.

Do you believe that? Yes, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, you do! And in believing in Jesus, your religious rituals now have value -- value not to save you or make you better in God's eyes, but value to show gratitude to God and focus more intently on him and his truth.

(1) For example, we often fold our hands and bow our heads when we pray. Do we have to? Does doing that make my prayers better in God's estimation? No! But we may freely decide to fold our hands if it helps us focus our hearts better on the prayer that we're speaking.

(2) How do we view religious artifacts and furniture? Do we have to have candles, pulpits, and altars? No, we don't worship in our homes. But in Christian freedom, we may choose to use these externals as peripheral tools to help us picture certain truths that the Bible teaches us or to help us focus on the message rather than the messenger. But if we ever *demand* these things as essentials, we have moved from true faith to "fake" faith.

I'm sure all of us know people who view religion as only the performance of certain behaviors (going to church, saying your prayers, getting confirmed and other "rites of passage"). We need to be careful too not to think it's all about going through the motions. But *The One True Faith* is not that at all. It's not about my actions, but about Jesus' actions to save me.

## II

That beautiful truth about Jesus' grace causes our hearts to overflow with thanksgiving. It moves us to want to follow the Lord by "*loosing the chains of injustice*" (when we see people being unfairly treated), and "*to share our food with the hungry and to provide the poor wandered with shelter...*"

While faith alone saves, God also teaches that "*faith without works is dead.*" True faith is never without love. Serving others in love is evidence that our faith in Jesus is alive. James wrote, "*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).

In order to do this, sometimes we need to get out of our **comfort zone** as Christians. Comfortable rituals, properly used, are fine. But sometimes the situation calls for us to stretch a little bit.

Just ask the volunteers who help with *Worship at the Cross* for the developmentally disabled. The way things are done at that service may seem a bit awkward at first -- and for sure we're not all experts concerning what to do and say as we work with special needs visitors. But that's OK! It's an opportunity to bring Jesus' saving love to more precious souls in a setting and method that is more understandable to them.

God promises to bless our sincere, heartfelt efforts to convey the truths of salvation whether they are inside or outside the box, as long as they are done "*decently and in order.*" Blessings will flow: Isaiah says, "*Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear....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.'*" (Or as Jesus said, "*I am with you always....*")

Christian friends, God wrote these words because he wants us to do some evaluating. By grace, I am included in Jesus' family photograph. **How does that truth affect me?** Will I robotically just going through the outward motions of a religion? Or am I filled with the joy of salvation and want to help everyone, including the most vulnerable, to know the saving love of Christ?

The love of Jesus makes every prayer a prayer from the heart. The love of Jesus makes every offering placed on the altar a gift of deep gratitude and love. The love of Jesus makes every day a day dedicated to the Lord and lived abundantly to the glory of God!

Amen.