

Why do we fast? To ask the question that way is to assume that we obey Jesus' implicit command to fast, though I imagine - and hopefully I'm not being too presumptuous - that few of us fast regularly, if at all. I can't say I do. Perhaps I and others like me might be tempted to give ourselves a bit of credit, because at least by not fasting we avoid the pitfalls these two passages present as potential temptations for those who do. You can't practice false piety if you're impious. And yet here we are, hopefully, tentatively, reluctantly entering a season in which we are called to fast. Why do we do this?

We definitely do not live in a world where public piety provides social capital, where we might expect to impress others in just the way Jesus warned us not to. In fact, most of us need no reminder to keep our fasting discrete; if we fast, we're happy for it to remain a secret. In fact, the problem that we run into is quite the opposite: we have learned to think of our faith as largely a private, internal endeavor, a personal project of knowing God. We might then fast because we expect that God will do something in return, that God is obligated to honor our sacrifices. We might approach it with an if/then calculus in which we assume we will receive some spiritual benefit, that God will finally be persuaded to reveal himself. Or perhaps, rather than practicing piety for others, we practice with self-regard in order to convince ourselves that we are the kind of pious people with whom God must be pleased. Even in our age, the pitfalls remain considerable.

Rather than projecting upon you, I can say that, when I have fasted in the past (the now fairly distant past), these were the thoughts in my head. It will not then surprise you to hear that I never seemed to experience the purported blessings of fasting. I suspect I'm not alone in feeling a kind of futility, like it might've been better not to have attempted at all. The usual kind of response to this would be to say that people like me just need to change their mindset, they need to approach fasting from a different perspective. And while it can't be denied that this might help, the striking passage from Isaiah suggests that we require more than just an attitude adjustment.

The chapter begins with God declaring that the very people who seek God and delights to know God's ways - commendable traits, surely - yet also deceive themselves into thinking that they practice righteousness or do the things God requires. And so they cry out, "Why do we fast but you do not see? We humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Despite their pious practice, God seems absent and unresponsive. They've done the things expected of them, but God isn't doing the things they expected. It's futile because their fasting is essentially self-interested, but that kind of fasting will not get your voice heard in heaven.

"Is not this the fast I choose", declares God, "to loose the bonds of injustice", to relieve burdens, to free the oppressed, to share bread with the hungry, to house the homeless, and to clothe the naked. If the people would only do these things, God says, "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am".

If you want to know God, hear from God, and please God, then you must practice righteous compassion toward your neighbor. This is a consistent theme in Scripture, the prophets in particular. Jesus himself put this concisely when he pronounced that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor, whom you have seen, is a prerequisite for loving God, whom you have not.

As we enter this season of repentance, we might consider that our religion, even the decidedly minority practice of fasting, is more self-serving than we realize, that we desire to cultivate our piety toward some kind of personal spiritual blessing much more than we desire to identify with Christ in his sufferings so that we might become the sort of people who, like him, sacrifice for others. We might consider that, if we feel a bit like our pursuit of God doesn't get us any closer, if we have a nagging suspicion that faith is futile, then we might consider the faith we practice is, at bottom, self-centered, even a kind of self-help.

I've noticed, in myself no less than others, a trend toward selecting Lenten practices which fall into the category of health and wellness, where we use Lent primarily as an additional motivation to diet, or to moderate certain behaviors, or abstain from certain things, which we probably ought to be doing anyway, which just about any person, including the non-religious, would agree is to our benefit. And, by all means, let's do some of that.

But I think - and here I admit that my words are out in front of my my actions - for fasting to really be "effective" it probably needs to be difficult, arduous, even painful. We might actually need to suffer a little.

The real benefit to fasting, as far as I can tell, is that, in denying ourselves that which we desire, we die to ourselves, not only realizing our contingent existence and thus our absolute need, but also practicing the very truth that is at the center of our faith but which we find so difficult to believe: that when we humble ourselves, we will be lifted up, that death leads to resurrection. So it is my hope that, as we engage in our meager attempts at fasting, that we really will experience this as true. And in suffering ourselves, even if only a little, we come to know the God who, in Christ, suffers with us.

And if we can learn that lesson, then we might also find ourselves more prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to practice righteousness toward our neighbors in need. Then we just might find that the God who seemed so distant now seems a bit nearer. And then we might find ourselves, not fasting reluctantly, but joyfully, expectantly because we know that it's by dying that we truly live.