

Study 4: The Call to God's People: Act Justly

Students at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga know the InterVarsity/Urban Initiative¹ as a student organization that truly cares about the community. Their chapter started a mentoring program at one of the lowest performing middle schools in the area, weaving discussions about common challenges the kids face into activities like arts and sports. The kids have been inspired through the examples of the college-aged men and women in their lives. The student leaders have expanded their understanding of vocation and see their careers as a way to invest back into their communities. This is what it could look like to seek shalom, to work with God for justice on a personal, communal, and systemic level. What a beautiful picture of God's people embodying God's heart! But God's people haven't always done that.

Today's passage is an indictment against God's people for limiting their understanding of religious practices and disconnecting those practices from how they live and love those around them. As you discuss today, consider how this text shapes our understanding of the connection between practicing faith and pursuing justice.

Discuss

- In our culture today, how have faith and justice been pitted against each other? When are you tempted to do the same?

¹ [InterVarsity / Urban Initiative](#) - Staff Jamal Morris - UT Chattanooga

i Centuries have passed since the exodus, and the Israelites are now established as two nations in the promised land after a civil war. God sends prophets that call Israel to repentance for breaking their covenant with God. The conditional language that Isaiah uses in this chapter echoes the blessings and curses that come from obeying or disobeying the law (Lev 26, Deut 28). The Sabbath is a day of rest, where Israelites stop work to remember and celebrate God. The rest is intended for everyone in the community: their families, their servants, the animals, and the foreigners (Deut 5).

Isaiah 58

¹“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. ²For 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. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³‘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. ⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble

themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is 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? ⁸Then 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. ⁹Then 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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with

Dwellings.¹³ “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,¹⁴ then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken

Discuss

- What is the difference between the peoples’ and God’s understanding of fasting?
- How do you see God’s shalom breaking through in this passage and how does it happen?
 - *Shalom is the biblical word that captures that sense of what we long for in our broken world—when things are as they should be. It connotes a sense of wholeness, completion, and peace in a material, physical, relational, and moral sense. To seek shalom is to work for justice and righteousness on a personal, communal, and systemic level.*
- What would it look like for shalom to break through in our world today? What would change for you personally, your community, or the campus?
- Additional questions (optional)
 - What contrasts do you see in the passage? (O)
 - What conditional statements do you notice? Who benefits from them? (O)

- In verses 3-4, the people essentially ask if their fasting and prayer counts for anything before God. What does this reveal about their understanding of the purpose of religious practices? (I)
- What does God desire of his people? What will happen as a result? (I)
- What inspires you in this text and why? (A)
- What challenges you in this text and why? (A)

Summary + Reflection

God sends prophet after prophet, indicting the people of God for oppressing the innocent, mistreating the poor, cheating, and having bias in the courts, and ignoring the plight of the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, (the marginalized in society). The people of God are missing the point, committed to religious rituals but simultaneously living in a way that contradicts God's character. The separation of faith from justice stirs God's anger. We today have done the same. The passage paints a picture of what could be when the two come together. It is more than just the sum of two parts. Faith is deeply spiritual *and* embodied. Pursuing justice *is* a spiritual practice that leads to deeper relationship with God; it leads to freedom and life and joy and strength to continue to follow God. Shalom breaks through and God's people shine like a light in the darkness.

- Take a minute to pause and listen; how might God be speaking to you?

Apply

Spiritual Practice: Fasting

Fasting is letting go of an appetite in order to make space for God. It's an opportunity to consider what might be taking up too much space in our lives, to get rid of it for a period of time, and intentionally fill that space with God instead. As the passage described, our fasting is other-focused rather than self-focused. Commit to fasting from something and actively seeking shalom in a related way for one week.

| Fasting | Seeking Shalom By |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Food: 1 meal / day | Buying 1 meal / day for someone else |
| Money: Unnecessary spending | Only purchasing local, organic, green, fair trade and slave free products |
| Social media | Help 10 friends register to vote. Pray for 1 friend every day, then write them a letter. |
| Video games | Enjoy nature and identify 1 way you can care for the environment. Replace plastic bags with reusable bags, clean up a local park or beach, ride your bike or walk instead of driving your car. |

Reflect + Share

Journal your responses to these questions, then share them with your group.

- This week I will fast from:
- I will intentionally seek shalom by:
- How is God speaking to you?

Closing Prayer & Announcements