

**Call to Action**

February 8, 2026

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> Shout loudly; don't hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their crime, to the house of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup> They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn't abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgments, wanting to be close to God. <sup>3</sup> "Why do we fast and you don't see; why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?" Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup> You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn't fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one's head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

<sup>6</sup> Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? <sup>8</sup> Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; <sup>10</sup> if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. <sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. He will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won't run dry...

*<sup>12</sup> They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account; the foundations of generations past you will restore. You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.*

### Matthew 5:13-20

*<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. <sup>14</sup> You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.*

*<sup>17</sup> “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*



Last week, through Micah, we heard God’s call to live with justice, mercy, and humility. The question was whether or not our worship, both in church and in the world, was aligned with God’s desires and with God’s heart for all of creation. This week Isaiah calls us to action.

Jesus echoes the call to action in Matthew 5. His call to action begins with the charge to be salt and light in the world. The second half our gospel lesson aligns well with Isaiah's call to action as Jesus calls for righteous obedience to the word of God. Both Isaiah and Jesus focus on the living out of our faith in the world as the thing that really matter to God. As we prepare to work through these texts and themes together, let us begin with a word of prayer...

*God, speak your word to us, a lamp unto our feet, so we may know your ways. Shine your light upon us, so we can see your path. Shine your light within us so we can know your presence. Shine your light out through us, so we can help you bring your love into this world. It is with this hope that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.*

Please turn with me to Isaiah 58 as we begin this time together. You'll note right away that Isaiah is right where Micah was last week. Micah 6 begins with God bringing God's case against the people of God. Today, in Isaiah 58, God instructs the prophet to "*Shout loudly; don't hold back... Announce to my people their crime.*" As we read on, in verse 2, we see that the problem is the same as it was in Micah 6. The people *seem* like they are seeking God. They want to *appear* to be acting righteously. They are going through the motions. They are kind of wanting to be sort of faithful to God. A little bit.

Can you relate? Ever come to church on a Sunday when you didn't really want to come? Ever been so upset about being in church that you just fumed inside the whole time, making no space whatsoever for God's presence or Spirit? Ever been here on a normal Sunday and found yourself thinking about everything but God and your faith? Me too. Yes, me too.

The people of God think that they are doing okay. This is evident in their question to God in verse 3: “*Why do we fast and you don’t see; why afflict ourselves and you don’t notice?*” The people of God are going through the motions. But they think this is enough. God responds in the next verse. Yes, they are fasting – sort of. The people are ‘sort of’ fasting because they are beginning their day of fasting by oppressing their workers and by fighting and quarrelling with each other. Simply put, going through the motions, the fast has absolutely no impact on how they are living their lives or on how they are treating one another.

This idea of fasting is not something the church today is very familiar with. Likely none of us fast on a regular basis. At points in the history of the church, fasting was a very regular part of people’s lives of faith. The practice of self-denial is a practice that can draw us closer to God. In Lent, we see this in some people’s practice of giving up something for Lent – chocolate, Facebook, alcohol, and so on. The moments when one “misses” the thing they’ve given up can be opportunities to turn to God for strength, resolve, assurance. A fast can work the same way. When hunger rises up, one can turn to God in prayer, in the scriptures, and so on. Our need for God works to keep us humble and it can remind us of the needs of others. If you would like to know more about fasting, that is the topic of chapter 2 in our Lenten study book *Stretched*.

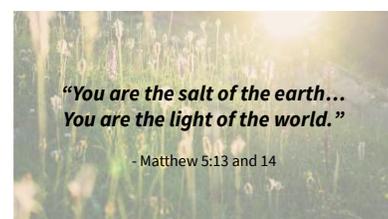
The first part of a fast that Isaiah calls his audience and us to is that of confession. Nearing the season of Lent, this call to confess prepares us for the season that begins with Ash Wednesday on February 18<sup>th</sup>. Our confession, whether personal or corporate, involves the naming of our sin. We must name it in order to know what to turn away from as we work step two: repentance. The acts of confession and repentance, in turn, will guide us to living more justly, more mercifully, and more humbly.

In our Old Testament passage, God names the people's sins. They have been violent and oppressive with those among them and with one another. If their hearts were truly aligned with God's heart, I do not believe the Israelites would have had any trouble at all naming what was separating them from God and from one another. The same is true for us. When our heart is aligned with God's heart, the Holy Spirit is swift to bring the conviction of heart that leads us to a place of confession and, hopefully, to repentance.

Because the people's fasting is focused on self rather than on God, there is a problem. They cry out to God, frustrated that God does not see how humble they are. We afflict ourselves, God, and you don't seem to be noticing. Because of this, their "Sunday behavior" does not impact even the fast itself, never mind spilling over into Monday or into any other day of the week. They fast while scheming how to exploit their workers even more. They fast while planning their revenge on that person who somehow wronged them earlier in the week.

Jesus was addressing the same half-hearted effort that his followers can slip into as well. Please turn with me to Matthew 5 as we hear Jesus' words for us yet today. In verses 13 and 14, Jesus makes two declarations: "*You are the salt of the earth...*

*You are the light of the world.*" But if we read the words that go with these declarations, Jesus is really saying, "You are *called* to be the salt of the earth... You are *called* to be the light of the world."



Jesus knows that we can lose our saltiness. He knows that we will not always let our light shine out into the world. Jesus knows that when we stop flavoring the world around us, when we stop working to preserve our faith, then we will be "*thrown away and trampled under foot.*" Jesus knows that a light is meant to shine, to be held up. He also knows that at times we conceal our faith, we decide to "*put it under a basket.*"

The fire that can be lit in our hearts and souls on a Sunday morning can get snuffed out by our fears and worries over what others might think. The response to the call to be salt and light, to be love in action – our resolve can quickly flicker away when the voice of the world grows loud. Jesus offers this encouragement to his followers then and now: *“Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.”* Jesus encourages us to share our faith, to shine our light so that others will see God at work in our lives and will, in turn, offer their praises to God. Note the focus here is on others seeing God at work in and through us. It is not about us. It is about God at work in us.



It can be tempting to want others to notice our faith in action, though, can't it? That was the trap that the people of Isaiah's day had fallen into. While we are unlikely to sit here and wave at God, hoping God notices how faithful we are, we can slip into wondering what's in it for us or into thinking that maybe we need to try something else to get God to respond to our prayers and needs in a different way. We want others to notice too. We want to feel like we are making a positive difference in the world. And because of the culture in which we live, we can start to wonder if it is all worth it. The grass can seem greener over there in those self-focused fields.

Returning to Isaiah 58, God offers the antidote to those empty feelings. Perhaps counter-intuitive at first glance, but I believe the prophet is really spot on here. Isaiah's antidote to those empty feelings? Get over yourself. It is that simple. Get over yourself. That is what God is inviting us to when God asks us, *“Is this the kind of fast I choose?”* Today God might ask us, is this the kind of worship that I would choose, one that focuses on meeting your needs and filling your wants list? That woe-is-me attitude? No, it is not pleasing to the Lord.

Jumping back to Matthew 5, Jesus also reminds us that humility matters. For Jesus, in this passage, humility is grounded in obedience to God. This is one way that we place God on the throne of our heart instead of self. In verse 17 Jesus reminds his audience then and now that he did not come to “*do away*” with the Law but to “*fulfill them.*” As he continues, Jesus reminds us that those who are obedient to the Law, to the will and way of God, those will be considered the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

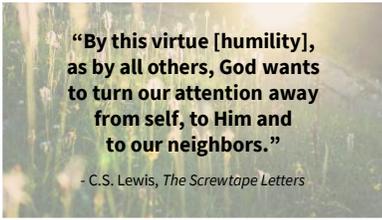
Bringing the conversation back to the kingdom of God here on earth, Jesus focuses in on the importance of righteousness. Mirroring those in Isaiah’s day who wanted to really look like they were fasting hard, Jesus points to “*the legal experts and the Pharisees*” – those who worked really hard to appear righteous in Jesus’ day. These religious leaders were anything but humble. They are the ones that Jesus was referring to earlier, in verse 19, where Jesus says, “*whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same*” will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. Centered on self and what others thought of them, many of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were arrogant and prideful.

As we turn back to Isaiah’s words, we find guidance that helps us to shift from focusing on self to focusing on the other. In verses 6 and 7, God describes the outcomes of a fast that would be pleasing to God. A fast that properly transforms our heart and aligns us with God’s heart will lead us to help release people from bondage and restraints and will guide us to set the mistreated free. It will cause us to share our bread with the hungry and our homes with the unhoused. Such a fast will guide our hearts to cover the naked and to engage with our families. This is the Biblical understanding of humility: a focus on others, centered on a love for God and for others, particularly those that society has marginalized and abused the most.

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis captures the essence of humility. In this book he writes, “By this virtue [humility], as by all others, God wants to turn our attention away from self, to Him and to our neighbors.”

For Lewis, humility is not a matter of thinking less *of* ourselves — but less *about* ourselves, forgetting ourselves and turning outward

in love. In forgetting self and our wants and desires, we are freed to turn outward in love, focusing on our relationships with God and with one another.



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- C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*



This, my friends, is our call to action. Faith is not just a set of beliefs; it is a way of life, a pattern of behavior. Faith is about worship in all parts of our lives. It is not just the one-hour-a-week time, but worship of God with our whole lives, our whole being, every day and every moment. The call to action is to live our faith out in real-world, practical ways. These are the actions Isaiah calls us to. These are the actions that Jesus envisions being lived out in the kingdom here on earth. These actions lead us to live in ways that build up the body of Christ and that reconciles the world to God and to one another. May we love humbly and faithfully this week, bringing all the glory to God. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. Which call to action in Isaiah 58:6-7 is hardest for you? How would courageously living out this call-to-action lead to growth in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you sometimes focus on self instead of on others or on God? I think we all do at times. Pray for the Spirit to turn your attention away from self this week.
- 3) *Study*. Skim through the headings in Matthew 5:21-48. Read the section whose subtitle raises up some conviction in your heart. What, then, is your response?