

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah 58:1-9a (EHV)

The Lord says: ¹ Cry out with a full-throated shout.

Do not hold back.

Shout like the blast of a ram's horn.

Declare to my people their rebellious deeds.

Declare to the house of Jacob their sins.

² They seek me day by day,
and they are delighted to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right,
as if they had not forsaken the just ways of their God.

They ask me for just verdicts.

They are delighted to approach God:

³ "Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why do we afflict ourselves, but you are not aware?"

This is what you do!

On the same day when you fast, you do whatever you please,
and you oppress all your workers.

⁴ You fast so you can fight and quarrel,
so you can strike with a wicked fist.
You should not fast the way you are doing it today
if you expect God on high to hear your voice.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast that I would choose:
a day when a person afflicts himself
and bows his head like a reed
and makes his bed on sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call this a fast, a day to gain the Lord's favor?

⁶ On the contrary, isn't this the kind of fast that I would choose:
to loosen the chains of wickedness,
to tear apart the ropes of a yoke,
to release the oppressed so they go free,
and to tear every yoke to pieces?

⁷ Isn't a true fast that you share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless and afflicted into a house?

Yes, when you see a naked person, you are to cover him,
and do not hide yourself from your own flesh and blood.

⁸ Then your light will break forth like dawn,
and your healing will spring up quickly.
Your righteousness will go out ahead of you,
and the Glory of the Lord will follow you.

⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer.
You will cry out, and he will say, "Here I am!"

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so that we may reflect in our own lives the same love you show us through your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, here's a scary thought: What if everyone can tell what your relationship with God is like by watching how you treat everyone around you?

And by the way, I'm not talking about how you treat people here in worship for the next hour or so as we sing our praises and pray our prayers. Everyone can all be nice for a while, but sooner or later this type of façade can wear off. Therefore, I'm talking about how you treat people during the week when you're tired, or impatient, or irritable, or when things go wrong, or when you reckon you know better than everyone

else.

In this case, what are you revealing about your relationship with God when you spread rumours about someone, or when you avoid someone you've seen in the next shopping aisle, or when you put people down with your sarcasm, insults or jokes, or when you treat people badly out of spite or revenge, or when you swear at the person driving in front of you, or when you fail to help someone who's in need?

Now, some of you may wonder how you treat others relates to your faith in God, after all, you may think most of these bad behaviours have anything to do with God, but this is what God seems to do in his words through the prophet Isaiah today.

But, before we look more closely at what he says, it's important to note who God's talking to.

He's not making this announcement to non-believers.

He's talking to his own people, the people of God, the people whom he loves, forgives, blesses, and saves. While we're not the original audience, we should take note of how our faith in him relates to how we treat each other.

So, what's this important announcement God makes to his beloved and precious people? Well, he says his people are all guilty of rebelling and sinning!

Now, you already know this, so this isn't a surprise! You know you all fall short of God's expectations!

You also know God is gracious and merciful. He's slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is why you keep coming back to worship: to seek his love and mercy, and to be forgiven for your sin again and again.

God acknowledges this, saying he knows you seek him daily. He knows you're intent on knowing his ways and activities. He knows you're trying to live as his holy people. He sees how you perform all the right religious motions and say all the right things at church, but he can also see all those other times during the week when you don't live as his light and salt in the world.

He also sees when you're frustrated with him.

After all, you give up your Sunday mornings for God, you sit in uncomfortable pews for God, you repeat ancient creeds, hymns, and prayers to God, you serve on committees for God, and you patiently listen to God's word read and explained. You may think you do so much for God, but this doesn't always seem to impress him.

It's possible some of you may be tempted to say or think something like this:

"Hey God, I've done all the right things. I go to worship regularly. I read my devotions. I say my prayers before bed. I work (or have worked) on many church committees, but I'm not receiving the blessings I reckon are due to me! I've been good to you, so why aren't you being good to me?"

Unfortunately, God doesn't take too kindly to this kind of manipulation or bargaining! Performing all the right religious duties or having long-winded pretty prayers won't make your voice heard any louder in heaven than anyone else, especially when you do all the right things on Sunday while the rest of the week you're fighting, and abusing, and ignoring, and judging, and taking advantage of others.

God also talks about fasting with his people and what type of fasting he expects.

Now, I don't know whether anyone here fasts or not. It could be that some of you fast from certain foods during Lent or other times. Some of you may 'fast' by giving up time or money for God and his people.

But today God tells us what type of fasting he wants his people to do:

- Fasting isn't about abstaining from eating certain foods, but about abstaining from wickedness.
- Fasting is forgiving your enemies, no matter how much they hurt you.
- Fasting is loosening the yoke of the oppressed, including unburdening people from unfair demands and expectations.
- Fasting isn't about making people work harder, but about taking burdens off them.
- Fasting is sharing your food with the hungry.
- Fasting is bringing the homeless into your own homes.
- Fasting is covering those who are naked.
- Fasting is removing any of your accusing fingers and not causing fights and arguments.
- Fasting is about avoiding foul language, lying, careless talk, and verbal abuse.
- Fasting is listening to people's desires and satisfying them.

Interestingly, most of these things God lists as types of fasts have very little to do with worship on Sundays but on how you live during the week. This means, not only can people tell what your relationship with God is like by watching how you treat those around you at your weakest moments, but so can God.

However, there is good news!

You see, God still loves you, which is why he's calling you to live as his holy people in all aspects of your lives.

Some might say God loves you just the way you are, but he also loves you so much he doesn't want you to stay the way you are. He wants *you* to reflect *his* light and love, not just to the people you see on Sunday, but to everyone you meet during the week.

God, out of his gracious and merciful loving-kindness, has forgiven you for all your failures to love and serve. He's forgiven you for your harsh or abusive words, your unjust ways, and your unfair expectations of each other. He's adopted you in the waters of baptism, cleansed you of sin, and made you holy through the gift of his Holy Spirit so you can be a beacon of light and hope in this dark, sinful, chaotic, and hurting world.

Therefore,
as a result of having faith in Jesus who died and rose for you,
as a result of receiving God's undeserving forgiveness,
as a result of being joined to the holy body of Jesus through baptism,
as a result of having Jesus' blood course through your veins through your participation at the Lord's Supper,
you'll naturally live in peace and love with all those around you, no matter what day of the week it is, who's in front of you, and where you are at the time.

You'll let God have his way with you instead of you having your way with others. You'll love as you've been loved by God and forgive as you've been forgiven by God. Undeservedly, mercifully, and graciously.

In this way, Jesus' love, mercy, peace, forgiveness, grace, and faithfulness will shine through you. As bearers of God's grace, you won't hide it, cover it up, or make excuses as to why you don't share it.

This means, as you receive and put on the nature of Christ himself who loves and forgives and serves you, people will see Christ's nature live in you when you don't add to other people's burdens like everyone else. Instead, you'll remove them. Yes, it's possible you'll get hurt for your efforts, but like Christ, you'll continue to serve and help, for their sake.

People will see how the Lord has strengthened your backs for service and heals you quickly so you can get up to serve again. They'll see you're people who willingly stand in the breach for the sake of others and work to repair the overworked, provide for the homeless, support the frail, accompany the lonely, and pray for the sick. They'll see you're people they want to call on in times of trouble.

After all, Jesus lived this way by helping, restoring, healing, listening, caring, and proclaiming peace. Because you're joined to the body of Jesus, this is the way you also live – not by your own power, but with God's help through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Your worship then has nothing to do with what you give to God or about how you can learn to pretend to be a better person, but it's about what you receive from him.

Worship is a time and place where you're forgiven, cleansed, re-equipped and renewed so you can love and serve and forgive and bless those around you.

As disciples of Jesus, you come here to receive his holy gifts so that you become bearers of Christ and his holy gifts to the world around you. Worship then isn't just for you and your own pleasure, but for the sake of the world.

So, here in our worship, you're forgiven for your failures and selfishness. You're reminded of the selfless and sacrificial acts of God for the forgiveness of your sins through his Son Jesus. You're reminded to be holy people of God as God has made you holy. You receive the nature of Christ so that you'll willingly and joyfully serve others and loosen their burdens of guilt and shame through your sharing of Christ's forgiveness. You're equipped to reflect the light and salt of God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and peace to the world. And God knows this world needs to see and experience God's light of mercy and peace and hope these days!

Children of God, people can tell what your relationship with God is like by watching how you treat those around you.

How can they tell God loves you and has forgiven you? How will they see God has given his Son to die for you and put you right with God? How will they experience the fact God has given you his Holy Spirit so you may live in a right relationship with everyone around you and be beacons of his light in this dark world? How will people see you're right with God through your living?

Therefore, as you learn to love and forgive as you've been loved and forgiven by God, may...

*...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*

Pastor Stuart Kleinig
South Burnett Lutheran Parish
5th Sunday after Epiphany
8th February 2026