

Isaiah 58:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not?
wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no
knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure,
and exact all your labours.

Analysis

The people's complaint reveals their transactional view of religion: "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not?" They expect God to respond to their religious performances like a vending machine—insert fasting, receive blessing. "We have afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?" assumes merit-based relationship with God. God's answer exposes their self-centered worship: "Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours." Their fasting is selective—they abstain from food while pursuing business interests and exploiting workers. The Hebrew *shephets* (pleasure/business) suggests they use fast days to advance personal agendas. "Exact all your labours" means demanding full work from employees despite the religious occasion. This reveals that their fasting serves self-interest, not God's glory or neighbor's good. From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates that works performed from wrong motives, even religious works, are sin. True religion transforms the whole life—worship and work, vertical and horizontal relationships. Fasting without justice is abomination to God.

Historical Context

The post-exilic community had instituted regular fasts (Zechariah 7:3-5, 8:19) commemorating Jerusalem's destruction. However, these observances became

mere ritual divorced from ethical living. The prophets consistently condemned this disconnect between worship and ethics (Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8). Jesus would later criticize similar hypocrisy in the Pharisees who fasted ostentatiously while neglecting justice and mercy (Matthew 6:16-18, 23:23).

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How do we sometimes approach spiritual disciplines with a transactional mindset?
2. What does it mean to pursue personal pleasure or advancement even while engaging in religious observances?
3. How should our worship transform our treatment of employees, neighbors, and the vulnerable?

Interlinear Text

לָמָּה	צָמְנוּ	וְלֹא	כִּי יֵדוּ			
H4100	Wherefore have we fasted	H3808	say they and thou seest			
	H6684		H7200			
עַנֵּינוּ		וְלֹא אֵלֵינוּ	יָדְעָה			
not wherefore have we afflicted		our soul	and thou takest no knowledge			
H6031		H5315	H3808			
			H3045			
הִנֵּה	בַּיּוֹם	צִמְמֶיךָ	תִּמְצְאוּ	חַפְּצֶיךָ	וְכָל	עֲצֻבֶיךָ
H2005	Behold in the day	of your fast	ye find	pleasure	H3605	all your labours
	H3117	H6685	H4672	H2656		H6092
תְּנַגְּשׁוּ:						
and exact						
H5065						

Additional Cross-References

Malachi 3:14 (Parallel theme): Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?

Leviticus 16:29 (Parallel theme): And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you:

Psalms 69:10 (Parallel theme): When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach.

Proverbs 28:9 (Parallel theme): He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.

Nehemiah 5:7 (Parallel theme): Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.

