

Isaiah 58:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

Analysis

God exposes the contradiction in their religious practice: "Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness." Their fasts don't produce humility and reconciliation but strife, contention, and violence. The "fist of wickedness" (egrof resha) suggests aggressive conflict—perhaps legal disputes, business rivalries, or social divisions. Religion becomes a weapon to advance factional interests rather than a means of reconciliation. "Ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high." Their fasting produces noise, not acceptable prayer—clamor instead of genuine worship. The implication is clear: God will not hear prayers accompanied by injustice and oppression, no matter how religiously correct the forms. This aligns with the Reformed emphasis on the inseparability of faith and works. Saving faith necessarily produces fruit (James 2:14-26). Religious observance divorced from ethical living demonstrates false profession, not genuine faith. Our prayers reach heaven not through multiplied religious rituals but through the mediation of Christ and hearts transformed by His grace.

Historical Context

The prophetic era was characterized by religious controversy and factionalism—between true and false prophets, between those advocating foreign alliances and those trusting Yahweh alone, between those exploiting the poor and those defending them. The post-exilic community struggled with similar divisions (Ezra

9-10, Nehemiah 5:1-13, 13:23-27, Malachi 2:10-16). These conflicts often played out in religious settings, with competing groups each claiming divine sanction.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How can religious activity actually increase rather than decrease strife in communities?
2. What does it reveal about our hearts when spiritual disciplines produce contention rather than reconciliation?
3. How does Christ's mediation change the basis on which our prayers are heard?

Interlinear Text

יְהִי	לְךָ	יְבִי	וּמַצָּה	תֵּצַ וּמוֹ	וְלַחֵכּ וְתֵ	בְּאֶגְרִי
H2005	for strife	and debate	Behold ye fast	and to smite	with the fist	
	H7379	H4683	H6684	H5221	H106	

רָשָׁע	לֹא	תֵּצַ וּמוֹ	כִּי הַיּוֹם	לְהִשָּׁמַע יְעֹ	בְּמָר וְהִ
of wickedness	H3808	Behold ye fast	as ye do this day	to be heard	on high
H7562		H6684	H3117	H8085	H4791

קוֹלְכֶם:

to make your voice

H6963

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 21:27 (Evil): The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?

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