*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.

2They 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.

4You 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.

5Is 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?

6On 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?

7Isn’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.

8Then 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.

9Then 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 the love you show to us through your Son Jesus Christ may be reflected in our living. Amen.*

What if I were to tell you that I can tell what your relationship with God is like by watching how you treat those around you?

And by the way, I’m not talking about how you treat people here in worship for the next hour or so. It’s easy to behave well and impress people for an hour or two, but it’s so much harder if you have to live this way every day and every hour. Therefore, I’m talking about how you treat people during the week when you’re tired or frustrated or irritable or annoyed or when you reckon you know better than anyone else.

* For example, when you put people down with your sarcasm, insults or jokes, you may not be right with God.
* When you’re pushy and bossy with people, thinking you deserve certain privileges, you may not be right with God.
* When you argue or fight with others, you may not be right with God.
* When you treat people badly out of spite or revenge, you may not be right with God.
* When you take advantage of, or exploit others, or think you’re better than everyone else, you may not be right with God.
* When you put on an act in order to gain attention for yourself, you may not be right with God.
* And even when you do and say all the right things with the expectation God will be good to you and give you what you want because you think you’re doing the right thing, then you may not be right with God.

Now you might protest, wondering how I can possibly say you may not be right with God. You might want to say Jesus died for you, and therefore, through his sacrifice, you’re now right with God. And I’d agree! You’re saved freely for Christ’s sake through faith. You don’t make yourself right with God through your actions or words, but you’re made right with God through trusting Jesus.

However, as a result of this saving faith, 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 would naturally live in peace and love with those around you at all times. If you don’t, then God, and those around you, could easily argue you may not be right with God because they don’t see *his* love reflected in *your* living.

Now, you might think this is harsh, but let’s have a look to see what God himself says to you today through this Word of Scripture.

Before we begin, it’s firstly important to note who God’s talking to. He’s about to make a very big announcement and is calling people to listen. In this case he’s not making this announcement to non-believers. He’s talking to his own people, the people of God, the people he loves, forgives, blesses, and saves.

So, what’s this important announcement God makes to his beloved people like you and me? He says you’re all guilty of rebelling and sinning!

But you might argue you know you’re a sinner, yet 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, to be forgiven again and again. You come to hear his gracious Words of love and peace, and how you may do his will.

God acknowledges this, saying he knows you seek him daily. He knows you’re intent on knowing his ways and activities. He sees how you perform all the right religious motions and say all the right things at church, but he can also see those times when you expect him to be good to you or bless you because you think you’ve done all the right things!

Then, when he doesn’t answer you or bless you the way you wanted, you argue with God saying something like, ‘Hey God, I’ve done all the right things, I go to worship regularly, 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?’

But, whoever said God works this way? God never works with what’s deserving, because if he did, you really wouldn’t like to get what you truly deserve! ‘Deserving’ talks more about judgment, not about mercy. You want mercy from God, not judgment.

God doesn’t take too kindly to your manipulation or bargaining or selfish demands! He will be merciful and bless whomever he wants to because it’s his gift and not an entitlement you can demand. Performing all the right religious duties or having long-winded pretty prayers won’t make your voice heard any louder in heaven, 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 the way you fast. Now, I don’t know whether you fast or not. It could be that some of you fast from food as a way to prepare yourselves to receive God’s holy gifts or a sign of your repentance, but other times you might ‘fast’ by giving up your time, effort, or money for God and his people, perhaps even telling others so they’ll be impressed with your shows of faithfulness.

Well, today God says he doesn’t want you to fast this way. He tells you the type of fasting he wants:

Fasting isn’t abstaining from foods, but abstaining from wickedness.

Fasting is forgiving enemies even though they hurt you.

Fasting is loosening the yoke of the oppressed, unburdening people instead of burdening them with your demands and expectations.

Fasting is definitely not making people work harder, but taking burdens off them.

Fasting is sharing your food with the hungry.

Fasting is bringing the homeless into your home.

Fasting is covering the naked.

Fasting is removing your accusing fingers and not causing fights and arguments.

Fasting is when you stop speaking foul language, stop lying, stop careless talk, and stop 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 how you live during the week. Remember, people can tell what your relationship with God is like by watching how you treat those around you at your weakest moments.

Well, this hasn’t been a lot of good news so far, has it? You don’t like giving up your Sunday morning in order to come to worship and be told you’re a sinner (unless of course you reckon I’m not talking about you because this really applies to the person next to you instead).

You don’t like hearing how selfish you can be and how you often fail to live as God’s holy child during the week. You don’t like hearing you’ve got it all wrong and God doesn’t love you or bless you because of what you do. Some of you might ‘bust your gut’ to help people and don’t like to hear there’s a selfish side to your service.

Yet, there is good news. You see, God still loves you. Some say God loves you just the way you are, and he does. But he loves you even more than that. He loves you so much he doesn’t want you to stay the way you are.

Jesus has come as the Light of the world. He’s shone his love on you through his undeserving forgiveness and free gift of salvation. He’s adopted you, cleansed you and made you holy through the gift of his Holy Spirit so you too can be a beacon of light and hope in this dark, sinful, chaotic and hurting world.

But now, as a result of receiving God’s undeserving forgiveness, as a result of being joined to the holy body of Jesus through baptism (which also happened to Zachary this morning), 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 those around you. You do this when you let God have his way with you instead of you having your way with others. You love as you’ve been loved by God and you forgive as you’ve been forgiven by God. Undeservedly, mercifully, and graciously.

In this way, Jesus’ love, mercy, peace, forgiveness, grace, and faithfulness is to shine through you – not just on Sundays, but all through the week. You are bearers of God’s grace. Don’t hide it, cover it up, or make excuses as to why you won’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, but instead remove them. They’ll see you get hurt for your efforts, but like Christ, you continue to serve and help. They’ll 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 are 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 are people they want to call on in their 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.

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 can 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 worship is for the sake of the world.

Here you’re forgiven for your failures and selfishness. Here you’re reminded of the selfless and sacrificial acts of God for the forgiveness of your sins through his Son Jesus. Here you’re reminded to be holy people of God as God has made you holy. Here you receive the nature of Christ so that you will willingly and joyfully serve others and loosen their burdens of guilt and shame through Christ’s forgiveness. Here 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 that God loves you and has forgiven you? How will they see that 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 those around you and be beacons of light in this dark world?

As you learn to love and forgive as you’ve been loved and forgiven by God, may…

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

Pastor Stuart Kleinig

Bethlehem, Wagga Wagga

5th Sunday after Epiphany

9th February 2020