

Isaiah 58:3-8, 11 (NRSV)

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ¹¹The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

John Wesley had this to say about fasting: “We may indeed afflict the body too much, making it unfit for the works of our calling. So we must also diligently guard against doing physical harm to ourselves. We must preserve our health as a good gift from God. Therefore, when we fast we should exercise care to adjust the fast to the needs of the body. We must not offer God murder for sacrifice or destroy our bodies in efforts to benefit our souls.”¹

Lynne M. Baab, in a recent book on fasting, adds this thought: “As we explore the discipline of fasting, we have to remain clear that we don’t engage in spiritual practices or disciplines to punish ourselves. . . . Jesus redeemed us; any punishment we deserve belongs in the past.”²

In groups of three, discuss the following questions:

1. What have you heard or thought about fasting in the past?
2. Do these readings confirm or challenge your understanding of fasting?
3. If we take seriously the guidance of this passage of Scripture, as well as the advice from John Wesley and Lynne Baab, our companions on the journey, how might we fast today?

Prayer Suggestion: If your group has found its understanding of fasting challenged, lift that up to the LORD, asking God’s guidance toward a fuller understanding of the purpose of fasting.

¹ Kenneth Cain Kinghorn, *John Wesley on the Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 192.

² Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 15-16.