

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. You may be seated. We have quite the variety of interesting readings today. The Old Testament from Isaiah, he's talking about fasting and the misunderstanding of that whole thing. Paul is talking about the power of the Holy Spirit and also focusing upon Christ and him crucified. And then Jesus is talking about being salt and light and a light upon a hill and your holiness must surpass that of the scribes of the Pharisees. Now, what in the world do these things have in common? And to me, the things that they have in common is the power of the Holy Spirit is working throughout it all. So I'm going to try and weave that in through everything that we talk about today.

First off, let's get to Isaiah and his fasting. You have at the very beginning, Isaiah quoting the people, in essence, how they are fasting and how they're speaking to God. "Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?" In essence, what they were doing and what they seem to be saying was, "Look Lord, we fasted now you owe us what we want. We did the right things. We mortified ourselves. We cleared our flesh. We resisted the desires of our flesh. Now, we've humbled ourselves by fasting before you now give us what we want." Not exactly understanding clearly what fasting is all about.

Now, I know we in the Lutheran church don't really talk about fasting a whole lot, largely because fasting ends up being very legalistic very quickly. And so you have to understand it from the right perspective to be able to get it right. But Luther himself, when he's talking about the Lord's supper, he says that fasting and bodily preparation are indeed good things and useful. But that person is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these words, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. You see, if fasting isn't empowered by the Holy Spirit, for the purposes that God intends, fasting does us absolutely no good. The problem with the Old Testament people is they were not listening to what the Holy Spirit was guiding them to do. They were seeking to manipulate God to get what they wanted. And at this point, what they wanted was freedom from the oppressors of the foreign governments that were all around them and giving them problems. They wanted to go back to the glory days with King David and King Solomon. And so they were trying to force God to act. See, see, we're doing all the right stuff.

Now, we may not be so crass or maybe we are. I don't know. Sometimes. But how often do we think that God should answer our prayers the way we want our prayers answered? How often do we say when something bad happens to us, "Why me?" Instead of saying, "God, what are you calling me to learn? What are you teaching me? How is the Holy Spirit at work in this circumstance?" Instead, we feel miserable because it doesn't seem fair. But it is the power of the Holy Spirit that guides and directs us, especially when we're fasting.

Now we're coming up to lent here soon, and a lot of times we talk about giving up something for lent. It's interesting we often ... What are you giving up for lent? I want to judge what you're doing compared to what I'm doing to see if I'm measuring up. It's how we do it sometimes and how we think about it. But fasting, let's fast from something important. Let's fast from wickedness, from wrongdoing, from evil, from sin. That's really what God is saying here. Do you really think I want you to fast and look so morose and like, "Oh, I'm so hungry. I'm fasting. Look at how holy I am." No, that's not what God desires. What he truly desires and the reason for the fast, if we do indeed fast, is to recognize that everything that we have and all good gifts come from God. And the fasting is a means of remembering that, of thinking about it. Every time you get hungry, you think, "Oh, but God has blessed me with such rich blessings. Even if I'm not eating today, I know that he has given me all that I need to support this body in life." And what a blessing that is.

But none of that can be done properly unless we are filled by the power of the Holy Spirit because it is the power as Luther says, the Holy Spirit is the one who calls us, gathers us and enlightens us in the one true faith. See, we can't come to God by ourselves unless the Holy Spirit calls us. And how does he call us? He calls us through his word. And the word of God, as we talked about last week, the word of the cross, Christ crucified the word of God on the cross. That is the message. And that is what everything that we do, all of our disciplines, all of our training, all of our worship is focused upon that, Christ and him crucified. And we can only preach that, we can only believe that, we can only act upon that if we are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now, just like we don't talk about fasting a whole lot in the Lutheran church, we don't often talk about the Holy Spirit. We focus upon Christ and him crucified and rightly so. But it is the power of the Holy Spirit behind everything that we preach, everything that we teach, everything that we do is empowered by the Holy Spirit. And that's his job. He doesn't want the limelight. His job is to focus us upon Christ because that is where our hope is, that is where our joy is. In fact, Jesus makes it very clear that that is indeed exactly how we are supposed to act just like the Holy Spirit. Not put the limelight upon us, look at how Holy I am, but rather let your light shine before others that they might see your good works and give glory to God.

See, if they're giving glory to you, how wonderful you are for the good works that you do, not the right way of doing it. The whole point of good works is to lead people to put their trust and their hope in God, in Christ, crucified, because he has, as he said, fulfilled the law and the prophets. He hasn't abolished them, but he has fulfilled them. And when we fail to look to him and his promises, we are then

guilty of all the God commands. And that's why Jesus says at the end, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you're never going to enter the kingdom of heaven." Well, the scribes in the Pharisees look good on the outside, their righteousness looked righteous, but they were really whitewashed tombs, looked really nice on the outside, but they were rotten to the core because they wanted people to praise them for how good they looked. And when Jesus says, "Look, you don't just need to look good, you need to be good. And not just good, but perfect." And that is something that we cannot accomplish and we never will.

And so our fasting is not to prove our holiness before God or man. And in any other discipline that we do, all the good works that we do is not to prove our worthiness before God, but it is a result of God claiming us in spite of our unworthiness. Calling us and gathering us through his Holy Spirit in baptism so that we might know that we are his children. And as his children, give him the glory in all that we say and do. To focus upon him.

So we are called to fast from evil and from sin, and we are called to feast upon him and his word through the power of the Holy Spirit. And we get the opportunity to do that every Sunday. What do I say? A foretaste of the feast to come is his body and blood that we receive for the forgiveness of our sins. We get to feast upon the presence of God. We get to feast in the knowledge that our Holy Spirit has enlivened us and made us his children. We get to feast on the opportunity to share the love of God in all that we say and all that we do so that he might shine through us and through our lives.

And so we can fast, but we fast so that we might be reminded of the blessings of God, so that we might focus upon his gifts given to us, so that we might be ready to be generous with all that we have and all that we are, because we know God is promised. He will give us all good things. He's not promised to give us the things that we think are good. That's important to remember, but all good things. And so we rest. We rest in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit has called us, has gathered us and has enlightened us. And what a joy it is to know that through the Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptisms, by the power of Jesus Christ, death and resurrection on the cross, because of the will of our Father, we have everything. We have everything that God has promised. It is ours. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to worry. We don't need to fret, but we can trust. Even when we don't even know what to ask, he says, "The Holy Spirit intercedes for us." So even if we got no clue what it is that we really need in this life, God knows, and we can rest in that.

So let us rejoice that the Holy Spirit is at work in all that we say and do, in all that we read and hear and understand, because even the word of God would not make

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any sense unless we have the Holy Spirit. And so let us rejoice and celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit because he points us to Christ and Christ is our hope. And because our hope is in him and not in our own efforts, we can do our good works to the glory of God, for his praise and for his honor and for his glory. Hold fast to the promises of God, for he is with you always to the very end of the age where we will celebrate the feast, which will never end. May his grace and his mercy and his peace be and abide with you always now and forevermore unto life everlasting. Amen.