

To Share With the Hungry

Scripture: Isaiah 58

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People of God, what image comes to mind when you hear the phrase: World Hunger? For many people, it's the pictures seen on TV ads for certain relief organizations: the people, whose legs are like sticks, whose ribs can be easily counted, or whose stomachs are bloated. Yes, that is one face of hunger. The most desperate face of hunger. The one needing the most urgent and immediate intervention, lest death takes its toll. But it's not the only face of world hunger. It's not even the most common version of hunger.

In other cases, the faces of hunger might not be so immediately obvious. There is food. But there is not enough food to have a balanced diet for a healthy life. It's not a question of starvation. It's a question of malnutrition. Death is not an immediate threat, but it is faced before it should. It's a face of hunger I saw in a trip to Africa, back in 2002.

We were driving through rural Zambia, along a dirt road, passing by many small villages. When we bushed camped one night, we made sure we were not close to any village so that no one would detect our presence. At first, I thought that was strange. Why be so secretive? Wouldn't it be a good experience to spend a night in a local village?

But the guides explained the problem. When we would prepare and eat our meals, we would have attracted a large crowd. We would be having fresh vegetables and meat, luxurious items for them, in portions they would be envious of. If we gave away our leftovers, it could easily cause some of the people to fight over the food. It was best not to attract such attention.

The point was driven home when we did stop the next day to visit a village. In return for their hospitality we offered a couple of loaves of bread, which were quickly snatched away. Eventually, the woman who took the loaves was found and the food was shared with the villagers. It was another face of hunger.

World Hunger. But it's not just an African problem. Hunger also shows its face in North America—even in our own local community. Why else do we have food banks? Why are there breakfast programs at our local schools? Because there is a need. The situation is not as extreme as the malnutrition in rural Zambia, but there is a need. A need to provide food, to teach people how to cook proper nutritious meals, to challenge parents to provide breakfast to their kids, as well how to budget so there is money for buying food.

World hunger. It has many different faces. But in whatever form it comes in, it demands a response, especially from God's people, who recognize that we have all been created in the image of God. It calls us to seek justice: to share our food with the hungry and to deal with the underlying causes that lead to hunger.

That's what the prophet Isaiah calls the people of God to do in the chapter that we read. The chapter begins with the complaints of the people, especially the leaders and the ruling class of society. They had been complaining to God: Why haven't you been with us? We've been very religious but it doesn't seem to have any effect. We've been doing what you wanted, so where is the pay-off? Where are your blessings? They ask in verse 3: *Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?*

But then God explains why he has rejected their fasting. (Not that fasting is completely rejected. Jesus expected his disciples to fast at certain times. And that includes us. But that's a different message for another time.) At this point, God rejects their fasting, because they were just going through the motions. They were just paying lip service to God's commands and his concern for justice. They may have been following some of the outward forms of religion, like fasting, but their hearts were not really in it. That showed itself in terms of their outward actions.

The Lord exposes the hypocrisy of their religious rituals when he says (in verse 3 and 4):

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.

Does that sound like their fasting resulted in good things? No, it doesn't. They keep on oppressing their workers: working them too hard, not paying them a decent wage—just treating them like dirt. That's not what God wants. They didn't even show love to one another. Instead, their fasts just ended with quarrels and fights.

That was the nature of their religious rituals. They may have followed the outward aspects of the ritual, but they didn't allow the ritual to shape their attitudes and their actions. Instead, they carried on as they always did: not showing love to their fellow man. So why, asks God, should I listen to your prayers?

Indeed, why should he? If the same thing was going on in our community, why should God pay attention to our prayers and our religious rituals? Why should God bless the harvest, if those doing the harvest are being overworked and underpaid? Why should God bless the work of our hands, if we work so hard that we neglect our families and put worship and church activities off to the side? Why should God hear our prayers, if our hearts are following a sinful path? Why should God provide us a nice comfortable lifestyle, if that upper middle class existence is based upon taking advantage of the poor?

Those were the questions God's people had to wrestle with in the days of Isaiah. God wasn't impressed with their religious ceremonies, not because the ceremonies were wrong, but because they didn't allow those observances to shape their lives. What kind of fasting was God looking for? What kind of religious rituals does he expect from us? Ones that result in shaping our attitudes and our actions. The Lord says in verse 6 and 7:

Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen:
 To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
 To set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
 And to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
 When you see him naked, to clothe him,
 And not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

This is the kind of attitude and actions that God wants from his people. God wants our acts of worship to shape our lives—including the desire to see justice done when it comes to the oppressed and downtrodden, the hungry and the homeless.

What is the result when we seek justice for the hungry and the disadvantaged? The answer begins in verse 8:

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear... Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

The pursuit of justice will lead to the blessings of the Lord. That makes sense doesn't it? God wants us to show love to our neighbor, especially to those who are disadvantaged. When evil is confronted, when injustice is overturned, when the root causes of poverty are tackled, then ultimately good things will result. The blessings of the Lord follow the pursuit of justice.

In other words, when justice is pursued then God's people can experience the shalom, the peace, of God's kingdom. Isn't that also the message Jesus came to bring? In Luke 4, when Jesus began his ministry, he alludes to verse 6 about bringing good news to the poor. Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrated this message by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, casting out demons, and

destroying the chains of death. At the end of his ministry, in Matthew 25, Jesus alludes to verse 7, when he says to those who will inherit the kingdom:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Jesus, therefore, reinforces the words of Isaiah.

We are called to do justice, to deal with problems like that of world hunger, in all of its various forms. That lays us before a serious challenge, because there are great needs in our world when it comes to hunger.

It's easy to point to the problem of world hunger. It's relatively easy to raise the biblical concern about the need to do something about it. It is much more difficult to point the way to a solution. How can we loose the chains of injustice? How do we share our food with the hungry? There is no simple answer.

It's simplistic to say: They're poor and hungry because we're rich and have stolen from them. It's simplistic to say: We just need to wipe out the debts of the African governments because that is stopping them from developing. It's too easy to say: We just need to give more aid.

Perhaps the way Western countries are giving Aid to the poorer countries is contributing to the problem. At least the suggestion of various scholars. In Paul Collier's book, *The Bottom Billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*, the author identifies some of the traps countries find themselves in: like being in a country which continuously in conflict. Countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Sudan and Congo have gone through decades of civil war. No wonder the people are poor. Government resources are focused on military spending, not on helping the people.

Or there is the trap of being a landlocked country, especially is you have bad neighbors. Mali, a country heard about last week, is land-locked. That makes it extremely difficult to export its goods, especially is your neighbors make it difficult for you to access their ports.

Or there is the trap of corrupt government. Zimbabwe is a good example of this. Mugabe, in evicting all the white farmers in the name of land reform, but in reality to keep himself in power, has caused Zimbabwe to go from being the breadbasket of Southern Africa to needing foreign supplies of food. And even then, he has tried to use relief programs for his own purposes.

And so there are complex reasons for world hunger, so that the solution is more than simply handing out aid. Because as Dambisa Moyo argues, aid is not

working, but in fact it kills growth. There are better ways to overcome poverty and hunger.

Education is an important factor. After all, if people cannot read and write they will not be able to advance themselves. If they do not improve ways of farming, their crops will remain subsistence. If they are not taught some basic health hygiene, disease and death will take its toll. Basic education can go a long ways.

But often education is not enough. The people also need the tools and resources to put their education to use. They need access to world markets, which need to operate on a fair playing field. That requires basic respect for the rule of law, for private property, for an understanding of how wealth is created.

In saying all of this, I do not wish to undermine the call to do justice. Though the issues can be complex, we still need to tackle them. But I do want to challenge some simplistic answers that I hear from Aid organizations, even Christian ones. The solution is not merely sending more money. That's hasn't worked. It's changing how cultures and governments work. It's working at the local level, with local people, overcoming the obstacles to long-term growth.

And in saying that it's too simplistic to say: "They're poor, because we're rich", doesn't mean we in North America, don't have some tough questions to wrestle with. Isn't there something fundamentally wrong when CEO's can earn millions of dollars while the company goes bankrupt, laying off thousands of workers and leaving retirees with worthless pensions? Are we able to purchase cheap Christmas toys, because of sweatshops in Third-World countries? Is our North American lifestyle, where we consume so many resources, sustainable for the long term? These are some difficult questions we have to deal with.

God calls us to do justice: to loose the chains of injustice... to share your food with the hungry. If this call to do justice, to be concerned about world hunger, requires a little more work and thinking than the easy answer of simply giving more money, then so be it. And if I end up advocating different policy suggestions than what might be promoted by aid organization, I hope I have the freedom to do that. Let's have some good debates. But let's remember the goal, we're seeking to achieve: to loose the chains on injustice, to see an end to poverty and world hunger.