

***“FASTING, GOD’S WORD, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS”***  
***ZECHARIAH 7:8-14***

A few years ago, [Richard Patterson](#) was told by a Muslim friend that in Islam there is a tradition of writing out the Koran by hand among more devoted followers. Richard thought it was a good idea, and because he wasn’t Muslim, he found some appropriate pens and paper and began handwriting the King James Bible. All 788,000 words of it. For 6-8 hours per day, for four years, he meticulously wrote. And after 2400 pages and four years, he finished. He said he does not consider himself to be particularly religious. So why do it? “It expands my mind more and more...not so I can become more of a religious person, but so that I can become more of a whole person.” He apparently believes that his practice makes him better — but without considering his relationship with God. His delusion is not unusual. Even the OT Israelites were confused about the reason for their spiritual practices, as evidenced in Zechariah 7.

Zechariah 7:8-14 is still answering the question of fasting (“may we stop now?” v. 3), and expands the indictment of Israel’s false motives for fasting in vv. 5-7 to also include false obedience (vv. 8-10), false submission to the revealed Word of God (vv. 11-12), and the consequences of past failures (vv. 13-14). All these combined to reveal what independent, non-repentant, unrighteous living looks like.

Their quest to end their fasting was really a quest to end their dependence on God. They wanted self-autonomy and a loosening of the “shackles” of obedience and submission to God. This second response from God demonstrates that their desire was a manifestation of unrighteousness and a rejection of God’s Word — and of God Himself. The emphasis of God’s address in vv. 8-14 is —

*SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ARE OF VALUE WHEN THEY PRODUCE RIGHTEOUS SUBMISSION TO GOD’S WORD.*

Spiritual disciplines, including fasting, are of no value if they promote self-righteousness and reject God dependence. Time in God’s Word and in fellowship with Him in prayer and with one another in worship should stimulate repentance and dependence — this passage unveils **three characteristics** of righteousness as it relates to Israel in the fifth century B.C., and us.

1. A **PICTURE** of the Righteous Life (vv. 8-10)
  - ✓ Honest brotherly relationships
  - ✓ Compassionate giving care
  - ✓ Pure heart desires
2. The **SOURCES** of the Unrighteous Life (vv. 11-12a)
  - ✓ Inattention to God’s Word
  - ✓ Rejection of God’s Word
  - ✓ Hard-heartedness to God’s Word
3. The **CONSEQUENCES** of an Unrighteous Life (vv. 12b-14)
  - ✓ God does not respond
  - ✓ God does judge

## 1. A PICTURE of the Righteous Life (vv. 8-10)

- In v. 8 we see the same phrase that we did in v. 4 — *then the Word of the Lord came to Zechariah...* It is a formula to indicate four revelations (answers) from God for the question of the Bethelites in v. 3. There are two more answers starting in 8:1, 18.
  - ✓ In the first answer, God exposes the hypocrisy of wanting to be free of fasting. Though their fasts were not mandated by God, they were designed to express dependence on God. They wanted out of the ritual as an expression of their independence and self-reliance. They didn't want God.
  - ✓ This opening phrase in v. 8 is also designed to help the reader/hearer understand the authority of God that compels him to respond in obedience (cf. vv. 4, 7, 9, 12, 13; 8:1-4, 6-7, 9, 14, 18-23).
  - ✓ The Bethelites made a request to remove themselves from God's authority; these messages are packed with the reminder of God's authority, both in His title (*Lord of Hosts*) and in what He says.
  - ✓ He *is* authoritative and He expects submission to His authority. And there is no righteousness without submission to Him and His Word.
  - ✓ Specifically, in this second message God emphasizes the need for genuine inner conformity to God over legalistic practices by reminding them of Israel's past (particularly her rebellion).
  - ✓ In these opening three verses of this discourse, God emphasizes that people who are righteous and genuinely wanting to please the Lord (vv. 5-6) have transformed relationships.
- **Honest brotherly relationships** — verse 8 has three characteristics that define relationships; these are duties expected of every Israelite follower of God (patterned after **Mic. 6:8?**)
  - ✓ **Dispense true justice** = The force is something like, "Judge with true justice."
    - **Justice** is a common OT word (425x) is foundational to the Law (Ex. 18:19ff) and is commonly used of God — when an individual is just, he is emulating the character of God (Lev. 19:2).
    - To give "true" justice is emphatic — to be just, justice must be true (can't be false, or it isn't justice). The word "true" also has the idea of "reliability," "permanence," and "faithfulness." God is faithful in all His judgments of His people — mankind can always rely on His faithful nature (**Ps. 146:6**). So, He probably means, "dispense justice/fairness faithfully."
    - To dispense justice is not just a requirement of those who make legal decisions; it is the nature of God's people to treat one another this way — we are scrupulously and overtly truthful and fair in our dealings — our word is our bond and we are reliable in every way (**Js. 5:12**).
  - ✓ **Practice kindness and compassion each to his brother** — this phrase emphasizes the importance of each individual being responsible to carry out these actions:
    - **Kindness** is the most important OT word for grace (*hesed*) — it is the loyalty of covenant love. It is giving grace to others because of a promised responsibility. It is generous and warm.
    - **Compassion** is mercy that comes from one's bowels (inner man). "I want to be kind."

- These attributes are expected of every Israelite and every believer (Gal. 5:22-23; Col. 3:12). It is a mark of transformation (both in the OT and NT) and indicates genuine faith.
- While the Lord emphasizes caring for fellow Israelites when He says *his brother*, the Israelites were also to be gracious toward foreigners as well (Ex. 23:9; Dt. 24:14).
- These was also part of the regular condemnation of the Israelites — they were called to do this and they didn't (Jer. 7:5-7; Ezk. 18:7, 12, 16; Amos 4:1). This is the Messiah's nature (Zech. 9:8).
- ✓ This also echoes John's words — 1 Jn. 3:14-15ff. Loving care for one another is essential.
- ✓ We love each other well; let us keep on loving (by being kind, patient, and forgiving).

#### • Compassionate giving care

- ✓ In addition to gracious mutual relationships, there also were responsibilities to be gracious to those with whom there was not "mutuality" — when there was opportunity to exert power and authority.
- ✓ To *oppress* someone was to take advantage of the vulnerable — it was to use political, financial, or social pressure to suppress and exploit the weak. It was to crush those who were in a low position.
- ✓ He identifies four groups that are particularly vulnerable:
  - *The widow* — she has no husband to provide and no means of livelihood (Dt. 24:19-21; 27:19)
  - *The orphan* — even more vulnerable than the widow, they have no provider, no wisdom, often lacking maturity and discernment.
  - *The stranger* — The foreigner and the temporary resident were at a disadvantage because they were "different." (Jesus addressed this in Lk. 10:30ff — good Samaritan.)
  - *The poor* — particularly at a time of severe economic depravity (Hag. 1:6, 9-11)
- ✓ Why should the Israelite conduct himself this way? Because it is demanded by the Law (Lev. 25:17) and because it emulates God who is compassionate towards the weak (Ps. 119:121-122)
- ✓ The Israelite (and we) should ask, "are the vulnerable safe with me?" Do I care well (individually) for those who are helpless and needy? Do I share what I can share? Give what I can give?
- ✓ Remember this is in response to "can we stop fasting?" ("We are righteous and don't need it...") This is God's test for their righteousness — "how do you care for one another, and how do you care for the most vulnerable and needy?" The Q isn't whether they are righteous by fasting, but if their righteousness has made them compassionate for people and relationships. (We need one another.)

#### • Pure heart desires

- ✓ It also is not enough simply to do things for each other. It has to flow from a genuine heart desire.
- ✓ It's not enough to fast without a heart for God and it's not enough to serve others without a heart.
- ✓ *Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another* affirms that they still had an internal problem — wayward hearts that wanted to do harm. Whatever they did, they apparently still had evil on their minds. They were not inclined inwardly to love and be compassionate.
- ✓ He will say the same thing in 8:16-17. And so will Jesus (Mt. 22:36-39).

- ✓ Have you noticed the emphasis in these verses? It's not fasting that counts. It's **justice**, and **truth** (faithfulness), and **loyal love**, and **compassion**, and **brotherliness**, and **helping** the oppressed...It's about inward inclinations that always move towards building and preserving relationships.
- ✓ Fasting without obedience to these principles turned the Israelites into spiritual hypocrites. God is not impressed by fasting (giving up food) for the sake of righteousness. He desires His people (Israel and us) to give up our very lives in caring for others (Epaphroditus, **Phil. 2:30**).
- ✓ This is a snapshot of righteousness (the "after"); how do we look next to this picture?

## 2. The **SOURCES of the Unrighteous Life (vv. 11-12a)** — where does unrighteousness come from?

### • Inattention to God's Word

- ✓ This section has multiple warnings, and both in v. 7, and now in vv. 11-12, Zechariah points to the past failures of Israel as examples of those who didn't fulfill God's call (note **they refused...**)
- ✓ The main accusation is in v. 11 — **they refused to pay attention**. They weren't listening to God. They didn't have an auditory problem; they had a heart problem: they didn't care what God said.
- ✓ Originally, I put this in the category of apathy — "I just don't care..." It's not apathy. It's rebellion. It's someone saying, "This conversation is over." Or slamming the door in your face. Or, "if you send me one more email like this, I will never speak to you again." Or, "Don't read the Bible to me and don't pray with me or for me; I want nothing to do with God." This is willful inattention...

### • Rejection of God's Word

- ✓ They were in willful rebellion. That rebellion was pictured in three ways:
  - **They turned a stubborn shoulder** — like an ox that refused to be harnessed, or a donkey that refused to move when constrained, they were resistant to God's commands (**Dt. 9:6-7**; Hos. 4:16).
  - **They stopped their ears** — The same word is used of Pharaoh (Ex. 9:34; 10:1). It is also in the sober warning to Isaiah of Israel's coming rejection (**Is. 6:10**).
  - **They made their hearts like flint** — Their hearts were unbreakable and impenetrable. (Their disobedience was an inner man/heart problem — Dt. 4:29; 6:5.)
- ... They were hardened against **the Law** (Moses) and **the prophets** — the totality of Scripture.
- ... They rejected God's Word because they were rebellious against God's Word — and they lost the ability to know, understand, and respond to the Word (**could not hear...**).
- ... They had no interest or intent to listen — and they lost the ability to listen. They had no desire, and when they heard, it was incomprehensible. Zechariah could have given many examples (2 Kings 17:7ff), but gave none, because this was Israel's long history against God.
- ... How does one become hardened to God's Word?
  - Read it and argue about speculative ideas (1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:14, 23)
  - Read it and do not do anything about what you read (1 Tim. 4:2)
  - Find someone who agrees with your fleshly ideas to shepherd you (2 Tim. 4:3)

- Do what the Israelites did — read it as a means of self-justification (v. 3)
- If you want to be hardened, just don't read it and let it examine and change you (Is. 1:21-24; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12).
- ✓ God already alluded to the importance of the prophets' words (v. 7); here Zechariah is explicit — the words of the Law and prophets were God's words, mediated through *the Spirit* (2 Pt. 1:20-21). I.e., the Word of God is authoritative and compelling. It is well written, and it is interesting, and it is instructive. But most of all, it is commanding and demands attention and allegiance.
- ✓ [Tip: When you read, don't close your Bible without asking, "What does this tell me about God and what does this tell me about me?" And thank Him for those revelations.]
- ✓ Notice the progression — they don't give attention (ignore, don't listen...), they reject, they become hardened. Like stony soil (Mt. 13:19ff), they will not produce fruitful lives.
- ✓ But there is an even greater consequence...

### 3. The CONSEQUENCES of an Unrighteous Life (vv. 12b-14)

#### • God does not respond

- ✓ The straightforwardness of Scripture is sometimes overwhelming. Here is an "Oh no" verse: *Therefore great wrath came from the Lord of Hosts* ("God Almighty").
- ✓ God did not only pour out wrath, but it was *great* wrath — in the form of the Babylonian captivity (2 Chron. 36:15-17). He had warned through Moses what would happen, and when they ignored and rebelled, His patient waiting came to an end (as it always will) and He sent them to Babylon.
- ✓ And then in Babylon they awakened. Now they wanted the Lord: *they called...* "Help us! We need You." *And I would not listen...* They did not want Him, so He did what they did; He did not listen to their pleas. He refused to listen. Why? Principle of **Ps. 66:18**.
  - They wanted sin, so they couldn't have Him. One commentator calls this "powerlessness in prayer," but it is far worse than that — it is unheard and rejected prayer. How can you guarantee that God will shut His ears to you? Reject what He says to you. Follow your own counsel instead of His counsel. Delight in yourself and not Him — and He will not listen to you.
  - God will not be shared with other idols and gods; when Israel turned to other idols, they tragically discovered that when they finally turned to Him in desperation that He had consigned them to their new gods (**Jer. 11:11; 14:12**).
  - You've had the experience of calling customer support and being put on hold; that's an inconvenience when they don't listen. It is an eternal disaster when God doesn't listen.
- ✓ You may be thinking, "God is so demanding; it's so hard to give up what I want to follow Him." That's true. You will have to die to self if you want to live for Him and with Him. But there is something harder than His demands. What is harder is following the sinful demands of your own heart and finding that you have been so rebellious that God isn't listening to your cries for help.

- ✓ The text says that God will not listen when they call; yet here is how gracious God is — at times, when they should be cut off, He *does* listen (e.g., **Dan. 9:1-2, 27**).
- ✓ Oh friend, if you are not yet trusting in God and His Son Jesus Christ for your salvation, I implore you: He is calling for you to repent and believe in Him. Turn away from your sin, your self-righteousness, and your idols, and believe that He died to free you of those things and begin following Him in obedience.

- **God does judge**

- ✓ When God does not listen to the prayers of the rebellious, it is a form of judgment (Rom. 1).
- ✓ But the judgment is even worse than not listening — ***I scattered them with a storm wind...***
  - God “blew” them into captivity as He promised through Moses (Dt. 28:63-64).
  - ***The land is desolated*** (2x) — the land of Israel was devastated. It became uninhabitable. It became isolated and deserted.
  - And remember this, the ***pleasant land*** that had been created by God and was flowing with milk and honey — prosperous — was now ruined because of the rebellion of Israel.
  - The ***pleasant land*** that was the gift of God’s covenant to Israel was now empty and forsaken.
- ✓ This destruction of the land was a picture of the danger of not repenting (**1:5**).
- ✓ This is a reminder that God will not be mocked. He was patient with Israel’s rebellion and He may be patient right now with you rebellion, but He will still judge all sin. He is righteous God; He must be wrathful against all sin. Don’t mistake His patience for apathy. He cares and He will judge.

## CONCLUSION:

The Bethelites had come to Jerusalem seeking an answer to their question about fasting. It seemed simple enough: “Is this an acceptable time to stop?” But they did not receive a direct answer. Instead they received rebuke for their self-righteousness and their self-dependence (last week). And they received an examination of their spiritual condition. God took a spiritual inventory of their lives — **in your righteousness**:

- ✓ Are you honest in your brotherly relationships?
- ✓ Are you compassionate in giving care to the needy and vulnerable?
- ✓ Are your heart desires for others pure?
- ✓ Are you being attentive (obedient) to God’s Word?

**BENEDICTION (Don):** Micah 6:7-8