

Isaiah 58 & the Sermon on the Mount

A Verse-by-Verse Theological Study with Word Studies on True Fasting

Comparing Isaiah 58 (NIV) with Matthew 5-7 (NIV)

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Introduction: The God Who Redefines Religion

Isaiah 58 stands as one of the most penetrating prophetic critiques of empty religious performance in all of Scripture. The oracle arrives from God Himself — not merely through Isaiah — as a trumpet blast of divine confrontation. The people of God have mastered the outward forms of piety: fasting, sackcloth, prostration, and Sabbath observance. Yet God refuses their worship. Why? Because their religion has become a ritual disconnected from righteousness.

Seven centuries later, Jesus sits on a mountainside and delivers the Sermon on the Mount. He is not quoting Isaiah 58, yet the thematic resonance is unmistakable: both texts attack performance-based religion, redefine what it means to seek God, and insist that covenant faithfulness is expressed through justice, mercy, and Christlike character. Read together, these two passages form a canonical arch from the prophetic tradition to the fulfillment of that tradition in the Person and teaching of Jesus.

This study works verse-by-verse through Isaiah 58, pairing each unit with parallel teachings from Matthew 5-7. Hebrew word studies deepen the theological analysis. The goal is not merely comparative exegesis but doxological application: *What does true fasting, true worship, and true covenant life look like today?*

VERSE 1 — The Trumpet Call of God

Isaiah 58:1 (NIV)

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
קָרָא	qara'	To call out, proclaim, summon	Not a polite suggestion — a royal summons. Same word used when God called creation into being (Gen 1).
שׁוֹפָר	shofar	Ram's horn trumpet	Used to declare war, call assembly, announce Jubilee. The proclamation is urgent and public — not pastoral whispering.
פְּשָׁע	pesha'	Rebellion, willful transgression	Not accidental sin (chata't) but deliberate covenant-breaking. The people know what they are doing.
חַטָּאת	chatta'th	Sin, offense, guilt	General term for moral failure. The pairing of pesha + chatta't covers both willful rebellion and moral failing.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 5:1-2; 7:24-29

Isaiah 58

Isaiah 58:1 — God commands Isaiah to shout without restraint, to trumpet the people's sins publicly and clearly.

Matthew 5-7

Matt 5:1-2 — Jesus opens his mouth and teaches with

authority. Matt 7:29 — "He taught as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the law."

Theological Note: Both Isaiah's oracle and the Sermon on the Mount begin with a shock of divine authority. The tone is not accommodating. The living God does not negotiate with comfortable religion. Isaiah's shofar imagery in verse 1 prepares the reader: this is not pastoral advice but prophetic confrontation. Similarly, Jesus speaks from the mountain — an unmistakable Sinai echo — as lawgiver and covenant Lord.

VERSE 2 — The Appearance of Righteousness

Isaiah 58:2 (NIV)

"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
יִדְרְשׁוּ	yidreshun	They seek / inquire diligently	Drash — same root as midrash. These people are scholarly, diligent. Their seeking is real, but the motive is performance.
מִשְׁפָּט	mishpat	Justice, judgment, right ruling	A central OT term. Justice is not merely legal but covenantal — it encompasses fair dealing, protection of the weak, and right social order.
תְּצַדִּיק	tsedaqah	Righteousness, covenant faithfulness	Paired with mishpat throughout the prophets. Together they form the foundation of the Davidic throne (Ps 89:14).

Matthew Parallel: Matt 6:1-6, 16-18; Matt 5:20

Isaiah 58

Isa 58:2 — The people appear righteous; they seek God daily, ask for just decisions, act eager. But it is performance without transformation.

Matthew 5-7

Matt 6:1-6 — "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them." Matt 5:20 — "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees..."

Theological Note: This is the diagnostic verse of the whole chapter. The people are not atheists or pagans. They are sincere, diligent religious practitioners. The problem is that their religion has become a system of earning, a performance for God's benefit, rather than a response of love. The Hebrew tsedaqah and mishpat are not just individual virtues — they are relational realities, descriptors of a community that mirrors God's character. Performance-piety produces individuals who look righteous but communities that oppress.

VERSE 3 — The Complaint and God's Answer

Isaiah 58:3 (NIV)

"Why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed? Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
צָמַתּוּ	tamnu	We fasted	From tsum — to abstain from food as a religious act. Originally connected to mourning, repentance, seeking God. By this period it had become formalized and ritualistic.

ענינו נפשנו	inninu nafshenu	We afflicted our soul / humbled ourselves	Innah nefesh — the official phrase for Yom Kippur fasting (Lev 16:29-31). The people are using Yom Kippur language but their hearts are absent.
עצב	etsev / chefets	Your own pleasure / your own matters	Chefets = what one desires, one's own affairs. The fast day is spent pursuing self-interest, not God's interest.
עצבתם	atsavtem	You exploit / drive hard	Nagas = to press, oppress, drive as a taskmaster. Economic exploitation on a holy day. Religion and injustice coexist.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 6:16-18; Matt 23:23-24

<p>Isaiah 58 Isa 58:3 — They fast and expect God to see and respond, but the same day they exploit workers. External piety and active injustice coexist.</p>	<p>Matthew 5-7 Matt 6:16-18 — "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do." Matt 23:23 — "You have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness."</p>
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Theological Note: The word innah nefesh (afflict the soul) is the precise technical term for Yom Kippur observance. These people are doing exactly what Torah commands on the holiest day of the year. Yet the Torah-compliant fast is declared worthless because the social fabric of the community is torn. God does not evaluate religion in isolation from economics and labor relations. This is a stunning prophetic move: fasting is null and void if fasters exploit their employees. Jesus sharpens this in Matthew 23: the Pharisees tithe mint and dill while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness — the weightier matters.

VERSE 4 — Fasting That Fuels Strife

Isaiah 58:4 (NIV)

"Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
רִיב	riv	Quarrel, strife, legal dispute	Used in legal contexts — a lawsuit or controversy. The fast becomes a weapon in social conflict rather than a path to peace.
מַצָּח	matsah	Contention, fighting	From a root meaning to press or squeeze. The fast creates pressure that erupts in violence.
לִשְׁמִיעַ	lehashmi'a	To make heard, to cause to be heard	The desired outcome of the fast: that God hears. But their behavior disqualifies their voice. Prayer and character are inseparable.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 5:21-26; Matt 6:14-15

<p>Isaiah 58 Isa 58:4 — Fasting produces fighting, not peace. The religious act generates conflict rather than reconciliation. Voice is not heard.</p>	<p>Matthew 5-7 Matt 5:23-24 — "If...your brother or sister has something against you...first go and be reconciled." Matt 6:14-15 — Unforgiveness blocks the Father's forgiveness.</p>
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Theological Note: Isaiah 58:4 introduces a devastating diagnostic: instead of producing humility and peacemaking, the people's fasting produces quarreling and violence. This is the signature of false religion: external religious performance generates internal moral rot. Jesus in Matthew 5 makes worship contingent on reconciliation — one cannot approach the altar while a broken relationship remains unaddressed. True fasting produces peacemakers (Matt 5:9), not fighters. God measures the fruit of our religious practice, not its frequency.

VERSE 5 — What God Does NOT Call a Fast

Isaiah 58:5 (NIV)

"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
צום	tsom	Fast, fasting	The substantive noun for fasting. God is questioning the very category — asking whether their practice bears resemblance to what He intended.
לְעֹנֹת נַפְשׁוֹ	la'anot nafsho	To afflict one's soul/self	Used of Yom Kippur again. The outward posture (bowing, sackcloth, ashes) has become the substance of the fast. The affliction is only physical.
אֲגָמוֹן	agmon	A reed / bulrush	Papyrus that bows under weight. God's image is scalding: bowing your head like a reed is performative and spineless — no moral weight behind the gesture.
יוֹם רַצוֹן	yom ratson	Day acceptable / day of favor	Ratson = divine pleasure, delight, approval. God's ratson is not stirred by physical posture but by covenant action.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 6:16-18; Matt 23:5-7

Isaiah 58

Isa 58:5 — God explicitly rejects external religious performance: bowing the head, sackcloth, ashes. These are not what He chose.

Matthew 5-7

Matt 6:16 — "They disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting." Matt 23:5 — "Everything they do is done for people to see."

Theological Note: Verse 5 is the pivot of the whole chapter: it is God's direct, rhetorical dismissal of empty religious form. The agmon (reed) image is devastating. A reed bowing in the wind has no conviction, no backbone, no substance — it bends to whatever force acts upon it. God is saying: your humility is reed-humility. It bends before Me on a fast day but snaps back to exploitation the next morning. Jesus uses equally visual language: the hypocrite "disfigures his face" to signal fasting to others. Both images describe the same phenomenon: the body performing what the soul does not inhabit.

VERSES 6-7 — The Fast God Has Chosen

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NIV) — The Heart of the Chapter

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NIV)

"Is not this 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 the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

HEBREW WORD STUDY — THE ANATOMY OF TRUE FASTING:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
פָּתַח חַרְצוּוֹת	patteach chartsuvot	Loose the chains / bonds of wickedness	Pattach = open, release, untie. Chartsuvot = chains, bonds (used of prisoners). The "fast" is an act of liberation — prisoner release, debt release, freedom.
מֹטָה	motah	Yoke (of burden)	The image of economic oppression — the heavy wooden yoke placed on a slave's neck. True fasting is yoke-breaking.

רְצוּצִים	retsutsiyim	Crushed ones / oppressed	From ratsats — to crush, bruise, shatter. The same word used in Isa 61:1 (and quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18): "to set the oppressed free."
לֶחְמֶךָ	lachmekha	Your bread / your food	Not surplus bread — your bread. God calls for sacrifice, not charity from excess. The Hebrew is emphatic: this is your own provision shared.
קְרוּדִים	merudim	The homeless / wandering poor	From rud = to wander, roam. These are the dispossessed — people without stable shelter, the refugee, the itinerant poor.
עָרוֹם	arom	Naked, bare	Physical nakedness but also vulnerability and shame. Clothing the naked is a direct act of restoring dignity.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 5:3-10; Matt 25:35-40

<p>Isaiah 58 Isa 58:6-7 — True fasting = liberating the oppressed, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, caring for family.</p>	<p>Matthew 5-7 Matt 5:3-9 — "Blessed are the poor in spirit...the merciful...the peacemakers." Matt 25:35-36 — "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was a stranger and you invited me in..."</p>
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Theological Note — The Redefinition of Fasting: Verses 6-7 constitute the theological heart of Isaiah 58 and represent one of the most radical statements in the entire Hebrew Bible about the nature of fasting. God redefines the fast not as abstinence from food but as engagement with the suffering neighbor. The verbs are all active and outward: loose, untie, set free, break, share, provide, clothe, not turn away. Fasting, properly understood, is not about what you withhold from yourself but about what you give to another. This represents a profound theology of embodied covenant: the hunger you feel in fasting is meant to produce solidarity with those who are involuntarily hungry. Jesus' Beatitudes in Matthew 5 establish the same character matrix, and Matthew 25:31-46 makes the identification complete: Jesus identifies Himself with the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner. What Isaiah calls "the fast God has chosen," Jesus reveals is service rendered to Him in the person of the least.

VERSES 8-9a — The Promises of True Religion

Isaiah 58:8-9a (NIV)

"Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
אור	or	Light	Fundamental symbol of divine presence, life, and salvation. Aurora imagery — not gradual, but a sudden breaking through. The same or is the first creative word in Genesis 1.
אָרוּכָה	arukah	Healing, restoration	Specifically: the healing of a wound, the closing up of a gash. Used of national and personal restoration. The metaphor is medical: the social body heals as justice is restored.
צִדְקָךָ	tsidqekha	Your righteousness	Not imputed righteousness but the tsedaqah lived out in vv. 6-7 — practical covenant faithfulness. It goes before them as a vanguard.
כְּבוֹד ה'ֵהוּא	kevod YHWH	The glory of the Lord	The manifest, weighty, substantial presence of God — not just His reputation but His Person. He becomes their rear guard (me'asseph).
הִנְנִי	hineni	Here I am	The deepest relational response in the Bible. God's hineni answers the cry of the just. The same word Abraham speaks to God (Gen 22:1), and Isaiah to God (Isa 6:8).

Isaiah 58

Isa 58:8-9a — Social justice practice produces: light, healing, righteousness as vanguard, divine glory as protector, and direct divine response to prayer.

Matthew 5-7

Matt 5:3-12 — Each Beatitude ends in a promise. Matt 6:33 — "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you." Matt 7:7 — "Ask and it will be given to you."

Theological Note: The hineni of verse 9a is one of the most moving moments in the entire prophetic literature. God says: "Here I am." This is the covenant name YHWH — the God who is present. The condition for God's nearness is not ritual correctness but the active pursuit of justice and mercy. Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6 embeds the same logic: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth" — and then immediately connects the forgiven-forgiving community as the vehicle for that kingdom. Both texts insist that God's availability to us is connected to our availability to our neighbors.

VERSES 9b-10 — Remove the Yoke, Extend the Bread

Isaiah 58:9b-10 (NIV)

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
אָצְבָּע	etsba'	The pointed finger	Accusing gesture — contempt, condemnation, social shaming. The finger-pointing that accompanies economic oppression creates a culture of shame.
דִּבְרַת	divrat	Malicious talk / speaking wickedness	Speech as a tool of oppression. Slander, false accusation, gossip used to maintain social hierarchies and silence the poor.
תָּפַק	tapheq	To pour out / spend yourself	Generous, costly self-giving. The same root used of giving a gift wholeheartedly. God calls for expenditure of self, not mere donation.
צָהָרְיָמִים	tsaharayim	Noonday / midday brightness	The darkness that surrounds the oppressive community becomes noonday when justice is practiced. Not just light but the fullest light possible.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 5:13-16; Matt 5:43-48

Isaiah 58

Isa 58:9b-10 — Remove oppressive speech and gesture; spend yourself for the hungry. Then night becomes noonday — maximum light.

Matthew 5-7

Matt 5:14-16 — "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Theological Note: The etsba' (pointing finger) deserves special attention. Malicious speech is placed alongside economic exploitation as a form of oppression. God is concerned not just with structural injustice but with the micro-practices of contempt — the finger pointed at a debtor, the gossip that shames a poor worker. Jesus in the Beatitudes blesses the meek and the merciful — the opposite of finger-pointers. And the command to love enemies (Matt 5:43-48) is the most radical form of removing the pointing finger: blessing those who curse you, praying for those who persecute you.

VERSES 11-12 — The Well-Watered Garden

Isaiah 58:11-12 (NIV)

"The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
גַּן רִוְחַה	gan raveh	A watered / saturated garden	Raveh = soaked, saturated. The antithesis of sun-scorched aridity. The just community becomes a life-giving oasis. Echoes Eden (Gen 2).
מִצְדָּא מַיִם	motsa' mayim	A spring / outgoing of waters	Not a cistern but a living spring — a continuous source. The community that practices justice does not merely receive blessing; it becomes a source of blessing.
חֲרוֹבוֹת	chorevot	Ancient ruins	The ruins of the destroyed Jerusalem. The same word used in the post-exilic laments. God promises restoration of the broken city through the practice of justice.
גֹּדֵר פְּרָצִים	goder perets	Repairer of the breach / broken wall	Perets = break, rupture, breach in a wall. This is the name God will give to the just community: the one who restores what was broken. Social repair is the fruit of spiritual fasting.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 5:3-5, 13-16; Matt 7:24-27

Isaiah 58

Isa 58:11-12 — The just community becomes a source: garden, spring. They rebuild ruins — called "Repairer of Broken Walls."

Matthew 5-7

Matt 5:13 — "You are the salt of the earth." Matt 5:14 — "You are the light of the world." Matt 7:24-27 — The wise builder builds on rock, restoring and enduring.

Theological Note: The image of the gan raveh (well-watered garden) is powerfully Edenic. The community that practices true fasting — liberation, feeding, sheltering, clothing — becomes a restored Eden: a place of abundance, life, and fertility in the midst of a scorched earth. The title "Repairer of Broken Walls" is the highest civic-theological honor God can bestow. It describes not an individual hero but a community whose justice practice reconstitutes the social fabric of a broken society. Jesus' salt-and-light language in Matthew 5 carries the same freight: the disciple community is a life-giving presence that preserves, illuminates, and heals the world around it.

VERSES 13-14 — Sabbath: The Capstone of the Oracle

Isaiah 58:13-14 (NIV)

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

HEBREW WORD STUDY:

Hebrew	Transliteration	Meaning	Significance
שַׁבָּת	Shabbat	Sabbath / cessation	From shavat = to stop, cease, rest. Sabbath is not passive laziness but active reorientation — stopping self-directed activity to redirect toward God and community.
עֲנֵג	oneg	Delight, pleasure, luxurious enjoyment	The Sabbath is meant to be experienced as oneg — deep, sensory, embodied delight in God. Not reluctant obligation but joyful anticipation.

שְׂפָד	chefets	Your own pleasure / business	Same word as v.3 — doing your own affairs. The Sabbath prohibits not all activity but self-directed activity. It redirects the human from self to God.
תִּתְעַנֵּג	tit'anag	You shall delight yourself	From anag — to be soft, delicate, pampered with pleasure. God promises that Sabbath delight in Him leads to riding the heights of the land — triumph and abundance.

Matthew Parallel: Matt 6:19-24, 33; Matt 11:28-30

<p>Isaiah 58 Isa 58:13-14 — The Sabbath is meant to be oneg — delight. Stop self-directed business; find joy in YHWH. Promise: triumph and inheritance.</p>	<p>Matthew 5-7 Matt 6:33 — "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." Matt 11:28-29 — "Come to me...and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls."</p>
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Theological Note: The oracle closes with the Sabbath — not as an afterthought but as the theological capstone. Sabbath is the rhythmic practice that holds all the other practices together. True fasting requires a Sabbath-shaped imagination: one that knows how to stop pursuing personal advantage and open the hands to others. The word oneg (delight) is striking — the Sabbath is not a burden but a feast. Jesus in Matthew 11 offers the same invitation in terms that are clearly Sabbath-shaped: "Come to me...and I will give you rest." His yoke is easy and his burden is light — the antithesis of the heavy yoke of oppression in Isaiah 58:6. Jesus is the fulfillment and embodiment of what Isaiah's Sabbath vision pointed toward.

THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS: ISAIAH 58 AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Five Parallel Themes Across Both Texts:

Theme	Isaiah 58	Matthew 5-7
Performance vs. Transformation	External fasting condemned; internal transformation required (vv. 1-5)	Righteousness surpassing Pharisees; secret devotion honored by the Father (5:20; 6:1-18)
Justice as Worship	Loosing chains, breaking yokes, feeding the hungry = acceptable fast (vv. 6-7)	Hunger and thirst for righteousness; caring for least = caring for Christ (5:6; 25:35-40)
Speech and Community	Removing the pointing finger and malicious talk (v. 9b)	Loving enemies, blessing cursers; removing contempt (5:43-48; 5:22)
Light as Witness	Light breaking forth; darkness becoming noonday (vv. 8, 10)	You are the light of the world; let your light shine (5:14-16)
Rest and Delight	Sabbath as oneg — delight; ride the heights (vv. 13-14)	Come to me and find rest; easy yoke, light burden (11:28-30)

CHRISTOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: JESUS AS THE FULFILLMENT OF ISAIAH 58

Jesus does not merely teach the principles of Isaiah 58 — He embodies them. He is the one who looses the chains of injustice (his healing ministry), breaks every yoke (Matt 11:28), shares his bread with the hungry (feeding of the 5,000 and the Last Supper), provides shelter for the wandering (calls disciples to himself), clothes the naked (the garments of righteousness), and does not turn away from his own flesh and blood (the Incarnation itself).

The fast God had chosen in Isaiah 58 finds its ultimate expression in the kenosis of the Son: "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). The cross is the ultimate act of yoke-breaking, the ultimate feeding of the hungry, the ultimate light breaking forth — from the darkness of the tomb at dawn on the third day. Easter morning is the sunrise of Isaiah 58:8: "your light will break forth like the dawn."

The community that practices true fasting as Isaiah defines it is therefore a Christ-shaped community: incarnational, justice-seeking, mercy-giving, Sabbath-resting, light-bearing. It is the community that lives out the Beatitudes not as religious requirements but as the natural fruit of those who have been set free by the one who loosed their chains.

"For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." — Isaiah 58:14b