

# The Luminous Life

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good evening to all of you. I know most of you. My name's Tommy. I'm a pastor here. And strangely, I love Ash Wednesday.

Even though the focus is maybe not our favorite topic, the idea that everyone in this room is going to die a premature death. Not the kind of thing that we like to dwell on.

Nevertheless, it's true. But at this point in the service, we want to turn our attention to God's Word.

And I know that there are different people in this room coming from different places.

And maybe even spiritually, I'm assuming you're in very different places. Some of you may be here tonight and you feel full of faith. You feel like God is near you.

He's present in your life. You feel alive and exhilarated by what God is doing in your life. And full of passion for the kingdom. And if that is you, then praise the Lord.

[ 0 : 58 ] Lord, I'm so glad that is true. And we're going to pray and ask God that that just continues in your life. For the rest of us who may feel like faith is a struggle.

If you feel like God is very distant, that your faith at some point grew cold. If your prayer life feels like an exercise in futility, then Lent is the season for you.

And I'm glad that you're here. Because Lent is a time when we focus uniquely on our relationship with God. And when we talk about our relationship with God, it is supposed to be a relationship that is life-giving and intimate and love-filled.

And yet, I think sometimes that's not our experience. When we look at the common images used to describe the relationship that God desires to have with us, one of the most common images is the image of a marriage.

A lifelong, intimate, committed relationship of mutual love. And yet, I think that sometimes that's not our experience. So, if you don't have that kind of relationship with God, then something is getting in the way.

[ 2 : 15 ] Because we know that that's what God wants for us and with us. And so, Lent is a good time for us to ask, as we look inward and as we come before the Lord, times like this, what's getting in the way of that relationship with God?

And that's why we're looking at Isaiah chapter 58 briefly before we receive ashes. Because this is a place where God's people are complaining about this very problem.

They're complaining that their relationship with God has grown cold and distant. And it shows us two reasons why this kind of thing can happen. Let me ask God's blessing on this time.

And then we'll look briefly at those two reasons. Lord, we do ask that as we come before you, that this would not just be an exercise in empty religion. But we're here because we know on some deep level that we need an encounter with you.

And we know that that can only happen through your word. And so, we pray that your word would facilitate this interaction. Lord, that it would open our hearts and that it would bring you into our midst.

[ 3 : 26 ] That we might see you face to face, Lord. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So, Isaiah 58, what are the reasons, what are the things that get in the way of us having this kind of warm, intimate, life-giving relationship with God that I think probably most of us in this room wish we could have?

One of the things that I learned in marriage, and you definitely don't have to be married to learn this kind of thing. Just for a person like me, it took that to teach this to me.

But some of you already know this. But one of the things that I had to learn in marriage is that when it comes to showing your love for somebody, words are never enough.

And I don't mean that words don't matter. Words do matter. But if, over time, the only way that you express love to your spouse is through words, very quickly those words start to lose their meaning. And they start to sound hollow. And so what I had to learn is that if you really want to make somebody feel loved, you have to figure out what makes them feel loved.

[ 4 : 35 ] You have to figure out how to show love in ways that they're going to recognize and receive as love. So a few examples in our marriage, my wife Laura, I know that if at the end of the day, if we get our kids down, which is its own kind of small miracle, and then we have some time left and some energy left, I know that if I, instead of pulling out my phone or flipping on a show or diving into a book, I know that if I look at her and we sit down and I ask what's on her mind, what's on her heart, what's she thinking about, and I devote time and energy, and we sit there and I listen and I care about the things that she cares about, and I help her process some of the things that are on her mind, I know that she's going to feel tremendously loved by that.

It doesn't take much. I know that if I proactively, miracle of miracles, plan babysitting down the road in the future at some point, and maybe even plan something for us to do, she's going to feel tremendously loved by that relatively small gesture.

I know that the things that she works on are very important to her, and if I just show some support, genuine encouragement and support, toward the things that she's working on, that makes her feel loved.

And so I know that my words matter to her, but what I've learned is that these things that I'm able to do, and many of them don't require a whole lot, they convey so much more powerfully the genuineness of my love, and they result in us feeling a lot closer and more connected.

So the point is, if you want to make somebody feel loved, and you want to feel a connection with them, you can't just use words. You have to show that love in tangible ways. And the reason that I say this is because the same is true of our relationship with God.

[ 6 : 27 ] The best way to show our love for God is to love the people that God loves. It's to love the people that God loves.

So in our passage, Isaiah 58, verses 2 and 3, these people are praying daily to God. They want to feel close to God. It says they, quote, delight to draw near Him.

And then it says in verse 3, we've humbled ourselves and fasted and prayed. Why haven't you noticed? We're doing all the right things.

We're going to church. We're fasting. We're putting ashes on our forehead. We're wearing uncomfortable clothing, sackcloth. We're doing all of the things. Right?

We're observing all of the rituals. In other words, we're upholding our side of the deal. And somehow you're not showing up.

[ 7 : 27 ] And God essentially responds through Isaiah. He says essentially to Isaiah, give a full-throated shout and respond to the people this way.

God says, you say that you love me and you say that you want to be close to me. You say that you want intimacy with me. But the people that I most care about, you ignore.

They don't seem to matter to you at all. So God says, you know, you say that you love me and you look the part. You look pietistic. You look like I matter to you.

You're wearing the right clothing and saying the right words. And yet you work your employees to death. And you pay them barely a minimum wage.

And you don't offer health insurance or retirement benefits at all. He's like, you say that you love me. I hear the words. But then you go and you bicker over nothing.

[ 8 : 33 ] You gossip because you love drama. You go and you're nice to people's faces and then you criticize them behind their back and you make fun of them.

God says, you say that you love me. You look the part. It sounds right. But you seem oblivious to the injustice that is all around you.

So God's response is to essentially say there's a disconnect here. Like something doesn't add up. And then God says, is this not the fast that I choose?

In other words, this is how I know that your love for me is genuine. I mean, the best way to know how to show love to somebody is to sit down and ask them, what are the things that I can do that make you feel loved?

That's what God is talking about here. Here's the fast that I choose. Here's the expression of love and devotion that I recognize as genuine. That's what he's saying. If you truly love me, he says in

verse 6, then don't just free oppressed people.

[ 9 : 42 ] Break the yoke. Deal with the systems and institutions that make oppression possible. Break the yoke. If you truly love me, he says, if you truly care about me, then in verse 7, don't just fast from certain kinds of food.

If you're not going to eat that food, give it to somebody who needs it. Give it to somebody who's hungry. Better yet, he says, invite someone into your home and serve them that food.

Maybe spend less money on clothes so that you can go clothe someone who doesn't have any. Cover their nakedness. That can also imply, don't just meet physical needs, but recognize that the deepest needs that people have often are connected to deep sources of shame.

Minister to people's shame if you really love me. And this is important. Certainly spoke to me. The end of verse 7, God says, if you truly love me, don't hide from your own flesh.

What does that mean? It took me a little while. Sometimes it's hardest to recognize the sins that are closest to true for us. Don't work so much that you neglect your family.

[ 11 : 01 ] Don't give yourself so much to other causes and pursuits that you neglect your friends, that you neglect your church community. Be available to your family.

Not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually. Don't hide yourself from your own flesh. And the thing that connects all of these definitions of love is they all have to do with the way we treat the people right around us that God has put there.

Right? So the first point is this. If you want to love and be loved by God, if you want to feel close to God and intimate with God, words are never going to be enough. Gestures like this are helpful, but they're never going to be enough.

Right? God has given us neighbors, people he puts in our lives, and guess what? God loves and delights in those people more than we can possibly imagine. And if we don't show some amount of love and concern for those people that God is so crazy about, then no matter how much we try to tell God that we love him, our words are going to ring hollow.

And this is one reason our relationship with God might grow cold or distant. If we think that we can love God without loving any of the people around us in our lives that God loves.

[ 12 : 19 ] All right? So that's reason number one. Reason number two that we see in this passage is a little more subtle, but it's every bit as significant. Either reason number one, we're failing to love God's people, that's what causes distance, or reason number two, we are failing to love in God's way, God's way of loving.

So some of you are vegan, and some of you are vegan based on principles, right? You have an ethical conviction based on what you believe about the food industry and whatnot that you want to be a vegan.

That's a lifestyle that you've committed to. So imagine there's somebody in your life and they really want to make you feel loved, and they say, I'm going to make you this extravagant meal, and I'm going to go all out, you know, kind of like Babette's Feast style.

If any of you have seen that movie or read that book, I'm just going to, you know, spare no expense, lots of money, lots of time, lots of energy, and the night finally gets there and they plop this plate down in front of you and it's a big old T-bone steak.

Right? And you would look down at that and the question would be, you know, they're looking at you expectantly, do you feel how much I love you? And of course, if you're honest, you might be moved by the effort, but at the end of the day, that dish does not convey love at all.

[ 13 : 38 ] It's in fact maybe the opposite because no matter how much money they spent on that food and no matter how much effort, no matter how high-end or grass-fed or well-marbled that steak may be, at the end of the day, it's a steak.

And that meal does not communicate love to you if your commitment ethically is to be vegan. And what that means is this person is trying to love you, but they're not doing it in your way.

In other words, they're ignoring your principles. They're ignoring your character. They're ignoring commitments that matter to you. That's not loving. I say this on a day when some of you are fasting. I apologize for that. But loving God doesn't just mean loving the people that God loves, which matters. It means loving the way that God loves, which means loving according to God's standards, God's character, God's commitments, God's principles.

You know, I've heard so often people quote Isaiah 58 and say, well, what this shows, I mean, this justifies the idea that God actually doesn't care about our personal lives.

[ 14 : 51 ] He doesn't care about our morals. All of that is just empty religiosity. What God really cares about is social justice and ending oppression. That's all God cares about. And so if we do that, no matter who we sleep with or how we spend our money or our time, that's what matters to God.

We are doing justice in the world. This proves it. All the rest is empty religion. But it says in verse 2 that God's people are people who delight in His ways, who desire to do righteousness, who do not forsake the judgments or the commandments of their God.

And then you have to look at the larger context of Isaiah chapter 58. Just before it, in Isaiah chapter 57, which is a profoundly important chapter, it talks about the core problem of humanity.

The core issue is not oppression or injustice, but idolatry. Worshiping other things in our lives instead of God.

And what idolatry means is that we are driven by our desires. We are driven by our appetites. Right?

[ 16 : 04 ] Appetites like lust or greed or covetousness. And so things like injustice or poverty or oppression are symptoms.

They're downstream from these uncontrollable appetites. Which result from the fact that we have given ourselves to false gods who can never satisfy our appetites.

We're always hungry. We're always thirsty. We're always yearning. That's why we have injustice and oppression. And so God calls His people to be free from these idols and to worship Him alone and to have the kind of holiness and character that reflects His holiness and character.

He says in Leviticus, Be holy for I am holy. And so this means the way that we use our money or our bodies or our resources, that all needs to reflect God's heart.

So if we believe that we can love God simply by doing justice, but then we take liberties in redefining justice to fit whatever agenda or issue matters to us.

[ 17 : 20 ] If we seek justice in ways that disregard God's character and holiness, that's like serving a T-bone steak to a vegan. It doesn't matter how much money or effort it takes.

It's not an act of love. In fact, I think it's profoundly unloving because it's profoundly self-focused. So loving God means loving God's people God's way.

Loving God's people God's way. And this is not going to lead us and this is not only going to lead us to have a deeper sense of God's presence and love in our lives, but the amazing thing at the end of this passage is it says, if we love God's people God's way, it turns us into the kind of people this world most needs.

It says in verse 10, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. You know what that means in more common terminology?

Your life is going to glow in the dark. You're going to live a luminous life. You're going to shine into the darkness of this world.

[ 18 : 34 ] Because listen, this world has enough empty religiosity and piety. But this world also has enough social action campaigns and charity organizations. What the world really needs is people who glow in the dark.

People who radiate the love of God into the world like beacons of hope, like lighthouses in the darkness, like lamps in a dark wood.

That's what this world needs. So as we enter this season of Lent together, which this marks the beginning of our Lenten journey, maybe you could think of this like a marriage retreat between you and God.

And ask yourself this question, am I loving God's people God's way? Am I showing love to God in ways that matter to Him?

Right? Some of us may need to focus during this season on loving God's people more by engaging in the needs and the people around us. That could be the hungry and the homeless.

[ 19 : 39 ] It could also be our own families. Serving the people God has put in our lives. And listen, pastors need to hear that more than anybody else.

Right? The kind of people who are ready and available for people in their church but neglect their own kids. We all need to hear that. Maybe this means just making extra food when you cook and thinking of people you can bless with that extra food.

I had a good friend in seminary. This is what she did every week on her Sabbath. She would make food and she would make twice as much as she needed and she would just randomly pick people

to give it out to.

And I was the recipient of some of those blessings and I can tell you I felt deeply loved. Maybe it simply means working fewer hours or turning our phones off so that we can be more emotionally available to people.

Others of us need a different focus this Lent. Maybe we need to focus more on living and loving God's way. Right? Maybe you do need to fast from sugar or caffeine or alcohol because maybe these things are leading your appetites to become out of control.

[ 20 : 53 ] Maybe you need more control over those appetites. Maybe you need to learn how to seek the Lord for satisfaction rather than these things. Right? Maybe there are areas of deep sin that we need to face and confess and turn away from in our lives.

So some of us need to focus on loving God's people more. Some of us need to focus on loving God's way more. Many of us probably just like me need a little bit of both. The last thing I'll say is this.

If you are here and you don't have a relationship with God at all and by some strange twist of providence you find yourself here on an Ash Wednesday service.

the least seeker sensitive service of the Anglican year. And maybe you're here and you don't have a relationship with God. Before you do anything that I just said you need to read Isaiah chapter 59 which comes right after chapter 58.

Because in that chapter this is where he says that we on our own are utterly powerless against the idolatry and the oppression and the injustice in our world.

[ 22 : 06 ] And so God says because you're powerless because the situation is hopeless for you one day I myself am going to come. My arm will accomplish salvation for you.

One day a redeemer is going to come. And we're here tonight because we know who that redeemer is. Jesus Christ who died on the cross not only to save us from sin and death not only to take away the fear that we have of the premature death that we will one day die but also to invite us into a loving intimate relationship with God himself.

And so if you've never come to Jesus before this is a perfect night. Lent is a perfect season for you to come to Jesus in prayer to ask him to forgive all of the sin in your life and then to receive the love and the forgiveness that God desires to pour into your life.

Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your word and we thank you for the hope and we need it. We need hope.

We need truth. We need love. I pray that you would kindle in our hearts the embers that they would become flame that we would rediscover our passion for you that we would fall in love with you even as we know the love that you had for us from before the beginning of the world.

[ 23 : 41 ] And we pray this for our good Lord but ultimately for your glory that as we radiate your love and truth into the world you would be glorified.

In your son's name. Amen.