

Loose the Chains of Injustice

A Study Guide

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How to Use This Study Guide

You can use this study guide at any time of year. It was originally designed by me for my own use during Lent and has been modified twice since then. If you choose to use it during Lent, you may want to try this approach:

Ash Wednesday	Read through Isaiah 58:6-14, slowly and prayerfully, reflecting on what God considers to be true fasting. You may wish to read different translations of this passage.
First Thursday of Lent	Begin memorizing Isaiah 58:6-14. This will be your memory passage during Lent. Turn to chapter one and do one of the activities.
First Friday of Lent	Do one activity from chapter two.
First Saturday of Lent	Do one activity from chapter three.
First Sunday of Lent	Skip to chapter seven, and do an activity from that.
First Monday of Lent	Do one activity from chapter four.
First Tuesday of Lent	Do one activity from chapter five.
Second Wednesday	Do one activity from chapter six.
Second Thursday	Return to chapter one.
Second Friday	Return to chapter two.
Second Saturday	Return to chapter three.
Second Sunday	Return to chapter nine.
Second Monday	Return to chapter four.

Continue focusing on one chapter each day, returning to the Sabbath chapter every Sunday. If you complete all suggested activities for a chapter, you may want to come up with new, related activities. You also can repeat activities from that chapter or move on to one you haven't completed.

You do not need to follow the pattern suggested above. You may choose to focus on one chapter at a time before moving on, but I recommend that you not neglect some aspects of Isaiah 58 in favor of your favorites. Whatever approach you choose to take, I strongly encourage you to take Sundays off, doing only activities from chapter seven or no activities at all. Remember: we are not worthy because of what we do; instead, we rely and rest on God's gracious love for us.

Chapter One: Verse 6

“...to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke”

Over and over in Isaiah 58:6-9, the Lord calls his people to liberate the oppressed from injustice. It’s easy for us to say, “But I’m not oppressing anyone,” or “How can *I* possibly liberate the oppressed?” Even if we don’t encounter oppressed people on a daily basis, our actions have consequences. Our cheap food may be supplied by slave labor. Someone within driving distance of our house may be holding teenage girls against their wills to use as prostitutes. The clothing we purchased for a few dollars may have been sewn by women who were locked in a factory to work long hours.

Activity One *Learn more about injustice.*

The first step in liberating the oppressed is to open our eyes to see the injustices in our world. We can do this through educating ourselves. This is the heart of activity one.

Set aside some time to explore websites that will tell you more about human trafficking. Here are some good places to start:

state.gov/g/tip/
ijm.org

To learn more about unjust conditions in sweatshops, read:

theworld.org/2011/03/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire/
greenamerica.org/programs/sweatshops/

To read more about fair trade, visit:

fairtradeusa.org
fairtradefederation.org

Activity Two *Change your habits.*

Pick *one* shopping habit to change based on what you have learned about human trafficking and sweatshops. For instance, you might decide to buy sustainably made or used clothing whenever possible, or you might decide to buy only fair trade chocolate bars. Don’t move on to another change until the first one is a habit.

Activity Three *Spread the word.*

Teach others about the unjust conditions under which we obtain cheap food, clothing, and other consumer goods. You can write a letter to the editor of a local paper, make a presentation at your church, tell a friend or family member, or think of other ways to share your knowledge in order to inspire change.

Activity Four Ask companies to change their policies.

Can't find fair trade coffee at your local supermarket? Ask them to start carrying it! Found out that your favorite chocolate company isn't doing anything to combat slavery in the cocoa industry? Write a letter and tell them you will be spending your money on fair trade chocolate from other companies. Companies do change when enough consumers let them know they are concerned about their policies.

Activity Five Write letters to literally free oppressed prisoners.

Participate in a campaign to free a prisoner of conscience. Two organizations that feature such campaigns are Voice of the Martyrs (persecution.com) and Amnesty International (amnesty.org).

Activity Six Contemplate spiritual oppression.

Oppression can be spiritual. Christians believe that Jesus is good news for the world, but is that the message we convey to others? Think about how you model Christ and how you might better demonstrate God's love for the world through the way you live.

Chapter Two: Verse 7

“...to share your food with the hungry”

Here’s a radical concept: maybe fasting is less about going hungry (at least as an exercise in self-discipline) than it is about feeding the hungry.

Activity One Work to provide food for the poorest of the poor.

Volunteer at Feed My Starving Children. If your church doesn’t regularly send groups of volunteers, you can sign up online at fmsc.org. While there, consider adding to your gift by making a donation and/or making a ministry-supporting purchase in their gift shop.

Activity Two Feed the hungry locally.

In 2015, 5 percent of U.S. households experienced “very low food security,” meaning that members of the household had to disrupt eating patterns and reduce food intake, because they did not have adequate food. Consider how you can feed hungry people in your area.

- Volunteer at a soup kitchen.
- Donate to a food shelf.
- Contact a local school, see if they have any unpaid lunch accounts, and help pay off one or more accounts.

Activity Three Feed someone you know.

When you make a meal or bake for your family, double the recipe and freeze half of what you make. Give what you have frozen to a family you know that is struggling financially.

Activity Four Give anonymously.

Send an envelope containing a grocery gift card, but omit your name and return address. Leave a bag of shelf-stable, packaged groceries on someone’s doorstep. Give an ice cream store gift certificate to your church with directions for the pastor to distribute to a family that can’t afford treats. There are many ways to provide nourishment and occasional celebratory foods for others!

Activity Five Donate livestock to a hungry family.

Heifer International helps impoverished families by providing them with livestock that can provide for the family’s needs and even provide the family with extra income. The livestock provide participating families with resources like milk, wool, eggs, fertilizer, and other resources that can make a difference in their well-being. You can donate through heifer.org.

Chapter Three: Verse 7, continued

“...to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...”

People need shelter when they are displaced, due to war, natural disasters, or economic difficulties. I once read that if every church in the United States took in one homeless person, there would be no such thing as homelessness in America. I’m not sure if that is true, but the Bible makes it clear that it is our responsibility to shelter the homeless.

Activity One Make a donation to a homeless shelter and/or a disaster-relief fund.

There are homeless people both in your own area and around the world whom you can help with financial donations. Among these organizations are Catholic Charities (catholiccharitiesusa.org/efforts/sheltering-those-in-need), the UN Refugee Agency (unhcr.org/en-us/shelter.html), Shelter for Life (shelter.org), Compassion International (compassion.com/disaster-relief.htm), Preemptive Love Coalition (preemptivelove.org), and World Vision (worldvision.org/our-work/disaster-response).

Activity Two Help resettle refugees.

Imagine that you were uprooted from your home due to circumstances like war or persecution. Refugees are among the people who most need our help.

Given the current political situation, one of the best things you can do for refugees is to let your senators and representative know that you support continued refugee resettlement in the United States.

You can also contact an agency that works with refugees in order to volunteer for the agency or to financially support its work. Among these organizations are International Rescue Committee (rescue.org), World Relief (worldrelief.org/refugee-crisis), and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (refugees.org).

Activity Three Open your home to international students.

Not all international students in the United States are housed on campus. Consider opening your home to a student from abroad. Host families have the opportunity to make friends from around the world and to share the love of Christ with their guests. One agency to consider is International Student Exchange (iseusa.org).

Activity Four Volunteer to help at a homeless shelter.

Homeless shelters need volunteers to everything from cooking food to sorting through donations to driving buses. Contact shelters in your area to see if you can lend a hand to support their work.

Chapter Four: Verse 7, continued

“...when you see the naked, to clothe them...”

It’s pretty rare to see naked people walking around outside, but we can provide clothing for those who need it, and we may even be able to do so without spending a dime.

Activity One Donate your own clothing.

Start this activity by deciding what your basic wardrobe should encompass. How many pairs of pants do you need? How many dresses, tops, and skirts? How many shoes and coats? Once you have decided on a basic wardrobe on paper, ruthlessly go through what you own. Do you have more than you need? Where can you eliminate clothing? If you have stained or ripped pieces that you no longer wear, toss them. If you have clothing in good condition that you can part with, find ways to pass it on – giving it away to people you know are in need or donating it to a resale shop or other charity. Be similarly generous with outgrown children’s clothing.

Activity Two Donate new clothing or money, if you can.

Consider donating cash or like-new clothing to Dress for Success (dressforsuccess.org), an organization which provides professional clothing for impoverished women entering the workforce. And, if you are an expert bargain shopper, you may be able to find some inexpensive, current styles in career wear that you can pass on to this charity.

Activity Three Set aside winter clothing for fall coat drives.

If your children have outgrown their winter coats, or if you have acquired a new coat but still own a coat in good condition, clean the coats and set them aside for winter coat drives in the fall. Also, although store shelves probably have been stripped bare by March, if you do see any hats, scarves, or gloves for sale, buy them and set them aside to donate.

Chapter Five: Verse 7, continued

“... and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood...”

What does it mean not to turn away from “your own flesh and blood”? Commentaries note that this definitely includes your kindred, but also all humankind. John Gill writes that “all men... are the same flesh.” The Geneva Study Bible says of this verse “for in him you see yourself as in a mirror.” We are to turn away from no one who needs us, including, of course, our relatives. Because I feel that many of the activities in other chapters help us reach out to others, I focus specifically on relatives in this chapter.

Activity One Practice hospitality in your own family.

Make family members comfortable, especially when they are sad, tired, or ill. Frequently include their favorite foods in meals. Keep your home tidy for their sakes, if you won’t do it for your own sake. Provide them with surprises, such as breakfast in bed. Make a list of other ideas, and try to do something each day to show hospitality to members of your family.

Activity Two Reach out to someone who is difficult.

Think of a relative or another person in your life from whom you would rather “turn away.” Make a list of ways that you can reach out to them and pick at least one thing a month to do for them. Some ideas include calling the person just to say “hi,” giving a sincere compliment, giving the person a care package when they are ill or stressed, sending them a loving letter, finding out the things they love and giving a gift related to one of those things, helping them with an overwhelming project, welcoming them to your home warmly, scheduling one-on-one time with them, asking for their prayer requests, and finding ways to show gratitude to them. Make a decision to love the person unconditionally, and ask God what he wants you to do for them.

Activity Three Reach out to distant family members.

If you have family members who live far away, be sure to make a point of reaching out to them on a frequent basis. Call, write to, or email them regularly. Visit them when you are able, especially if they can no longer travel. Send them mail -- cards, photos, gifts, whatever helps them feel included in your life.

Chapter Six: Verse 9

“... do away... with the pointing finger and malicious talk...”

I find it is so easy to “point a finger” at that those I disagree with and to engage in malicious talk about the more “difficult” people in my life. God wants us to love not just with our actions, but also with our speech. In these activities we will practice building people up rather than tearing them down.

Activity One Stop the gossip.

Decide that you will only speak kindly about others. Ask yourself, “What would the person I’m speaking about think if they overheard me? How do my words reflect back on Jesus?”

Activity Two Be an encourager.

Make a commitment to encourage others rather than tearing them down. Take some time every evening to reflect back on conversations, and ask yourself if your speech was encouraging or discouraging. *Note: This does mean that you can never speak critically about someone’s behavior. It does mean that you need to do so without violating their dignity as a person. Focus on the behavior and not the person.*

Chapter Seven: Verse 13

*“... keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please... call the Sabbath a delight
... honor it by not going your own way and not... speaking idle words”*

This is the most difficult chapter for me, because I don't fully understand it. How do we keep from breaking Sabbath yet not do as we please? Evidently, whatever we do, even if it isn't "as we please," we are not to complain but to take delight in the Sabbath. And what does it mean not to speak "idle words"? I don't claim to have definitive answers, even after reading some commentaries on this passage, but here are some ideas for trying to put this into practice.

Activity One Don't work on the Sabbath.

Step one in keeping the Sabbath is learning how to let go of our need to be busy and in charge, how to truly rest. Make meals ahead that can be easily heated on Sunday, or prepare very simple meals, like pasta and sauce from a jar. Let virtually all of the housework go for a day. Plan ahead so that you don't shop. Sometimes I've found it helpful to define the 24-hour period I will call the Sabbath (Is it from the time I get up to the time ago to bed? From sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday? From dinnertime Saturday to dinnertime Sunday?), and then mark that time with a special ceremony at each end, such as lighting candles and saying a prayer.

Activity Two Don't use the Sabbath as a personal vacation.

This one is hard for me, especially since I'm an introvert. At the end of a busy week, I want "me" time! But from passages like this, I get the idea that, while the Sabbath is a day of rest and a delight, it isn't a special weekly "me" day. When deciding Sabbath activities, we should choose in favor of worshipping God or serving others. We know we should go to church instead of sleeping in. But if the choice is catching up on the great novel you were reading or taking a walk with the family, take the walk. If the choice is having a date with your spouse or calling a hurting friend, call the friend (and schedule the date for another day of the week). I think this is what it means to not do as you please or go your own way. (Note, based on a personal area of temptation: While housework is a way for us to serve our families, I think we need to be careful not to justify a day full of housework on the Sabbath as a good activity because we are "serving others" – unless it really is something special, like taking over chores for a bedridden person.)

Activity Three Keep watching your language

What on earth does it mean to not speak "idle words"? Some people believe that all of our words should be profitable. To me, this smacks of legalism. Can we really not engage in light chat with our friends on Sundays, like discussing a favorite TV show? If we want to avoid such a strict approach, what should we do? I believe this brings us back to the notion of speech that builds up

or tears down. We should watch our speech all the time, but most especially on the Sabbath. Consider using Sundays to focus on the way you speak to and about others.

Activity Four Take a break from social media and other digital temptations.

I can say from personal experience that I've actually made new friends and reinforced friendships through social media. That said, social media, surfing the web, and other ways we use electronic devices can become time sucks. Consider taking a break from social media, email, and possibly from electronics altogether in order to make time for God and face-to-face relationships.