

Do I have to take Isaiah 58:7 literally?

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A particular verse of scripture has been haunting me lately. I hear it as an indictment of an aspect of my personal life.

First, it was a [lectionary text in Epiphany](#). Then I found it in the unifying passage of [a devotional book I read](#).

“Bring the homeless poor into your house,” we read in Isaiah 58:7, part of a passage on genuine fasting.

It would be easy to dismiss this as specific to the people the author is addressing. We might add that homelessness is different in our time: Organizations are now the best way to help. There are numerous organizations and ministries worth financially supporting and serving as a volunteer or employee. (If you can't think of any, check out [Love Wins Ministries](#).)

And collective efforts are fitting. After all, the prophetic author of Third Isaiah is addressing a people about what God desires as a moral way of life. Through organizations, people with and without homes are part of the same circles of concern. That's like bringing people into one's house, right?

I was more-or-less satisfied with such a response. Then a member of the homeless poor became more of a part of my life.

In the past couple of years my husband has struck up a friendship of sorts through conversations on the street in downtown Chicago. ("Friendship" may be the wrong word for a connection created from such an unbalanced situation.) After starting my job at the *Century*, I began sharing my husband's commute four days a week, and I got to know the man as well. (I omit his name for the sake of his privacy.) We would help him get food and inquire about jobs, but mainly we listened to his concerns. Like friends, maybe.

A couple of months later, the man became ill. It was lung cancer, and he has had several stays at the public hospital near our house. We visited and prayed with him. He had reconnected with his family and was staying with them sometimes, though there has been continued conflict. When a relative called the room, he said we were his "friends from downtown."

Perhaps ironically, in growing closer to this man I have felt more strongly indicted by the words from the book of Isaiah. Why don't we bring our friend from downtown into our house? Why have I been satisfied with collective responses without being willing to also make a personal sacrifice?

We have reasons for not inviting this man to live with us, some of them good ones. And we don't know that he'd accept if we invited him. I got a reference for hospice care should the time come, care that would be better than what we could provide.

In the end, such reasoning doesn't seem to be what I ought to take away from this passage. Isaiah speaks plainly, and it causes discomfort. God doesn't call us to be wracked by guilt, but perhaps we are supposed to live with the discomfort rather than seeking the ease of rationalization. We are not excused from wrestling with the words of the prophets, words that resonate in our own time.

We are doing something. We could be doing more. We live in between the two.