

When It Is Time To Fast and Pray

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Philippians Series
Philippians 4:13

This morning I want to talk about the subject of fasting. It is a subject that I don't believe I have ever taught on before, in part because as I am going to tell you several times throughout this talk, I believe I am the worst faster that I know. This is a radically under developed area of my own life. One that has been pretty much neglected for the years that I have been a Christian. But, I will talk about it today and hopefully if you are like me, we can grow together.

Part of the reason I love preaching in this church is because you have given me the grace to be who I am. I don't have to play pretend with you and you don't have to play pretend with me. As we understand everything and do everything, we can be really who we are and learn how to grow together spiritually. That is a major part of why I love the Vineyard, because I think that the church does emphasize reality. If you are a guest here, I think you will find that. We are real with each other.

So, we are going to talk about fasting and I am going to talk about it as one who is an utter novice, but I am responsible as a pastor to teach the Bible even about those things that I am bad at and that I have to tell you that I am bad at.

Now, where I would like to begin is by looking at a verse that we only briefly addressed in Philippians. I think I only have one more teaching in Philippians. You know, every time I come to the end of a series or a book, it is sort of sad. It is like

leaving a familiar friend. You get comfortable in a certain place. I have been teaching through Paul's letter to the Philippians for a number of months now. I have only one teaching left. But there is a verse that I gave very short attention to a couple of weeks ago. That was Philippians 4:13, where Paul writes:

"I can do everything through him who give me strength."

Now, I think this verse really summarizes the life of the Christian—the Christian man, the Christian woman, the Christian teenager. It holds in beautiful balance, this perfect tension, the complicated nature of the Christian life. In fact, I would say that there are no people on earth more difficult to understand than real Christians. Because real Christians always have these two qualities running through them that are described in this verse. The verse says: "I can do all things...[I can do everything] through him who gives me strength."

On the one hand you see this incredible confidence that exists in a growing way in the true Christian. I can do everything. There is nothing that I can't do.

On the other hand, you see this incredible weakness and dependence in the true Christian. "...Through him who gives me strength." And it really is like a seesaw in the Christian life that the longer a person walks with Christ, the longer a person is a real Christian and advances in spirituality, you are going to see this sense of growing confidence and optimism about the future on one hand. And then on the other, you are going to see this growing weakness and lowliness and dependence.

I can do everything. That is the upside of the seesaw. There is nothing that I can't face. On the other side...but only through him who gives me strength. Incredible weakness, incredible dependence.

I want to accord this out for just a moment. You know, the real Christian lives in utter contrast to everyone else. I think about most Americans and there is probably no place that you see the contrast between real Christians and the rest of folks than in something like this—this seesaw balance. As I said, real Christians have this incredible confidence and yet total dependence, weakness. And over against that, when I look around at most of America, most of America is not confident at all. We are incredibly anxious. We don't know what is going to come next and what is hitting us. We are fearful about the future and fearful about the economy. Fearful about terrorism and fearful about the possibility that we could have cancer or that our body is sick or what is to become of our kids. We are worried continually.

And on the other hand, most Americans are incredibly independent. Don't fence me in. Don't tell me what to do. I need to make my own decisions about life. Don't tread on me. Our basic document is the Declaration of Independence. We have taken that to be a personal statement of beliefs and not just a political statement.

So we see exactly the opposite seesaw in the United States. Instead of incredible confidence and yet great dependence on God and great weakness, we see this incredible anxiety, don't we? Isn't it the case, as I said a few weeks ago, that the best selling medications in America are anti-anxiety drugs? More and more people are being treated for panic disorders. And that is only on the extreme. Many of the rest of us are suffering continually from these crippling worries about the future.

You just don't see that in the New Testament. You don't see this crippling worry, but you do see this extraordinary weakness. Statements like: "I can do nothing" and "when I am weak, then I am strong" and Jesus tells us, "Apart from me you can do

nothing” over against trying to create all of these props to rest on ourselves, to hold the future back. The real Christian says, “Hey, I can face anything. Even though I am so incredibly weak and frail. But I do it in growing dependence on God.”

Last week I had the opportunity to go out to California to a board meeting. I am on the national board for the Association that we are a part of in this church. This local church called “Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus” is part of a national association called the “Association of Vineyard Churches”. And we have about 500 Vineyard churches now around the world. We are in 31 countries. The association is very new. We have only been around for about 12 years. And basically, the churches are reaching out to young people. We use contemporary music. If you have been around, you know our style. We are trying to help people grow in their relationship with God.

Now, the churches are all locally governed and all the churches own their own property. We don’t get orders from above about what to do with our property or who to appoint as our leaders. But we are a part of a larger association that assists us to be involved in global missions and to do church planting. Also it benefits us by way of larger accountability in case there are problems in the local church.

In any case, all that is to say that I am serving on the national leadership board for the association of Vineyard churches. This past week I was out in Anaheim, California, where we had a national board meeting. While I was there, I had the opportunity to stay in the home of John and Carol Wimber. John Wimber is the president of the Association of Vineyard Churches.

For those of you who don't know John, I can tell you that there is nobody who has ever had a larger impact on my life spiritually than this man, John Wimber. He has had the greatest impact on the direction of my Christian life and Christian growth of any human being. And as I looked at this text: I can do everything through him who gives me strength—I thought who is it to me that models huge confidence on the one hand—I can handle anything—and, yet, extraordinary dependence and weakness on the other? Who is living out this seesaw? It would be John Wimber.

I don't know how many of you know, but in the last five or six years, John has been through real hell on earth in many ways. He had a heart attack about six years ago and then a couple of years ago discovered that he had cancer, which has been successfully treated, it appears. In any case, in the last six months, life has become particularly difficult for John and his wife, Carol. John retired from his church as senior pastor and turned the church over to his associate. John's plan was to not stop working, but to work in a different area. To do more writing and to do a lot of leadership training conferences over the next five to ten years. John's hope was to train up a lot of young leaders who he could pass on his understanding of Christianity and to help young leaders to grow spiritually. He was planning to do a lot of writing and to do conference speaking as well as to teach in his old church.

Then he has a stroke which, at least for the current time, set back any plans he had to write or to do conference speaking because of his weakness. They moved from their house. When you just think about the life transitions of retirement, a stroke, cancer, and moving from your house of 25 years and, then, just a week ago, they

discovered that their son, their oldest boy, has melanoma, cancer, that has gotten into 28 of his lymph nodes. They had to operate. It's just one thing after another.

I have been watching John for the last eight years and I see this wonderful seesaw in John more than I have seen it in anyone else, which is why I respect him so much. I can do everything. I can face the future. I do not have to sink into despair or into anxiety. I don't have to spend hour after hour in mind-numbing fretfulness. And yet, I am so incredibly weak in myself. I know myself so well as to know that I can handle nothing in my own strength and in my own ability, my own competence. The only way I can do anything is through Christ who gives me strength.

John will say it over and over again: It is not about us. It is about Christ. This whole thing is not about my great faith and my great ability. It is about his great ability and his great strength.

The paradigm for real Christianity is not anxiety and independence. It is confidence and dependence. Confidence and weakness. Optimism and lowliness and brokenness before God. That is the way we live.

Now, the rest of the talk, what I am going to do is to discuss how we can grow in these qualities of confidence about the future and a growing sense of dependence through the practice of a spiritual discipline known as fasting. I believe fasting is a way that you and I can grow in confidence and in weakness. I have called today's talk, "When It Is Time To Fast and Pray." Let's just ask God's presence.

Now, I want to switch gears here for a moment and talk with you about what is coming up for our church in the near future. About a month or two ago I felt like God personally spoke to me in a series of very brief visions in which I believe, I am not sure,

but I believe that God wanted us, as a whole church family, to focus on reaching out to our community around us as our singular goal for the next four months. And he gave me a picture of a tent out in the parking lot. What we are going to do as a church family in reaching out to the community around us, to our neighbors, to our families, to our friends, to the poor, is we are going to throw, basically, a big party here. We are labeling our party, "Summer Harvest". And we are planning to have at the end of the summer a week of events, music and I was hoping that we could do some country line dancing maybe a couple of times during the summer out in the parking lot. Set up a band and get some of our folks who know how to do that to do it and teach the rest of us. Get some music and food going, some grills. We will have a speaker in each evening and talk about how to start a relationship with Jesus.

To prepare for this we are going to do a bunch of training to learn how to reach out to friends, families, neighbors and to be able to share your faith better. One of the reasons that I am so excited about the Summer Harvest that we are going to have [by the way, there are going to be events for kids and events for teens and some for adults] one of the reasons that I am so excited about this is that we can get to do this whole thing together as a church family. We are family. Because of what Christ has done, those of you who have placed your faith in Christ have become sons and daughters of God. And because you are sons and daughters of God, we are related to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Do you know it has been five or six years, other than building this building, it has been a number of years since we have done anything together, all of us, as a church family? We have so many wonderful things going on in this church. So many groups

and so many ministries and activities—reaching into jails and toward the poor. We have AIDS ministry and hundreds of groups. Stuff for men and women and young people and all of that. But this Summer Harvest is an opportunity for every part of our church to pitch in and draw together and reach out to the community as one church family.

And so, where we want to begin is not with a bunch of training right off the bat. It is not with a bunch of activities. It is not with a planning list. Where we want to begin is in this place of great confidence in what God can do and yet extraordinary dependence and weakness regarding ourselves. I really believe that the foundation of the whole summer must be laid in fasting and in prayer. That job #1 for Summer Harvest is to really bathe the whole thing in fasting and prayer as an entire church, not just as a few people who are good at that kind of thing—the pastors (excluding me). What I am talking about involves the entire church family. That means you, if you are a part of this church. Husbands, it doesn't just mean your wives. It means you. Wives, it just doesn't mean your husbands. It means you. Teens, it is not just your parents. If you are a teenager here, or in middle school or in high school or are just starting college, what I am talking about in terms of fasting and prayer regarding the Summer Harvest is something I want to have grip you personally. Not just your parents, this is for you.

Again, where we want to begin with all that we are doing for the summer is in the place of great confidence in God and in great weakness in our own selves and great dependence on God. I believe that can be birthed in fasting and in prayer, as I read my Bible. I realize that there is a lot of resistance in you, if you are anything like me, to even hear a discussion about fasting, partly because most of us have utterly neglected fasting as part of our spiritual disciplines and spiritual lives.

In fact, there was very little, at least in Protestant churches and evangelical churches like ours, there is very little discussion about fasting until the last 10 years or so. Richard Foster has a wonderful chapter in his book on spiritual disciplines [which, by the way, we have copies of in our bookstore—if we don't, we need to get some]. But in Richard Foster's book, he said that in his research he could find no book written on the subject of fasting for about 100 years, from about 1855-1955 in the English language. People just stopped thinking about the discipline of fasting.

I realize that inside of me there is a strong personal objection to a discussion of fasting. The personal objection is rooted in this basic idea that I really love to eat. It is not very complicated. You don't need to be a sleuth or a world-class detective to discover that in America, we are absolutely obsessed with food. I mean, apart from your own eating, how many messages a day do you get just encouraging you to think about food? You drive out of the church and there are huge billboards advertising food. Every other commercial on TV is a food commercial. Look at a magazine rack sometime and see the number of magazines devoted to the preparation of food and different kinds of food. Go to any bookstore and look at the sections of cookbooks and food. There are a thousand different kinds of cuisines.

We have some dear friends in the church, Jim and Sara Meyer. Jim and Sara are now serving as missionaries in Singapore. The church is helping to support them financially. In any case, Jim used to be an advertising executive and he used to shoot the Wendy's commercials. He told me that a team of people, producers and directors, artists, graphics people, would spend literally a day getting camera angles on Wendy's hamburgers. Making sure that the tomato was sliced exactly right and they would put it

on a piece of glass and shoot it from underneath so that it appeared to be hanging in the air. They had to get the steam right. They would bring in fans to make sure that the steam off the hamburger was wafting straight up. Or that there weren't little bits of grizzle or fat on the bun. They used colored marbles for different kinds of effects. We take our best and brightest in America and they spend their time making a hamburger look incredibly desirable.

So, living in this food obsessed culture, part of our resistance to the subject of fasting is that we all love to eat. Some of us believe that if we stopped eating for a day or a meal, we would starve to death.

Can we talk here? Can I get personal here? If you look at me and look at yourself, we won't starve to death if we miss a meal. Nor will we starve to death if we miss three meals.

I realize that there are a few of you who have medical conditions and we have diabetics in this church who must watch your food intake. But I am not talking to you. I am talking to the rest of us who don't have a medical condition regarding our eating. We can afford to miss a meal.

But we do resist the notion of fasting because all of us love to eat. And we also have religious objections to fasting. Part of the evangelical reaction to fasting has to do with its association with certain medieval ascetic practices, mainly among Roman Catholics and people living in monasteries. Fasting became associated in the medieval church with what is known as asceticism. Now, I want to distinguish for you asceticism from Christianity.

The mark of an ascetic is that person believes that a spiritual discipline is an end in itself. And so ascetics will often talk for hours about the wonder of fasting and the glory of all night prayer meetings and how we all stayed up in midnight watches to pray. It wasn't until 5:00 a.m. that glorious things happened. But there is this continual competition among ascetics to do more and more and more by way of spiritual discipline. The focus is on the discipline, whether it is fasting or giving away your money and living a simple lifestyle or prayer or Bible reading. The focus is on the practice as an end in itself.

Now, biblical Christians always view spiritual disciplines not as an end in themselves, but as a means of getting close to God. The focus of a biblical Christian is always away from a spiritual discipline like prayer, like fasting. In terms of a concentration of a thing in itself, the concentration is always on the end. To gain God, to gain Christ, to gain the mind of God, to draw close to God, to grow in dependence on God, to grow in confidence in God.

See, I believe that the medieval ascetics, people who live today and are constantly making other people feel guilty about how much they pray and we have all night prayer meetings and we live simpler than Thou—I believe ascetics are like body-builders who have long ago lost the point of weight lifting. You know, it is no longer that we lift weights as a means to an end to physical health or as a means to relieve stress or because we enjoy seeing lots of weight get thrown around to some end. But weight lifting becomes an end in itself and we begin to measure the size of our biceps. Where bigger is always better. An ascetic practice is always like that. More is always better. Well, if you fast for one day, why not fast for seven days? If you fast for seven days,

why not fast for 30 days? The focus is always on the practice in itself rather than what the person has gained through the practice.

Of course, in the Bible the Pharisees were the ultimate ascetics who always talked about their disciplines and not about their relationship with God. In reaction to asceticism and the extreme practices of the medieval monks, evangelicals have said forget the discipline of fasting. But I need to tell you that you don't have to be an ascetic to practice fasting. Some of us may wonder if there is even a biblical reason to fast. Perhaps your objection is not in terms of the misuse of fasting throughout the church age, but rather your objection really has to do with your understanding of the Bible and you don't yet understand the biblical place of fasting.

This past week, in preparation for this talk, I had the opportunity to read, I think, every single occurrence of fasting throughout the Old and New Testaments. There are quite a number of instances of people fasting. What I discovered was that in the Old Testament, fasting was commanded. For one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, the entire Jewish nation, the people of Israel, were commanded to spend the day fasting. You can see that in Leviticus 16. Fasts were also called as needed as in the case of national emergencies, during wars when Israel was surrounded by enemies, the King would call a fast.

There were national days of fasting for the purpose of repentance and returning to God. There were times of fasting because of personal needs. We see many people in the scriptures take time to fast because of a personal need. David fasted when his baby was ill. He fasted before God and prayed for a week. Hezekiah fasted when he was sick. Daniel fasted to draw near to God in repentance and identification with the

sins of Israel. Esther called for all of her friends to hold a three day fast before she went in to see the King. Ezra fasted. Nehemiah fasted. But the short of it is that fasting was commanded in the Old Testament.

Now, in the New Testament, fasting is not commanded. I challenge you to find one verse in the New Testament where a Christian is ever commanded to fast. You can't find it. Yet, as I looked over the numerous passages regarding fasting in the New Testament, what I believe is that where fasting is not commanded, it is assumed as a practice of Christians throughout the New Testament.

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus in Matthew 6 lays out three practices which he assumes all Christians will engage in. The practice of giving money to the poor and to the work of God. The practice of praying. And the practice of fasting. There are three acts that characterize the Christian life in Matthew 6: giving money, praying and fasting. And you will note in Matthew 6, if you have a Bible, in verse 2 Jesus says, "When you give, give this way..." In verse 5 he says, "When you pray, pray this way..." And in verse 16, Jesus says, "When you fast, do it this way..." Not if you fast, I am assuming that if you are a follower of mine, from time to time, you are going to fast. Well, here is how you do it.

In Matthew 9 in a very strong statement, Jesus says in response to the question: How is it that we and the Pharisees fast and your disciples do not fast? How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and then they will fast.

What time is it? What time is Jesus referring to regarding when the Bridegroom will be taken from the disciples? He is talking about the time after his crucifixion and

resurrection. I don't believe he is just talking about the day he is put on the cross. He is talking about the whole New Testament age—the church age.

You say, “How do you know that he is talking about that time?”

Well, if you look at the next verse, he speaks about the old and new wineskins. It is very clear that he is talking about the New Covenant age. During the New Covenant age he said they will fast.

Beyond this, we have of course, the practice of Jesus himself who is our model.

Now in the New Testament we see the early church involved in this practice of fasting whenever there was an important decision to make. For example, when the church was seeking the will of God for their future in Acts 13 the Lord launched the world's first Christian missionary endeavor through the church's act of prayer and fasting in Acts 13. When the church needed to appoint leaders, they did so after a season of prayer and fasting in Acts 14. Of course, Jesus appointed disciples after a time of fasting and prayer. It tells us something about our own hasty decisions in selecting leaders and how that particular step needs to be bathed in prayer and fasting.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 6 and 11 tells us that he engaged in fasting often. Both Jesus and Paul, of course, are models for us. Is there a command to fast in the New Testament? No. Do we see people who practiced fasting? Is it the implicit assumption of the New Testament that Christians will fast? The answer is yes.

And by the way, this is the reading of the New Testament by folks whose godliness and spiritual lives are way beyond ours. If you look back at church history at the great saints in the past, people who have become Christian heroes and heroines, we are talking about John Wesley or George Whitfield or Martin Luther or John Calvin

or George Mueller, Hudson Taylor. Women like Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avillia, Mother Teresa of today—they all engaged in this spiritual discipline of fasting. It is just an assumption of the Christian life. We see it in the Bible and we see it in the Christian church.

Now, I want to answer the question why we ought to fast. I have tried to demonstrate that we see fasting in the Bible. And by the way, do search this out for yourself by just taking a concordance. Some of you have concordances at the end of your Bible. If it is extensive, it will have the word “fast” in it. Some of you have your own concordance. I would suggest that every Christian ought to own an exhaustive concordance. If you don’t have one in your home, save up and get one. Get a Strong’s Concordance or one key to your most used Bible, an NIV concordance or a NASB concordance and look up the word “fast”. Just go to the places in the Bible that you find fasting and you will be able to develop your own teaching on fasting by looking up all the verses and seeing what the Bible teaches about it in an exhaustive way.

I haven’t, yet, said *why* we are to fast. And before I tell you why we are to fast, I want to tell you why we ought *not* to fast. Because frankly, I am very concerned with the kind of teaching that I see on the subjects of various spiritual disciplines. Particularly when it comes to fasting or tithing, giving, or prayer. I think there is a lot of teaching and thinking that is quite unfortunate. So I will apply this bad teaching to fasting, but I tell you that you can just as easily apply it to giving or to prayer.

One false bad reason to fast is what I will call a magical way to think about fasting. By magical, I mean that if I do a certain spiritual practice, like fast, then God will give me whatever it is that I want. It is really a pagan idea taken from the ancient world

of the way that people related to the gods and goddesses. If we engage in certain activities, we can manipulate the spiritual world to obtain what we want. In the ancient world, if they wanted fertile crops and fertile wives, lots of children and rain to come, they learned these practices to manipulate the spiritual world to gain the desired result. And unfortunately, this kind of magical thinking in which we somehow gain control of the spiritual world through an activity has permeated the Christian church. You see it particularly with the three spiritual disciplines of fasting, and tithing, and praying.

You know, my business was declining [you will hear this kind of story], my business was declining and we were always stretched for money, but we learned the spiritual secret of tithing. The moment we began to tithe to our local church, our business increased four-fold or five-fold. And it will work for you if you will simply tithe.

Now, I have no doubt that there is an indirect relationship between giving and blessing. It doesn't always work out that if someone tithes they will see an increase in their business. And we don't give in order to obtain that result. I have seen the same kind of magical thinking that if I do x, then God must do y when I have heard about all night prayer meetings. You know, you look back at church history and many of the great revivals were born as a result of all night prayer meetings. Therefore, we will hold an all night prayer meeting and we will spark a revival at Ohio State University or in the city of Columbus or in southern California. It is true that many revivals were born out of all night prayer meetings, but many, many other people have prayed all night and not seen revivals. The relationship between the discipline and the result is indirect. It is not mechanical. It is not a one-to-one correlation.

This is particularly so in the area of fasting. See, the purpose of fasting, in part, is not to gain control over God, but to grow in dependence and weakness upon God. It is not so that I can boss God around but so that God can be more of my Lord. I go to fast in order to be broken before God and to be weak before God. Not to order God around and to tell God, “You must do this and you must do that.”

And so when we engage in a fast together as a church, let’s get rid of magical thinking—because I do this, God must do that—no. That is simply not so. And I have always hated that kind of formulaic thinking in spiritual disciplines when it comes to healing. You know, if you just do these four steps, then you will get your healing. If it were that simple, then everyone would be healed. It is not that simple. We always have a God who is in control. The purpose of the Christian life is to come under the control of God more and more. Fasting is a means of that.

Well, if there is a bad approach to fasting because of magical thinking, I would say another bad approach to fasting is the mechanical thinking. That is that you just simply set aside certain times to fast because it is a good discipline. So the Pharisees used to fast Monday and Thursday. Churches, for years, have said that you need to fast on this and this and this holiday. But it is not designed to gain God. It is just a mechanical practice. I see the same thing in people’s devotional lives. It is a good thing to have the discipline of getting up in the morning and reading your Bible and praying, so long as you use it as a means to gain God. But when it just becomes mechanical, when we pray and read just because we need to check it off a list, you have lost the point.

Fasting is not meant to be magical and it is not meant to be mechanical. We just don't do it to check it off a list. And of course, we don't fast and pray in order to advertise to the world our spirituality. Jesus said, "When you fast [I am assuming you will from time to time] when you do it, don't do it like the Pharisees, the hypocrites. For they disfigure their faces to show men that they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that it won't be obvious to men that you are fasting."

What he is saying is don't advertise your spirituality. Brothers and sisters, I will tell you that I am so challenged by Jesus' words. I think of how many times I have advertised my spirituality. By advertising, I mean that there is this idea that if other people don't see what I am doing, then no one sees what I am doing. We advertise when we begin to believe that the only way for some act of ours to be rewarded is for another person to see it or to acknowledge it or to appreciate it. And we feel bad, we are advertising when we feel bad, because no one has patted us on the back recently for a job well done. We have the advertising mentality when we say we are tired of doing something when we have not been thanked. When we think about a job being a thankless job. We have an advertising mentality when we work harder just when people are around or when the boss is around. We have an advertising mentality when we change our prayer style just because we are being watched. Or when we pretend to be something that we are not.

Jesus said just because other people don't see you, don't worry that no one sees what you are doing in your home, the acts of service that you do for your children or for

the church or for your parents. Don't worry that no one sees what you are doing in your giving. Or in your praying, because God sees you.

Well, why should we fast then if not for magical or mechanical or advertising purposes? One good reason to fast is to come to the discovery that our true need is God. Through fasting, we can discover that our need below every need is God. We think we need a million things. And in a consumer society, in a materialist society, let's be honest and say that if we put together a list of our needs, it would be ever expanding, never satisfied, never satiated. The list is always growing.

In a psychological society, not only do we need a million consumer goods, the newest and the latest, but we also have all these psychic needs and emotional needs and nurturance needs. We are discovering new needs all the time. And it is not as if all of that is entirely false. But frankly, what America needs to come to grips with is that there is a need that we have that goes below every other need—a need for God.

Pascal, the great philosopher and mathematician said that inside of each one of us there is a God-shaped void that we try to fill with other things. We still find ourselves in need. Augustine, the great theologian and church father, said that our souls are restless until they find their rest in God.

Jesus fasted. And when Satan came along to tempt him, Jesus responded with the scripture, "Man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In other words, real life, true life, the meeting of our deepest needs is not just by eating or drinking. Life, Jesus said, is more than food. And the body needs more than clothes. In fasting, we discover that we have been filling our lives with so many things, TV and entertainment and continual music and noise and relationships

and sex, but you know, what we really need is to become a friend of God again. Among everything else, I have lost friendship with God. I have lost a deep relationship with God. I am not intimate with God. I don't hear God's voice any more.

Why fast? To discover that your deepest need, the need below every need, is God.

And second, in order to practice what I will call true spirituality. Oh, I love being a Christian because we Christians who God's mercy has come to, are people who love dealing with reality—with the concrete, with the creation. See, most folks, whether they realize it or not, don't understand what it means to be spiritual. And the way that spirituality is often understood is in a Greek way in opposition to the body and creation and to material. To be spiritual means to have a certain attitude, a certain mindset.

But you know, the Bible wasn't written by Greeks. It was written by Jews. Jesus was a Jew. Paul was a Jew. Moses was a Jew. And the Jews have always had a much more solid, material, concrete view of spirituality. Spirituality is something that you can taste. It is something that you can smell. It is something that you can look at. It is physical and relational.

See, fasting reminds us that true spirituality has to do with our bodies. That we can't escape our bodies. True spirituality is not just a matter of your inner attitude toward food; it is a matter of food and eating. Paul says that the way he practices spirituality is that he gets on top of his body. 1 Corinthians 9:27. You are not a spiritual person, a truly spiritual person unless you have gotten on top of your sex life; on top of your appetites for nicotine; on top of your appetites for alcohol. Spirituality involves our relationships with each other.

I love the fact that Isaiah 58, a great chapter on fasting, says that you can't be engaged in a fast unless you start giving money to the poor and relating to other people with justice and with cleaning up your relationships. True spirituality has to do with relating to your spouse and with relating to your kids rightly.

I so often meet people who say we have an attitude of giving money. But giving is not an attitude alone. It is an attitude and an action. You actually give money, sacrificially and substantially, or you are not a spiritual person. You cannot be a spiritual person unless you are sacrificially giving. You cannot be a spiritual person unless you are physically involved in the thing. And so fasting reminds us of true spirituality. That it involves not just the attitude of the soul, the motion of the spirit, it also involves the body, eating, drinking, what we do with our eyes, our hands, our feet. It is very, very practical and very, very physical.

We engage in fasting to seek God for a break-through. Again, I want to tell you that the relationship between a spiritual discipline and obtaining what we are seeking is indirect. There are no guarantees. It is a dotted line, this business of the kingdom of God. Yes, there is an already in the kingdom, but there is also a not yet. There is, however, this dotted line relationship between what we are doing and opening ourselves up to be able to receive a break-through.

Over and over in the Bible, during times of stress or crisis or when people we're particularly seeking God regarding a decision or the future or when people we're particularly seeking God for a blessing, all that I would label under the word "break-through" we see people, we see nations, we see groups, we see churches engage in the practice of fasting.

As I mentioned before, when Jerusalem was surrounded by an enemy army, the king called a fast. Throughout the Old Testament, in times of national crisis, the leader of the nation called a fast.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, if in light of this tragic bombing and the death of so many children and so many innocent people in Oklahoma City—in light of the national crisis that we are in, in terms of the violence in our society, if the President and the Congress and the Supreme Court and our leaders said we will stop looking at our crisis as a purely political thing. We will not play politics. We will not look at our national crisis as an economic matter. It is just about money and budget deficits. We will not look at our crisis as a purely educational matter. What we need is to improve our schools.

But like the kings and the leaders of old in the Bible, wouldn't it be wonderful if our national political leaders called a day of national fasting and repentance to seek the face of God? Recognizing that our crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis? That we, as a country, are disconnected from God?

John Wesley wrote of the King of England in his day in 1756, who during a time of national crisis, as a result of a threat and attack by the nation of France, tore his robes and called for the whole nation of England to engage in a fast.

We fast to gain break-throughs, personally. In the Bible you will find examples of parents fasting for their children. Some of you parents have kids who you are very concerned about. They may have a behavioral problem. They may be involved in drugs. They may be personally hurting, in pain, going through a divorce. Your child may be ill.

Or it may be you. You are going through some sort of crisis. You are going through a separation. Your spouse needs a turn-around. You need a turn-around. You are looking for a break-through in terms of a life-controlling habit. We need to seek God.

I really appreciate Isaiah 58:6 when it says: "Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen to lose the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and to break every yoke?"

When I read those words, I think about break-throughs. And very often, there is an issue in our life that needs a radical change. Again, brothers and sisters, I am not suggesting to you or promising a certain result, but if we go before God in sincerity, in fasting and prayer, we are at least making ourselves available and increasing our capacity for God.

But the final reason we fast and pray is where I started. To increase dependence on the Lord and to build confidence for the future. Here we are, we are going to engage in a Summer Harvest. How can we think that we can impact the community around us unless God is on us? How can we think that we can reach out and communicate the wonder of a relationship with Christ unless we as a church are changed? What difference is there in our life that would make us attractive?