

Fasting for a Breakthrough

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Capital Campaign: Responding to God's Extravagant Grace Series

Isaiah 58:1-12

If you've been here over the last several weeks, or if you just are new and drive into our south parking lot, you see that there is some construction going on. Most of you, by now, who are coming to the church are aware of the fact that we are planning to build a new 3,000 person auditorium on the back of this building. We are going to add a large new children's ministry wing, a new full service bookstore, a new café, some extra classrooms, and a new lobby. We are more than doubling our square footage here. We have 52,000 square feet in our present facility with the new wing we opened last year. We're adding 78,000 more square feet. We're going to have almost 3 acres of building under roof. It is going to be a fairly large place when all the construction is done.

We've been holding what we call "personal contact meetings" that are just informational meetings every night. I've been urging you to attend. Now, some of you are not listening to your pastor. If you're part of a small group and your group is listed, please, if you can, go to one of these meetings. Our strong preference would be that you would go as a married couple. But if you both can't go on the same night, that's OK. Pick one night and make plans to attend. For those of you who are not connected to a small group, just pick one of the available nights and go.

Last week I mentioned that I really want every single person to get the information we have and to see the new video. It is a computerized video of the new building. I said that I really want you to go. This week, I'll just underline that. I really, really want you to go. If you can't make your small group night, then come on one of the other nights, but come out. You are part of this church family. This is the largest undertaking we've ever been involved in as a church. You need to know what is going on.

Now, because of the enormity of this project, and the number of needs that we have, what I'd like you to do is pull out the bulletin insert called "40 Days of Prayer and Fasting." If you take a look at it, you will see that there is a number of prayer needs that we have as a church family. We desire that Christ would be glorified in all that we do, and that we would move forward, especially in this season, in unity. We want the Lord to protect the moral purity of the leadership, and protect the leaders marriages and children. We desire that the leaders would hear God's prophetic Word, that there would be a deep hunger for the presence of the lord, that there would be great generosity and giving, and that we would have protection from Satan. We want evangelism to go forward, the building process to be blessed, and the power and presence of the Lord to be here.

Because of the enormity of the project, and the number of things that we need to bring before God, we have decided to engage the church in a 40-day process of fasting and prayer. You can sign up to fast everything from one meal to a week, or in

the next 40 days. We've even had 6-7 people who said they were going to fast the entire 40 days.

Now, because we are engaging in this process of fasting and praying, I thought this weekend I would teach on the subject of fasting. Fasting is definitely one of those topics that most Christians seek to avoid. In my life, it certainly has not been my favorite topic. If I'm ruthlessly honest, and I deal with the deep reasons why I've avoided the topic of fasting, and I dig underneath all of my motives and thoughts, and if I were to undergo psychotherapy for 10 years, what would probably be discovered in the end is that I simply like to eat! For me, and perhaps for many of you, the reason why we don't study the subject of fasting in the Bible or engage in this practice is because we like food a lot and we don't enjoy being hungry. Particularly in America at this period of time, we live in perhaps the most food-obsessed culture in the history of the world.

On the one hand, every other commercial on TV is selling us food. Come to Chi Chi's, a Celebration of Food, Pizza, Pizza, did somebody say, "McDonald's?" You turn on a TV and at any moment you are going to see dancing M&Ms that are singing and tap dancing. You are going to see nuns walking in the park eating Edy's Ice Cream. There are going to be elves pitching Keebler cookies and cartoon fish selling Star-Kist tuna. On the one hand, about every other advertisement on billboards, on the radio, and on TV is selling food.

On the other hand, every magazine and book is selling us a diet. So we spend billions and billions of dollars dieting from our over-consumption of food. In the history of the world, there has never been a culture more obsessed with food, eating, dieting, and stimulating appetites than America right now. It is any wonder that we have more eating disorders during this period of time, than has ever existed in the history of the world?

Fasting takes deadly aim at one of the primary idols in America – food! Go into any office building and into the lunchroom. There will be plates of food – cookies and candy. People have stashes of food in their desks, food in their purses, and even scraps of food in the backseat of their cars, in case we can't get to a drive-through quick enough. People have food in bedroom refrigerators. People are now moving food from their kitchen upstairs. They have microwaves and refrigerators in their bedrooms. That way they don't have to actually climb the stairs and risk burning calories to get more food. Why do most of us not like to hear about fasting? Because we're obsessed with food.

Now, let me tell you what I mean by fasting. There are lots of different kinds of fasts and we see these in the Bible. There is what one might call "the normal fast," which means going without food for a definite period of time during which you ingest only liquids like water or juice. When we say you ingest liquids, we mean that you don't puree your steak or blend a chocolate cake and say, "Well, I'm not eating anything solid during the fast. I'm just drinking this chocolate cake." The normal fast is a fast

in which you go without solid food and only take in water or juice for a day, 3 days, a week, a month, or 40 days.

Then there is the partial fast. A partial fast means that you choose to skip certain meals. Maybe, you say for a week I'm not going to eat lunch, or I'm going to cut out eating breakfast and lunch for a week. Perhaps you cut out certain kinds of food. Partial fasting might mean you're going to cut out caffeine. I hear the groans now! Or you might decide to cut out sugar, or meat.

Certainly, for some people fasting can be dangerous and is medically unwise. If you have certain health problems, or are on certain kinds of medications, it would be life threatening to fast. People with diabetes would not be wise to fast.

Biblically, there are lots of things that one can fast from beyond food, although today I am primarily going to be talking about food. In 1 Cor. 7:5, the Bible speaks of married couples abstaining from sexual intimacy, by mutual consent, so they can pray. Couples can refrain from romantic intimacy for a brief period of time. You might choose for a week or a month to fast from the TV. Cut the cable and put the TV in your closet. You may choose to fast from videos or movies. For example, during this 40-day fast, you may choose to go on an entertainment fast, because you see that you are obsessed by, dominated by or drenched with entertainment. Even if you aren't drenched or obsessed, you might want to take some of that time, which would normally be spent watching movies or TV, and pray and read your Bible.

You might choose to fast from shopping for new clothes, or CD shopping, or window-shopping. You might fast from using your credit card.

Why would anyone fast? Why would I give up food that I like so much? Why be hungry, which I dislike very much? Why fast from food?

If I were to summarize the biblical material, I would say that the overriding reason why people fast is because there is something more pressing, something more important for a period of time than eating food. You say, "What could be more important than eating?" I can think of a number of things, all of which fall under the heading of needing a breakthrough from God.

Have you ever felt you needed a breakthrough from God? Maybe you are bound by a certain entangling sin and you've asked for deliverance. You've confessed and you've gone to groups. You've sought counseling and you still fall into the same trap over and over again. Do you know what the Bible says to one who is trapped in sin? Have you considered fasting?

Maybe you need insight and wisdom for a major new direction in life. You are considering marriage. You're considering a career change. You are considering moving to another city, or taking on a business partner. You feel in this time that you must hear from God. The Bible says, have you ever considered fasting?

You may be under enemy attack. Your health may be under attack. A relationship or your family is under attack. The Bible asks: have you considered fasting? Maybe you have a great desire for blessing to come to the church. Maybe you want to see revival where there seems to be dryness. Maybe you want to see God come in power when you see very few healings or deliverances. Maybe you want to see multitudes of people converted where we see only trickles. The Bible says, have you considered fasting?

Maybe you are not getting the breakthrough you need and want relationally or financially. No matter what you do, you keep spiraling down and you need a breakthrough spiritually or you need a breakthrough in your health you want a breakthrough regarding the salvation of a loved one, or you need a breakthrough on practical issues – the Bible says, have you considered fasting?

We have a volunteer coordinator on our staff. As you can imagine, with our building campaign, we have an enormous number of things we need to mail out to all of our members. We have something like 3000 people who call this church their church home. So, imagine the amount of mailing that needs to go out. Our volunteer coordinator has been praying about people to come and help with the mailings, but she hadn't gotten a very good response. Last week she decided to fast; she felt led by God to fast. She needed a breakthrough in this small thing, "I just need people to help with this mailing." The Lord spoke to her spirit, "Have you considered fasting?" She fasted for a day. The next day she came to work and several people had left voice mail messages completely out of the blue saying, "Hey, I want to help out with

the mailings you need to do at the church.” By the way, there are many, many volunteer opportunities advertised weekly in the back of your bulletin. I would encourage you to look at those things and take time to help your church family.

The Bible and church history both say to us, when you need a breakthrough, when you feel like you are just running your head into the wall, and you’re not gaining ground, have you considered fasting? When a church wants a breakthrough, even if it’s just we want a release of greater blessing, greater influence, greater power, and greater anointing, the Bible says, have you considered fasting?

Today I am borrowing my title from a book by Elmer Towns with a similar title. I’m calling my message, “Fasting for a Breakthrough.” Elmer Towns’ very helpful book is titled *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*. If you are interested in the subject of fasting, you may want to pick this book up in our bookstore. “Fasting for a Breakthrough,” let’s pray.

If you have a Bible, I’d like you to open it to Isaiah 58. I’m going to read vv. 1-5, *Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet, declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. 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. “Why have we fasted,” they say, “And we 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 you exploit all your*

workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is the kind of fast I have chosen only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

Now the prophet is speaking to the people of Israel and rebuking them for wrong kinds of fasts. If you were to outline Isaiah 58:1-12, you might say vv. 1-5 is fasting when it is wrong and vv. 6-12 is fasting when it is right. In vv. 1-5, the prophet is sent by God to rebuke God's people for wrong kinds of fasts. In fact, the prophet is told to stand in front of the people and scream at the top of his voice. Shout it aloud. What he's about to say regarding fasting is not to be whispered. This is not a matter of a private correction. The nation needs to be publicly rebuked. The prophet uses a simile in v. 1 where he says, "Raise your voice like a trumpet." Literally, raise your voice like a shofar. In Judaism in the ancient world and today, during this season of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and then Yom Kippur, a shofar, or a ram's horn is blown. In the Old Testament, people used to blow the shofar, this ram's horn, to gain attention. The prophet is commanded to shout aloud about the wrong fasting and let his voice be like a shofar. Let people know when fasting is wrong.

When is fasting wrong? Fasting is wrong with a person thinks they can manipulate God by fasting. The people are complaining in v. 3, "Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?" The people think, "I put my penny in the slot by sacrificing a meal. Why

hasn't the gumball come out? I did my little bit. I fasted a day, 2 days, where's the blessing that was promised?" Fasting is wrong when they think they can manipulate God by fasting.

Friends, God is not impressed by a big prayer meeting alone, or by our religious activity, or by fasting. If we think by fasting we are going to get a prize out of God's closed hand, something that he doesn't otherwise want to give us, we're wrong. In fasting, we're not manipulating God. What we are actually doing is humbling ourselves. We are surrendering ourselves by surrendering food. It's an outward sign that we are going to surrender ourselves to receive what God desires and surrender ourselves to the will of God.

God wants us to be free of bondage to sin. It is not your desire to break addictions and compulsive behaviors? It is God's desire that you be free. In Thess. 4 it says, *For this is the will of God, your sanctification*. God wants you to be free and to be holy. When you are fasting for the salvation of a loved one or a friend, you are not prying that salvation out of the unwilling hand of God, or manipulating God. The Bible says it is God's desire to save.

In 1 Peter 3:9, *God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*. God wants to save. God wants to give us wisdom and direction as it says in James 1. *If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault*. God is not upset when we say we're confused and we don't

know what to do. God loves to give wisdom and he doesn't find fault in our lack of knowing what to do.

We don't need to manipulate God to give us spiritual gifts or to give us healing, prophecy, or the capacity to hear his voice. When we fast and pray, we're submitting ourselves to God's desire and will when he says in Matthew 7, *If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?* God desires to yield. God desires to bless. God desires to give us spiritual gifts. He wants to give us a breakthrough. Instead of a pagan, magical, manipulative view of fasting, "I am going to somehow bend God's arm to give me what he doesn't want to give me," rather than trying to manipulate God to do our will in fasting, we're opening our hands. We are surrendering ourselves. We're enabling ourselves to receive what it is God's will to give us.

Fasting is wrong when we seek to manipulate God by it.

Fasting is wrong when it is a substitute for obedience or relational integrity. Isaiah says, *Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit your works. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking one another with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord?*

Fasting is wrong when it is a substitute for obedience. Fasting is not a way around obeying. We can't say to God, "Well, God you know I've satisfied you by religion." While all the while we are at odds with our wife, or with disrespecting our husbands, or we're lying to our customers, or we're cheating on our exams, or having sex outside of marriage. God sent prophet after prophet in the Old Testament, and one of the main messages of Jesus in the New Testament is how much God hates religion that is used as a cover, or a veneer.

Isaiah is saying that fasting is absolutely wrong when a person uses it as a way to short-change obedience to God. "I know that there is this area of my life that is wrong, Lord. But instead of addressing that area, I'm going to spend some time fasting, pretending before you and before everyone else that I am sincerely seeking you and I want your will done." When all the while I know there is a part of my life where I've ruled you out. I don't want your will done. God hates veneer Christianity. He hates the show of religion.

When my wife, Marlene, was in high school she was saved and went to a church where every week a couple would come in and lift their hands to God and worship fervently. And at a certain time in the service, the man would stand and give a prophetic word. Sometimes his wife would speak out loudly in tongues. A great show of spirituality. And then they would leave the church and drive home in separate cars. Marlene knew from others in their family that they were constantly fighting. They had a horrible marriage, but when they entered the church building, they showed lots of religion.

Fasting is wrong when it is lots of religion. God hates religious form without substance. God hates hype, show and pomp. He desires authenticity. He wants us to be the real thing. He wants genuineness. To use a biblical phrase, God desires truth in the inward parts.

If we don't use fasting to manipulate God, and we don't use fasting simply as a substitute for real obedience and real submission to the will of God, when is it appropriate to fast?

The right use of fasting is to fast for a breakthrough. What sort of breakthrough? I mentioned fasting when we need a breakthrough in the health of a loved one, or relative, or when asking for a financial breakthrough. Here Isaiah tells us that fasting will achieve a breakthrough in releasing people from bondage.

Let's look at v. 6, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen, to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords to set the oppressed free and break every yoke."

There are four verbs in v. 6 and they are all about liberation, setting people free from bondage. They are all about releasing captive people. He speaks of loosing the chains, untying the cords, setting the oppressed free, and breaking every yoke.

Now, certainly in this context, it has social dimension. Setting people who are oppressed economically, politically, and socially free. It has a social and economic

dimension to this release. But it also has a spiritual dimension. Many people are trapped by what Hebrews 12 calls the sin that so easily entangles. The KJV calls it the besetting sins. That's worked itself into the popular Christian terminology – besetting sins. It is what we would call today addictive behavior or compulsive behavior. There are many people who are trapped by addiction, or compulsions. When Hebrews 12 talks about the sin that entangles, its not so much the occasional lapses or the momentary failures. It is talking about habitual behaviors. It is something that regularly enslaves us, whether the habitual behavior is an attitude, a behavior, a practice, or a way of thinking. The bondage that you are in makes you feel like your will in a certain area has been taken away. One person put it this way, “I feel as though I’m forced to play a game where I always lose, but I can’t quit playing.”

Are any of you involved in playing a game where every time you play that game, you always lose, but you are compulsively addicted to playing that losing game? Alcoholics Anonymous defines insane behavior as doing the same behavior over and over and over and expecting a different result each time. This particular behavior has always brought me shame; it has always caused guilt. It never works, but yet I'll try again.

What are we talking about by bondage? We are talking about slavery to alcohol, slavery to drugs, to homosexual relations, to pornography, to smoking. We are talking about slavery and bondage to lying, where you repeatedly lie every time you are cornered. Bondage to anger, self-pity, masturbation, adultery or eating. You try,

but you simply can't break control. You don't want to, but you feel like you can't help it. The same lies in those times of besetting sins, those habitual sins that say you are powerless, you are trapped, and you can't break free. It doesn't matter that the Bible says that you are dead to sin. It's not true in your life.

Isaiah is saying, in times of bondage, "Have you considered fasting?" There's a story in the New Testament where the disciples in Mark 9 are trying to chase a demon out of a boy. They can't. Jesus goes ahead and casts the demon out, delivers the boy, and the disciples ask, "Why couldn't we do it?" Jesus says, "this kind only comes out by prayer" (Mark 9:29). There are some early manuscripts, copies of the original gospel of Mark that add the words, "and fasting." It is quite clear that Mark didn't originally write that this kind only comes out by prayer and fasting. But the early church made an addition to Mark's manuscript because the early church understood that there was a spiritual principle that fasting breaks bondages.

There is a spiritual principle that the early church was aware of. When you fast, you are taking mastery over your physical appetites. This leads to mastery over your emotional and spiritual appetites. You know when you take control of something as basic as eating, you develop strength to take control over other areas of your life. Let me work this out for you because I really believe fasting is one way a person can regain control of an out-of-control life.

See the issue of bondage is, what will control you? Your appetites? Sex? Drink? Cigarettes? Anger? Pornography? Shopping? People Pleasing? Popularity? The

issue of bondage is what will control you, your appetites or Jesus Christ? Right now you may say something or someone other than Jesus Christ is currently controlling you. Now what is going on in fasting is that you are wrestling for the control of your will again.

Let me put it this way. Your will, as a result of a repeated sin, has gotten eroded and needs to be strengthened again. It needs to be shored up. By saying no to your appetite, what the Bible calls self-denial, or crucifying the flesh, you are basically saying “no” to what you want, saying “no” to what you’ve given yourself to over and over again. When you say “no” to yourself in the area of food, you will get restored to a place of health. Your will can get restored in other areas so that you can say “yes” to Christ and Christ’s mastery over your sex life, over your anger, over your shopping, or over your self-pity. As you gain control of your physical appetite, you then gather strength and will and gain control over spiritual or emotional appetites. Fasting breaks bondage by reinforcing prayer. Fasting is the means of reinforcing or underlining our prayer.

My strong suggestion to any of you who are considering fasting for a day, 3 days, or a week, or whatever, is to put off fasting if you’re not going to take a lot of additional time to pray. If you are super busy, just loaded up with work, or other activities, if the time for fasting is just going to be filled with watching TV or other kinds of entertainment or media, you are not going to get very much spiritual benefit. I think of fasting as sort of a booster rocket for prayer. When we fast, there is often more earnestness in our prayers of confession. Sometimes we have acknowledged over

and over again a specific bondage or sin, but there's not a lot of earnestness in it. We've lost our capacity for sorrow. Fasting is a way of afflicting our souls. Indeed, the Hebrew word for "fast" literally means, "to afflict oneself." By means of fasting, we dig up a hardened conscience and reinforce a prayer of confession. By means of fasting we might reinforce a prayer of renunciation. When there is something that has gained control over us, a counterfeit control, it may be the control of other people's approval, or the control of pornography, or of credit cards, in fasting, we go after these issues of control and we have an opportunity to renounce the counterfeit control of something other than Jesus.

Fasting reinforces prayer. Fasting can reveal to us areas of self-deception. As we go before God in a time of fasting and prayer, desiring to break bondages over our lives, we ought to ask the Lord for wisdom concerning areas of self-deception in our lives. Remember I said a few weeks ago that at the bottom, all sin is based on a lie. If you are in bondage to an entangling sin, if you find yourself addicted, or subject to some compulsive behavior, then there is surely some lie or set of lies that you have come to believe deeply. In fasting one of the things I would do to dig up the root of that addictive behavior is to ask the Lord to reveal to you the lies you believe. "Lord, where have I become deceived?"

The Bible says there are lots of different ways we can deceive ourselves. For example, a person may deceive himself or herself into thinking that because they read and know the Bible, they are obeying the Bible. In James 1:22 James says, "Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The Lord

can reveal self-deception in me. The Lord might reveal to you that you are a person who regularly deceives yourself by reading the Bible, but not applying what the Bible says to your own life. You don't regularly ask yourself: "Am I doing what I'm reading? Am I doing what I'm hearing?"

During this campaign we are encouraging you to fast and pray. Are you going to do it, or just listen to it? We are encouraging you to pray about what you are going to give. Do not simply look at your checkbook and say, "What can I afford" and give a little bit of your excess. Ask the Lord to reveal his mind. Will you do that?

The Bible says we can deceive ourselves into thinking that God doesn't really care about our sin because there are no immediate consequences. It seems as though there are no consequences from this particular behavior. Sure, I feel guilty and, sure I feel far from God. But there doesn't seem to be any real consequence. Therefore, God probably isn't going to discipline me. Probably God is not going to intervene. That is a major self-deception. The Bible says, "Don't be deceived." God is not mocked. What we sow, we will reap. It may take time to reap all of the negative works of sin. It may work itself out slowly. God is patient. He gives us time to repent but it is the height of self-deception, and you are being lied to and you are lying to yourself when you think that repeated acts of disobedience will not yield a negative result.

Do you know one of the greatest lies that Satan tells you? One of the greatest lies that we're told is that we will somehow suffer, if we give ourselves entirely to God. If

you really give up the sin, totally and completely, if this thing was totally out of your life, somehow you would be less happy. If you gave yourself in entire devotion to God, somehow your life would be less enjoyable. There are many people who are standing on the edge of making a commitment to Christ. Some of you are here today. You are standing here, but you haven't quite stepped over the line and entirely surrendered your life to Jesus Christ. Many people hesitate. They are afraid. They say, "What is God going to do with me, if I surrender my will to him? If I say yes to Jesus, 'Yes, Lord, you sit on the throne of my life, you call the shots, I'm going to get off the throne and I'll stop calling the shots,' then I'm afraid that something bad will happen."

Francois Fenelon, who was a Catholic archbishop in France back in the 17th century, wrote a book called "Christian Perfections." Francois Fenelon said this, "What folly it is to fear to be too entirely God, it is to fear to be too happy. It is to fear to love God's will in all things. It is to fear to have too much courage in the crosses, which are inevitable. To have too much comfort in God's love, too much detachment from the passions which make us miserable." The Lord says through the Psalms, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord. Come, taste and see how good God is." Never fear and never submit to the lie that something bad will happen to you, if you give yourself entirely to God. I especially say that to those of you who are hesitating on the brink of a decision for Christ.

Let me share a word to those of you who are counselors and therapists. I want to encourage you to add fasting to your arsenal of weapons, especially when you are

dealing with compulsive behaviors in the life of a client. When you write out your prescription, counselor, along with saying you need to join a group, along with setting up another appointment, along with journaling, include fasting. Ask your clients if they've considered fasting.

Fasting that is right not only breaks bondages, but we also fast to gain wisdom. In Acts 13 it says, "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers; Barnabas and Simeon, called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene and Manean, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

A good sign to fast is when you're contemplating a major directional change. For example, you are contemplating getting married, or moving to another city, or shifting your career, or choosing a business partner, or significantly reorienting ministry, or appointing new leaders, or sending our missionaries. Major directional change in your life demands wisdom from God. So many of the blunders and mistakes people made in the Bible are the result of not seeking God's wisdom first. Read through the Bible and what you will repeatedly see is that people do what is right in their own eyes and they stumble and fall instead of seeking wisdom from God.

So Samson hooked up with a young babe, Delilah, because she looked good. Seemed like a good relationship. It turned out to be disastrous. Joshua is deceived by the Gibeonites. They seem like they are telling the truth. Everything seems good.

But he's lied to. He didn't seek God first. David numbered the people of Israel. It seemed like a good idea. God hated it.

Think about this principle in your own life. Friend, how many of you have made unfortunate decisions that resulted sometimes in years of unhappiness because you did not seek the wisdom of God first? You made a very unfortunate choice in marriage or in romance, or you made a terrible financial investment, or picked the absolutely wrong business partner, or joined the wrong company, or firm, or gave yourself to the wrong church because you didn't seek God's wisdom. How many churches in America have laid their hands on the wrong people because they didn't do what the apostles did – fast and pray for wisdom from above.

We don't know the future and we can't see below the surface. We are people easily deceived. Why do you fast when you need wisdom? Now, how does that wisdom come? Very often during a fast, God shifts our desires. By that, I mean that he purifies our hearts. When a person fasts and prays, seeking God for wisdom, God will often shift their hearts and begin to deal with issues that are clouding their judgments and preventing them from making good decisions. For example, a typically bad reason why people get married is that they don't like living at home. I can't tell you how many couples I talk with who got married young and who said, "Well, to be honest, I think one of the primary reasons I decided to get married was because I didn't want to stay at home. I didn't want to be with my mom or dad, and this person was available." When you fast and pray before you make the decision to get married, God will bring that to the surface. Is that a good reason to get married?

Or it may be that your thinking is being clouded by greed. As you pray and fast about accepting a job, God may show you the real reason you are going after this job or moving from one city to another is because they are offering more money. But it is not as if you think the Kingdom of God is going to be promoted that way, or that it is going to be better for your family, or better for you spiritually. You are just being offered more money.

God may reveal to you as you fast and pray that the reason you are moving churches is because you are unwilling to engage in the hard work of reconciling a relationship. Or maybe you are afraid. The reason why you are not changing ministry or not doing something God wants you to do is that you are afraid of what everybody is going to think and especially if you've been in a position for a long time, you may be afraid.

The bottom line friend, is that when we fast and pray, God will often show us our motives. He'll show us his heart, so we are able to get rid of the impurities and say, "O God, that is a terrible reason to make that decision." Sometimes God, in the process of fasting and praying, will actually change your desires. Something at the beginning of your fast seems really desirable – that job is so attractive, that marriage prospect is just what I want, that ministry position that has opened up in Texas is where I need to go, but during fasting, God changes our heart and begins to speak to us. God may speak to you by drawing your attention to a particular text in the Bible.

One of the things I recommend during a fast, along with praying, is to take in massive doses of the Word of God, the Bible. Let the Bible be bread for your soul when you are not eating bread. Let the Bible be for you meat and drink when you are not eating and drinking.

So often God speaks to us by taking a phrase or a word from the pages of the Bible and just running us through like a spear in the chest. I recommend if you are seeking God for wisdom, each day you take an hour and read 10 chapters of the Bible and say, “God, speak to your servant’s heart. Take the words from this book and let me see something that will encourage me in this new direction.” God may speak by way of a very vivid impression, a vision, or a dream. Many people who have fasted a lot more than I have in my life say that the times of greatest clarity in their relationship with God is during a season of fasting. God may speak to you prophetically. He may stir up somebody else to come along with a word that you need.

We fast to break bondages. We fast for wisdom. We may fast to spread the influence of our faith, to spread righteousness, to spread light.

In the Isaiah text that we looked at before, Isaiah clearly spoke about spreading social righteousness. “Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen?” And then he goes on to say “Is it not to share your food with the hungry, 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, 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.” As people fast, righteousness is spreading, light is shining more powerfully. Fasting is for the purpose of spreading righteousness.

Now sometimes that righteousness can be spread as God removes hindrances to the spread of righteousness. For example, it says here in Isaiah, you do away with the yoke of depression, in v. 9, with the pointing finger and malicious talk; fasting is often used to remove slander. In this case, it was the people’s own slander but sometimes we need a breakthrough because we have been unjustly accused, unjustly maligned, or assaulted, and we really desire that righteousness will be vindicated, that the truth will win out.

Elmer Towns, in the book that I mentioned before, has a wonderful story about how fasting can break the yoke of slander and spread righteousness. There was a public school teacher who really attempted to live for Christ in his classroom on the school staff. The personnel director criticized him in his district for being too strict because he wouldn’t go to happy hour with the staff to have a drink after work. This teacher was very conscientious. He invested lots of extra time in tutoring students, meeting with them, personally counseling them, and in preparation for his classes.

At one particular staff meeting, there was a policy disagreement. The personnel director said to the teacher, “I’m going to get you fired and I am not going to rest until you are gone. I’m making it my #1 job to get rid of you!”

The Christian teacher decided to fast and pray to break the yoke of oppression and to have the truth vindicated. He didn't pray for vengeance on his enemy, however. He prayed in accordance with Jesus' words, "Bless those who curse you and pray for those who spitefully use you." He prayed for the personnel director's salvation; and, he prayed for success in his family's relationships. This teacher fasted to bless his enemy, not to curse him.

The very week of the teacher's fast, the personnel director was caught in a major violation of school policy. Security personnel escorted him from the building. The locks were changed on his office. That next year the teacher who fasted and prayed for his enemy was named "Teacher of the Year" in his school.

Fasting can remove oppression, and fasting can release righteous influence. It says in v. 8, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear." We fast for breakthroughs in healing, "but 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 I am.'"

Look at verse 12, "Then the people will rebuild the ancient ruins and raise up the age old foundations. You will be called repairers of the broken walls, restorer of the streets with dwellings."

Listen, we live in a time when the moral bottom of our nation has been completely eroded and seems to have fallen out. The foundation seems to be destroyed, or is in

the process of being destroyed. We are watching leader after leader being exposed for sexual sin and for lying. There is corruption in every high place. People are cynical. The divorce rate is skyrocketing. There are more and more children born out of wedlock. What do the people of God do? Fast!

The Bible says, "Have you considered fasting?" Isaiah says, "If we fast, people will rebuild the ancient ruins and raise up the age old foundations. You will be called repairers of the broken walls, restorers of streets with dwellings."

He is talking about the coming day when after Babylon came in and destroyed Jerusalem and knocked down the walls as the result of the judgment of God on sin. There was going to be a time when the walls would be repaired, when the buildings would be restored. Friends, throughout history, God has spread the influence of Christianity, spread righteousness as people fasted.

Prior to the first major revival in America, Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian of the 18th century and a young pastor in Connecticut, decided to fast. God used his fast to give him a sermon that ignited the Great Awakening. The sermon was titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In 1859, when America was at a moral low point and on the verge of the Civil War, some businessmen decided to fast their lunch hour and meet in a local church building to pray. They were joined by other businessmen, who also decided to fast their lunch hour and meet in local churches to pray.

Soon a revival broke out up and down the east coast where tens of thousands of businessmen joined together at lunchtime. They went to any local church building that was available to pray. They didn't necessarily go to their own churches, but they went to any local church that was available to spend their lunch hour not in eating, but in praying. It was one of the greatest revivals in American history. It is reported that several hundred thousand people were saved in 1859, right before the Civil War. God broke through.

This is a season when we are thinking about the influence of what God has done here in the Vineyard. Spreading all the blessings that he's packed in. We want to get out beyond our church walls. The Bible would say to us in the Vineyard right now, "Have you considered fasting? Fasting will give you the breakthrough you are looking for." Let's pray.