

“Is not *this* the *fast* I choose?”



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Courage Church

Detroit, MI 48209

Next week, we are going to be starting a new series. It is called “A case for bad choices” - It is a series that really, it would be

great if you invited your friends too. It is not like the last series we did... it is not a thorough examination of the scriptures... it is something that everyone can understand, and everyone can relate too, at least if they are honest.

The idea is, essentially, how God breathes life into everything. How he will give you beauty for ashes when it feels like your world has fallen apart... how he is with you in every moment.

How there will be times in your lives, when you will know what you are supposed to do, and everyone else is going to think you are crazy. They are going to think you are being foolish. They will think it is a mistake.

And what this series is, is going to be a case for doing what God puts in your heart, even when it doesn't make sense.

and we definitely could have included today into the series, but I decided to kind of just do something separate, today... but please, share the series, tell your co-workers and neighbors... get your friends here for the series that starts next week.

so...

It is really great to be back.

Dawn and I had an awesome vacation, we did one of those “stay in Michigan vacations” and surprisingly, it was one of my favorite vacations ever. It was so so refreshing, and I feel like I came back excited, and really ready to go.

Here are a few pictures from it, just because:

(picture of canoe) A couple of times we took the whole family out on the canoe... it was so refreshing. And this time Dawn took this picture from shore, of me taking Milly and Fiona out.

(picture of Fiona) This was near the sleeping bear dunes. Fiona saw Milly doing this glider thing, and she wanted to do it. She went so fast gliding across, and when she hit the other side she let go... I anticipated it and thankfully was able to catch her.

(picture of camp) This was our campsite that we found on labor day weekend. We drove down the coast from Traverse City checking every camp site and it wasn't until 12:30 in the morning, near Silver Lake that we finally found a single site.

(picture of dunes) and this is the girls running down a sand dune in Silver lake.

Yeah... so it was a pretty great trip!

But what it was, for us, was a great time to connect as a family.

To relax. To ride on canoes.

To swim in cold water and camp in tents.

We stayed with great friends at a cabin for a few days, and before that, I have a relative who let us use their cabin on the lake. It was really great.

It is amazing what happens, when you focus on your family... how much focus it helps you have for the other areas of your life.

So that was an awesome time for us.

Today.

Today is going to be very different.

Because today is not like other days.

And most people may wake up, and think, its just another day.

But its not.

and the only reason that we wake up on days like this, and we treat them as if they are like any other day... is because the world just moves so incredibly fast all the time... we move from one thing, to the next thing, without even thinking about what the last thing was.

But as many of you know, 15 years ago today, the world turned upside down when two planes flew into the world trade center in New York City. Another flew into the pentagon, and another crashed in route to attack the white house.

I was talking to Ben Allen a few weeks ago, and he said something that I couldn't believe... its the 15 year anniversary today...

so the teenagers turning 18... the youngest age that will be allowed to vote in this years election...

Were three years old when the world trade center fell.

Three years old.

Do you remember that day?

I do.

I remember it well.

I was a senior in high school, and was in an economics class, and we happened to be doing a simulation of "wall street trading" in the computer lab that day - but it was connected to the real system and all of the computers were down. But we didn't know why nothing was working.

When the bell rang, the news hit the hallways, and everybody was crying and was afraid that we were going to go to war.

After class, I got in my car and drove to our church, where people were just as shocked. And I spent some time with Pastor Kevin and a few others there. Nobody knew what to do really, but everybody wanted to be near people.

It was the day that a handful of my closest friends decided, “when I graduate this year, I am going to go into the military.”

Because suddenly something was prompting them to do something more than what they were currently doing.

It was a time of great despair and great unity.

Where everyone seemed to unite and stand with the families of the victims.

The nation for a brief moment in time did not feel divided... as we determined *together* that we were not going to let hope be diminished by evil.

but we would stand in unity because only together would we ever be strong enough to get through it.

It didn't matter if you were black or white, democrat or republican. Rich or poor.

We all bleed red. and have the same basic human needs.

and everyone acknowledged together that what was destroyed must be rebuilt.

But I can't help but notice how short lived unity really is in a world of so many opinions, so many ambitions, so many people who ultimately know that in order to get to a certain level of success in the world, it means that

there is only so much that you can give to others, before you have nothing left for yourself.

Because where tragedies tend to shake up our senses... and prompt us to action...

the daily routines of our lives, if not built with the same intention, can leave us numb to the broken worlds that we walk through every single day.

And today I want to take a look at passage that I find so interesting. Because this group of people described here, has found themselves diligently seeking God for him to move in their lives and he is not moving.

and the reason why is incredible.

Isaiah 58:1-12

- “Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- 2 Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.
- 3 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
- 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
- 5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,

and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?

- 6 “Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
- 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
- 10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
- 11 And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
- 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

The title of today’s message is: Is not *this* the fast I choose?

Let's Pray

This is a bit of an odd set of scriptures.

and from everything we have learned all summer with the sermon on the mount and the way that Jesus addressed the Pharisees, it should be no surprise to hear these words spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah.

Now, though we read from a different translation, some of you may have noticed that the last section, verse 12, is the verse that we used in our Courage Discipleship video that we did, when Jimmy painted the castle.

Because we all want *that*.

We all want to repair the breach.

every single person that I talk to about Detroit, especially lately... it is like God is lining up people together, to have a part in this. The translation we read from in the video said:

You will be known for repairing the broken places. You will rebuild the roads and the houses. You will restore the streets that YOU DWELL IN.

So many people are moving into Detroit. They have dreams just like we have, of restoring old houses, moving people into broken down neighborhoods and rebuilding communities.

And what Isaiah does here, is he shows us what it takes to be the repairers of the breach. He shows us what it takes to rebuild cities,

He shows us the types of people that he uses for jobs like that.

and I am telling you, most people don't like it.

Most people want it to happen in a different way.

They want to bring heaven to earth inside a church building this this one, where they can leave feeling good. And there is nothing wrong with doing

that too, but FOR FAR TOO MANY people it starts and it ends in a building. In brick and mortar that can be destroyed in an instant and has no value in the scope of eternity.

But the truth is, when you are really bringing heaven to earth... it happens in the trenches. It happens by going into the broken places. It happens in ways that at the end of the day, you don't always go home with warm and fuzzy feelings. Because the people business is a messy one.

And that is exactly what God is saying.

These people expected God to hear them because of what they gave up.

I know you feel this way sometimes!

God! Do you even hear me? Are you even there?

I am fasting!

I am praying!

Why are you ignoring me and not showing up for me in my life?

Listen to me closely guys...

if you can not hear others, God will not hear you.

'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.

Yes you fast. But you don't love.

You ignore needs, because you have your own.

And isn't that the main reason we justify not helping others? Because We need help ourselves. Because We have enough going on ourselves.

Verse 4:

Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Please read that last line, like 10-15 times in a row.

and go back and read everything up to it... because it describes most of the fasts that I have done in my life. Disconnected from everything...

and not noticing anything. and God is not hearing it!

now, It is not wrong to sometimes disconnect... Jesus did it.

but it is wrong to ignore. and if your so called spirituality puts you farther away from the people you are called to be impacting then you missed the point of it in the first place.

But is not this the fast I choose?

to loose the bonds of wickedness, to set the oppressed free...
to share bread with the hungry, and let the homeless stay in your house.

This is the same language that Jeremiah uses in Jeremiah 22 when he says "He plead the cause of the poor and the the needy... Is not this what it means to know me, declares the Lord?"

So when God defines what it means to know him, he says it is "to plead the cause of the poor and the needy"

and to the people who think that they will be heard by God for their many worded prayers and by fasting and separating themselves from the world all the time, he uses the same language to define how He actually wants us to fast. He uses it to define for us what real spirituality looks like, and it is not a comatose position of solitude your whole life:

is not this the fast I choose?

The fast that I choose, God says, is:

Not to separate yourself from the world, but to engage in it.

Not to live on a high hill, where you are safe, while the city below you burns.

It is not to stand across the street, watching out your window as your neighbor cries in her front yard because the tax auction just happened, and the home that their family owned for 25 years now belongs to someone else... and you watch from a distance and maybe even say a little prayer for them, so you can feel better about the fact that you have such a higher quality of life than they do...

Because your house is paid off, and theirs just got taken from them.

it is not that.

Its getting out of your house and going over there and allowing yourself to hurt with your neighbor. Hurt for your neighbor. To cry WITH YOUR NEIGHBOR. To see if there is any way that possibly you can help your neighbor.

It is not avoiding the problems,

its throwing yourself right in the middle of it.

You have to take notice when God says things like "is not this?" because what it implies is that WE THINK IT IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT. We think that knowing God means going to church. We think that knowing God means praying and fasting. God says no! It is when you plead the cause of the poor. We think God wants us to fast so that we can get him to hear us but here is he saying "I don't hear that kind of fasting."

Another way you could say "is not this" would be "surely it is"

surely it is the fast I choose.

To engage the people. To cry with them...

When Dawn and I lived in Brooklyn, we lived in this little 1 bedroom second floor apartment in a brownstone type of row house on a little street called Luquer street. It was full of charm, and even though it was tiny, it carried with it a pretty decent level of privilege. Beautiful, safe streets, the subway was close and only two stops from Manhattan... we could walk to Manhattan if we felt like it. I felt like I had it all.

I remember, it was two years ago today, that we got the kids together, put them all in the strollers and walked the mile and a half from our 600 square feet of private space to the riverfront of Brooklyn heights, which is positioned directly across from downtown Manhattan.

And we did that, that night, so that we could get a clear view of something called "the tribute in lights."

This is a picture of it.

And pictures will never do justice to the feeling that you get when you see that skyline, with what seems to be this most simple tribute.

A light reaching the heavens in the place that each tower once stood.

I am telling you. Maybe I am just emotional about this stuff. But when I stood there in Brooklyn Bridge park and looked in silence at the picture painted by lights of something that is supposed to be there but is not there anymore...

representing the lives of thousands who are supposed to be here, but they are not here anymore...

I felt it in my chest. I felt it in my heart.

I felt compassion.

Even so many years later, that image gave me this chilling feeling that there are things in our world that just are not as they should be. They are not right. They are not just.

And it is possible to go through every day and not notice those types of things...

you walk by a need every day, and if you ignore it long enough, you stop noticing it entirely.

I have driven by the Freedom tower, which is part of the new world trade center, probably thousands of times without letting it remind me of what it represents, and of what happened there that day.

But on September 11, 2001, it was the only thing on everybody's mind.

and the reason that it affected us all that day was because it hit so close to home that even if we were 700 miles from ground zero, it felt personal. It felt like it happened to us and our family, even if it didn't.

It left us all feeling vulnerable. It left questions.

Then. When it was right in front of you.

But those feelings fade, don't they?

But if your dad was in that building, then even now, 15 years later...

It is still personal.

When you walk out even now, and you go to Brooklyn Bridge park and you sit on a hill and stare as the tribute in lights shines its way to heaven...

you see your dad.

But if that is not you... several years later, maybe you still have your dad. And maybe you don't actually know anybody who was killed. And it becomes more and more distant for you.

I know it did for me.

But when I moved to New York, and suddenly I found myself talking to families members in the park while our kids were playing with their kids, and they were explaining how they don't live in the city anymore, but come back every year on this day to mourn their brother... man.

When I moved to Rockaway, and found this memorial on the bay side of my street: (picture of memorial)
and this memorial on the beach side of my street... and I realized I am surrounded by families who have experienced loss I could never comprehend.

When I found myself at my church talking to friends, and hearing their stories, like the story of my friend Joe, who was on the 64th floor of "tower one" when it was struck, and though he made it out, knew many who didn't. His secretary was buried under the rubble for 26 hours before being found, alive.

And to have these conversations with flesh and blood who actually lived it...

Suddenly, for me, it got personal again.

Suddenly, even though there are no words that could ever be said that could do justice to what was done to them,

their pain, in a way, became my pain. Just like it had for our entire nation 15 years ago.

and see the way that our nation responded, internally... amongst ourselves...

that is where I want to focus.

Today is not about war. It is not about the countries we invaded or about the people who carried out the attack.

It is about the people who weeped with people they didn't even know,

it is about the people who wept FOR people they didn't even know...

it is about people who went into burning buildings to give their lives for people they didn't even know...

It is about the way that we all felt something. Even if it didn't happen to us.

It is about compassion and empathy's role in bringing justice to our world.

Do you ever wonder why, when Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus, and he joins with his friends Martha and Mary...

Why does it say he weeps?

Why weep? knowing that you hold the key to all of this?

Why weep? knowing, that everything is going to be okay. That Lazarus will rise again, and that you will make all things new, and you are going to do it in a matter of a few minutes?

He wasn't weeping because Martha and Mary had lost something.

He was weeping because they felt something.

Something that was not right.

and knowing that he was going to put all of the pieces back together he still cried because God is love. And love meets people where they are.

And Martha, and Mary, in that moment, were in a lot of pain.

One of my favorite verses in the whole bible is Hebrews 4:15-16

It is so powerful.

This is what it says:

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That is what Jesus did for Martha and Mary, and it is what he did for all of us, when he made himself poor. When he made himself, and vulnerable, and tempted and tried.

We he faced a public character assassination followed by a public execution.

I think that so often, people have a hard time with the verses like the ones here in Isaiah, and passages like we find in Matthew 25 (v31-46), where Jesus tells people on his left “depart from me, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...

Because I was hungry and you gave me no food.

I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me.

Naked and you did not clothe me. Sick and in prison and you didn't even visit me.”

and we don't get that.

But those are the people who Jesus can empathize with the most because Jesus made himself all of those things on our behalf.

and when we take care of the stranger we are taking care of someone who looks an awful lot like Jesus did.

and really Matthew 25 is an echo of what Isaiah says here in chapter 58.

We have all these people who think that they are doing all the right things, but they are getting frustrated, because God is not responding to them. It says that these people were seeking God daily. DAILY!

It is not like they gave it a shot once, and moved on. They are diligent. They are consistent.

They were locking away, they were worshipping... They were fasting and praying.

and they are getting so frustrated... they start asking, "why are we going to all of this trouble, to not even be heard by God?"

so God hits them over the head when he says:

you think I hear you with your fasting? No.

You want me to hear you? Try this:

Try sharing bread with the hungry.

Try bringing the homeless poor into your house.

I don't know. Maybe that was a typo by Isaiah. Bring the homeless poor into your house? You clean house, with air that doesn't smell like a person who hasn't taken a shower in month?

Is not this the fast that I choose?

to loose the bonds of wickedness... another translation says:

to loose the chains of injustice. Because it is about justice.

Now, its important to understand that when God talks about justice... he is not just talking about us taking a wrong situation and making it right. That is justice. But there is more to it than that. Justice has more to do with the collective than it does the individual.

But it is how you see each individual, that determines the type of culture you will have collectively.

Let me give you an example from this passage.

Verse 7 says this:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own **flesh**?

The word “flesh” there (*basar*) could either mean yourself... the flesh of your body... or it is used to describe your “kindred, or blood relations”

Like when I talk about my children, they are “my flesh and blood.” They are family. They are as close to me as possible. And obviously, in the context here, God is not talking about yourself. He is talking about your family.

But look at what it says?

Who is your family?

The hungry. The homeless poor. The naked.

That's your flesh and your blood.

He says clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and give shelter to the poor so that you don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood.

And in that culture especially... it was NOT an individualistic society. It was not every man for himself. The only gauge a person had for success was the success that his entire family could enjoy.

you didn't move to New York, and work on Wall Street, and live the life of a millionaire while your family still lived in a little trailer down south somewhere and still can't afford groceries... a person like that would have

been considered a failure in that society, though likely viewed as successful, in ours.

Everything was family driven. It was about corporate health. It was about corporate growth and success.

but what God is saying here, is that the naked... and the poor homeless... they are just as much my family, as the daughters that I canoed with on Lake Superior. They are just as much my flesh and blood, as the family that I went camping with, and ran down sand dunes with, and drove all around our crazy state with last week.

When they fall... I should run to catch them just like I ran to catch Fiona as she reached the end of the glider at full speed and she couldn't hang on.

Our city has the concept of family woven into the very fabric of its being. On the plaque in front of the famous "Spirit of Detroit" statue downtown, has this inscription describing the heart of its creation: "The artist expresses the concept that God, through the spirit of man is manifested in the family, the noblest human relationship."

The key is realizing that your family extends farther than you realize

We bring heaven to earth when we let our worlds collide with strangers and we accept them as family.

When we let our lives so intersect with one another that when something happens to one of us, it happens to us all.

When something happens to the poor homeless, in the scope of the universe, and of eternity, and of the Kingdom of heaven... it is like something is happening to my own family.

and until you can view people that way, you will not repair the breach. Think about Jeremiah 29. It is another one of those staple mission chapters for us.

This is what God says to the exiles from Jerusalem who are in Babylon...

He says: Make this place your home.

Build houses, plant gardens. Take wives. Multiply.

Do all the things that affect communities not just individuals. Do all the things that allow you to bump elbows with your neighbors who you may think are evil because they are from Babylon... but I am telling you that what happens to them matters.

Then it says this:

Seek the welfare of the city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In making sure that the place you are living in is getting better, you will get better.

But if you ignore it. I will ignore you.

That is the problem with the first half of Isaiah 58.

That is the problem with the people that stood to the left of Jesus in Matthew 25.

It wasn't that they ignored God. Its that they ignored people.

its that they made everything about this weird, four walled experience but they didn't live the great commandment. They didn't live the great commission.

and God just said "no."

My Kingdom is about people, not buildings. Its about needs, not comforts.

Its about weeping with those who weep. And rejoicing with those who rejoice. Its about meeting someone new and treating them like family because you know in your heart, that just like you,

they are a child of God.

and they literally are your family.

I am realizing more and more... the first word that God gave us when we got to Detroit was "reconciliation" - a word that in Hebrew comes from the same word as table... and when I look at justice, the way that God describes it throughout the bible, I am beginning to see that reconciliation in this city is going to look an awful lot like a family sitting around a dinner table eating together.

No race barriers. No socio-economic barriers. People who treat one another like family. And when someone gets hurt, or someone loses someone...

its a family crisis.

and when someone gets a promotion, or someone gets a house, or someone gets off of drugs and off the streets and gets a job...

it is a family celebration.

and it is when we do that, that we can actually, truly, faithfully work for, and experience, what Isaiah talks about in verses 10-12.

¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.

¹¹ And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.

¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,

the restorer of streets to dwell in.

I want to a part of repairing the breach in our community.

And it starts with the one.

It starts with seeing how the one affects the next. and the next and the next.

Today is a day where you will see a lot of tributes. And you will have the opportunity to read a lot of articles and see pictures that take you back to one of the worst experiences in American history.

Today is a day that we remember.

But tomorrow most of them will be gone, but the void won't be.

There just won't be as much comfort tomorrow as there is today.

But lets be a comfort in our community everyday. To the circumstances that we don't understand, that happen to the people that maybe we don't even know...

Because they are our brothers. And they are our sisters. And in their welfare lies our welfare.

- 6 "Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
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