

7:14 – Calling
Delivered January 6, 2013

Both the genesis of this series and its actual execution will be somewhat of a different experience for me. For the last several years I have gotten used to collaborating with a few other people in my sermon preparation. Some of you may know that I actually plan our sermon series a year and for the past couple years I've done that with Jason, as well as a couple of other pastor friends in Boston.

This year for the first time I am actually working in collaboration with several other pastors from around our southern New England area. Some of you may not even be aware of this, but we are part of a larger network of churches called The Assemblies of God, and our Southern New England region includes about 150 other churches besides us. This year our regional leadership has asked our churches to consider taking time for prayer and fasting in the month of January, and we have decided to work with them in that. The overarching purpose for that focus is pretty simple: we want to see God awaken a movement of people coming to faith in Jesus in our area such as hasn't been seen here in hundreds of years. The reality is that you and I now live in the least "churched" area of the United States – we don't have to go anywhere to go to the mission field, it's all around us.

Mostly I'm excited about this series for you because I believe that as we take the time to teach on prayer and fasting, God is going to do a work in your own heart that will be deep and lasting. I believe God is going to open up our eyes to the power of prayer in our lives. But at the same time, I think God is going to do something else for us. I think he's going to open up our eyes to the reality that we are not alone in this kingdom

– that we are actually a very small part of a much larger movement.

As hard as it may be to believe, there are other pastors preaching to other churches who are just as excited about what God is doing in their church as I am about what God is doing here. There are other churches in our area who will be talking about exactly the same things over the next four weeks, and together we are believing God to accomplish something remarkable in our region. So I hope that you are going to be encouraged and challenged by that knowledge, and that it will serve as a catalyst to jump start your own spiritual life as we turn the page to a new year.

Because if most of us are honest, we might have to admit that while Christmas can be a highly religious time, it isn't always the time we feel the most spiritually connected. We've just come through the season of excess – excess food, gifts, parties, debt – and all of those excesses usually don't serve to connect us to God more deeply, but actually to work the other way around. We feel exhausted from the whole production, and no matter how hard we try to fight the tide, we are relentlessly pulled along for the ride. We get to the new year, and it's no wonder that we feel like it's a time to refocus, redirect our priorities, and start off with a fresh slate.

In that season of excess we easily lose sight of God's purpose in our lives, and any sense of God's calling, because we become incredibly self-focused. We are all about meeting our own needs, fulfilling our own purposes, and providing for ourselves. We take our eyes off of a critical reality: that God is our provider, and his purposes are infinitely more important than our own. So what if coming out of this season of excess God wants to remind us that his calling, purpose and direction

are critical to our lives? We might find that a season marked by the twin disciplines of prayer and fasting would be just the remedy we need. If we genuinely want God to awaken a movement of men and women coming to Jesus, then we should acknowledge that it must begin with us.

For the next four weeks we are going to follow the framework of a well-known passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14 to shape our thinking about prayer and fasting in a way that would set the tone for the year ahead. We want to pray and fast to see our lives line up with God's purpose for us individually, as a church, and ultimately to see that spill over into its impact on our communities.

Let's read from **2 Chronicles 7:11-18**. Verse 14, as short as it is, is packed with great truths, but it's important for us to back out to a broader view for a few minutes to make sure we understand what's going on here in this verse. It's the occasion of the dedication of Solomon's Temple, and the nation of Israel is in the midst of one of its appointed feasts - the Feast of Tabernacles, ironically enough. This was a time when the entire nation of Israel was supposed to dwell in temporary booths or tents to mark the way that God had gone with them as they walked through the wilderness for years between Egypt and the Promised Land. The larger purpose of this feast and symbolic act was to remind the people that even though they lived now in the Land God had given them, in houses they hadn't built, and now with a Temple of magnificent beauty they were still in need of God's provision for them. So the feast would begin with a Sabbath day of rest from their work, and a celebration of God's calling to them as a people.

In the midst of this feast, Solomon chooses to dedicate the Temple. He has just finished leading the nation of Israel

through the kind of building project that most of us can't begin to imagine. After years of Israel's worship centering around the Tabernacle, Solomon constructed a Temple for the worship of the Lord. The entirety of chapter 6 consists of Solomon's prayer of dedication for the Temple he has built.

If you read Solomon's prayer closely you find one important theme runs throughout the prayer. Israel is God's chosen people. He prays it not so much to remind God of his choice, but by praying it out loud before the people, he reminds them that they are God's people. You'll find in nearly every phrase of chapter 6 Solomon saying that these are God's people, called by his name, chosen to be his own, and redeemed for his purpose in the world.

So when God responds to Solomon's prayer in 7:12 and following, it's not surprising that he chooses to respond by acknowledging just what Solomon has confessed throughout his prayer: Israel is my people. And 7:14 begins with that critical phrase: "if my people called by my name". Fundamentally the call to prayer is a call to God's people to acknowledge that they are what he says they are – his people, and he is their source.

Of course, the only reason for God to say this to Solomon is if he, and others, are likely to forget that this is true, or to stop acting as if it's true. God knows they are likely to forget that they are his people, called by his name, for his purpose. They are just as likely as we are to get caught up in their own needs, purposes, and agendas for their lives, and in the process forget all about God's calling for them and choosing of them. They will forget that God provided the land, the food, even the Temple itself in its turn, and in the process they will inflate their own sense of importance.

When they do this, the prescription is specific, and direct. They should pray, and perhaps they should pray like Solomon did, reminding themselves that they are God's people called by his name, in desperate need of humbling themselves before their God. I would add that while this prayer comes in the midst of a time of feasting, the discipline of fasting applied alongside the discipline of prayer will remind us of our calling as God's people and humble us before him.

As we will see when we work through the passage, God is still pleased to answer prayer that comes from this place – not just the physical place of the Temple, but this place of calling and humility as God's people. The prophets showed later that just praying in the Temple wasn't enough to arrest God's attention, but prayer from a humbled, contrite, called people never failed to attract God's answer. This same reality is confirmed and expanded in the New Testament, as God no longer chooses to dwell in a physical Temple, but promises that he will, by his Spirit, dwell in his people.

No longer does our worship at a Temple mark us as the people of God, called by his name, and humbled before him. Now the presence of God by his very own Spirit in us individually and among us as a church marks us as that people. That's how we know we belong to him. And prayer and fasting remind us that this is, in fact, true. As we pray God reminds us again that we are his people. As we fast, we turn away from our ability to provide for ourselves, and humble ourselves before God, our sole provider.

And the combination of the two serves to put the question to us: who are we that God should choose us as his people? Who are we that God should choose to dwell within us by the

Spirit? Who are we that God should choose to so richly provide for us? The answer is that we are not anything important, powerful, special, or strong, but God has chosen us out of his mercy and grace. So we don't have anything to stand up and boast about. All good prayer begins with a humble acceptance of our place as Gods called people, chosen to fulfill his purpose in the world.

One of the resources we are making available during this series is a prayer journal with some daily scripture readings and a prompt for something to pray about that day. As we respond to God's word to us, our hope is that we will be moved to pray in alignment with his purpose for us. So this week all the Scriptures will relate in some way to God's calling in our lives and our humble recognition of our place in relationship to him. Please use this as a resource to focus your prayer this week.

Additionally, we're asking you to participate in what may be a new discipline for some of you: fasting. It may be a meal or two this week. Others of you may choose an entire day, or even more than that, to fast. Our hope for this week is to appropriate both our prayer and fasting to this purpose of embracing God's calling and purpose for our lives, and humbling ourselves before him. We're not praying or fasting so that we can "get something" from God, but simply so that we can acknowledge that we desperately need God to have all of us.

I'm convinced that God is up to something significant in New England, and he wants our church to be a part of it. But it all starts with his people, called by his name, humbling themselves before him, praying for his purpose to be accomplished in us and through us.