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October 9, 2011



## METHODOLOGY: THE HYPOTHESIS

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We are in the midst of a relatively new, year-long series we are calling *Praxis: The Experiment*. Praxis is a Greek word that means practices, and the word is also an acronym for us as it stands for five practices we are asking people to experiment with this year. The “X” stands for Jesus to remind us that he is in the midst of it all. But the other letters stand for Pray for the entire world, Read through the entire word, Add to the community, Invest in the kingdom, and Send yourself to the nations.

Over the next year we are going to spend a little over a month on each one of those practices, talking through those in worship and thinking about what they might mean for us. We are also going to have a particular tool we are going to ask you to use during that time

so that you can consider how you can live each one out. For example, when we get to the “pray for the entire world series,” we have a 35-day prayer guide we have written that leads you to pray through every single country in the world. It’s going to be a really cool year; I am really excited about it.

We are still in the midst of an introductory series where we are going through these five ideas and talking about them sort of in microcosm. This Sunday we are talking about “Invest in the Kingdom;” we are on the “I”.

We have two Scripture passages that are going to guide our conversation this morning. One of those comes from the prophet Malachi. Malachi is the last prophet in the Old Testament, not necessarily chronologically, but as we order the books of the Bible. We are in Malachi chapter 3, verses 6-12. Now Malachi is a post-exilic prophet. What that means is that his ministry happens after the return from the Babylonian exile, somewhere after 515 B.C. A lot of scholars, however, believe that Malachi’s ministry is contemporaneous with that of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jew who became appointed as the governor of Judea under the Persian Empire and he actually serves two terms. He serves once, he leaves for several years, and he comes back. Malachi’s prophesy and his words to the people seem to fit really well with the situation that Nehemiah faces when he returns.

Our passage this morning talks about tithing, and God encourages the people to bring the full tithe into the storehouse. Nehemiah gives us a little bit of background. You see, when he returns from the Persian court to be governor of Judea for a second time, he discovers that the temple has completely shut down. All the priests and the Levites have gone home and the sacrifices have ended; and worship of God essentially has come to a stop. The reason this has happened is because the people have stopped tithing and the priests and the Levites, who have to feed their families and themselves, have gone home to their own fields or herds or hired themselves out so that they can make money to feed their families.

Now, we don't have a temple anymore in our faith, and so it is difficult for us to assess the significance of the temple worship stopping, but it is rather if you left the United States for a couple of years and came back and every single church in our country had closed its doors. It is that significant for the people, and so Nehemiah addresses that, but Malachi does so perhaps in an even more beautiful way. He imagines a conversation between God and the people, and so I want you to listen to that conversation and the faithfulness to which God calls his people.

### ***Malachi 3:6-12***

*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'*

*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.*

Now in the New Testament, we are in the gospel of Matthew, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, the 19<sup>th</sup> verse. Matthew is in the middle of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It begins in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter. When we were in Israel earlier this year, we had the opportunity to go to where we think the sermon was preached. It is called The Mount of Beatitudes. Even though the passage says, "Jesus sits down on the mountain," he probably goes up to the mountain and sits in front of it. It works almost like a Roman theater where the people who are on the mountain above him can hear his voice because of the acoustics of

that place.

In the midst of this sermon (chapter 6), Jesus starts to talk about spiritual practices. He speaks about the practice of giving alms to the poor; he speaks about the practice of prayer; and he speaks about the practice of fasting. Then he begins this conversation about money and its relationship to our spiritual lives. Essentially, he creates this dichotomy: these three sets of pairs that are opposite to each other. He talks about treasure in heaven and treasure on earth. He talks about healthy eyes and unhealthy eyes, and he talks about serving two different masters. What Jesus wants us to understand is that there is a collision of kingdoms that are happening around this issue of money and finances. We are going to talk about that in a little bit but first hear Jesus' words from the gospel of Matthew, the 19<sup>th</sup> verse:

### ***Matthew 6:19-34***

*'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'*

*'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!'*

*'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'*

*'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry'*

*about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

*‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is always awkward for the pastor to preach on money. Two reasons it’s awkward-- you guys are already feeling awkward aren’t you? Two reasons it is awkward: one is there is the fear that we look greedy, we just want your money; the other fear is that we come across as sort of “holier than thou” and we want you to feel bad about having money. Incidentally, it occurs to me that the last couple of times the sermon series has called for a sermon on money, Jim Wood has been mysteriously absent, and yours truly has been up here. I don’t know what to do with that, it’s a mystery. ☺ Anyway...

Jesus talks about money a lot. You have heard me say it before; it’s the topic he talks about more than any other after the kingdom of heaven. He talks about money a lot because it is an important spiritual issue for us. Jesus is not particularly greedy. When you have created the world, worldly things don’t have a lot of appeal for you. He is not particularly “holier than thou,” actually he is definitely “holier than thou;” however, the whole ministry of Jesus is about putting aside what makes him separate and his becoming one of us and walking amongst us and humbling himself. So, Jesus has a different reason for talking about money.

I think Jesus wants us to understand that there is a war going on between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this earth, and that what we do with our money by in large defines where we are in that war, which side we serve.

Now on some basic level we get this, it's intuitive. Imagine for a moment if you had a friend after 9/11 who came to you and said, "I am really opposed to the Taliban and al Qaeda and we need justice for our friends and family." Imagine if they went to rallies and they called their congressmen or congresswoman. Imagine if they wore t-shirts that said "Justice for 9/11" and read voraciously on the subject and, at the same time, gave large sums of money to Al Qaeda.

We know where they really are. We understand that money serves, in that sense, as sort of a barometer for what is really valuable in their life. We have heard before that "you tell me what your values are with your words and I'll tell you what your values are with your calendar and your checkbook." I think Jesus is saying that, but I also think he is saying something more profound that we don't always get. I think Jesus wants us to understand that the way we think about money is just as important as what we do with our money. I'm not sure that the people often get that. Certainly they do not understand that in the time of Malachi.

Malachi imagines this great conversation between God and the people. God says, "Return to me and I'll return to you." And the people say, "Return to you, how shall we return to you?" And God says, "Will anyone rob God? But you are robbing me." And they say, "How are we robbing you?" I think that the people are being genuine. I don't think the people are being disciplined. I think they really don't understand what this distance that has grown up between them and God is about or how it has happened. It seems to me that that's a challenge for us as we think about our monies. We don't think about it as a spiritual issue. We usually think about it as a worldly thing that has no relationship to God or what God wants from us.

Now this is an issue that is bigger than just the tithe. Malachi wants to talk about the tithe and it is important. The tithe is the Old Testament commandment that we are to give ten per cent of everything that we receive back to God. The idea of the tithe is really simple: nothing that you have is yours; everything that you have is God's. When God allows you to have so much, he asks you to return ten per cent as a way of reminding yourself that it was not yours in the first place, it is his.

Malachi imagines what it would be like if the people all tithed. I can only imagine what it would be like if every American or every Christian or every Christian even in our church tithed. The ministry we could do would be amazing. But that is not even the fullness of what Jesus is saying. Because Jesus, as he often does, wants to take the requirements of the law and broaden them and expand them and make us think more deeply. He wants us to see that in the midst of this conversation about money there are two kingdoms, two kings, two masters, which are opposed to each other, which he is calling us to align ourselves between.

He says it really powerfully, he says, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Now, without a question, that is a timeless truth, but I think it is particularly relevant for us in our culture today. I would suggest to you that materialism is the defining sin of the modern American culture.

Materialism is the defining sin of the modern American culture. I use the word materialism very intentionally because it is not money itself that is good or bad. Paul says that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." Jesus says the same thing. It's about how we see it, how we perceive it. It's not about the thing itself. When Jesus talks about two eyes, he says that with a healthy eye you be filled with light. His point is that if you perceive money as it really is, that if you perceive the gifts you have been given, the wealth you have as a gift from God over which you are a steward, then your life

becomes rightly ordered, and your life is filled with light, and you see the world as it really is. But, if you see the things in your life as the definers of your value, if you see them as the keepers of your identity, if you see your money and your things as that in which you put your trust for security and safety and hope, if you see it as the measure of your success, then your eye is unhealthy and the light in you is darkness. See, Jesus wants us to realize that we are being forced to choose who our master will be. Will we be mastered by Christ or will we be mastered by material things?

I see this really often when I am talking to students and I ask, "What's your goal in life, what do you see in your future, or what's the purpose for your life?" Actually I usually get a similar response when I talk to parents as well. Usually the response eventually comes down to something like this: "I want to make good grades so I can get into a good college, so I can go to a good school so I can get a good job, so that I have a good salary," and then they add something at the end there, they wouldn't say it, but I would add for them "because salary is related to happiness, and if I don't do all of those things, then I won't be happy."

As parents we want those things for our children, not because we think of ourselves as selfish, materialistic people, but because we believe that their happiness will be related to their wealth. We believe that if our children don't have things they won't be happy, they won't be safe, they won't be secure. Our culture reinforces that. Our culture warps our perceptions and justifies our behavior and teaches us that yes, we are right to believe that our value and our worth and our identity is in our things rather than in what Christ has done for us and in whose image we have been made or the mission that God has given us for the world.

I was driving to work earlier this week and Jonathan, my 2 ½ year-old attends who the preschool here, was in the backseat. As we were driving, all of the sudden he says, "Daddy, who's that man?" Now if you have a two year old you have to get used to weird questions, so I asked, "What are you talking about?" He said, "That man on the

sign?" and I said, "Well, honey, I didn't see the sign." I'm going to guess it was a billboard, I'm going to guess it was a man selling us something that we don't really need, but really I didn't even see it. Then if you have a 2-1/2 year old you know what his response was, "Daddy I need it! I need it!"  
"Honey you don't even know what it is."  
"Yes, Daddy, but I need it."

Unfortunately I think that's true for us, right?

Steve Jobs died this week. Steve Jobs was a genius and a visionary and I guess I'm bordering on an Apple fan-boy a little bit so I have great respect for him. Yet one of the things Steve Jobs was so good at was making us need things we never knew we needed. Am I with you? The iPad. What the heck is an iPad? I don't know, but I needed it as soon as I saw it. Are you with me? So that's a challenge for us. That's sort of a superficial level, but we begin to discover that our need for things becomes a place that we go for hope or safety or happiness. Buying things and owning things becomes a place of security for us, and, eventually, our identity gets caught up even in the things that we have and own.

There is a commercial that I saw on Hulu a few weeks ago. I think it is for Norton Anti-virus software. I don't know if you have seen this commercial or not but it is pretty weird, but it is pretty powerful as well. Can we play that commercial?

<COMMERCIAL>

*The stuff that lives in your hard drive, your devices and on the web. It's who you are stuff. Where you've been and where you are going stuff. The stuff that connects you to the people you love. But sometimes, bad stuff can happen to your stuff. Your stuff can get lost, even stolen. The thing is STUFF HAPPENS which is why you need Norton, because what are you without your stuff. Better yet, without your stuff, who are you?*

Hmm.... Sometimes commercials are really subtle, and sometimes they are not. Without your stuff, what are you? Who are you? Right? That's a scary message for me, but I think it's a familiar message. I think it's a message that we hear and our children hear a hundred times a day. It begins to tell us that our life is about the things that we have and not about who Christ is and what he has done for us.

There is a second sort of step that we take when we get sucked into this world of materialism. The second step is we begin to create a world in which we can function and be protected from the suffering of the world that doesn't have our affluence. We put on these blinders and we begin to see only the things that we want to see because our lifestyle is uncomfortable when compared to the lifestyle of most of the world.

I have been re-reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and we have been talking about Narnia a lot in the last few weeks. In the first of the Chronicles, depending on the order in which you read them, is *The Magician's Nephew*. *The Magician's Nephew* is Lewis's allegory of the book of Genesis where he talks about creation and the fall.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, there is a character named Uncle Andrew. Uncle Andrew is really the villain of the story. He does some evil but it's not a lot of evil. The reason he doesn't do a lot of evil is not because he doesn't want to do great evil, but because he is just a small man. He is cowardly and unintelligent and afraid of everything.

Incidentally I think very often we excuse people who are evil because they do small evil, and I think that is kind of dangerous. I think that God probably cares more about what is in our heart than what we manage to accomplish.

So Uncle Andrew is this small man who wants to do great evil. He tricks these two children into traveling between the worlds using magic. At one point they end up in this sort of world where nothing

is, just blackness and emptiness, and immediately they are afraid; but then they hear this voice, it starts singing. The children think it is this beautiful song and as the song grows and becomes more beautiful. All of a sudden, above them, planets and stars pop into existence. As soon as they appear, the children hear this chorus that joins in with the singer. As the song builds to a crescendo, the sun arises and there is light everywhere for the first time. And they see where they are; and they see in the distance a lion and the lion is singing.

Now you know *The Chronicles of Narnia*, you know the lion is Aslan who is Jesus in the story. So the lion is singing, and, as he sings, life is almost flowing out of him and green things are growing and water is flowing. Near the end of this scene, the earth starts to bubble and these animals sort of “pop up.” Aslan goes to the animals and he breathes on some of them. The ones that he breathes on become talking beasts; and they can think and they can speak.

Now, while that whole thing is going on and the children are so enamored with the amazing things they are seeing, Uncle Andrew has a very different experience. Uncle Andrew, from the very beginning, hears the song. He knows it's a song, he recognizes it, but he doesn't like it. He says it makes him think and feel things that he doesn't want to think and feel. So when the sun comes up and he sees that the singer is a lion, “Only a lion,” he says. He begins to tell himself that it is not a song at all, but in fact that the lion is only a lion and it can't speak and so it can't be singing. And so what he must be hearing is only the normal sounds that any lion might make. As the song grows louder and more beautiful and more things come to life, he refuses to make any connection between the noises the lion is making and the things that are appearing. Lewis says this great line, he says, “The danger with trying to make ourselves stupider than we really are is that very often we succeed.” Ultimately, Uncle Andrew so convinces himself that the lion is just a lion, that he is unable to hear anything other than growling and snarling from Aslan.

Now that's me. I arrange my life in such a way so that I can only experience the things that I want to experience. So that I can block out the parts of my life that are uncomfortable that make me think and feel things I don't want to think and feel. Perfect example: this Friday, being a little bit of an Apple fan-boy, I went and bought an iPhone 4S or whatever it is called. I know what it is called, I'm just pretending.

The phone cost me \$200. Now honestly, I was so excited about what I was getting, I didn't even think about that. It wasn't until a little bit later on Saturday that I started realizing that that \$200 that I spent on a phone is a hundred days wages for people I know in Kenya. I know people that live on \$2 or less a day. Half of the world lives on \$2 or less a day. I have been to people's homes. I've met their children. I have sat on their dirt floor. I thought nothing of spending \$200 on a phone! Now I'm not saying it was immoral to do, but I wasn't even thinking about people because it was easier for me not to do so.

I know that 26-27,000 children die every single day of hunger and preventable disease, but it is easier to not think about that because, when I think about it, it messes up the comfort of my life. So I'd rather just not think and feel about things that I don't want to think and feel about; and I make myself stupider than I really am. I make my world this world of materialism that is safe for me to live in where I can ignore the suffering of the majority of the rest of the world.

The next challenge for me is to think about this issue of materialism. First there is our culture, and then there are my own choices, but then, even once I get past those, even once I begin to accept that it is a problem that Christ calls me to address, it's so complex, it's so confusing, it's so bewildering that it almost seems as though it's beyond my power to effect. So I give up just because it's an overwhelming challenge.

There is an image that came up on facebook this week or last week of a plastic spoon. It's a great image. It's a plastic spoon, and it says, "It's pretty amazing that our society has reached a point where the effort necessary to extract oil from the ground, ship it to a refinery, turn it into plastic, shape it appropriately, truck it into a store, buy it and bring it home, is considered to be less effort than what it takes just to wash the spoon when you are done with it." That's interesting because it's true. Right? I mean we genuinely think that, "Oh great! I can use this spoon and throw it away." The complexity of the material world that we face is overwhelming, and knowing even where to begin to attack the problem is so challenging.

We know that there are people just south of our border who are paid terrible wages in what we would call sweat shops to make t-shirts and shoes and plastic spoons for us, but we don't know what to do about it. If I don't buy those things, will that make any difference? If those factories get closed down, does that really help people who had some salary and then would have no salary? How do I effect this world in ways that are meaningful?

People are starving to death in Somalia, but how do I matter to them? Even if we can get food to them, the warlords kill the people bringing the food. So, do we send soldiers? It's so complex. It seems as though there is nothing that I can do. It seems as though I can't make any difference. So very often I just say, "Well I can't effect it, so I'll just leave it alone. Somebody else can solve this one."

I think materialism is going to be the defining sin of the modern American culture. I think that it is going to be the thing that we are called to account for. I think that if we look back just 150 years, there was a different defining sin of our culture. One hundred and fifty years ago, the defining sin of the American church was slavery. Without a doubt, it was the thing that divided us, that we obsessed over and that we were unable to solve. It was a thing that our culture was complicit in, that our culture encouraged and said was good. There were letters and treaties written about how immoral it was to free a slave because they couldn't make it on their own. It was a

place where we created these individual worlds where we put blinders on to ignore the suffering of people around us so that we didn't have to see what we didn't want to see so that we could keep living as we wanted to live. It was a problem that was so complex that even the people that recognized it as evil and wanted to do something about it very often gave up because they thought that there was nothing that they could do. They thought that they couldn't make an impact.

One hundred and fifty years later we look back at them and we say, "How could they have been Christians and followed Jesus Christ and been willing to allow that system to continue? How could it have been a Christian culture and been so defined? How could they have really been motivated by the love of Christ and been willing to give up because the problem was too big?" I wonder if in 150 years people will look back at us and say, "How could they call themselves Christians in the midst of the overwhelming suffering in the world, in the midst of poverty? How could they live like they lived and choose to ignore all of that? How could their culture have allowed it? How could they have been overwhelmed? "

So what do we do? What is our response to materialism? What is our response to this issue, this system that seems to define us as a nation and as a culture and as a church?

A couple of ideas: Jesus usually does a good job of not only defining the problem, but giving us some part of the solution. So Jesus, at the end of our passage in Matthew says, "You worry about all these things, but seek first His kingdom and his righteousness and everything else will be added unto you." Jesus says that if you want to order your life so that you are being mastered by me and not mastered by the things and the material and the money in your life, then you begin by placing me first. That means especially in the area of money. You have got to place me first. I can't be an afterthought. I can't be something you do when you are able. Every time I hear this Sermon on the Mount, I think to myself as Jesus speaks about worry, "Oh, I've got to pay those credit card bills." Or, "Oh, I've got

to pay that mortgage” or “Oh, I’ve got to make sure that I can afford this.” Yes, I understand what worry is about. But Jesus is not speaking to middle class people in the Sermon on the Mount. On the Sea of Galilee, he is speaking to fisherman and shepherds and farmers, who are literally wondering where their next meal might come from or where their next set of clothes might come from. And he says to them, “Don’t worry, put me first and everything else will be added unto you.”

See, the message is not just for the rich, it’s for everyone. If we want to order our lives correctly, we put Christ first and then we understand that everything, including our finances, he provides. This is not a message that if you tithe you will be rich, by the way. That is not what Christ says. He says, “I will provide your daily bread. I will give you enough to get through today, but I want you to trust me enough to trust me for tomorrow as well.” That it’s not about YOU making it secure for tomorrow, it’s about trusting me to make your tomorrow secure.

The second thing for us, I think, is we have to learn not simply to put Christ first with our finances to give, but we have to learn to really sacrifice. We have to begin to live out the extravagant generosity of a God who was rich in all things and yet gave up everything and became poor so that we might be rich as he is. We are going to talk in January about the four-month tithe challenge which is a great idea to help us put Christ first and reorder our lives, but tithing has never been the goal. Tithing has never been the standard that God wanted for us. The standard that He wants for us is generosity. He wants us to be a people who live like Christ lived.

Last week, Jim preached beautifully about the need to reach those who are missing from God’s love and grace and our desire to share that love and grace with them. I would suggest to you that there is no more effective way to witness to who God is in the midst of our culture and our materialism than to become a people of extravagant generosity – people who are known not for what we keep but for what we give away.

The third thing for us, and probably the most important, is we have to begin to see the world as it really is. We need what Jesus calls “healthy eyes.” We can’t be overwhelmed by the complexity of a problem or seduced by the complicity of our culture or blinded by the false realities that we choose to live in. We have to recognize that every day with our lives we are investing in a kingdom. We have to choose which kingdom in which we want to invest.

You guys should have found in your chairs a Sweet’N Low packet. Actually it may be a sugar plus packet. Will you pull that out and just hold onto that for a second? In my little geeky, preacher, heart-of-hearts, I imagine that you’ve been thinking this whole time while you’ve been listening intently, what in the world that Sweet’N Low packet is for, and does it have some great significance and is it valuable in some way? It turns out, no. It’s a worthless little packet of fake sugar. Yours is a worthless little packet of fake sugar; however mine is one of the most valuable things that I own. I want to explain why it’s so valuable, and to do that I’ve got to tell you a little bit about my grandmother.

Some of you guys know my mom’s mom was named Grandma Brownie, which is a great name. Her real name is Jessie, but everybody called her Grandma Brownie. Grandma was a strong woman. Grandma was physically strong, she lived to be 99, which is pretty good, but she was also just a strong woman. She lived through some extraordinary things. She saw brothers killed in WWII; she survived an incredibly difficult marriage and was widowed. She raised two girls all by herself, did an awesome job, and in the midst of that, she worked full-time as a nurse here in Norfolk. She was also a great-grandmother to me and my cousins.

Near the end of her life, perhaps because her body was so strong, Grandma’s mind began to give out before her body. She had pretty severe Alzheimer’s, and, as that developed and she got more confused, we had to move her to the Balentine. While she was in the Balentine she had a stroke, or maybe a series of strokes, and we

moved her to Harbor Point where we hoped that she would recover. She didn't really.

While she was at Harbor Point we visited her every day. Somebody from our family was there to see her. I was usually there once or twice a week if I could. Just to talk to her. Sometimes early on she sort of knew what was going on and we had a little bit of conversation. Later on, it wasn't really so much a conversation just as me wanting her to know that I was there and that I loved her.

I remember one day when I was sitting and talking to Grandma, lunch was brought in. I tried to get her to eat some lunch and tried to feed her, and she didn't really want to eat anything. So I just talked for a while. Finally I said, "Grandma, I love you. I have to go; I'll see you soon." And she reached out her hand as I was giving her a hug, and she grabbed my hand. She took her other hand and she put her hand in mine. She looked at me, and for a minute she looked at me like she was my grandma again. Like she knew who I was, and like she loved me and had something special for me. So she held my hand for a minute and she kind of shook it, and she looked away and let go and I had this Sweet'N Low packet in my hand. Thanks, Grandma!

I don't know what she thought she was giving me, but I treasure this because it reminds me that, in the midst of her darkness, in the midst of her confusion, in the midst of a body that was failing and a mind that was failing, she still loved me. She still knew me. She still valued me. She had something special for me.

So here's the deal. I don't particularly like Sweet'N Low. I never really drink anything you'd put Sweet'N Low in. It's not something I needed. God doesn't need anything that you have to give, but he will treasure everything that you give. God doesn't need your help to reach the poor. He doesn't need your help to go out and find those who are missing and bring them into the kingdom. He doesn't need your help to worship him. He doesn't need your help to teach people

about him. But he treasures that you want to be part of his kingdom and his ministry.

So this is my encouragement for you guys today. I want you to take your Sweet'N Low packet. I want you to put it in a wallet, in a purse, on a dresser; somewhere you are going to see it. Every time you see it, I want you to remember that the things of this world, the material things that so often we look to in order to provide us security and hope and safety and identity and success, in the light of God's kingdom, they are as worthless as a packet of fake sugar. But when we turn those to God and when we give those back to the one who gave to us, when we give to the poor and to the lost and to those who want to know him, when we choose to invest our lives and our gifts in the kingdom, then they become treasure in heaven because God treasures them.

So I hope you will keep this and I hope it will be a question for you every day as you see it for the next week. What kingdom are you investing your life in? Amen.