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## Invest In The Kingdom

**Jim Wood, Pastor**

Our Old Testament lesson today comes from the last words in the book of Leviticus. I want to spend some time discussing context. It's important to get some grounding in both of these passages. This passage in Leviticus is addressing the subject of tithing. As you listen or read along, you will also understand that it is stating there is a difference between a tithe and an offering. This distinction can be lost on us if we are not careful.

I have reflected on this as well as with Jim Gates and Valena Hoy, that when we are reading about the tithe in the Old Testament, we usually wrestle with questions such as, "If a tithe is ten percent, then ten percent of what?... Is it my take home pay or my gross income?" Well, very, very clearly, the tithe is the first fruit. It is the first offering. It is the first of what I have. It comes at the beginning.

I want to ground it by simply saying this: It appears, and I think it's quite legitimate, that the actual amount that we are called to give in the Old Testament is not ten percent but twenty-three percent. Here is why... Numbers 18 talks about a ten percent tithe that goes to the Levites. That would probably be what we would equate our tithe to today. This would have gone to the management of worship, the management of the temple, etc.

Deuteronomy 14 talks about another tithe of ten percent that goes specifically for communal meals. This would very often be feast days, celebrations and festivals. It would also likely go towards providing for those who can't provide for themselves. For those who are so poor, they couldn't feasibly attend if they had to bring their own provisions. So here is another tithe, again ten percent, which appears to go towards funding communal meals.

Also in Deuteronomy 14, there is a third tithe that is given every three years for the alien and the poor in our midst. So, if you round that down, that would basically be about three percent.

To sum up, you have the annual tithe to the Levites, the annual tithe for communal meals, and the every third year the tithe for the alien and poor. This would bring the total to about twenty-three percent.

When we read this passage it may appear a little confusing because it's discussing questions such as, whether you can redeem something or how do you substitute it. Listen for the Word of the Lord. Leviticus chapter 27:

*Leviticus 27:30-34*

*All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the Lord's; they are holy to the Lord. If persons wish to redeem any of their tithes, they must add one-fifth to them. All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to the Lord. Let no one inquire whether it is good or bad, or make substitution for it; if one makes substitution for*

*it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy and cannot be redeemed.*

*These are the commandments that the Lord gave to Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.*

Now we'll turn forward to the New Testament, the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The sixteenth chapter comes after the fifteenth chapter of Luke. You know you are a true Bible scholar if you figured that out. The reason I say that is because the fifteenth chapter is very often called, "The Lost Chapter." Not that the chapter is lost, but because it shares three stories/parables of something that is lost; the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost brother or brothers. Often we refer to that as the story of the prodigal son, the lost sons.

Now after that powerful fifteenth chapter, Jesus continues another parable. This one can be challenging to wrap your head around. On many levels, it doesn't seem to make sense. It talks about a dishonest manager, one that Jesus ultimately uses as a positive example.

Let's begin by considering parables for a moment. I think one of the mistakes we often make with parables is that we expect it to be something about morality. They frequently are but that's not their purpose. If we make the parable about something moral, we run the risk of missing the larger point. A parable is always, always, always talking about the kingdom of God. It's giving us a glimpse through a story and through our reflection on that story, of what the kingdom of God might be. I want to lay it out for you before we read it. Then we will talk about it.

Basically, in this story, Jesus says there is a manager who is dishonest. He is turned in by his clients to his boss. In the parable, the boss is God. The boss

says, "I'm going to do an accounting and when I'm finished, you will be out of here because I believe it is true that you are dishonest." The manager is too proud to beg. He knows he has to do something. I think verse nine is the key and Jesus affirms it. He goes to the people to try to ingratiate himself with them and become friends. He removes part of the debt they owe. Listen for the Word of our Lord.

*Luke 16:1-15*

### *The Parable of the Dishonest Manager*

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is*

*dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave 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.'*

*The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'*

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

In this passage, I think and a number of scholars agree, that what is happening is that Jesus is using the dishonest manager as a story of the kingdom to make clear that our wealth and all that we have is given to us.

Jim Gates gave a great children's sermon last week addressing the idea of an allowance. Everything we have is really an allowance of God's. He gives it to us and blesses us. I know we work hard for it but it is all His. He wants us to use our money as verse 9 says, to make friends. It's about relationship.

When the manager goes to those two people who owe a debt, I think it's significant that he cancels fifty percent of the debt with the first and only twenty percent in the other. It is highly likely that the fifty percent was his commission. Then the next one he only takes twenty percent. It is more than likely that was his commission on that particular bill. What he is trying to do is make friends with these people so that when he loses everything, he'll still have a place to go. He hopes to be welcomed by people by correcting what he had done.

Now that's counterintuitive when you think about it. Every single one of us, if you knew you were going to lose your job, would try to conserve

what we have. We might go out and get everything we could. We would try to get that fifty percent commission, which is a ton of money and amounts to years and years of a laborers' pay. You would hope to save it and weather the storm. But what God says is that in weathering the storm, it's not about what you provide for yourself or what you can hoard, but it's about the relationships that you have. It's about what you use in relationship and how you use your money for relationships. We are going to talk about this more.

Bob Pierce is a hero of mine. In the 1940s, Bob was an evangelist. He worked for youth for Christ. He was on the level of Billy Graham, an incredible evangelist. In 1947, he was on his way to China to do an evangelism tour and didn't have enough money to make it all the way. Somewhere between the west coast of the U.S. and China, as he was working his way across, he did a crusades in school-type settings. He was phenomenal. People would flock and commit their lives to Christ. They would come up and make confessions and professions of faith before Christ.

One particular example was a girl named White Jade who gave her life to Christ. Bob was excited about his growing list of people who had come to Christ on this particular crusade and all the others to come. A teacher came to him and said, "Do you see that girl? Her name is White Jade. She is abandoned. She doesn't know where she is going to live. She has no education. She is destitute and now that she has given her life to Christ in a non-Christian community, even those who would have cared for her before are going to have nothing to do with her." The teacher then looked and Bob and said, "What are you going to do for that girl?"

This broke Bob's heart. He wrote something in the cover of his Bible as he reflected on what was to be done. He went on to China, continued his crusade, eventually returned to the U.S. He opened up his Bible and realized that what he had written was simply this prayer: "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."

Out of that prayer, Bob Pierce and a few other people created an organization in his living room called World Vision. Today, World Vision

is one of the largest aid organizations on the face of the earth. After he created World Vision, he left and moved on to create another organization known as Samaritan's Purse. Franklin Graham, Billy Graham's son, leads Samaritan's Purse now.

That prayer continued to be his for the rest of his life. "Lord, let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." I simply want to say to you today that for me, that's my prayer. Lord, let my heart be broken by the things that break your heart. Because of all the things I've experienced and all the things I've done, all of the sins I have and all the mistakes I've made, all the good things I've done as well as all of the bad, in the midst of it all, the one thing I have to come realize in my life is that for me to be near the heart of God is where I am at my best. To be near the heart of God is to live a life of generosity.

We have a generous God. It's not just for football Sundays. For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son...We have a God who loves us so much that He gave His only son for us. There is no question in my mind that I would give my life at this moment for any of my three sons. No question. That is the deepest understanding of love that I know on this earth. But a God that loves me so much that He would give up His own son? That is a love that overwhelms me.

We have a God of generosity. Everything is his. He made it all. When we are near that heart, we are overwhelmed by that generosity. As we are near it, we seek to be with that generosity, to grow into it, to love it, to share it, to be part of it. To be that near to the heart of God, I believe, means that we have to be near those in need.

At the end of our last trip to Kenya, when the team had left, we did something with our Holy Family staff. These are our young healthcare professionals and there around about sixty or so of them. They are amazing, working in the trenches everyday with over four thousand HIV positive patients in overwhelming poverty. So we take them away. The last couple of years we took them to the coast. We do a three or four day seminar with them. We let them write their goals for the year. They do their own planning. I do some teaching with them. I decided to do what I

did for a secret church here a few months ago... I did a five hour teaching for them on the mission of God. In that context, as an aside, I said, " You know, we talk alot about a tithe and ten percent, but in the Old Testament, more than likely it was a twenty-three percent tithe." I just kind of threw that out there.

Well, I went through another hour of teaching before we took a break and as soon as we did, they all came up. "Pastor, pastor, twenty-three percent in a tithe? Help me understand that." Now these are people who are overwhelmingly committed. They are living on little. They are not paid well and struggle. They are young people trying to get their life started, considering marriage or having kids and all that goes with it.

So I said, "Okay, let's look at it." We spent some time and to this day that conversation continues with a number of them through email and Facebook. "Pastor, I'm studying this, I'm reflecting on it." What is amazing is that they are reflecting on it not because it is some legalistic understanding, but I believe it is because they are living with those who are in greatest need. They are near those who are near the heart of God and there is something about this generosity that has opened up in them because they see the generosity of God being lived out in powerful, powerful ways.

Ultimately, this is where Sheryl and I are right now and where we are struggling. We are trying to figure out in our financial life how we can be near to the heart of God.

You see, ultimately we have a choice. Our money can either be a tool or a toy. I started tithing when I was twenty-seven years old and elected an elder in a Presbyterian church. I tithed because I thought you couldn't be an elder without tithing. We have given in addition to that over the years. But I'm coming to realize that in my life I have, almost without exception, viewed my financial resources as a toy and not a tool. It's all about what I have, what I don't have, what I've saved, what I've given or not. It's all about the money as a toy rather than really considering what those resources actually do for the kingdom of God.

It's really not a question of how much we give away but how much we can afford to keep. Here is what I mean by that... God forbid, imagine someone who just found out their child was diagnosed with a potential terminal disease. The doctors say, "There is a treatment that may or may not save your child's life, but we need to let you know that it is not covered by insurance and it's expensive." What would you do?

There would be a for sale sign in front of my house the next day. Every bank account I had would be emptied, every credit card maxed out. I would do anything. You would do anything to save your child. I believe with every ounce of my being that that is the way God looks upon every single person in need on the face of this earth.

If I am near the heart of God, what a privilege it would be for me to be able to see those in need in the same way. To see them not as someone else's children, not as "those" people, but to see them as my own. Then the real question isn't, "How much can I give away?," but, "How much can I afford to keep?"

Now, don't get me wrong, I live a great life. I've got nice clothes. They may not be in style but they are nice. (That's not supposed to be funny, by the way.) I drive a nice car and live in a great home. I have a good retirement account. But I'm coming to realize that if I really want to be near the heart of God, I need to shift the way I think about the financial aspects of my life.

So here is what I've decided to do and it's really helped me. I keep a prayer list. It's on the desktop of my computer and includes a number of you. It also includes things which I want to celebrate, things for which I am grateful. It includes people in Kenya and Nicaragua. It includes a number of folks here who are struggling with addiction, emotional or mental illness, or financial struggles. It includes people who are on the street, in our own congregation, and those who have just found new homes. I include the names from Crisis Pregnancy Center, of young women who are pregnant and have decided against what so much of the world would say, to keep her child. I also include her potential due date.

Every day I pray over every single one of those names. It takes me time, but here is what I've found. At the start, as I pray over those names, they are just names... Janice, Shinita, Susan, etc. But over the course of that month as I pray for them, something happens to the Holy Spirit that I start to feel as though they are part of my family. I can't make sense out of it. It's overwhelming for me. I know that I need to do that because I'm not a generous person. Just as Sheryl. I'm not generous by nature in any aspect of my life. I'm not generous in what I do to help out. I'm not generous in my praise. I'm not naturally generous. I'm a hoarder, I'm a keeper and I'm a saver. That's my nature. My sinful nature, but that's the way I am. I've come to realize that in order for me to have a generous heart, I have to be near the heart of God. I have to keep these situations before me. I have to keep praying for them and holding them up.

I've been through a lot in my life. There has been a lot of ups and downs and I have to be honest, there is no way I would have made it if it hadn't been for you. You have made an eternal difference in my life. You've loved me, and most of you have forgiven me. You've accepted me. You've been there as a support, an encouragement, and a hope for me.

It's also more than just those particular situations. I pray for people in my neighborhood as well. The ones whose cars don't move on Sunday morning. I'm not trying to judge in any way. They are out there trying to live the American dream. But I don't see any conversation or reflection on what it is to know God or be known by Him. I look at them and think, "What's going to happen once something happens in your life? Where are you going to go?" I really pray for them because I don't think I would make it. Actually, I know I wouldn't make it. This is what it is to be near the heart of God, to believe in this life of generosity.

I was at a luncheon out at Regent University this week. It was really interesting. It's a gathering of folks whose influence and affluence is much greater than mine ever will be. It's always fun. We are talking about a national Christian foundation. With most foundations in the U.S., people contribute money and then that money gets invested and then what's made of that investment is used for things. That is kind of the primary way of doing it.

Well, this foundation is done in a very different way. They encourage and help people to give in very generous ways, such as giving part of their businesses and those kinds of things. Then, those funds are almost immediately used that year. It's great. I think this one foundation gave away more than five hundred million dollars last year of which almost all of that came in to them over the course of that year. It's really incredible.

They shared the story of a family. The man had made it in his own world, dealing with a lot of heavy equipment in a specialized arena. He had a family of seven. He gave his life to Christ and decided he wanted to do something with his business for the glory of God.

Rather than asking, "How much can I give away?," he started with, "How much do I need to live on with a family of seven?" He finally decided that they could live on ten thousand dollars a month, one hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year.

Now, that's a lot for me because that is more than what I have. They live on that fixed amount every single month, sell a portion of their business and contribute one million dollars every month. They live on one hundred twenty thousand dollars a year and give away twelve million dollars.

There is something overwhelming to me about that story. It's not the money or the amounts; it's simply being able to say we are no longer going to see it as a toy. We are going to see it as a tool.

Jesus said that you can't serve two masters. You can't serve God and wealth. That's where I am in my life, trying to figure out what I am serving and how I can allow it to be used for His glory rather than my own security.

I believe in our world today, our finances are our greatest struggle. They are the thing that keeps us from the glory of God more than anything else, even our sins. Our sins are forgiven. The reason why is because I believe it's the one place in our life that our God increasingly says, "You have a choice, you have to decide."

Sam Childers, The Machine Gun Preacher, says that we often see God as a genie in a bottle. Rub the bottle and everything will be great. In the Presbyterian tradition, we call that grace. We just trust and believe in God..rub the bottle and Jesus will make everything right. I know we are forgiven by grace. I know it's not by work, it's by faith. I get that.

But here is the thing: God is not a genie in a bottle. Our God is a God who says first you have to decide. Decide and say, "I'm done. I'm done with the old. The old is past and I'm ready for a new life." Decide that although I may struggle with addictions perhaps for the rest of my life, I'm no longer going to be controlled by them. They will no longer be the demon of my life. You must decide that these relationships are not good for you in the kingdom of God and in your life. There has to be this moment of clarity for us.

I was with someone who was recovering not long ago who shared something with me. I realized that so many folks in the throws of different kinds of addictions, very often reach a moment they became sober, the moment of sobriety. The moment. It doesn't mean that this was just the one time they were clear but rather a moment where they finally said, "I don't want this life anymore. I want something new. I want something free. I want to be set free." You have to decide.

Whatever your decision is, God will honor it. If you decide to change, decide you want a new life, God will honor it. If you decide you don't, He'll honor that as well. But that doesn't have to be you. You can accept Him right now.

This is not just for those who perhaps are here for the very first time or who have never had an encounter with a living God. This is for every single one of us. You can accept Him right now. You can say, "Lord, the old is done including the old things I worried about...My life is controlled more by worry than by anything else. The old stuff that controlled me, that has worn me down, threats, fears, etc, I am done with it. I know it's going to be a struggle. I know I might slide, but I know I want something

different. I know that is going to come from accepting You, knowing You, claiming You and from claiming Your promises.”

You can decide and He will honor it. He has your life. Why try to hedge your bets on all of these other things? That is what I’m telling myself.

If you know me, you know that one of the people that is overwhelmingly important in my life is a man in Kenya named Simon Mwangi. Simon struggles with a severe mental illness. He is one of the great heroes of my life and one of the most godly, strong people that I have ever known. Due to his illness and the stigma surrounding it, now matter how well Simon is or will become, he will likely never have a job. People will not hire him. We hire him to help around, to clean and do things. We pay him a full-time salary. It comes to about eighty dollars a month.

I was with Simon one day when he got his monthly paycheck. He was paid in cash and then I went home him. He lives in a little cowshed. It’s immaculate. He goes into his house and immediately pulls out his money. He reaches under a table and pulls out four cans, just as he does every single month. The first can is his tithe. He lives on eighty dollars a month. It’s his tithe to his congregation. The second can is for helping his family and extended family for whatever needs they may have, school fees, etc. He lives on eighty dollars a month. The third can is for a neighbor who lives down that street and needs a little help. Then the fourth can is where he puts the rest of his money that he lives on for a month.

Being the good American I am, I said, “Simon, I think we need to figure out how to get you a raise.” He just looked at me. I said, “Simon I think we need to get you a raise so that we can get you a fifth can.” He said, “Pastor, a fifth can for what?” I said, “Well, Simon, you need to prepare for your future. You need to save some. You need to be able to have some things so when you want to spend it or do something, you’ll have that resource.”

Simon, as he is prone to do, just smiled at me and affirmed me even though I knew in his look that I was wrong. Finally, I said, “Simon, what do you think?” He said, “Pastor, help me understand. A fifth can is for my

future?" I said, "Yeah, for your future." He answered, "Pastor, God has the fifth can of my life."

I want that faith. I want to believe what I tell you every week, that God loves me, He loves my family, He loves my friends and He has our future in His heart. I'm not in any way saying I shouldn't be prepared for retirement. Don't misunderstand me. I'm simply saying this: I need to remember over and over that the fifth can is His, in His heart, and not in mine. All I can do is just close to that heart of God. I hope that makes sense to you. It's starting to make sense to me.

Thank you for letting me talk out loud about it. Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God. Pray with me just for a moment please.

Father, I thank you. I thank you that you have given me so much. I thank you that you have overwhelmed me with your grace and forgiveness. I pray, Lord, that my heart would be broken by the things that break your heart. I pray that I would be near your heart because when I'm out on my own, I am hopeless. But when I am near yours, Lord, you give me this gift of wanting to share the love. I know it's not me because its not my nature but yours. I offer this prayer for my family and friends who are gathered here today. I pray, regardless of where we are, we would decide that fifth can is yours. I pray that our future, our hope, would be our life and that we would be people of generosity. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray, Amen.