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INVEST IN THE KINGDOM

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Now, we are in our year- long series, looking at what we call "Praxis," which is a fancy word from antiquity meaning "practices." We're asking our congregation to consider five experiments over the course of this year. Those five experiments are to pray for the entire world, to read through the entire Bible, to add to the community, to invest in the kingdom and to be sent to the nations. Right now we are continuing a little series about investing in the kingdom. Every one of these five practices has a specific experiment. The experiment for this one is to consider tithing for four months-- a four- month tithe challenge. If you are already tithing, we ask you to consider giving in excess of your tithe to the point that you can actually feel something missing as you organize your finances; and we would love for you to consider doing that. You can make that commitment on the

card, which we will talk about later, but when you do it, you also get a free book called The Generosity Ladder by Nelson Searcy, and it's a real good help for you. If you have done the challenge, then just go to the ladder when you go out to the commons. The books, The Generosity Ladder, are on it. Put a fake gold coin in the piggy bank, (symbolically). It is a great opportunity for you.

Today, in the light of that challenge to invest in the kingdom, we are going to be looking at two passages, one in the Old and one in the New Testament. The Old Testament passage comes in the twelfth chapter of Deuteronomy.

The word Deuteronomy means "the second law" from *Nomos* (law) and *Deutero* (second). It is not the second law; it is the second telling of the law. And in essence what Deuteronomy is about is God taking an opportunity through Moses to give us a compilation all the things God wants us to do as far as his law is concerned when we enter into the Promised Land. God knows that there are going to be incredible challenges when we enter into that land, so he wants us to be prepared, and he wants us to have these reminders. As Abraham Heschel would say, if you had to sum up the Old Testament in one word it would be "Remember." It is in these ways we are reminded who God is, and who brought us into that land, and how God works in and through us as individuals and as a community. You are going to hear some interesting words that will give you a real clear idea of the main understanding or challenge that Deuteronomy wants to address. Let's look:

Deuteronomy 12:1-7

These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth.

You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and

thus blot out their name from their places. You shall not worship the LORD your God in such ways. But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

In the New Testament Paul had been charged with taking up an offering for the orphans and the widows in Jerusalem. It was a very important offering, not only because of the need of the widows and orphans. Many folks when they reached that point would come to Jerusalem, so there was a large collection of folks who often didn't even live there their whole lives but would come, and so there is this great need. It was also a rich opportunity for Paul to model solidarity with us, with people who are followers of Christ "world-wide," as it would be understood at that time. He was going to Corinth and he had asked the Corinthians last year to take up an offering. It seemed like they began, but they didn't give anything. He returned, and he wanted to tell them about some people north of them called the Macedonians.

Corinth was an influential wealthy city. It was not a port city, but in essence it was. The city sat on a narrow isthmus between two great bodies of water and it was much easier for ships to download all of their cargo to be carried across that isthmus than it was for the ships to sail all the way around. So Corinth was extremely cosmopolitan, extremely international, and extremely wealthy. But, as in today's world, often with great wealth comes great poverty. It was a city in many ways similar to what we would encounter in some of the larger cities of our nation and our world. Some of the believers there were Jews; a number of them were not. So, taking up this offering for primarily the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem gets kind of interesting when you think about it.

Paul says, "Look at the Church in Macedon. They are under persecution, they don't have the resources that you do, they have

been troubled in many ways, and yet they have given in an extremely generous way.” He held the Macedonian church up as a model for them. Then he challenged them-- not to beat them up-- but just held it up as a model and spoke to their higher motivations. Listen.

II Corinthians 8: 1-7

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I want you to do something for me this morning. Take a pen or pencil and write down one word. Think about it for moment before you do it. If there is one value that you would want your life to represent, what would that value be? It has to be a value; you can't say, “Jesus.” What word would you put beneath your name on your tombstone? [Congregation volunteers answers].

I have been thinking about this a lot. I have been running it through my head and through my spirit. I think that there are times in my life when perhaps if I have been a victim of abuse or something that might shape my understanding or need to survive at that particular point, that I might put "safety" or something. But almost without exception when we go to this exercise and when we spend real time with it, I believe that we find that God does give each of us a word for our lives. I believe that God gave us that word before he formed us in the womb. There's a word, something that God desires of us or desires for us and through us, that is a word of how God ... It is this value that God wants us to live into.

This is important to share: I would say that when we go through this exercise we [should] pick a word that's relational, meaning it's not just when you say "love." I know that as Americans we are taught to love ourselves, but it doesn't really work. You have to have someone to love; it's relational, compassionate. You have to be in relationship. In our understanding of generosity or integrity or reputation, each is all about relationship.

I fully believe that God has made us and in fact I think we often make the mistake of looking at our lives and saying, "Okay, what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do in the future?" It's all about going forward, when in a sense perhaps one of the real challenges and opportunities is to be more a people of recovery. Meaning, I recover that "word;" I recover what God desired for and through and to me. I find this to be an amazing thing: that God made all of us so different and yet God wants us to be a relational people, relational with him and relational with each other.

Let me ask this question now, but don't answer out loud. This is only for your heart and your spirit. You have that "word." How is that "word" being lived out in your life today? Are you one hundred percent good with how you're doing with it? I'm not. Another way to ask it is, if the people closest to you were asked, would that be the word they would choose? I think that's a really important question for us, because it's really not {about} just what I desire or what I feel. That act of recovery really is an act. It's about living it out. We all know that.

I was sharing with the team last night and I have shared this with you before. I love the Beatitudes. I pray the Beatitudes, but I have one favorite Beatitude beyond any other. It is the one that says, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called children of God." Peace is a great thing, and here is why it is my favorite. It doesn't say, "Blessed are those who desire peace, blessed are those who love and crave and pray for and hope for and call upon peace." It says, "Blessed are the peace makers." It says, "Blessed are those who do something about it." Blessed are those who not only have this understanding of what God desires, but are willing to live into it, those who are living out that word.

I come to realize that, whatever it is, I need to have that “word, “ whatever God desires for me, as a template for my life and it needs to be something not only that I pray over but that this is the kind of person I want to be. I have to find ways to live in to it. I have to have that as a reminder in every aspect of my life, because how I live into it in all these aspects really is what I truly believe. I believe that is why the Bible talks so much about remembering, because it is easy to forget. It is easy to lose your grounding. It is easy to come and say, “I want to be a person of love or compassion or generosity or integrity,” but I get out into the world and the world just starts happening. I realize I have to compromise in this area because this is the way this business is done, or I have to do this because that is the only way that relationship is going to work or.... Then I start to lose my grounding.

How do you take that “word” and tear it off and put it in your wallet or pocket and how do you let that “word” fall over every aspect or certain points of your life? Without that I will lose it or forget it. I will and you will as well. I see that played out in extremely large ways, by the way. I think it is one of the great temptations of Christianity in the context of our time.

Rene Sherrard, great anthropologist and sociologist, interestingly says that in his studies, every Christian nation (nations founded on the principals of Christianity) over time, almost without exception, loses Christ. I mean, you can look at Europe as a great example. For the sake of broad sweep, nations that were Christian, for example Sweden, [that is] certainly not being played out right now. Why is that? One of the reasons is because we lose our grounding in the source of the things that matter to us. We come to be a people of freedom or a people of compassion or a people who care for those who can't care for themselves. All of that comes from a relationship with Christ when we're in a relationship with God. Over time we forget that that came from God. We think that is just the value that everyone has, and so we claim or pillage the things of Christ or the things of these values that work for us, but we lose the underlying source. Ultimately we start to lose those things because they are all grounded in relationship.

I saw that in a really interesting article in the Virginian Pilot in the Daily Break section this week. It is an article that says for alcoholic atheists, AA's "higher power" poses a problem. It is basically an article that talks about what atheists do when they want to get involved in AA; because, as you know, AA's third step of twelve is "to make a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understand him." From people in AA that I have known, and from having gone through it me for spiritual reasons, the whole thing of the twelve step movement is that it is all predicated on one principal. It is the belief that God can help me and that I am totally lost without that understanding of God. But-- we want everyone to be sober. We certainly want atheists to be sober as well, so maybe we compromise that step or maybe we think through another way to look at it so that we take God out of it, so that it will still work for them. Then the real question is, will it? I would argue, absolutely not. I truly believe the whole power of these twelve steps is something of God, because I have known so many people who have found hope and wholeness and healing in the midst of that. It has to be of God.

It becomes so easy for us (even for the right reasons) to compromise. When we get to the twelfth chapter of Deuteronomy God says, "When you go in there, take it all out. Smash the idols; tear down everything." Take those stones and just bust them up, get rid everything of those people that were there, because if you don't, you're just going to start following them or you're going to get confused and drawn in to it and think it's all kind of one thing, all about being good. God says, "No, you have to smash the idols. "

A beautiful young woman in my life said to me, as we were here talking about this, that idols are really mirrors. I thought, "Wow!" What a profound thing. Idols really are mirrors. They reflect what matters to us. We need to smash the idols of the world; because if we don't, we'll get drawn into them.

The real question I asked was, "What is that one 'word,' that value for your life and how do we help ourselves live into that?" We have to smash these other idols. We have to get rid of these other things so we can start to let that word become the focus of our lives. We are a

nation founded on the principals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What is happiness? How do you find happiness?

True story: I have a friend on his fifth wife, and he's had a number of other relationships. He says, "God wants me to be happy and I haven't found it yet." What is happiness? I would say [that] happiness is living into that value to know that I'm in the relationship with God in such a way that I'm fulfilling it, even in the midst of whatever would come. That is not what the world says, though.

In the thirteenth century it was really popular to be French. Imagine. It was so popular that there was a particular wealthy Italian merchant who allowed his son to claim the name "Francesco," to claim the name "France" as a first name even though it wasn't his given name. He was a wealthy clothier, meaning he sold some of the most expensive material and thread in the world and he became a very wealthy merchant. He spoiled his son with everything, gave him the best of everything-- the best clothes, food when he got old enough, the best wine, the most women. He lived a decadent life based on that prosperity. God got a hold of him [Francesco] and said to him, "I want something different for you in your life. A desire that is different." Francesco started to rebuild a little church. He got some money from his dad and they had some conflict. His dad basically said, "Now, you are going to have to bring that money back. I don't want that money to go to the church; our money goes to good clothes and things like that." So he came to a little town, his home town, called Assisi, and Francis of Assisi stood in the square. He laid the money down for his father and then he took off every piece of his clothing and laid them down as well. Then he walked away. He walked to that little church with no idea what he was going to do. He had absolutely nothing and he was naked.

Now, if you have ever lived in a small town, then you know how small towns work. If you stand naked in front of the square, you really don't go back. That's called "smashing your idols." Francis smashed the things that mattered most to him, the things that had identified his life. There are times in our lives when we just have to smash the idols, because they just have so much control over us if we don't. We think we can control it. We think we can manage it. We

think, "Oh, I can use that for the glory of God." As long as I look really good in my jeans, God is going to use that for some reason. Ultimately underneath, we know what our idols are.

Here's the bottom line. In today's world, we live with two competing world views. The whole thing boils down to this: there is a battle of two different world views, two differing definitions of happiness. The first definition of happiness is security. If you have enough, save enough, prepare enough, or you got enough, you can be secure enough, and you'll be happy. It's what we're taught. We can kind of blame Ayn Rand for it, but it goes back to Hobbs and Rousseau. It actually goes back to the third chapter of Genesis, if we want to be honest about it.

The world's second view of happiness is generosity. God gave me a life so that it would be shared. I would say that when you reflect on that word for your life, it is about our word "generosity." It's about sharing; it's about being in relationship. The first definition of "security" is about looking inward. "Generosity," the second, is about looking outward. "Security" is all about locks; "generosity" is all about open doors. "Security" is all about managing my idols, my mirrors; "generosity" is about smashing those idols and living for the true God.

If you want to be happy, it is very clear. Try being the security stuff. Have I got it together? Do I have enough? Did I get into the right places? Am I doing the right things? Then I just want to ask, how's that working out for you? If that hasn't worked out for you, maybe the answer is that our world view is wrong. Maybe it's about generosity. Maybe it's about saying that there is some other way I need to live. I need to hold that up and have that as the model for my life in every aspect of my life.

While I was thinking about this, a story came to me, actually just a verse from the Bible, and I started checking it out. This is really cool. There is a line from King David that is often used in stewardship sermons or on little pledge cards. It simply says, "*I will not sacrifice to the Lord My God that which costs me nothing.*" I went to find it in the Bible; it is in II Samuel 24. David did something to dishonor God.

God was angry at him, so God said to David, "David I'm going to give you three choices. Something is going to have to happen; here are the three choices. I can bring a famine on your people for three years, I can have your enemies chase you for three months, or I can bring a plague upon your people for three days." David at this point in his life was cowardly and fearful of his adversaries and tried to rationalize. He picked the third, a three-day plague.

The first day, seventy thousand people died in the plague. David began to cry out to God and confess his sin and say, "God I was wrong and I didn't choose myself. I didn't choose what would happen to me." God then stopped the plague at one particular place. He stopped the death on the threshing floor of a Jebusite man named Araunah. David went to that place where the plague stopped. He said, "I've got to worship here; I have to."

Araunah, who owned threshing floor, who knew he was King David, said, "You are the king."

David said, "I need to make a sacrifice here."

Araunah said, "You can have it. You are the King."

David looked at him and said, "No, I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God that which costs me nothing." He made Araunah sell it to him. He bought it for fifty shekels of silver. Here's what's really cool about this. Fifty shekels of silvers was ten times the going rate for what he bought. He bought it for ten times what it was worth because he saw that giving, in itself, was a worship of God. He made a sacrifice there.

Here's where it gets awesome! When Solomon, David's son, was called to build a temple, the Bible says that Solomon built the temple on Mount Moriah over the threshing floor of Araunah. It's still, in essence, there today--Mount Moriah. I think about how amazing it is that the temple, as awesome as it was, as incredible as it was, was built for the glory of God over the sacrifice place, the place where David had come to grips with his own sin. Then he began to live a life of generosity, giving ten times what it was even worth. You see,

what generosity does is nurture a relationship. It nurtures relationship with God and it nurtures relationships with each other.

Often when we talk about tithing, tithing is a way of worship. It's a way of saying to God, "In this aspect of my life, there so many idols and so many competing values, but tithing is a way for me to worship the one true God." In II Corinthians when Paul calls upon the [Christians] to give, he doesn't say to excel in *giving*, he says to excel in the *grace* of giving. It's all about worship and relationship.

My first church was in a beautiful little one-square mile colonial town. The church was a pre- revolutionary war church right by the pond. There was a group of women there called the "Villagers." They did all kinds of things; they were the power brokers of Allentown, New Jersey. They did great stuff. One of their projects was to get these beautiful big dolls, and they would spend almost the whole year making dresses for the dolls-- handmade, with beautiful embroidery. On the last day of school before Christmas they would go to the public school, pull out all of the poorest kids from their classes, have a little reception for them, and they would present them with these dolls. Everybody was so excited about it; the kids were happy and smiling.

One particular day I was down at the ice cream shop (I tended to habitate the ice cream shop) in this little town right after school let out. A group of kids from the elementary school came in , and a couple of them had their dolls with them. They were sitting sharing one coke among the eight of them. One little girl was just rubbing her doll's hair and fixing her dress and doing things girls do, when one of the other girls looked at her and said , "You know why you have that doll don't you?" She said, "You have that doll because you're poor and those people that gave it to you don't think your parents love you enough to give you a doll." That huge smile just disappeared. Five or ten minutes later they left, and I looked over and under the chair of that table, the little girl had left her doll.

That's a sappy story, but I remember that feeling as if it were happening right now. A woman in the back corner of the shop was an active "Villager"-- she was a leader of the "Villagers"-- and she saw the whole thing happen. I looked over at her and she was just bawling. She got up, she picked up that doll, and she carried it out. Here's what happened. That moment changed that woman's life. From that moment on she became one of the most generous people I've ever known in my entire life. She had a small shop in town; she gave away part of that. She started giving sacrificially. She started helping in so many things. She started getting the "Villagers" to find new ways to care for those kids that went far beyond dolls, by inviting them to a table of hospitality and by opening their hearts to them. She went from a definition of saying that security is happiness-- from a world of locks to a world of open doors where dolls are not left under chairs at ice cream shops, but they are pulled out and played with in the kingdom where we all come and worship in honor and humility.

I share that story with you because one of the great idols in my life (and I think it might be in yours) is the idol of "Not yet, Lord. I want to follow you; I want to do your will; I want to be your servant. I want to give my life to you but I just can't do it right yet, not yet Lord. Let me get this figured out. Let me deal with these kids right now. Let me work on this relationship. Let me get started in this business. Let me get started in my job. Let me apply to this school Lord; it's on my mind." That was Augustine's prayer. Augustine, one of the great leaders, saints influencing the church throughout all of history, perhaps as significant as any figure outside those within scripture. Augustine, in his confessions, would say that when God started working on his life, God would speak to him. and Augustine would say, "Yeah, I want to give my life to you but not yet."

I believe one of the great idols that we have is the belief that "I'm safe, secure and I can hold off for now." I want to do it, but when the time is right. That doesn't have to be you today. Today you don't have to be a person that wants peace, that craves peace, that desires peace, and prays for peace. You can be a peace maker today. Today doesn't have to be a day in which the idol of "not yet" shines its light

on you and reflects something of your life. It can be a new world for you today. You can do something today. You can receive and accept this grace today in your life. You can do it in a way that might be big and emotional and I'm all for that. If you want to come up, I'll pray with you, but let me tell you that nothing will matter if you don't walk away and decide to walk in a different way.

What am I going to do and what are those small places in my life where I might be able to take that word that God has formed over me even before he formed me in the womb? How might I live into that today? How am I doing that with integrity in so many different aspects of my life? How am I doing it and what can I do today? What I simply ask you to do today is to pray about it. Is this the day that doesn't have to be a night yet? Maybe this is that moment of sobriety for you, that time when you say life is going to be different and it will be. If you want that, I would encourage you to take that word, that word that God had for you even before he formed you in the womb, that purpose for your life, that desire, that dream that God had for your life, and place it over something today in the daily life that you are living. I believe that if you are able to do that, not only your life but also the lives of those you impact can be changed eternally.

Some of you here today have changed my life eternally. Some of you here today that have changed the lives of my kids. If I told you when and how, you'd probably think, "Wow! That guy is crazy!" That's what I want for my life today; I hope it's what you want. If it is, let me encourage you just [to] pray for a moment. I don't know what you call this kind of prayer (I need to study this), but I'm going to pray for myself; and if you want to jump on to my prayer and steal part of it, that's great. I pray that the Lord would give you words that might be your words

Father, I thank you for today. I thank you that when I got up real early and took the dog out, stepped outside and took that first deep gasp of cold air, that you filled my lungs in a way that said, "Something's new here!" And I pray, Lord, that I would live into that newness today. I pray, Lord, that you would help me in the battle that shapes so much of my life, the battle of seeking so much

security--thinking that I can just get it together and get it going and that I have all the resources to do the things for you that you want me to do. I pray instead to live today as a generous person. I pray, Lord, that today you would change my life from being concerned about locks-- locks on doors, locks on relationships, locks on parts of my heart and spirit—and open doors. I pray that you would be the God of open doors today. I pray, Lord, that you would help me see the idols in my life and know that they're simply mirrors, and that the mirrors are simply idols. Lord, I know what is right; I know how I want to be. I know the life I want to live, but I'm still shaped by so many things. Even at my age and state, I want to look good in my jeans, Lord. I just pray you would help me. I pray that this might not be just my prayer, but that it might be the prayer of my family and friends. I pray that you might give us the gift of your Holy Spirit in such a way today that we might smash our idols-- at least some of them, Lord. Just blow them full bore, blast apart, and I pray that you would remove today from my vocabulary that idol, "not yet". Let this be a day where you put your word over my life and give me something to do so that I'll know that I've claimed it. In your Holy and powerful name Lord, I offer this prayer to you. Amen.
