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## **INVEST IN THE KINGDOM**

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We're continuing in our year-long series of five experiments. If we take them seriously, what might God do? Right now we're talking about one of those experiments which is to invest in the kingdom.

It's always interesting what the Spirit does. Two weeks ago we had our largest attendance we know of outside of Easter or Christmas Eve. It was the Sunday when I was talking about the tithe being twenty-three percent instead of ten percent. Last Sunday we were down about 400 people in worship. I want to credit it to people being away for the Martin Luther Day Jr. weekend, but I'm not quite so sure. It's just kind of interesting, the way the Holy Spirit works in the midst of all of this. 😊

We're continuing to talk about investing in the kingdom, though; and

today I hope that it will be more than interesting to you. We will look at these passages and see what they might mean to us. The first passage is found in the Book of Numbers, chapter 18 beginning with verse 21.

This is one of the places in the Old Testament that speaks of a tithe. As I mentioned to you before, when we read the Old Testament (unless we want to go through, what is for me, troubling exegesis), I think that it is clear, that we are called in the Old Testament for more than one tithe when we look at it all. This is the one that speaks of the tithe to the Levites. We'll talk about that in a moment.

We find in Deuteronomy 14, as well, that there is a tithe for communal meals at festivals. Then also, in Deuteronomy 14, every three years there is a tithe for the alien and the poor, those ministries of compassion. You divide that out, round it down, and it comes to about twenty-three percent.

Today we're going to be looking at the tithe that goes to the Levites. It's an interesting situation: God has given responsibility for the temple (which is not built yet) for worship, for gathering the people, and for keeping our identity together as a worshipping people to one particular tribe.

What God has done is said, "You are the only tribe who will not have land; but, what we will do to care for you is we will take up a tithe of ten percent from all of those who are around which will be used to sustain you in worship and your living."

One of the interesting things in the midst of this is that God even says to the Levites (who get the tithe—the only opportunity of their livelihood comes from the contributions of others), I want a tenth of that. So, it's this idea that God is ordering our lives in such a way that we see the priority of God being first, even when God provides it to us.

Listen for the Word of our Lord, beginning with verse 21 in chapter 18 of Numbers:

## **Number 18:21**

*To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for a possession in return for the service that they perform, the service in the tent of meeting. From now on the Israelites shall no longer approach the tent of meeting, or else they will incur guilt and die. But the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear responsibility for their own offences; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations. But among the Israelites they shall have no allotment, because I have given to the Levites as their portion the tithe of the Israelites, which they set apart as an offering to the LORD. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no allotment among the Israelites.*

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: You shall speak to the Levites, saying: When you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them for your portion, you shall set apart an offering from it to the LORD, a tithe of the tithe. It shall be reckoned to you as your gift, the same as the grain of the threshing-floor and the fullness of the wine press. Thus you also shall set apart an offering to the LORD from all the tithes that you receive from the Israelites; and from them you shall give the LORD's offering to the priest Aaron. Out of all the gifts to you, you shall set apart every offering due to the LORD; the best of all of them is the part to be consecrated. Say also to them: When you have set apart the best of it, then the rest shall be reckoned to the Levites as produce of the threshing-floor, and as produce of the wine press. You may eat it in any place, you and your households; for it is your payment for your service in the tent of meeting. You shall incur no guilt by reason of it, when you have offered the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the Israelites, on pain of death.*

The New Testament, in the Gospel of Mark chapter 10 beginning with verse 17, describes encounter that Jesus has; this story in some variation shows up in two other gospels. We call this generally the story of the rich young ruler. From what this passage tells us, though, we don't know that he's young and we don't know that he's a ruler; we just simply know that he's rich.

But, we can call him the rich young ruler for a desire to not confuse other things. Listen for the story but before you do, I want to ask you a question: In your life today, right where you are, what is the one thing that is missing? Think about that; perhaps, multitask as we read this story.

### **Mark 10: 17-34**

*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." 'He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth. 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. 'When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 'And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. 'They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'*

*Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. 'Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'*

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

Let's jump right in with the rich young man. What's going on with this story? I want to begin by letting you know that I'm talking to myself in this. This is an ongoing struggle in my life, and you'll hear a touch of that in a moment.

Often, when we talk about this story, it is usually a story that is usually completely missed or totally abandoned. Sometimes it's missed because we use it to beat up people. Almost always when we read it, we think of someone who is wealthier than we are and we think, "Oh, that's the rich person." Let me start by saying that every single one of us is wealthy by the terms of the story. Every single one of us, no matter what your situation, no matter what debt, no matter whether you have a job or you don't – we're all wealthy by the story. Please don't cheat yourself by trying to apply it to someone else.

It's also one that we often just avoid because it's hard, and, in addition, it starts talking about things that are pretty personal. When I grew up, I was told to stay away from three topics: sex, politics, and money. I think that sex conversation has changed in the world. I'm not seeing that quite so much. Politics, I can have a long talk with my sister who is in South Carolina.... I'll leave that one alone, and then there's money.

The rich young man comes to Jesus and says to him, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Now one of the things we learn from this story that is really interesting is that this rich man has it all together. He has respect. He has great manners. He's gone to all the great schools of etiquette. He knows to bow down. He knows to call Jesus a "*Good Teacher.*"

He knows how to approach him in the right way, and he says, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus goes straight to the big ten. He

goes to the Ten Commandments. The order is a little different, which is kind of interesting. I think what Jesus is trying to say is that it's not about just one through ten: it's about the whole understanding of the big ten, the Ten Commandments.

And the guy says to him, "Well, I've followed those since I was a youth." He obviously is a man of great integrity and incredible good works. He's done everything right. He has wealth. He has it all together. He's the all-Palestinian boy. He's one who excelled, probably, at hide-and-seek of the dreidel. He's one that was at the top of everything. He is honorable. He's filled with integrity. He lives a good life. He's what you look at, and he would be the kind of guy you want your daughter to meet and marry.

There's nothing wrong with him at all in this story. I think that's important for us to realize. There is absolutely nothing wrong with him in this story, and then Jesus all of a sudden throws this amazing curve ball at him.

Now you have to imagine all that when he asks Jesus, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus goes to the big ten, the Ten Commandments, and the man says, "Oh, I've got that." I would imagine that he had to be feeling confident and thinking, "Okay, I've got this. I've done this."

Jesus says, "You lack one thing. Go, sell, give, come, follow." Now what's really important for us to realize is that it's both not about money and all about money in this passage. Here's why it's all about money: because money really is the symbol of what I would call "adulthood" in our lives. It's the symbol of adulthood in our lives and in our culture.

That's pretty understandable because money really is the only thing that I can think of that can be perfectly measured. If you spent

enough time, you could sit down and measure to the penny everything you have. It can be perfectly measured. What else can?

Go and ask someone the question, "Am I good looking?" How can that really be measured? You don't say, "So, you're good looking to me." Are you really confident in that? Or, if they say to you, "Well, you have a great personality." I mean, how are you going to measure it? Is there really a perfect ten?!! What can you measure?

What else can be measured but money? Money can be perfectly measured. We can know exactly what it is and, over time, we see what that does in our lives. It starts to creep in as a measurement for everything else because we really are a people who want to measure up. We want to be able to know what makes us distinct from each other. We want to know what makes us unique. We want to know what makes us different. We want to know what makes us the same. Money is the easiest place to be able to measure that.

I measure how much my job is valued by how much I get paid or how much it's undervalued by how much I don't get paid. I can measure everything by money and so, over time, what starts to happen is that that measurement starts to creep into other aspects: into the emotional life and into the spiritual life and, over time, we start to ask the question, "Have I really measured up?"

That's what the rich man is really asking Jesus. When he's saying, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" he's really asking, "Have I measured up?" And let me tell you, that is especially troubling for those of you who are good people because, over time, you start to think that, "Well, if I'm just good enough..., do I have enough good works..., can I measure all the good things I am doing..., and then we start to let this measurement make all the decisions for us until we ultimately lack trust in anything else.

That's exactly what's going on with this rich man. And Jesus says to him, in effect, "It's neither works nor wealth. In fact, those are things that might be the very obstacles to your salvation. The works that you do, the great things that you've done since you were thirteen, since you were a youth such as, "I've followed all these rules. I've done all these things. I'm just a good guy. Everyone will look at me and say, 'That's just a great guy.' Or the accumulation of value, that I'm honored and I'm valued in the material aspects of my life." And Jesus says, "No. It's neither works nor wealth." And he so astounds this young man, who's such a good guy. It's really important for us to get this. It's not a scum bag who walks off; it's a really good guy who's done everything that he's been told.

He's followed all the rules. He's done all the things...and Jesus says to him, "You know, as meaningful as that is, that's not what this is about. This is about trust. This is about a relationship with me and there are times in your life where sometimes you have to move beyond those things that are holding you back; even the good things in your life that are holding you back—to the point that you need to put them away, that you can never get them back."

So Jesus says, "Go, sell, give, come, and follow." Now this astounds the disciples. Let's be really clear about the passage. This passage is not really about the rich man. We focus on that all the time, but this passage is about the disciples and what they get and what they don't get. Keep in mind, here's the thing: The disciples are with Jesus. We are well into the Gospel of Mark. We're a number of chapters into the gospel. They've been with Jesus. They've really given up everything. They probably have a little bit of stuff. They gave up some professions. They gave up, perhaps, relationships with family for some time to follow Jesus and they are out there. You have to imagine that Jesus is living a life modeling poverty. He's got to be living a life of poverty.

The disciples are with Jesus and they're thinking, "What in the world is he talking about? You really can't get into heaven if you have wealth? It's so hard to get into heaven that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle?"

A little caveat for you here: a number of you who grew up in the church heard the story that there was a gate outside of Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle and that it was so small that, when the camels came through, they had to take all the bags of stuff off so the camels could kneel down to get through—totally nonsense! Totally nonsense! I think that actually started with Shakespeare.

Jesus says, *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."* And he means it. The disciples are astounded. You see, wealth is valued in their culture. It's valued religiously, and you see that when you go to Jerusalem now. When you see all the ruins of homes that were built, we think around the time of Jesus, you start to realize that the more wealthy you were, the more opportunity you had to create the right places in your home to worship, the right ways to honor God, to celebrate God and to give God the glory in all.

All of this is in there and they are thinking, "What in the world is he talking about?" And Jesus says to them, "It's just so hard." Here's the clue to the entire answer in this passage: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God?" The disciples were perplexed at these words, but Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. "If you do a word search in the gospel of Mark, you'll realize that that's the only time that Jesus calls his disciples, "children." I think there's something amazingly powerful in the midst of that. In fact, I think it's perhaps the clue to the entire thing. Think about that for a moment.

Jesus is reminding them that they are children. Think about children. Children don't measure things the way adults do. Say you have little kids and you're on a cross country drive. You're probably opposed to drugging them so you try to figure something else out. McDonald's has capitalized on this. You go to the playground and just try to wear their little bottoms out. Now, really think about it for a moment. You can take kids and you can put them on a playground where they know nobody else, and those kids will play with each other.

Those kids don't look and say, "You know, you have designer jeans and I don't." Those kids don't say, "I notice the kind of car you pulled up in with your Momma over there." They don't do that, do they? They'll play with anybody. Kids measure things differently than adults.

Now, jump forward in your own life and ask the serious question. Think of the playgrounds in your life, the people with whom you're in relationship, and it's almost a guarantee that they're people like you. They look like you. They, kind of, come from the same background. They have the same kinds of interests. Children, though, have this amazing capacity for generosity. For a child, nothing is reserved; all is in.

Mike Fremaux, a dear friend and a great elder in our congregation, and I were laughing just a little while ago. Mike is at that place in his life where he's realizing that his son Michael is going to be taller than he is. I also had to get used to that. All three of my boys are taller than I am right now. Zach's the tallest but he's the youngest. He loves the fact that he's taller than his brothers.

So, I was laughing with Mike. It's very true, that when I say to Zach, "I need a hug," Zach always knows that he has to get down to reach me. I remember this with all three of my kids, and I'm thinking about Zach right now because he's here. I can remember when I

would come home from work or when I would come home from the church or whatever, and Zach could be out there playing in the yard. He could just be “in the zone” in whatever game it was, but as soon as he saw me, he would throw everything down and he would run to me like you wouldn’t believe. And he’d take this huge leap. What greater gift? I mean, come on. Now I’m afraid if he ran and leaped on me, I’d ...so we got a dog that does it. The dog licks, the kids never did – it still feels really great.

You know I wear a cross. The cross doesn’t come off because it actually won’t. The clasp on the back has eroded. This story is about one of my other boys—not biological—but whom I love with every depth of my heart. Nguvu in Kenya wanted to do something for me one day. He disappeared for four or five days. I thought I had done something to offend him. He wasn’t around the house and I found out that he had gone to some woman whom he thought was the wealthiest woman he knew. He asked her if he could do some work for her. She gave him enough to do in order to give him some pennies every day. And, after four or five days, he had made enough money to go buy a cross to come and give to me.

Do you think that cross means more to me than almost anything else I have? You see, children have this amazing capacity for extravagant generosity.

Now that carries forward. Imagine this for a moment—and, let’s be honest here. A guy goes out, he’s in love with a girl, and he decides he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. He’s doing it all the old-school ways, and he decides he’s going to go and pick out a ring to give to her. Any guy that spends more than 50 dollars on a ring has made a bad financial decision. I mean, let’s be honest. What are you going to do with it? What’s it going to do for you?

I hope that there isn't a guy here stupid enough to follow that advice, by the way. But think about that for a moment. He goes and he might cash in a CD. He might mortgage or leverage something. Here's the thing: I will almost guarantee you that, if that guy is really in love with his girl, he never buys a ring thinking, "I want to show everybody else how big a ring I gave my girl." He buys that ring because he wants her to love it. That's an extravagant capacity that comes in our childhood, and what Jesus knows is how we quickly outgrow that. Jesus knows that we can so quickly outgrow that.

I was talking to someone not long ago, a young woman in her mid-twenties, and she was just sharing with me. She said, "You know, Jim, the one thing that I had, that I knew as a little girl, was that my dad loved me, without any question, unconditionally. I knew my dad was there, I knew he loved me. It was just a model, a symbol for me of unconditional love."

She said, "Do you know what happened, though? When I got to the third grade and he went on a field trip with me, I looked at the way he was dressed and how some of the other moms and dads were dressed, and I started to realize my dad was a nerd." True story.

"My dad's a nerd. He's kind of a geek, and, when you're in the third grade and you're a girl, you have to have it all together. I thought I needed to distance myself from my dad. We'd go on these field trips and I wouldn't sit near him on the bus. I'd put him in the back. And do you know what I did? Though I had that unconditional love from my dad, I started living with the belief that I needed to earn love from someone else...almost because I knew it was just always there for me, that I had to go and earn it from someone else."

And she said, "Do you know what it did? It put me on the path in my life of potential destruction because it took me to places where I thought I could earn love from guys in certain ways, or where I

thought the accolades of an employer would be what I needed for my life to be complete.”

You see, one of the greatest threats of adulthood is wealth. It's having something and not being able to understand what it is. It is, ultimately, to fool ourselves to think that what I do, what I earn, or what I hold might actually be enough and Jesus knows that.

So, the rich man walks away. I think of all the passages in Scripture –I have to be honest with you, and that's the one that scares me the most. Jesus let him walk away because he had many possessions.

What about you today? Are you tired of trying to measure up? Are you tired of trying to build all the security in your life based on that measurement of money? Are you tired of trying to measure up and thinking things like, “If I was just the right kind of dad,” or “maybe if I wore the right kind of jeans, then she would sit next to me on the bus.”

Or maybe you're trying to measure up, saying, “I know what I'm supposed to do but, see, here's my stuff.” I wrestle with this money stuff all the time, and Sheryl and I are really struggling with it. We're realizing that we've got to get a handle on this thing. Our issue is this: we realize that God is calling us to a deeper level of faithfulness in him. We're actually trying to set a percentage amount that goes beyond the ten percent tithe and, in all honesty, goes beyond the 23 percent tithe. This is our way of, not only bringing glory to God, but of being able to say in our life, “This is what we feel called to do.”

Are you tired of trying to measure up in some ways? My struggle is this: It's that I know what the right thing to do is. I know what kind of guy I'm supposed to be. I know what honor is. I know what fidelity, prowess, generosity, courtesy, and honor are. My kids can tell you what those five characteristics are if you ask them, “What

does your dad say?" I know what they are, but I know I'm not living fully into them; and, ultimately over time, I start to think that maybe, if I lived fully into them, then maybe that would be enough. But, you see, it's never enough.

Are you tired of trying to measure up?

I was away this week at a couple of conferences: one with a gathering of friends, the other about some really exciting things going on in the kingdom of God. It was really cool, but I flew through Atlanta. Two things almost always happen to me every time I'm in Atlanta: one is that I'm delayed, and the other is that something of God happens. It's just bizarre.

I flew into Atlanta and a friend was supposed to pick me up, but he was delayed. It was going to take him almost three hours to get me, so I go into a little restaurant. I'm trying to stall, take as long as I can to order so they don't kick me out, drink twelve diet cokes..., all that kind of stuff. So, I'm just there. I'm looking and I'm thinking, "Here are these delays and all of this," when I saw this amazing thing.

I was at the place at the Atlanta Airport between the baggage claims where people come down and where they can meet their families. It's where they first meet past TSA. There's a guy in a wheelchair in a full dress uniform, a little unusual. You don't often see that. He wasn't a young guy. He was a Master Sergeant. It looked like he was haggard. He wasn't my age, but not far off. He's being wheeled down in a wheelchair and I can see a purple heart and a bronze star.

As he's being wheeled down, all of a sudden these people who knew him started yelling. I don't know if it was a spouse. I don't know if it was kids or if they were nieces or nephews, brothers or sisters, or old schoolmates, but they just gathered around him. As soon as they did, they helped him and he got up with this cane. Purple heart, bronze

star, dress uniform—he's standing there with this cane with everyone around him. I'm crying just taking this thing in, and, in the midst of it, something seemed incomplete. I can't explain it but something of the spirit told me that it was incomplete.

So, I'm just watching and then, all of a sudden, I realized that it was incomplete. There was one person that didn't come forward; she stood back where she was originally. She looked like she was haggard and worn from another war. She looked like she was in her seventies perhaps. She stood there, and then all of a sudden they made eye contact.

As soon as they did, everybody parted. He started with the cane but within two or three steps he dropped the cane. The sole haggard face from whatever battles and wars, I can only imagine, started saying, "My child! My child! My child! That's my baby!" and nothing was going to come between them.

And he said, "Momma, I love you!" And I think about the extravagant love that God has for us when he calls us his children. When I think what my life would be if I was unencumbered enough from my own expectations in my life or the things that hold me down to be able to catch a glimpse of him and just run. I don't know about you, but that's what I want in my life. So what about you today? Are you ready to be a child again? Are you ready to replace the uniform of a soldier, trying to do the right things, trying to honor the right people, trying to measure up with the cloths that will enable you to run without stopping?

I pray it will be today. Or you could turn your back and walk away. God will honor your decision. Will you honor his?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

We're going to do this thing again that I've been in the habit of doing: I'm going to pray for myself, and I'm going to let you jump in on my prayer if you want. You can change, mend, or adjust anything that you want.

Let us pray.

Father, I thank you. First of all, I thank you that you tell me I can call you Father. And I know, Lord, because I've read your Word, that the only way I can call you Father is because Jesus gave me permission. And the only way Jesus gave me permission was by giving his life for me. I think Lord, that's love. I thank you Father, I thank you Dad. I thank you that you love me. I thank you that you've given a perfect relationship of love to me, and I pray for forgiveness even today in those times when I don't sit with you on the bus and I think that maybe you're not quite cool enough. Even after all these years of journeying with me and all these things you've done for me and all the ways you've saved me and how you've lifted me up out of so many pits that I can't even count them, Lord, how dare I be filled with enough sin that you might not be enough for me to think I could even measure up. So I pray, Lord, that you would help me. That you would help me leave behind all those things, those canes that cause me to stumble or slow me down. I pray, Lord, that you would help me remove the uniform of a soldier who's trying to do it himself for the clothes of grace which only you can provide. Father, I want to be a child. And yet, I know without your Holy Spirit, all I'll do is walk away. So today let my decision be different. Let it be different than any decision I've ever made. And give me an extra dose of your Holy Spirit today so that, as I make this decision, I know that you will give me the strength to live into it because I can no longer try to measure up. I'm just too tired. In your powerful name we pray. Amen.