

“Making the Most of Our Money”

Introduction: As we move along in our look at the 7 Signs of a Missional Church, just a follow-up comment on our sign from last week, “Making Good Work.” And that is that not only is God a worker and so affirms the nature of work, but so do the old hymn writers who have composed hymns to celebrate a variety of occupations. “I Need Thee Every Hour” (Baker). “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (Civil Engineer). “Open Mine Eyes That I Might See” (Optometrist). “Nearer My God to Thee” (Astronaut). “Crown Him with Many Crowns” (Dentist). “On a Hill Far Away” (Golfer). “Seek Ye First” (Baseball Player). “Standing on the Promises” (Politician).

Moving on, we come to our third sign, “Making the Most of Our Money,” which helps us to think about what we do with what we earn from whatever work we’re engaged in. Now most of us, I’m sure, want to make good use of what we earn. We want a good return on our investment, whether we’re buying a new car, shopping for groceries, putting our savings in the stock or money markets, and even giving a percentage of our income to the church, as you will be asked to do this week.

Now, on most of these items it’s fairly easy to measure your return on investment. Your car either gets good gas mileage and your odometer reaches 200,000, or it doesn’t. Your food bill is either more, or less, when you go to Marked Basket as compared to Shaw’s or Stop N Shop. Your quarterly dividend or bank statement reveals clearly how much you’ve earned, or lost! But what about your investment in your church? How are you to measure that?

The traditional way is sometimes called the ABC’s of church growth, or Attendance, Buildings, and Cash. If you have growing attendance, if you are always expanding your facilities, and if your cash position is always positive, then your church would be considered a success and be worthy of your continued investment. But, these standards are certainly not all there is. Note what we just heard Jesus say: “Watch out! . . . life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (v. 15). Applied to the church he might be saying: “Watch out! Church life is not only measured by an abundance of attendees, buildings, and cash.” Instead, he might just have us consider that the return on investment question is not: “How big are we becoming?” but: “How is our giving bearing fruit for the kingdom of God?”

I. The Rich Fool (vv. 13-21)

A. To think about fruitful, kingdom giving, let’s begin by looking at the parable Jesus tells about a man who had many possessions, but who is identified in the parable as a rich fool. Jesus was out, moving among the crowds of several thousands, teaching his disciples, when someone in the crowd interrupted with a pressing family issue. “Teacher,” this man said, “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Evidently, this man’s father had died or was about to die and the all-important question of who gets what was upon his sons. Jesus didn’t want to put himself in the middle of their quarrel, and chose to get to the heart of the issue instead. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Greed was the issue and the warning was that it could come in many forms and would always be destructive.

B. To illustrate his point, Jesus spins a story about a farmer who has had a really good harvest, so good in fact that he doesn’t have enough room to store his crops. So, he decides to tear down his old little barns and build new, bigger ones. There he stores his surplus and

kicks back, thinking he's got it made and that his future is secure. Giving any of it away never seems to have occurred to him; if it did he thought it a foolish investment. But, just when he puts his feet up and thinks about how easy and wonderful life is going to be, God appears to him and calls *him* a fool, a term for one who has acted without God and his wisdom. This man's many possessions, his selfish investments, were no good. He had been rich toward himself and not toward God. Thus, his investment portfolio had become way out of balance. When his life came to an end, it could do nothing for him.

C. Now, Jesus is not against having a bumper crop, or building a bigger barn. It's not a bad thing to exceed your sales quota and get a bonus, or find a higher paying job, or have your investments do well, or look forward to a nice inheritance. Jesus never condemns wealth, only its selfish use, being rich toward self and not toward God. He condemns the ways in which we can trust in material things for meaning, purpose, and security in life. In vv. 17-19, the words "I" or "my" are found a dozen times, highlighting the self-focused nature of this fool, the way in which the pursuit of wealth controlled his heart and his investment decisions.

II. Investing in What God Is Doing

A. Well, is there another way to invest? Jesus goes on to say that there is, that our investment strategy should be controlled by bearing fruit for the kingdom of God. At the beginning of the next section Jesus puts it like this: "Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear." And he ends like this: "For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." We are, in other words, to invest in what God is doing in the world. That is the ultimate value, the ultimate, no can lose, investment.

B. So how do we think about this as a church? Let's go back to our ABC's and re-define them along the lines of healthy, kingdom giving.

A: Instead of attendance, let's think attitude. That is, attendance on a Sunday morning is not the best measure of kingdom impact. Bigger is not necessarily better. Kingdom of God growth comes not from churches getting bigger but healthier. As Dallas Willard fondly puts it, "instead of counting Christians we should weigh them!" We should weigh them by focusing on qualities of growth, such as that evidenced by Christlikeness, and the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Followers that grow in such a weighty way have real kingdom impact.

B: Instead of buildings, let's think blessing. That is, healthy churches may not always need to expand their physical space because they are sending churches, they train and send from within to bless those without. This, as I look back over the past couple of decades, is one of our great gifts as a church. Some of those we've mentored and trained we've gotten to enjoy, like Jason, who came to us as while in seminary and has remained, along with Robin, both sharing their amazing gifts of teaching and music. Or the Andrew and Rachel Fondell, who came to us as youth group volunteers while in college, have blessed us with their gifts of teaching and art, and are now starting a family among us. But now think of how many college and seminary students we have been blessed to train up and then send out to be a blessing to others. Some of them you know. Andy Sutton, renewing a church in the hard soil of Vermont. Bobby and Shelly Ross, in Dunstable, leading a church toward much needed healing. Ben and Mary Beth Boyd, off to pastor a church looking to grow its young adult ministry. Some you may not know, like John Barber and Kelly Barefoot, both involved in renewal ministries within the

UCC in Holden, MA and NC respectively. Or Jennifer Demming, working as a hospital chaplain, and Josh, doing prison ministry, both in New York state. Or Brian and Rebecca Muh, who went off to start a church within the Emerging Church movement in PA. All of these folks we invest in and they are bearing fruit for the kingdom of God that can't be measured in a traditional way.

Illustration: In the financial world there is a concept called leverage. It using a relatively small amount of money, adding a bunch of debt, and seeking to gain a very high return in relation to your original investment. If you think about it, that's just what Jesus did when he took five small loaves of bread and two small fish. He offered them up to God, leveraging, if you will, the debt of grace, and God blessed several thousand people with lunch. When we invest in people and then send them out, we're leveraging God's power to bless many more than we could if these folks had remained among us. We are bearing the return of fruit for the kingdom of God

C: Instead of cash, let's think of cost. That is, a healthy church is willing to spend in order to reach out and be Jesus to others, looking to meet the needs of those who are broken in some way, even if there is little or no apparent cash return. And so there is Divorce Care, and Open Door, and Family Promise, the Kijabe Education Fund, and For His Children. Very few of those touched by these ministries will find their way into our pews, or contribute a dime to our budget, but they are all being deeply touched by the cost this church has been willing to incur to bring hope and healing into their lives.

Illustration: Here I think of the very brief, one verse parable, Jesus told: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Ma. 13:44). The kingdom cost him all that he had, but it gained him everything that mattered. The return on his investment in the kingdom—his joy—was immeasurable.

Attitude, Blessing, and Cost, better measurements, possibly, of investment return than Attendance, Buildings and Cash, which can become very worldly measuring sticks. Would it be great to double in worship attendance, put a gymnasium out back, and make sure Nancy never has a sleepless night worrying about our cash position? Absolutely! But it might not be the healthiest way for us to think about being a church.

III. Leveraging What We Have

A. So as we all think about our pledge cards in the next few weeks, remember that Jesus sees faith and finances as closely linked. In fact he talks a lot about money because he knows that how we think about it says a lot about who, and what, we trust. As you prayerfully ponder your pledge card in these next two weeks, I pray that you would be both intentional and proportional in your giving. That is, make a pledge, so your giving isn't just what's left over in your wallet but becomes a habit based upon what you and God have talked about. And make that pledge based on a percentage of your income so that you can keep track of, and possibly increase, it each year going forward. And as you ponder, remember the concept of leverage, that God will use and multiply what you're able to give to bear fruit for his kingdom.