Celebrating Good Decisions

Matthew 6:19-24

2011 Time, Talent, Treasure Series

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Probably about nine years ago I started always having the radio going whenever I'm out in my shop working and I just started to notice more and more advertisements for organizations that existed to help people in financial crisis. The more I thought about that the more I wondered, "How many people are in financial crisis, that this number of organizations can market and exist?" This led me to start thinking, "How many of those people that are all messed up financially are walking through our doors?" And that sent me on a mission over the next few months to try to figure that out and what I figured out is: a lot! Over that period of time God deeply convicted me that, in this area, I had been a very poor pastor.

The conventional wisdom when I went through seminary and entered into ministry is you don't talk about money. If you do, visitors won't come back. If you do, people will leave, and so I didn't talk about money. And then I began to think, *"You know, we don't tippy-toe around any other issue; why would we tippy-toe around this issue?"* And what I began to realize is: people sitting in the pew—people I deeply cared about—were all messed up in terms of money and *stuff* because I had failed to teach them what God has to say about money. Those that know me know that I felt this pain very deeply. Each time I would hear about somebody else all messed up in the area of money and stuff, I owned the fact that a part of that responsibility was mine; that was partially my fault.

That's when we determined something needed to change. And we began to think strategically how to roll out a comprehensive stewardship ministry to help people understand what God has to say about money and stuff. So when I hear Jeff give a report like that, that is very encouraging to me because what has happened over the last eight years is absolutely dramatic. We have changed dramatically in terms of who we are as a people and how we manage what God has given us. The exciting part of that is this isn't just about money. I have heard these stories over and over and over again that, as people began to understand what God has to say about money and stuff, they began to understand more what it means to *live on purpose*. It began to bleed over into all different decisions we make. People began to live much more *on purpose*, much more *on mission*. It has dramatically affected what we do with our time, what we do with our talent—by understanding what God asks us to do with our treasure.

I want to, this morning, encourage the many, many, many of you who listened to what God has to say about money and stuff and you have determined, "I want to live for the things that matter". You have determined to be generous; you have determined to be sacrificial. You have determined to give your time and your talent and your treasures for the things that ultimately matter and there are many, many, many of you who have sacrificed to do that. This morning, primarily, I want to talk to you. I want to encourage you and remind you why that is really important.

We want to frame this around a decade. It was about nine years ago that all this started to stir here and, with all the talk about next week being the ten year anniversary of 9/11, it's just kind of a good framework to use. What has changed over the last ten years? We're also talking about living a *Decade on Purpose*, so it causes us to think about how we're going to live out this decade *on*

purpose. Do you realize that these last ten years are ten years you never get back? Whatever you did with them, you don't get a second chance; you don't get them back. You only get to steward each day once. It is entirely possible that over this last year you could have wasted every single one of those days. You could have invested everything that you have in consuming your resources upon yourself. You could have been selfish to the core. You could get ten years down the road and realize the last ten years were a total waste. You could have totally blown it! But you didn't! And that's what I want us to get this morning: this really matters! The sobering reality is the Bible clearly teaches: if you don't get this money and stuff thing right, you're not going to get much of anything right in terms of that which lasts forever. Over and over and over again the Bible says, "If you don't get this one right, you're probably not going to get much else right in terms of living for what ultimately matters."

That's what we want to talk about. If you have your Bible, turn with us to Matthew, Chapter 6—a very familiar passage—we've used it several times. But it's one of those foundational texts that we need to go back to over and over again, especially trying to live in such a consumer-driven culture. Matthew, Chapter 6—part of what's referred to as the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus is talking to the disciples; we would say today, Jesus—talking to believers. We pick it up in verse 19:

> **"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal."** (*NASB Matt. 6:19)

So he starts with **Do not**. Do not ultimately live for the things of this world. Our motive in life should not be to **store up treasures on earth**. Now in the ancient world, if you did happen to accumulate a little bit, one of the challenges was, "What do I do with this?" You know they couldn't just go down the street and drop it in a bank. So holding on to wealth, if you accumulated wealth, was a really big problem. So they might put it into an expensive garment, in essence, so they could wear it so nobody could steal it. But they had to think that way and so that was always a problem and that's clearly what Jesus is tapping into. A lot of cultures in our world still struggle with this. Many of the people in India, out in the more rural areas where we are involved, struggle with this exact problem. If they do happen to accumulate a little bit of stuff or money, what do you do with it? Last year a wonderful couple from India, Deepak and Anuja, were in the States and they stayed with us for a couple of days. And so each morning I would drive them the twenty miles from where we live into town and one of the things that so struck them, as they looked at the farms and they looked at the acreages, was all the stuff lying around—all the stuff out in your garden, all the stuff in the lawn, all the stuff in your barn. And what they kept asking is, "How do you make sure nobody steals that because, in India, if you left it out one night, when you got up in the morning, everything would be gone?" They just couldn't even process a culture where something could be left on the lawn and it would still be there the next morning. That's very much like the first century culture. So they always struggled with: even if I get it, how do I keep it?

Now it's hard for us to identify with that in our culture. We take it down to the bank or we invest it in some way and I think, at one time, we thought all those places were pretty safe. I think today there's a lot of question about that. I think the more you have, the more you wonder what you do with it and the more you worry about it, because the more unstable the world seems to be getting. But the point is, even if you put it in the safest place imaginable, and you have it until the day you die, you lose it. That's the point. Nobody gets to keep it. As long as you're investing in the things of this world, as long as you're storing up treasures on earth, no matter who you are and no matter how much you have, at the end of the day, it's gone—total loss, nothing to show for it! That's the point he's trying to make. The alternative, verse 20:

"But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;"

Now there's a lot of discussion about what exactly does that mean—**to store up treasures in heaven**? There's a lot of discussion around that. I think I have changed my opinion three or four times over the years as well. It's really very vague. It's very much like the discussion related to rewards. It's hard to really nail that down and I think, because of that, we need to be careful that we don't over-define it because I don't really think we know. I do know for sure that it's not saying that you will have some sort of big bank account in heaven, that you will have some sort of big house in heaven or that you will have a really nice car. We're not going to take the consumer culture we live in and move it to heaven. I guarantee you that! But I would also say, clearly **treasure in heaven** is not synonymous with our salvation. The text simply doesn't allow that language. It is saying, "This is something I choose; I can do it or not." It's much like rewards: there is some way in which, when I store up treasures in heaven, there is something meaningful about that that will define my eternity. What exactly that is, I don't know. But I would say that God is clearly saying to us, "This is the way to live". When we are talking about storing up treasures in heaven, we are basically talking about investing ourselves in the things that matter—our time, our talents, and this passage is specifically talking about money—pouring our resources into the things that really will matter forever. Now that's a challenge in a consumer-driven culture. You really have to live out of step with the rest of the world around you.

One of the things that we know about our giving and, just to understand this clearly, nobody has access to the giving records except the people in the business office, so if I happen to be looking at you when I'm making a point, don't take it personally. (laughter) I don't know anything. But we still, through the business office, can kind of get certain patterns within our giving and one of the things that we know is that the giving of Lincoln Berean is spread over hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. There are not a handful of people that give huge sums of money that pay for our budget. That just isn't us. It's average everyday folks sacrificing what they have been given and accumulatively God does something wonderful with that. Now if that's true—and it is—that means that primarily what we are talking about are people that genuinely have to sacrifice in order to make this work. They have to really prayerfully think about: am I going to buy this new car...are we going to move into a bigger house...are we going to take this vacation? These are decisions that affect the most ordinary everyday things and you genuinely feel the sense of sacrifice when you are willing to give generously to God. Most of us are not in a place where we just can call an accountant and say, "Hey, throw some money at God," and I don't feel it in my lifestyle. I think most of us would agree with that. We say, "We feel this," and so making those decisions day by day can be very difficult. So let's just remember what lasts and what doesn't.

So let's go back and say nine years ago you heard this; you wrestled with it and you decided, "I really think I want a new car more than I want to see churches planted in India and so I'm going to consume my resources on myself." Now you probably wouldn't say it that way but that's the decision you make. Now, again, there's no problem with a new car but there is a problem when we consume all our resources on ourselves. So that's the decision we made. Okay, that was wonderful at the moment. It felt so great and we were driving around in our new car and that wonderful feeling lasted about a month and then it's not very new anymore. Now here we are nine years down the road; it's got 150,000 miles; it's headed for Weird Wally's and you have to think about, "What's next?" And in real terms—that treasure is gone! That's what you spent it on. All the stuff of this world ends up in the junkyard—in the trash. It doesn't last and we have to look at it from the perspective that, "Okay, wasn't that wonderful but now, nine years later, I have nothing to show for

it. Contrast that with your decision that maybe this isn't the time and we want to be more generous to God, and so we're going to invest it in the things that last.

Shortly after we started getting our stewardship act together, we launched the *Purpose Campaign* to build this auditorium, to plant a church in north Lincoln and to plant churches in India and we really called people to sacrifice to do that. And many, many, many of you here this morning listened to that and prayerfully chose to do that. So now, nine years later, what do you have to show for your investment? If you haven't been up to North Pointe, I would encourage you to do that some Sunday morning. What's happening there is wonderful! They have their own building; they're reaching people; they are excited; they have their own congregation; it's very satisfying to see what God has done with what we have invested in that ministry.

What is happening in India is staggering! Jeff has been sharing more and more. He just recently got back again and I tried to twist his arm to tell you more next week, but he's saving the goods for November for Missions Conference, but I'm telling you what is going on there is amazing. Thousands and thousands and thousands of people coming to Christ and hundreds of churches being planted—there's an absolute movement of the Spirit of God. We, from Lincoln, Nebraska, are actually part of changing the country of India! It is staggering! Imagine every one of those thousands of people, then, will reach other people; then they will reach other people and, for every single one of those, God rewards your gift. The return on that investment is staggering! And that is an investment; that is a return that can never be devalued; it can never be lost; it is yours forever! Even if the economy of the United States totally tanks, that investment is safe and will return for the rest of eternity.

Many of you contributed so sacrificially that we might build this auditorium. At that time we were doing six weekend services and we were all getting very tired. We were running about two thousand people; probably this weekend it would be more like thirty-five hundred people that never could have walked through the doors. This isn't just about bricks and mortar; it's about tools for ministry. Think over the last years how many concerts, how many weekend services, how many lives have been touched and changed because of a facility that made that possible. How many addictions have been broken? How many marriages have been put back together? How many people have found a relationship with Christ that has totally changed their lives? And each one of those people reaches another person, reaches another person, and that goes on until Jesus returns and you are rewarded for every single one of those because that's the return on your investment—**to lay up treasures in heaven.** You could have wasted the last nine years and have nothing to show for it—but you didn't! And your return on the investment is staggering! This isn't just about money though; this is about heart and that's what Jesus says. Verse 21:

> **"...for where your treasure is, that is where your heart will be also."**

Now every time we go through this text, it kind of messes with our heads because we're convinced Jesus doesn't get this right. What we want to say is, "Where my *heart* is, that's where my *treasure* will be." But Jesus doesn't say it that way. It's **where my *treasure* is, that's where my *heart* will be**. There's just a simple reality that that which I treasure is that which I worship, is that which I live for and that, ultimately, is where my heart's going to be. We all understand: talk is cheap. You can say, "I'm the world's greatest Christian," and you can convince yourself that is true. "I'm a really good person; I'm a really good Christian and everything is fine and God is really happy with my life," but the fact of the matter is, if He doesn't get your treasure, He doesn't have your heart. I didn't say it; God said it! Jesus says, "**Where your treasure is, that's where my heart is**." Now every time we go through this passage there are always people that push back on that and there are

always people who are unwilling to part with their treasure and they're trying to figure out why, in their case, there's some reason why they're the exception where, "God really has my heart; He just doesn't have access to my treasure." **Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.** There is no more accurate barometer of the true condition of your heart than what you do with your treasure. For those who are convinced that's not true, verses 22 and 23 are for you:

> **"The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"**

The ancient world—the first century world—considered the eye to be kind of the window to the soul. This idea—it's kind of a metaphor—is that the light comes through the eye and then shines into the rest of the body. So the idea was: if the eye is good, the body is full of light. If the eye is bad, then the body is full of darkness. The eye also typically is a reference to covetousness—in other words how I view and see *stuff*—so it makes a good imagery for the discussion here. What He is saying is, "If you see this clearly—if you understand **where my treasure is, that's where my heart is**—that I don't want to store up for myself treasures on earth, I want to store up treasures in heaven; I want to live for the things that matter. If I see that clearly and I organize and arrange my life accordingly, then basically that light shines into all areas of my life and, by and large, I will have my priorities in order. It will affect how I live my life, how I run my business, how I treat my family. It penetrates into all areas of life.

But it is equally true, He says, if your eye is bad. Think of the eye as kind of the window of the soul and the window's covered with mud and no light can penetrate. It's not just that my eye is covered with mud but there's no light, so everything is in darkness. In other words, if I don't get this one—this isn't just about my bank account—this is now about every area of my life. If I'm unwilling to see this clearly, I'm not really going to live *on purpose*. I'm not really going to get my priorities in order. I'm not really, ultimately, going to live for the things that matter because, if this one is not clear, then the darkness is going to show up in all areas of my life. That's what He is saying there. But He goes one step farther in saying, "But if you think your eye is clear, but it's actually dark, how great is that darkness?" In other words, "That's the darkest of all!" We would refer to that as self-deception. I've convinced myself that even though God doesn't have my treasure, He has my heart—that I'm living *on mission*; I'm investing myself in the things that matter. But one day when I stand before Him, I'm going to find out it was a total miss! I have been self-deceived.

I think probably this morning there are three different groups of people here: There would be many, many, many of you—and you are the primary people I want to encourage this morning—who, you believe this and you have thoughtfully, prayerfully made decisions to live for the things that matter. You have sacrificed; you have given generously because that's how you want to live your life. Your eye is clear. The light has penetrated and it shows up in all areas of your life and you have every reason this morning to be encouraged.

There's a second group that would say, "You know when I hear this, I realize I still have work to do. I'm really not living this way, but I want to live this way. I want to get my financial house in order. I want to be a generous person. I want to live for the things that matter. I do want to store up treasures in heaven," and there's still a sense on conviction that says, "We need to make some changes and that's what I want." And we'd be thrilled to come along side of you and help you anyway we can.

But there's a third group this message will not even begin to make an impact on. You have somehow convinced yourself that these things don't apply to you. You've convinced yourself that God has your heart; you're a really good Christian; you're living your life the right way; the rest of the culture is applauding you and you've convinced yourself God's applauding you too. Your eye is covered with mud but, you are so self-deceived you don't even see that. You think everything's fine. And there's a pretty good chance you're going to go to your grave thinking you have this life *wired*. "I can have my cake and eat it too and God won't care." I'm just telling you, as your pastor that deeply cares about you, that is self-deception and unless something changes, you're going to get to the finish line and realize it was a total miss. And I want to tell you, I can't imagine anything worse than that. There are very few things that can keep me awake at night but that's one of them! Just the thought of getting to the end of my days—knowing that you get one shot at life; there are no do-over's—and I was so self-deceived, it was a total miss.

Do you realize over these last nine years you could have been so self-deceived that you were busy storing up treasures on earth; you were busy living for the things that don't matter; you were living your life your own way, consuming your resources upon yourself. But you have convinced yourself that you were doing it right; you are a great Christian; everything is fine; God is going to be happy with you and you'd stand before God and find out it was a total miss. Do you realize you could have lived the last nine years that way? But you didn't...but you didn't! I can't imagine anything more horrible than being self-deceived. To understand that the light penetrated, you understand it; you get it—we want to live that way—is something to celebrate and should cause you to go out these doors saying, "That was the right way to live and what we have received back in reward can never be lost!" He finally sums it up in verse 24:

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

You cannot serve God and money and *stuff*. It just doesn't work that way. Now the **master** imagery was very powerful in a culture where they understood slavery. The master owned the slave and you can't have two owners. That imagery doesn't really affect us much. So I'm going to change the language a little bit and use John's language from 1 John saying, "You cannot have two lovers. You cannot love this world and love God both. He simply won't tolerate it." John says, "If you love the world, you don't love God." It's as simple as that. You can't live with one foot in this world and one foot in the kingdom of God and think that God finds that acceptable.

We've talked about this many times. If I were to come home and say to Patty, "Honey, I love you but I've found another and I've decided I would like to have two lovers." Once I regained consciousness, I would know that is a bad idea. And if you know Patty, you know that is what would happen. (laughter) But that is what should happen. That's totally unacceptable; I can't have two lovers. But this is the key: I don't want two lovers; I have never wanted another lover. For thirty years I have been crazily, passionately in love with the woman I'm married to. I don't want another lover. This isn't about getting caught. This isn't about the rules. This isn't about what somebody else might think. This is about deep in my heart, I love this woman. And if Patty was to die tomorrow, one of the things I would treasure most is, for the last thirty years, I believe, with all the integrity in my heart, I have loved this woman to the best of my ability. I'm not saying I've been the perfect husband. I'm not saying I haven't been hard to live with at times. I am saying that in the integrity of my heart, there hasn't been one day I've ever wanted another woman. I've never shared myself with another woman. I've never told another woman, "I love you," romantically. I have given myself fully and totally to this woman because I love her. And at fifty-two years of age, that is deeply meaningful to me and is something I deeply, deeply treasure.

That is exactly what God is asking of us. He is saying, "I don't want religious games; I don't want some sort of self-deception; I don't want you trying to manipulate things. I don't want you to try to have your cake and eat it too. I want you to love Me. I want you to deeply, passionately love Me; I want you to give yourself to Me! I want you to devote yourself to the things that ultimately matter." What Jesus longs for from us is this deep, passionate love relationship with Him! This isn't about trying to figure out what is the right percentage and how do we manipulate things and how do we give as little as possible, and how do we have one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God? This is about loving Him deeply and passionately! At the core of my being, I long for the day when I can stand before Jesus and say to Him, "Jesus, I loved you. With all of my heart I loved you and I gave everything I had to serve you. I wanted to use the best of my time and best of my talent and the best of my treasure." And I want to be able to look Him in the eyes and Him to look at me and say, "Yes, I know that's true. This was not some sort of a religious game to you. I do believe you deeply and passionately loved Me and lived for Me." That's what the text is talking about.

Do you realize over the last nine years you could have been completely deceived? You could have poured yourself into the things that don't matter. You could have convinced yourself that everything was fine when it's not fine. You could have tried to have two lovers. You could have tried to serve two masters. You could have consumed your resources on yourself and convinced yourself everything is fine, only to end up one day, eyeball to eyeball with Jesus and realize it was a total miss. You could have totally blown it…….But you didn't...But you didn't! You need to celebrate that! You need to understand this is what matters. I had choices and I made the right choices and now, looking back, I can't imagine living life any other way. The return on the investment that you have made into the things that matter is eternal and is unimaginable and that is something to celebrate!

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us and You love us so much that You have spoken to us clearly about how we are to live our lives and how we are to manage our money and our stuff and our time and our talent. Lord, You haven't left us to guess, so that someday when we stand before You, it would be a surprise. You have laid it out very clearly. Lord, this auditorium is full of people; they know this; they believe this; they live this. Lord, none of us is perfect. We struggle, but in the passion of our hearts, we want to love You. We want to live for the things that matter. We want our lives to count. And, Lord, because You told us the truth, this morning we celebrate that, over the past few years, that is how we've lived. Lord, for that we give You thanks. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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