

God's Plan in Human History

This morning I want to continue in a series that I started a few weeks ago on *Recovering Our Christian Hope*. I came to a conviction a couple of months ago that there really wasn't sufficient discussion—at least not in this church—but I think in general in America about the future and particularly the future as laid out in the Bible. Somehow, we have completely lost the future and the looking forward in the modern Christian world. What we have is no real anticipation of heaven, even though Christianity still contains certain doctrines regarding the return of Christ; the signs that will precede the return of Christ. Those doctrines don't meaningfully reflect our lives today. We live with tremendous sense of hopelessness. Many, many Christians suffer severe depression without any kind of counter-balancing joy or hope. And, as I have considered the counsel offered in the Bible, one of the points of counsel for the depressed, for the hopeless, for those who are suffering tribulation, is that there is something glorious and wonderful awaiting you in the future. Life is not just to be lived in the present, but there is an anticipation for the Christian for something wonderful in the future.

Now, today, as we explore in a little more detail some of the signs that will precede the Lord's return, what I want to do is to fit those signs into the overall purposes and plans of God throughout history. You see, where history ends is part of the overall plan of God and his outworking of a plan in human history. Lots of times as we look back at the flow of human history, it might seem to be a confusing array of facts and dates and people—there was a war going on over here; and then, there was a flood over there; an airplane crashed in another place; and the New York Yankees take, yet, another World Series, just proving the general superiority of New York sports teams over Ohio-based teams—I mean, you look at the flow of history and you must ask yourself the question: Is there a mind behind history? Is there a plan?

I think looking at the world is very much like looking at a man who is building a cabinet. You watch the man cutting some boards and then he goes over and sands some other boards. Maybe he will join some other pieces; gluing some things together. But, it is not in a linear step-by-step progression. He doesn't wait for all the glue to dry before he goes on to the next step. But, the craftsman works in a way that, unless you knew and could appreciate the overall plan and purpose, you would find his work to be crazy and confusing.

Well, let me use a different illustration to get at my point. You start back before the world began—back in human history to the river flowing from the very throne of God and you see this incredible flow, a river, beginning at the throne of God and watch the course of the river as it flows into human history. It takes all of these curves and turns and bends. Looking at the river you could ask yourself: Is this river, this flow, from the throne of God going anywhere? Does God have an overall purpose, a plan? We would find out, yes. The scripture repeatedly

says that there is a mind, a planner, a craftsman, an overall designer of history behind all that we see and behind even the signs leading up to the coming of Christ—the wars, the earthquakes, all of that. There is a mind behind it. There is a planner. The signs that we are going to look at today fit in God's overall plan. God has a plan and he is working out that plan in human history. He has a plan for you and your part in world history.

So, let's start with the broad strokes and we will narrow in. The broad strokes of God's plan are what? What is he up to? I said several months ago that where God is going and where he has been going from the beginning is stated in the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, chapter 2, verse 14. It says: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas." God is, from the beginning, about the business of sharing his goodness; sharing his joy with creatures who could appreciate it and his expanding the circle of joy and the circle of the enjoyment of his goodness. So that one day the circle of the participation in his joy and the circle in the participation in the enjoyment of the goodness would include people from every tribe and tongue and nation, as it says in Revelation, chapter 7, verse 9: "After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the lamb."

The river might look like it has all kinds of bends and turns, but the flow of the plan of God from the beginning begins with God's throne and a decision in the council of the Trinity to create people with whom he could share his goodness. Then it goes through human history terminating, again, back at the throne of God where representatives from every people group, every language, every tribe, every color are before the throne enjoying and participating in a shared experience of the goodness of God. The earth is going to be filled with the knowledge of the goodness of God as the waters cover the seas.

So, today we are going to explore the working out of the purposes of God in the last days. And, then, where we fit into the working out of those plans and purposes. One of the great joys for me has been the discovery that I get to participate. I don't have to, I *get to participate* in the plan of God for human history. Let's pray and then we will take a look at God's word.

See history is the working out of a purpose. There is a history, a mind, a plan behind all that we are observing even though lots of it doesn't make any sense when you are standing on the sides of the river bank. You watch the river bend and you say: It doesn't seem to be going in any particular direction. From the air, you see that this river is going somewhere. History is the outworking of God's overall purpose to spread his goodness and his glory throughout the world so that men and women from every nation will stand before him; enjoying his goodness and giving him glory. Using Bible language we would say that the kingdom of God—God's right to rule and reign—will be spread through the world capturing men and women and delivering them to God.

Now, what does all of this have to do with the last days? Jesus told us that before he returns to earth—before his glorious coming, what we talked about last week, his glorious coming, his observable coming, his coming that no one could miss—before that great manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ in the heavens

like lightening flashing from east to west, there were going to be signs that his coming was near. He gave us in the Bible certain ways to anticipate that the coming of Christ was near. There are, by my reading, three major signposts—three great indicators, the big ones—that when these things occur, Christ is going to return. He is coming back. He didn't leave never to show up again. Jesus Christ, the same Jesus that walked in this world as a man, is coming back in glory. He said that there are three things that must happen before he comes back. And, as I read it in the Bible, only three things that must occur before Christ returns.

Number one—The Jewish people, as a whole, as a nation, must receive Jesus as Lord and Messiah before Jesus returns. We must see a large conversion of the Jewish people as a pre-requisite, as a pre-condition, as a sign of Christ's near coming. You say: Where is that in the Bible, Rich, that we have to see the Jews turn to Jesus before Jesus will return? We are going to work an argument out of Romans 11, but let me read to you another passage in Matthew 23, verse 37: "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. [This is Jesus talking here] For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." You will not see me again. I will not return until Jerusalem recognizes Jesus as Messiah and gives him the proper honor due Messiah. It says "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." We recognize, now, that Jesus has been sent by the Father to us. He is the gift of God. One great sign is the turning of the Jewish people as a whole to Jesus as Lord and Messiah and Savior.

The second great sign, a pre-requisite, a condition for the Lord's return is the spread of the gospel to all people groups, all *ethnos*—the Greek word is; all nations. It is not sufficient in the fulfillment of the plan of God for only half the world to have heard the gospel preached. It is not sufficient in the mind of God to have a one billion people in the world today who have never heard the name Jesus Christ even once. Before Christ returns, he tells us in Matthew 24: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, all *ethnos*, and then the end will come." It is stated with great clarity, likewise, in Mark 13:10 and we see this as a pre-requisite for the Lord's return when he says: "And the gospel must first be preached to all nations." There is a divine necessity of the preaching of the gospel. It must, and there is an order, it must first be preached to all nations and then Christ will return.

The third of the great signs of the Lord's return I am going to teach on next week. And that is the revelation, the revealing of anti-Christ. It says in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, "Don't let anyone deceive you in anyway for that day will not come [*it won't come*] unless the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed. The man doomed to destruction."

Now, I want you to see that these three great signs of the Lord's return are in accordance with all that has been going on in human history. Human history has been a story of the spread of God's kingdom; the spread of God's goodness through the world; that's the first two signs. Jews must come to Jesus. The

Gentile nations must turn to Jesus. But, it is also a story of the opposition to that spread by Satan. And so, in the last days before history ends, before Christ returns, we are going to see these three great events. In the sharpest focus possible, Jews are going to turn to Christ in mass. The gospel is going to be preached to every nation group and there is going to be significant opposition to the spread of the gospel by a human being who will embody opposition to God—namely anti-Christ.

Don't spend your time focused on minor wars here and earthquakes there; famines, all of those things are quite confusing and quite ambiguous. They don't really sharply tell us that the Lord's return is near. I will tell you the things to look at. There are only three things that must absolutely happen before Christ comes back in glory.

Number one: The Jews as a nation must turn to Jesus.

Number two: The gospel must be preached to every ethnos; every people group.

Number three: Anti-Christ must be revealed. The man of lawlessness must stand up in opposition to the spread of the good news.

This week we are going to look at the first two signs. Turn to Romans, chapter 11. We are talking about the outworking of the grand purposes of God in these last days. A plan that began before eternity flows from God's throne and is going to terminate before the throne of God. Romans, chapter 11, Paul writes: "I ask then, did God reject his people? By no means, I am an Israelite myself, a descendent from Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people [He is talking about the Jewish people.] whom he for-knew. Don't you know what the scriptures says in the passage about Elijah? How he appealed to God against Israel. Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me." And, what was God's answer to him? "I have preserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. So, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace."

We consider this idea that there is an overall purpose or plan for the world begun in the mind of God. And, that plan is laid out in the Bible. Often, as you look out at the world or as you examine your life with some honesty, you must come to the conclusion, from time to time, that: I don't think God's plan is working or can work. The prospects for the working out of the purposes of God seem to be quite bleak. God intended Christian marriage to be a permanent institution and yet, we watch Christian couple after Christian couple getting divorced. God intended that his church be united and yet, we watch church after church split. Things seem to be moving in reverse in the United States. Rather than gaining ground, we seem to be losing ground. God has a purpose that churches grow and expand, and yet, we watch as churches shrink all over this country and whole denominations are on the verge of collapse. It is very possible to feel like the little candle we are holding of Christianity is about to be blown out by a great wind of opposition, a great wind of secularism.

Here is Paul's argument in Romans 11, verses 2-5: "God is in the business of preserving his purposes." Here is the great prophet, Elijah, who is so much like

us wallowing in self-pity: Oh, Lord, your purpose and plan for the world is being destroyed. Oh, Lord, look at the condition of this country. Oh, Lord, look at the condition of my own life. Nothing is working and nothing is going well. We begin to wallow in self-pity. God never assists us in wallowing in our self-pity. Instead, he reminds Elijah of something. He doesn't say to Elijah: Oh, there there, poor Elijah, you are really right. Things have gotten desperately off track and I am just wringing my hands, wondering: what has the world come to? Yes, you are quite right, Elijah, your life is falling apart and I have no purpose and no plan for you. You have a right to self-pity. He never caters to our self-pity because God knows something about himself; something about his character. And, God announces to Elijah this very wonderful truth in which he says: I preserve and I protect what is mine. The candle that I have lit will never blow out no matter how hard the opposition wind is blowing. I am going to cover the candle with my hand and preserve it. Yet, 7000 remain, despite all the demonic opposition, I protect what is mine.

You want a testimony about God's ability to protect what is his, to finish what he has started, look at the Jewish people. Just look at the Jews. Is there anything that is a greater testimony to God's ability to protect and preserve and keep to the end whatever he starts than the existence today of the Jewish people? With all the opposition that the Jews have had from every single people group for thousands of years—the Romans came in and burned the city to the ground and slaughtered every man, woman and child in Jerusalem; the Spanish Inquisition they threw the Jews up on racks and hacked them into pieces and burned the synagogues; the Russian pogroms, the reason why my family is in this country, is because of the great pogroms, the great persecution that Russian Jews faced in Russia, they were swept out of the country. Over a million Jewish people were murdered by the Russians. The Holocaust—the Nazi plan to exterminate every Jew on the face of the earth. In the face of all of this, this little group of people still exist and have been preserved by God. And, the greater nations—the Romans, the Greeks, the great Phoenician people, the Byzantine empire—all of these great and glorious, powerful nations have vanished from the face of the earth and the Jews are still here.

Whatever God starts, he preserves until the end. In your life, in my life, he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.

Then, I want you to see that even though the river seems to be meandering, seems to have gone off track, there is a plan, there is a purpose. That is what is described in Romans 11 beginning in verse 11. "Again, I ask, did they stumble [he is talking about the Jews] so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all, rather because of their transgressions, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. For if their transgression means riches to the world and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring? I am talking to you, Gentiles. In as much as I am the apostle of the Gentiles. I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

Paul is talking in this passage about God's guidance, God's providence in his goodness of world history. He is saying: It seems as though things are crazy and life is just sort of meandering hither and yon. Let me give you an illustration on what Paul is saying in verses 11-15. If you open up the back of a Swiss watch and see a bunch of gears—50 to 100 gears, little and big ones going in totally opposite directions—you might say: Who designed this thing? It must have been designed by an insane person, but all of those gears have one function. And that is to make the hands operate perfectly.

That is what happened with the Jewish people, Paul says. The Jews rejected the Messiah. In verse 11 they stumbled. They transgressed. The Jews rejected the Messiah. And the Jews rejected God's purpose for them. Not only did they reject the Messiah, but they rejected God's overall purpose in choosing them. God chose the Jewish people according to Isaiah, chapter 49, verse 6: "To be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring my salvation to the end of the earth." God chose the Jews to be a light to the rest of the world. To be a testimony to the nations. But, according to Jesus, in Matthew 23, the Jews rejected that purpose. In speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus says: "You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You, yourself, don't enter it [that is you have rejected Jesus as Messiah] nor will you let those enter who are trying to. You also prevent others; you have rejected your purpose as a light." Well, what happened? Did God's purpose go awry? No. God used their transgression and said: Fine, if you won't receive Jesus as Messiah, then I will have the gospel, the good news, go to the Gentiles. Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Their transgressions has meant riches for the world. God took the kingdom that was formerly possessed by the Jewish people and he gave it to the Gentiles. And now the message is spreading from Gentile to Gentile.

I want to return to the theme, for a moment, of the spread of the preaching of the gospel to every people group. I said before that there are three great signs, three pre-requisites that must occur before Jesus returns in glory. One of them is the preaching of the gospel to every people group. In Matthew 24, verse 14; Mark 13, verse 10, terminating in Revelation, chapter 7, verse 9, "that every nation, tribe, people and language would stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb." You know one of the most exciting things that is occurring in our life time is the fulfillment of this requirement that the gospel be preached to every people group. I want you to turn to the back of your outlines. Here is a little chart made up by the U.S. Center for World Missions which is strategically coordinating the effort to reach every unreached people group, every language and tribe on the face of the earth. The goal of the U.S. Center out in Pasadena, California is that there be a viable evangelizing church movement within every single human culture.

I want you to understand something. When it says in the Bible that the gospel must be preached to every nation, it is not probably talking about "nation" in the modern sense of the word as nations represented in the United Nations. But, it is talking about people groups and the reaching of every people group within modern nations. It is not hard to see that just because the gospel message has penetrated suburban America, it has not necessarily penetrated the Navajo

Indian tribes living on reservations, or Alaskan Eskimos, or Jewish people living in New York City, or inner-city Black who are outside of the reach of an evangelizing church movement.

As I said, one of the most exciting things that is occurring in this decade is that all of the various people groups on the face of the earth are being targeted so that if you look at the chart on the back of your outline, you will see that the number of unreached peoples is dramatically decreasing in proportion to the number of congregations that are available to reach them. What we are seeing is the trend of reaching unreached people so that God's purpose in human history—to have people from every tribe, tongue and nation before the throne is being fulfilled. That trend is occurring at a rate faster than it has ever in a two thousand year history of Christianity and it is happening today in our life time. Look at this: From 1980 to 1989 the percentage of non-Christians to believers in the world went from 11:1 to 7:1. By the year 2000, that number is predicted to fall to something like 3:1. And that decline, that precipitous decline in the reaching of unreached people is happening at a rate now, if you look at the percentages, it took the first 900 years of church history to accomplish by way of percentages, what was accomplished in the last 9 years. It took the first 900 years of church history to accomplish what has been accomplished in the last 9 years in terms of the spread of the gospel and the reaching of unreached peoples.

Something is going on brothers and sisters. We are on a fast track here. This sign of the reaching of hidden peoples is happening in our life time. Now, no one knows the precise definition of nations, and people and tribes. No one knows what is finally in the mind of God regarding how many people he wants before his throne. But, it does appear, it does appear that the spread of the gospel into every part of human culture is a finishable, do-able task in our life times.

So, Paul writes: The Jews rejected God's purpose for them. Well, the gospel then spread to the Gentile nations. One day, though, very soon, the Jews are going to become jealous, envious. It says in Romans 11, verse 11: "Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious." Paul says in verse 14 that he makes much of his ministry to arouse his people to envy. I always like to ask the question: Are you, Gentiles, living a life that would that would make a Jewish person jealous? Be honest, is there anyone who would become jealous because of the evident work of God in your life?

The prophetic clock is winding down, brothers and sisters. All those little gears that I talked about before that seem to be working in opposite directions, in fact, are moving the hands of the clock to strike twelve. In a very short time, I believe, the gospel message is going to come back toward the Jewish people again in mass. Jews will be stirred to jealousy. It says that if their transgressions meant riches for the world, and their loss meant riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring?

When will the trumpet sound? When will the cry go out? "Messiah has returned! Christ has come! His glory is showing through the whole earth!" When will that happen? In verse 25 of Romans, chapter 11: "I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited." Israel

has experienced a hardening in part and I remind you only in part. There have always been Jewish people who have believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But there has been a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. That day is approaching when the full number of Gentiles will have been brought in. Then, all Israel will be saved. Gentiles now come in and after that the Jewish nation comes in and what is the third step? The Deliverer will come from Zion. "He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. This is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." The Deliverer will come back.

God has a purpose that he has been preserving through human history and you see it in the case of the Jews. God's plan has never been side-tracked. It appears that it might be from time to time in the rejection of the Jewish people, but it has never been side-tracked. As the hymn writer says: "Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wondrously reignth."

The third thing I want you to note is that we get to participate in the outworking of the plan of God in history. The master craftsman that we are watching, actually hands us the hammer and the nails and says: Go to it. I want you to partner together with me, as it were, to work with me as instruments of my kingdom. The extraordinary thing about God is not only that he has a purpose that he is working out, but that he is so sovereign that he uses us to be full participants in the outworking of the kingdom. And as we do that, we find that we get to share in the joy of the master. Where I want to finish today's sermon is by taking a look at our participation in the working out of God's purposes in the world in these last days.

Looking at Matthew, chapter 25, I am going to begin reading in verse 14. Let's take a look at some of the elements in this story. We see, first of all, that there is a man. It says: "It will be like man going on a journey." The man is later called the master of the servants. Clearly, the man in the story is the Lord Jesus, himself. It is said about him that he is going away on a journey and in verse 19, that he went away for a long time. That is a picture of the Lord Jesus leaving us, returning to heaven and being gone for a long time.

So, there is a master, namely the Lord, who is going away for a long time. That master, it says, is going to return and that is what we are talking about in this series—the return of the Lord in his second coming. Another common element that we see is that the master determines the amount of talents given to each person according to their abilities. People do not determine the amount of talents.

Now, I believe that the talent here is a picture of our opportunities for investment in God's kingdom and the spread of God's kingdom and his goodness through this world. Our opportunities for influence are determined by God. And, God determines those opportunities for influence and the in-breaking of his kingdom according to his assessment of what he has put in our lives by way our abilities. People do not determine their opportunities for influence. You don't just make your own way in this world. The opportunities for divine influence and for the spread of the knowledge of God are sovereignly given. As we are going to find in this passage, they can be seized so that a person can invest in those opportunities and use those divine opportunities to spread the influence of God

or not use those opportunities. But, it is a sovereign choice regarding what doors for influence and for investment and for the placing of your money and your gifts and your time and your energies, indeed, your whole life—what kinds of doors have opened up to you and will open up to you. That is the choice of our sovereign Lord. And we see that there is a day of reckoning.

Now, the Lord comes back and to the first two men he basically says the same thing. They have invested, they have given themselves over to divine purposes and use the opportunities they had to invest their lives. By the way, a talent is it says in the NIV footnote: Something more than a thousand dollars. I should say so. A talent of gold was a measure of weight back in the days of Jesus. And, if you had a talent of gold that was what a day laborer would make in about 20 years. If you project the earning power in today's terms and say what would a laborer make in 20 years, I would think it would be something more than a thousand dollars—something like \$500,000. So, what Jesus was talking about in giving away five talents of gold would have been an enormous sum of money. Tremendous divine opportunities for influence were given to this first man. Something on the order of a million dollars was given to the second man. It was a sacred trust—and, five hundred thousand to the third man.

Now, look at the commendation after these men give themselves to participate in the outworking of God's plan. The master says to them two things. One: Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge over many things. So there is a reward. But, here is the line that I want to emphasize: Come and share your master's happiness.

Do you remember from the beginning God's purpose was to share the joy that he had as a triune God, the joy and the enjoyment that the members of the Trinity have with each other—the Father enjoying the Son's company; the Son enjoying the Father's company; the Father and Son enjoying the Holy Spirit's company—this wonderful enjoyment in the Trinity and, the decision to share that with the world.

Then we see three men and two of them have decided to partner together with God; to spread God's influence and his joy to others, the reward they get is that they get to share in the joy. The picture that comes to my mind is of that river flowing from the throne of God through human history. That river is the river of the purposes of God. I picture people walking along the banks of the river. Some people make a choice to throw themselves into the river and swim right out into the very center of the river so that they can be carried along in the purposes of God. Those people are people who abandon themselves and their whole lives to the purpose of God for them. They say, I am going to fully invest in this project called "The Spread of the Kingdom of God." Those people are people who get to share fully and completely in the joy.

You see, you have to dive in. You have to jump off the bank and dive into the purposes of God in an abandoned way in order to share in the joy. Do you understand that God's call on your life to invest yourself in the spread of his kingdom in one way or another is a call to you to experience greater joy? So many people hear the message of using your opportunities (and I will talk about what some of them are in just a moment), but so many people hear that message

of using your opportunities for influence as a call to great sacrifice. And, the drum is always hit on the issue of sacrifice and the issue of additional commitment. You can go into some churches and they are always saying: We are not doing enough and we need to sacrifice more. You people are not sacrificing enough and everyone feels guilty. Oh, I have to sacrifice more. That is not the New Testament message of investment in the kingdom.

In fact, this whole sort of self-pitying sacrificial mindset was strongly rebuked by Jesus in Matthew, chapter 19. You remember in chapter 19 there was a story of a rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and says: Jesus, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? And, Jesus answers: Well, you need to obey the commandments. And then he goes on and says: There is one thing you lack. Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me. The man walks away from him very sad because he was very rich. The mindset could be from that passage: Oh, the man wasn't willing to sacrifice enough to inherit the kingdom. That is not the meaning of the story of the rich young ruler. Jesus never tells us to give something up except to the extent that that lesser good is keeping us from experiencing something better and greater. He never says to us: Well, give up that boyfriend, just because I want you to make a big sacrifice. He says: No, give up that boyfriend so that you can experience something better which is the fullness and the enjoyment of my presence, my reign and my kingdom in your life. Unless you give up that lesser thing, like the rich young ruler, you will never experience the greater thing. Whatever is keeping you from being right in the center of the purpose of God, Jesus says: Give it up. Abandon it. Not so you can prove your great sacrifice, but so that you can experience and share in the joy of the master.

Now, Peter doesn't get it because he hears this call to the rich young ruler to give it all up and he says in Matthew 19 to Jesus: "We have left everything to follow you. What will there be for us?" Well, Jesus, we have sacrificed totally. Is that the issue? You know, how much can you give up for Christ? How bad can you make it for yourself? You know, if you are living out in the garage now, move into the woodshed. Is that what it is? Don't ever get married. Don't ever enjoy your money. Don't ever take a day on the beach. Just give it all up to prove your love, somehow, for Jesus. And Jesus says that is not the good news. The good news is not a cause for sort of self-sacrificial self-pitying. Look at how much I have done for God.

Jesus says this: I tell you the truth that the renewal of all things when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones. Then he says this: And, everyone who has left houses, or brothers and sisters, or fathers or mothers, or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much, and will inherit eternal life.

Listen, I really appreciate the straight-forwardness of Jesus to the two men who invested their lives and to Peter. Jesus doesn't offer just sort of a watered-down kind of answer to our self-pity and our sense of sacrifice. He doesn't say to us: Well, Rich, you know, you are such a good guy and God so much appreciates you and all that you have done for God. He just doesn't patronize me and cater to my self-pity. No. He cuts right under it. He says: Rich, you

haven't lost a thing. If you think you have lost a thing, you don't understand the good news. Because what you are involved in and what you have plunged yourself into by giving your life to me will make you a winner. You don't lose anything. You give up your mother, you gain a hundred mothers. You gave up your house, you gain a hundred houses. You never lose by investing in the kingdom. You get to share in the joy.

Some people really understand this. Anyone who has made the least investment in the kingdom and used a divine opportunity to serve ends up saying about themselves: Hey, this is sheer gain. Yeah, I have invested. Yeah, it cost me a job, or a little bit of money, or some time, but, man, I am out in the center of the stream. I get to flow with the purposes of God and in that I experience joy. There is no room for a spirit of self-sacrificial martyrdom in the kingdom of God. And, there is no room for self-pitying wallowing, or presenting God with some sense of obligation to us. We are winners, total, pure, absolute winners. The more we invest in the system, the more we, ourselves get out of it. We give up our lives, yes. But, we give it up to find greater life. Abandonment results in joy for you.

I want to use some examples of people in this church who have abandoned themselves to the purposes of God and would look you in the eye and say: Do not lay on me some trip of what a great person I am and how much I have sacrificed because we are net winners. I think of Jim and Sara Meyer. Jim was involved in advertising and was working for one of the larger advertising companies here in the city; working on the Wendy's account and so on. He and his wife felt a calling to world missions. Jim and his wife, Sara, have decided to use their abilities in the arts and in video taping to video tape various ministries and missions around the world in order to communicate the message of those ministries to local churches. Jim and Sara now have an expanded opportunity. I believe they have been faithful in a little, and the Lord is opening up much to them. They now have the opportunity, it appears, through the U.S. Center for World Missions to begin video taping some of those hidden peoples—those unreached people groups that I spoke about before and then communicate about those unreached peoples to local churches in North America and around the world. If you said to Jim or Sara: My, you have given up so much to be involved in ministry. I believe they would say to you: Do not patronize us or rob us of the joy that God is giving us in our ministry.

I can think of Craig and Lilly Mayton. Craig was Upper Arlington City Attorney, making good money, they were living comfortably in Worthington. They decided to plunge themselves into the purposes of God. Craig and Lilly are leading our church plant in St. Petersburg. Don't talk to me about sacrifice, I can hear Craig say. I am a winner. I am having the best time of my life.

Margi Moriarty, John Moriarty, our assistant pastor's wife, is a homemaker. She is at home with two little ones. How do you invest your life? She is involved in discipling. She has known Jesus for a long time. She gets together with other women and helps to disciple other women. She leads a discipleship training course for leaders here in the church. Beyond that she is very involved in women's ministry and does a lot of the administration for the women's ministry

and on and on. You say Wow! What a lot of sacrifice. She would say that is not sacrifice. I benefit. Because in my investment, I experience the kingdom of God.

I could point to a number of people here in the church that would say: Do not talk to me about my great sacrifice. Because I am a winner in this.

Well, there was one person who did not understand what Christianity was all about and he chose not to dive into the rapidly flowing river of God's purposes from the banks. Instead, it says that he buried his talent, his opportunity, he didn't seize the opportunity for influence, instead he buried it. And it says about him in verse 24: "Then the man who received the one talent came. 'Master, I knew you were a hard man, harvesting where you haven't sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'"

Let's note a few things about his wicked servant. The master says regarding him in verse 26: "You wicked, lazy servant." Here are a few things that I would say about him. I believe this man represents a lot of conservative evangelicalism in the United States today. Number one: It doesn't say that he was an awful sinner. That he did something terrible, he killed somebody or committed adultery, or was involved in some larger sin, or even that he was involved in the lesser sins of pride, or lust, or anything like that. Rather, it says, regarding him not that he did terrible things, but he did nothing. All he did with his divine opportunities was try to preserve them.

Why do I say that he represents conservative evangelicalism? Because I believe that a lot of the church today is involved in simply a defensive game. We want to make sure that we protect and preserve the little bit that we have. So long as we hold the line, don't give into the forces of secularism, we feel good as a church. And breaking it down to the individual level, that defensive mindset evaluates a life this way: So long as at the end of the day, I can look at my life and say: Well, I didn't sin too much today. My kids are still living at home and are relatively OK, I guess I have held on to whatever was given me. I guess that is a good day. The notion that Christianity isn't a defensive thing, but something that is meant to be offensive and growing and changing those around you, that you would use your influence whatever it is and give yourself to God and abandon yourself is nowhere in this thought process.

Do you know, for those of you who are interested in our history in this church, it was this discovery that Christianity is not meant to be simply a defensive game where we hold on to our own and protect ourselves from the world around us that led us away from our former church involvements toward joining up with the Vineyard. There was a very clear choice that we had back in 1986. We were involved in a church movement that was essentially defensive. It used to describe the church as basically being a bulwark, a protection, against the world's influences. One day I recall that Danny and I were walking in England and it hit me like a thunderbolt. I looked at Danny and I said, "I hate our church. I hate the kind of Christianity that we are involved in because I don't want us to be a bulwark, I want us to be a bulldozer. I want to go out and change the landscape of the world around us. To plow it up for the kingdom of God; not

simply hiding in here and protecting our borders. We are called to be a bulldozer."

Christianity is not meant to be a defensive game. It is meant to be an offensive game. The church and you, as an individual, are asked, if you are a follower of Christ, to change the landscape around you, to dig it up, whatever divine opportunities you may have been given.

There is a second thing. Not only did this man misconstrue the nature of Christianity, he misconstrued the nature of Christ when he said: Master I knew you were a hard man, harvesting where you haven't sown and gathering where you haven't scattered seed. So I was afraid. The master comes back and says: So, you knew that I harvest where I haven't sown and gather where I haven't scattered seed. Well, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers. Here is the idea. Many people perceive Christ to be basically a taker and not a giver. That he is a hard master like I described before. They perceive Christianity as basically calling for more and more self-sacrifice. That is mainly God taking from us where he hasn't sown. Lord, you want all kinds of faith, but you haven't sown reasons to believe, but you want me to believe anyway. And then, you get upset with me when I struggle with my belief. God, you want to harvest a big crop from my life, but you haven't given me anything to work with. Jesus says essentially this back to that kind of attitude: If that is what you thought of me [and I think he says this to the church], if that is what you think that God is like, then why don't you fling the whole thing away? Why don't you be honest enough to chuck it all overboard? Get rid of it and put it someplace else with the bankers. I mean, if you really think that God is a hard guy and that the kingdom is not good news of the opportunity to participate in the joy of God, then throw it out. Be honest. At least that would have integrity. Be like a Nietzsche who says: forget it. Or a gay activist who says I will tear the whole thing down. So many Christians are afraid to tear the whole thing down, but they won't go the whole route and abandon themselves to the purposes of God. It is amazing. You know, we want to stand right in the center of the bridge in our conservatism—the bridge going from earth to heaven. We won't stand on earth and throw heaven out, but we won't go all the way to heaven either and grab onto God's purposes. We just sort of prefer this conservative, frugal, lukewarm kind of existence. And then we complain as we stand in the very center of the bridge and won't go one way, hot or cold, we complain and we say: God hasn't given me enough for me to experience real joy. Well, perhaps the issue is that we never get to experience real joy while we bet one poker chip at a time on Christ. You take the whole pile and push it into the center of the circle.

You do not experience the purposes of God by standing on the banks and dipping your toes in. You dive in. It really, brothers and sisters, is so much like a marriage where two people are having a horrible time with each other and a large part of the problem is they have never really given themselves to each other in the level of their hearts and their time and their attention. They have made no real commitment to work on their marriage, but they are frustrated because their marriage is not working. They can look each other in the eye very often in a marriage that isn't working and say: You know, part of the problem is that we

have never abandoned ourselves to each other. We have so many other things going on in our lives. We have so many other commitments. I am far more committed to my career than I am to you, as my wife. And, I am far more committed to the opinions of my parents and to something else other than to you, as my husband. You don't get to experience the joy without the investment in the giving of your life.

Jesus said in John 7:17: "That if anyone does my will, he will know whether I am speaking on my own account or whether the Father has sent me." You have to throw yourself in.

So why did this man not invest? Well, we see that he has a distorted view of Christianity and believes that it is a defensive game. He has a distorted view of Christ. And, perhaps he was a man who looked at his talents and said a couple of things. Number one—I have only one talent and these other people have five. There is no point in investing my little bit. See, I think that a lot of folks compare their opportunities for service with other people's opportunities. And, because their opportunities and their ability to influence is not as great as some others: They say it is not worth investing at all. What a foolish attitude. Because my gift package and my opportunities are not at the level of Craig Mayton and I am not going overseas, I can't even begin to imagine doing that.

There are a thousand and ten ways to use the opportunities that you have. Do you work in a business? Is there no one in your work that you could influence in the direction of Jesus Christ? There are men in this congregation who before I began pastoring a long time ago I got together with every week for a year just to talk about their marriage and their kids and their jobs. Are you telling me that you can't get together with one other man in this church and just talk and pray with them about their marriage. You can't get together with one other woman to encourage them? I am talking about the little things. Investing in a child in this church. You don't need the approval, by the way, of the church to invest. God is laying something on your heart, do it. Some people compare their opportunities with others which leads to the final point regarding this guy.

The final point is that there are many of us who feel that if we can not be spectacular, we will not be significant. If I can't be in the spotlight, then I don't want to invest at all. I have musical gifts, but I don't get to be on the worship team. Brothers and sisters, if you have a musical gift and you want to employ that and invest that, I can sign you up today. You can be on a worship team for the kids today. Well, I have a gift. I know the Bible and I can teach the Bible. Brother or Sister, if you can teach the Bible, we can use you today and hook you up with somebody that you can teach the Bible to. That is true on every level. You can take a son or daughter of a single mother to a Clippers' game, can't you? You can take a son or a daughter of a single mother out shopping, can't you? You make lots of money, you can give that away to influence the spread of the kingdom, can't you? You are a CEO of a business, how about using some of your business influence for Jesus? You could do that. You could use your legal influence for Jesus; your influence as a teacher for Jesus; your influence in your neighborhood for Jesus. You could take those two cards—the reason we put those cards in the bulletin this week is because this is a way for you to plunge

practically into the kingdom. Take those two cards and put them into your purse or wallet and then, give one of those cards to someone else and be a bringer and an includer to church.

Here is the principle. You can never be a loser by investing in the kingdom of God. You cannot lose. If you plunge into the river, you can only win. Will you sacrifice? Yes. Could you suffer persecution? Absolutely. But you cannot lose.

Jim Elliott, a missionary to the Auca Indians, who ended up giving his life in trying to bring the gospel to a tribal people of the Amazon said: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." God will never be in debt to us. God will always turn the table on any sacrifice you make and make you out to be the winner.

Brothers and Sisters, ultimately for your own selves and for your own joy in life, I call upon you to plunge in—to dive off the river banks and abandon yourself to the purposes of God for you in spreading your influence. The frugal, the conservative, the play-it-safe people will never get to share in the joy of Jesus either now or in the future. But, the risk takers?

I want to finish with a quote from Teddy Roosevelt. Here is what Teddy Roosevelt said (one of my all time favorite people): "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered on occasion by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

You don't need to live in the gray twilight, not knowing victory or defeat. Get involved in the great purposes of God—seeing a neighbor or a friend coming to know Jesus and include them in your circle. In the end, you will never say to God: Look at how much I given. If you are in the river, you are going to come to the realization that Paul did at the end of Romans, chapter 11, where he says: "Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom of the knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has ever been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

Everyone—everyone in the end will say: It has simply been a privilege to swim in the purposes of God. It flowed from the throne and it is going back to the throne. To him be the glory, forever. Amen.