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What Do I Value?

Intentional Series

Genesis 4:1-8

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As Ryan mentioned last week, this weekend we're talking about money. Now I want you to just take a moment and be aware of whatever emotions that comment just stirred, because I want to come back to that in a little bit. Over the years, I've become very passionate about this subject, but it hasn't always been that way. So I want to give you a little bit of my own personal history with this subject.

I went to seminary in the early 80s, and the conventional wisdom was, "You don't talk about money." If you talk about money, you'll scare the visitors away. If you talk about money, people will leave. So if you want people to come and stay, you don't talk about money. So, like a lot of my peers, I bought into that. I think in my ten years as pastor at Broken Bow, I don't know that I talked about money one single time. I came here in 1993, and we didn't talk about money. You weren't supposed to talk about money.

But an interesting thing happened. As strange as this may seem to you, I started noticing how many commercials on the radio there were for organizations starting to help people that are in financial crisis. And I started to ask myself, "How many people must be in financial crisis for so many of these organizations to exist?" So then I began to wonder, "How many of our people in the congregation live in bondage to financial crisis?" So I did a little investigating, and my conclusion was: a lot! So in 2003 while we were still back in the chapel, I stood before this congregation and I apologized for being a bad pastor in this area. The reality was we didn't tiptoe around any other issue, so why were we tiptoeing around this issue? And I felt like a lot of people were in financial crisis, at least in part, because I had not done my job as a pastor, to teach them what the Bible says about money. So I declared that and asked the congregation's forgiveness. But I also vowed from that weekend on, that would change.

What's happened over these twenty plus years has been absolutely remarkable! We've gone from a congregation with a stagnant-to-declining budget to a congregation known for great generosity. We witnessed this again last week when Ryan gave the update about our year-end fiscal giving. We've been able to pour a considerable amount of money into our community with various projects. We've been able to support ministries around the world. We launched a campaign to build this auditorium, the youth complex, plant a church in North Lincoln and start 100 churches in India. And in 2016—a moment I still consider remarkable—for the first time in 60 years, we became 100% debt free. What has happened has been remarkable!

But for me, what drives my passion goes way beyond the money. This isn't about fundraising. The more I studied what the Bible has to say about money, the more I realized almost every text is

intended to provide a very objective barometer to help us measure what we're ultimately living for, what ultimately matters to us, what ultimately we worship. I'm sobered by the fact we only get one shot at life, and I feel like, as your pastor, it's my responsibility to do everything in my power to convince you to live for the things that ultimately matter. I don't want you to get to the end of your life with regrets. I want you to get to the end of your life with a deep satisfaction that you poured yourself into the things that will matter forever. We've often said, "If you want to waste your life, you're free to do so, but we're going to make it very difficult to do so."

So with that in mind, this is my last opportunity to talk to you about money, and about how money is a measurement of what ultimately matters to you. So I want to invite you to turn with me all the way back to Genesis, Chapter 4. It's a good reminder this is not a modern problem. This is not an American problem. This is a human problem, and it's been a problem as long as people have walked on planet Earth. I believe you come out of Genesis chapter 3, essentially, with two paths in life. One path is a path of a willingness to surrender to God as God and to worship Him as God and to live for Him. The second path is made up of those who are determined to be their own god. "I'm going to run my own life. I'm going to do it my way. Don't tell me what to do." Those two paths then are represented by two brothers by the name of Cain and Abel. We pick it up in chapter 4, verse 1:

> **Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have gotten a manchild with *the help of* the Lord." Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.** (*NASB, Genesis 4:1-2)
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> So two brothers, Cain and Abel. One is a shepherd; one is a farmer, both noble professions. Verse 3:
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> **So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard.** (Vs. 3-5a)

So verse three opens **in the course of time**. There's no way to tell how much time had passed, but we know from the text, there are other people living on the earth, Cain has a wife, so it's a considerable amount of time. And somewhere along the way, there was a conversation with God in terms of expectations for an offering. So Cain brings ***produce from the ground,*** what the Bible would call a grain offering. Abel brings ***a firstling and the fatty portions*** of one of his animals. And the text tells us that God accepted Abel's offering, but he rejected Cain's offering. Why is that?

So there's one school of thought that Cain brought the wrong thing. The idea is that it should have been a blood sacrifice, and instead he brought grain. But there are not very many scholars who hold to that view. I certainly don't think that's correct. I don't think that's the issue. First of all,

we're told that Abel is a shepherd and Cain is a farmer, in order that we would understand they brought from what they had. That's the whole point. We also know that when God gave the Law, a grain offering was a perfectly acceptable offering to God. What we do see is that Abel brought the best of what he had. Biblical language for that would be the **firstling and the fatty portions**. With Cain, not so much. Cain brought some grain. Notice specifically how the text is worded, because that's the key. The text says that **the Lord had regard for Abel** (the person); therefore He had regard for his offering. But **He had no regard for Cain** (the person); therefore He had no regard for his offering. In other words, the issue was the heart of the person, but the heart of the person reflected what that person was willing to give to God as an act of worship.

I think many people would prefer to think Cain just brought the wrong thing, because that's much easier to correct. This is the essence of religion. "Just tell me the rules; tell me the hoops I need to jump through; tell me the boxes I need to check. Tell me what I need to do to keep God off my back, and I'll do it." So we want to believe he just brought the wrong thing. So what does God want? Like, 2%? 5%? 10%? Is it before or after taxes? What's God asking for? These are all the questions we ask. What we're trying to do there is check a box: "Alright!" But the problem wasn't that Cain brought the wrong thing. It's that Cain needed to be a different person. That's a much more complicated conversation.

The consistent message of the Bible, as it relates to money, was summed up by Jesus when Jesus said, *"**Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.**"* Now I've been doing this a lot of years, and I know that makes some people very upset, because we want to believe we're all-in as a Christian, even if God doesn't have our money. But Jesus said, **"*Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.*"** If you want to get mad, don't get mad at me. I'm just telling you Jesus is the One that said it.

Let's imagine it's Valentine's Day, and I say to Patti when I leave the house in the morning, "Honey, tell me, 'What do I need to come home with to keep you from yelling at me? *(laughter)* Just tell me; I'll come home with it." I can tell you with great confidence, it wouldn't matter what I came home with, it would not be what she wants, because what she wants is my heart. After 44 years, she still wants to know she's the love of my life. That's what she wants, and that's what God wants. God doesn't have a cash-flow problem. God wants our hearts. But the most objective way to measure that is, "What do we do with what we have?" The text goes on:

> **So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not *your countenance* be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.** (Vs. 5b-8)

So Cain's heart is exposed, and he doesn't like it, so he gets mad. I love God's response. "Cain, it doesn't have to be this way." God doesn't whack him. It's like God is pleading with Cain to rethink

some things. “Cain, it doesn’t have to be this way; you just need to make some changes. All I want is your heart.” But Cain wants to be God. Cain wants to run his own life. Cain wants to do things his own way. The New Testament refers to this as *the way of Cain*, and it’s a very common path. But God says to him, “Cain, if something doesn’t change, sin—your desire for idolatry, to worship yourself, to do this your own way—it’s crouching at the door.” It’s language used to describe a lion that’s crouching in the grass, ready to pounce. “It’s going to pounce on you. It’s going to make a mess of your life if something doesn’t change.” And, of course, Cain is not interested in listening. He ends up killing his brother. If you read the rest of the chapter, Cane’s life is miserable for the rest of his life.

Now, let me ask you a question. When I opened up saying, “Today we’re going to talk about money,” be honest, what emotions stirred in your heart? Because I know a lot of people get upset; they get angry; they get grumpy. Some of you are thinking, “I wish I wouldn’t even come today.” *(laughter)* Why is that? That’s a very odd response. Why is that? Answer is: because money exposes our heart and we don’t like that. But here’s the deal. You only get one shot at life. You can waste it if you want to, but I want you to get to the finish line and realize you’ve lived your life for the things that matter and have a deep satisfaction that that is true. It’s easy for us as Christians to convince ourselves, “Hey, I’m all in.” But if God doesn’t have your money, He doesn’t have your heart. ***Where your treasure is, that’s where your heart is.***

So here’s the deal. If you don’t want to give your money, don’t. There’s no arm twisting. There’s no pressure. Don’t! If you’re going to be all grumbly about giving your money, keep it. God doesn’t want it, and neither do we. It’s not what it’s about. I just want you to understand what that represents, that you may not be as committed to following Jesus as you think you are. But maybe there’s people that would say, “You know, I think I want to rethink this. I do want to live for the things that matter. I don’t want to waste my life on the things that ultimately aren’t going to matter.” So you need to think about beginning to make some changes.

The title of this series is *Intentional*. When we live in a world that is so materialistic and so selfish, the only way something’s going to change is if you’re very intentional about wanting to live a different way. Probably the most common response I hear from people is, “I just can’t afford it.” Yes, you can. You afford a lot of things. You spend money on a lot of things. The reality is it represents a value system, and for whatever reason, God isn’t figuring into that value system. You do have to make changes.

In the Old Testament, David was looking for a piece of ground to offer as a sacrifice to God. The owner of the ground offered to give it to David for free, but David insisted on paying for it with this comment, “***I will not give to God that which costs me nothing***.” It is not supposed to be about leftovers. It’s supposed to cost you. It’s supposed to be a sacrifice. That’s the whole point. It’s a rearranging of a priority system to gain clarity about what really matters to us. So maybe this year, it’s about being intentional, about making some changes. Just start somewhere: 2%, 5%, whatever, but start somewhere and see what God does.

You may not know this, but all around you this morning are some of the most generous people I know, who have discovered the joy of generosity. And I am absolutely sure not a single one of them would ever want to go back to the way it was before. What we would all want for you is to discover that same joy and to ultimately live for the things that matter. Let's pray.

Our Father, we're thankful that You are such a generous God. We're about to celebrate that with these amazing baptisms, as we are reminded of the cost of our salvation. Lord, may we, in return, be a generous people. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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