

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 11/15/15

“Five Encouragements: God’s Kingdom is Eternal”

Matthew 6:19-21

As most of you know by now, as I am approaching the time of my retirement, I am focusing my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five were challenges which I have presented to this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with. My first “encouragement” message was my article for *The Bell* for this month, where I reminded you that you are not alone; and my second one was last week, and was the promise that God will direct you as a church.

The third encouragement is: *remember all the work you do for God’s kingdom, is working for the eternal*. There is nothing more frustrating than putting a lot of work into something where in a very short time, it’s back to like it was, and you have to do it all over again! Like raking fall leaves! Now, I have to admit that I have a good leaf-raking helper. We got a little rake for Abel, and he really enjoys helping push those leaves around. But the first time we did it this fall, I was just about finished, when a strong breeze came along, and within minutes, there were nearly as many leaves on the ground as before we started raking. And by the next weekend, when we raked again, there were more! Yesterday we raked some more, and MAYBE this time the improvement will remain. There are *some* leaves still up there, just *taunting* me!

It seems that a lot of the work we do in this life is like that. You work hard to make a difference, and within a really short time someone – or *something* – comes along and undoes it all. Most of you are probably aware of the Greek story of Sisyphus. He was the king of Ephyra (now known as Corinth). He was punished for his self-aggrandizing craftiness and deceitfulness by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, repeating this action for eternity. That pictures well the frustration of much of the work that is done in our temporal world.

That is NOT the way it is when we work for God’s kingdom. We are assured of this in several biblical passages. In our Scripture for today, Jesus tells us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures in earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.” We are used to hearing this in relation to financial stewardship, but it has strong implications for all we do. If we invest our time and talent in God’s kingdom, we invest in what time does not destroy. Similarly, Paul tells us if we build on the foundation of Christ, what we build will survive the fires of time (1 Cor. 3:14).

Now, to be clear, none of this means that this individual congregation will be eternal. No congregation is. Paul, great Apostle that he was, failed to plant a single local church that has survived until today. Church growth organizations tell us that average lifespan of a church is about

the same as the lifespan of an individual – about 70-80 years. By that measure the church has already lived 45-55 years longer than the average. For another basis of comparison, the first Baptist church in America, the First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, is now 377 years old and still going! So it can be done. I say all of this just to say, whether our congregation lasts another 2-3 years, or another 20-30 years, a congregation is *temporal* not *eternal*. Our congregation has been greatly blessed by God to have existed as long as we have. But if we want to put in our work for that which is eternal, we need to work for the kingdom of God. That is far bigger than this individual church. If we do something *through* this church to build the kingdom of God, then whatever happens to this church, what we will have built will remain.

Investment in the kingdom of God has eternal value for two reasons. One is, it is investment in the lives of people. When you invest your time and energy in the kingdom of God through this church and the work of God in this community you invest in people. You invest in the lives of all those gathered here today – your friends and fellow church members. You invest in helping to strengthen their faith, a faith that is laying the groundwork for their eternity. You are investing in people helping people—helping them to make sense of their lives; helping them to deal with loneliness, sorrow and death; and helping them to develop a permanent and loving relationship with their Creator. And you aren't just investing in helping people in this congregation. We help people in the community through Tent City 4, Mary's Place, The Union Gospel Mission, the Sophia Way, and many more. And that's just locally. We also help with struggling people in Haiti, through our support of the mission work there – especially the school we are helping to build.

People who give investment advice talk about how you should always seek to “buy low, sell high.” Most of the people helped by these agencies and missions I have mentioned are at really low points in their lives – women fleeing abuse, families evicted into the street, children in Haiti sifting through garbage, trying not to starve. But we can help make all of that better – not just in this life, but for the life to come. We can help them thru our words and actions to know God's love, and respond to that love in faith. The idea is that if you can find that point in time when a stock or commodity has “bottomed out,” and you invest at that point in time, it has nowhere to go but up. Churches should be places where we find under-valued people, *invest* in them, and turn them into priceless treasures. Talk about “buying low and selling high”! I read a quote a little while ago I really liked, by General George Patton. He said, “Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom.” I like that! Investing in struggling people is investing in giving them an eternal bounce.

When, through Christ, a person who is being sold for nothing in the world, suddenly realizes that he or she is priceless, what a gain has been made on your investment! There is a classic poem which illustrates this well. It's called “The Touch of the Master's Hand” and I remember it touching my heart way back in high school. It goes:

“Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste his time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile
'What am I bid, good folks,' cried he,
'Who'll start the bidding for me?'

‘A dollar, a dollar,’ then, two! Only two?
‘Two dollars, and who’ll make it three?’
‘Three dollars once; three dollars twice;
Going for three...’ But no,
From the room, far back, a grey-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: ‘What am I bid for the old violin?’
And he held it up with the bow.
‘A thousand dollars, and who’ll make it two?’
‘Two thousand! And who’ll make it three?’
Three thousand once; three thousand twice;
And going and gone,’ said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
‘We do not quite understand
What changed its worth?’ Swift came the reply:
‘The touch of the master’s hand.’

And many a one with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A ‘mess of pottage,’ a glass of wine;
A game – and he travels on.
He is ‘going’ once, and ‘going’ twice,
He’s ‘going’ and almost ‘gone.’

But the Master comes and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's Hand."

Churches should be places where we find under-valued people, *invest* in them, and turn them into priceless treasures.

But our work for God's kingdom has an eternal effect, not just because it helps people, but even more because it is work in allegiance to our eternal God. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Our relationship with this eternal God is our guarantee that what we do for him will not ultimately be "rolling a rock up a steep hill, just to watch it roll down again". Each act of love we show – whether the one receiving it shows appreciation or not – makes an eternal difference in the kingdom of God. Each time we share our faith with someone else – whether they come to faith through it or not -- I believe that makes an eternal difference in the kingdom of God. We are not dealing with what rusts out, or can be stolen here – even by the most sophisticated criminal! This past week we were the victim of identity theft. Somebody got my credit card information and charged something at a Walmart in Nebraska. We are fortunate in that the credit card company will reverse the charge. I am amazed at all the identity theft that goes on today. But identity theft won't get you treasures in heaven! Nor will it ever take away your worth before God or the treasures awaiting the faithful.

So my encouragement to you as a church this day is, keep investing yourselves in building the kingdom of God, and that investment will pay off!