

“Off By A Few Degrees”

Matthew 6:19-24

Series: LAUNCH Week 4. Launched to Invest in Eternity

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What difference do a few degrees make?

An unexpected explosion on their spacecraft forced the crew of Apollo 13 to make several quick decisions and tense maneuvers to survive and get back home. After using the moon's gravity to slingshot them back to earth they faced a nearly impossible challenge. If they hit the earth's atmosphere at too shallow an angle they would ricochet off it like a stone skipping across a pond. If they came in too steep they would burn up. A news commentator explained the situation by saying if the earth was a basketball and the moon a softball, they needed to find an opening no thicker than a piece of paper. And they would have to do it entirely without computers.

Commander Jim Lovell took the controls and piloted it toward that paper-thin portal. The lunar module, not designed for this operation, bucked and bounced like a rodeo bull. A few degrees off and it would all be over. All three crew members rode that tense wild ride to the perfect spot. How did they do it? They kept the earth as a target in their window. In essence, they aimed for home, their hearts' desire.

A few degrees off make all the difference.

I've read if a pilot is off course by a single degree, every mile of flight will put the plane 92 feet from the landing target. That amounts to about one mile off target for every sixty miles flown. On a flight from New York to Los Angeles that might put you out in the Pacific Ocean. One degree off could be the difference between making it to an important meeting on time or using your seat as a flotation device. I'm thinking the next time my wife tells me to stop and ask for directions I can tell her, "I'm not lost honey. I'm just off by a few degrees."

Sometimes Jesus confronts us with a stark either/or decision. He says,
No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Matthew 6:24)

I think if you asked most people, "Do you love God or money?" the vast majority want to love God over money. Yet in our culture it's easy to start on the road to loving God and then gradually get off by a few degrees. There is so much pressure from the outside to acquire and accumulate stuff. The latest products come to us through television, the internet, the sales circulars that fill our mailboxes. We see the shiny new things sitting in our neighbors' driveways or their family rooms. Our kids tell us they need new sports equipment, the latest fashion, a better game system, the newly released iphone or ipad. And, of course, Christmas is in the stores...and it's October.

Those outside pressures scratch our inner preferences and pleasures. We all want stuff – for various reasons: status, security, self-esteem. A few years ago there was a disturbing movie called “The Joneses.” Demi Moore and David Duchovny and their children are a fake family that moves into an upscale neighborhood. They aren’t just living the American Dream, they’re selling it. They practice stealth marketing. By showing off their new cars, phones, furniture, golf clubs and even frozen dinners they make everyone in town want to keep up with the Joneses. It works so well the neighbors go deep into debt leading to a tragic end.

The funny thing is: I don’t really own stuff. I just manage the flow. Stuff comes in the door. It finds a place to settle somewhere in the house. It eventually obeys the law of gravity and winds up in the basement. After a while the flow of stuff begins to back up in your house and you have a garage sale or you put it in the trash except for computers, CD and DVD players, TVs, electronic toys and games, cameras, air conditioners, cell phones...basically everything. And let me warn you, when your kids move out, they don’t take their stuff with them. Recently everyone’s been asking me, “How do you like living in an empty nest?” I replied, “It’s not empty yet.” Like Apollo 13 focusing on the earth, we start off loving God but gradually our sights focus on stuff and we start swerving and serving money. All it takes is being off by a few degrees.

How do we get back on track? A number of people in our culture use God and serve money. Jesus wants us to serve God and use money...the way He intended it. Jesus spoke a lot about money because He knows it holds power over our hearts and He wants us to be free. That means we have to make some midcourse corrections. We have to make some choices.

First, **Choose Prayer over Panic.** You may be saying, “Pray over my finances? I’m panicking because I don’t have a prayer.” Others say, “People shouldn’t pray about money.” Correction: people shouldn’t pray to *get* money. That’s selfish. Yet we need to pray for God’s wisdom on how to handle what He places in our hands especially since it’s His. Every manager of someone else’s funds asks the owner for directions on how to invest it. Prayer is essential to this whole process. That’s why in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus put the most famous prayer of all, the Lord’s Prayer in between His teachings about giving to the poor, about storing up treasure in heaven and about serving God instead of money.

One of the great benefits of choosing prayer over panic is you receive God’s peace. A few weeks ago we looked at the roller coaster the Apostle Paul faced. Talk about an up and down financial portfolio. But in the middle of it he wrote,

Do not be anxious about anything, *but in everything*, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

We are concerned about guarding our dollars and cents in the bank while God wants to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. We think if we can just get more money, we

will stop panicking. We have it backwards. We'll stop panicking if we first pray for God's peace. You'll never reach a point where you say, "I have enough money." But today you can know, "I have God and He's all I need. He's more than enough."

Second, **Choose a Plan over a Plunge**. In the book of Proverbs it says, Careful planning puts you ahead in the long run; hurry and scurry puts you further behind (Proverbs 21:5 The Message).

Most Americans have no peace in their finances because, instead of planning, they take the plunge. They spend first and decide how they will pay later. They focus on today and give no thought for tomorrow. They close their eyes, take the plunge and hope it will work out. We want to help people get free of debt so they can start to serve God without fear. That's why last Spring we offered the seminar "I Was Broke Now I'm Not." We continue to have counselors who will help you put together a budget, pay down your debt and, best of all, help you stick to the plan. Some of you may need even more help. Look for a godly financial advisor that will help you work out a specific plan instead of a plunge.

Last Sunday Felix Baumgartner took the biggest plunge in history. This Austrian skydiver and daredevil ascended 24 miles above the earth by the aid of a helium balloon. It would have been enough for him to set the altitude record for a manned balloon flight. But then he opened the capsule door and jumped. He reached a speed of 834 mph or Mach 1.24 – the only human to fall faster than the speed of sound. But before he took the plunge he had lots of practice and planning, an entire mission control ground crew and one more thing. After he successfully landed, a reporter asked him what went through his head in that moment before he jumped. He simply said,

Well I thought, "Please God don't let me down." But if you are standing in His Son's arms there is nothing that can go wrong in that moment. That is what I was thinking.

Don't take the plunge. Make a plan and put yourself in the arms of God's Son.

Finally, **Choose Eternity Over Temporary**. When making financial decisions, advisors will often tell us to take a long view. Don't jump in and out of the market. Start early and invest for the long term. Jesus takes this advice up to the next level – eternity. Now that's really long term. He says,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21)

If you have ever tracked your spending you will probably be surprised, as I was, to see where the money goes. It's one way to see how much stuff we buy. Someone has said that our checkbook or our bank statement is probably the most accurate biography of our

lives. It certainly tells something about our values. Now Jesus doesn't say it's wrong to buy stuff. He just says it's not your best investment because it doesn't last. Moths chew through the clothes, rust eats up the metals and thieves steal what's left. Stuff is temporary. The earth is temporary. It will not be here forever. And neither will you. So don't invest in the temporary. Invest in eternity.

Financial advisors tell you to take the long view. Well, God wants you to take the really long view – His view. Some sent me a comic strip named Pickles in which a child named Nelson wants to be God. He says, "I want to be God for Halloween." His grandmother says, "Why on earth would you want to be God for Halloween?" Nelson replies, "'Cause I like Him...And I think maybe it will make people want to give me a tenth of all their candy." That's one way to see things from God's view.

Here's another. To get a glimpse of eternity picture a very long line which stretches infinitely in each direction. In that infinite line, your life is just a scratch, one tiny mark. Most of us focus only on our life here on earth. Some think that's all there is. Yet even those who believe in heaven seem to pour all their time, money and energy into only what's happening here on earth. They live only for the scratch.

Jesus says live for the line. Invest in eternity. What is eternal? Heaven and people. When you store up for yourself treasure in heaven what you are doing is investing in the lives of people so they can be there in heaven with you. That starts with your family. Make no mistake, God has called you to invest in and take care of your family. But it doesn't stop there. You also invest in your church family and reach beyond that to your neighbors and the world. If you invest in people – caring for their needs, helping them when they are lost, lonely and hurting, sharing the Good News so they become followers of Jesus – you make it possible for them to receive God's gift of eternity where they will be with you forever. That's what Jesus means about putting your treasures in heaven. The treasures are people and no moth, rust or thief can touch them.

Jesus concludes this teaching with an amazing truth:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).

What does He mean? Your heart goes wherever your money does. If you invest your treasure in Microsoft stock, you will start to follow what happens to Microsoft. You will watch it go up and down in the financial pages. You will wonder what will happen when it rolls out a new version of Windows. You will wince at every Mac commercial which makes fun of Microsoft. Your heart goes to the place where you invest your treasure. Your heart will ride up and down with the stock market. But if you invest more of your treasure in people and in eternity, that's where your heart will go. And the more you invest in people and eternity the more you will focus on people and eternity, the more you will care about people and eternity, the more you will look forward to seeing people in eternity, because that is where your heart will be.

Next week we will make two commitments – one to get rid of the mortgage on this facility and the other to do God’s ministry and mission in 2013. Let me give you three wrong reasons to give.

1. I give because God needs my money. That’s actually comical. God needs your money? The entire universe is His. By comparison we are infinitely smaller than the gnat you crushed under your shoe when you walked in. God is the owner of all things. He actually owns all you have. He is the giver of every gift. Don’t give because you think God needs it.

2. The Church Needs My Money – Some give to the Church out a sense of obligation, guilt or paying their dues or their fair share. Some say the Church is so desperate for money it should do fundraisers. This is pledge week on National Public Radio and I was wondering what it would be like if, instead of asking you to give we sold you things: For a pledge of \$500 Karen Houser will come to your house and make you a breakfast of Crème Brulee French Toast. For \$1000 Darlene, Kim or Dawn will sing a praise song as ringtone on your cell phone. For a pledge of \$10,000 we’ll give your own LAUNCH rocket. And for a pledge of \$5 you’ll get your own Doug Mug.

Brothers and sisters, the Church does not need your money. What the Church needs are sold out believers in Jesus Christ who are walking in the power of the Spirit. The more this Church is filled with open hearted and open handed followers of Jesus, giving will flow as a natural byproduct.

3. I Give Because of the Pastor or I Don’t Give Because of the Pastor – Right now, on every street corner in this town there are Election signs. It’s possible that you feel this Growth Campaign, LAUNCH, is a referendum on me. You may want to give because you like my leadership or withhold your pledge because you don’t. Please don’t do either. I am not the Church. I am just a sinner saved by grace like you. One day I won’t be here but by the Grace of God Woodside will. Years ago people gave because they love God and love people and believed in what God was doing here. And we have reaped the benefits of their sacrifice. Those are the only reasons to give: because you love God and you love people and you want to help more people love God.

These two pledges are an investment in people, people who will live with God eternally. Why did we expand this building? So we could welcome more people into God’s family and God’s kingdom. Why do we give away to mission 10-11% of everything we receive? Why do we engage in so many local and international mission projects? So we can invest in people and see more people in God’s house eternally. That’s why we give and that’s why there’s so much joy in giving. We know it’s making a difference, an eternal difference in many people’s lives. When I ask people what they love about Woodside they say again and again: they love the people, they love the family feeling of the people here in God’s house. Yet I wish I could show you all the people in far off places such as the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, Haiti, Zambia, Mozambique, India, Russia, Appalachia, Louisiana, people many of whom you will never

meet, who were healed, fed, touched, taught and transformed because of your investment in eternity.

I want to share with you the personal story of a couple who sit in the seats with you on Sunday. They graciously gave me permission to share with you how they discovered the joy of investing in eternity.

When we first met, both of our careers dealt with investing money. We both graduated college, saved up to buy cars, bought smaller houses than real estate agents said we could afford, and opened regular college savings accounts for the kids soon after their birth. We had many setbacks, like losses on houses when we moved. But we always tried to live within our means rather than try to keep up with everyone else.

Early in this decade, and while I was at a very high-risk company, we began to give to others at levels we never thought possible. We realized we couldn't count on our tax dollars or the wealthy to help others. We knew others had far greater need than us. Our giving exceeded 10% of our income. We were able to save more because our "standard of living" did not increase while our income did. We saved, and we could give more. In recent years, our savings reached a pretty high level where we feel that our retirement nest egg is adequate.

So now what? Buy some luxurious new thing? Every time we think about a bigger house or some other luxury, we calculate just how much less we could give away. In Matthew 19, Jesus says to the rich young man - sell everything and give the money to the poor. He doesn't say give ten percent to the poor, He says give it all. Our goal has risen such that about half of our income is set aside to be invested in those in need, primarily through Christian sponsored organizations. And that amount is woefully short of Jesus' teaching, just proving that we need to always remain humble. But, we can make an impact on people today, and tomorrow, by helping spread God's love to others.

I can't tell you how blessed we feel to be entrusted with investing in others.

Keep your eyes on Jesus and you'll stay on course.