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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

ELKHORN, NEBRASKA

NOVEMBER 25, 2007

LOWELL NELSON

1 MR. LOWELL NELSON: Good morning. Happy
2 Thanksgiving. Was it a good Thanksgiving for you?

3 I was up 4.2 pounds. I'm now down to 2.2 pounds up.
4 Perhaps some of you shared those opportunities to eat.

5 My goal for today is to share some good news with
6 you. It has to do with money.

7 Money. How many of you think of money as good news?
8 If you are in church, yes, there's people that do that.

9 If you are in church for the next three weeks we are
10 going to follow what Mike Breen said last week.

11 Remember, he was talking about in this time, in this
12 era, there are three commands that he gave us.

13 One is to give.

14 The second one was to guard, guard our families and
15 guard our lives in Christ.

16 And the last one was to go.

17 We are going to spend three weeks on giving, and
18 Mark delegated this to me.

19 I enjoy talking about resources. I hope that you
20 get the message here that our lives have less stress because
21 of one simple truth.

22 I'm going to ask for the next slide.

23 Life is all God's. This view is one that we often
24 don't get. When you look at the earth as an entirety.

25 God has created everything, and so the opportunity

1 for the next few weeks, and throughout our lives, is to think
2 of life as stewards of what God has given us.

3 I think some of you have been hearing this message,
4 I'm just going to keep repeating it, because I think God
5 wants me to share it with you.

6 Which is God loves you. You are not alone. You are
7 a child of God.

8 And often on money we think we are all alone.
9 Certainly the messages in this culture are you're all alone,
10 it's up to you.

11 And, sure, there's proper stewardship and planning,
12 proper stewardship in your budgets.

13 But I want to suggest to you as Christians, as
14 Christ-followers, whether you are a new Christian, or still
15 exploring that, or you have been a Christian your entire
16 life, is the pressure is off.

17 It's all God's. We are just giving back what is
18 God's.

19 I'm teased about that I'm a pastor in training. I'm
20 going to seminary.

21 One of the things that I have not been taught yet is
22 how to do jokes well, so I am going to try that right now.

23 This has to do with money, and it has to do with an
24 old Christian lady and a neighbor next door who is an
25 atheist.

1 has given you.

2 Next slide, please.

3 I picked these verses from Romans and again thanks
4 to Gene and the team for singing it.

5 I want to read those to you right now. They are
6 from Romans, so this is Paul's writing.

7 "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge
8 of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how
9 inscrutable his ways.

10 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has
11 been his counselor, or has given a gift to him to receive a
12 gift in return?

13 "For from him and through him and to him are all
14 things. To him be the glory forever."

15 One of the things I wanted to unpack from this is
16 that in the second paragraph there it talks about who has
17 been the counselor of God, or who has given a gift to him to
18 receive a gift in return?

19 I think often in financial stewardship, in giving to
20 the church, to the community, and to the world, we often
21 think that it's a bartering system.

22 Okay, God, if I share a little bit with you, will
23 you give something back in return?

24 I would encourage us not to think that way, not to
25 think that it's just a bartering system, because the last

1 paragraph is the one that struck me.

2 Thinking again of our whole life, for from him, and
3 through him, and to him are all things. From, to, and
4 through. To him be the glory forever.

5 Next slide, please.

6 This was a chart that Martha helped me on, which is
7 often in our life we don't demonstrate that.

8 Financial stewardship of giving back to God's
9 mission a percentage of our income to make sure that God's
10 mission occurs in this world.

11 I've heard this before. God doesn't need your
12 money.

13 God doesn't need your money. God wants you to
14 follow him.

15 And money, as emotionally charged as that is, is
16 probably one of the best indicators for showing whether we
17 are following or not.

18 It's not a way to get closer to God; it's just a
19 demonstration of how you aligned you are.

20 This chart looks like the old Trivial Pursuit chart,
21 but it's about the various aspects of our life, if we have
22 bought into this idea that perhaps because of our physical
23 health, our emotional health, or our social, or vocational,
24 is we often separate money, money is over to the side.

25 There is this comment about a baptismal ceremony in

1 the African plains with a group of people that were warriors,
2 and the missionary was struggling but finally got the Gospel
3 message out to them and that was that they needed to be
4 baptized to be born again into the kingdom.

5 As he was doing that he noticed that the warriors,
6 as they were being dunked in that tradition, would keep their
7 right hand up.

8 And he was confused by that and afterwards he asked
9 people, why did they do that, and that was the warrior's way
10 of saying, you can baptize all of me except for my arm that
11 has to be the warrior arm. I still need to kill.

12 Now on a different track is that even Luther
13 understood this as he wrote back five hundred years ago that
14 there are three conversions needed.

15 A conversion of the heart for Jesus Christ, a
16 conversion of the mind, and he said it this bluntly, and a
17 conversion of the purse, or our money.

18 So my suggestion to you is to not think about life
19 as separate, that you can have any aspect of my life except
20 my financial resources, God, because it's from him, and
21 through him, and to him all these things are his.

22 Next slide, please.

23 Here at church we're trying to be very clear about
24 the culture.

25 I have been here two months. Some of you have been

1 here for days, first time here, some of you have been here
2 for years, some of you have been here all your life, and we
3 are trying to be very explicit about the culture we want, and
4 especially about stewardship.

5 If you look at this, this is a continuum chart from
6 more to less on two poles.

7 Next slide, please.

8 So the first one is we want this to be a church of
9 challenge. We do want to challenge you.

10 Giving to God through your local church is not just
11 something that Mark and I thought of. It is what God says.

12 Let me read to you what God says about that. From
13 Matthew 6, Jesus talks about this.

14 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth
15 where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and
16 steal, but store up for yourself treasures in heaven, for
17 where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

18 And from Luke, Chapter 12, Verses 15 and on. This
19 one I want you to think about.

20 "Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of
21 greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of
22 possessions," and then Jesus told them a parable.

23 "The land of a rich man produced abundantly and he
24 thought to himself, what should I do, for I have no place for
25 my crops.

1 "And then he said, I will do this. I will pull down
2 my barns and build larger ones. There I will store all my
3 grain and my goods and I will say to my soul, soul, you have
4 ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, be
5 merry.

6 "But God said to him, you fool, this very night your
7 life is being demanded of you and the things you have
8 prepared, whose will they be?

9 "So it is with those who store up treasures for
10 themselves but are not rich toward God."

11 That's a challenge, isn't it? It's a challenge to
12 our very life about how we plan for things.

13 And in these verses it talks about this landowner,
14 who of course represents us, and he's talking about my barns,
15 my grain, my soul, my life.

16 It's God's. We are simply stewards of what God has
17 given us, and Jesus challenges us in this message to not
18 forget that, it's not ours, we are stewards of what God has
19 given us.

20 For me, that word steward is maybe a term you
21 haven't heard, but for me it relaxes me, because I realize
22 that I have a partner.

23 I have God as my partner, and so I am relaxed and to
24 not being accountable for all, except to be accountable for
25 what God has given me.

1 And so the challenge there is very blunt. The
2 purpose of life is not to have possessions that are yours;
3 the purpose of life is to be able to share what God has
4 given.

5 Next slide, please.

6 If we are going to challenge you as a pastoral team,
7 and as a church council, this congregation also wants to be a
8 place where you can be supported.

9 So if you understand the good news of Jesus Christ,
10 we want to continue to amplify that theme.

11 You are not alone. God loves you.

12 We will continue to do that as often and in as many
13 different places as we can.

14 But we also want this to be a place of practical
15 support and we will do practical things, like helping you
16 reduce your debt.

17 Financial Peace University is a great program that
18 helps people practically reduce their debt.

19 We want to be a place that supports you, to not be
20 overwhelmed by the consumerism that is taught to each of us
21 each and every day, those practical supports.

22 I want stewardship to be so much fun that people
23 want to be on the stewardship committee.

24 I've been trying to figure out our stewardship team,
25 and really cool people, but I want to reconstitute it so that

1 our stewardship team supports each one of us in a variety of
2 different ways, including debt management, practical ways
3 there, including time management, so that you can spend time
4 with God and the people that you love, with practical ways of
5 supporting you in your concerns for financial stewardship, in
6 gift giving. We want it to be fun.

7 I like the first service a lot. I like the 9:00 and
8 I like the 10:30.

9 The first service was funny. Somebody said, "So you
10 are around to kick me in the shin again."

11 I thought what a great view of stewardship. We just
12 go around, so for you that need to receive the good news of
13 Jesus Christ through a kick in the shin, Mark and I will be
14 happy to do that.

15 Come on over, we will be able to do that, but for
16 us, we want this type of relationship, which is you're
17 challenged, very bluntly, and I encourage you to Google on
18 tithing if you want to take a look further, which is giving
19 ten percent of your income to God's work.

20 And I encourage you to save ten percent, and I
21 encourage you to invest the next 80 percent as you best see
22 fit as a steward. That's not our idea; that's what God says.

23 We are going to continue to challenge, but hopefully
24 support you in that, too.

25 Next chart, please.

1 I love this. I guess you don't love it as much.

2 (Laughter)

3 But I like it because it's meant to be cheerful
4 giving.

5 You have probably heard that verse, but let me talk
6 to you about that again

7 Second Corinthians, Chapter 9, Verses 6 to 8, this
8 is Paul writing to people of Corinth.

9 "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will
10 also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will
11 also reap bountifully.

12 "Each of you must give as you have made up your
13 mind, not reluctantly, or under compulsion, for God loves a
14 cheerful giver.

15 "And God is able to provide you with every blessing
16 in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything,
17 you may share abundantly in every good work."

18 Cheerful giving, make up your mind, and there is a
19 word here that I struggle with, which is, "God is able to
20 provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by
21 always having enough of everything you may share abundantly
22 in every good work."

23 We are going to be talking about a way to respond to
24 this, but one of the goals I have for you this week, if you
25 so accept this challenge, is to spend time thinking about

1 that.

2 Do you have enough?

3 This has been an interesting year if you listen to
4 the financial messages that are being sent out by Wall
5 Street.

6 It looks like there is not going to be enough. Oil
7 prices are going up, credit markets are crumbling, there
8 won't be enough.

9 And what I'm asking you to think about is, as
10 Christ-followers, there is enough.

11 And we need to be able to have that security in a
12 relationship first to then be able to release our financial
13 resources.

14 So the goal is to challenge you and provide
15 practical support so that you'll be a happy giver.

16 The next one, please.

17 There's another continuum, and that has to do with
18 accountability.

19 Mark and I, I just love time with Mark, we were with
20 each other early this morning and we were just talking about
21 this, is that your accountability doesn't lie with Mark and I
22 and coming up to us and saying how much you are going to
23 give, so you're free.

24 You are free. I say the good news, but also awesome
25 news, is that your accountability is with God.

1 Your accountability is with God and I encourage you
2 this week to think about that relationship with God.

3 Some of us are taking a very practical approach to
4 relationship with God, you might pray, say God, what do you
5 suggest for me to give? How can I finish this year strong in
6 giving of what you have given me and how can I plan for next
7 year to provide financial stewardship? God, help me to do
8 that, and to listen.

9 One of the things that I've noticed here in this new
10 role as a pastor is that often financial management and
11 giving is very difficult for spouses.

12 Some spouses may not have Christ-centered spouses
13 and so this whole giving gets to be just a matter of giving
14 to an institution, a fund raising campaign.

15 And I hope that you get enough messages here, this
16 is about life, about whole life.

17 This is about responding to God; not simply a
18 stewardship campaign that tries to get money for a budget.

19 This is about your life, and I pray to God that this
20 week, if you have that time with your spouse, is to be able
21 to talk about how do we respond to God's love?

22 I'm praying that that can be an opportunity for a
23 breakthrough, as opposed to the separation that I often
24 sense.

25 So you're accountable to God, I'm accountable to

1 God, Mark is accountable to God.

2 Next slide, please.

3 We don't want to control here at this church. I'm a
4 little confused about the use of cards.

5 For those of you who have been here before, once a
6 year we often ask people to bring forward a card, an estimate
7 of giving.

8 And that's helpful to financial types, such as
9 myself, and we are wrestling through it, we are praying
10 through it, which is what can we give you that doesn't seem
11 like a sense of control, but is a matter of encouragement for
12 you?

13 For some people, they want to share what they are
14 going to give the next year, because we can send them letters
15 to say, here's where you're at, here's what you pledged,
16 looks like your a little low.

17 Or, thank God, things have been better and so you're
18 sharing.

19 But for many people that is viewed as restrictive,
20 and so I ask you to pray for us, because we're trying to
21 figure out how in a couple weeks on Consecration Sunday we
22 can have you meaningfully show your commitment.

23 And it may not be through a number; it may be
24 through the commitment that you've talked to God, you've
25 talked to your spouse, and you're prepared to finish strong

1 this year and to finish well for 2008.

2 But we don't want to be a controlling church, we
3 don't, and so the happy face that comes up on this one is
4 there.

5 As a cheerful giver you are accountable to God. We
6 will do all we can to encourage you in your accountability of
7 praying to God about what you should give.

8 And with a cheerful heart, we will do it with a lack
9 of control so that you can be entrepreneurial, you can figure
10 out between you and God and then declare to God and to us
11 what you'll be doing.

12 Does that make sense? That's the culture, so we are
13 going to challenge you.

14 The Bible talks about tithing, but we want to be
15 practically supportive.

16 You're accountable. It's between you and God. What
17 good news that is. It's not between people.

18 It's about between you and God and that we are not
19 trying to control.

20 Next slide, please.

21 This has to do with, how do you view worship? There
22 was a family that left worship and as they were sitting
23 around their lunch time eating the father complained about
24 the sermon.

25 And the mother complained about the music, and they

1 This next one has to do with belief and action and
2 this idea of being a cheerful giver.

3 Transformation happens in a couple different ways.
4 How are you transformed?

5 And there is one school of thought that says if I
6 get enough information, if I change my belief structure, then
7 I'll change my action.

8 And I think that's well-documented, that many people
9 are like that. I need to believe first and then I will act.

10 But Jesus talks about where your treasure is, also
11 your heart will be.

12 Where your treasure is, there your heart will be,
13 and that has been explained to me in some of my reading is
14 that you can also act your way into belief.

15 If you start spending and investing your resources
16 into the church, the church will become important.

17 Some of you need to be understood about the budgets,
18 you need to understand that this church has good value, that
19 we are doing good things from God.

20 So I want to declare to you, as we are going through
21 this cycle of stewardship, that on January 27th we are going
22 to have an annual meeting where we will talk about how God's
23 resources are flowing through this congregation.

24 And I commit to you it will be in such detail that
25 you will feel comfortable to understand what is going on at

1 this church, especially about how we tithe as a church back
2 in what God has given us.

3 We will be a place that reflects God's love out into
4 the world.

5 So I encourage you to hang with us for the next six
6 to eight weeks, because then February 1st, roughly that time
7 period, Mike comes back and we kick off the year and it's
8 going to be awesome.

9 Some of you said I need to continue to understand
10 before I take any action.

11 I just encourage you to take that as a challenge for
12 your faith life also.

13 Which is, what can we do to encourage you to step
14 forward in faith?

15 What can we do to help you be a better giver?

16 For those of you who discovered the gift of giving,
17 it's a freeing experience.

18 We hope to share next week some people that are
19 freed up, for those of you who don't yet believe that you're
20 not alone and you need to hunker in, and you never know what
21 the future is going to be, this is an opportunity to be able
22 to look at your life and say, God, I need your help. I'm
23 struggling to know if I can even trust my money with you.

24 But we are trying to trust our souls with God, and
25 how can that be that we are trying to do that, and yet we

1 can't trust our money?

2 It's because we need help, and that's what this
3 church is about, is to be able to bring forth the good news
4 that Jesus Christ is real, that our God is real, you are not
5 alone, and in sharing God's resources back into the world,
6 you can do it either way.

7 And I encourage for those that are stuck and saying
8 I don't see how it makes sense to tithe, I don't see how it
9 makes sense to take a step forward, is that leap of faith,
10 which is to try it.

11 Try to understand how God can be that concerned
12 about your life, that things will make sense to you, that
13 your financial resources will balance.

14 Next week we have testimonies on that and then in
15 two weeks we'll be gathering together again to say here's
16 what we understand together.

17 Pray for me as we try to do this in a way that is
18 full of freedom and entrepreneurial zeal for your life.

19 And I want to pray for you now, and then I'm going
20 to ask Mark to lead a response.

21 I'm going to pray for you, which is that this week
22 you can spend time together as a family.

23 What a teaching moment it can be for your family to
24 teach your young ones that everything is from God and this is
25 how we show a reflection of that understanding, is by giving

1 back.

2 Take the time with your children. We miss that
3 opportunity often.

4 We went on the Simply Giving program where money is
5 automatically deducted, it's a great program, but for many
6 years our kids never saw us put anything into the offering
7 plate.

8 So when I was talking about giving, my youngest son
9 said we don't give.

10 I missed an opportunity. I don't want you to miss
11 that opportunity, and in this whole spirit is that your
12 accountability is with God, you are not alone, we are here to
13 help. And my last prayer right now is, let's pray.

14 God, I hope these words have sparked the spirit. We
15 know that everything is yours. We are so thankful for the
16 gifts that we have received of our talents, of our time, our
17 financial resources.

18 So often we think it's all up to us, but you are
19 with us.

20 Help us this week to be able to talk clearly, to
21 talk about our 2007 income with our spouse and be able to
22 reflect that love back to this congregation and into the
23 world, and help us prepare for 2008, not in a way that
24 constricts us, but in a way that shows our confidence in you.
25 In Jesus' name. Amen.

1 PASTOR MARK FRY: Thanks, Lowell. That's great food
2 for thought.

3 A couple of things that seem to come through as I
4 was listening to Lowell this morning.

5 I don't know if you were following along in the
6 scriptures, but right after the Romans 11 text there is a
7 word about transformation.

8 In Romans 12:2 it says, "Do not be conformed to this
9 world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so
10 that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good
11 and acceptable and perfect."

12 So that transaction/transformation picture was
13 really a neat way of thinking about it, and I'm putting a
14 couple of things together.

15 We sang "The Heart of Worship" song. About a year
16 ago I had the privilege of meeting Matt Redmann.

17 Matt wrote that song. He's from England. He's a
18 worship leader in London, and actually the last song we are
19 going to be singing is written by his partner, Tim Hughes,
20 he's the other worship leader.

21 But Matt tells the story of when he wrote the song,
22 "Heart of Worship" his pastor, Mike Pilavachi, he's the
23 pastor of the largest church in England, it's called Soul
24 Survivor.

25 And one day Mike just got up on a Sunday morning and

1 he said, "I've had it. No more music."

2 And he had Matt and Tim as worship leaders.

3 "We need no more music. I'm just sick of this. We
4 are not going to have music. We're just going to listen."

5 And for weeks they worshipped without music and
6 people left in droves.

7 These are the finest musicians. One of their
8 worship leaders now is Eric Clapton. This is a big time
9 church.

10 And Matt was away for some time and those words to
11 that song came to him.

12 "When the music fades, and all is stripped away, I
13 simply come. Lord, we're sorry for what we've made it. It's
14 all about you, Jesus."

15 And I don't know about you, but there are different
16 ways that I've made my relationship with God a transaction
17 instead of a transformation.

18 Well, God, I'll trust you with this -- if. It's
19 kind of a transaction, isn't it?

20 But what I was sensing is that it's not about
21 transaction; it's about transformation.

22 And for me that begins with confession. I'm sorry
23 for the things we've made it. It's all about you, Jesus.

24 So I don't know if that speaks to you, but it's
25 interesting, when all is stripped away, all we have is Jesus.

1 That's all we need.

2 And I know I need some things stripped away, and I
3 need to be accountable to do some of that myself.

4 I don't know if that speaks to you, but I would like
5 to pray as well, just that you might, as Lowell said, have
6 some time this week to press in on that with yourself, with
7 your Lord, and with your family, maybe your spouse.

8 My family was a little like Lowell's. My kids
9 didn't really understand.

10 At the end of the year I would always talk about
11 tithing and how much we gave the church and they would see
12 that amount and they would go, "That's a lot of money. I
13 never saw you do that."

14 And we missed opportunities in that as well to teach
15 our kids, and now my son teaches me about tithing. It's
16 beautiful.

17 So let's pray for a minute about that
18 transformation.

19 Lord, when all is stripped away, we simply come.
20 Thank you, Jesus.

21 We're sorry for what we've made worship.

22 We're sorry for what we've made faith, the different
23 ways we've thought of you not as a loving father, but as a
24 tight-fisted father.

25 But, Lord, your word teaches that if we ask for

1 bread, you will not give a snake or a scorpion. You will
2 bless.

3 And so, Lord, I pray that we might have some time
4 this week to seek transformation, not transaction.

5 Thank you, Lord, that your word is alive and
6 convicting us and releasing us at the same time.

7 I thank you, Lord, for the gift of stewardship. I
8 thank you that everything is yours; we just get to touch it
9 for a while.

10 And so, Lord, make us faithful and work that
11 transformation in our hearts.

12 Thank you, Jesus. You're beautiful. You're
13 beautiful, Lord, so beautiful. We thank you, Jesus. Amen.

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