

“In the Zone--Skittles”

[VIDEO OPENER] Parents, have you ever had something like this happen? You're at a ball game, or a store, or a movie and one of your kids comes up to you and says, "Can I have some money for some candy?" You're feeling generous and you give them a little money, they go buy some candy and they come back a few minutes later with a bag of Skittles. I've had this happen. Zoe's got her bag of Skittles and I'm watching her eat them. And I say, "Zoe, can I have some Skittles?" She says, "No." I say, "Zoe, just give me a couple." "No, they're mine."

Now, my little daughter didn't understand several things. Number one, she didn't understand the fact that I was the one who bought the Skittles for her. Number two, she didn't realize my strength. I'm strong enough to forcibly take those Skittles from her and eat every one of them. If I wanted to, I could have done that. Number three, she didn't understand the fact that I could have gone and bought her 500 bags of skittles. So many Skittles; I could have rained so many Skittles on her that she couldn't have eaten them all in a year. I could have done that.

You see, we all have Skittles. Some of us here have a pretty nice size pile of Skittles in our life. Others have a medium-size pile of Skittles. And some have these little bags of Skittles. Our loving God comes to us, and our loving Father goes, "Would you bring me some Skittles? Just a few Skittles." What do you think our reaction is? "No! They're mine!" God says, "Just bring me some Skittles." "Uh-uh. I bought those Skittles. I own those Skittles."

Like little kids, we don't understand several things. Number one, God is the one who gave them to us. They're his Skittles. He bought them. If God wanted to—because after all, God is omnipotent, all powerful—he could take all the Skittles from you and me like that! Also, we don't understand the fact that if God wanted to, he could rain so many Skittles on our lives, we just wouldn't know what to do with them. We couldn't eat them all.

Last week we kicked off a series called "In the Zone." We talked about how we're wired to live in the zone. We are made to live in the blessed place. We're made to live in the sweet spot of God's success. Just to refresh let me draw this out like I did last week. Let's say this is the zone. This is where God wants us to live. We're made to live this way. How do you live in the zone? You have to realize that God is the Blessor. Everything we have is God's. All of our Skittles, no matter if we have a Bill Gates pile of Skittles, they're God's. I don't care if we have a couple of packs of Skittles, they're God's. God's the Blessor. He's given everything to us—our personality, our drive, our creativity, our innovation, our smile, our laugh, our athletic abilities. He has given it all to us. And because we have it **from** God, the stuff we have **is** God's. God is the Blessor. We are blessed.

Because we're blessed—and here is the fun part—we can turn around and be a blessing. Wow! That's what it means to live in the zone. "How do you be a blessing? How do you do that? How do you get in on the receiving end of the tangible and intangible favor of God?" Two things. Number one, we receive the supernatural favor of God. And then we reflect those blessings. We realize that we are just—and this is a big "just"—managers. We don't own anything. We manage stuff.

Some of the first words God ever said to human beings were all about management. In Genesis 1:28, God told Adam and Eve to manage his garden. And that should put to rest the age old debate concerning what is the oldest profession. It's landscaping! Because God told Adam and Eve, "Take care of the garden. Manage it. It's not yours. I made it," God said, "Just take of it. Manage it."

Some people, though, in fact a large block of us, don't live in the zone. A lot of people live in The Land of "Ing." Do you live in The Land of "Ing"? Are you zoned out instead of being zoned in? If you live in The Land of "Ing," you're into own-ing, earn-ing, hoard-ing, cloth-ing, hous-ing, bling-bling, ca-ching, ca-ching! You think you're stuff is your stuff. But your stuff isn't your stuff! Your stuff is God's stuff. You might think it's your stuff, but it's God's.

God wants to move those who live in The Land of "Ing" into the zone. God wants to put his bless on your ing. He wants to put his super on your natural.

Here's the question. Here's the question that hangs in the balance. How do we move from The Land of "Ing" into the blessed place? How do we move from The Land of "Ing" into the zone, into the blessed place, into the place where we can receive the supernatural favor of God, tangibly and intangibly. How do we do it? It starts with what we talked about last week. We understand that we're managers of our blessings, not owners, and when the real owner asks us to do something with those blessing, we do it. We do it.

That goes back to Skittles. What are you doing with the Skittles? What am I doing with the Skittles? God talks a lot about Skittles throughout the Bible.

In preparing of this message I discovered that one out of every six verses in the New Testament happens to be about stuff, happens to be about money, about Skittles. I discovered that Jesus talked more about money and the handling of it than he talked about heaven, hell, prayer, or faith. Is that crazy or what? 30% of Christ's parables were about Skittles, money, possessions, stuff.

There's no subject that we're afraid to talk about here. And I know that when I open the Bible and I communicate to you what God says about marriage, what God says about forgiveness, or dealing with fear or handling stress or being blessed; I know, because I'm opening up God's word, that it's going to help your life and mine. I know that.

The same thing is true in talking about what the Bible says about money and possessions. Money is so huge. It's an extension of who we are, isn't it? Because it's the result of our work, our skills and abilities put into action. We spend so much time trying to get money and invest money and protect money and save our money and spend our money and hoard our money. It's a big part of our lives because it relates to every part of our lives. That's why Jesus talked a lot about it. He cares about our lives and because money can mess them up, he wants us to have a right understanding of money.

We need to remember that Jesus never said that money is evil. The Bible puts it this way, **[SLIDE...]** **"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:10, NIV).** the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. So we've got to talk about this stuff, because this is going to help all of us. Then next week we'll move on to the final part of this series about giving thanks, celebrating the good stuff.

Let's talk about putting first things first. This is important to living in the zone. Some examples: We're told in the story of creation that God created the heavens and the earth. He separated light from darkness. He made a week. What did God say about the week? "One day. Give to me one day. Honor me." What was God talking about? He's talking about first things first. God says throughout his word, "Give that first day to me. A day to rest. A day to worship. A day reflect." For us that first day of the week is Sunday, resurrection day. We give our first day of the week to God. First things first.

Remember the children of Israel? They escaped from Egyptian slavery and they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They were right on the edge of moving into the zone, into The Promised Land. There were 10 cities that they had to conquer. God told Joshua, he said, "Hey Joshua, this first city that you're going to conquer is named Jericho." God said, "When you take Jericho, Joshua, make sure that all of the stuff in this first city—gold, silver, bling-bling—make sure all of it (He didn't say bling-bling), make sure all of it goes to my house." First things first. Was it because God needed the money? No, he was teaching his people obedience. First things first.

Then let's look at Exodus 13:2. God said, **[SLIDE...]** **"Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal" (Exodus 13:2).** What does it mean to consecrate? It means to set apart something for holy usage. We know back in Biblical times, back in the Old Testament, the first born child, that was major! They were to be set apart for a holy life of service. First things first. Also, when an animal was born, the first born animal was a big deal. This first born carried a lot of weight, a lot of octane. This first born animal was designated as a sacrifice. First things first.

So you've got the first born and then you've got the first fruits. Back in Biblical times, people were farmers. Let's check out this text, Exodus 23:19, God's speaking again, **[SLIDE...]** **"The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God." (Exodus 23:19).** First things first. It's simply about recognizing God's ownership and doing what he asks with what we have.

Now, there's something in here I missed for a very long time. It's easy to miss, but it's important. It says that we are to **bring** this offering, not **give** it. Why is that important. Bringing implies that I don't own it. Giving implies I own it and then I'm going to let go of it. Bringing it means that I realize I'm not the owner, I'm merely the manager. We should bring our firstfruits. We do this out of obedience, out of the recognition of the fact that God is the owner and I am the manger. We do it out of obedience but there is a reward.

Proverbs 3:9-10 says, [SLIDE...] **"Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" (Prov 3:9-10, NIV).** In other words, honor God, He's going to honor you. First things first. The reward isn't our motivator, but the promise is there. Oh, there's a warning too.

Look at Malachi Chapter 3:8-9. God is speaking here: [SLIDE...] **"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings."** What does the word "tithes" mean? It means 10 percent. First things first. Verse 9, God said it, [SLIDE...] **"You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me."**

You see, first things first has the power. So when Janet and I bring the first fruits of our Skittles, our income, to Saint Paul's, what's going on? God is supernaturally blessing the other 90%. The other 90% is redeemed.

So here is my question for you. Do you want to live with 90% of your income supernaturally blessed, or 100% of your income cursed? It's your option. Blessing or cursing. For me and my house, that's a no-brainer. I mean, that is a no-brainer.

I would tell you this. I would say if you're living in The Land of "Ing," and you are withholding what is God's—if you are not bringing the tithe into the storehouse—I would say you can't enjoy your stuff like I can. I would tell you I enjoy my stuff more than you. And I don't care if you are worth \$20 billion. I know I do. Because I learned a long time ago, I don't have stuff unless I can give it away. I don't have anything unless I can give it away.

And God doesn't need your money. He doesn't need it. But he knows that money is a test. God knows that when people like you and me bring the firstfruits of everything we make to the local house of worship, things happen. Lives are reached, children are taught, youth are equipped, adults are given purpose. And we move into the zone. We can help others and build the most important thing out there, the local church.

Look at Verse 10, [SLIDE...] **"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse."** Again, notice it says bring. And it says bring to the Storehouse—in the Old Testament the storehouse was the temple. It was the tabernacle. In the New Testament it's that which is most near and dear to the heart of God—the local church. **"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse."**

That means that we don't break the tithe up. We say, "Okay, I'll give 4% to this ministry overseas. I'll give, like, 1% to this College, and then 5% to my local church." You're robbing God. You're not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse. I am all for supporting ministries overseas. I'm all for giving to Colleges and Universities, Habitat for Humanity, Christian Radio. Janet and I give to all of those. But that is over and above our tithe. The local church is the hope of the world; the wisdom of God will be made known through the local church. I believe that only one power exists on this planet that can truly transform the human heart and ultimately change the world. "It's the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world one life at a time." (Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*). This radical message of transforming love has been given to the Church! The local church is the hope of the world. That's the heartbeat of God, the bride of Christ.

God doesn't need your money, doesn't need it. But when we're obedient with it, not only do we live in the zone, but we help others find their way to the zone.

God goes on to say in Malachi 3:10, [SLIDE...] **"Test me in this and see if I will now throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (Malachi 3:10).** This is God talking. And this is the only place in Scripture where God says, "Test me. Test me in this. And see if I don't throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out unimaginable blessings in your life." I want to sign up for some of that. I'm telling you man, my life is a testimony to this. I'm blessed

financially, yeah. But I am blessed relationally, occupationally, and emotionally much greater than I'm blessed financially. I'm a living testimony to this fact. And I've never met a person who said, "You know what, Aaron? I bring the tithe, the first 10% to the local church and my life's boring, man. I'm not blessed. I'm just not making it. And I'm living the same old, same old life." I've never met that person. Wow, what can happen in our lives if we get hold of this!

Go back to God for a second. (This is rich here.) You know when God gave Jesus Christ to us for our sins, do you think people in heaven were going like, "Man, God, that's...whew! You've given.... That's a little bit much! I mean, Jesus? For those people that fumble the ball and sin? God, that's, that is stepping up!" God gave his best. First things first. Jesus was like God's tithe. Christ redeemed us. He blessed us before we turned and followed him.

Matthew 6:21. Where's your treasure? Jesus said, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" You look at my treasure, you look at your treasure. I could follow and you can follow the heart. That's the treasure test, the treasure test.

It's very easy to tell if Jesus is number one in someone's life. It's simple. You know how? Just look at their checkbook. Look at my checkbook. You can tell like that if Jesus is Lord, if He's number one. And I discovered something a long time ago. You cannot out-give God. God wants to bless your life and mine.

And sometimes when I teach about money, now and then people get a little bit upset. But the reason you're upset is because I told you where your heart is. Maybe your heart is into owning and earning and clothing and housing and hoarding, and bling-bling and ca-ching, ca-ching and you're out here in The Land of "Ing." God wants to put his tithe on your ing. He wants to bring you from here [out of the zone] to there [in the zone]. It's an adventure. It's a blast.

Listen to this letter sent to me earlier this year...

"Aaron, I would like to thank you, your staff, and the members of St. Paul's who have been praying for [me and the kids]. On Easter Sunday I put in a specific request for prayers for us, we have been having serious financial difficulties. [My husband and I] are still going through a divorce [and I've been left] completely responsible for all debts and expenses...I am down to working one full time job because [the kids] need me at home. I'm sure you can image the stress finances have put on me, especially because I simply can't go back to working 4 jobs 70-90 hours a week. So...I put in this prayer request on Sunday, and on Tuesday, I sold [the] truck...the very first person who called me about it bought it, and at the price I needed! Also, on Friday, I received my federal income tax return (which I did not expect to because [my husband] had already claimed both kids and got a big return). It was \$2500!! So on Saturday...I could pay up the kids' medical bills (some of which were about to go to collections), and catch up on many of our other bills. Plus, I still had money left to buy groceries!!

"Through all of this, I have faithfully paid my tithe (even when I knew I wasn't going to have enough left over for my other expenses) and God has ALWAYS provided for us. If you figure my income and expenses, there is NO WAY we should be able to make it financially. However, each time I really need money for something, I get a check in the mail for something I didn't expect, don't owe as much for something as I thought I did, etc. About a month ago, I was holding my check for my tithe, thinking I would send it later, when I had more money. I knew that by the end of the week, the check wouldn't clear the bank. On faith, I mailed my tithe Thursday morning. After the mail came on Thursday afternoon, I got an unexpected check in the mail for more than the amount I had just mailed...not a coincidence, I think!

"Basically, this e-mail is a thank you, and I wanted you and everyone to know what your prayers have done for us...specifically." She goes on to ask for prayer for her and the kids and says, "We are struggling through it, but things continue to get better and better!!! Feel free to share this letter with your staff and anyone else. I am so very thankful and want everyone to know what God has done for us, and this is only one small example!!"

Isn't that awesome? She's in the zone. So, how about you? As you're sitting in the stands of life, eating your Skittles, stuffing your face with all these Skittles and stuff, pretending to be an owner when our

loving Father says, "I want to bless you, get in the zone, this is where the blessings are. Follow my lead and the floodgates will open up into your life." What's your response?

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Take on the challenge of becoming a tither. If you're not already, set that as your goal and give in proportion to your income until you reach that goal. What are you going to do with those Skittles? Let's make the decision to live in the zone. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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