

**How to Build Something Great**  
***Ask the Hard Questions***  
**September 17, 2017**

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO**

**Worship Songs – Greater / Jesus /**

**Prayer: Naomi**

**BTS Video**

**Feature Song – You Owe Me an IOU /**

**Offering**

**Video – “It’s Not about the Nail”**

Good morning everyone!

Wow, what a great setup for today’s message: “is it or is it not about the nail?”

Show of hands, please:

- How many think it’s *not* about the nail?

- How many think it is about the nail?

Point is ... if you're going to build something great – whether you're building a relationship, a family, a business, a team, a church – if you're going to move beyond mediocrity towards greatness, you have to constantly evaluate what you're doing. *You have to ask the hard questions.*

Or, as Jesus once put it: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

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We'll get into that in just a bit, but if you're here today for the first time or the first time in a long time, you should know that this is the fifth of six messages in a series we're calling “How to Build Something Great.”

And each of the messages in the series is based one of our six values as a church; six biblically-based principles that define what is of highest importance to us *in the process* of carrying out the mission for which God put us here 23 years ago ... which is:

- To reach seekers
- To build a family of believers
- To impact our community in such a positive way that the reputation of Jesus and the movement He started – the Church – increases.

That's our *mission*.

But our *values* define *how* we want to go about accomplishing our mission.

And by adhering to them over the years, we've created a unique culture as a church. Our values are the biggest reason why North Heartland *feels* different from other churches; especially when you get involved beyond just coming to services on Sunday.

And I'm not going to go back through the first four this morning but, if you've missed any of those messages, you really should go to the media tab on our app or website and watch, listen to or read it ... *especially if this is your church or you're thinking about making it your church.*

I mean, why would you even consider being part of something if you didn't know what mattered most in how it goes about its business?

And even if this *isn't* your church and you're not thinking about *making* it your church, reality is that in whatever it is you're building, you *are* creating a culture. You may have never taken the time to define them but you *have a set of values* to which you're adhering.

The question is ... are those unwritten and undefined values creating the culture you want?

Are your values – and therefore your culture – actually helping you to accomplish your mission ... whether it's:

- A loving and stable marriage
- A happy and productive family
- Kids who love Jesus, the church and the world (that needs Jesus and the church)

- A business that's profitable and not only doesn't kill you and your employees in the process but actually adds value to you and to them *as people*.
- A team where the players not only win but grow in character while doing it.
- A ministry where the staff and volunteers actually *treat one another like Jesus would* as they promote Jesus.

Whatever it is you're building, there is a culture and it's based on your values. The question is: *are your values and your culture working for or against your mission?*

Tough question ... actually several tough questions in that introduction ... which brings back to today's topic and principle which is ... "*ask the hard questions.*"

And, by the way, if your answer to my values and culture question is “no ... it’s not good and it’s not helping,” then I recommend you consider the values I’m talking about in this series because they’re transferable. If you adopt, communicate and live by the principles and values we’re talking about in this series, you will transform for the better whatever it is you’re building (and yourself) in the process.

So, with all that said, let’s get into it. And, as I’ve done in each message in this series, let me start out by telling you where this particular value came from.

## **Why This Value**

At about six years “in” (around the year 2000), as I’ve told you in previous messages,

we began to sense a lot of discontent in our congregation and we were advised that part of the solution was to get very clear on our mission and our values.

But what I *haven't* told you is that a big part of that process – actually, the prelude to that process – was a series of congregational surveys and focus groups.

Back then we had a guy in our congregation who did that kind of thing as part of his job. (He's still with us, by the way).

And he offered to help us by designing a survey and personally leading the focus groups ... *without any of our pastors in attendance*. That way people would feel free to say what they were really thinking.



With no small amount of fear and trembling – and because we were desperate – we agreed and turned him loose.

A couple of weeks later, as he handed me the report of his findings, he said, “I have good news and bad news.

- The bad news you already know: there’s a lot of discontent and confusion.
- The good news is that *people really care about this church* because you guys have done a lot of good things and had a big impact on their lives.”

A few days later, our pastors and ministry directors met at my house and went through his report point by point. And to say we

were not happy with what we read is an understatement.

- “What?! How could anyone think *that?!*”
- “What?! We’ve communicated about these things over and over! Isn’t anyone listening???”
- “What’s wrong with these people????”
- “Don’t they know how hard we’re working on this stuff?!”

It was brutal. Not that people were brutal in what they *said* (although a few were).

But hearing what people truly thought was hard to take because *we were* working incredibly hard and, clearly, all of our efforts were not producing the result we were hoping for.

Anyway ... after we had processed all of the feedback, we were thoroughly demoralized. And I thought, “Well, this is it. This is the day when everybody quits.”

So I went around the circle and asked each person, “Are you still in? Are you still in?”

And to a person they said, “Yes, I’m in. This is what God has called me to do.”

And I said, “OK, at least we know where we are and what we need to work on.”

And work we did ... including working to define these values that I’m talking about in this series; one of which came *directly from that day* – from the brutal experience of listening to the honest feedback of people

who, in truth, really *did* care about us and this church.

**We call it the value of effectiveness – a commitment to continually seek the most productive strategies, structures and leadership ...**

... which always begins with evaluating *how well we are actually accomplishing our purpose*; asking the hard questions that would reveal that ...

**... and then making changes as God guides us to.**

As painful as it was to hear so much negative feedback that day, there was no denying that it was extremely valuable to us in setting a course for the future. In fact, had we not listened to what our people were telling us and taken it seriously, I'm not sure

we would be here today.

## **Able to Assess**

Of course, the idea of asking hard questions and evaluating – “is what we’re doing actually getting us to where we want to go?” – is just as essential to *you* accomplishing *your* mission in whatever you’re building as it is to North Heartland accomplishing *its* mission ... which is why this is a transferable value. You, too, can end up working really hard and still not get the result you want.

There’s a great story in the Old Testament book of Haggai that illustrates that point. Haggai by the way is one of the minor prophets tucked in near the very end of the Old Testament.

Way back in 587 B.C., the nation of Israel was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, but not before he captured the best and brightest of its young people and carted them off to become his servants.

Fast forward about 70 years and most of those young people had died, but their children and grandchildren had multiplied.

And when Darius, King of Persia (whose kingdom had overthrown the Babylonians) ordered those young people to be released from their exile, many of them returned to the Jewish homeland – specifically to the city of Jerusalem – *all of which was in ruins*, including the glorious Temple that King David's son, Solomon, had built hundreds of years before.

And so they set about rebuilding the city, beginning with their own homes AND also with the intention that “one of these days we’ll get around to rebuilding the Temple, too.”

But they never did.

**And so, the Bible says ...**

*The word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (the Temple) remains a ruin?”*

*Haggai 1:4 (NIV)*

And I can imagine people responding, “Well, Lord, I don’t know. That’s a really hard question to answer. I mean ...

- “We planned to get to around to helping financially but there were major cost overruns in building our own house.”
- “We hoped to get to around to helping with the work, but the weather was bad, then kids were in school then we went on vacation.”
- “We meant to get around to it but then this terrible drought hit and our income dried up along with it.”

**To which Haggai responded:**

*Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have*



*enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”*

**And then Haggai repeats the first line again for emphasis.**

*This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.” Haggai 1:5-7 (NIV)*

In other words, “Evaluate. Ask yourself the hard questions.”

For example:

- Why is this happening to us?
- Have I been playing a game with God? Saying one thing but intending to do another?

- Is what we're doing actually effective in getting the result we desire?

In their particular case, it clearly was not.

And through Haggai, God went on to tell them that because they had ignored His house and left it in ruins while spending so much time and money on their own, He was frustrating their efforts! He said, in essence, "I'm causing the drought to get your attention."

**Of course, God, being gracious, then gives them the corrective action to take:**

*"Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.                      Haggai 1:8*

(NIV)

And that's what they did.

They gave careful thought to their ways – “we've spent all of our money on our own houses and our own comfort and, therefore, God is not blessing us. Hmmm ... maybe it's time to change our strategy. Let's invest in God's mission and not just our own.”

Of course, there are many other examples like this in the Scripture where people gave thought to their ways and then made a change. It's kind of a big deal. We call it “repentance” – changing your mind and then changing your actions.

Now, a lot of people never think about this but, of all God's creatures, *only humans are able to do that*; to “give careful thought” to

their ways; to analyze the situation and then decide “You know, I really don’t like how this is going” and then make a decision to change things. We’re the only creatures on the planet who can do that. Animals can’t.

I’ve owned several dogs through the years and while they’ve all appeared to be very smart, in reality, they’re *instinct-driven* creatures, not *thought-driven* creatures. Ring a bell and they don’t ask “I wonder who’s there?” They salivate.

Well, at least Pavlov’s dog did.

Dogs don’t sit around contemplating their life and what they might do to make it better:

- “Maybe I should go to doggie-training

school.”

- “Maybe I should eat less and run around in the backyard a little more.”
- “Maybe I should blow this Popsicle stand and find a new owner.”

Dogs don't do that. They don't have that ability. Only humans have that ability. That's part of what it means to be created in God's likeness. It's a gift from God.

*But ... and this is a big but ... we have to decide to use that gift!*

### **That's why the Bible says that ...**

*The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.*

*Proverbs 14:8 (NIV)*

Would you mind reading that out loud with me? Here we go. <read>

The prudent person understands that they have received this great gift from God and so they put it to use. They ask themselves the hard questions:

- Why is my life the way it is right now?
- Do I even *like* the life I'm living right now?
- What dumb things am I doing that are holding me back?
- Could I be blaming others and my circumstances instead of taking responsibility?
- How might I go about improving my life?
  - Maybe I should go to school and

get my degree.

- Maybe I should I start working out.
- Maybe I should I look for another job.
- Maybe I should I stop hanging out with these bad influences.

A prudent person gives thought to their ways. They evaluate whether or not their current approach is getting them to where they want to go.

Again, as Jesus put it, *you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*

## **Why We Deny**

On the other hand, a foolish person not only *doesn't* think deeply about their ways, they

actually prefer not to see and not to hear the truth.

Their “folly” – the dumb behavior that traps them – is “deception” which means that whenever someone – maybe even God – tries to tell them the truth, they cover their eyes and ears. They *prefer* staying in the dark. They’d rather not think about it. They don’t want to know the truth.

And I know that some of you are thinking, “Oh come on Rick. Why would someone not want to know the truth if it could make their life better? Why would someone prefer self-deception?”

Well, I’ll tell you what *my* reasons are in those times when *I’m* resistant to the truth. There are three of them.



By the way, all of three were, at some point, how I reacted to the feedback I heard on that brutal day so many years ago ... and how I *still* react at times when I'm confronted with things I don't want to hear that might actually be true about me.

**Reaction #1. Pride – “I’m smarter than you are.”**

For instance, pride says something like “you might have to *listen* to my messages, but I’ve been preaching for years – long before you got here – and I know what I’m doing. So, if you’re not ‘getting’ what I’m saying, I’m pretty sure it’s you and not me. Thank you for sharing ... but ...”

That’s pride.

**Reaction #2. Fear – “Maybe I *can’t* do anything different from what I’ve been doing. And maybe doing something different will be even worse.”**

For instance fear says “look, I get that sometimes my messages are ‘out there’ and a little hard to follow. But, I’ve been doing it like this for years and maybe this is all I *can* do.”

“Plus, if I try to change things that might be an even bigger flop. So, I don’t know if it’s even worth hearing whatever you have to say.”

That’s fear.

**Reaction #3. Comfort – “I know what I’m doing isn’t really working but at least I’m used to it.”**

That was the point of the song that Richard sang.

The only thing constant about the couple's relationship was the constant reminder *he'd* never change ... that *she'd* never change ... and, therefore, that *they'd* never change.<sup>i</sup> They were never going to stop playing the game of "you owe me" – keeping score of who had wronged who – simply because they had gotten used to it. They were "comfortable with their dysfunctional."

That was actually the point of the video, too. It really *was* about the nail but the gal didn't want to hear that. She'd grown comfortable with her dysfunctional.

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Pride, fear and comfort: all three are big reasons – excuses, really – why many of us decide we’re *not* going to “give careful thought” to the effectiveness of our ways in whatever it is we’re building ... and therefore, why we’re also not going to make the changes that would allow us to be more effective.

**Of course, as one wise sage has put it: “you can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can’t make both.”**

## **Getting Practical**

So, assuming you want to be “wise and making progress” instead of “foolish and making excuses,” let’s talk about how to implement the value of effectiveness in whatever it is you’re building.

I've said that at North Heartland we've made a commitment to continually seek the most productive strategies, structures and leadership which always begins with evaluating *how well we are actually accomplishing our purpose*; asking the hard questions that would reveal that ... and then we try to make changes as God guides us.

As we've done that over the years, we've learned a few things which might be helpful to you.

**1. Face the most brutal facts of current reality (without losing hope).**

That idea actually comes from Jim Collin's book *Good to Great*. He calls it "The Stockdale Paradox" named after admiral Jim Stockdale, who was a military officer held

captive for eight years during the Vietnam War.

Stockdale was tortured more than 20 times by his captors, and never had much reason to believe he would survive the prison camp and someday get to see his wife again. And yet, as he told Collins, he never lost faith during his ordeal:

“I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Then comes the paradox, which Collins describes like this:

While Stockdale had remarkable faith

in the unknowable, he noted that it was always the most optimistic of his prisonmates who failed to make it out of there alive.

“They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

Collins concludes:

What the optimists failed to do was confront the reality of their situation. They preferred the ostrich approach,

sticking their heads in the sand and hoping for the difficulties to go away. That self-delusion might have made it easier on them in the short-term, but when they were eventually forced to face reality, it had become too much and they couldn't handle it.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, that sounds very dramatic and it was in Stockdale's case. But sometimes the brutal facts aren't dramatic. They're just facts that you'd rather not know.

And I could give you many examples of times that's happened to us but let me just tell you about a set of brutal facts we're currently beginning to face as a leadership team here at NHCC.

1. In the area surrounding this facility,



30% of the adult population is between the ages of 18-35. Millennials make up almost a third of the Northland.

2. And yet, on any given Sunday at North Heartland, Millennials make up only 19% of our congregation. (We know that from the little survey we do three times a year).
3. The senior pastor and several other pastors are all pushing 60 or have reached it.
4. And we will continue to grow older. (That fact is really brutal).

Honestly, I'd rather not know or think about these things.

But, if we don't pay attention to those facts ... if we don't think carefully about what we're doing, what's going to happen?

We're going to dwindle and maybe even die as a congregation. Not tomorrow but eventually.

So you know what we're doing? (And this is happening behind the scenes right now)

We're seeking the most productive strategies, structures and leadership that will help us reach that generation. And at some point, I'll tell you a lot more about that and how you can be involved.

Anyway, effectiveness requires confronting the brutal facts of current reality. You will know the truth and the truth will set you

free.

**2. Another thing we've learned – and this is extremely difficult – is don't take feedback personally. Instead, listen "between the lines."**

When you begin to get serious about evaluating your efforts in whatever it is you're building, you *will* ask for feedback. Formally or informally, you'll ask your spouse, your kids, your employees, your co-workers, your volunteers, your team members ... "how are we doing?"

And when you do that ...

- You're going to hear some things that are flat-out wrong.
- You're going to hear things that are mean.

- You're going to hear things that are painful.
- And, of course, somewhere in all of that, you're going to hear things that are true.

That's happened every time we've asked for feedback (and haven't asked – it's just been given).

And what you have to do in those times is to separate yourself from the situation – actually, to rise above it – and tell yourself “this is not about me as a *person*. This is about me as someone who is trying to build something. And there is valuable information here that will help me if I will sort out the junk and accurately interpret what the emotion is communicating to me.”

As Ladell likes to say, “Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”

And you don’t have to *like* breakfast. But it’s a good idea to eat it.

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Now, most of what I’ve said to this point has to do with asking the hard questions, evaluating, knowing the truth. But this next thing we’ve learned is about seeking the most productive strategy. And it’s going to sound weird but it brings a huge amount of clarity.

### **3. Imagine the “hit by a bus” scenario.**

(Why is it always a bus?)

Anyway, what I mean by this is to imagine

what would happen if you were suddenly removed from the scene and someone else with no previous emotional attachments or entanglements started running your life or business or team.

- What would *they* do about the feedback you've gotten?
- What would *they* do about the brutal facts of your current reality?

That doesn't mean *you* should do those things but it does help to clarify what the best things to do are. And then you use that to guide you.

7 or 8 years ago, we were faced by three very difficult challenges that all hit at the same time: two personnel issues and a financial/leadership issue. I was driving

down the road one day, whining to the Lord about how hard it was and out of the blue the “bus” question came to me.

I felt like God said, “So, Rick what would happen if someone came in tomorrow and took your place as the senior leader of NHCC?

And I immediately answered, “Oh, that’s easy. They would do this and this and this.”

And the Lord said, “So, why make them get another pastor to do what needs to be done? Why don’t you stop whining and go do these things yourself?”

So I did. And it wasn’t easy. But it was clear and it was right. And, most importantly, it lead to a much greater level of effectiveness

for everyone involved.

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Ok, one more thing we've learned through the years about effectiveness – and this one is really hard, too, because of the emotional attachments that sometimes develop.

**4. Be brave enough to kill (or pause) a good tradition when it stops producing.**

Through the years we've done many really cool things as a church that a lot of other churches never thought about or were bold enough to try. And some of those things we stopped doing because they stopped producing the results we wanted.

For example, we used to do this thing called



the Easter Eggstravaganza which brought in hundreds of people who were not going to church anywhere. And some of them started coming to NHCC and became followers of Jesus. Some are still here.

But because we are always evaluating, we began to notice that wasn't happening anymore. Instead we realized that most of the people who were coming already went to other churches! And we also noticed that a bunch of other churches had started to do their own version of the Eggstravaganza ... which was really cool ... which meant that we could stop doing it and put that energy and expense into other things.

It was a hard call because we were really good at it and everyone loved it. But we killed it because we value the most effective

strategies and it just wasn't anymore.

And there are other examples I could share – including a significant change to a longstanding tradition that's going to happen after the first of the year \*the movie series\*.

But we're almost out of time. Don't worry I'll tell you about that later. It's not going away, just moving.

## **Getting Personal**

Anyway, as we bring this to a close, I feel like we need to take one more look at that verse from Proverbs 14.

**Here it is again.**

*The wisdom of the prudent is to*

*give thought to their ways, but  
the folly of fools is deception.  
Proverbs 14:8 (NIV)*

So, let's take a minute or two to give thought to our ways. I'm going to ask some questions for all of us to ponder. And you can think about these in terms of whatever it is you're building or you could think about them just in terms of your own personal life. Ready?

- What brutal facts of your current reality are you choosing to ignore?
- What feedback are you shutting down because it's too painful to hear?
- Are you blaming others and your circumstances instead of taking responsibility?

- If someone else stepped in and took your place – as a mom or a dad or spouse or a boss or a team member – what would they do in your situation?
- Is there any pattern or habit or tradition that was once effective but is no longer? What would it take to kill it or pause it or change it?
- Are you too proud, fearful or comfortable to consider another way of doing things?
- Do you want to make excuses or do you want to make progress?

Let's pray.

Father, you are the source of all wisdom and

knowledge and truth. You said if we asked you would freely give it to us so we are asking right now.

But you also tell us that you are our strength which is a good thing because the brutal fact is that we are weak.

## **Feature Song – Man in the Mirror**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick**

1. Prayer person down front
2. Next Sunday – final message in the series ... when all is said and done *Never Forget This One Thing*
3. NHCC Golf Tourney Fri Oct 6<sup>th</sup> at Tiffany Greens ... noon for registration and 1 pm shot gun start, sign up at table

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> From the song, You Owe Me an IOU by Hot, Hot Heat.

<sup>ii</sup> Jim Collins, Good to Great, quoted at <https://ndoherty.com/stockdale-paradox/>