

At the Movies
Moneyball
February 17, 2013

PRELUDE – “Your Love Never Fails”
Worship Songs – “Praise Adonai” / “The Stand”
Drama – “The Movie Guys”
Feature – “Uprising”

Video Clip – 01 \$114,457,768 vs. \$39,722,689 (1.2 min)

B: Screen: “American League Elimination game”

E: Announcer: “They’re standing and anticipating another trip ...”

If you’re up on your baseball history, you know that the Yankees went on to win that game and the upstart Oakland As were eliminated from the 2001 MLB postseason.

Good morning everyone. As Ladell said, today we are continuing our “At the Movies” series using five fairly recent blockbusters to illustrate the journey of faith – what it looks like for a person to go from “no relationship with God,” distant from God, living life without God, to “an experience of a deep mutual friendship with God.” And, as I said last week, of all five movies in this series, this one – *Moneyball* – is my favorite. How many of you have seen it? Glad to see that. We’ve got some baseball fans here.

Now, you might be tempted to think that it’s my favorite because I am a huge baseball fan. And it’s true – I do love baseball. For some reason – and I’ll admit, this is totally weird – there is something about baseball that affects me emotionally. So I was a total sucker for this movie from the opening scene (which we just saw). But that’s not why it’s my favorite in this series. The reason this movie is my favorite is that it is *the greatest illustration I have ever seen of the most significant thing Jesus ever said.*

And that’s saying quite a lot because Jesus had a lot to say about a lot of things. But there was one thing He said which trumps everything else and puts everything else in context ... and we’re going to look at that this morning through the lens of *Moneyball*.

Some of you know that this movie is based on a book by the same name which was written in 2003 by Michael Lewis. However, as is typical, whenever Hollywood gets involved, they tend to spice it up a bit by taking a little bit of literary license ... which means that not everything portrayed in this movie is 100% historically accurate, nor is it intended to be.¹ (We’ll see the same thing in two weeks when we look at the movie *The King’s Speech*).

But that’s OK because historical accuracy isn’t what we’re interested in this morning. What we’re interested in is how the story *as it’s told in the movie* illustrates the most significant thing Jesus ever said.

Movie Introduction

So, let's get into it.

And let's begin with a scene that illustrates the dilemma facing Billy Beane, the GM of the Athletics (who is played by Brad Pitt). Not only has his team just lost the elimination game to the Yankees, to add insult to injury, Beane is also losing his three best players to them (and to the Red Sox, as well) through free-agency.

Here is Billy explaining to the owner why the team won't be getting any better in the future.

Video Clip – 02 A SMALL MARKET TEAM (1.3 min)

B: Billy: "We're not going to do better next year."

E: Owner: "... not spending money I don't have"

When you're a small market team and you're a small market General Manager, you just don't have the money to compete in free-agency with the big boys. So, if they're going to win, Billy has to figure out how to do it some other way. They can't continue to do business as usual.

In this next scene, Billy's team of scouts has been discussing how they are going to replace these three star players they have lost. And Billy is frustrated because they're missing the point.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 03 AN UNFAIR GAME (1.7 min)

B: Billy: "You guys are just talking ..."

E: Scout: "... a shortstop from Seattle."

Now, even though Billy knows they all need to start thinking differently, he's not exactly sure what that means ... until one day, he meets someone *who is already thinking differently* about baseball ... and who can also explain *how* to think differently.

Billy is in Cleveland working out a trade with the Indians and, while he's there, he meets Peter Brand, who works in their office as a statistician. It's obvious that Peter is excluded from the inner circle but Billy is intrigued by him. As he's leaving, he asks Pete to explain his oddball way of thinking.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 04 ALL THE WRONG QUESTIONS (2.1 min)

B: Peter: "There is an epidemic failure ..."

E: Billy: "You're funny Pete"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1>

Pete's ideas – plus the fact that he's a geek who has obviously never played the game – are too much at first even for Billy. But over the next several days, Billy realizes that Pete is onto something. So he hires him because *he's a man who needs to rethink everything about baseball*. And Pete, regardless of his

appearance and background, can help him.

And the rest of the story, which we'll pick up in a few minutes, is how that "rethinking" plays out in the 2002 baseball season.

The Most Significant Statement

But at this point, I think we're ready to talk about how *Moneyball* illustrates that most significant thing Jesus ever said. And I know that you've been wondering what that is ever since I brought it up, so I won't keep you in suspense any longer.

The *most significant thing* Jesus ever said was also the *first thing* Jesus ever said – at least, in his public ministry. It's the statement he kept repeating wherever he went. It was his main message. Everything he taught – whether in the form of commandments or parables – and every miracle he performed was meant to be an illustration and application of this one idea. Here it is:

The Gospel of Mark says that at the beginning of his ministry ...

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)

"Jesus is beginning his ministry," Mark writes, "but before I tell you what he said and what he did, let me give you the big picture. Let me tell you the point of it all."

The time is fulfilled. There's no more waiting. It's right now. The moment is upon us.

It's not "someday ... when you die ... and if you believe in Jesus ... you'll get to go spend eternity with God as a disembodied spirit floating on a cloud strumming a harp in a church service that never ends. Hallelujah, lucky you." That's *not* Jesus' message. His message is *right here and right now*. The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand in this life, in this reality. And you can grab hold of it. You can experience the presence and power of God in your life today.

"But," Jesus says, "in order to do so, there's something you have to do first. *You have to repent.*"

Unfortunately, when a lot of us hear that word, we think of a guy standing on a street corner with lots of signs and very little compassion screaming at people as they go by. "Repent! Turn or burn! The end is near." Or maybe you think of times when your dad was mad and yelling at you to "straighten up and fly right or there's going to be big trouble!"

"Repent" sounds like that to a lot of us. But here's what the word really means:

It comes from the Greek word "metanoia" and it means "to change your mind; to rethink things."

It means way more than “straighten up; fly right; knock it off; stop doing all the evil things you do and start obeying God” ... as good as it is to do those things.

But the fundamental idea behind “metanoia” goes much deeper than that. To tell someone to repent is to tell them to rethink *everything*. “All the things you're building your life on ... rethink those things.”

In fact, other translations of Mark’s Gospel capture this idea very well. For example, here’s the J.B. Phillips version:

Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, saying, “The time has come at last—the kingdom of God has arrived. You must change your hearts and minds [i.e., repent] and believe the good news.” Mark 1:14-15 (JBP)

See, most people have in their minds a concept of “how life works” and “how God works” (and that concept might be that “God doesn’t work” because they believe there is no God). But, in the middle of all that, Jesus walks in and says (like Peter Brand in the movie) “I’m telling you – that’s not the way it is. I’m telling you – there is an epidemic failure to understand what is really happening in life.”

“So here’s the truth – and it’s good news: *you are not alone*. God is here. And He is here as much as He is in the spiritual realm called heaven; He’s as present now as He will be in the future. And you need to change your mind about that and *rethink everything* from that perspective. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe this good news.”

That’s the most significant thing Jesus ever said and that’s what *Moneyball* illustrates so well.

Narrowing It Down

Of course, rethinking everything in your life isn’t something you can do overnight because it’s so huge. We’re talking *everything*! So, we need a place to start and what I want to do for the next few minutes is to narrow it down to several key issues that Jesus repeatedly emphasized which, amazingly, are also illustrated in this movie.

And we’ve already seen one of the things we need to rethink about our lives.

1. We need to rethink “the problem.”

We need to change our understanding of the main obstacle that every single one of us face in our lives.

In *Moneyball*, the real problem that Billy faces is not “we need to replace those three stars we lost.” It’s far worse than that. It’s “we’re a small market team trying to compete in a game that’s completely rigged against us.”

... which is, if you remember, exactly what we saw in *The Hunger Games*. Those kids were up against a

totally evil and corrupt system that was completely rigged against them. And *that* movie illustrated for us the biblical truth that, because of the curse of sin, every single human being is in that same condition: fatally flawed, without hope, destined to death and destruction unless God intervenes.

Of course, most people believe that the problem in their lives is something far less insidious. "All I need," most people think, "a minor tweak here or there. I just need a break. I just need a new spouse, a new house, a new figure, a better job, a bigger bank account, a little more self-esteem. I'm really not that bad off."

But Jesus comes into this long history of a rigged broken game that we're in and he says "repent – rethink everything" and that includes your assessment of the biggest problem in your life. He's saying "you think it's only minor but I'm telling you that's not the way it is. I'm telling you, it's far worse than you ever imagined."

There's a fascinating passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus is having a discussion with some of the religious leaders of his day who were beginning to believe in him.

And he makes this relatively benign statement which is almost like a compliment.

"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

But they are highly offended by that because ...

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." John
8:31-34 (NIV)*

Have you ever sinned in your life? Have you ever acted in ways that are less than 100% virtuous? (That's a good way of defining sin.) If you have, then you are a slave to sin. That's the biggest problem you face in life and death. In fact, it is so big that Jesus had to die to make atonement for it. It was either him or you. And to repent – change your mind - about that means to stop telling yourself, "it's not that big of a deal. My sin is not that bad. Those Republicans are worse. Those Gays are worse." No – Jesus needed to die for you. That's how bad it is.

"But if I'm really that bad off, Rick, how can that be good news? Didn't Jesus say we need to believe the good news? Where does that come in?"

Well, let me show you another scene. After Billy hires Pete, Pete explains to him how they can build a team that will win. But it's not how anyone else would do it.

Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1>

Video Clip – 05 VALUE NOBODY ELSE CAN SEE (1.7 min)

B: Stats on screen

E: Pete sitting at computer

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Did you catch what Pete said? "Everyone else in baseball undervalues them like an island of misfit toys." In other words, "Billy, we need to rethink how we value players."

Amazingly, one of the things Jesus was most noted for was how *he* valued people in a way that no one else did. They actually called him "the friend of sinners."

See, most people think that God only values the people who already have their act together; people who've never messed up. I can't count the number of people in this church over the years who have said to me, "I didn't want anyone to know that I had a problem because, well, Christians aren't supposed to have problems."

Or sometimes people think (especially if they've grown up in a Christian family and pretty much walked the straight and narrow) that, really, the only people of any use to God are those who have "fabulous testimonies" where God miraculously intervened and saved them from a terrible life of sin.

But in the face of both of those ways of thinking, Jesus says "repent" and ...

2. Rethink who matters to God.

It's who you would least expect. In the eyes of Jesus, all of us are Chad Bradford. If we were totally honest – if we really did rethink the problem we all have – we could think of a dozen reasons why every one of us ought to be rejected by God. But we're not (or, at least we don't need to be).

For instance, God took the Apostle Paul – a man who was about as straight and narrow as they come – and invited Paul to rethink the problem. When Paul looked at his life and he said, "oh, this is how righteous I am," and he started looking at that and when he began to compare it to the absolute virtue of Jesus, he said, "you know, this is kind of like filthy rags." And God said, "you're right." And God used him to change the world.

At the other extreme, there's the Apostle Peter. When Jesus met him, he was a fisherman. One day Jesus wanted to teach a crowd by a lake so he borrowed a boat from Peter and James and John. He said "push me out onto the lake about four feet." And he began to teach.

Later, Jesus says to them "let's go out into the deeper water put down the nets and pull in some fish." And they say "dude, you stick to carpentry, we'll do the fishing. This is the wrong time of day. It's not going to work." But Jesus says "just do it."

And they do, and they throw the nets down and they start pulling in so many fish the boats start to sink. Peter sees this and it hits him: "Oh. My. God."

And I mean that literally. "Oh my ... I've got God in the boat with me."

The Bible says ...

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" Luke 5:8 (NIV)

And what he means is "surely you don't want me. Surely someone like me isn't worth anything to someone like you."

And Jesus says, "Fear not, Peter. We're going to win the World Series together."

Well, not exactly. What he said was "From now on you're going to follow me and instead of catching fish, you're going to catch men and women who mistakenly believe they don't matter to God."

The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent – change your thinking on this – and believe the good news of who matters to God. *You*, as messed up as you are, matter to God. That's why Jesus paid for *your* sin.

Are you seeing this? Are you seeing how this movie is an illustration of repentance – rethinking everything? But, wait there's more!

Once Billy decides to buy in to what Pete says about how they need to rethink valuing players, life doesn't get easier for them. It actually gets harder because now he's got to bring that concept back to those scouts who represent the conventional way of thinking. And there's a conflict between the way things are and the way things are going to be.

Check this out.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

Video Clip – 06 LISTENING TO A NEW VOICE (1.5 min)

B: Scout: "Who do you want to talk about first?"

E: Shot of Pete

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

And Pete needs to be there because he represents a fundamental shift in thinking. *They're not simply adding a new strategy to their already effective arsenal.* They will no longer be led by conventional baseball wisdom. Instead, they'll be guided by things like on-base percentage – how often a guy actually gets to first base – because collectively, as a team, that's the single greatest predictor of runs scored (and you have to score runs to win – in case you don't know how baseball works).

Sometimes, when people look at their life and sense something is missing, they think "you know, I could

probably use a little bit of that church stuff, that Jesus stuff. I don't need to become a fanatic or anything but a little bit of 'religion' would be good for me, like chicken soup for the soul."

And I don't want to be misunderstood when I say this because having Jesus in your life *is* good for you. But in the face of the way of thinking that says God is merely just another good add-on to your life, Jesus says "repent. The kingdom of God is at hand – it is near and it is now – so you need to ...

3. Rethink who needs to be in charge of your life.

I mean, the very phrase "The Kingdom of God" implies that there's a King. And when Jesus says that the Kingdom is at hand – it's right here, it's right now – he means that it's here and now because *the guy in charge of the kingdom of God* – the guy that's the King – is here. He's talking about Himself! That's why he once said to his disciples ...

"Why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say?" Luke 6:46 (NLT)

What Jesus wants isn't for you to "add him to your life." What he wants is to *take over your life*. He wants to come into your life and not just clean up a little bit and straighten up the furniture. He wants to rebuild your life. He wants to be the answer to questions like:

- *Who runs things ultimately in my life?* Who gets the final say about things like money and relationships and how you handle conflict?
- *Who runs things immediately in my life?* Not ultimately somewhere off in some theoretical time and place. Who runs this afternoon? Who gets to be most important when you wake up tomorrow?
- *What informs everything in my life?* Who gets to say "this is how we think" or "this is what we do and do not value?"
- *What judges my life?* Who gets to say "this is good and this is not good?"

Jesus says, "I want to be that person. Repent – stop thinking that you're in charge and that God is just an add-on."

OK, let's summarize the kinds of things Jesus is talking about when he says "repent" ...

- Rethink my problem.
- Rethink who matters to God.
- Rethink who should be in charge of my life.

And there are two more illustrations I want to show you very quickly. I wish we had more time!

After starting out poorly in the first few months of the season, Billy presses the manager to make changes to his lineup based on the new philosophy, and they catch fire. They set an American League record by winning 20 games in a row. It's incredible but, surprisingly, Billy isn't that excited.

As he and Pete watch the replay of the walk-off homerun that wins the 20th game (which, you'll see, comes against the Kansas City Royals – of course. *We made dubious history*), he explains why he's not excited.

Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

Video Clip – 07 I WANT IT TO MEAN SOMETHING (1.6 min)

B: Billy: "It's hard not to be romantic about baseball"

E: Billy: "And that's what I want."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

Even though it's hard not to be romantic about baseball, Billy refuses to be. He's not in it for the notoriety or to entertain people. He's not even in it to win it. He wants to change the game.

You know, the world we live in tells you and I that we're here to make a name for ourselves or to be entertained and to have a good time. "Enjoy the good life because this is all there is."

But into that mindset Jesus says "I'm telling you – that's *not* how it really is. Repent and ...

4. Rethink your purpose because, it is far greater than you ever believed.

The Kingdom of God is here and Jesus calls his followers to a higher purpose – to be representatives of that Kingdom to His world. He's no longer here in the flesh but we are. And it's our assignment now, no matter what our job or role or position.

I could give you scripture after scripture on this if we had time, but I'll just quote one of my favorites.

Jesus said to his followers:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14-16 (NLT)

"You have a purpose that far exceeds your own notoriety or entertainment," Jesus says.

So rethink what you've been thinking about why you're here and what it's all about. Repent and believe the good news that you get to represent Jesus to the world around you.

OK, one more example from the movie.

After they win 20 in a row, the As are in first place and, once again, they find themselves in the playoffs. But what Billy said he dreaded most – losing the final game – happens. This time they lose to Johnny Damon and the Red Sox.

And *he* thinks it's all been a waste but Pete, as you might expect, has a different perspective. Check this out.

<END SLIDE SET 4>

Video Clip – 08 HE DIDN'T REALIZE IT (2.0 min)

B: Pete: "Come with me to the video room."

E: Billy: "I know it was a metaphor"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 5>

It's a metaphor for the fact that Billy believed all of his efforts were in vain when, in reality, they were not. Even though they lost that season, baseball did change. And, in the real world, after that season, other teams began to take notice of what they were doing in Oakland and many of them adopted the same methods of player evaluation.

Now, I think a lot of people have similar doubts about saying yes to Jesus and the Kingdom of God as Billy did about that 2002 season. Does it really pay off to follow Christ? Does it really pay off to let him be in charge? Is it worth it to become a person who is constantly repenting and rethinking life in light of the presence of the Kingdom of God?

Our world tells us, no, it's not worth it. It's just a fairytale. And Jesus steps up and says, "That's not how it is. You need to repent and ..."

5. Rethink what you believe about the payoff.

It may not come now, in this life, but it will come.

Matthew tells us that, at one point, Peter says to Jesus, "we did rethink everything. We did believe this. We traded away everything and everyone and we left everything and followed you. What will there be for us?"

Matthew tells us that Jesus responded:

"Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

I love that Jesus doesn't say "How dare you ask that question? Shame on you Peter! You should know that following me is reward enough."

Instead he says, "That's a great question, Pete. I promise you that at the end of all things, there will be a payoff – a reward."

And then He adds:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life." Matthew 19:27–29

Anyone who's made any sacrifice for me will get it all back and then some.

Response

Well, there you go. That's *Moneyball*. The greatest illustration I've ever seen of the most significant thing Jesus ever said: "The Kingdom of God is here and now; so rethink everything ..."

- Rethink your problem.
- Rethink who matters.
- Rethink who should be in charge.
- Rethink your purpose
- Rethink what you believe about the ultimate payoff

... and believe the good news!"

The question this morning is what are we going to do with all this? More specifically, how far are we willing to go with this?

I want to show you one more clip. This one happens in the middle of the season. The manager has refused to buy into the new scheme and Billy decides to trade his best player, a rookie by the name of Carlos Pena, as a way of forcing his hand.

Video Clip – 09 DO WE BELIEVE IN THIS OR NOT? (1.9 min)

B: Billy: "Dave, Pena's going on the block."

E: Billy: "What are we talking about, then?"

What's the debate? Are we in or are we out? Do we believe in this thing or not?

For some of us to be "in" this morning we may need to accept Jesus ...

- Rethink your problem.

- Rethink who matters.
- Rethink who should be in charge.
- Rethink your purpose
- Rethink what you believe about the payoff

Let's stand together and let me pray for you.

God, thank you so much for your word. Thank you that you can even use a stupid movie from Hollywood to communicate truth in such a vivid way. And I know that there were many of us this morning who were touched by different parts of this movie. I pray they would become real in our lives as you become real in our lives. We thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Next week, we'll look at *True Grit* ... the new version, with Matt Damon. See you then!

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://blogs.kqed.org/newsfix/2011/09/28/art-howe-rip-moneyball-and-billy-beane-listen-to-knbr-appearance/> and <http://blog.chron.com/ultimateastros/2011/09/28/art-howe-livid-over-his-portrayal-in-moneyball/> for more information.