

Generosity Teaching 03:

All We Have Belongs to God

Intro hook:

Personal Example:

- For many years, I have been a part of a small group of pastors that get together every spring. This annual retreat has become a key part of my formation.
- Early on, a wealthy Jesus businessperson found out about our group. His family owned a beautiful vacation home on the California coast near Big Sur — on the water, whales right out the back door.
- The owner let our group, and many others, use it for years until he passed away and the family sold the house.
- All those years, there was a woman who was the caretaker of the property. She was a lovely, godly woman. Her job was to keep this valuable resource in impeccable condition, to make sure it was ready when the owner would come to visit, and that it was put to good use while he was away.
- She had the best life! She lived in a cottage at the top of the property with the Pacific Ocean spread out in front of her! She got to enjoy this home that I could only dream of living in.
- She lived there, but she wasn't the owner. She was the caretaker.
- The problem is, when most of us think about our relationship to our home, or stuff, or money, we don't think of ourselves as the caretakers; we believe they're all ours.
- But that is not actually the view of Jesus.

Recap:

- We are working through four themes from Jesus' teachings on money and generosity, which we summarize as:
 1. There's more joy in giving than receiving.

2. Watch out for greed!
3. All we have belongs to God.
4. Be generous to the poor.

- Next up on the docket for session 03 is: All we have belongs to God.
- As I said in the last session, scholars argue upwards of 25% of Jesus' teachings have to do with money and generosity.
- And almost half of Jesus' parables have to do with how his disciples are to steward their resources.
- Let's look at one. Turn to Luke 12...

Luke 12v35-48

- In context, we are about to read from one of Jesus' longest teachings on money and generosity.
- In the middle is his famous line:
 - "Sell your possessions and give to the poor."
- But he bookends this teaching with two parables.
- We'll look at the first one called "The Parable of the Rich Fool" next week.
- The last one is called "The Parable of the Faithful Servant."
- The two parables are a compare and contrast.
- The first is a negative story about a rich man who was evil and hoarding all his wealth; the second is a positive story about the servant of a rich man who is good.
- Let's read it...
- 35-37: "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes."
 - Here, disciples of Jesus are to be like the servant of a wealthy aristocrat, but there's a twist.

- 37: “Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”
 - This is the upside-down kingdom of Jesus! The master takes the role of the servant!
 - This is Jesus’ picture of God: God is a rich, generous master who takes the place of a servant to his servants.
 - Jesus goes on:
- 42-44: “The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.”
 - Meaning, if he does a good job stewarding the master’s house, the master will give him even more resources to steward.
- 45: “But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk.”
 - He begins to waste the master’s resources and treat the people under his care terribly.
- 46: “The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.”
 - Then, here is the summary line in verse 48:
- 48b: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

Jesus’ view of wealth:

- The radical idea Jesus is laying out here in Luke 12 has come to be called “stewardship.”
- Gregory Baumer and John Cortines define stewardship as “The active and responsible management of God’s creation for God’s purposes.”²
- And this idea was just as radical in Jesus’ day as it is in ours!
- There are three basic components to the biblical theology of stewardship.
- The first is that:

1. God owns it all.

- In Jesus' day, there were two basic views of wealth:
 - The first was non-ownership.
 - You see this in Greek philosophy. For example, if you read Plato's "Republic" in school, the rulers own nothing in his mythical utopian society; all resources belong to the society as a whole.
 - The other basic view is ownership:
 - This was the Roman view: you had absolute authority over your property. If you had a barn, you could burn it down with impunity because it's your barn.
 - This is the majority view of the modern West.
- But the Judeo-Christian view that comes to us through Jesus and the library of Scripture is a radical third way, not of ownership or non-ownership, but of "stewardship," or caretaking.
- God is the owner and we are the caretaker.
 - In the first story in the Bible, God creates the "heavens and the earth," a Hebrew way of saying everything!³ The universe is his creation. Then he creates a garden and he literally breathes air into Adam's lungs; life itself is a gift.⁴ Then he puts Adam and Eve in the Garden "to work it and take care of it."⁵
- And this theme runs all the way through the Bible:
 - "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers."⁶
 - "To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it."⁷
 - "For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills... the world is mine, and all that is in it."⁸
- The idea all the way through the library of Scripture up to Jesus here in Luke 12 is that *God owns it all*. Sure, we buy and sell and farm and build and invest, but we're not Brad Pitt. We are the caretaker, not the owner of the house.
- The second component to this is:

2. We are entrusted by God with resources to do good.

- God owns it all, but he entrusts it to you and me to steward.

- Many of us live under the false assumption that whatever money we receive from work, or an inheritance, or the lottery, is ours to consume.
- Many of us live at or above the line of our income level, maxed out with no margin to share. Or, even worse, in debt rather than under the line with breathing room to practice generosity.
- We don't realize that not all our money is for us.
 - Some of it is for us to live! To provide for our families, to put a roof over our head and food on the table. And more, to enjoy our life before God! There's that line in Timothy about how God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."⁹
 - God isn't a stingy investor but a generous Father who wants to bless you!
 - But it's not all to spend.
 - Some of our money is to give away to the poor and the needy, to the church and the Gospel.
 - And some of it is to build for the future, for what God has put in our heart for our family or business or kingdom dream.
- And we are entrusted by God with his resources to channel every dollar to the right place.
- We're stewards.
- Now, we don't live in an agrarian economy so a more salient example of a steward or caretaker in our world is an asset manager.
- Think of people who work in finance and their job is to invest other people's money. They make a living off their good stewardship.
- So if a rich person gives them a million dollars to invest and they grow it by \$100k through their skill and diligence, they usually draw a fee of around one percent of total assets, so around \$11k for them, \$89k gain for the owner. Win-win.
- But what would the owner say if they lost \$100k? She would say they were a bad manager.
- Or what if they made \$100k, but they spent it all on a house for themselves in the Bahamas? She would call the FBI!
- She certainly would not entrust any more resources to them.
- But, what if they doubled her money, to two million? Not only would the asset manager get a larger fee, but the investor would likely give her more money to invest.

- Which leads us to the final component of a biblical theology of stewardship:

3. God blesses us to give more, not just to have more.

- You see this idea in all of Jesus' parables on stewardship: Those who steward the master's resources well are given more resources to steward.
- No one does a better job of working out this principle than Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, one of the hallmark passages on generosity in the New Testament.
- In it, he is raising money from the church in Macedonia for the church in Jerusalem, which is living through a severe famine.
- In chapter 9, he writes this:
 - 7: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."
 - God loves a person who isn't coerced into giving a minimum percentage, but who prayerfully listens to God and to what's stirring in their heart and gives joyfully.
 - Then here's what I want you to see:
- 8-11: "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."
- This almost sounds like the prosperity gospel, a uniquely American heresy that, put crassly, says you give to get; that if you give to God, he will give even more back to you, which ultimately means the motivation for generosity is greed, not love.
- Two words separate Paul's theology from the prosperity gospel heresy, "so that." "You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous!"
- The prosperity gospel is not a lie, it's a half-truth.
- When we give and are good stewards of what has been entrusted to us, God often does give us even more. (Our "harvest," in Paul's metaphor, may come back to us in the form of more money — or more opportunity, relationship, health, happiness, etc. But if you give, God will give back a net increase to you in some way. As the saying goes, "You can't outgive God.") But, the purpose is not to make us rich, but to make

us even more generous.

- Not to build bigger barns like the man in the parable, but to steward more of God's resources to the right place.
- As James Merritt put it, "God blesses us to raise our standard of giving, not our standard of living."¹⁰

Recap:

- So:
 - God owns it all.
 - We are entrusted with his resources to do good.
 - God blesses us to give more, not to have more.

Hinge:

- If this is true (as radical as it is!), then it means the question is less, "How much should I give?" And more, "How much should I keep?"
- In many church traditions, tithing is a central practice. Many people take their income, calculate ten%, and then give it to the church.
- It's easy to think that the 10% is God's and the other 90% is ours to do whatever we want with.
- But everything we have belongs to God and we are entrusted to use 100% of it well.
- There's the famous dichotomy between savers and spenders.
 - Savers are more motivated by fear and a need for safety and security.
 - Spenders are more motivated by greed and the lust for more!
 - There's a third option; not a saver or a spender, but a steward. One who, as an act of apprenticeship to Jesus, is working to channel God's resources for good.
- But this raises all sorts of questions.
 - What do I keep? What do I give? And where? And to whom? What's an appropriate standard of living? Where's the line between enjoying our life before God? And wasting his resources? What kind of car should I drive? How many pairs of shoes should I own? A million questions!

- I get how complex this is. Some of you have kids and other responsibilities in a place with a high cost of living. How do we weigh generosity to the poor next to our responsibility to our kids? I get that it is not simple.
- But these are the right kinds of questions.
- And (I hate to break it to you), the New Testament does not spell it out for us.
- Instead it calls us to discernment; to listen deeply to God with a singular desire: to know and do his will.
- That said, there are six basic guidelines from Paul in his letters to the Corinthians.
- Our giving should be:
 1. Regular, not sporadic:
 - He writes, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money.”¹¹
 2. Proportional:
 - “Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.”¹²
 - Meaning, the more money you make, the greater percentage you should give.
 - If you are barely able to fund your basic life necessities, you’re still called to generosity, but it’s going to look very different than if you start a company that goes wild and have way more than you need to live on.
 - The basic principle is: the more you make, the more you give.
 3. Sacrificial:
 - “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.”¹³
 - It should hurt a bit. There should regularly be things we want to buy but don’t in order to give.
 4. Voluntary:
 - “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion.”¹⁴
 - Which means we need to make space to pray and discern.
 5. Joyful!

- “ ... for God loves a cheerful giver.”¹⁵
- God doesn’t want grumpy money!

6. And motivated by apprenticeship to Jesus: (not religious duty or even philanthropy)

- “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”¹⁶
- Meaning we see growing in generosity as an aspect of training under Jesus in kingdom living.

Listening:

- So we’re not flying blind. There are guidelines.

Sticky line: *But the lack of a clear rule to follow means we have to listen to the Spirit of God in our heart — to regularly come to quiet before God and ask him, “Father, thank you for the gift of these resource. What do you want me to do with them?”*

- Do you do this? Do you listen to God?
- If you were to answer a survey question with three options, which would best describe you today?
 1. I do not listen to God.
 2. I listen to God, but not about money and generosity. “I don’t ask him about that!”
 3. I listen to God about money and generosity. “Is this for me? Or for me to give away?”
- Many of us don’t listen to God because we’re scared of what he may say.
- We still believe the myth that more money equals more happiness and we’re scared God may ask us to give our money away. And we don’t yet believe in God as our Father-provider.
- Which is why Jesus says in the same passage we read in Luke: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”¹⁷
- God is not a stingy investor out to maximize his profit margins. He’s a loving Father who wants to bless you and form you into a son or daughter who is like himself, generous and joyful.
- And it is our honor to steward whatever resources we have.

Ending:

So the invitation this week is to radically rethink your relationship to your money and resources, not as owner or non-owner, but as caretaker. And to begin a lifelong journey of learning to listen to the voice of your loving, generous, joyful Father and provider.

Notes

1. Luke 12v33-34
2. Baumer, G., & Cortines, J. (2016). *God and Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School*. Rose Publishing.
3. Genesis 1v1
4. Genesis 2v7-8
5. Genesis 2v15
6. Leviticus 25v23
7. Deuteronomy 10v14
8. Psalm 50v10-12
9. 1 Timothy 6v17
10. Merritt, J. (2020). *Character Still Counts: It Is Time to Restore Our Lasting Values*. Harvest House Publishers.
11. 1 Corinthians 16v2a
12. 1 Corinthians 16v2b
13. 2 Corinthians 8v3
14. 2 Corinthians 9v7a
15. 2 Corinthians 9v7b
16. 2 Corinthians 8v9
17. Luke 12v32