

Does It All Belong to God—Really?

Psalm 24:1-6; Matthew 6:25-33

Sunday – 11-10-24

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I watched a webinar on generosity this past week that was very helpful. It was based on research done by the folks at Thrivent and Barna, two groups that care very much about life in our churches. The webinar started out with an intriguing finding: 83% of U.S. adults say they would like to grow in their generosity, but they're not sure where to begin.

Friends, if you're part of that 83%, there's a Bible verse in 1 Peter 4 meant to encourage you: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." If you don't know what your particular gifts for generosity might be, I encourage you to use the exercise provided in the bulletin insert. It's entitled *My Generosity Story*. Spend an hour reflecting on questions such as: What's a memorable generosity experience you've had? What are some of the ways you are regularly generous? And what beliefs influence your generosity? The goal of this exercise is to help you more fully develop your own Generosity Story.

Let me give you an example of what this might mean. I played golf on Friday afternoon at Oak View. I didn't have playing partners lined up in advance, but I paired up with a couple of folks along the way – a man and a woman. They found out I was an interim pastor. It turned out that both of them were churchgoers, but not at Good Shepherd. I told them I was talking about generosity this Sunday. Would they mind if I asked them a question about that? "Sure, no problem," they responded. So here was the question: "Where does generosity show up in your life in a way that feels important to you?"

The man shrugged and didn't have much of an answer. In contrast, the woman got very excited. She said she has a couple of friends with health concerns. She loves cooking meals for them and bringing those meals to their homes, and always with enough for leftovers. I was especially impressed at how quickly this woman had an answer for me. *Where does generosity show up in a way that feels important to you?* Even as a pastor, I found myself wondering if I could have answered as quickly as she did. How about you?

The webinar made the point that all of us express generosity differently. It partly depends on our station in life: newly-marrieds are in a vastly different

place than the newly-retired. Our generosity also depends on things that have influenced us along the way: opportunities to give that have come to us, learning from the generosity of others, and chances to serve in our community and at church. Sermons also made the list of influencers, but much to my chagrin, they were not even close to the top of the list.

The webinar reinforced what's been going on at Good Shepherd for a long time: our generosity is a combination of how we use our time, talents, and treasures in service to others. The webinar divided these categories a bit differently – and you can find them on the front page of the bulletin – but essentially they're the same. And I think the starting point is Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." Or as one translation puts it: "God owns everything."

Do you believe that? We often refer to the components of our lives as *my* time, *my* talents, and *my* treasures, but the psalmist wants to expand our thinking. *The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. God owns everything.* That's where the idea of stewardship comes in. Being a steward is not about holding on to what is rightfully ours and deciding to share a portion of it every now and then. Rather, it's about being caretakers of that which belongs to another. And that "another" is God.

Friends, if you're part of the 83%, both wanting to grow in your generosity and caring for that which belongs to another, I encourage you to spend time giving thanks for what you already have. "Do not worry about your life," Jesus assures us, "what you will eat or drink or wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

Giving thanks for what we already have will likely deepen our trust in the God who provides for us. In the midst of our abundance, though, there are a couple of hazards to avoid. One is an attitude of entitlement. It's so easy to think: "I grew up in a good family. I went to good schools. I've worked hard for what I have. Really, I've got this coming. I'm entitled to it."

Such thinking is not unlike what ancient Israel was experiencing as they got ready to enter the Promised Land. Moses warned them in Deuteronomy: "When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses, when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold has multiplied...do not say,

“My power and my own hand has gotten me this wealth. Remember the Lord your God,” said Moses, “for it is he who gives you this wealth.” (Deut. 8:11ff.)

A feeling of entitlement happened in ancient Israel and it happens still today. God showers his people with good gifts, but all too often God’s people turn right around and forget God, and then claim that they themselves are the source of all that they have.

A second hazard of abundance is an attitude of being favored by God. For those of us awash in possessions, we can quickly pivot to see ourselves as especially blessed, and to view our blessings as a sign of God’s favor. We need to keep in mind that out-of-balance abundance is due, not to God’s faulty apportionment of blessings, but rather to flawed human systems. Too often our systems help the rich get richer and keep the poor in their place.

Friends, trusting in God’s generosity prompts us to tend to the time, talents, and treasures God has given to us. Shortsightedly, we can assume that God is concerned only with how much of our time, talents, and treasures we share with others, and once that’s completed, then the rest is ours to do with as we please. But such thinking is questionable, at best. If God really does own everything, then our role as stewards is to care for *all* that God has given to us, and hopefully to care for it in a way that’s consistent with God’s wishes for us and for our world.

Many of you know that when I was in junior high and high school, I worked on an area farm in southeastern South Dakota. The farm belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Stene. Perhaps you remember me talking about occasionally caring for Mrs. Stene’s goats. She had lots of them, floppy ears and all, and she cared deeply for them. One Christmas the Stenes were going to Texas for 3 weeks. They asked if I would watch the farm, do the chores, and especially take care of the goats.

Well...what the Stenes didn’t know is that the Billy Goat had gotten out of the pen five months before, and many of those nanny goats were about to give birth to little kids. Imagine my surprise when, on the Stenes’ first night away, a couple of kids showed up in the goat shed. *Uh oh, now what?* There weren’t any cell phones to call for help. And you can probably guess that I’m no expert in overseeing the arrival of baby goats.

But nature took its course, the mothers gently licked their babies clean, and in no time at all, they started nursing. And yes, every once in a while, it took a little coaxing from me – some pulling and tugging – for the babies to safely arrive. One mother led to another mother, and another, and another, and pretty soon we had a veritable nursery in the goat shed. Twenty-five new mothers and probably fifty to sixty new babies.

I'll be honest: I was probably earning \$1.50 an hour, and I would gladly have found something more fun to do with my Christmas break. But deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling that those were not my goats. They belonged to Mrs. Stene. And I knew how much she cared for them. So I, in turn, gave them the very best care that I could. Morning, noon, and night I checked on them. As I recall, not a single kid was lost that cold Christmas season. And fifty-five years later, I still have a feeling of accomplishment, even pride, that I'd done the right thing; that I'd taken care of all that had been entrusted to me.

Friends, does our world and all that is in it belong to God, really? The psalmist says yes: *God owns everything*. Jesus says yes: *If God so clothes the grass of the field...will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?* Here's the important question: What do you say? If it's "Yes, it does belong to God," then how will you respond in generosity to God's good gifts? What are you going to do – morning, noon, and night – with all that's been entrusted to you? If you're part of the 83% looking to grow in your generosity, why not start by exploring your own generosity story. It's bound to expand your horizons and to help you see possibilities that you could not see before. Amen.