

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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We Belong to God

Psalm 24

Today, I'm beginning a month-long series of sermons on the theme of generosity, especially as it relates to our stewardship of money and possessions. The word "possessions" has to do with a state of having, owning, or controlling something. It refers to property, something that belongs to you. We Americans know plenty about personal property. Property rights have always been a major theme in our nation's history and political culture. There's a certain sanctity about private property, especially when it comes to how we view the role of government.

During last Monday's Presidential debate, the subject of private property wasn't necessarily a hot topic, though there was plenty of heat surrounding other issues. If the Libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson, had been there on the stage with Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, we might have heard more, at least in a broad or indirect sense, about the importance of individual property. That's because the theme of property occupies an especially central place in Libertarian thinking. As one representative of the Libertarian perspective has put it, "Libertarianism is, as the name implies, the belief in liberty. Libertarians believe that each person owns his own life and property and has the right to make his own choices as to how he lives his life and uses his property—as long as he simply respects the equal right of others to do the same."¹

I'm not highlighting this point of view as a political endorsement, but simply as an example of the sacredness that's often attached to the concept of private property in our lives and in the life of our society. No doubt, Republicans and Democrats, as well as representatives from the Green Party, would also have strong opinions about the significance of private property, though at different points on the political policy spectrum.

But wherever you come down on the political spectrum, as Christians our views on property and possessions are grounded in our convictions about God as creator and owner of the world. Rather than taking our cues primarily from a particular party's platform, we operate within the framework laid out by the psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (vv. 1-2). Now when it comes to formulating specific policies, you can take that basic affirmation and go in lots of different ideological directions. But wherever you end up, there's no altering the reality announced at the opening of today's Scripture passage. Our personal opinions on government and ownership have to somehow align with the fact that God creates, God owns, and God governs.

You and I, and the world we inhabit, exist by the will and power of God. We're not self-made. No, we and the entire cosmos are brought into being by a good and loving God who creates and saves. We believe that he has come to save, to reveal his sovereignty, through Jesus Christ. This is what we call the gospel, the good news. It's the announcement of how God's realm of righteousness and peace has arrived in Jesus. And the Lord's arrival isn't like a hostile invader who comes to conquer what rightfully belongs to another, as if his mission is to seize our property here in this earthly realm. No, the Lord comes as the one

to whom it already rightfully belongs, in order to establish his will and his reign. And not with overwhelming force or coercive violence, but with a kind of might and a form of strength that subverts our notions of power. As we heard in today's reading from Philippians, Jesus "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness," all the way to death on the cross, and then resurrection into the glory of God. So the gospel is a royal announcement about how God, in such surprising fashion, has entered this earthly space, so that we can enter his heavenly space.

In one respect, that's what we do in congregational worship. We enter God's space, God's realm of righteousness and life. "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?" asks the psalmist. "Who may stand in his holy place?" (v. 3). It's because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ that we're able to come into his presence. And when we do, we come prepared to leave something at the altar. For the Israelites, this may have been some type of drink offering, or sheaves of wheat, or a particular animal. These were their ancient equivalents of money. They took these things that they valued, brought them to the altar, and left them there. They gave them up, gave them away.

In a similar way, we bring our money to church and give it away. True, we give God many other kinds of things during congregational worship. Things that we value, like time and talents. But in addition to time and talents, there's treasure involved too. Right there in the midst of the service is another form of self-giving called the Sunday morning offering. Remember that a lot of our worship requires words. Words of fellowship. Words we sing. Words we pray. Words I preach. Words you hear. The offering, though, is unique partly because we're called upon to present not just our words but our wealth. We're called upon to part with some of our possessions. Offering God praise with our lips is one thing. Offering God praise with a portion of our livelihood is another.

When the offering plate comes down your pew, our primary objective isn't to take up a collection so that the church can pay its bills. Yes, our congregation needs to meet its operating expenses. But keeping the church, and its services of worship, running isn't the primary significance of the offering. One pastor tells about a Sunday when he tried to do things a little differently. Instead of preaching at the end of the service, he did the sermon first, with the music, offering, and Scripture reading afterward. As he stood behind the pulpit, he could see people getting ready for the offering, until they realized he was starting his message. A young girl in the congregation was perplexed by this change of routine, and whispered frantically to her mom, "Doesn't he know we haven't paid him to talk yet?"²

Don't take the fact that we have the offering right before the sermon as an indication that you're paying me to talk. True, your generosity helps provide for me and my family. But when you and I place our gifts in the offering plate, we're doing so much more than just funding the church budget. Most of all, we're worshiping God, the God to whom it all belongs in the first place. Only the Lord has the power to give life. Only the Lord has the power to save. Only the Lord can claim rightful ownership of the cosmos. Only the Lord can govern the world, and each of our lives, in a way that culminates in his reconciling, redeeming, and restoring purpose.

Augustine, a great leader in the early church, wrote, "Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshiped." That's part of the purpose and significance of the Sunday morning offering. It's an acknowledgement that money is meant to be used, not worshiped, and that God is meant to be worshiped, not used. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." The psalmist also says, "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (v. 7). Ancient gates actually had no parts that moved up and down. The psalmist is using a metaphor to refer to the lifting of one's head to

acknowledge the entrance of one who is greater, more important, more gracious than the self. This is a picture of lifting one's head at God's entrance, in order to acknowledge God as God.

This attitude of reverence, faithfulness, and gratitude is our proper stance toward the Lord. And one of the ways we practice it and demonstrate it is by the financial gifts we bring to the Lord's house. Through our offerings, we both confess and deny. We confess that all we are and everything we have belongs to God. We confess that the Lord is the one true ruler, and that we want him to be in charge of everything, including our money. At the same time, we deny that we belong to ourselves. We deny that we are the rulers of our own lives. We deny anything else that claims ownership of our lives and demands our deepest love and highest allegiance. And all that in the length of time it takes for the ushers to circulate the plates and return to the front of the sanctuary to prayerfully dedicate what has been given. Financial giving is an act of worship, a way of expressing our love for God and our devotion to him.

In his book *The Prodigal God*, pastor and author Tim Keller tells a story about gifts for a king:

Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, "My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as [the gardener] turned to go the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing. But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a *carrot*—what if you gave the king something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. So the king said, "Let me explain. That gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse."³

The Sunday morning offering is such an unadorned act of worship that calls for simple and sincere devotion to God. It's a way of saying, "Lord, the world belongs to you. I belong to you. You're the one true ruler, and I want you to be in charge of my money. Thank you for all your goodness to me, most of all through Jesus. Lord, I love you, and as an expression of that love I want to give up something that I value, not for my own gain but for the sake of your kingdom."

As we'll see over the next several Sundays, generosity is about many things. But most of all, generosity is about worship. It's about worshiping God and using money, not worshiping money and using God. It's about lifting your soul up to the Lord. Generosity is about a heartfelt relationship with the God who creates, redeems, and reigns. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. . . . Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty—he is the King of glory."

¹ Sharon Harris, President of Advocates for Self-Government. Accessed September 28, 2016 <<https://www.theadvocates.org/libertarianism-101/definitions-of-libertarianism/>>.

² Gordon Wood, "Kids of the Kingdom," *Christian Reader* (July/August 2000).

³ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2008) 69-70.