

SERMON TITLE- "Should We Give? Part #1- The Earth Is The Lord's"

TEXT- 1 Corinthians 10:14-25

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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In fall I received a call from one of the Conference people asking if I would be willing to write a lesson series on giving. The reason was that they are concerned that our churches have balanced teaching on this controversial topic. And there are few topics as controversial as the matter of telling people what they are supposed to do with their money. He described what he wanted and it was quite involved but the more I thought about it the more I came to conclude that whether or I do this for his project- it is a topic that needs to be talked about in a systematic manner. And so I set my first 3 Sundays in the New Year aside for a short series on the Biblical teaching about giving- or what God wants us to do with our money.

To start with we are going to look at a text that doesn't seem to have anything to do with giving. It is from 1 Corinthians 10. What it does do however is lay down a solid principle from which we need to build.

The issue that is being addressed was, for this church, also very controversial. Their issue was the matter of meat offered to idols.

In Corinth, as in every city in the Greco Roman world, the common practice was for people to bring meat to the pagan temples for a sacrifice. This was the same thing that the Jewish people practiced.

Rather than throwing away all this meat, however, the temples would take and sell it in the market place and possibly higher because this meat was blessed by the gods.

The result was, when you went to the meat market you a significant portion of the meat for sale would have come from the temple.

So, "what is a Christian to do in this situation?" was the big question. Was a Christian allowed to eat meat that had been offered to idols? So Paul addresses the question-

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say . . . Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons . . . 1

Corinthians 10:14-20

"Everything is permissible"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. 1 Corinthians 10:23-25

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." 1 Corinthians 10:26

Now if you have been listening to the flow of his argument- and I have shortened it down a bit and tried to keep its gist- you will notice that it is not simple.

On the one hand, Paul is telling them to be very careful not to become contaminated by idols and to stay clear.

On the other hand, he says, "eat anything sold in the market without asking questions."

What's going on? First, it gives very practical advice- if people tell you that this is offered to idols- don't eat. But if you are just eating meat, don't worry even think about it.

That's practical advice that you can figure out in real life terms.

Second- it does not simplify a complex situation. Writing down instructions can make things sound far simpler than they are. Paul does not make complex problems simplistic.

So what holds these 2 pieces of advice together? The answer is "**The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.**"

This phrase is a foundational piece that goes below a whole lot of complex problems we face. It turns out to be the foundational piece for the matter of giving to the church as well.

Of course it does not take much thinking to realize that it takes us back to the very first verses in the Bible-

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1

So many discussions find their way back to those simple words.

This statement, of course, is easily a truism for religious people. Of course that's true.

I've dealt with truisms before and the big problem they face is that while the flow so easily from our lips the very fact that we speak and think them without reflection means that we can all too easily miss what they say and mean.

What does it mean that, "the earth is the Lord's"?

Let's go back a little to the sources Paul was drawing from when he quoted this. The first time this phrase is used is by Moses.

Moses replied, "When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the LORD. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the LORD's. Exodus 9:28-30

The setting of this is when Moses is in his famous series of conversations with Pharaoh. This takes place in the 7th plague [the plague of hail] as Moses is proving to Pharaoh that indeed he is a messenger from God.

This is the plague of weather and Moses' command over the weather is a direct sign that he is in touch with the God of creation. Interestingly the parallel in Jesus' time on earth is when He is in the storm on the boat and Jesus commands that the storm be still- and it immediately obeys.

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." Luke 8:24-25

When Jesus calms the storm is when the disciples are truly in awe- even more, it seems to me, than when He performs all kinds of amazing miracles such as raising the dead. God, as the Creator, as the owner of the heavens and the earth, does not just influence the world we see- He directs it by command.

When the phrase, "**the earth is the Lord's**" is used- that is what we are supposed to understand. That is why Moses remind Pharaoh that when the storm stops- it will be because the Creator God is behind what is happening.

From there it is repeated in 2 separate OT songs, first in a song that Hannah sings as she brings her son to the temple. Then David puts it into his song-

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. Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? Psalm 24:1-3

When Paul draws this phrase forward to use in his argument about food offered to idols- he is drawing it from this background.

What does this mean for our real life?

The phrase “**the earth is the Lord's**” is used by God's people in all kinds of situations to make sure we understand the foundations correctly. Today I want to look at 3 levels where it sets us right. I am going to think of it in terms of orientation or facing us in the right direction before we set out on a journey. I think we can all agree that starting off in the right direction is quite important as we embark on a journey.

As a bit of background to what follows. While on holidays I kept in touch with Ryan's blog and there was a discussion about what difference it makes if there is a Creator or not. As I wrote this sermon I quickly realized that much of what I was writing track how that discussion went.

Practically speaking this means that you are part of a conversation that is quite philosophical- but I think philosophical on matters that are very important and down to earth. I hope that what follows will be very down to earth.

#1. It Orients Us Materially

The world we live in is an amazing place. We notice it best when we travel to new places and suddenly the ocean is a different blue than we have seen before, the mountains have ridges and valleys in shapes that take your breath away, and the stars in the sky shine with an unfamiliar hue.

Of course for the people who live there that is simply how the world is and when we come home we see our own oceans, mountains and sky- and they too are amazing. When we look at the world with those eyes we should be amazed and wondering why there is any beauty in creation at all. Half the blessing of going away is coming home and seeing what a beautiful world we live in right here.

If the earth is the Lord's then we understand why there is beauty. It is beautiful because it is created.

When we understand that the earth is the Lord's we also understand why David writes-

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. Psalm 8:1-2

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. Psalm 8:3-5

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Psalm 8:6-9

So how does that orient us in the material universe?

It tells us that against the vast scale of the heavens, where we look out across billions of light years of time- we are not just globs of stardust swirling around among other infinite numbers of globs of stardust- we are beings that are created.

That conclusion is not automatic. Without a sense that something much bigger is going on here, we could easily reflect on that vastness of it all and come to conclude that we are just globs of meaninglessness.

On that scale the logical conclusion to come to is that my particular glob of stardust is really not much more important than the slugs that crawl through the forest and shrivel up when the sun beats down on them. That's a pretty gloomy thought, to be sure, but it is a thought that is part of the mind of anyone who looks into space or into a microscope without the knowledge that, **“the earth is the Lord’s.”**

We have a place here. We have been lifted out from the other globs of stardust and given a place. As human beings- we are significant.

No wonder that at the end of his reflection of this, David cannot help but write down his hymn of praise.

Praise to God is our reaction to the world that we see around us because **“the earth is the Lord’s”** we have a place in this vast universe.

There is another important aside that is part of the phrase **“the earth is the Lord’s”**. It not only tells us something about ourselves- it also tells is something important about God.

There are very few real atheists in the world. By real atheists I mean people who really believe that there is no God. There is, and always has been immense confusion about who God is. The most natural belief is that God is somehow the same as creation. This is natural because the world we live in is beautiful, and vast, and beyond comprehension, and seems to direct every step we take. When an earthquake strikes Haiti devastation rises from apparently no-where. The natural response is to cry out to the gods for answers and the god that is being cried out to ends up being the earth or sky itself.

The Bible, however teaches something quite different- God and creation are not the same thing. God is not creation- God created and owns it.

This is very important and distinguishes the God of the Bible from almost all the other gods. It also leads to the next orientation an orientation that rises out of this knowledge.

#2. It Orients Us Teleologically

I introduce this big word because it tells us something important. It talks about our end- specifically when it comes to our purpose.

We are not the only people who look out at the universe and are struck with awe. I remember reading an article by a woman who was a materialist [meaning that she doesn't believe that there is any meaning in the universe that can't be described other than by material]. She was walking on a beach in the Galapagos Island and watching the astonishing display of life around her. Suddenly she had what she called a “religious” experience. She was overwhelmed by it all- and in her view without God. Somehow everything came together and she “saw” something. She called it a spiritual experience.

From our definition of spiritual her language just sounds silly because we understand spiritual to mean something beyond material. What I don't doubt, though, is her experience. When we truly have opportunities to glimpse the world around us it is

amazing.

But it is not just amazing- it points somewhere- it points to an end and specifically to a destination.

God built us for a purpose. That is what sets created things apart from stuff that happens. Various rock formations can be very beautiful but they were not shaped with beauty in mind- they were shaped by various forces of nature but the principles of those forces, whether, wind or water or ice or heat.

This is very different from a painting which is usually far less beautiful than the scene it is trying to capture- but its beauty lies in the skill of an artist.

In fall I told about an encounter I had as Ryan and I were flying home from Saskatoon. I was sitting beside a woman who was wondering what her purpose was. Behind that question was a much deeper question- did she even have a purpose?

Very few people really want to go there because if the answer is “no” then you are trapped in what is called “nihilism”, or the belief that there is no meaning.

The world is full of people who live like nihilists but very few of them dare to come face to face with this possibility. Instead they ask the next questions, such as “what is my purpose?”

For those who understand that “**the earth is the Lord’s**” there is no confusion on this point. We are people with a purpose that was set by the God who set the stars in motion.

The question of writing out what that purpose might be in a sentence or 2, or even in a million or 2 sentences- remains a challenge [that shouldn’t surprise us as we look at the astonishing world around us] but the fact that we have a purpose and need to constantly orient ourselves back to that- defines what it means to believe in God.

The prayer that I pray over and over again when I lie awake at night and try to sort out where I am and what I am doing is-

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23-24

Those verses remind me that anxious thoughts, offensive ways, and getting onto wrong paths are the marks of people who seek to serve God.

They also remind us that constant correction is required.

When I was in university I was given a metaphor for understanding the market place by my economics prof. He said that the market is constantly correcting like a person riding a bicycle who actually sways from side to side while keeping his balance. No one rides without swaying but those who fall have one cycle go too far.

That is a picture with many applications and particularly in serving a God who has built us for a purpose.

We are people with a purpose- people created with an end in mind.

This adds the last piece, for today.

#3. It Orients Us Morally

If God created us, and if God created us for a purpose, then it follows from that, that He gives us directions about the best way to live.

When you buy a car it will come with all kinds of directions some of the most

important being-

-you will have to put gas into it

-you will have to check the oil and water and tire pressure

-you will have to have regular check-ups

Whose idea are all these directions? They come from the maker of the car.

Why does the maker of the car give us these directions? Because as makers, they know what will keep this car functioning according to its purpose, which is to get us about.

If the purpose of the car changes from what it was built for- and now its purpose is becoming recycled material, then the rules change.

In the same way God gives us directions for living.

Now this again seems so obvious for many of us- but it is not obvious at all.

When we try to sort out our morality, just as we do when we operate our vehicles, we like to know the “why?” of it all.

Knowing “why?” helps a great deal. Why should we change the oil at the right periods? Because if we wait too long we the necessary quality of the oil is lost- and if we change it more often than recommended we are wasting effort money.

But in complex matters we will often just need to trust the manufacturer’s instructions. There are things we just need to do because they are “right.”

This is certainly true when it comes to morality. God created us as His special creation. God created us for a purpose- even if that is hard to articulate easily. And God has given us a moral code that we are to live by.

Some parts of that moral code are easy to understand, some parts are harder to understand. Some parts make sense, some parts are mysterious. The bottom line of the whole moral code, however, is that it does not ultimately have its source in the mind and purposes we devise- but in God’s grand plan.

And where does this all lead? It brings us back to the beginning- to the question about what we are supposed to do with the money we have and earn.

In this the Biblical code is very simple and repeated again and again-

A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. Leviticus 27:30

Now, the reason that this is not a one sermon topic, is that there are some very important questions that we have not addressed and we are going to look at those in the next 2 weeks.

Next week- why 10%? If God owns everything why doesn’t everything own just belong to Him?

The week after that- isn’t the tithe just an OT law and since we are now part of the NT community do we still have to worry about that?