

Possessions – The Relationship That Can Control

U.S.A. Today ran a four part series entitled “Baby-boomers and Their Parents.” It explored a whole array of issues facing adult children with aging parents — money, health, housing, dying, grieving. One of the topics was “Facing Up to Mortality and Faith.” It talks about how parents and their adult children deal with parents’ death and all the issues that are related to it. There’s a fascinating perspective I want to read to you:

... seniors [are] frightened not for themselves but for their children and grandchildren they believe are on the futureless side of a salvation gap.

The parents see the next generation drawing identity from relationships and accomplishments and material goods, from things that will pass away.¹

Do you think that is true of you? Do you think if your parents or someone else were to take a look at your life that they would say that you get your identity from accomplishments and from material possessions? No doubt there are many, many Americans who seek meaning from income, savings, investments, securities, houses, cars, furniture, cabins and a whole list of other possessions.

I suppose that it is safe to say that we today, in America, more than at any other time or place in all of history, count possessions as among life’s most important relationships. It is an issue where Christians have gone to great extremes. There are those on the one hand who emphasize poverty. They quote Jesus as saying we should sell all that we have and give to the poor. And then there are those who emphasize prosperity. They teach that God is a rich God and we are his children and therefore he intends for us to be as healthy and wealthy as we possibly can. On the one extreme we are made to feel guilty if we have any possessions at all. On the other extreme we are made to feel cheated if we are not billionaires or if we don’t have more than everybody else.

Since possessions are such an important part of our American lives and since possessions were

so much a part of the teaching of Jesus, let’s try to figure out what is a truly Christian relationship to the things we may own.

Jesus talked about money and material things often. There are four biblical principles for us to consider. The first of those is that everything that is good comes from God.

In James 1:17 we read:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

The great overarching principle of all material possessions is that God made everything, that God owns everything that exists and that everything good that we have comes from God.

For the past several years, I have worked out of a lovely office in the church building. It was built the summer of 1985 and now it is being torn apart. I went in there the other day and where there used to be windows there are concrete blocks. The place where I have been studying for years is being turned into a corridor which will connect to the addition now under construction. The office I have just lost was fitted with many comforts. It had air conditioning for hot summer days and heat for the winter time and a computer and telephones and lots of bookcases. It was just great. I have

repeatedly referred to it, probably thousands of times, as “my office,” but I do not hold legal title to it. I never did. I have

had no rights to it other than temporary rights. It has been a very good office — a gift from the church, a gift from God. But never mine to own. Only to use.

That could be said about everything else that is in my life. And it could and should be correctly said about everything that is in your life as well. For everything that we have is really owned by God. It is on loan to us — the house, the car, the computer, books and clothes. Everything that I have — everything that you have — belongs to

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God. But he's very generous with all that he has, exceedingly generous. So, God has allowed us to live in his world, drive his cars, eat his food, enjoy his art, wear his clothes and occupy his houses. God just loves doing this. He loves to share all that he has made, all that is good.

But never make the mistake of thinking that you own what's really on loan. For the moment we make that mental mistake, we become thieves and are taking ownership of something that is not truly or rightly ours.

The second principle to consider as Christians in our relationship to possessions is that we are to be grateful and enjoy God's generosity.

All of this raises what for me at least is a difficult question and that is why is God more generous with some people than with other people? I have been in the homes of Christians that could be described as palatial. Their size, their cost, their contents are breathtaking. But I have also been to the garbage dump outside of Manila in the Philippines, a place where many Christians live. People are born on the dump, grow up and live their entire lives in shacks on top of the dump, go to church on the dump and die on the dump. Everything they eat and every single possession is somebody else's garbage, yet some of them are devout Christians.

I cannot help but ask why some have so much when others have so little. Is it because some people are smarter than others? Is it because some people are better than others? Is wealth determined by hard work? We know from observation that there are people that don't work very hard that have a great deal and there are people that work very hard that have virtually nothing. We know people that aren't very smart that seem to have many possessions and people that are very smart that hardly have any possessions. At least when we reflect upon it, we wonder why were we born into a situation where we would have such access to affluence.

I sometimes wonder why was I born in affluent America where it is comparatively easy to get possessions while others are born in places where there is not very much to be had even if they are

smart and work very hard.

I don't know the answers to these questions. For me it is a matter of trust. I believe that God knows the answers to the questions and I am convinced that he is wise, kind, good and just. When I put all that I know about God together with my observations of inequities in our world, I conclude that God knows answers that I have not been told. I anticipate that perhaps someday in eternity I will be told things that now I could not begin to understand. And between now and then I must trust God for that which I do not know and I must behave Christianly on the basis of the information that I do have.

We are to be grateful and enjoy God's generosity. The Bible teaches the concept of gratitude and enjoyment. One example is in Ecclesiastes 5:19 where we read,

When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and to be happy in his work — this is a gift of God.

In other words, God invites us to enjoy the many gifts he has given to us.

Like God, I too, am a father. And, as a father I take delight in giving gifts to my children and want them to enjoy those gift. I don't want them to feel guilty that they have something others don't have. I want my child to appreciate the gift, to use the gift and to enjoy the gift to the absolute fullness.

Let's face it, most of us have a lot of possessions. Now I know that's not true of everyone. I

realize that there are some who are struggling to make ends meet — maybe unsuccessfully. But for the majority of us, we have multiple televisions, multiple

telephones, multiple cars, multiple bank accounts. Yes, there are some that have more than others and there are some that have far less than others. But all of us have more than billions of other people around the earth today.

As Christians we need to count, take inventory in a sense, all the gifts that God has given to us and have a response of gratitude and enjoyment.

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The third principle for our relationship to possessions is that we are to enjoy wealth, but never to trust it. Because the day that our confidence is in the gifts that we have is the day that we have turned our backs on God. In 1 Timothy 6:17 the apostle Paul tells Timothy to:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Now I can't speak for everybody so I'll only speak for me and I'll tell you candidly I find it is very difficult not to trust in possessions and wealth. If I set out on a car trip, intuitively I go through a checklist to be sure that I have clothes and a map and sufficient cash in my wallet. I make sure I have at least one but preferably a couple of different credit cards and an ATM card to take care of all the things that might go wrong. It's easy to trust those things to be sufficient to get me through any difficulty. I'm not alone in this.

When facing worry we get home security systems, some purchase handguns to keep in a drawer next to the bed. Others make a point of living in a community where there are high enough taxes that the police and firemen will immediately respond to a 911 call. It's easy to trust in those things.

As we anticipate retirement we trust in good investments, a 401K or company pension plan, paying off our house mortgage, if possible, plenty of insurance. All of those things can give a sense of personal security, even if we think social security is going to be bankrupt by the time we get to retirement.

It doesn't take a lot of money to trust in money. It takes, actually, not very much money to trust it. You know, you can take a nickel and hold it in front of your eye and blot out the entire sun. And it doesn't take much more than a nickel's worth of wealth to block out God. It is switching our trust from God who deserves our trust and is adequate for our trust and instead putting our trust in the

gifts and the possessions that God has given to us.

All of this is arrogantly misplaced trust. One of the wealthiest people that I ever met lost everything through collapsing investments when he was in his seventies, far too late in life to recover. We know that home security systems don't always work. We know that a handgun can get in the hands of an assailant and can be used against us. We know that we can call 911 and if that particular moment they get seventeen calls we might not be the highest priority and the police might not make it in time. We know that there are illnesses for which no amount of health insurance is adequate because there is no treatment that will result in a cure.

So, never trust money. Never trust possessions. Only trust God. At the very most, money and possessions are instruments that God uses as means for good in our lives. But to misplace and put our trust in those possessions is really an insult to God.

I don't think that this is easy to do. For sincere and serious Christians it can be a very hard distinction between enjoying but never trusting the good stuff that God has given to us. I don't pretend that I've got it all figured out, but I can tell you some of the things that I try to do. I try to thank God for every meal as a frequent opportunity for me to communicate my gratitude and trust in him. I try every morning to make my first waking thought to thank God for as many things as I can think of — family, clothes, house, bed, radio,

TV, safety, job, insurance, eyeglasses (especially my glasses because I see so poorly without them!) Every

time I go to a doctor I tell God that my life and health are his to give or take and that I place my confidence in God, not in the doctor.

And when things go wrong I realize the frailty of the possessions that I have. Last May my telephone calling card number was stolen. I didn't know anything about it until the phone bill came with nearly two thousand dollars worth of extra phone calls on it from the Netherlands to the Bronx. One of these calls was over eleven hours long and cost \$735. Once I settled down a bit I talked to God before I called the telephone company. I told

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God it was a reminder of just how vulnerable the things that I count upon really are and how easily they can get messed up or lost. Enjoy God's gifts but never trust the gifts. Trust only the Giver.

The fourth and the final principle for a Christian's relationship to possessions is to share God's blessings. Again in 1 Timothy 6 in verses 18 and 19 there is another command to those who are rich:

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they [that is those of us that are rich] will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

The principle is simple and straightforward. Those who receive God's gifts should share those gifts with others.

I've been really helped by the perspective of a man named Dr. Ralph Winter who is a church historian and theologian. He's got a great and insightful analysis of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. He says that the people of Israel in the Old Testament wanted to be blessed by God but they didn't want to bless anybody else. They wanted God to bless them in a big way but they were unwilling to share those blessings with others. As a result, eventually God quit blessing them.

I see that same principle often repeated in the New Testament as well as in our times. That's why the New Testament tells us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The only way to keep God's blessings is to give them away. The only way to get new blessings from God is to share the old ones and make room for more.

What does this mean in practice? It means giving away our money to help others. It means opening our homes to guests. Our tables are to be a place of hospitality where food is shared. It means that we are not reluctant to lend tools to a neighbor and that we are not upset if those tools are not returned. It means that when a small child accidentally breaks an antique of great value or scribbles on the wall that we lighten up and don't get so upset. It means that we look for every opportunity to give away, give away and give away. That is the Christian perspective rather than the horribly anti-Christian perspective that what life

is all about is to get, get, get. We can't continually ask God to bless us but be unwilling to bless others as we would like to be blessed.

Does this mean giving money through the church? Well, sure, I'd like to think so. I'd like to believe that we can do things together as the Body of Christ that independently and individually we could never begin to do.

But that's not the point. Feel free to pass by the offering plate every Sunday if that's what you believe you should do — but do not fail to share God's blessings. Don't just keep them. Don't be greedy. Don't be selfish. Don't just use the good things that God gives. Give it away. Share it. Bless others.

Don't be stupid like Old Testament Israel expecting God to bless us but then being unwilling to bless others. Share God's blessings.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, summarized it very well:

*Make as much as you can,
Save as much as you can,
Give away as much as you can.*

To have a Christian relationship with possessions, remember that everything good comes from God. Be grateful and enjoy God's generosity. Never trust wealth. Share God's blessings. As we are blessed, let us bless others.

Now, may God bless you with great and many gifts. May you not trust those gifts but only the Giver. And may you, as you receive the blessings of God, bless others in turn for the sake of Jesus Christ.

¹ USA Today, 7/20/95, pg. 3D.

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