

life groups discussion guides

02.12.17 – giving away happiness



“God is your source. Everything else is just a resource.”

-- Tony Evans

*“A winner is someone who recognizes his God-given talents,
works his tail off to develop them into skills, and uses these skills to accomplish his goals.”*

-- Larry Bird

In looking over the “Big Idea” for this sermon (“God wants to change our perspective to see every possession and resource as an opportunity to bring heaven to earth.”), I wrestled with exactly how to begin unpacking this. I think the knee-jerk reaction to hearing something like that is that we think it’s about keeping us from being materialistic; from loving money to the point that we become selfish with it. And let’s face it selfish is our default setting is it not? It seems hardwired into us from the time we were little. I was once at a friend’s party and the young child of one of his other friends approached me as I was examining a skateboard or some such thing and told me to give it to him. I asked “What’s the magic word, little buddy?” To which the little imp bellowed “MINE!” We all laughed...and the little delinquent got the stupid skateboard.

But is selfishness really the biggest enemy when it comes to our possessions? From a biblical perspective we can certainly find places where we are encouraged to be generous. I often think that if the Bible is telling us something it’s because it’s addressing something that is not the way we’d typically behave. I mean, if everyone were inherently unselfish, there would be no need to tell us not to be, right? But here’s the rub – do you think it’s possible to behave in a certain way without realizing we’re doing so? Can I be unloving without realizing it? Can I be prideful without realizing it? Can I be selfish with the things God has entrusted to me without ever realizing it?

That’s somewhat rhetorical of course, because most of us would answer yes to those things because we’ve seen evidence in our own lives of their truth. I know for a fact that I can be unloving without wanting to be – because I’ve done it. David was a man after God’s own heart, and yet even this man who was so very close to God wrestled with faults that might be hidden from his own sight. Consider the end of Psalm 139 where David writes (v. 23-24),

Search me, 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.

It’s interesting when read in context, because these words follow this proclamation from the shepherd-king:

Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

It’s ironic at best that these words immediately precede a request for God to examine his heart. One can almost imagine God saying “Uh...David, let’s start with that hatred in your heart for these people you’re talking about.” David either sensed a light bulb go off and his asking God to search him was the result of that epiphany – or he just didn’t get it at all. If David can be blind to his own hatred of others, then I can certainly be blind to selfishness (and a host of other issues) in my life.

Q :: What are some of the dangers of having these spiritual blindspots? And what steps can be taken to address them?

The notes given as prep material for preparing this guide indicated that the sermon would address the spiritual warfare aspect of our attitudes and perspectives regarding our possessions and resources. Every believer is the focus of spiritual warfare that most often takes one of three forms: The world; The flesh; and the devil. Perhaps if we have a better understanding of the tactics of the enemy we might be better prepared to take action that leads to victory.

Q :: Taking each in turn, describe how the world, the flesh and the devil might present an opposing view from God's regarding the use of our possessions and resources for the advancement of His Kingdom?

We typically have these conversations around how to use our possessions for God's glory – most often we think about this from a financial perspective. The topic often comes up in the context of a sermon series tied to financial stewardship. We talk about how our money doesn't really belong to us, but to God. That we give Him a tithe of 10%, but He really owns it all. And all of that is true. However it is true not just of our money, but of ALL of our resources – even the non-financial ones.

Q :: Describe non-financial resources we may have at our disposal – and then how those might be used in service to God.

Q :: Can we be *rich* in these non-financial resources? If so, might the same expectations from God about our handling of them, and our heart towards them apply? Might the same potential for being blind to our misuse of them exist?

There are some very real dangers pointed out in Scripture about not handling our possessions and resources properly, and they're relative to the condition of our heart and the rightness of our perspectives and motives. For example, I've heard people "quote" from the Bible that "money is the root of all evil." Perhaps you've heard this as well, but that's not what the Bible actually says. 1 Timothy 6:10 says: "For *the love of money* is a root of *all kinds of evil*. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Money itself is not evil, but many evil things grow out of a love for money. In loving money we invite danger – and that danger, the "all kinds of evil" can take many forms, and often manifests in significant ways. Though this verse talks specifically about money, I don't think it a big stretch to say that it can apply to the heart we have to all of our possessions and resources, not merely the financial ones.

As the end of the verse from 1 Timothy shows, loving money can draw us away from our faith. This is echoed in the book of Deuteronomy. As the Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land, Moses is giving them instructions about how they are to behave in this new land. Mixed in these early verses of the book are warnings as well as promises. The promises outline the extent to which God desires to bless them. The warnings relate that many of those blessings can be swept away if they are not careful to obey the instructions God is giving through Moses. One passage in particular illustrates both the truth that God's intention for them in their new home is one of prosperity and success, and that the very thing God is bringing as a blessing could potentially be they very things that becomes their undoing. From chapter 8, verses 7-19 (NIV):

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.

Deuteronomy is literally filled with warnings to "be careful". If you ever want an interesting Bible study, ready through this book and highlight every time you see the words "be careful", "carefully", "beware", or other such cautionary terms. You'll be surprised how often they pop up. And using the same logic I mentioned earlier, I'd say these warnings to be careful are given because they serve to point out what our natural tendencies might otherwise be. This passage features a real doozy –

“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God”. And THAT is the real peril inherent in our stuff, be it financial or otherwise – that in having it we think it came from us and we can end up leaving God completely out of the picture, and by natural extension, out of our story altogether. Further making the point that the blessings are not the enemy, Moses reminds his people that God gives them the ability to earn wealth, so the resulting reward from their work was not evil at all – God was involved in it after all. The caution instead relates to the tendencies of our frail and faulty human heart. We are prone to love God’s blessings so much that we can easily end up chasing them instead of pursuing God.

Oswald Chambers in his classic devotional *My Utmost for His Highest* addresses this very thing in a very pointed way (in typical Chambers fashion):

We are not here to develop a spiritual life of our own, or to enjoy a quiet spiritual retreat. We are here to have the full realization of Jesus Christ, for the purpose of building His body.

Am I building up the body of Christ, or am I only concerned about my own personal development? The essential thing is my personal relationship with Jesus Christ— “...that I may know Him...” (Philippians 3:10). To fulfill God’s perfect design for me requires my total surrender— complete abandonment of myself to Him. Whenever I only want things for myself, the relationship is distorted. And I will suffer great humiliation once I come to acknowledge and understand that I have not really been concerned about realizing Jesus Christ Himself, but only concerned with knowing what He has done for me.

My goal is God Himself, not joy nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God.

Am I measuring my life by this standard or by something less?

And really, doesn’t that get right at the problem with having the wrong perspective about our possessions and resources? They become a standard of measurement for our life, both good and bad. Perhaps the focus rests too heavily on them to begin with? Maybe this is where my initial struggle lied with this topic and how to unpack it. By placing so much focus on how we use our stuff, are we taking attention off of God Himself? What if how we handled our possessions and resources was dealt with properly because it was the natural by-product of a life lived in radical pursuit of God, and not because we spent our time focusing on how to use what we have rightly.

Don’t get me wrong, I believe we should live with intentionality. Absolutely. And I think that applies to the use of the resources entrusted to us. But look at it this way. If I spend the next five minutes telling you NOT to think about kangaroos, you know what you’ll be doing when I’m done? Trying to get those hopping marsupials out of your head. Because I tried to get you not focus on something by making you first focus on it. We need good solid biblical teaching that helps us live according to God’s plan for us. All of the “be carefals” in Deuteronomy is proof of that. But what if the answer to how to change our perspective about our possessions and resources might be to stop thinking so much about them and channel that energy into a pursuit of God that drips with reckless abandon?

Q :: 1 Timothy tells us that the love of money can cause us to wander from our faith, and Deuteronomy 8 reminds us that an abundance of prosperity from God can cause us to forget Him. So is this a call to better resource management – or more passionate pursuit of God?

Q :: If we are pursuing God with the passion that we should, does that inherently help us attain a proper view of our possessions and resources, and how to use them as He’d have us do? Or is the spiritual battle in this arena such that it requires our focused attention and targeted efforts to counter attack the enemy?

Lofty and difficult questions, I think. Maybe no easy answers – or universal ones. Maybe the approach from us should be relevant to our own predispositions. Or maybe we need to pursue God with all that we have and that settles everything else.

Whatever the case may be, there’s one thing you must do right away — stop thinking about kangaroos! ;D