

The Earth is the Lord's

Text: Psalm 24:1-6 for 08/06/2017

¹ The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ² for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters. ³ Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? ⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. ⁵ He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

Imagine that you are visiting a foreign country. As you speak with the native people of that country, and you begin to understand their culture, you discover that the people still believe in witchcraft. They truly believe that one person can put a spell on another person for harm or good. What would you think of those people? Would you think they were naive or backwards? Or imagine that you found out that the people of the country worshiped their ancestors, and even sacrificed food to them on little altars in their homes. You find out that this is a part of their culture. What would you think about people who did such things? Would you think of them as foolish, and perhaps even godless?

Professor Paul Wendland, the president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, spent one year of his ministry in Zambia, Africa. While he was there he also had the opportunity to spend some time at the seminary for the Lutheran Church of Central Africa. Prof. Wendland once shared this comment with a friend. He said, "If students from the seminary here in Africa were to visit our seminary in Mequon, and if they would see all the new cars in the parking lot and then hear the students complaining about the food in the cafeteria, they would think that we are the most godless and thankless Christians they had ever met." What about us? When we look at the cars sitting outside of our church, and then consider the declining state of the inside of our church, what do you think those African seminary students would think of us?

Materialism: it is the idolatry of worshipping material, created things, rather than worshipping the Creator. It is the lie that filling our lives with stuff will somehow bring us joy and happiness. It's the deception that earthly treasures and pleasures will somehow last and not disappoint us. It's thinking that we never have enough when we have more than we need. It's failing to put everything we have and everything we are into thankful service to God. And the worst part about materialism is that, like witchcraft in Africa or ancestor worship in Asia, it is so much a part of our American culture that we don't even realize we are doing it!

This morning we are beginning a stewardship series in which we want to explore the reasons why we give to the Lord and how we do that. Today we will be using the words of Psalm 24 to examine the motives of our hearts, because joyful generosity begins with a heart that recognizes that ...

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1. We worship the Creator and not created stuff.

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2. We worship a God who has redeemed us for himself.

Psalm 24 begins with a bold statement. **“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”** (vs. 1-2). It is a simple truth: Everything in the world belongs to God, because he made it. We belong to God, because he made us. This church belongs to God. Our houses, our cars, and the priceless collections of things that we treasure all belong to God, because the earth, and everything in it, are his.

Yet neither our culture nor our sinful nature accept this simple truth. We like to think we own ourselves. Think of how many terms we have in our culture which contain the word “self.” We have the right to SELF-DETERMINATION. We say that we can choose whatever we want to do with our bodies and lives. We take SELFIES, because we like looking at ourselves. We talk about SELF-ASSURANCE, SELF-AWARENESS, and SELF-CONFIDENCE. We say SELF-ESTEEM is important so we read SELF-HELP books and articles. But when we focus our attention on ourselves, isn't that just another way of worshipping what is created instead of the Creator?

Psalm 24 goes on to say, **“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false”** (vs. 3-4). What is interesting about verse four is the word that was translated “idol.” The word from the original Hebrew literally means, “empty.” Not the empty of having nothing inside, but empty as in something that has no value. It is something that is worthless and in the end serves no good purpose. Idolatry isn't so much loving someone or something that is evil. The truly deceiving form of idolatry is when we love God's good creation more than we love God. Idolatry is loving things that have no value when it comes to saving our souls.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon describes these worthless things as “meaningless,” and he applies the word to lots of good things that people do. Solomon was a great architect. He built the temple. He built palaces. He built storehouses and treasure cities. Solomon loved building things. We like to “build” things too, don't we? Whether it's a house, or a garden, or a career, or our reputation. But Solomon said this was all “meaningless,” something worthless.

Solomon was known as the wisest man on earth. He was a master of economics, biology, architecture, and earth sciences. But in the end, he said these things were meaningless. Pursuing knowledge and wisdom is not a bad thing. It's just not the most important thing. How worthless it is to put worldly knowledge ahead of the knowledge of God.

Solomon was also rich. His annual income of 666 talents of gold, today would be worth about 42 billion dollars. He had everything money could buy, and he spared himself no delight or pleasure. But what does he say about it all? Wealth is meaningless. When your life comes to an end you cannot use it to buy your way out of hell, or into heaven.

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What are the worthless things we have lifted up our hearts to? What are the things we have worshipped instead of worshipping the God who created us? Is it our work, our careers? Is it the endless pursuit of pleasure? Is it money, or all the “stuff” that money can buy? None of these things are bad in and of themselves. But if we let these empty, worthless things become bigger than God in our life, we are missing out on the one thing that can bring real joy. We are missing the one thing that can bring real meaning to our lives.

And what's that? The only joy that will never disappoint us is the joy we find in serving the God who made us and saved us. It is the joy of worshipping the God who redeemed us for himself. That is where we find true value in life, true success in life.

Some people compare finding success in life to climbing a hill. The problem is most people don't know what real success is, so they just keep climbing. I read a story about a reporter who interviewed three of the top stars in Hollywood. All three of those star's lives ended in despair and disaster. They had all climbed that hill of success. They made millions at the box office. They were interviewed by late-night talk shows. They were followed by adoring fans and the Paparazzi. Yet they lived in fear and despair. Why? Because they felt that if they did not have one more successful movie, they would be forgotten. They were happier when they were nobodies than when they were famous.

So, what went wrong? They were ambitious and successful. Yet they believed their life meant nothing if they were not successful one more time. What was their real problem? They were climbing the wrong hill. King David writes in Psalm 24, **“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior”** (vs. 3-5).

There is only one hill worth climbing, and that is the hill that brings us closer to God. But isn't that also an act of despair? Who CAN climb that hill and stand before a holy God? Do we have clean hands and pure hearts that have never sinned? I know I don't. If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that we struggle with hatred, desire, jealousy, or bitterness. How many times have we lifted our hearts to things that are worthless and empty? Have we never sworn by what is false? How many times have we thought that we could successfully climb the **“hill of the Lord”** all on our own by our own perfect keeping of God's commandments. On our own we are dead in sin and cannot climb our way up to God's standard of perfection.

So how do we ascend the hill of the Lord? How do we stand in that holy place? We do so by the power of our generous God who makes us holy. You see a better translation of verse five is that believers, **“[...] will receive blessing from the Lord and RIGHTEOUSNESS from God his Savior”** (v. 5). Through faith in Jesus, your Savior, you have everything you will ever need or want to make your life complete. In Christ, you have complete forgiveness for all the times you worshiped created things rather than the Creator. Your forgiveness is so complete that you can stand before a holy God because Jesus has dressed you in the

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righteousness of his perfect life. Jesus became poor for your sake so that you might become rich in a way most billionaires will never experience. You are promised a full and fulfilling life. In Christ, you are now a child of the most high God. That means you are looking forward to an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade.

All the rest of the empty stuff of this world will fade away. The movie star's beauty fades. The billionaire can't buy his way out of a hospitable bed. The athlete's strong body eventually becomes weak and frail. The scholar's knowledge diminishes with time. But our faith in Jesus sustains us to the grave and beyond. It provides us with a life that will never fade.

That living, breathing life of faith gives us joy in worshipping the God who redeemed us for himself. Yet worship God goes so far beyond what we do in church for an hour each week. True joy in worshipping God is found when we generously serve others with the blessings God has poured out on us. Hands that Christ has cleansed from sin with his blood can now generously give. We use our hands to give when we care for our children, when we help our neighbors in time of need, when we serve within the church, when we lift our hands in prayer, or when we use our hands to open a Bible to feed the souls of those around us. We find joy and meaning in life when we joyfully give not only of our treasures, but when we share our God given talents and abilities so that others may be blessed by the blessings God has so generously poured out on us.

Our lives don't have meaning because our bank accounts, or our calendars, are full. Our lives don't have meaning because we get to enjoy one pleasure after another. Our lives don't even have meaning because of what others may think or say of us. Life has true meaning when we know God as our Creator and Savior, and when we find joy in serving him with all that we have and all that we are. That is where joyful generosity begins! Amen.