

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S

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Every man sustains many different relationships in life. There are three major areas which to a very large degree cover the whole ground. First of all, there is his primary relationship to God, who made him. Next, man sustains vital and important relationships with a great many peoples such as parents, brothers, sisters, husband or wife, children, friends, teachers, employers, employees, and many more. In the third place, he also sustains vital relationships with things. Among these things are houses, lands, cars, clothes, books, personal effects) and many, many more.

In one sense these relationships and the attitudes behind them will determine where a man spends eternity. They will determine whether he is saved in heaven, or lost in the eternal fires of hell, as mentioned by our Lord. In this particular study our concern is exclusively with man's relationship to things. Let us begin by noticing some of the passages in the scriptures which suggest what man's attitude toward material things ought to be,

God's Word

One of the simplest, yet most complete, of all the statements in the Bible concerning the material universe is that from the pen of David, often called Israel's greatest king. He wrote, "The earth is Jehovah's, and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein." (Ps. 24:1). David unequivocally stated that the world and everything in it, including man, belongs to God. This is what we might well expect, since we remember that everything was created by the power of God.

In the New Testament there is an important passage in the 25th chapter of Matthew which further points out man's relationships to things. This is the familiar parable of the talents, from which we shall read only a few key sentences. "For it is as when a man, going into another country, called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods." Notice that the man was the owner and that he gave his goods into the hands of his servants. "And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several abilities; and he went on his journey."

In the verses that follow we read that the man who received five talents traded with them and received five additional talents. When his lord returned he said, "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Similarly, the man who received two talents earned an additional two talents and was given an identical reward. Tragically, the man who received only one talent failed to use that talent in any way and received only condemnation upon his lord's return: "Thou wicked and slothful servant ... cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 25:14-15, 21, 26, 30).

It is obvious from this passage that man is God's steward, having the responsibility of administering God's affairs for a limited period of time. Perhaps the meaning will be made even more impressive if we describe man not as God's steward, but as God's manager, God's administrator, God's supervisor, in charge of certain earthly possessions for a limited period of time. Man is never the owner in the full sense, but rather is a steward, in whose hands a trust has been placed. It is his primary responsibility to use the material things that come to him in accordance with the will of God. His eternal destiny will largely depend upon the use to which he has put these blessings which constitute a trust from God.

A Strong Emphasis

There are more teachings in the New Testament on the subject of stewardship than on the subject of baptism, even though there are more than 100 passages which contain the word baptism. There are more teachings in the New Testament on the subject of stewardship than on the Lord's Supper, even though this is a significant, climactic act of worship for each Lord's day. Approximately half of our Lord's parables develop this theme. One cannot read far in the New Testament without realizing that everything we have belongs to God, and that we are his stewards. Whatever it is, if we have it, God gave it.

While here on the earth Christ placed little or no emphasis upon material things, except to indicate that they are relatively unimportant. For example, on one occasion when a man came to Jesus asking his help in claiming part of an inheritance, Jesus responded, "Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?" Then Jesus took the occasion to add this important teaching on the theme of our study, "Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness: for man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruit? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods

laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:14-21). The emphasis that Christ makes here is that spiritual matters far exceed in importance our physical possessions. A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesses.

A second example is found in the tenth chapter of Luke in the story of Christ’s visit to the home of Mary and Martha. Martha was cumbered about much serving, though Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and heard his word. At one point in the story Martha came to Christ and said, “Lord, dost thou not care that my sister doth leave me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me. But the Lord answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful: for Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:40-42). Even such ordinary affairs as preparing meals and keeping house, are not to be compared in importance with the spiritual things of life.

Human Tendencies

In contrast with this teaching from the Lord, the human side of our own nature goes in the opposite direction, placing great emphasis on the importance of things. Along with this, men generally feel that the things which they control are their own, and, therefore, they may do with them as they wish. This is particularly true of things that men have secured by their own efforts or skills. There seems to be little or no comprehension of man’s role as a steward, but rather the idea that man because of his own natural abilities, his own special skills, and his own hard work has earned a clear title to all the material things which he possesses.

Observation suggests also, that there is absolutely no end to man’s want. It is utterly impossible to satisfy all the cravings of the human heart, so far as material things are concerned. As a man’s income rises, usually there is a corresponding rise in his standard of living. For example, imagine a man who makes some \$3600 per year and who lives in a small apartment in a modest apartment building. He dreams of the time when he can own his own house and enjoy a certain degree of privacy. As the years pass, his income rises and there comes a time when he purchases a modest two-bedroom home in a conservative section of the city. There he is very happy for a time. However, as the years go by, and as he sees the larger and more expensive homes of his neighbors and friends, there comes an increased desire for a larger and more pretentious home. The outcome is that when he is financially able to do so, he purchases a larger home: one with three bedrooms and a den. It is on a larger lot and in a more elite section of the city.

If his income continues to rise through the years, he also may add a swimming pool in the back yard, or a stable for horses, or any one of a number of other expensive additions. During this period of years, he also has advanced from owning no car at all, to the point of owning one car, and eventually to the point of owning two cars. From modest, relatively less expensive car, he also may advance into larger, higher-priced cars. If his income continues to rise, there are always additional wants equal to the occasion. Perhaps these wants include a house at the lake, with a boat dock and an expensive boat. If there is still more income, it can readily be spent in travel. As one friend confided to me, he spent \$5,000 on a three-weeks trip to Alaska to hunt Kodiak bear.

Self-Centered

Last fall when I last visited Detroit, friends took me out to see the property recently purchased for the establishment of North Central Christian College. It had formerly been owned by an insurance executive. He had spent something like \$500,000 on the twenty-six acres, lavishing his expenditures in the satisfaction of one whim after another. There was a beautiful little lake, planted with almost every kind of evergreen that one could name. The house itself was expensively built, but it was in the basement of the house that the extravagance of his expenditures was most obvious. There were several rooms paneled in worm-eaten -chestnut, the kind of paneling that most people consider quite appropriate to a beautiful den or even a living room. In these basement rooms there were fifty-four individual closets, each lined with cedar. Before he surrendered the property, there were 150 suits of clothing in these closets and 200 pairs of shoes in the accompanying shelves. Such lavish expenditure is hardly normal, but it does indicate the extremes to which men may go in satisfying their own desires.

One wonders how many hungry people might have been fed and how many naked people might have been clothed with the excesses of this one man’s expenditures. Somewhere along the line of expensive and luxurious living, which we have just been surveying, the Christian must drop out of the race. In the buying of larger and more expensive homes and cars and other possessions, there is a great danger that a man may lose his soul. While it is not possible for me to draw the line, for you and to say that beyond such a point your expenditures are sinful, it is imperative that each one of us search his own soul, remember his position as one of God’s stewards, and draw certain lines for himself.

Giving To God - Now

We are all familiar with the teaching of the scriptures on the subject of giving. In the New Testament era, our Lord has been very generous with us, giving us a flexible scale by which we do our own determining of how much we shall give. As the apostle Paul stated the matter in I Corinthians 16:2: “Upon the first day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.” We are grateful for this sliding scale, which means that if our income is small and if our

obligations to our family are large, that we may give proportionately smaller amounts into the treasury of the Lord. We are also to remember, however, that if our incomes are larger, we are expected to give more generously to the Lord.

In II Corinthians 8:8. Paul further says, "Proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity also of your love." In this instance the apostle is simply saying that a concrete means of measuring the sincerity of our love for the Lord is the generosity of our caring for the needs of others. In some cases, this measuring stick would indeed be disturbing.

It is estimated that we--the church--give an average of only about 3% of our gross income. If this estimate is at all accurate, we need to be deeply disturbed. For a congregation such as this one, enjoying the high economic level that we do enjoy, it is hardly reasonable to think that any of us should give less than 10% of our gross income. Many of us, perhaps, should give even more, much more. Let each one of us think back through his income of the last year and make his decision about how much he wants to give back to the Lord. Let us remember that after all, it belongs to the Lord anyway, and we are simply returning to him a portion of what he has given us to use.

Giving - In the Future

In what we have been saying, we have been placing the emphasis upon the importance of giving now while we live. While this is a very important and necessary emphasis, I should like to suggest that it is also important that we make some plans to give to the Lord when we die. My meaning is this. Most of us cannot give all that we have and desire to give to the Lord while we yet live, for we do not know how long we shall live and what emergency needs there may be toward the end of life. Often when we die some of these savings are left behind.

In addition, most of us are purchasing a house over a long period of years. We do not even own the house at the present time and therefore could hardly give it to the church. There will come a day, however, when we leave that house behind as a part of our estate. Our estate also may have certain significant additions through insurance that is paid only at the time of our death. Still further addition to our estate may come through investments that are left behind when we die. Altogether, nearly all of us will leave something behind in an estate when the Lord calls us home. It is about this estate that I wish to make two suggestions.

Suggestions

First, make a will. Roger Babson has said, "Nothing but trouble follows when you die without a will; don't be foolish, see a lawyer." He points out several advantages of having a will: It prevents misunderstandings later; it insures that your estate will be used as you wish; it makes certain that someone you trust will administer it; and it often reduces the expenses of carrying out your wishes in dispensing your estate.

A second suggestion is even more important. Make a Christian will. Some time ago a little folder was handed to me containing the following paragraph: "As a steward of God you are responsible for the distribution of your estate after your death, as well as in handling it while you live. God made all, owns all, and gives all. As Christian stewards we are responsible to God for everything that comes into our hands. God requires an accounting of our stewardship. That obligation continues to the final disposition of your estate--all of which is God's property and over which you are merely a steward. A Christian should make his legal will thoughtfully and prayerfully to see that those he loves are properly protected. Seek to know the will of God regarding the final disposition of your estate. Write the will of God into your will so that the causes that you hold dear will continue to be supported. No man can tell you the will of God regarding the final disposition of your property. Only by prayerfully seeking God's leadership, can you know what he wants you to do."

Equally important in my estimation, and even more so in some respects since the teaching of spiritual matters transcends in importance caring for the physical body, is the support of institutions providing Christian education for our young people. Think of the tremendous contribution that one could make, not only to the saving of the souls of the young people involved, but also to the on-going of the church in future generations by helping provide for those schools which teach the Bible to young people while they get their regular secondary and college educations. It is in this view, that I personally feel a responsibility to make a contribution to schools like David Lipscomb College, where more than 1700 young people are being taught the Bible each day.

In addition, there is also the very important responsibility of remembering the church in our wills. We would include in our wills a paragraph something like this, "I hereby give, devise and bequeath to the Hillsboro Church of Christ, located at Nashville, Tennessee, the sum of \$ _____, or the following properties, to wit: _____ to be used in promoting the work of the church and the Cause of Christ. I hereby appoint and designate the elders of the Hillsboro Church of Christ, or their successors, whoever they may be, as the executors of this my last will and testament, to serve without bond."

Conclusion

Just what will all of this mean? Nothing at all at the moment, except the slight trouble to which we would be put in making the will. But after a few years, when we have been called from this earth to give a report to our Father in heaven who has appointed us his stewards, it will mean a great deal. It will mean that orphans will be cared for who otherwise would have lessened support. It would

mean that elderly people can rest secure in the fact that Christians have felt the responsibility to care for their own. It will mean that young people will continue to have opportunities even on a more extended scale, to hear the Bible taught every day, as they prepare themselves for the various professions and works of life. It will mean that the elders of the church will be able to provide the funds for additional missionaries in areas where the gospel is not known and to provide funds for the building of church buildings in mission fields.

What a wonderful satisfaction it will be to each one of us, after having enjoyed God's blessings throughout life and after having given generously while we lived, to stand before God in judgment and to know that the last thing that we did on earth was to remember the Lord in our wills. Of course, we will want to remember our children and to provide at least something for their needs. This goes without saying. But in addition to those family ties, we also need to remember our responsibilities to God and our role as stewards of God's bounty. Whatever we have, God gave it and we have a responsibility to return a significant portion to him.