

The Principle of Ownership

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Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

—1 Chronicles 29:14

When we give to God, we are just taking our hands off what already belongs to Him.

—Anonymous

It's amazing how easily toddlers learn to emphatically announce, "Mine!" For some reason it's one of the first words in a child's vocabulary. And it's not just a word—it's an attitude, the attitude that what you have belongs to me.

The struggle over ownership begins early. Before we learn to walk or dress ourselves, we learn that if we want it, it's ours. Then we spend the rest of our lives chasing *stuff*. Sometimes it seems that our whole existence is built around getting more for ourselves and keeping others from taking it.

It All Belongs to God

The idea of ownership is at the very heart of stewardship and, more specifically, the issue of tithing. In order to be a true steward of all God has given us, we must recognize that everything we have belongs to Him in the first place. To give cheerfully requires us to have an adequate understanding that what we are giving doesn't really belong to us anyway—it belongs to God.

David sums it up very well in Psalm 24:1—
“The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” There is nothing that exists that doesn’t already belong to God. It is all His, and our tithe is merely a way of recognizing that fact.

David expressed the same conviction in his prayer in 1 Chronicles 29. In his last days as king, David had initiated a capital campaign to raise funds to build the Temple. The building of the Temple was a life dream—a dream directly from God. David had many successes in his reign, but the one driving force was to build this place of worship in Jerusalem. David had the plans and details ready to go, but it was God’s plan that Solomon, David’s son, build the Temple.

Still, David was passionate about the project and started the campaign by putting in a large offering of his own gold and silver. The people responded in kind with their own offerings. He watched with pride as tribal leaders and government officials came forward with gifts of

gold, silver, bronze, iron, and precious stones. Army commanders and generals followed with their own offerings. The offering turned into a celebration as David and his people rejoiced at the response.

David could easily have patted himself on the back and bragged about his leadership in this endeavor. But he didn't. David understood what was happening and put the accolades where they belonged, at the feet of God. In his usual poetic fashion, he praised God for the generosity of the people while recognizing the source of that generosity.

"Everything in heaven and earth is yours," David said in his prayer to God. "Wealth and honor come from you" (1 Chronicles 29:11-12).

David understood the basic principle of giving to God—it all belongs to God in the first place. Yes, he gave a large part of his fortune to this project, but everything he gave already belonged to God. And yes, the people responded with outstanding generosity, but they only responded with what was already God's.

David summed it up in verse 14: "Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?"

Once we understand that everything we have comes from God and belongs to Him, the whole issue of stewardship takes on a new light. It is not a matter of giving up what belongs to me. Stewardship is managing God's resources and using those resources to build His kingdom. Generosity is not measured against what someone else gives. It is rooted in our understanding of God's ownership of all that we have and our willingness to let go and let God use our resources as He sees fit.

Zig Ziglar, the popular motivational speaker, tells the story of a farmer who sat listening to a sermon on tithing. The preacher talked about how God owned everything, but the farmer disagreed.

After the service, the farmer invited the preacher out to his farm for dinner. Following the meal, the farmer and the preacher took a walk outside. The farmer made a point of show-

ing the preacher around his place. He showed him his house, barn, tool shed, and finished by pointing out his crops. Then he asked the preacher, "I've worked all my life on this land. Do you mean to tell me that it's not my land, but it's the Lord's land?"

The preacher thought about this for a moment and then responded. "Ask me the same question a hundred years from now."

For many people, tithing is an exercise of guilt and calculation. "Can I afford to give ten percent this week?" "Do I have to give ten percent of my net or gross pay?" "If I put this check in the offering, can I pay my bills this week?"

Or we resort back to our toddler-like selfishness. "I worked hard for this." "I built this with my own hands." "I deserve to spend this money on myself."

Recognizing God's ownership of all that we have removes these obstacles and opens the way for generosity. If we can really accept that God already owns it and that it's not ours, it

should be easier to give God a percentage as a way of saying to Him, "It's all yours."

The great thing about God's ownership is the freedom it brings. When God owns everything, He is responsible. We are just managers. Our only task is to take care of what He has given us. He provides.

Jesus reminds us that when we try to take ownership for ourselves, things will not end well. What we possess is only temporary. It will not last forever.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal," Jesus said. "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (*Matthew 6:19-21*).

On the other hand, when we accept God's ownership and remove our hands from it, He promises to take care of things. Jesus follows with these words:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them (*Matthew 6:25-32*).

Between my junior and senior years in college, a friend from church asked me to house-sit while he and his family were on vacation. They would be gone for about three weeks, and I would have access to the house and everything in it during that time. Three weeks in a nice house by the lake was a much better option than the dorm room, so I accepted.

For those three weeks I lived in his house. I swam in his pool. I ate the food in his fridge. I watched his nice television. I had access to everything in that house.

But the house was not mine. When he returned I had no right to bolt the door and yell, "It's mine now!" The house belonged to him, and when it was time to move out, I did. He was the owner. I was just the caretaker for a little while.

It was a fun three weeks. I knew all along, though, that this was not my house. I was just there to take care of it for the owner. Everything in the house belonged to the owner, not me.

Years later, my wife and I bought our first house. It was exciting. Finally we had a house that belonged to us. No more landlord to tell us whether or not we could paint the living room. We could paint any room any color whenever we wanted. We could decorate any way we wanted. We could take a wall out if we wanted to.

But it didn't take long for us to realize there is a dark side to home ownership. When the plumbing backs up, I have to fix it or, more likely, pay someone else to fix it. I am responsible for the leak in the roof, and I have to pay the insurance. I have to make sure the house is cared for. I have to take care of all those things because, in earthly terms, I am the owner.

Acknowledging God's ownership of our belongings is liberating. I don't have to worry about stuff. I don't have to wonder how I am going to fix problems, because I can trust God, the owner, to help me and to take care of me.

I don't have to hold tightly to my stuff and cry, "It's mine!" I don't have to worry that I might starve if I pay my tithe. I can trust God to

be faithful, just as He has promised He would be. Instead of grabbing, I can hold my hands out and say, "It's yours."

Grandma Sadie and the Social Worker

Jon pastors a growing, exciting church in Fargo, North Dakota. Even though some pastors find it hard to preach or talk about tithing, it's not a subject Jon shies away from.

"Jesus loved the rich young ruler enough to talk to him about money," Jon says. "If I love my people, I will do the same."

Jon credits tithing for saving his marriage and his ministry. As a seminary student, he found it difficult to pay his tithe, and he tried to justify not paying it. "I looked at it like this," Jon said. "I was studying for the ministry and giving up a lucrative career as an engineer to do it. The way I saw it, I was already sacrificing."

But the lesson Jon learned was that *he* wasn't giving up anything. God owned it all, including his future.

Jon learned most of his lessons on tithing from his parents and grandmother. "My mom made me tithe," Jon says. "I didn't like it then, but now I am so thankful she did."

Jon grew up hearing the story of his grandmother's experience with tithing. Grandma Sadie didn't have much in her life. Her husband left her and their three little girls when she was a young mother. She survived by cleaning houses and offices in the small town of Williston, North Dakota.

One day, at the urging of one of her daughters, Sadie attended a little church in her town, and for the first time she heard the gospel. She responded and allowed Christ to take possession of her. She quickly immersed herself in the Bible and learned what it meant to follow Christ.

One of the early lessons she learned is that God owns everything but asks for only ten percent in return—the tithe. Even on her small income she began to tithe, and she made it a lifelong habit.

Years later, the girls had grown up and moved away, and Sadie was living alone. She was still making a living as best she could, but age and health had made it more difficult. She could not earn enough to survive. One day a government social worker came to visit and help her get assistance. After the social worker totaled all the expenses, she told Sadie the amount she would be getting from the government. Sadie suddenly remembered that she had failed to include enough for tithe.

"The government doesn't pay tithe," the social worker responded. "And there's not enough here for you to give any to the church."

Sadie and the social worker went back and forth on the issue. Sadie insisted that she was going to pay her tithe even if it meant going without something. The social worker continued to point out that there wasn't enough money to do that. Finally, the social worker gave in and added enough money to Sadie's assistance for her to pay tithe.

The matter was really very clear for Sadie. She didn't own it, and the government didn't own it. Paying her tithe was a way to express God's ownership and her dependence on Him.

Your Ownership Story

Write about something you possess that's very important to you. How did you get it? Why is it important?

■ Think

1. Write down the items you personally own. Don't try to be super-spiritual here. What are the things you own in "earthly" terms?

2. How can you use these things in a way that shows you understand God is the ultimate owner?

3. Does the fact that God owns it all give you encouragement to tithe? Does it make it easier? Does it make it harder?

4. Are there things in your life you need to release to God? If so, what are they?

■ Discover

Read the following verses.

- "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it" (Deuteronomy 10:14).
- "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding? To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his" (Job 12:12-13).
- "If he holds back the waters, there is drought; if he lets them loose, they devastate the land. To him belong strength and victory; both deceived and deceiver are his. He leads counselors away stripped and makes fools of judges" (Job 12:15-17).
- "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (Psalm 96:3-5).

- “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
- “By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

What do these verses say to you about ownership?
