

Joyful Generosity 1

September 17, 2017

Psalm 24:1-6 (EHV) – ¹ The earth is the LORD's and everything that fills it, the world and all who live in it, ² because he founded it on the seas, and he established it on the rivers. ³ Who may go up to the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? ⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, whose soul is not set on what is false, who does not swear deceitfully. ⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God who saves him. ⁶ Such are the people of Jacob who look for the LORD, who seek your face.

Introduction

Paul Wendland, the current president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, spent his vicar year in Zambia, where his father was a missionary. During that year, he wrote a letter to a friend about how three students had to be dismissed from the seminary in Lusaka because they were involved in a witchcraft scandal. One of the student's children had died unexpectedly, so he and his friend accused a third student of putting a spell on the child. The two students who made the accusation were dismissed along with the one who was accused, because his reputation had been damaged beyond repair. The friend wrote back and asked how seminary students could still believe in witchcraft. Wendland replied that witchcraft was so much part of the African culture that it was hard to get it out of their heads and hearts.

Wendland also made the statement, "If students from the seminary here in Africa were to visit our seminary in Mequon, and if they'd see all the new cars in the parking lot and then hear the students complaining about the food in the cafeteria, they'd think that we're the most godless and thankless Christians they'd ever met."

Theme: Joyful generosity begins with a heart that worships God.

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

This morning, we're beginning a stewardship series in which we want to explore the reasons *why* and *how* we give to the Lord. Today, we'll examine the motives of our hearts, because **JOYFUL GENEROSITY BEGINS WITH A HEART THAT WORSHIPS GOD.**

Part 1: We worship the Creator and not created stuff.

Psalm 24 begins with a bold statement. "**The earth is the LORD's and everything that fills it, the world and all who live in it, because he founded it on the seas, and he established it on the rivers.**"

That's 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, because he made it. Our houses, our cars, and our priceless collections of things that we treasure belong to God, because the earth and everything in it belong to the LORD.

Neither our culture nor our sinful nature likes to accept that simple truth. We like to think that 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**. That means we say we can choose whatever we want to do with our bodies. We take **SELFIES**, because we like looking at ourselves. We talk about **SELF-ASSURANCE** and **SELF-AWARENESS** and **SELF-CONFIDENCE**. We say that **SELF-ESTEEM** is important and we read **SELF-HELP** books and articles. The list could go on. But when we focus our attention on ourselves, isn't that just another way of worshipping what is created instead of the Creator?

Our psalm continues. **“Who may go up to the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, whose soul is not set on what is false, who does not swear deceitfully.”** There’s a phrase in these verses that we need to focus on. It says that we shouldn’t set our souls, our hearts, on what is false. The first thing that comes to mind is maybe a false god, an idol. But it’s literally saying that we shouldn’t set our hearts on something that’s *inconsequential*. It’s setting our heart on something that’s not the most important thing. Idolatry isn’t so much that you love some evil thing or person. The really sneaky version of idolatry happens when we love good things too much.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon describes these inconsequential things as **“meaningless”** and applies the word to lots of good things that people do. The book of Ecclesiastes is a really depressing book unless you read the last verses in the book first. There Solomon says that there’s really only one important thing in this life: **“Fear God and keep his commandments.”** If you keep everything in context of your relationship with God, you can keep your heart focused on the Creator and not the created.

What kind of things was Solomon talking about? Solomon was a great architect and builder. He built the temple as God’s house. He built a palace for himself. He built a palace for his wife, the daughter of the Pharaoh. He built storehouses. He built treasure cities. He built stables for all his fine horses and chariots. Solomon loved to build things. So do we, right? We like to make things – a house, a garden, a business, a career. But Solomon said this was a **“meaningless”** thing—an inconsequential thing.

Solomon was known as the wisest man on earth. He studied things. He was a master of economics, biology, architecture, and earth sciences. He read every book he could get his hands on. But in the end, he said those subjects were meaningless and inconsequential. Pursuing knowledge and wisdom isn’t a bad thing. It’s just not the most important thing.

He was a rich man. He had an annual income of about 42 billion dollars! He had everything money could buy, and he spared himself no delight or pleasure. He had success above all other kings in the world at the time. But what does he say? It’s inconsequential – **“meaningless.”**

If you set your hearts on the inconsequential things – good things that you put too much value on, you’re committing idolatry. It’s idolatry because God comes in a distant second. It’s idolatry because you can’t find time for prayers or for worship. It’s idolatry because you’re missing out on the one thing in life that can give you real joy or happiness.

What are the inconsequential things in your life that you’ve set your heart on and worshipped instead of the God who created you? Is it your work? Americans are working themselves to death. Employers expect it and employees strive to meet those expectations so they can buy bigger homes and drive better cars. In the end, will you confess with Solomon that all this is meaningless?

Or are you setting your heart on that endless pursuit of pleasure? Most new homes have three car garages – two to hold the vehicles and one to hold the extras. Or maybe the vehicles stay parked on the driveway because the garages are too full to contain them. You’ve heard the saying that the one who dies with the most toys wins. Really? You want to bet your eternity on meaningless things?

What are you setting your heart on? None of those things is bad in itself. Work isn’t bad; it’s good. Recreation isn’t a bad thing; it’s a good thing. Comfortable housing isn’t a bad thing. But if we let the inconsequential things of this life become bigger than life, bigger than God in our life, we’re missing out on the one thing that can bring real joy and meaning in our life.

Transition

And what’s that? The only joy that will never disappoint us is the joy we find in worshipping the God who not only made us and owns us, but who redeemed us for himself.

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

Sometimes people compare finding success in this life to climbing a hill. The problem is that most people don't know how to measure success, so they just keep on climbing. A reporter once interviewed three Hollywood superstars whose lives ended in despair and disaster. They'd all climbed that hill of success. They made millions at the box office. They were guests on all the late-night talk shows. Paparazzi followed their every move. Yet they said they lived in fear and despair. Why? Because they knew that if they didn't have another blockbuster movie or another platinum album, they'd be forgotten. They were happier when they were nobodies than when they became somebodies.

What was wrong with their lives? They were ambitious. They were successful. And yet they believed their life meant nothing if they weren't successful one more time. What was their problem? They were climbing the wrong hill. **"Who may go up to the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, whose soul is not set on what is false, who does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God who saves him. Such are the people of Jacob who look for the LORD, who seek your face."**

There's only one hill worth climbing, and that's the hill that brings us close to God. But isn't that also an act of despair? Who CAN climb that hill and stand before a holy God? Can you? Do you have clean hands, hands that have never done violence? Do you have a pure heart? I know that I don't. If you're honest with yourself, you'll admit that you struggle with hatred or desire or jealousy or bitterness all the time. Have you never lifted up your heart to something that's inconsequential? Have you never sworn by what's false? If these thoughts plague your mind, you're climbing the wrong hill, because you think that God will judge you on your success in keeping his commandments.

The hill you want to climb to come into the presence of God is the hill that Jesus climbed. The psalm says that we **"receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God who saves [us]."** Through faith in Jesus, your Savior, you have everything you'll ever need or want to make your life full and complete. You can stand before God unashamed because Jesus dressed you in his righteousness. He became poor for you so that you might become rich in a way that billionaires will never experience. You're promised that you can have life and have it to the full. You can count yourself as a child of God. You have an inheritance that will never spoil or fade.

All the rest of the inconsequential stuff will fade away eventually. The movie star's beauty fades. The billionaire can't buy his way out of a hospitable bed. The athlete's strong body becomes weak and frail. The scholar who thought he knew everything can't remember his children's names. But our faith in Jesus sustains us to the grave and beyond, to an inheritance that will never disappoint us.

Conclusion

One upon a time, there was a man who was vacationing in the Caribbean. He met a fisherman who was sitting on a chair watching the sun go down. He asked him what he did for a living. He said he went fishing every morning and caught fish for his family. He was a good fisherman and his family loved to eat fish. He loved to play with his children in the afternoon and then go down to the sea and watch the sun set. The visitor had an idea. "If you're a good fisherman, I could loan you some money. You could put a fish stand here on the beach. People would buy your fish. If you caught more fish, you could open a market in town. You could buy a nice house for you family in the city. Wouldn't that be great? What would you do if you were so successful?" The fisherman thought for a moment and said, "I'd buy a house on the beach. I'd fish in the morning and play with my children in the afternoon. Then I could come down to the sea and watch the sun set."

At first, that story seems to make a lot of sense – don't let your ambition get in the way of enjoying life. But the story really misses the point. Both men were missing the point, weren't they? Life doesn't have meaning because I can make myself rich. And life doesn't have meaning because I can sit on the beach and watch the sun set. Life has meaning when I know God as my Creator and Savior and when I find joy in serving him with all that I have and am. That's where joyful generosity begins! Amen.