

LIVE AS IF GOD IS THE OWNER

PSALM 24:1; DEUTERONOMY 8:11-18

Sometimes spiritual truth can turn up in unlikely places. Prolific and popular author, Stephen King, gave the commencement speech at Vassar College in May 2001. In his speech, he referred to an accident he'd been in two years previously. He'd been left seriously injured and lying in a ditch alongside a country road after having been hit by a van as he walked beside the road. He said, "I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in the ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard." That day was a life changing moment for Stephen King. So were the following months. He continued, "We came in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke." Commenting on the power Americans have, King said, "... the greatest is undoubtedly the power of compassion, the ability to give. We have enormous resources in this country... but they are only yours on loan, only yours for a short while.... I want you to consider making your lives one long gift to others, and why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All you want to get at the getting place – from the Masserati many dream about to the retirement fund some broker will try and sell you on – none of that is real. All that lasts is what you pass on. The rest is smoke and mirrors." I have no idea of Stephen King's spiritual condition, but what he said is absolutely true.

I want to talk to you today about the fact that God owns it all. This is the first message in a four part series I'm calling How to Have the Best Year Yet. On the other side of the message notes, you can see the message titles and get a good idea where I'm going. Nothing new here. Nothing difficult to understand. But often wisdom is not so much learning new stuff as it is understanding at a deeper level what we think we already know. It doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for a week or for fifty years, the Holy Spirit is always wanting you to grasp in a deeper, more meaningful way what it means for God to be the owner, for Jesus to be the Lord, and for you to be both a steward and a servant. Here's what I know beyond a shadow of a doubt. If you grow in your understanding and practice of these four great facts – these four great truths about God and life – 2008 will be the best year of your life yet.

The first truth is that God is the owner. That's a fact! Do you remember police sergeant Joe Friday in those old "Dragnet" TV episodes? Occasionally, he'd get stuck with a long-winded witness to some crime. He'd role his eyes and say, "Just the facts, ma'am." A fact is a fact whether you believe it or not or like it or not. And God is the owner of everything whether you believe it or not or like it or not. Here's three thoughts I want to leave with you about this fact that God is the owner. Here's the first one:

IT'S A FACT THAT CONNOTES AN OBVIOUS IMPLICATION.

The Bible is very clear about the fact that God owns everything. Look with me at Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him." There's a very simple, straightforward statement that says God is the ultimate, final and eternal owner of the planet. Why? Primarily because He's the Creator of all things. The Bible underlines the totality and comprehensiveness of God's ownership.

He establishes this principle with the people of Israel: “The land cannot be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are foreigners—you're my tenants....” (Leviticus 25:23 MSG). The people of Israel sang about this truth in the psalms. There, God says: “Every creature in the forest is mine, the wild animals on all the mountains. I know every mountain bird by name; the scampering field mice are my friends. If I get hungry, do you think I'd tell you? All creation and its bounty are mine.” (Psalm 50:10-11 MSG) So even the physical land and all animal life belong to the Lord ultimately.

Do human beings belong to God? Absolutely! God Himself says, “ Every soul—man, woman, child—belongs to me, parent and child alike.” (Ezekiel 18:4 MSG) How about people who don't believe in God or follow Jesus – do they belong to God? Certainly. Just because you don't recognize God's ultimate ownership of your life doesn't change the facts. God is still the owner. By the same token, it's also true that when you begin to trust in and follow Jesus, you become God's property in a greater sense. God said this to His people back in the Old Testament: “ If you will listen obediently to what I say and keep my covenant, out of all peoples you'll be my special treasure. The whole Earth is mine to choose from, but you're special: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5 MSG). If you're a follower of Jesus today, you are God's property in a unique and wonderful way. God says you are His “special treasure.” Not only did He create you physically; He's also given you spiritual life. The Bible sometimes calls that redemption. It means to buy something back. Spiritually, you were once a slave to your sinful nature and destined for an eternity in hell, but God bought you – He redeemed you – through Jesus' death on the cross. That death paid for your sins. In light of that awesome fact, the Bible says, “...You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price....” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NLT)

So, then, what's this obvious implication? Because God owns everything, you own nothing! This includes but goes far beyond stuff like money, houses, cars, clothes and bank accounts. This encompasses everything about your life. You're a temporary resident on this planet and when you leave it you leave everything behind. Who gets it all? Your heirs will get some of your physical stuff, but, ultimately everything returns to God. If you're a follower of Jesus, the implication is even more clear and searching. No child of God owns his or her life. You don't own your body, your mind, or your very self. You can never just do whatever you want, because you no longer belong to yourself. Because Jesus bought you at the cost of His own life, you do what Jesus wants. Now, I've got to admit to you that I'm still learning the full implication of this fact. I think the apostle Paul got it. Here's how he put it, “For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” (Romans 14:7-8 NLT)

Think about these implications. God owns your time. He set the date of your conception; and the date of your death. Every minute of your time on this earth belongs to God. So what does that mean? He knows you need time to work, eat, sleep, relax and recreate. God doesn't begrudge you any of that. It simply means you're accountable to Him in how you use your time. God expects you to put first things first when it comes to time. He expects there to be evidence of balance and order. So as you look over the time

God has given you for all these legitimate life activities, let me ask you these questions. Do you make time to worship Him? Do you make time to read His Word and to pray? Do you make time to build a friendship with someone who doesn't know Jesus yet? Do you make time to serve the poor? Do you make time to serve Him through this church? When you see yourself as being accountable to God for every moment of every day, you've begun to understand the obvious implication that God is the owner.

By the same token, God owns your intelligence, your talents, your abilities and your physical energy. He's fully aware of the fact that you must devote a lot of that stuff to your home, your family and your job. But He also expects you to invest a portion of those abilities to build His Kingdom and advance His cause in this world and in this community. Do you know your spiritual gifts? Are you using them? I'm convinced that most Christians think they have very little to offer God and His work in this world. Most Christians, sadly, minimize and undervalue what they can do for the Lord.

I read about a pastor who conducted a funeral for a man who had helped develop the famous Boeing 747 aircraft. After the service, he spoke with the widow and commented on how remarkable it was that her late husband had helped build that marvelous machine. She said, "The truth is he worked on one little switchbox smaller than a loaf of bread. That's all he worked on for fifteen years! But when that 747 lifted off the ground for the first time, it was the happiest moment of his life." That man had worked on one small part of that plane for over a decade. But that plane would never have gotten off the ground without his contribution. Often, you look at your efforts in this church and they may seem very small to you. And then when you think of your efforts in this vast spiritual reality known as the Kingdom of God, they seem smaller than infinitesimal. But, my friend, your efforts are essential to this church and to the Kingdom of God. God will use your efforts to help this church "lift off" and for the Kingdom of God to "take off." When you give God a generous portion of the talents and energy He's given you, you understand the obvious implication that God is the owner.

God owns your material possessions. Yes, it's hard to realize that He ultimately owns your house, your cars, your clothes, your investments, your checkbook and your credit cards, but He does! Did you know that God doesn't just own 10% of your income? He's not just entitled to what's called the tithe. The truth is that God owns 100% of all your financial and material assets. Now, God doesn't begrudge you enjoying and using what He allows you to have. He wants you to provide for your family adequately. He even wants you to enjoy fully what He's given. But He also expects you to manage wisely the money and possessions He permits you to acquire. He does have a plan for how you are to use your money. And He does have a clear standard on what you are to return to Him to be used in the work of His Kingdom. It's called the tithe - 10% of your income goes back to the Lord directly even though He owns the other 90%, too!

Sometime ago, I found this contrast between the world's money plan and God's money plan. Here's how the world tells you to handle money: 1. Earn it. 2. Enjoy it, even if it leads you into debt. 3. Repay your debt. 4. Save for future needs if you can. 5. Give, if anything is left over. Well, you know how much gets saved or given with that kind of

“plan.” Here’s God’s money plan: 1. Earn it. 2. Give 10% to the Lord – the tithe. 3. Save for future needs. 4. Repay your debts and stay out of debt. 5. Enjoy the rest. Did you notice that after step one – earn it – the world’s plan and God’s plan are exactly the opposite? Now, which plan do you think will result in personal economic health and freedom if you follow it? When you handle money according to God’s plan, you’ve understood the obvious implication that God is the owner. Here’s a second thought:

IT’S A FACT THAT CONTAINS AN OMINOUS WARNING.

If you choose to ignore the obvious implication in the fact that God owns everything, then you need to hear an ominous warning. Let’s turn to Deuteronomy 8:11-18. What’s happening here? Moses warns the people of Israel about the danger of forgetting God. He reminds them of all the good things God has done for them and the many ways God has blessed them. Then he makes a remarkable observation. Sometimes, the blessings of God – which are good in and of themselves – can bring with them an unintended temptation. Somewhere along the way, you begin to believe that those good things you’ve acquired are really the result of your own hard work, your own intelligence and your own abilities. You begin to think you deserve them. You conclude that you have a right to them. Sadly, financial prosperity can lead to pride. And that kind of pride can tempt you to forget God entirely or to make Him less than the number one priority in your life.

According to the scripture we just read, the only proper response to God’s financial blessings is to praise God not yourself! If you’ve experienced some measure of financial or material prosperity, who should get the credit? You might say, “Well, Rick, I really worked hard for everything I have. I made good business decisions. I was shrewd. I knew how to be at the right place at the right time.” OK, but who gave you the ability and the energy to work hard in the first place? Who made your mind and gave you the abilities you have? Is it possible God had a hand in making sure you were in the right place at the right time? My friend, at the end of the day, it was and is God alone who gives you the ability to produce wealth of any kind to whatever degree. It happened to the people of Israel, so I know it can happen to you. It’s happened to other followers of Jesus, so I know it can happen to you. What’s that? When you forget that God is the owner, you will forget God. As a result, you will pay a very high price in the end. Now, here’s a third and final thought about God being the owner of everything:

IT’S A FACT THAT CALLS FOR AN OBEDIENT RESPONSE

If God is the owner – and that’s a fact – then all of us become accountable to Him for whatever He’s given to manage and take care of in this life – be it time, energy, talents, money, whatever. Now, remember, God is not some hard, stingy, exacting owner with a perpetual frown of disapproval. He’s not checking His watch to see if you prayed five or ten minutes. He’s not shaking his head because you’re only involved in two ministries instead of four. He’s not scowling because you’re using some of the money He’s allowed you to earn to give your family a good time. Quite the contrary! God is much more generous than we ever give Him credit for being. But here are the questions

you need to answer. Is God really the owner of my time, my talents and my treasure? If so, what does that look like in my normal, everyday, walk around life? If so, how does that affect my behavior, my choices and my priorities?

Jesus told a story about three men who were given talents by their very rich employer before he took off on a long journey. Now, a talent back then was a large sum of money. This wasn't a gift. Instead, this was an investment opportunity upon which he expected a return. When he finally did return, he called in each of these men to see what kind of return he'd gotten on his investment. What was the profit? The first man had been given five talents. He'd gone out, gotten busy and doubled his employer's money. The second guy had been given two talents. He, also, doubled his boss' investment. Both of them were congratulated and rewarded by their employer. Don't miss the principle in that story! What's that? It's not how much you have in life that matters to God but what you do with what He's given to you. Sure, some people just do have more talents, abilities or opportunities in life than others. Some people do end up with more money and possessions than others. But that's not the issue. The issue is what you did with whatever you've been given in life! The third man in Jesus' story was given only one talent. For some reason, he did absolutely nothing with his boss' money. In fact, he actually dug a hole, buried it and kept it hidden until his employer returned. The employer was furious with him and punished him as a result.

God is the boss in that story. We are the employees. The talents represent the investments God has entrusted to you and me – time, natural talents, spiritual gifts and money. That story reminds me that God will hold me accountable for His gifts of time, talent and treasure. What makes God angry? When you squander the opportunities God's given you in this life, God gets mad! No, we don't all receive the same amount in life – that's true – but we all receive something. Because God is the owner, He holds you and me accountable for how we manage those blessings He gives. Are you handling them well? Are you investing them directly in the things of God and in His work in this world? In 2008, will you live as if God is the owner?

A woman who had finished shopping was returning to her car. There she found four men inside her vehicle. She dropped her shopping bags, drew out a handgun of all things, and yelled, "I have a gun and I know how to use it! Get out of the car!" Those four men didn't wait for a second invitation. They got out and ran like crazy. The woman, somewhat shaken by this experience, loaded her shopping bags and then got into the car. But no matter how she tried, she couldn't get her key into the ignition. Then it dawned on her. This wasn't her car, after all! Her car was parked four or five spaces away. She loaded her grocery bags into her own car and drove to the police station to turn herself in. The desk sergeant to whom she told this story nearly fell off of his chair laughing. Then he pointed to the other end of the counter where four men were reporting a carjacking by an elderly woman with curly white hair, thick glasses, less than five feet tall and carrying a large handgun. Fortunately, no charges were filed. You see, she thought it was her car, but it really belonged to someone else. It was a silly mistake you and I can make. We think we own our own lives, but they really belong to God – every part of our lives great or small.