

The Earth Is the Lord's

Psalm 24

INTRODUCTION

When we enter into the kind of relationship with God described in the Bible, we relinquish our rights to the absolute ownership of our money and possessions. This new attitude toward property is very difficult for us to understand and even more difficult for us to practice because in the Western world the idea of absolute ownership has been the cornerstone of our economic life.

Widely held modern views of ownership actually reflect ancient Roman practice rather than the biblical view. According to the Roman view, ownership is a "natural right" of the individual to hold unconditional and exclusive power over his or her property. It implies our right to use property as we please, irrespective of the will of others.

In 1776 Adam Smith published a book on this idea which has had a profound effect on Western society for over two centuries. Smith's "laissez-faire" economics argues that each person should pursue his or her own economic self-interest in the context of a competitive society. Supply and demand must be the sole principle on which prices and wages are determined. According to this system, owners of land and capital not only have proprietary rights to their possessions, they have the obligation to seek as much profit as possible.

Since the so-called Keynesian revolution, Smith's ideas have



Tree, drawing by Wu Guan Zhung. Shum Chun, China.

had less of an influence on economic theory and practice, but his basic outlook remains the presupposition of much of the free world's attitude toward money and possessions. What is mine is mine. I have the right to use it as I please. I have the right to acquire more and more, thus building up my estate and increasing my control over land and capital. This attitude is a part of the "American way of life."

This is why it is so difficult for us to come to terms with the Biblical view which insists that God alone has an absolute right to property. God is the sovereign Lord of the entire created order. Economic activity, like every other area of life, is subject to his will and purpose. Anything we "own" does not actually belong to us. It belongs to God, and this determines how we are to use it.

No one is forced to accept the biblical revelation as the guide to life. But those of us who do are confronted with this radically different approach to the matter of ownership. This radically different approach has been called "the economics of the kingdom," and this economics of the kingdom is the most difficult part of the Christian life for many of us to accept.

COMMENTARY

The first verse of the twenty-fourth Psalm clearly states the basic principle of God's ownership of all things: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." Of all the writings of the Old Testament, the psalms are the best known to Christians. The Book of Psalms, read and sung by countless individuals and congregations through the ages, is the most famous prayer book of human history. It was the prayer book of Jesus.

The twenty-fourth Psalm is a liturgy of entrance used during times of worship in the temple in Jerusalem. It has three parts: verses 1-2, a hymn of praise to God as the owner of the earth and all it includes; verses 3-6, a compact "liturgy of entrance"; and verses 7-10, a liturgy which played a special part in cele-

brations of the new year. After stating the fact of God's dominion over the earth and all it contains, the author points to God's creative power as the reason for this dominion. God has the power to conquer the seas and rivers and "establish" the earth on the primeval watery chaos.

The idea of God's ownership of all things is also stated in the fiftieth Psalm, but in a very different setting. Here the author contrasts superficial worship by animal sacrifice and the profounder worship of the heart which leads to true obedience to the ethical demands of the law. Animal sacrifice had been viewed by Israel as the act through which the covenant with God was continually renewed. In this Psalm, God tells the congregation that they are not pleasing him by the scrupulous observance of this sacrificial system. Anything the people offer him is already his:

"For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
for the world and all that is in it is mine."

The psalms are not the only Old Testament writings which emphasize God's absolute ownership. God said to Job, "Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine." (41:11) He said to the people of Israel through Moses, "Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6)

It is important to note that God made three provisions which limited the ability of an individual to accumulate land or wealth. First, a percentage of the produce of the land must be given directly to the poor. (Deut. 14:28-29) Second, the produce which resulted from spilled seed every seventh year must be left for the poor. (Exodus 23:11) Third, and most important, every fiftieth year was called the year of Jubilee.

During this year each piece of land would revert to the family which originally possessed it. It is precisely because absolute ownership of the land rested with God rather than with the people that he could command this redistribution of property: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me." (Lev. 25:23)

A closely related biblical concept which helps us understand our relationship to God as the sole absolute owner of all things is that of "stewardship." Our modern word "steward" comes from the Anglo-Saxon "stiweard," a compound of "sti" (house, hall) and "weard" (warden, guardian). The word has thus been used historically to designate an employee or officer of a large household or estate, who is responsible for managing its affairs. He or she is not the owner, but is charged with administration in the best interests of the owners. Stewards appear many times in the Bible: Gen. 43:19, I Kings 16:9, Daniel 1:11, Luke 12:42, John 2:8-9, Eph. 3:2.

It is unfortunate that the word "stewardship" has lost its biblical meaning today. For many of us it is simply a convenient way of referring to the church's annual budget drive. It is important, we are told, to support the "stewardship campaign." If we can rescue the word from this narrow (and often unpleasant) application and think of ourselves as stewards of God's estate, we will be better able to live our way into the biblical understanding of ownership. Everything we own belongs to God who has appointed us stewards to care for *his* property and use it according to *his* will and purpose.

There are at least two very important results of this biblical attitude toward property ownership. First, instead of our property separating us from God (the Bible warns against this repeatedly), it actually makes us more aware of God. If we remind ourselves that everything we have belongs to God, we will tend to praise him and be more aware of his presence everywhere throughout the created order. Second, when we realize that everything belongs to God and not to us, we will be more responsible in our attitude toward others, especially those who are in need. There is a very strong biblical emphasis

on caring for the poor, for example, partly because God wants the poor to share in the use and enjoyment of *his* property.

It is not always easy to know what this biblical concept will require of us in specific situations. But it is essential for us to understand the clear biblical teaching on this matter and to try to build our attitude toward money and possessions around it, even if it means “marching to the tune of a different drummer” from the world around us.