

Sermon Outline 1 – Covenantal Trust

Introduction

When it comes to decisions, we all face a lot of them every day, both hard ones and easy ones. You made a decision to come to church today, and it's very probable that there are people here for whom that wasn't the easiest decision. We often do this by habit, but you probably came today because you defeated the devil's urge to make something else more important. That's a good decision.

The People of Israel

When the people of Israel were coming out of captivity in Egypt they had some decisions to make as well. They debated their decision to leave: "Yes, we'll trust the Lord. No, we won't trust the Lord. Oh, we trust the Lord; he's doing great things for us. Oh no, the Lord has brought us out here to starve."

God brought these people out of captivity. They had some stories of their forefathers, but those stories are not 400 years old; they know the stories, but they weren't their reality. Their reality was captivity. It was a world where everything was about owning, oppressing, getting stuff, gathering things. They were used to a leader who stood before them and said, "I'm god and I have everything" The Pharaoh kept most of the world as peasants and the Israelites as slaves, because he could (and did) take whatever he wanted.

In order for the people of Israel to get to the place they needed to be, God was counting on the people to make good decisions. In their path toward making good decisions he gave them some instructions: the Ten Commandments. He knew that they would need guidance, because these people had not been allowed to make their own decisions for generations.

[SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 20:1-17]

Now after doing the ones where he's talking about the relationship between he and the people he gave some rules for them and each other. [SCRIPTURE READING] And then the verse that we're gonna focus on today, the one that after the rules about our relationship between us and God, rules about us and a relationship with our neighbors, there's a rule about how we think. [SCRIPTURE READING] God doesn't want that to happen so he gave rules. These are the things you don't do.

All of these commandments are about relationship, because God has this brand-new group of people out there that he wants to bless. He made a covenant with them: I'll be your God if you'll be my people. Now, following Jesus is not just about not doing the things that you're not supposed to do; however, in this journey of following Jesus we are trying to imitate him, and there are some significant dos and don'ts. Do honor him. Do not make other images. Don't make false gods. That may not seem like a great temptation to you, but there are very real gods, false gods, in our world, and people ascribe the glory that is due to God to these things, to their possessions.

There are also some commands involving your neighbor – don't kill your neighbor, don't steal from your neighbor, don't lie about your neighbor. It is the tenth commandment, however, that is really interesting, especially by today's standards. The command to not covet is not necessarily action-oriented; it's a commandment for your mind or perhaps your heart. This commandment is a lot harder to follow; it's easier to not steal or kill your neighbor than it is to not be envious, right?

Stewardship

This is where stewardship enters into the picture. This is God's role in our relationship to things: God doesn't say you can't have things or that you shouldn't have things. In fact, God gives us all kind of things. Some people he gives lots and lots of things. Some people he gives great wealth. He's done that throughout the scripture.

This commandment, therefore, is not a message about things that we shouldn't have. It's a message about not letting the things that we have become our god or take the place of God. Our possessions should be viewed as under God's control. We are merely stewards of what God has given us.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrews didn't really consider themselves to be owners of the land in the same way that we do. They didn't have warranty deeds or fences. They very much believed that the land was God's, and that they got a lifetime to use it. The responsibility was to take care of God's things, not to own those things.

Stewardship, taking care of God's things, is a decision. The biblical doctrine of stewardship is a part of man's relationship to God. A biblical doctrine of stewardship recognizes that God is the owner, and that we are the managers. We manage the things that God has given us, whether it's our bank account or a house or a family. Stewardship defines our purpose in the world as assigned by God himself.

God has a plan for us, and he'll take care of us. There are two Greek words that translate into "stewardship," *epitropos* and *oikonomos*. The first means manager, foreman, or political governor, or someone who has authority. That's what a steward is – somebody who takes care of or is responsible for something. The second involves the word household. It is household manager, somebody who makes sure that things are in place and who has their own house in order.

Each of these definitions are about a lot more than money. If stewardship were all about money, we'd just take the offering and go home! It's not just about money; it's about taking care of the things that God lets us have. When we understand that everything belongs to God, we begin to realize that we are entrusted with God's things. It's pretty amazing that God allows us to care for his stuff on earth.

It goes a little bit like this: God entrusts us with things to see how we do with them. If we do okay, he'll trust us with even more. This is what God was saying to the Israelites. He was trusting them with a brand-new land and a brand-new way of life. He was giving them the responsibility to take care of the blessing he was about to bestow.

Covenant and Coveting

The story of the Israelites is a story of covenant and coveting. In the Garden of Eden, humanity was blessed with abundance. There was only one rule—don't touch that fruit. But what did Adam and Eve do? They coveted the fruit. In Egypt, the Israelites lived in the land of excess. They went there because Egypt had food and they didn't, and they ended up in a land where the rulers, the Pharaohs, were the hoarders of everything.

In fact, if you looked at who God is and you look at who Pharaoh thought he was, they were in stark contrast with one another. Pharaoh believed himself to be a god, but God has declared himself a jealous God and asks us to reject such earthly gods. This is our challenge and decision: Will we follow the earthly god or the heavenly God who is able to provide for us?

When the Israelites come out of Egypt, they have to learn a few new lessons. One of these is reliance upon God. Even though God promised to take care of them, they challenged his promises at various

times. Yet, when they complained that they were going to starve, God provided food. When they ran out of water, he provided for that as well. They were in the process of learning what God can do and who God is.

The manna that God provided for them in the desert is an interesting substance. It came upon the ground in the morning like frost, and they ate it every day. There were rules that went along with the manna, though. Don't get more than you need. Don't hoard it. Gather more on the sixth day so that you can rest on the Sabbath. Of course, not all of the people listened. Some tried to hoard the manna and found worms in it the next day. Others went out in search of manna on the Sabbath but came up empty handed.

There were brand-new rules, and they were learning reliance upon God. They were learning that they had to be different because their God was different. While every other tribe and group of people around was fighting to hoard the most resources, they were part of a covenant with God that required something different of them. As a result, God continually blessed his people. 40 years later, when it came time for them to build a house for the Lord, they had finally begun to realize that God's provision was sufficient. God provided for them, and they did not have to be like all the other nations, coveting the abundance of others.

The natural response is generosity. This happened: it came time to take an offering, and the Israelites responded with extravagant generosity. In fact, they gave far more than was needed to construct the tabernacle!

[SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 35:21-29; 36:2-7]

This is a completely different attitude toward possessions. The people saw a need and gave to that need without hesitation. They had begun to understand that their possessions weren't their own. We have one job: Take care of God's stuff. It's a relationship of trust. "I will be your God; you will be my people."

So What Do We Do?

What do we do with the story of Israel's relationship with their possessions? First of all, we tithe. That's foundational all throughout scripture. God told people numerous times to tithe; that is how we show God that we know he is sovereign.

Tithing requires consistency. It's a little bit like exercise. Many people decide in January that they're going to start exercising. You may follow your resolution on the first day, but maybe by the second you don't really feel like exercising that day. So you say to yourself, "I'll just do 40 jumping jacks tomorrow to make up for not doing 20 today." But then the next day comes and you don't feel like doing 40 because that's a lot, so you just put it off for another day. I'm sure many of us can relate to this scenario.

Our tithe often looks very much like this as well. Maybe you've said to God, "Lord, I'm going to tithe, but I really need that 10% this week so I'll give you 20% next week." But next week comes along and the electric bill is due, so you put that 20% off as well. Before you know it, the bills keep piling in and you're hopelessly behind. The thing to do at that point is say, "Lord, I'm sorry. I didn't trust you with this."

Tithe is a very simple concept. It's one of the ways that we show God that we know he's in charge and can provide anything. God isn't going to run out of stuff. He is a God of abundance. He can provide for us. He really, really will. His plan was to give us everything we need; in return, we give 10% back to him.

It's that simple so that he can open the door to blessings. This is not a prosperity gospel, and it is not so we can get more. It is simply a recognition of God's providence.

Second, we choose not to be selfish and to take care of our neighbors whenever we can. The 90% that we have for ourselves is also not completely ours. If our neighbor is in need, we are given the blessings that we have in order to care for them. We choose to not idolize ourselves, our bank accounts, or our houses and cars. God loves to give us good things, but he does not do that so that we can love those things in place of God.

To conclude, let's "shore up" a few aspects of our covenantal relationship with God. First of all, let's remember to stay in touch with God. We should pray and talk with God on a regular basis. Then, we should ask the Lord to help us take good care of the earth and its resources. Environmental stewardship wasn't invented by companies or political parties; it was invented by God in the book of Genesis. Third, we stop acting like everything is ours. Fourth, we give God at least 10% of what he gives us. And, fifth, we use the rest for his glory by blessing our neighbors, family, and others. Sixth, we choose to be God's people, and seventh we choose not to covet. This means that we try to keep our desires in check so that we want God more than we want anything that's in the world.

If we allow God, he'll let us move away from things that are taking his place and he'll move into our hearts instead. He wants to live in our hearts; he wants to put his spirit in our hearts. He can't do that if the wrong things are there instead. He can help us move closer to a right understanding of how God views our possessions and to keeping that last covenant, the commandment not to covet.