

It's All God's
Psalm 24:1
Sermon by Dan Schrock
November 22, 2020
Stewardship Sunday

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it.

Back in the spring, the Stewardship and Finance Commission asked me to prepare a sermon on stewardship. Many stewardship sermons I've heard are boring, and after hearing this one you might think it's also boring. Sermons about stewardship generally try to construct biblical and theological arguments for practicing responsible, faithful stewardship. Those can be very good sermons because knowing scripture and theology are crucial for the life of faith.

However, I want to take a different approach today. I want to begin with a simple biblical and theological affirmation, which Psalm 24:1 puts pungently: everything and everyone in the world belong to God. Period. You and I belong to God. Our children and friends belong to God. The rabbits in our front yard and the squirrels in our back yard belong to God. Every maple tree in Goshen belongs to God. Our homes and bank accounts and investment portfolios belong to God. There are no exceptions. It's all God's.

If we really believe this, then this single verse of scripture has profound implications. What would happen if we lived as if this were true? If we and all our stuff belong to God, then what does that mean for how we live our lives? What stewardship choices have you made? How does your life demonstrate that it's all God's?

I'll talk about some of the stewardship choices Jenny and I have made. I do this cautiously, because there are landmines strewn all over the place when preachers talk about themselves. However, I have 3 reasons.

1. Most Christians are reluctant to talk about money, which is odd because the Bible talks a lot about money. I'm not sure our reluctance is entirely healthy for us. Would more honest talk about money be a useful spiritual practice for us?

2. For reasons of confidentiality, I can't always talk about other people's stewardship choices. Those stories belong to them, and I'm not at liberty to share information that doesn't belong to me. But I am free to talk about myself without breaking anyone else's confidentiality.
3. I hope talking frankly about some of my own stewardship choices will spur you to think about your stewardship choices. After hearing me, you might say to yourself, "Well, that's dumb. I'd never do what Dan did. Those just aren't the choices I'd want to make. I have better ideas for how I want to be a faithful steward of God's stuff." If you react like that, then good! I want you to choose the path that makes sense to you in your context. Take the Bible's teachings on stewardship and apply them to the practicalities of your own life. That will probably make God happy.

With those reasons in mind, I'll go ahead and talk about some of the stewardship choices Jenny and I have made. One of our first choices after we married was to live frugally—a guiding principle that continues to be important to us. Sure, sometimes we're extravagant, such as the \$5,000 I spent buying soprano and alto recorders. But overall, we've tended to lean in frugal directions when buying cars, clothes, food, and so on. Of course frugal doesn't always mean the cheapest. We paid about \$1,000 more to put a metal roof on our house, but it will last 2-3 times longer than an asphalt roof. For us, that was the frugal choice.

We've also tried to tithe on our income. Sometimes we decided to give away 10% on our gross income, and sometimes 10% on our net income. In the 18 years that we've been at Berkey, our practice is that I tithe on the income you pay me for working as one of your pastors—and I give that back into Berkey's general fund. From her income, Jenny has sometimes chosen to give to Berkey, but more often she's decided to support other non-profit work, such as a missionary in Sudan, the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism at Goshen College, various environmental organizations, and so on.

However, I've decided not to tithe on my income from teaching at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Why? Because the time I put into teaching is itself the

tithe. I teach as a part-time adjunct professor, which doesn't pay very much. If I were teaching as a full-time adjunct, I'd earn \$33,000, which is only \$11,000 over the poverty line for a family of 3. The previous person who taught my courses was a regular faculty member who earned a lot more money than I am paid. That means the seminary saved a significant amount of money when they hired me to teach those courses. I've decided to teach these courses gladly, as a gift, a tithe, to God, to AMBS, and to our students. Therefore I feel no need to tithe financially on that income.

Next I'll say a little about end-of-life giving. 30 years ago, this wasn't an issue for us because we had no assets that amounted to anything. Now we do have assets. We own our house outright and we have retirement accounts. A year ago, we wanted to update our will. Before doing that, we went to our sons with a question. "How would you react if we changed our will, which currently gives each of you half of our estate, to giving our entire estate to charitable organizations instead? That means you'd get nothing from us, or almost nothing, when we die." Quickly, and easily, Peter and Nicholas said yes, that's fine. You've generously helped us through Bethany and Goshen College, and we think we'll be fine financially. So go ahead and give to charity.

With their permission in place, we then decided each of us would pick one organization. Jenny picked Mennonite Central Committee, and I picked Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Half our estate will help fund MCC's work of justice, peace, and food. And half will fund the Mennonite Church's theological education. Jenny and I know that if AMBS ever shuts down, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA will be in serious theological trouble. We will lose our theological center. I've watched what happens to other denominations that don't have a seminary, and in general they typically lose their distinctive theological shape. I don't want that to happen. Therefore AMBS will receive half.

By the time we die, we know our estate may have nothing left. Inflation might eat it up. There may be less Social Security than we hope for, forcing us to use more of our investments. But we have long-term care insurance, and with continued frugal living, something may be left for MCC and AMBS.

Changing our will to benefit charity has reshaped how I think about lifestyle choices. First, this change motivates me to be as well as I can be in order to save money and reduce health care costs. Wellness has physical, social, spiritual, vocational, psychological, financial, intellectual, and environmental aspects. I work hard to be as well as possible. I try to keep my body-mass index at 20.5. I walk at least a mile every day. We eat a Mediterranean diet. My blood pressure is excellent, and my cholesterol is fine. I've also taken a lot of steps in the last few years to reduce my levels of stress, which has been a problem for a long time. As I've lowered stress, I've been able to sleep 8 hours a night instead of 6 or 6½, which in turn contributes to my overall wellness.

Second, our decision about end-of-life giving affects how I think about medical care. I'm a sitting duck for cancer, since my grandfather, mother, and father all died from various cancers. I know I may get cancer and may die from it. Medical treatments can be very expensive, and giving our estate to MCC and AMBS has changed the way I think about medical procedures. If our assets belong to God, then God wants us to use them wisely. I believe God is happy for us to use our assets frugally to continue living and serving in the name of Christ. But when it comes to medical procedures, I'm very cautious. When my nurse practitioner recommends a test, I now ask her: Why are you recommending this? How necessary is it? Is there a cheaper option? And if I must do it, then who charges the least for this procedure? I fully anticipate that at some point in the future, especially if I have cancer, I may say no, I'm not going to do that because that will rob the poor, and the seminary, of money. Besides, I've already lived a long, good life, we're done raising our children, and I don't need to prolong my life if it's going to cost a lot of money. So no thanks.

I began with a simple but enormously consequential truth: this world belongs to God. Everyone and everything is God's. My life does not really belong to me. Your life does not really belong to you either.

Christian stewardship is simply living in ways that acknowledge it all belongs to God. If we let it, Psalm 24:1 could cause us to think more carefully about our choices. I've

shared some of my choices with you, but I don't assume for a minute those are the best choices, or that they should be your choices. That's for you to figure out.

How would you like Psalm 24:1 to influence your life? What one thing do you want to change about your life that would demonstrate it all belongs to God? What choices might God be nudging you to make?