

How Have We Despised Your Name?

[Show photo of 'Hoarder's' living room] Do you know what this is? It's the living room of a 'hoarding' couple. [Show next photo of them in chairs] Here they are just relaxing amidst their "stuff."

Why do people hoard? All of us have some level of attachment to our stuff, but hoarders are compulsive about it. They can't throw anything away because they think, "What if I need that someday?" So, everything stays. This is different from collecting. Collectors are proud of their "stuff." Hoarders are embarrassed by it. They think, "I don't know what's wrong with me. Why do I get so anxious just thinking about throwing stuff out?"

The good news is that there's a cure for hoarding. You CAN control it. You don't have to live as a slave to your stuff. And the key to that freedom is gaining a heart of blessing. In our two texts today, God will show us the Cause and the Cure of moving from a life of hoarding to a life of blessing. So, first, let's examine...

I. The Cause of Israel's Struggle with Hoarding.

The historical context is this: Malachi was a prophet in Jerusalem during the time that Nehemiah was governor, which means that this was about a hundred years after the first exiles had been released from Babylon. So, this is the next generation, the descendants of the Israelites we studied last spring in the books of Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah. They were the sons and daughters of the returning exiles.

Some of them had seen the temple being rebuilt. Many of them saw or even participated in the rebuilding of the city wall. But as the book of Nehemiah records, many of them also turned their backs on the faith of their fathers and mothers. Nehemiah records that after the wall was built, he returned to Persia to take up his position again in the court of the king. But he had to return to Jerusalem a short time later to deal with the apostasy of the people. They were once again giving up the ways of God for the ways of the people living around Jerusalem.

The book of Malachi, then, is describing this period between the time that Nehemiah went back to Persia and before he returned to Jerusalem. Listen again to how God describes the situation. He's speaking through the prophet:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD'S table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?" (Malachi 1:6-8a ESV)

Why would the people bring damaged goods like lame animals or rotten food as their offering to God? Because they were hoarders! They kept the healthy animals, the fresh food for themselves and gave what they "didn't need" or "didn't want" or "were no longer using" to God. Are we ever in danger of doing that?

Do you know what the difference is between stewardship and philanthropy? Wesley Willmer, professor at Biola University in California explains it this way:

In the beginning, God made and owned all that was. He created humans and entrusted into their care the precious world He had lovingly crafted. These people were his stewards (managers). When the stewards functioned according to their identity and calling, God's created world thrived.

However, over time, God's people became convinced that they owned it all. They became saturated in stuff, greedily surrounding themselves with possessions. They were "suffocated." ...the system God had established was broken. While God's people have occasionally tried to get back on track, today we are far from acting like responsible stewards in God's economy...¹

He goes on to explain that in America, in the first hundred years, a strong foundation of stewardship was laid. There was a general acceptance that the blessings of life were from God. This eventually gave way, however, to the concept of "philanthropy," a term coined by Andrew Carnegie, which was based on the concept of Social Darwinism. In an essay Carnegie wrote called "The Gospel of Wealth," he outlined how he and other captains of industry like him were examples of economic survival of the fittest. So, according to Carnegie, the proper motive for giving ought to be calculated in terms of cost-benefit for continuous economic growth, not a reflection of God's generosity in response to human suffering. Carnegie believed in helping only those who would be of "use" to society. Prof. Willmer concludes:

While being a "friend of humankind" sounds harmless, implicit within the concept of philanthropy is an assumption that we, not God, own our resources and have the sole authority to dispense them. Philanthropy strives to use money to make a prosperous society of the strong and able, while biblical stewardship advocates humans [from all levels in the socio-economic order] caring for one another as fellow creatures and servants of the God who provides everything we need.²

Why did God criticize the people in Malachi's day? Was He criticizing them because they weren't bringing offerings to the temple? No. He was criticizing them for the KIND of offerings they were bringing and for the HEART ATTITUDE behind their giving. Their gifts were completely self-serving – they gave what they didn't need or couldn't use, not their very best because God deserved the best. They hoarded the best for themselves because they didn't believe God would provide.

So, why do you give when you give? And why don't you give, when you don't? I'll tell you why – it all depends on whether you see yourself as the owner of your stuff or the steward of your stuff. Owners are basically 'owned' by their stuff. Stewards are able to be generous because they recognize that it's not their stuff in the first place. Stewards give their money and time and talent away because they're convinced that God will just give them more.

So, if a person wanted to move from an owner mindset to a steward mindset, how would he or she negotiate that move? In that regard, we need to look at...

II. The Cure for Hoarding: The Roman Road to Biblical Generosity

What's the real problem for hoarders? They're not living by faith. They truly believe that having what they need in the future depends on them. If they don't save it, if they don't hang on to everything, they simply won't have it when they need it.

But Jesus owned nothing except the clothes on His back and did He have what He needed in life? How did He get food? God provided it through generous people. How did He have a place to sleep at night? God provided it through generous people. Jesus said: (Matt. 6:25, 31-33)

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

“...Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

What role then, does working for a living play? Should we all quit our jobs and “live by faith”? No, God tells us in the New Testament that if you don’t work, you shouldn’t eat (II Thess. 3:10). Jesus’ three years of ministry were supported by generous people and possibly also by savings He had built up by working as a carpenter for 15 years. In Matt. 6 Jesus is teaching the powerful lesson that if building God’s kingdom is your highest priority, the Father in heaven will see to it that your salary will stretch to meet your needs.

In Romans 6, Paul uses four words that mark out for us the road to biblical generosity, which is a destination, by the way, that we all are expected to achieve and one that is not determined by the amount of money we give but by the attitude of our hearts! The four words that mark out this road, in the NIV translation, are “know,” “count,” “offer,” and “obey.”

Milepost one on this road is to “know.” Know what? Listen to verses 8 through 10:

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (Rom. 6:8-10, NIV)

Do you know that you are a sinner and, without Jesus’ dying on the cross, you would go to hell? Only people who know that can travel the road of generosity. People who don’t know this still may give away some of their money or some of their stuff, but it will always have a good-sized dose of self in it. Their gift will have strings attached or they will want to set up a foundation that has their name on it or when they give they will be sure to let the press know what they’re doing so they can send a news crew out to photograph them “being philanthropic.”

But if you know who you truly are – a person who once was a traitor, a conspirator, a Judas to God – you then give of your time, your talent and your treasure as just one small token of your gratitude for being rescued from the eternal punishment you deserve. The first step on the road to generosity is to know who we really are. We’re sinners.

The second milepost is to “count.” The ESV version says, “*consider*.” The Greek word is from the root *logidzomai*. It’s one of the most important words in the entire book of Romans. Paul uses it 19 times. If you don’t understand what this word means, you’ll miss the point of the whole book! It’s technically an accounting term. It means “to deposit to one’s account.” In the moral accounting books of your life, you are to take something from someone else’s account and ‘deposit it’ into your account. So, let’s put that phrase into verse 11. It then would read:

In the same way, deposit to your account that you are dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Pastor R. Kent Hughes makes this comment:

Have you ever taken the time to consider the fact that you participated in the events of the cross, [If you have repented of your sin and asked Christ to forgive you, then] you died and... you were resurrected with Christ? ...This reckoning to our account is something we are to constantly do, as the present tense of the verb indicates: “Keep on counting yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”³

If you do not admit that you are a sinner, you'll never become generous. But once you've acknowledged that and asked Jesus to deal with your sin, then you have taken the second step on the path toward generosity because you recognize, you acknowledge, how incredibly generous Jesus has been with you!

The third word we find in this passage is the word "offer." It's in verse 13. Beginning at verse 12, Paul argues the negative by saying:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. (Rom. 6:12, 13 NIV 1984)

Philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates or Michael Bloomberg want to believe that they are changing the world for the good. And they are. It's honorable that they are using their enormous wealth to feed the hungry and heal the sick. But, while what they are doing is good, it also is not permanent. The good they do will not last, it's temporary.

The works of biblical generosity, on the other hand, will bring about both good changes in people's lives now AND in their lives for eternity. Philanthropists only address surface needs, not the needs of the soul. Some have said, "Yes, but if a person has an empty stomach or is writhing in pain, he's not able to hear the Gospel." Well, who says you should share the Gospel without addressing physical needs? Certainly not Jesus. But how tragic is it to meet a physical need and not address the person's spiritual need, which, if left unaddressed, could send them to the next life to writhe in pain for eternity? Jesus said: (Matt. 16:26 ESV)

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?..."

No, Romans 6 argues powerfully that those on the road to biblical generosity will be disciplined with what they allow their physical bodies to participate in. Not efforts that only deal with the needs of flesh but they will offer their bodies to God, to be used as 'instruments of righteousness.' Works that qualify as righteous will ALWAYS include efforts to meet the needs of a person's soul, as well as the needs of his body. You can't fully bless someone without addressing the needs of his soul.

The fourth mile post carries the word "obey." Know, count, offer and obey. God tells us through Paul in verse 16:

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Rom. 6:16)

So, the first truth we see here is that we are easily enslaved. In fact, what God is saying is that the powers that exist in the universe are so formidable that one of two things will happen: every person on earth will end up being either a slave of evil or a slave of righteousness. You're like a tiny little village on the border between North and South Korea. You have no hope of being able to fight off either country if they decide to overrun your village. Your only hope is to align your village with one powerful force who will protect you from the other. That's the spiritual truth that God is revealing in Rom. 6:16. The concept of the autonomous man or woman who is the 'captain of their own ship' is simply a myth. Bob Dylan, of all people, actually had it dead on when he wrote:

*You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the Devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

That's Romans 6:16. And that serving, that obedience of yours, will lead you to either life or death. Which brings us to verses 20-23 which say in the ESV:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:20-23 ESV)

Did you catch that last comparison? As a slave of sin, you're paid wages, you get what you deserve – what you earned – which is death. But with God, you don't earn anything. You're given a free gift, at least free to you (it was actually very expensive to God). And it's eternal life with Him. The destination of the Road to Generosity isn't a wage or an award or plaque to hang on your wall – it's a relationship. Life together with God – starting now and ending never!

So, what does your life with God look like right now? The problem with the Israelites wasn't that they weren't giving, it was what and why they were giving. What and why are you giving? If you've come to the conclusion today, because of God's Word, that your giving needs to change, how is that possible? It's possible only by a change of heart.

Let me give you an illustration. [Glass of water illustration] This is a glass of water. If I shake it, like this; what happens? The water spills out, right? Why does the water spill out? Most of you say, "Because you shook the glass."

But there's another way to look at this. We could also say that the water spilled out because that's the nature of water. If water had a different nature, it wouldn't spill. What am I driving at?

Here I have another glass. This glass also has water in it but this water has had something added to it. Jello! So, when I shake this glass, what happens? The water doesn't spill out. Why not? I shook it just like I did before. It doesn't spill because now the nature of the water has been changed. The shaking was the same, but the result was completely different.

Romans 8:11 says this:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Do you want to live a generous life, like Jesus? You can't be generous naturally. You have to have a change of heart. The instant you surrender your life to Jesus, the Spirit is poured into your heart and it is changed. With you in Christ and Christ in you, the world can shake you all it wants and you will be able to keep on blessing others because your very nature, what's inside of you, has been changed forever. If you need a changed heart, let's ask God to pour the Spirit in right now. Let's pray...

¹ Wesley Willmer's "Creating a Revolution in Generosity," in *Revolution in Generosity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008), p. 28

² *Ibid.*, p. 29

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans, Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 126