

TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

Part VIII: Living as Tenants, Not Owners James 5:1-6 (NLT)

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)

My wife and I recently moved out of our apartment and into a house. We are renting this new place from a good family friend. The owner allowed us to have some input on the remodeling of the house, which was unusual considering that landlords normally don't do this. So my wife and I had impact on certain things, such as choosing the paint colors for each room and what kinds of flooring we wanted. In fact, the owner told us that she was giving us authority to tell the handyman what we wanted changed in the house.

At the same time, throughout this process, we were reminded of what our true position really was – we were still tenants of the house. No matter how much “authority” was given to us, we were not the owners of the house and ultimately the handyman listened only to the owner. Why was that? Because it was the owner, and not us, who was the one paying the handyman for his services. Much of our suggestions had to still go through the owner; the handyman would not budge until he got approval from the owner. And even the owner had some of her own ideas for the house that we knew we could not question. For example, I wanted to paint the inside of the kitchen cabinets to make it look better. Now, there was really nothing wrong with the inside of these cabinets; they just looked a little old-fashioned. The owner decided not to do anything about it. I had to accept that because technically this was still her house. We already appreciate the fact that she let us be involved in some of the decision-making, but the bottom line is she was the owner and we were the tenants, and at the end of the day we must submit to her decision. That is the relationship between the owner and the tenant.

Such a principle, I believe, is significant to our understanding of our roles when it comes to wealth. We automatically believe that what we own belongs to us because we had earned it. Our money, our possessions, our careers, all of wealth is ours; we can live life any way we choose and we can use our material resources any way we want. To live in luxury and self-indulgence is what we are entitled to.

But, when we read the Bible, God has different standards for us when it comes to wealth and the hoarding of it. When it comes to possessions we must understand this important spiritual principle:

1. All of creation, including our lives and our possessions, **belong to God**. (Leviticus 25)
 - The land and the people belong to God.

This is true because everything was created by him. God created humankind, the universe, and everything in-between. God is the owner of all that we see and experience in this world. This, in turn, makes us the tenants in the relationship:

- We are tenants of this world – **we have no right to claim anything as our own.**

Because God created each one of us, everything that we sense and experience come from him too. This includes all of the blessings that he has imparted to us, from the food we eat, to the homes we live in, to the water we drink, and the wealth that he has given. Everything that we have comes from God's divine provision. It is his desire that we enjoy his creation with utmost joy and pleasure.

But, his provisions for us do not mean we are owners of these things. God continues to have authority over these blessings. He has full rights and control over them; we are just tenants over his possessions. He gives us this responsibility because he wants us to trust in him for full support for our needs. He also wants us to use his blessings to bless those who are in need. In summary, the purpose of God's provision is this:

- Purpose – to devote ourselves to God alone

When we recognize that God alone is the source of all blessings, including material success, we are apt to dedicate ourselves to him fully. This is what we call "worship." God wants us to depend upon him for everything and he wants to fill our lives with tremendous victory. This can only take place when we live as spiritual tenants and allow God to be the spiritual owner over our lives and all that is associated with us.

But,

What happens when we are materialistic? (James 5:1-3)

¹Look here, you rich people, weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. ²Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. ³Your gold and silver have become worthless. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh in hell. This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgment.

James is very clear what happens to us when we choose to depend solely on our hoarded wealth over against God's sovereign provision:

2. We will experience **terrible misery.**
 - We will lose everything.
 - The loss will be vicious in nature (...rotting away...moth-eaten...become worthless)
 - We will continually and painfully weep for our loss.

The meaning and essence of wealth transforms from one of blessing to one of decay and decompose. No worth is found when we selfishly grab what truly belongs to God in the first place. We realize that what we wholeheartedly depend on turns into corrupted mist, disappearing right before our very eyes. When we fail to trust in God for everything and lean upon materialistic passion instead, God will take these very things away from us. In its place we will experience painful stabs of loss and wailing; what was once so dear to us has been taken away from us. The luxury and self-indulgence we were accustomed to in life no longer exists; violent misery replaces that.

You see, wealth loses its God-given identity when we think we are owners of it. God takes great offense when we live as if we own what we possess, that we have a right to claim material resources as ours alone. When we rely upon the resources instead of the one who provides them, we face the disappearance of what we deemed to be our prized possessions. God defines and shapes what wealth is and how humankind should properly engage with it. When we place wealth over and above God, the Lord turns it into something that no longer brings value to us. It rots away and becomes undesirable to us.

But, more than the loss of material possessions, we face something that is even more devastating:

3. In fact, the loss of our wealth will lead us to **eternal destruction**.

The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh in hell. This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgment.

- Our selfish gathering of wealth is a reflection of our sinful nature against God.
- Our accumulation will actually testify against us on the day of judgment.

When we choose to supplant God as Lord and replace him with our possessive hoarding we are choosing to become owners over our lives. We are selecting what is best for us instead of solely depending upon the one who is the supplier of all our needs. Such a selfish attitude only reflects our evil disobedience against him, and according to James, this will be used as testimony against us. When we act as owners instead of tenants what we are saying is that God is useless for us and that we do not need him. We can take care of ourselves without God encountering us in any way, shape or form. What a true manifestation of our sinful nature!

James then expounds that such a blatant sinful lifestyle will lead us on the road to eternal damnation. God will use our selfish hoarding as evidence that we forsook him and chose not to have a relationship with him at all. God will hold this against us and condemn us on the day when he judges all of creation.

But,

Why are we condemned when we are materialistic? (James 5:4-6)

⁴For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The wages you held back cry out against you. The cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every whim. Now your hearts are nice and fat, ready for the slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and killed good people who had no power to defend themselves against you.

4. When we are materialistic we only produce **self-indulgence**.

As spiritual tenants we depend on God to meet all of our needs. This honors God as the sole provider and humbles us as his servants. But, when we recklessly choose to become spiritual owners we put ourselves ahead of God. We sinfully indulge, promoting ourselves to be more significant than him. We satisfy our evil desires while we ignore God in worship.

5. When we are materialistic we act out in **injustice**.

When we promote ourselves ahead of God we no longer follow his ways. And since we no longer follow his ways, we act out in spiritual violence against one another. We selfishly hurt one another to get what we want. We do not care whether we have caused pain and suffering towards someone else as long as our hearts “are nice and fat.” We are ready to slaughter lives instead of protecting lives.

6. When we are materialistic we act out in **sinful immorality**.

Destruction is what we can describe our lives when we choose to become spiritual owners instead of letting God be Lord over us. We condemn and kill because we are no longer under God’s command. We destroy and hurt because those are the characteristics of our sinful nature. Sinful immorality plagues our very being and creates in us a passion for brutal anguish towards other people. Brokenness abounds when we fail to live as spiritual tenants and allow God to be the true owner of us.

So, what can we do to live as spiritual tenants?

Application

- Is my existence depended solely on God alone or on the wealth I have accumulated?
- God gave us wealth so that we can use it to show his love and care towards others.
- Persevere in righteousness even when the rich oppress you; God will ultimately judge them.

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