



# Joyful Generosity

## Sermon 1

*Text: Psalm 24:1-6*

*Theme: The Earth is the Lord's*

Paul Wendland, the president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, spent his vicar year in Zambia, Africa, where his father was a missionary. In a letter to a friend and fellow pastor, he told how three students in their seminary had to be dismissed because they were involved in a witchcraft scandal. One of the student's children had died unexpectedly, so he and his friend accused a third student of putting a spell on this child. The two students who made the accusation were dismissed as well as the one who was accused, because his reputation had been damaged beyond repair. The friend wrote back to Pastor Wendland and asked how students who were already at the seminary could still believe in witchcraft. Wendland replied that witchcraft was so much part of the African culture that it was hard to get it out of their heads and hearts.

On another occasion Wendland shared, "If students from the seminary here in Africa were to visit our seminary in Mequon, and if they would see all the new cars in the parking lot and then hear the students complaining about the food in the cafeteria, they would think that we are the most godless and thankless Christians they had ever met."

Materialism is the idolatry of worshipping material things, created things, rather than the Creator. It is the lie that filling our lives with lots of stuff will somehow bring us joy and happiness. It's the deception that these earthly treasures and pleasures will somehow last and not disappoint us. It is failing to put everything we have and everything we are into thankful service to God. It's thinking that we never have enough when we have more than we need. And the worst part about it is—like witchcraft in Africa—it is so much part of our American experience that we don't even know we are doing it!

This morning we are beginning a stewardship series in which we want to explore the reasons we give to the Lord and how we do that. Together we will examine the motives of our hearts, because joyful generosity begins with a heart that worships God.

### **Joyful generosity begins with a heart that worships God.**

#### **1. We worship the Creator and not created stuff.**

Psalm 24 begins with a bold statement. **"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters."** This is a simple truth. Everything in the world belongs to God, because he made it. We belong to God, because he made us. This church belongs to God, because he made it. Our houses, our cars, and our priceless collections of things we treasure belong to God, because the earth and everything in it belong to the Lord.

We might think, "Well, I worked hard for the things I have." But remember what it said in our first lesson, **"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deut. 8:17-18).** We ourselves and everything that we have belong to God.

We don't like to accept this simple truth in our culture or in our sinful nature. We like to think that we own ourselves and can do whatever we want. We are very focused on ourselves. But when we focus our attention on ourselves, isn't that just another way of worshipping what is created instead of the Creator?

Our psalm continues. **“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”** There is phrase in these verses that I would like to focus on today. It says we should not lift up our souls, or our hearts, to an idol. The Hebrew word for “idol” here means “something inconsequential.” So the Psalm is saying that we should not lift up our hearts to something that is inconsequential. Lifting up our hearts to something inconsequential is putting our heart on something that is not the most important thing. Idolatry isn’t so much that you love some evil thing or person. The really sneaky version of idolatry happens when we love good things too much.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon describes these inconsequential things as “meaningless” and applies the word to lots of good things that people do. The book of Ecclesiastes is a really depressing book unless you read the last verses in the book first. There Solomon says that there is really only one important thing in this life: “Fear God and keep his commandments.” If you keep everything in context of your relationship with God, you can keep your heart focused on the Creator and not the created. When Solomon says that everything is meaningless, he’s describing a world out-of-whack, where created things are placed above the Creator.

If you lift up your hearts to the inconsequential things—good things that you put too much value on, you are committing idolatry. It is idolatry because God comes is a distant second. It’s idolatry because you can’t find time for your prayers or your worship. It’s idolatry because you are missing out on the one thing in life that can give you real joy and happiness.

What are the inconsequential things in your life that you have lifted up your hearts to and worshipped instead of the God who created you? Is it your work? Americans are working themselves to death. Employers expect it and employees strive to meet those expectations so they can buy bigger homes and drive better cars. In the end, will you confess with Solomon that all this is meaningless?

Or are you lifting your hearts up to that endless pursuit of pleasure? There was a bumper sticker that said that the man who died with the most toys wins. Really? You want to bet your eternity on meaningless things?

What are you lifting up your heart to? None of these things is bad in itself. Work is not bad. In fact, it is good. Recreation is not a bad thing. It’s a good thing. Comfortable housing is not a bad thing. It’s a good thing. But if we let the inconsequential things of this life become bigger than life, bigger than God in our life, we are missing out on the one thing that can bring real joy and meaning in our life.

And what’s that? The only joy that will never disappoint us is the joy what we find in worshipping the God who not only made us and owns us, but who redeemed us for himself.

## **2. We worship a God who has redeemed us for himself.**

Sometimes people compare finding success in this life to be like climbing a hill. The problem is that most people don’t know how to measure success, so they just keep on climbing. I heard a story about a reporter who interviewed three of the top stars in Hollywood whose lives ended in despair and disaster. They had all climbed that hill of success. They made millions at the box office. They interviewed on all the late-night talk shows. Paparazzi followed them around and took their pictures. Yet they lived in fear and despair. Why? Because they knew that if they did not have another hit movie or another hit song, they would be forgotten. They were happier when they were nobodies than when they became somebodies.

What was wrong with their lives? They were successful. And yet they believed their life meant nothing if they were not successful one more time. What was their problem? They were climbing the wrong hill. **“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.”**

There is only one hill worth climbing, and that is the hill that brings us close to God. But isn't that also an act of despair? Who CAN climb that hill and stand before a holy God? Can you? Do you have clean hands, hands that have never done violence? Do you have a pure heart? I know that I don't. If you are honest with yourself, you will admit that you struggle with hatred or desire or jealousy or bitterness all the time. Have you never lifted up your heart to something that is inconsequential? If these thoughts plague your mind, you are climbing the wrong hill, because you think that God will judge you on your success in keeping his commandments.

The hill you want to climb to come into the presence of God is the hill that Jesus climbed. The words of the psalm could also be translated, "**He will receive blessing from the Lord and RIGHTEOUSNESS from God his Savior.**" Through faith in Jesus, your Savior, you have everything you will ever need or want to make your life full and complete. You can stand before God because Jesus has dressed you in his righteousness. He became poor for your sake so that you might become rich in a way that many billionaires will never experience. You are promised that you can have life and have it to the full. You can count yourself as a child of God. You have an inheritance that will never spoil or fade.

All the rest of the inconsequential stuff will fade away eventually. The movie star's beauty fades. Even the billionaire can't buy his way out of a hospitable bed. The athlete's strong body becomes weak and frail. All of the inconsequential things eventually fade away. But our faith in Jesus sustains us to the grave and beyond, to an inheritance that will never disappoint us.

I heard a story about a man who was vacationing in the Caribbean. He met a fisherman who was sitting on a chair watching the sun go down. He asked him what he did for a living. He said he went fishing every morning and caught fish for his family. He was a good fisherman and his family loved to eat fish. He loved to play with his children in the afternoon and go down to the sea and watch the sun set. The visitor had an idea. "If you are a good fisherman, I could loan you some money. You could put a fish stand here on the beach. People would buy your fish. If you caught more fish, you could open a market in town. You could buy a nice house for you family in the city. Wouldn't that be great? What would you do if you were successful?" And the man thought for a moment and said, "I would buy a house on the beach. I would fish in the morning and play with my children in the afternoon. Then I could come down to the sea and watch the sun set."

When I heard that story, I first thought it made a lot of sense. Don't let your ambition get in the way of enjoying life. And then, I thought that story missed the point altogether. Both men were missing the point, weren't they? Life doesn't have meaning because I can make myself rich. Life doesn't have meaning because I can sit on the beach and watch the sun set. Life has meaning when I know God as my Creator and Savior and when I find joy in serving him with all that I have and am. That's where joyful generosity begins! Amen.