

## Whose?

We began this year with a series in Romans 12 that we called: *Transforming Our Lives—Transforming Our Church*. We took our cue from verse 2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2a). In the rest of the chapter, we discovered specific transformations God wants to work in our lives.

“...be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That has a far reach. It informs how we think about becoming a fully-devoted Christ-follower. We are a people on the way, not glorified yet but fully engaged in a God-initiated process of becoming like Jesus.

Christ-followers are being re-formed from the inside out. We identify the ways in which our minds and hearts have been formed by this world’s system of values and ideals. And we reprogram our thinking with biblical truth that conforms to God’s “what is”—a way of understanding reality from God’s perspective.

That process is comprehensive. It touches every facet of our being, everything we think and feel and know and chose. God is working an extreme make-over in his kids, restoring us to the fulness of the *imago dei*, the divine image in the face of Christ.

Over the next four weeks we want to explore one of the most difficult transformational issues Christians face. It is an area of our lives so potent that it keeps many people from choosing to follow Jesus at all. It’s something that will rival God for your affections and loyalty. This issue is so powerful in our lives that we secret it away to deeply hidden places in our souls, resenting any intrusion into its sanctity.

We’re going to be talking about money. It’s a topic everyone loves to hate. Those outside the church think that’s all we talk about. We don’t. Actually, the last time we preached an entire series on biblical stewardship was in 1996—twelve years ago.

But even those of us who belong to our church family cringe. We don’t want anyone getting into our pockets. We jealousy guard our right to financial privacy.

And that’s why we have to talk about it. No other single area of our lives is more revealing of our love and loyalty to Jesus than how we think about and what we do with our money and possessions.

And it’s not just about our giving. This isn’t about meeting the church budget or taking care of our missionaries, or worse, sustaining a religious institution. It’s about bringing *all* of our lives, including our finances, under the leadership of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus isn’t after your money, he’s after your heart. He calls us to be agents of his Kingdom and glory in this world and how we manage our personal resources is a big chunk of that.

In order to get our arms around any biblical concept of resource management, we have to begin with some clear understandings about God. God re-defines our categories and our conceptions. Our soul, formed by this world, will always be deficient in its perceptions of God’s reality and God’s character. Humankind apart from God keeps him out on the circumference of what is, desiring a manageable deity who doesn’t intrude into their lives and preferences. Christ-followers, intent on following Jesus, are always working toward a theocentric—God-centered—picture of reality, a world view that has God at the heart of everything.

When it comes to biblical resource management, if we are truly seeking to be theocentric, the first thing we need to settle in our minds in the question of ownership: whose is it? Who owns this stuff that surrounds us, and this world in which we find ourselves?

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

- “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” (Psalm 24:1-2).
- “To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it” (Deut. 10:14).

God lays title to everything that is—no exclusions; no exceptions! He made it all. He created people in his image. He owns us. And for those who follow Jesus, we are twice-owned by God. He not only made us, he redeemed us.

You see, when humankind sinned, we became disconnected from God, disqualified for God's kingdom. We fell under the judgment of God's broken law, and put ourselves under the domination of Satan, the ruler of this fallen world.

By his death on the cross, Jesus paid our debt to God's law. He redeemed us, setting us free from our just condemnation and releasing us from the dark realm of evil. In Jesus, God “...rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

As a result, Paul could write to the church at Corinth and say: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? *You are not your own*; you were bought at a price.” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

I belong to God, heart and soul; lock, stock and barrel. Everything I call “Mine!” properly belongs to God: my cars; my toys; my house; my furniture; my paycheck; my retirement account; my checkbook; my lawn mower; my computer; my camera, my body. You name it, God owns it.

This has to mean something with real-world significance. It's not just the right answer to a Bible quiz question, or church-speak divorced from the world to which we return outside these walls. God told Job: “Everything under heaven belongs to me” (Job 41:11).

Over and over again, God claims personal ownership of the earth. “...every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. ...the world is mine, and all that is in it” (Psalm 50:9-12).

How does this reality transform our minds? What does God want to form in us that is so very much like Jesus by coming to terms with his ownership of everything? And how are we to think about all this stuff we like to call “mine”?

The old word is stewardship. We're probably more familiar with the concept of management. A manager takes care of the assets of an owner. He or she is accountable to the owner for what they do with those assets.

For instance, If God is the real owner of my stuff, then it matters how I take care of God's stuff—those things we call ours: our clothes, our furniture, our yards, our vehicles, even our environment. It is ours to use; not to abuse. We are managers accountable to God for how we use his earth and what he has entrusted to our care.

For instance, I knew a man who never maintained his car. He never serviced the engine or maintained correct tire pressure. He never even changed the oil. If the oil got low, he'd dump in another quart.

Guess what? His oil turned to sludge and the motor froze up. He had to buy a new engine.

This is a man who loves God deeply and seeks God's presence regularly. And this is a man who needs to be transformed by the renewing of his mind concerning what it means to maintain what God has entrusted to him.

“This is my Father's world,” the old hymn declares. If that's true, then how we care for our environment and our possessions is more than a pragmatic issue. It is a reflection of how we perceive our role as managers of what God owns.

Further, God, who owns everything, who entrusts a portion of what he owns into our care

and keeping, shares his stuff with us to provide for our needs—we get to use and enjoy those things freely: “...God...richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Isn't God good!

By the way, this is why it's important that we pause before meals and say, “Thanks.” We don't bless the food. We bless the One who provides the food. The Bible teaches us that God created food to be “received with thanksgiving.” When we give thanks, we acknowledge God as the one who has provided the meal for our enjoyment.

Remember the child's mealtime prayer: “God is great. God is good. And we thank him for our food.” That's a great piece of practical theology to instill in our kids.

God's ownership is the proper basis for our gratitude. We get to enjoy God's stuff. Whether it's a good meal, the comfortable couch in our living room, a day on a lake, or a walk in a park, God has richly provided us everything for our enjoyment.

But God also entrusts us with his stuff to advance his kingdom and glory in this world. We enjoy what we call our assets—our money and possessions—to provide for ourselves and the needs of our family, *and* to further God's purposes.

That's why it's so important that we settle this matter of ownership. If it's all God's to begin with, then he can ask for it any time he pleases.

A month ago we sent out a letter informing the church family about our financial shortfall. As I thought about how Jeannette and I might respond, I did a quick inventory of our budget and figured closely what we could add to our tithes. I was feeling pretty good about what I thought was a generous response when God threw another figure at me, about ten times what I was thinking.

I quickly protested, “We don't have that!” And God said, “What about your stash of mad money?”

How many of you squirrel away extra dollars for personal stuff? I do that. Unexpected personal income gets funneled into a pile of cash. It doesn't go into our general budget, although it may get tapped for emergencies. It's what I use to buy my grown-up toys.

That's what God put his finger on.

“But that's *mine!*” I said.

And God just smiled: “‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (Haggai 2:8).

And one more time, I had to settle the question of whose it really was. If it's all God's, then he can ask for it back any time he wants with no complaints on my part.

My neighbor, Mark, grows a small tomato patch. I let him use my 30 year old garden tiller any time he wants. He doesn't even have to ask. I have invited him to come over, take it out of the shed and work up his garden, even if we're not home.

I'm really glad Mark feels the freedom to do that. It gives me real joy to share my equipment with a neighbor that way.

Imagine Mark borrowing my tiller and keeping it at his house for a few days. And imagine further, that I've got some work I want to do with it. If I knocked on his door and said, “Mark, I need to use my tiller,” how do you think he might respond?

Mark's really a gracious guy. He would probably apologize for not getting it back. I can't imagine him getting upset because I was taking *my* tiller, as if it were really his.

So when God shows up and says, “Leo, I need to use my stuff,” it's his—no questions asked.

When it comes to our money and our stuff, we have to decide whose it is. If God owns everything, then “mine” becomes a relative term. “Mine” describes everything God has provided richly for me to enjoy. And since it describes everything that is really his, he can ask for it any

time he wants, with no complaints on my part.

We have to decide: Am I an owner with rights and privileges, or am I a manager with privileges and responsibilities. How we answer that will depend on God's place in our hearts. Is he at the center or out on the circumference. Does God truly own everything?

How do you answer the question of "Whose?"