

Hopeless Hoarding vs Freely Giving

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[0 : 0 0] words of introduction because face value these are not easy words to hear. An analogy I want to draw is a power tool. Imagine you've got a drill, a chainsaw or something like that and there's two different ways in which you could sort of explain the relationship between the person about to operate it and the thing itself. On the one hand you could sort of say actually if this power tool is used well, use it well, use it properly then you'll achieve fantastic DIY results. It'll be quick, it'll be easy, you'll stay safe, you won't be harmed, you'll be well at the end of it and you might even enjoy using it. On the other hand you could describe it along the following terms. You could describe it in terms of what it would be like if you were to misuse that piece of equipment. In fact you could go even more than that and you could be quite graphic as to what the consequences might be of misusing that thing quite radically. You could describe the kind of injuries that might be incurred. You could go into depth and detail about how that could actually be a fatal set of injuries. You could talk about blood and guts in all directions. Both of them would be equally true but our starting point might not want to be the second type of scenario that I've just described.

The Bible is not a human book about God. It is God's book about human beings and in it we read of God's vision for us. Vision that Jesus himself described as life in all fullness.

I think actually for most of the time that vision is described, it's depicted in terms of what that life in all fullness looks like, the good things that God wants us to have, not just for eternity but right now. But there are moments in scripture and they're the bits where we tend to as preachers perhaps veer away from because they're a little bit graphic. Where perhaps the narrative takes the style of the kind of blood and guts scenario that I just described a moment ago.

And this morning's reading is a great example of that. And generally speaking we come across that style of narrative in the Bible because it was a known fact that the readers, the listeners, basically weren't getting it. So with that warning in mind, let's hear from the book of James.

So I was going to say that today's reading comes with a health warning, but actually I think it'd be more accurate to say that today's reading is a health warning. We don't know the details of the rich people that James was writing towards, was writing to. Clearly they were issues, but they were issues, the problem being not because they were rich. The problem was with their attitudes. As James goes on to say, there were problems there over greed, over a sense of hoarding, over overindulgence while not caring about others. There were issues over being oppressive, over cheating people, not paying people their wages, over being abusive with their power. So as we hear this wake-up call, this health warning, let's just ask ourselves the question then, what is the positive vision that

[3 : 53] God is setting before us in his word that these particular words of scripture are perhaps the flip side of? I think a clue comes in the words of what has traditionally come to be known as the Lord's prayer. Specifically where Jesus, when he teaches his disciples to pray, says, was to pray, give us this day our daily bread. So we're thinking this morning about the sort of contrast between an attitude of freely giving, a contrast between that and the sense of hoarding and clinging to things. And when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and that includes us, give us this day our daily bread, it is Jesus's way of leading us into a relationship of trust. Notice that the prayer, Jesus's prayer, was not give us tomorrow our daily bread, but give us this day our daily bread.

Now, don't misunderstand that here, planning is important. And in fact, it's also a biblical theme. And we look back into the Old Testament, think of the story of Joseph, for example, and how when God spoke to Joseph through dreams to take to Pharaoh, the people of Egypt, actually encouraged them to store up for during the years of plenty for the years that were going to follow when there was going to be famine. So, you know, the problem is not with planning ahead for the future. The problem becomes when we hoard onto things. Because underlying our attitude with wealth and material things is the question of trust. You see, at the heart of our Christian faith is the call into a relationship, friendship, a friendship of radical trust in God. And the most wonderful thing, I think, about that relationship, which is simultaneously probably the hardest and most challenging thing, I find, is that challenge to trust in such a way that we trust for today and don't worry about tomorrow, as Jesus put it. Do not worry about tomorrow, but trust God each day.

In Scripture, right at the beginning of the book of Genesis, we have this beautiful picture of God's intentions for us as humanity. And we have this picture of the Garden of Eden, where there's no suffering, there's no pain, and there's no death and no dying. And there's this wonderful relationship of intimacy and vulnerability between human beings represented in Adam and Eve and the creator God. That soon becomes broken when the story talks about how, when we misuse our God-given freedom to choose not to trust in God. Sin comes into the scene and the world is broken.

But then right at the end of the Scriptures, in the book of Revelation, a book which is arguably very, very, very difficult for us to get our minds around, nevertheless, we have this theme again, this promise that at the end of time for all eternity is the promise that eventually, when we do not know the details of how and when, but we do know that, Christ will return. That heaven and earth will be infused, that God's dwelling place will be with us on earth. That it doesn't end in destruction, but it ends in new beginnings, where there will be no more death, no more dying, no more pain, no more suffering, because we will live in that restored relationship of perfect eternal life with God, with God dwelling among us, where we will be completely dependent on him with no worries, with no death, no pain, just sustained in love and joy and peace, with perfect satisfaction all the time, and yet everything ever more perfect. A satisfaction that can never be exhausted. It's going to be awesome.

But it's not just about then, because our Christian worldview is one that begins now. That sense of the eternity in which we will be forever completely dependent on God and receiving everything that we need each day from him, we're called into the dynamics of that relationship of trust now.

[8 : 39] In other words, this life is not just a rehearsal for the future eternity that awaits us, it actually breaks, that future eternity that awaits us actually breaks into the here and now. And so, our calling as Christian disciples is to learn now to accept that sense of complete vulnerability and trust in relationship with God. And that's quite an amazing thing. I'll tell you a story. There's a boy who, about 120 years ago or so, he was in the American Midwest, and he'd always longed to go to a circus.

He'd heard about them, he'd read about them, but he'd never seen one. So you can imagine his excitement when he found out that one day, the circus was coming to the village where he lived. He begged his parents to go. It cost a dollar. In those days, it was a lot of money. But he was told that if he worked really hard, did lots of chores around the farm, then they would give him the dollar so that he could go to the circus. Well, he did, Julie did. And eventually, you can imagine his excitement, the day when the circus came to the village. He was given the crisp dollar bill that morning, and he ran across the fields to the edge of the village. And as he approached, he could hear the sounds of the circus. He drew up to the, he ran up to the pathway, the lane, and he could see a huge tent in the distance, and he could see acrobats and jugglers and elephants and clowns and music. And he stood there for several minutes as he just soaked it all up. And in the end, he was so excited, he took his dollar bill and he passed, and he gave it to a passing clown, making his way back home, feeling completely satisfied. He thought he'd seen, he'd actually been to the circus. He hadn't. He'd just seen the circus parade.

Every now and then, in the life of faith, we get these little glimpses into eternity. Experiences, it might be experiences when we're here gathered in church, it might be during the week when we're on our own, it might be in prayer, it might be something that happens in our lives, a sense of experience that God is moving in us, whatever, but glimpses of eternity. And it's so exciting.

But anything, even the most amazing, mind-blowing spiritual experience in this lifetime is just that tiny, tiny little fragment in relation to what it will be like for all eternity. But it is right now that we face that daily challenge of getting into that rhythm, of living in that daily dependency on God completely and absolutely. So every time we're called, and it's a tough call, I'll grant you, but every time we're called not to worry, but to trust in God for his daily provision, it's this sense of pre-empting what it will be like for all eternity.

But for now, we have the reality of suffering and pain, the things that bring us stress and worry and trauma and anxiety, the fact that eventually we die. All of that is part of our experience now. It won't be then. But in the midst of all that we experience now, we are called to learn that rhythm of trusting what for all eternity will be the reality, i.e. there will be nothing standing between us and God. We will be completely and utterly dependent on him. Now that's exciting. But right now, as we learn that sense of rhythm of dependency, that dynamic, it's very, very challenging. And we see in the scriptures that God actually calling his people to get into that pattern, into that rhythm of trust and dependency. That is what the Old Testament sacrificial rules were about, about the laws. Because God would say to his people in the days of the Old Testament with the law, that when they had to bring their first share, the best of their crops and their livestock and to offer it in a sacrifice, that was God's way of teaching his people to learn that everything was given to them by God. And in taking the very first and the best of their produce and sacrificing it to him at the altar was their way of expressing, okay, Lord, everything is from you. So the very first thing before everything else comes, we're going to give back to you. Because we know and we trust that just as you have provided, you're going to continue to. That is where the principle of tithing your first 10% comes from.

[13 : 08] And during the time of the people of God and their wanderings in the wilderness for some 40 years, before they entered the promised land, God had this way of teaching them to become dependent on them. Every day, this stuff called manna from heaven, a kind of bread-type stuff, would be rained down upon them in the middle of the desert. And they were instructed that they would must only ever gather enough that they needed for that day. And that's what they did. Except unless it was a Sabbath day, in which case they could take more for that day as well. But otherwise, it was an experience by which they had to learn to be daily dependent upon God. For 40 years, they learned this. Eventually, when they entered into the promised land, a land which was full of great things, then it was at that point that that stopped. But they had to remember, God instructed his people, they had to remember how God had faithfully provided their needs every day in that relationship of dependency over those four decades.

Now, the danger for us is that we haven't been through that experience of being dependent in that daily way. We get so used to planning, preparing for the future, thinking of decades down the line.

So when it comes to actually trusting God just for one day, we struggle. It throws us into blind panic. But we are called to trust in God, to remember that it is that God who brought us to birth, the God who sustains us each day, and the God who will sustain us for all eternity.

Let me draw you a picture. I think probably our relationship with resources, with money and security and material things, with everything, we would probably quite like to have in terms of, if you can imagine, a reservoir, like a massive great reservoir. Wouldn't it be great if each of us had our own personal reservoir of resources that we knew that's going to see us right through? You know, it's absolutely massive, massive reservoir of stuff that we knew would keep us well and our children well for the rest of our lives. But that's not the kind of picture that we're given in Scripture.

The Scripture talks not of reservoirs, but of rivers. And a river is something that is continually moving. It's not a stockpile of resources for us, but rather it's something that comes from a source in which we're called to trust, to continue to run and supply our every needs each day.

[15 : 56] And that, I think, is why in Revelation chapter 22, right at the end of the Scriptures, we have this picture of what eternity will be like, where we have this image of the river of life. From which life flows. And for all eternity, we will be trusting in God, because God will just provide as we need it. And we do not need to worry about the future. Let me try another analogy, which perhaps might connect a little bit more with our contemporary experience.

And it has to do with music. Broadly speaking, in the most broadest of terms, there are two different ways in which we can supply our music to ourselves these days. We've got the traditional method of stored media. Now, that might mean digital files that we've got stored somewhere on an MP3 player or something. It might mean CDs. Has anyone got any cassette tapes still? Vinyl? That's made the comeback.

But in other words, stored music, physical stuff, you keep wherever you want to keep it, and it's there. You can see it, you can touch it. You pick it up, you put it on, you listen to it. You know it's theirs, it's yours. Of course, the far more contemporary way, that's like the Reservoir, by the way.

But it's limited. We could have a massive record collection, but it's still limited to the boundaries of what we've collected. The more contemporary way of listening to music is what we call streaming, whether it's on Spotify or whatever. Now, the thing is, is there, it's pretty well unlimited, I think. But it only really works as long as there's that connection, the internet connection. And I think that's perhaps a sort of an analogy we might draw with the analogy with the river, that we're called to stream. To not hoard this connection which we can see in front of us of all the resources, but to trust in God, the God whose limitlessness we cannot see, but to trust that he is always there. He always will be. We may not be able to see everything in all its infinite grandeur, but he's there, and it never runs out. And that's how it will be for eternity. But we're invited now to step into the river, to stream, and to have that confidence and that trust and that commitment too, that the God who always has provided, who does provide now, will always do so. It's not an easy thing to do, because it involves trusting in that which we cannot see and touch.

But it calls for that relationship of trust. It calls for that sense of connection and ongoing trust that he will continue to provide.

[18 : 50] So when we come back to these words of James, in which it can sound very condemning what he says, actually he was shouting very loudly to his people because they just weren't getting the message.

And when we begin to think of it in terms that we've been thinking of the last few minutes, we begin to see that actually it's not a message of condemnation over riches and money, it's more words of warning saying, look, God wants you to live in this relationship.

He wants you for all eternity to have this relationship of beautiful trust and intimacy and dependency, and he wants you to have that now. All the time that we hoard stuff, we deny ourselves that relationship. And so James has to shout pretty loudly in order for us to get that message. One last image. I'm told that in some parts of the world they have a method of catching monkeys. They take a coconut and they cut it in half, they empty it out of all of its contents.

They fix the two halves of the coconut shell back together again, but with a hole cut in the side of it. Now before they fix it together again, they put an orange inside it. So if you can imagine, it's a coconut that's been emptied out and it's got a big hole inside it. Inside there is an orange.

And then they put this in a clearing somewhere and they wait. Monkey comes along, sees the coconut, smells the orange inside, looks inside. Now the hole is just about big enough for the monkey to fit its hand into and to grab hold of the orange. But as long as it's got hold of the orange, it can't pull its hand out.

[20 : 48] So the monkey goes in and it grabs hold of the orange. It desperately wants that orange. It tugs and it pulls and it tugs and it pulls and it pulls and it tugs. And it's so obsessed with that orange, it will not let go.

So much so that the hunters come along from behind and throw the net over the monkey at that point. That, I think, is a pretty good picture of the difference between planning and hoarding.

If we want to know what the difference is in our own lives, then the question to ask ourselves, I guess, is when it comes to our relationship with the things that we have, do we have that kind of relationship that we actually can't let go and let God?

You see, the monkey can set itself free at any time, but it just has to relinquish its grip. What is it that we might have our grip upon?

You see, the message that we have in James is not actually a message of condemnation, although it might sound like it. Rather, it's a word of warning to say, okay, we can try and cling to those things that we think make us feel more secure.

[22 : 00] We may seek the reservoir. We may seek that which is tangible. But God has in mind for us something so much better, so much fuller, so much richer, something that is infinite and limitless, something for all eternity.

But we can only experience that in a relationship of trust and vulnerability in which we let go. Will we do so? Will we do so?