

Ownership... It's a big part of growing up in America today. What do you own? What does that mean to you?

What does it mean to you as a Christian?

The first things I think of when I think of what I own are my house, my car, my stuff. We wanted them. We bought them. We own them. Our Steinway... That took a lot of saving many years ago, to get that piano. It represents fiscal discipline in the Bouma family.

But let's back track to our house, our lawn. We bought them, we fought for them. We own them. But the weeds don't seem to agree. They sneak over the fence. The neighbors' dogs are the same way. They sneak under the fence. And rabbits have no respect whatsoever for private property. Seriously, there are a lot of assumptions we make about owning things, and a lot of gray areas concerning ownership. What about taxes, eminent domain, intellectual property and copyright issues? I could lead a semester-long seminar on the intricacies of intellectual property alone. I want to clarify that the purpose of this sermon is not to judge or to conclude, but to break some habits in our thinking and to provoke some new lines of thought. Please don't feel judged when some of my language works that way.

For instance, can we remember what Jesus says about ownership? When someone asked him how to get into heaven, he pulled no punches. "Give away EVERYTHING you own and follow me." There's really no wiggle room in that response. Jesus was clearly opposed to ownership of any kind. Look it up. That's one reason the weak Steve is not a fundamentalist. I can look for ways to twist that text. As we all do. Funny story. When we were in college, Lyn and I had no car. This was no problem most of the time, we mostly stayed on campus and rarely went anywhere else. But then her sorority had its spring formal off campus, and we needed to get there. So I asked my buddy Dale, who was kind of a self-righteous fundamentalist, if I could borrow his car. He said, "Well, it's not really my car. I call it God's car." So I said, "Does God mind if I borrow it?", and so he let me use his car. I just hope God approved of everything we did that night. I haven't seen any lightning bolts... yet.

I think a lot of people sitting here use a similar approach to Dale when trying to reconcile our possessions with that bit of scripture. We think of ourselves as stewards of our wealth. Not technically owners. That's sophistry, people. We are fudging.

For instance, ownership is a thorny issue when we consider wealth. Wealth distorts everything. And we are wealthy. Well, most of us. We don't live in a democracy. We live in a capitalist society. By that I mean that the bulk of the decisions made by most of the people in this society are based on affordability. We do not first ask ourselves, "Is that what everyone voted for?" We do not first ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" We first ask ourselves, "Can I afford this? Can we PAY for this?" That's what I mean when I say we live in a capitalist society as opposed to a democracy. I'm sure we could talk and argue about that forever too. But ask yourself this: When you make big decisions, how often do you first ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" before you ask yourself, "Can we afford this?"

The whole idea of wealth affecting decision-making is tied intrinsically to the concept of ownership. Wealth is the ownership of accrued value. I've worked hard, I've stocked up and now I own a bunch of... nothing, except the right to own stuff. That's some heady, pure ownership. And wealth entices us to make more and more moral decisions based simply on our ability to pay for the outcomes. Fewer and fewer decisions are based on whether it is the right thing to do, but on whether we can pay for it. In a

capitalist society, we are encouraged to forget that every decision should start with rightness, not feasibility.

I sound judgmental, but I mostly just want to get your attention. I kind of lied to you. There is another way to avoid the judgment in Jesus' quote. The original Greek need not be translated exactly like that. I think some of us learned that line of scripture from..... as "Master, how can I get into heaven?" but I have seen it translated as "Teacher, how can I be happy?" That changes a lot. It takes the judgment out of Jesus response and makes it a teaching moment. He wasn't necessarily saying, "You are a bad person if you can't give up everything you own." He might have been saying, "You'll be happier if you'd give up ownership." That's some food for thought. I think a lot of homeowners can relate to that sentiment! As a mental exercise, I propose we redefine the word "ownership". Let's say that a person owns something only if they created it, and only in that they created it. By that definition, we have full ownership of almost nothing, in fact maybe nothing at all. We share ownership of everything more or less, because we didn't create ourselves. Do you really own yourself? That is an esoteric question because from a practical perspective, the only way you don't own yourself is if you are a slave, and from a philosophical perspective the only way you do own yourself is existentially.

Anyway... what DO we create? That is an incredibly complicated question. When we garden, how much credit should we get for the produce? How much creation comes from God and how much from the sweat of our labor? This summer I left my garden completely in the hands of God, and frankly, Claire will tell you the results were disappointing: no flowers, no tomatoes, no carrots. God dropped the ball. You'd think that if a garden came mostly from God and only a little from my efforts, then if I did nothing, there would still be some kind of fruits. As a musician I have a special perspective on creation. I perform music every day. I create it, but that artistic musical creation happens on many levels. I play music composed by others, I perform cooperatively in ensembles. Sometimes I wave my arms in front of a crowd of people and music comes out! And to be honest, the art of music isn't worth much without people hearing it and enjoying it. Everyone involved has a hand in the creation of the art of music. Writers, performers, listeners, and leaders.

I feel that this kind of ownership is much more valuable than having control of stuff... of things. In fact I am going out on a possibly blasphemous tangent and say that maybe what Jesus was talking about wasn't giving up all of our stuff, but instead, he was advising us to worry less about amassing material fortunes, and to worry more about promoting happiness based on intangible things we create... Relationships, feelings, habits of behavior, and maybe some beauty and courtesy and graciousness along the way.

We remodeled our kitchen this summer. Or rather, we paid a bunch of contractors to do it for us. So I'm not sure how much we own our new kitchen by my new definition, but we do own the good feeling that we greased the economy by paying people to build something new, improved and beautiful. We enabled the improvement of the structure of our house. We also supported the concepts of excellent craftsmanship and healthy work for decent pay. I think there was effective creation at work with our money... it was money well spent.

By simply living, we also create lives full of habits and relationships. If I get up every day and complain, I am actively creating ill will. If I get up every day and thank my wife for being herself, I am doing better. I do try to do that. If I try to be kind and supportive as opposed to being condescending and dismissive of the people around me, I have built habits of creating positive relationships. Over our lifetimes, nothing we can create is more important. That kind of creation is special because it is always cooperative. It is a

mutual effort. Remember those weeds in my yard? I look at our fence and the weeds always come from the neighbor's yard. That's annoying. But then one day I was over at their house, and I noticed it looked from there like the weeds were coming from my yard! I think there is an analogy in relationships. The weeds that grow up in our relationships always seem to come from the other guy's yard don't they? And rabbits never eat weeds!

Nowhere in life is the creation of relationships more obvious than in child rearing. I once had an epiphany that becoming a parent is a moment of almost complete ownership. One day, there suddenly appeared this tiny person that the two of us created, and now we are spending the rest of our lives giving up that ownership. Yes, we might try to bend the growth of our child, but every parent should understand that no matter what we try, each person grows up their own way, and gradually creates themselves, despite our efforts to form them. One way to look at parenting is that it is a gradual continuum of releasing. Releasing control, releasing responsibility, releasing connectedness, releasing ownership. We all disagree how fast that releasing should occur, but only fools believe that they can hold on forever to their kids.

All relationships are akin to parenting. A friendship is the mutual ownership of trust and enjoyment, helpfulness and comfort. Remember the phrase, "Make friends"? Making friends is creating something worth owning: a friendship. A family, whether through blood or other association, is a group of people who understand each other and love each other anyway. These are people who spend enough time together to create an attachment of mutual support. A family is a group of friends, whether we like them or not.

So, Christian ownership. Sharing what we have is the most important part of ownership. Material things are the least important things we'll ever own. Our habits of relating to people, the relationships we build. The attitudes we develop. These are much more important stuff to own. We have one life. We can put our primary creative efforts into piling up numbers in a bank account and putting things in our attic, thus safeguarding our retirement, or we can focus on kindness, compassion, sharing and helping others. The greatest monuments attesting to a glorious life of ownership are not statues or buildings, but legacies of joy, connectedness and compassion and kindness.