

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Whose Is This Anyway?

Scott Dudley

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Scripture:

Psalm 24:1-2

Of David. A psalm.

¹The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ²for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

Transcript:

The text today is Psalm 24, the first two verses. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." So, Jesus, help us understand these words and more importantly live them. In your name, amen. Well, when my wife and I were moving here from California, we came up for a few days to find a place to live, and we found a house we liked, and we made an offer. And we went back to California. But then the inspection showed that there were tons of problems with that house, so we backed out of the deal. The only other time we were going to be here before we moved was a weekend where we already had lots of stuff to do, so we only had four hours to find a house.

So our realtor showed us four houses in four hours. I remember standing in the last one going... We didn't know where we were. So we're like, "How far from the church? What are the schools like?" And within about 10 minutes, we said, "Oh, it's good enough. Fine. We'll take this one." I think that is a wonderful way to buy a house because we didn't have time to deliberate and debate. "I don't know. The wall is beige. I was hoping for more of an earth tone."

We didn't have time for that. We just had to take it. And it turned out great because we love our house. It has a porch. I love porches. I love my house. Except I didn't say that right, did I? Because it's not my house, it's the bank's house. They own it. I'm working on it, but they own it. But it's not even the bank's house because of the verse that I just read. The earth is the Lord's and everything, and I think everything would include my house in it or as King James version puts it, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

And the text tells us why for he founded it on the seas. It all belongs to God because he made it including the wood that makes my house. And if you go to the trouble to make something, you want it to be used right, don't you? So for instance, one of the things I make is pies because I love pie. I am happy to share the pies I make with other people under two conditions.

First, that I get at least two pieces of the pie because I made it so I get more. And then second that you don't take two bites of the pie and then leave the rest because that is a waste of the pie that I made, and it could have gone to me. The pie is Scots and the fullness thereof. And I want people to enjoy it, but I want them to use it right. And that's how God feels about the earth and everything in it, including where we live, whether that's an apartment or a rented room or a house.

God wants us to use it for his purposes. And this is all over the Bible. It's everywhere. In the Old Testament, God says, "The land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." Our property doesn't belong to our landlord or the bank or us, it belongs to God. We are just the managers of it. My wife and I have a financial advisor and he figures out where to invest our savings and all of that, but it's not his money, it's ours. He just manages it for us.

When you start to think of everything you have and your property, wherever it is that you live, rent it or own, when you start to think of that as not yours, but it belongs to God and we're just the managers of it changes a

whole bunch of stuff because God wants us to use it for his purposes. Community, mercy, justice, healing. In the Bible, God told the Israelites, "When you reap your harvest and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow in order that the Lord your God may bless you."

There's a blessing when we do this. "When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again. It shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow." In other words, what God is saying is don't harvest everything in your field. Leave some of it for people who need it. It was called gleaning and it's all over the Old Testament. It's okay to own property. It's okay to prosper from the property we own, but just use some of it for God's purposes.

The really radical thing that God commanded was that every 50 years would be a year of Jubilee where if someone had sold their land, God said it will be returned in the jubilee and they can then go back to their property. So every 50 years, all property reverted to its original owners to... Yeah, wow. That's super radical, isn't it? And the point of that was to prevent cycles of poverty from accumulating. It was this kind of this giant control, alt delete of society, a reset.

God says, "If you deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in the land I gave your ancestors forever and ever." And he says that multiple times in the Bible, "I'm giving you this land to manage for community and mercy and healing and justice." But the Israelites didn't do it. They worshiped false gods. They did not pursue justice. And for centuries, God warned them if they persisted in that, that he was going to send them into exile.

Prophet Isaiah says, "God looked for justice but saw bloodshed, for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no spaces left and you live alone in the land." It's okay to own property and acquire property, just leave some for someone else. Therefore, God says, "My people will go into exile." Because they didn't obey, God sends them to exile. That's what happens. They're conquered by the Babylonians taken into exile for 70 years and then they return.

When we get to the New Testament, it's interesting to note that about a third of Jesus' parables involve land and property. So a sower sowing seed or someone buys a field. About a third of his parables are like that. Now in part, that's just Jesus using metaphors and an agrarian culture would understand. But he's also saying that how we manage our property whether we rent it or own it, has spiritual implications and it matters to God.

And then after Jesus' resurrection when the Holy Spirit comes and the church begins, the Bible says that one of the first signs of this new life that Jesus creates in us is that God's grace was so powerfully at working them all that from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostle's feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Now, this is not communism, as is sometimes asserted. It's not communism. We are forced to give up your property. This is disciples willingly using their property for justice and healing and mercy because God's grace was so powerfully at work in them. And all of these commands about using our property justly and for healing and for God's purposes, all of these commands reveal God's character. They show the world who God really is.

They show the world his mercy and his justice and his healing. This is who our God is. This is the God who comes to us in Jesus. And it's one of the reasons I follow Jesus, because there is no other God like this.

And this is revealing his heart. As a church, we try to use our property for the things that God cares about. We have a farmer's market and that helps small farms have a place to sell their produce so that they can thrive and prosper. We share some of our space with immigrant communities like New Hope and Chinese Covenant who bless us in return so much. We have houses for teens who don't have safe places to live because God commands it, but also for our own sake.

As God says in those verses that I quoted, "Use your property for God's purposes in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the works of your hands." When we do this, others get blessed and we get blessed. That's the theology. That's the quick overview of land and property in the Bible. But the bigger question is how do we live it? How do we apply it? Well, there's lots of ways we can do this. You could get creative with it. I'll just suggest three. First, use property to enable community. All of those commands about gleaning, selling your property to help others, they're all about creating a community where people care for each other.

Create community even just in little ways. So for instance, every summer I grow tomatoes in my front yard and whenever I'm out there working on the tomatoes, which is often, people from the neighborhood just start to stop by and have conversation and talk. It's like my property creates this little mini community as people that are interested in the tomatoes and they talk and all that.

And then I always say to them, "Come anytime. Come anytime. Pick as many tomatoes as you want. You can come at midnight, pick tomatoes. It's okay. Take as many as you want." Sort of suburban gleaning. That creates community. I remember one time when my youngest daughter was three, somehow she got out of the house and was wandering around our front yard and one of our neighbors called us and said, one escaped, so that we could go get her.

It's little things like that that create connection and community. Use our property, but also our time. Not all of us own property, but we all have time to create community where we live. Visit that senior citizen that is shut in and doesn't get out and needs connection because they're isolated or maybe that young family that needs community.

Second, use property for hospitality. So for instance, Pastor Alexis always has a newly arrived immigrant family living with him and his family of five. No, six in their house. That's biblical hospitality. Using his property to help newly arrived immigrants. Some of you have done this and you have said what a blessing it is for you, but also for your kids, how it shapes their values, how it works against the materialism of our culture.

Some of you rent your property below market rates, which is so helpful because it's really hard to live here because it's so expensive. And some of you rent below market to help people be able to afford housing here.

Third, use your property to include rather than exclude. Who gets left out in your neighborhood or your apartment complex? Sometimes unintentionally we don't mean to. But again, that senior citizen who is shut in or that immigrant family. Who's being left out where you live? Look around, include them. In your apartment building or your neighborhood, what things are you advocating for or against? Do they include or do they exclude? Where do you see Nimbyism? Great idea, but not in my backyard.

But here's the thing, it's not our backyard. It's God's. And he asks us to use it for his purposes. One of the things we've been talking about in this sermon series are the long term effects of redlining and racial covenants in our area that prevented minorities from owning homes and living in certain neighborhoods.

Some areas were coded red as bad investments, not based on economics, but solely on race. Now, we all agree that was sin. No one is going to argue that that was sin. It was sin. And the practice was outlawed in the '60s, but the long term effects are still with us. Black and other ethnic groups were prevented from owning homes. And since that's one way to build wealth, those groups haven't been able to build as much wealth as others because they couldn't own homes, weren't allowed to own homes.

There wasn't a lot of investment in red line neighborhoods which created depressed economic conditions, which in some areas still linger today. We are a church filled with people who want to do justice and to help people, and to bring healing. One way to do that would be to find out if you live in an area that had racially exclusive covenants, and if so, rewrite the because you wouldn't know otherwise because it happened a long time ago.

If so, you can rewrite the covenant and attach it legally to your deed, so you get rid of that bad one and you write a covenant saying, "This is what we're going to use our property for the things of God." You can legally attach it to your deed so that people after you will see it when they buy it. Even if you didn't live in one of those neighborhoods or live in an apartment, you can still write a covenant with God that says, this is what this property is going to be used for. You can write it up.

As Anthony said last week, "Write it up, put it on your wall to replace that eat, pray, love sign. You got a pottery barn. Put it up there and then live it out." And this is not more than just symbolic. As we said a couple weeks ago, there are spiritual forces that work in our world. The spiritual world is real, and somewhere some, someone somewhere back then invited spirits of the exclusion into our neighborhoods and they will linger there until we deliberately tell them to get gone. And writing a covenant is a way to do that.

Another way to help would be to put some or all of your money in a black owned bank that invests in under-resourced neighborhoods and helps qualified first time minority buyers to get a home for the first time. My wife and I are going to do this. It's just normal bank, federally insured, all of that. It's not a handout. It's still your money. It's a small change in something we're already doing like banking that can direct resources to communities that have been left out.

There are people in the lobby with lanyards that can help you do all of these things. The racial covenants are gone, but that spirit of exclusion pops up in other ways unless we deliberately break agreement with it and kick it out of our homes and our neighborhoods. Like a lot of neighborhoods, mine has changed a lot over the years. And now there's a lot of immigrants in where I live. What a wonderful opportunity to get to know them and know their culture, show them Jesus. It's hard to be an immigrant. You don't know the languages well. You don't understand the customs. It's lonely. Sometimes, maybe even you face hostility from people who are nervous about their neighborhoods changing.

The gleaning laws in the Old Testament. Leave some of your harvest. It says, "It shall be for the alien, the orphan, the widow." Part of how we use our land well is to help immigrants feel included by making friends with them,

helping them out, understanding different cultural values about what a yard should look like or how many generations live in a house.

One of the uncomfortable questions this sermon series has forced me to ask myself is who would I exclude if given a chance? None of us would do it for racial reasons, but I might do it for other reasons. Who might I exclude? And one of the things I've come to is when I lived in California, one year, I rented a room in some people's house and the next door neighbor had this dog that they would leave outside all night. And that dog barked all night long right underneath my window, all night.

These neighbors also had really loud parties outside in their backyard, really loud that would go till two or three in the morning, again, right underneath my window, right next to my window where the room I was renting. What did I do about it? Oh, many things. I complained. I complained a lot to my friends who couldn't do anything about it. I even had fantasies of injecting a steak with some kind of sleeping medication and then throwing it over the fence for the dog to eat so the dog would sleep all night. I didn't do it, but I thought about doing it.

One time. I yelled out the window at two in the morning, "Shut up," as Jesus would do. I'm pretty sure it's somewhere in the Bible. If I found out those same people were going to buy the house next to mine here in Bellevue, how would I feel? And if I could sign a piece of paper that would prevent them from buying it, would I? Almost certainly not. But in my heart, I would want them to go somewhere else. Many of you were here when as a church, we bought several homes for Eastside Academy students who didn't have a safe place to live. We bought those homes and some of the neighbors were very upset by this, very upset. And we kept explaining that these kids were in no way a danger to anybody, but it just didn't go well.

Lots of nimbyism. Loved the idea, but not in my backyard stuff. And one in one meeting in particular ended very badly. As the person on the receiving end of their anger, I just want to say you have not lived until you have a room full of people on their feet yelling and cussing at you. That is an experience. Let me tell you that. Well, a couple months after the students moved in, we got an email from one of the leaders of the neighborhood opposition, and he was out for a walk and the students were in the front yard. And to this man's credit, he stopped and he talked to them.

Afterwards he sent us an email that basically said, "I was wrong. I met the students. We talked, they're wonderful. They are a valuable addition to our neighborhood." We used our property for healing and justice, and the students were blessed, the neighborhood was blessed. Everyone got a glimpse of Jesus. This man did what I did not do with my neighbors in California. He talked to them. If I had just talked to my neighbors instead of yelling at them and complaining at them, we probably could have found common ground. We fear people when we don't know them, but when we get to know them, our fear goes away.

So how can you use your apartment or house for God's purposes? Maybe it's to write a covenant of how you're going to use it for God's purposes or put some of your money in a black owned bank that will direct resources to people who've been left out historically. Maybe it's to open your house for a night of prayer and worship like we talked about couple weeks ago, a night of prayer and worship to drive out the spirits of exclusion and pray in the Holy Spirit into every room of your house and into your neighborhood.

Some of you have heard me tell this story before, but I want to tell it again to close because it's a time in my life where I experienced the joy of using property for God's purposes. And it was before my parents died and my mom had Alzheimer's and my dad had strokes and they couldn't stay in their house in eastern Washington anymore. So my siblings and I moved them into an assisted living facility that they liked. And then we had an estate sale to get rid of the stuff in their house in order to sell it.

And they had a lot of stuff. Well, the day before the estate sale, I got an email from a family that goes to my parents' church in Richland, in eastern Washington, offering to buy their house, but their offer was well below its market value. Well, a couple hours later, I got another email from a man in my parents' church to tell me this family's story that had offered to buy my parents' house below market.

And then what happened was that through a series of tragic events, this family had lost their previous home, ended up homeless, a family of four living in their car, and through hard work, they'd clawed their way back and they were ready to buy a house again and get out of homelessness. But because of the foreclosure on their record, the maximum loan they could get was well below the market value of my parents' home. And they're asking if we would sell it to them for that.

So my siblings and I talked it over for, gosh, I bet we talked a whole three minutes. My brother said, "God is all over this." And my sister and I agreed. Well, after the estate sale, we were in despair because it didn't even make a dent in all the stuff that was in my parents' house and we knew every spare minute of that summer was going to be spent driving over to Richland to try to get rid of all the stuff in my parents' house so that we could sell it.

And that evening we met with his family to talk about selling them the house. And as we're talking, I said, "You said in your email that you would buy this house as is. Can we define as is right now and all this crap, I mean, treasured memories become yours?" And they said, "We can't give you more money, but we do have friends and we can take care of this for you." And we were like, "Sign, sign, sign. Sold, sold, sold."

But then we told them the real reason that we wanted them to have the house. We said, our dad grew up very poor. At times our dad was homeless and he never wanted to sell this house because it was the only house he'd ever had. And we said, "But if he could make this decision now we know that he would absolutely sell it to you." And so we did. See what God did there? My dad who grew up homeless at the end of his life, helps a family get out of homelessness. Beautiful.

Well, several months later, my dad died. And when I left the hospital, I thought I don't want this family to hear it through the grapevine. I need to tell them myself. So I drove to the house, rang the doorbell of the house I'd just been walking into for 49 years, which seemed kind of weird. They answered and I told them that my dad had died. The wife gave me this big bear hug and she said, "Come in, sit down. Tell us stories about your family, stories about this house. What were Christmases like? What were funny stories?"

So I told him about the time my brother and I blocked the drain in the shower to turn it into a swimming pool and flooded the basement and things like that. I warned their kids not to try it, but they may have. And all of this, just a few hours after my dad had died. I realized I wasn't there to tell them that. I was there for me. I was devastated. And the one place I wanted to be more than anywhere else was home. I got to go home one more time and be loved.

We didn't sell that house below market to help them. We did it to help us. We just didn't know it at the time. And yes, to sell a house below market to help a family get out of homelessness, absolutely using property for justice. But the bigger blessing by far was to my siblings and me. That's what happens when we are more than just neighbors, but become just neighbors who make our neighborhoods more just... And bell-pressed collectively, we can do that. People are struggling. Our neighborhoods are struggling. People are isolated. There's all kinds of stuff. BelPres.

We can change the east side collectively by making our neighborhoods, places of justice and healing and mercy. It's like what Joshua says to the Israelites after they got out of slavery in Egypt and are about to enter the land that God had promised them. Joshua says something that I know all of us would want to say. He says, "Choose for yourselves this day who you will serve because we're all serving something or someone. But as for me in my house, we will serve the Lord."

So Jesus, help us do just that. Help us to use what you have given us, our property to create community and wholeness, and healing, and just show us the opportunities we have. Show us the people who live around us. Show us who's excluded and how we can bring them in. Show us who is lonely and how we can reach out to them. Show us where there's no community so we can create community. Show us where there is no justice so we can be healers of injustice, so that the whole world knows who you are, what you're about, what your character is, and are forced to call you, Lord. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question: Who is your favorite neighbor and why?

Opening Question: Looking back to last's week's sermon and scripture...How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

For Further Study: Leviticus 19:9-10; Leviticus 25:23-28; Deuteronomy 5:32-33;

Deuteronomy 16:20; Deuteronomy 24:19-22; Deuteronomy 8:1; Joshua 24:15; 2 Kings

17:22-23; Isaiah 5:7-13; Jeremiah 7:5-15; Jeremiah 24:10; Jeremiah 25:8-11; Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:33-35

Acts 5:1-2

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How does thinking about your property (rented or owned) as belonging to God change how you view and use it?
- Have you ever received or benefited from the hospitality, generosity, or inclusion of others who have used their property well to serve God and others?
- How is God asking you to use your property (rented or owned) for his purposes?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.