



I lived to be 51 years old with 36 years of driving under my belt before I ever had a problem with a vehicle transmission. I had heard horror stories about them and the crazy costs of repair and until two weeks ago they were only other people's stories to tell. A week ago Monday I got a call from the transmission guys telling me that the transmission on our van was shot and would require a \$4000 fix. This was the third garage I had asked for an opinion hoping that the first two were wrong or that the transmission experts could fix it for much less. Less than an hour later another of our car's transmission failed. Two hours after that it was sitting in Sheldon's junk yard. The "good news" was that Sheldon's paid me a whopping \$100 for the car, which was slightly less than the cost of replacing the front brakes two weeks earlier. So in less than an hour we lost about \$6,000.

After we got word of the second failure Karen and I were sitting in the living room absorbing all of the bad news. I said to her that it felt like a good time to be generous. I was able to give away the nearly new tires from the junked car to someone who needed them. And we immediately received generosity from someone else who lent us their car for a week. We're still out six grand but the whole saga has been a good reminder about generosity and ownership. Is it really "my" van? Did I "own" the car that was hauled off to the junkyard? The titles from the state of Wisconsin stated that they belonged to us but the Word of God says something different.

All generosity begins and ends with God's ownership over all things. God is the owner, we are the stewards. God holds the title and we manage what belongs to him. You can't be generous without this conviction. You can give stuff away out of your surplus but you will never be sacrificially generous.

The early church understood this principle well. Turn with me to Acts 4.

*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. **33** And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. **34** There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold **35** and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. **36** Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, **37** sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

The part that truly troubles us is verse 32. *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.*

It troubles us because it is such a foreign idea to us. But it also bothers us because it sounds so much like Communism. Karl Marx gave a succinct summary of his Communist doctrine. "The theory of communism may be summed up in the single phrase: abolition of private property."¹ Don't these sound way too much alike?

We are rightly concerned about the growth of ISIS. They are evil to the core. We should speak out against them. Our president and military should do all they can to wipe them off the face of the earth. However, as we become obsessed with the trials of our current day we quickly forget the horrors of the last century. Communist beliefs resulted in the death of almost 100 million people. In comparison to Communism, ISIS look like a children's playground. And the core of this evil philosophy is the abolition of private property.

Therefore, when we read verse 32, it makes us uncomfortable. So here's what we do. We start to explain away this story. We say things like this:

- This is describing how the early church lived. This is not a mandate for believers today.
- This was a sort of Christian utopianism that could only have happened in the first century.
- What they did here was completely voluntary. This was communal living, but not Communism.

In other words, it doesn't apply to us today. We put this verse into the category of all such obscure commands that no longer apply to Christians living under the new covenant.

- You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together (Deut. 22:11).

Most of you have been guilty of breaking this command countless times, perhaps even right now.

- Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard (Leviticus 19:27).

Every man in this room breaks this command every day

- Do not...put tattoo marks on yourselves (Leviticus 19:28).

Personally, I'm not crazy about tattoos but I would not say that the Bible completely forbids them based on this one verse. So it's really easy to cast verse 32 onto the heap of arcane Bible verses that no longer apply to us anymore. *No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.* Nope, that's old school. That's outdated. That's legalism. That smacks too much of Communism.

Isn't it amazing the amount of effort we put into not obeying Scripture? I am not just talking about verse 32. But whenever we find something we don't like, we are quick to explain it away. If we only put as much effort into obeying Scripture as we did into not obeying it. I want to

explain why this verse still applies to us today and why you shouldn't confuse it with any sort of communism.

The first phrase is an absolute Biblical truth: *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own*. Do you really own anything? I am not talking about car titles and deeds to your land and homes. According to the laws of our nation, state and county, you do own those things. They are yours to buy and sell and do whatever you want with them. But Biblically speaking, do you own them? You do not. This is a truth repeated again and again throughout Scripture. I will go into this more deeply in a bit.

The first phrase in verse 32 is a Biblical truth but the second phrase is a voluntary application of this truth: *but they had everything in common*. These believers knew that they really didn't own anything; that all was the Lord's. An obvious application of this truth was to sell what they had and give it to those who had real needs. This was a completely voluntary act on their part. In chapter 5, Peter said this to Ananias.

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:3-4).

As a side note, this is the clearest description of the deity of the Holy Spirit you will find. First Peter said that he had lied to the Holy Spirit. Right after that he said that he had lied to God. In Peter's mind, lying to the Holy Spirit was exactly the same thing as lying to God. Therefore the Holy Spirit is God.

But as it relates to ownership, Peter said, *While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?* You can't get more clear than that. Ananias was under no compulsions to sell his land and give to the needy. He was under compulsion not to lie and try to make everyone else think that he and his wife were super spiritual. His lying was his undoing. So what these believers were doing was completely voluntary. Certainly not everyone sold lands and gave away the proceeds but a great many did. So did they or did they not own these lands before they sold them? Peter's told Ananias that he owned his land but Luke the author of Acts wrote: *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own*. This is not a contradiction because both were true. They owned the land in a legal sense and could do whatever they wanted with them. But spiritually speaking, God owned them. This was the source of Luke's description- *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own*.

And what is it called when God's owns everything and we manage it? It's called stewardship. I absolutely love this word because if you truly grasp it, this word will transform your life. Usually sermons on stewardship and generosity start with the sayings of Jesus in the gospels or with Paul's powerful words on the subject. I have done that in the past. You could also pull from some Old Testament prophets, for they spoke about money and possessions very often. Let me give you a clue as to where the message of stewardship originated. What is the foundation of stewardship? In other words, what is the main reason that God owns everything? Because he created it all, right? This is the Sunday School answer but it's also the right answer. Stewardship

was not first taught by Paul, Jesus or the prophets. Stewardship goes all the way back to the first chapter in the Bible.

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

These are the first words of the sixth day of creation. This was the pinnacle of God's work--the creation of Adam and Eve. We are the pinnacle of God's creation because we were given his very image and likeness. This was pure grace, wasn't it? After all, as Paul said in Romans 9, *Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"* (Romans 9:20) We had no say, no rights, no anything when it came to our own creation. It was just as God made it and declared it to be. We were made in His image. That's why we are special.

There has been much debate about it means to be created in God's image. It certainly includes possessing a mind, emotions and a will. These are things which distinguish us from the animal world. It may seem like your favorite pet dog or cat has all of these things. And to some degree they do have emotions and certainly they have a will or at least a natural dominance which needs to be tamed. But animals are not rational creatures. They can be taught strong associations. Pavlov's dogs salivated when a bell was rung because they were trained to do so. They came to associate the bell with food. That's why your cat comes running if it hears you open a can of cat food. It's the same thing. But as much as you love your pet, this cannot be called higher reasoning.

Many people debate what it means to be created in the image of God. Most Christians do not understand what it means to be created in God's image. In fact, I find that most pastors do not adequately grasp the full meaning. But I'm not sure why it's all that difficult. We don't have to guess because we are told right here in the text. After stating the plan to create us in His image, God said, *And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.* Now some might argue that this is what we are to *do* and not necessarily who we are and what we *are*, but in the end, that distinction does not matter. What matters is that we were created to have dominion over creation. Now we have not yet determined exactly what that looks like. Just to be clear, I will be making the case that dominion and stewardship are the same thing. But there is no disputing that this was the first description of our role as humans. To be created in the image of God is to have dominion. This is what it means to be created in the image of God.

What this simply means is that God created the earth and immediately turned it over to the human race. Actually, even that's not entirely accurate. God created the earth for the very purpose of turning it over to the human race. Isn't that a remarkable thought? Again, we haven't

even fleshed out the meaning and significance of this word dominion but the Bible is clear that this was our first and guiding command. Let them have dominion. God says, "Creation is mine, but they will rule over it.

But some of you are thinking, "What about the command to be fruitful and multiply? Wasn't that the first command?" They certainly are related to each other. The first recorded thing that God said to Adam and Eve was *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*. But you know what? We always stop right there for some reason. Look at the full phrase. "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion*. Procreation is not necessarily the highest command. Dominion is. Dominion was laid down as a purpose even before Adam and Eve were on the scene. Dominion comes in verse 26 and is repeated again in verse 28. But "be fruitful and multiply" didn't come until verse 28. Moreover, God also included the word subdue-subdue the earth and have dominion. So the purpose of being fruitful and multiplying was *so that* the human race could have dominion over the earth. Two people can't have dominion over the earth.

Alright, let's talk about the word dominion now. Just what does it mean to have dominion over the earth? Isn't it crazy to think that this was the first command in all of Scripture yet we never talk about it? The very first command! Think about that. Since there are seven billion people on the planet, I think we have done a pretty good job at multiplying. I'm not saying we should stop, just that we understand this part. What we have not addressed and have very little understanding about is the command to take dominion. That's why I want to spend the next several weeks working out what this means in all areas of life.

This dominion mandate is also spelled out in Psalm 8

5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,

7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas (Psalm 8:5-8)

Dominion seems like a forceful term, kind of a harsh word. It simply means to rule over. That's how many of the English Bible translate the word--*to rule over*. We all know that there are good rulers and bad rulers so all by itself, it's a neutral. But obviously, God would not allow us to rule his creation in a bad way. So it's not just *that* we have dominion and how we *exercise* dominion over God's creation. Psalm 72 gives us a perfect model for dominion. It does so in the context of a benevolent king.

1 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!

2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!

3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!

4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!
5 May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
7 In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!
8 May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!

There are several descriptions of a good and righteous ruler. he defends the cause of the poor, needy and oppressed. He brings prosperity and peace. His dominion is from sea to sea. This is describing a benevolent dominion. This is the role of our dominion over the earth. This is the only way to care for that which God has entrusted. remember-he made the earth and then immediately turned it over to us. We ruined it very soon after that but even then, he did not revoke our dominion.

Imagine if you had a \$60,000 BMW and your teenager wanted to borrow the car. They drive the car way over the speed limit completely recklessly and they nearly total the car. No one's injured but the car is a mess. You fix the car, your insurance rates skyrocket. Once the shiny car comes back from the shop, your same teenager wants the keys to the car again. What are the chances that you will give the keys to him or her? Zero chance, right? Despite ruining God's creation through the curse and continual affects of sin, God still did not revoke his dominion mandate from us. It's just a staggering thought.

A few years ago we invested in a nice camera. Kellyn enjoys photography and so has gotten the most use out of it. She needs a nice camera for her summer In Africa but at first I thought, "No way. The camera is too expensive to be risked in Africa. She's not taking it. But these car issues has helped me rethink it. So I texted Karen the other day and said it would be OK with me if Kellyn needed to take our camera to Africa. She texted back and said, "Yeah, we've already been talking about that." OK, once again, the girls are scheming behind my back! That's fine, but my point is that God entrusted us with the entire earth and I'm not willing to let go of a camera? My new saying is, "It's only money." Sometimes we just need to say that out loud. It's only money.

That's why the right kind of dominion--benevolent dominion--is the same thing as stewardship. God owns it--we must not ever forget that--yet he turns the responsibility of caring for and developing his creation to us. But don't think for a minute I am only referring to environmental issues or something like that. Usually, when you link the word stewardship and creation together you only think of environmental issues.

Let me give you the best definition of stewardship I have ever heard and then list the ramification of proper stewardship. Stewardship is "Maximizing God's blessings for His glory."

- Creativity

- Science
- Work
- Parenting/family
- Evangelism
- Building a church
- Money/Generosity
- Politics
- Suffering

These two bigger ideas are weaved like a thread through everything else.

- TIME
- The Gospel

God's ownership extends from the pennies in your pocket to the children sitting next to you in the pew. God owns pennies and people. If I own my vehicles then God does not have a right to take them away. If I own my life, God must not lay a hand on me in sickness or in death. But if he owns pennies and people, money and possessions, our life, our soul our all, then it will change all of these areas of life.

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¹ http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/pillars_marx.htm