

As we approach Independence Day, a day on which our thoughts turn to freedom, I want to invite your consideration of freedom in three very different ways: freedom from materialism; freedom from hatred; freedom for relationship.



Freedom from Materialism. This week's Supreme Court ruling in favor of Hobby Lobby has focused national attention on the Green family of Oklahoma City, deeply committed Christians who own the company, and who give 50% of its profits to Christian causes. Thinking about that caused me to remember Pastor Rick Warren, who, with his wife, Kay, give 90% of their income to Christian causes (a practice known as "reverse tithing").

Thinking about the Warrens caused me to think about my own parents, who, at the time of my Dad's resurrection, gave 67% of their income to Christian causes (after providing for food and shelter). And all of this causes me to ask the question, "Why do these people do such things?" Maybe you wonder the same thing.

Last Sunday we looked at the fifth of Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, which is **Extravagant Generosity**.¹ Schnase pointed out that "The notion that stewardship rightly focuses on the Christian's need to give rather than the church's need to receive is not simply a money-raising strategy but a spiritually powerful truth. . . .

"Americans live in an extraordinarily materialist and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds acquisitiveness, the appetite for more and bigger, and that fosters the myth that self-worth is found in material wealth and that happiness is found in possessing. . . . Millions of couples struggle under oppressive levels of debt that strain marriages, destroy happiness, and intensify conflict and anxiety. As [Dave Ramsey] says, 'We buy things we don't even need with money we don't even have to impress people we don't even know.'"²

One of the many things I like about Bishop Schnase's approach is that he focuses on spiritual **flourishing**. Isn't that a nice word? In his two books, the Bishop points out how each of these five practices leads to spiritual flourishing, and I suggest to you that the reason the Green family, the Warren family, and my parents—among thousands of others—are so generous with their material goods is that they have proven to themselves that such extravagant generosity does indeed lead to their own spiritual flourishing. Here are eight reasons for such flourishing, excerpted from both books:

1. GIVING HELPS CONGREGATIONS THRIVE

"Many people give simply because they love their church and they want the life-changing ministries of their congregation to prosper. They are themselves the beneficiaries of the church's ministries and they do their share . . . so that others can receive what they have received. . . . Churches with generous members offer more ministry, work with greater confidence, have less conflict, and make a greater impact on their communities and on the world."³

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007). The other four are Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, and Risk-Taking Mission & Service.

² Schnase, *Congregations*, pp. 112-113.

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 119.

2. GIVING ALIGNS US WITH GOD’S PURPOSE

“People give because their contribution aligns with the purposes God wants them to fulfill in the world. Helping people, relieving suffering, teaching the spiritual life, reaching young people—when we sense God’s call to make a difference, we can contribute our time or become personally involved in the day-to-day ministry.”⁴

3. GIVING CHANGES US INSIDE

“People give because generosity helps them achieve God’s purposes in *themselves*. By giving, we develop the inner qualities of generosity. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the practice of giving. . . . God uses our practice of giving to reconfigure our interior life. By giving, we craft a different inner desire as the driving element of life. Our motivations change. . . . In the daily interior struggle fostered by a consumerist, materialist society that pressures us to pursue many things that do not lead to real happiness, the practice of giving aims us at what ultimately satisfies. Giving sanctifies and deepens the struggle, and constantly resets the internal compass in the right direction.”⁵

4. GIVING MIRRORS GOD’S NATURE

“We give because we are made in the image of God, whose essential nature is giving. . . . God’s extravagant generosity is part of our essential nature as well; but we are anxious and fearful, influenced by a culture that makes us believe we never have enough. And we are scarred by habits that draw us away from God and that turn us inward with a corrosive self-interest. God sent Jesus Christ to bring us back to ourselves, and back to God. As we ‘have in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus,’ we become free.”⁶

5. GIVING FOSTERS A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP TO MONEY

“Giving provides a spiritually healthy detachment from the most harmful influences of a materialist society, an emotional distance that is otherwise unattainable. . . . Without beliefs and intentional practices that counterbalance the influences of culture, we feel discontent no matter how much we have. Extravagant giving is a means of putting God first, a method for declaring to God and to ourselves the rightful order of priorities. . . . By provoking us to give, God is not trying to take something from us; God is seeking to give something to us.”⁷

6. GIVING ENCOURAGES INTENTIONALITY

“Serious giving leads us to ask, ‘What is our family’s definition of success? . . . What difference do we want to make in the world?’”⁸

7. GIVING DEEPENS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

“Our clinging and coveting and hungering for wealth can obstruct our pathway to God and to the life God would have us enjoy. . . . We cannot ‘pay’ our way to a closer relationship with God; whether giving aids us in our relationship with God or not depends upon our inner attitude. . . . Generosity feeds our love for God.”⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Schnase, *Living*, pp. 120-121.

⁶ Schnase, *Living*, p. 121.

⁷ Schnase, *Living*, p. 123.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Schnase, *Living*, pp. 124-125.

8. GIVING HONORS CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

“By giving extravagantly, we participate in the ultimate self-giving nature we perceive in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Transformation involves [a kind of death in relation] to the things we love.”¹⁰



Freedom from Hatred. Yesterday was the 80th anniversary of “The Night of the Long Knives,”¹¹ a purge in which Hitler’s minions murdered dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of persons perceived as threats to the Nazi party’s growing power. It was also the day on which I experienced the National Holocaust Museum in Washington in the company of my friend, Rabbi Seth Bernstein.

As I’m sure you know, The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately SIX MILLION Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. The word, “holocaust” is derived from Greek, and means “sacrifice by fire.”

While I already knew much of what the museum chronicled, I did not have a clear picture of how that which became The Holocaust developed over time. Nor did I know how complicit we in the United States were in allowing it to happen.

As just one example, the Nazis did not begin killing the Jews in huge numbers until it became clear that western nations—including the United States—were not going to provide asylum for them. One ship with nearly a thousand Jews on it arrived at Miami but was not allowed to enter port, sending those persons back to Germany to their deaths.

Although the United States “pulled out all the stops” in order to defeat Germany and Japan in World War II, there was more we could have done—and sooner—to protect at least some of the Jews who died in the Holocaust. And before we get all puffed up with self-righteousness and patriotism, we need to remember the blood of the African slaves and of the Native Americans before them

Whether you’ve been to the museum—or others like it—or not, I encourage you to watch the 39-minute *YouTube* video that chronicles much of how this all came to be.¹² You might also be interested to know that the museum specifically identifies two German firms with which you are familiar as being particularly guilty of benefiting from the slave labor of the condemned Jews: BMW and Daimler-Benz.



Upon exiting the museum displays, one enters the Hall of Remembrance, on whose walls these verses are inscribed: “*The LORD said, ‘What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from*

¹⁰ Schnase, *Living*, p. 125.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_of_the_Long_Knives

¹² www.ushmm.org/learn/introduction-to-the-holocaust/path-to-nazi-genocide

the ground” (Genesis 4:10). “Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them” (Deuteronomy 4:9).

As horrible as these things are to consider, we need not be surprised by them. From the very beginning of creation, “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart [has been] only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). And Jeremiah reminded us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9).

And that brings me to the final freedom on which I want to reflect this week, **Freedom for Relationship**. This is a happier note ☺.

One of the many joys of living in Columbia is our extensive network of paved paths that connect our villages through the woods. There is a very nice path just across the street from my house that leads back to the Middle Patuxent River. To the end of the path and back is 3.4 miles, and I walk it several times a week, usually in the evening. Thanks to abundant rain, the forest is strikingly lush and verdant, and it brings me great pleasure to enjoy it.

A couple of nights ago, I was walking along with this view ahead of me. As the late afternoon sun streamed through the trees and illumined the path, I was reminded that in the beginning, the LORD God walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8), and I wondered to myself what that must have been like.

How wonderful it must have been to walk and talk with God every evening! How wondrous it must have been to walk and talk with our Lord Christ when He walked among us!!

Such blessing is available to us today through God’s indwelling Spirit, and we practice the extravagant generosity with which I began in order to so structure our interior lives that we can perceive that gift. And it is such walking with God that prevents the hatred represented by The Holocaust and so much more in our sadly broken world.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake (Psalm 23:1-3).

Dave



the next time you witness hatred

the next time you see injustice

**THINK
ABOUT
WHAT
YOU
SAW**

the next time you hear about genocide

The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know **O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

Week twenty-six: The Heart of the Matter

*“The LORD does not look at the things people look at.
People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).*

When the prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint the future king of Israel, he sought out a son of Jesse. The proud father lined up his six strong and strapping, hardened and handsome sons before the prophet. They were the personification of the best the flesh had to offer. However, Samuel was not impressed. He inquired if there was not another son. Indeed there was. He was a “ruddy” shepherd boy named David who was out tending his father’s sheep. The rest is history, and Samuel reminded us that “man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” The Lord looks where? At the heart.

Now to the heart of the matter. What is it, exactly, that the Bible refers to when it mentions “the heart”? The word appears over eight hundred times in the King James Version. Is it that mass of muscle, about the size of a man’s fist, located in front of his vertebral column and in back of his sternum? One of the helpful principles in understanding biblical truth is what might be called the “law of first mention.” That is, there is significant insight to be found as to the meaning of a word by studying its first uses in Scripture. In the early chapters of Genesis, we see three clues that reveal to us what God’s Word really means when it refers to the heart.

THE HEART IS OUR INTELLECT

“Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5)

This is the first use of the word *heart* in the Bible. Here, it is associated with the thought process, the intellect. This is why we read, “As he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). The heart is our intellect, the thinking part of our being.

When we read that the Lord looks upon our heart, we understand that He is watching how we think, whether our thoughts are pure or not. Yes, while man can only observe our outward appearance, the Lord has the capacity to look into our hearts, to know what we really think.

THE HEART IS OUR EMOTIONS

“[The LORD] was grieved in His heart.” (Genesis 6:6)

The second occurrence of the word *heart* in Scripture reveals that it involves our emotions. When the Lord saw the rebellion of man, it “grieved [Him] in His heart.” The heart is the seat of our emotions. It is not simply our intellect; it involves our feelings as well. How many thousands of love songs have been written about the heart?

THE HEART IS OUR VOLITION

“Then the LORD said in His heart, ‘I will.’” (Genesis 8:21)

This third appearance of the word *heart* refers to the essence of our own will, our volition. The Lord said “in His heart, I will.” Often we find this volition entwined with the heart. The prodigal son was out in the far country, a long way from home, when his heart was changed. He changed his mind. Or, as the Scripture says, “he came to himself” (Luke 15:17). Once this happened, he changed his volition. He said, “I will arise and go to my father” (v. 18). Then he got up and turned his heart—his intellect, his emotion, his volition—toward home.

It is God Himself, at our conversion, who takes that old heart of ours and gives us one that is brand-new. For He said, “I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24:7).