

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

**Title: FOR THE LOVE OF MONEY: What's wrong with the Prosperity Gospel?
(1 Chron 29:10-14)**

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The subject I've been given this morning is 'What's wrong with the Prosperity Gospel?' and the passage which was read to us earlier was 1 Chron 29. Many of you may not have heard the phrase, 'the prosperity gospel' and I want to sketch an outline of it before moving on to the biblical passage. What I want to consider in this sermon is the impact of wealth on people. I want to look firstly at wealth and prosperity in the service of God. And then we'll look at the dangers of prosperity, the dangers which each person here struggles with. Prosperity in the service of self.

- 0. Prosperity in the service of God.
- 0. Prosperity in the service of self and its dangers.
- 0. The tests of prosperity.

We'll start with a thumbnail sketch of this phrase 'prosperity gospel'. The Gospel is good news, so what is this good news? It's the good news that it's ok to be rich and a Christian. Indeed, it goes further. It's God's intention that Christians be rich, you'll be glad to hear. I've not discovered the fullness of that yet... More than that, riches are a blessing on your Christian life, for living it. More than that, the riches and prosperity show that you're doing it right. And even more than that, sadly sometimes, poverty is a sign that somewhere you're going wrong. Even perhaps that you are sinning.

Now there is an element of truth in the prosperity gospel, and I want to bring it out, but it causes me, at least, grave difficulties. I see it as a rationalisation of modern wealth. Many Christians want to live a Christian life and retain wealth as a total blessing, without the dangers, as if it is God's imprimatur on their life. But before Christ comes back, there are no unambivalent blessings for we are made in the image of God, but fallen. We are saved by grace and we struggle with all things in our lives, including wealth, until we are taken to be with Christ. And so wealth, like power, is a mixed blessing and we need discernment as the body of Christ. We need wisdom to sort out the way through the mire, to find a way that's sure, so that with Paul we might finish the race.

The difficulty for me is when I think of Matthew 19:23: Jesus is looking at the rich executive as he leaves and He says these words: 'How hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. He invokes the picture of the camel and the eye of the needle. Mary's song, the Magnificat, talks approvingly of sending the rich away empty. Paul writing to Timothy in 1 Tim 6:9-10, the young church leader, says, 'People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.'

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Why is it difficult for many people to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it because of any lack of God's grace? No. Is it because God doesn't like us very much? No. He loves us and died for us. The dangers and the problems with wealth come not out of God's attitude to us as people, but what it can do to us as people.

Before we come to these dangers, let's look at 1 Chron 29, because here is David's prayer as it was read to us – we see prosperity in the service of God and there are many wonderful, encouraging lessons, that those of us who are struggling with these things can learn and put into our own lives.

The context of our passage is David's desire to build the Temple, to put up a monument to the glory of God. His purpose is a sacred one. His mission is a mission of integrity; at the heart of his faith he wants to use the wealth of the people for the service of God. What can we learn from this?

The previous chapter is helpful. Chap 28:2,3. The first thing is that David allows God to change his plans. David stands up and says, listen to me, my brothers and my people. I have it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord for the footstool of our God and I made plans to build it. But God said to me, "You are not to build a house in my name because you are a warrior and have shed blood." He goes on to explain that Solomon, his son, will build the Temple. David has good plans, plans that are about the glory of God. And yet David, powerful king that he is, with authority over many people, listens to God. He doesn't assume that because they're good plans they should be put in operation. He doesn't assume that he has the right, because he's a wealthy king, to do as he wishes. He communes with God as he listens to what God has to say. More than that, he changes his mind, as a result of what God has to say.

And those of us who have wealth, and who have a measure of power, sometimes make plans which we ask for God's rubberstamping of, praying that things may go well or go smoothly, because the cause is just or righteous. We believe it is God's priority to do it as well. But, we cannot neglect a sensitive listening to God in all that we plan to do. Even though we have the human power to carry out our own plans, plans that are not for evil, but are for good, we must be sensitive to God's priorities for our life and the lives of those for whom we may be responsible.

So, David allows God to change his own plans. He does not use his access to wealth to push them through.

Secondly, ch 29 vs12, everything we have comes from God. Wealth and honour come from God. Notice the two together. This is not a wealth that has been disreputably come by, through the exploitation of the poor or injustice. No, wealth with honour comes from God. And in the Christian life, wealth with honour is the only kind of wealth we should be interested in. *Because* it comes from God. In vs. 15, there's that well-known phrase. "Everything comes from you and we have given you only what comes from your hand." This is difficult to remember. It's difficult as we struggle with work, those of us who are privileged to have work, as we work our way up the career ladder, as our ideas are taken on board in our professional

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life, and we're rewarded for our innovation and our creativity. It's difficult sometimes to remember that everything we have comes from the hand of God. And it's difficult to live a life that constantly seeks to remember that every possession, every privilege, everything that we have has come from the hand of God. There is no concept of the self-made man in the Christian scriptures. For everything that everybody has is His. It is His world, and we are trustees of it for a little while. Therefore let's be thankful for the gifts that we have, for the houses we live in, the cars we drive, and the jobs we have. If we have them. Let's have a thankful heart to God.

Thirdly, humility is essential if wealth is to be a blessing. Vs 14. 'But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this?'

Wealth in the OT is often seen as blessing. Why? Because Israel was a slave nation. Here's a nation that starts in Egypt making bricks out of mud and straw, under the whip of the Pharaonic dynasty. Here, they know that all of them were once slaves and out of that slavery anything that they now have is a gift from God. They could, apart from the grace of God, have remained slaves. It was God who liberated them from Egypt and they know as a nation, that as their history goes back to slavery, their praise must go to God because they have no other basis for what they own. And when arrogance creeps in to wealth creation and ownership, it is a horrible thing to be arrogant because one possesses much. David teaches, who am I? And who are my people? Humility is essential to pleasing God, especially for those of us who have access to wealth.

Fourthly, a willing and a thankful heart. Vs. 14b. David goes on to say in vs. 17: 'All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent and now I've seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.'

John Stott once spoke about the hallmark of the Christian being generosity, simplicity and contentment. A willingness to ride loose to wealth, a willingness to give generously and joyfully, because what we have is God's and we wish to give it in his service. One of the things we need to examine ourselves about is the motivation for our giving. Do we give grudgingly? Do we give little, or do we give generously? I struggle with these things. I struggle with feeling some weeks that I can't give. I come back to these passages and I ask myself – is God my first priority or my second priority? How do I rank being joyful, generous and willing with what I have? Give willingly to God, not begrudgingly. Next, integrity. Vs17 again. I know my God that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. God looks not on the outward behaviour alone but on the inward motive, on the integrity of our lives. What a need there is in politics and business life, and in every sphere of the modern world for people with integrity.

Last Sunday, I was preaching in Nottingham at the centenary of a printing works which was a family business, and the theme chosen by the family was 'industry with integrity'. And I went round the print works and I talked to the people, and they were trying, at this particular firm, to do business with integrity. If they got new machinery, where a firm would normally lay off people, they kept the same people. In one case it had taken two years to train a person from one kind of machinery to another. But 25% of their labour force came from nine families, and they were committed to their labour force, they were committed to doing business ethically

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and with integrity. And it was good to go round and worship with them on the Sunday morning and to speak about industry with integrity. We need people who want to live lives of integrity; who want to use what they have, their gifts and their wealth with integrity. It seems to me that people in our nation are getting fed up with talk of quick profits, talk that assumes that the thing we're all interested in is economics and nothing else; that only if the market is efficient will all our dreams be met. As Christians, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with others who are not Christians but who desire a return to integrity in our nation. We must say that human relationships are more important than money. Let's in our use of money and in our earning of money serve the God who tests the heart and is pleased with integrity.

Look at vs. 15. Life is a brief pilgrimage. We're not here for ever, life is not permanent, riches are uncertain. Let's be aware of the shortness of the span of our life. Vs. 15 'We are aliens and strangers in your sight' and then - 'our days on earth are but a shadow.' It's a bit difficult to believe that, when you're young; when you're a student and you've not really begun your career and your life stretches out ahead of you. Living each day for God is important because those days go quickly, and putting your hope on things that are eternal is more important than building up things which are ephemeral.

So: the blessings of wealth. Wealth used for the service of God is put at God's disposal. We're willing to change our plans if they're not God's plans. If we see everything we have as coming from God, we're humble even though we may be powerful. We're willing to give it away and be generous, because we're riding loose to it. We've got integrity in the means of getting that money and the means of distributing it. And we know that our life and the things we possess are brief and only here for a while.

That kind of person can live before God with wealth and use it in the pursuit of justice and righteousness, can be changed by God if God wants to change their life; can be blessed by God. But wealth is also a great danger.

Let's look at some of the dangers if we use wealth in the wrong way.

Luke 6:24 Jesus says these heavy words: 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.' Now comfort is one of the great blessings of wealth, isn't it? To be comfortable – many of us say, 'oh no, I'm not wealthy, I'm just comfortable'. And yet that very comfort which is such a solace and blessing to us can blunt our spiritual appetite. Like the rich executive who's rooted to the spot by his riches when Jesus was moving on and he couldn't go with him. Like Ananias and Sapphira who pretended to give everything to the Lord but kept some for themselves and reaped a fearful judgement. Like those who didn't want to get involved in the Good Samaritan story because they had other things to do and they didn't want to get involved in the poor and the vulnerable.

Comfort can blunt our passion for God. And I ask myself and I ask you, how is your passion for God? How far are you willing to take the call of God in your life? There are many people who when the preacher gets passionate and calls people to take up their cross and follow Christ, hear the words through a filter. And the filter is, what they are prepared to do in response to the word. And many people hear it as, support your local church, because that's what they're prepared to do. What are you prepared to do outside your comfort zone for

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Christ? Outside your career plans? Are you, like David, willing to have your career plans changed because they are not God's priorities for your life? Are you willing to take a risk that other friends might think is foolish because you care about God's plans for your life?

The second danger is another blessing: the blessing of privacy. I was in the slums of Delhi a few weeks ago with Tear Fund, filming a video for next year's Tear Fund Sunday, talking with people in the slums of Delhi about their lives, and making new friends. When I first went to the Third World a few years ago, when I went to Africa, I was aware of the fear as I went on the plane, a fear of stepping out of the comfort of the BA pressurised cabin and into the unknown of the Third World. A fear that people were going to take something away from me and not give something to me. But I found that in Africa and elsewhere, in India and Egypt, I have found new friends, new joys, new tragedies of course, but I have found a richness that I would not have found had I not stepped outside my insular privacy.

One of the things that happens to many of us as we get wealthier is that we begin to associate with like-minded people, people with a similar background as ourselves, we begin to see people who are poor, struggling with life, as different from us, and we begin to have friends who are all like us. Luke 6:32-36 says these words:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that.

Reciprocity is not the basis for the kingdom of God. This passage goes on to talk about loving our enemies. In the church today we have people from many nations who were former enemies, and we are here as a unified body of people who love one another across the cultural divide. But also we must love across the wealth divide. For the church is not only a church unified about different cultures, but also to bring those who are rich and poor who have one maker, (as the Proverbs say) to worship their Lord. The Christian gospel creates community where there is none. As Christians we cross the divide of class and race and culture and wealth to make people friends because Christ has made us friends. And if in our privacy because we are wealthy we have gates in front of our house and we decide who is to come in and they're only people like us, we are poorer for it. Christ calls us not to have friends who will always agree with us, not to have friends who are easy-going, easy to get on with, but in the cause of the gospel to offer the love of God to those who are unlike us that they may be brought into the fellowship of Christ. Don't become insular. Don't become frightened about people outside who are unlike you, stereotyping them and labelling them as people who are 'not like us'. Befriend people with the love of Christ that the church of Christ may be that diversity which is reflected in God's own creation.

Thirdly, the danger of worldliness. John the Apostle in 1 John 2:15 says these words, 'Do not love the world or anything in the world.' Now he's not talking about appreciating the goodness of the creation that God has made; he's not talking about maybe the love of music or the love of art, although these things can become idols. He's saying, don't love the world. This world's passing away. You might think because it's visible that it's concrete, but it's not. There'll come a day when it disappears, when it's ephemeral, and the things of God are the things that remain. So don't invest your love in the things that are around you. Invest your

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love in the Kingdom of God and God's priorities. Think for a moment about your death. I know it's unpleasant, but think about your death, just for a moment. What does your death mean to you? Is it an end of all you've loved and worked for, or is it an entrance to all you've ever longed for? Which is it? An end of everything or a beginning of everything? It can't be both.

One of the problems with those of us who are tied down with our wealth is we don't have anything to hope for. If you want to hear a message about heaven, go to a suffering church. Go to a church of the poor which has no investment in this world, that is looking eagerly for the new world that is coming, that Christ is ushering in. I know that I've sometimes been to churches that have been very wealthy, and I've heard sermons on heaven, and they've been awful. Because they've have it already, they've already received that comfort. They can't imagine what could be better than what they have now. No wonder the gospel says it's the poor in spirit who'll inherit the kingdom of heaven because it is they who are looking forward to the kingdom.

Self-sufficiency is the fourth danger. Deuteronomy 8:11; vs. 17,18 says these words: 'Don't forget God'. Don't be so self-sufficient that you lose your dependence on God. Here's a verse from Proverbs: 'Give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread otherwise I might have too much and disown you and say "Who is the Lord?" or I might become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God.' The writer of the Proverbs realises that if I have too much, I might say, 'who's God? I don't need God. I can provide all this on my own.' I've forgotten God. And as we live routine lives, day in day out, working, going on holidays, buying and selling, it's sometimes difficult to remember where God fits in. Don't forget God. Don't lose your spiritual dependency. Don't lose your willingness to suffer in the cause of Christ. Don't become so self-sufficient that you forget that your heavenly Father wants to give you the Kingdom.

The last danger this morning is indifference to the plight of the poor. We're not only in personal spiritual danger but we're in danger of forgetting that the God we worship is a God of justice. That the God of creation has created a world with enough for everybody and that Christians are called to be passionate, not only about the glory of God but about justice for those who are poor. Again, let's recognise that God not only wants us to be blessed materially, but He wants them to be blessed materially. And it's not enough to say, 'God bless me with material possessions and to go through life having nothing to do with the plight of the poor, because in my generosity I can create enough for somebody else.'

I praise God for every church that has learnt the lesson of generous giving. So that others, like myself, might do the work of God; be missionaries in foreign countries, or work amongst the poor, or do medical work because of the generosity for the people of God. I want to call you today to be generous, willing, joyful sacrificial givers. In doing that, you discover the freedom that comes from such generosity. Let's not be indifferent to the plight of the poor.

God calls us to live with integrity before him. To live openly. To be willing to live, maybe in discomfort, because of Christ. Not to be worldly but to have our eyes fixed on the hope that is to come. To be generous to have friends from all kinds of diverse backgrounds who are poor, and of different races, cultures and classes. And to be spiritually passionate and

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dependent on God. How hard it is to live the Christian life, if we no longer see the need to pray because we have everything.

Prosperity brings many blessings which are to be used in the service of God, but it has many dangers which you and I ignore to our peril and which we struggle with daily. It is so difficult in our society to defeat those dangers - we need each other. I believe that it needs to be a theme of every fellowship group that if we are to live with integrity before God in the materially-obsessed world, we must openly and honestly help one another to do it. Because on our own we often feel that we do not have the power to stand against the temptation that our world puts in our path.

In brief conclusion, the tests of prosperity are these:

Faith, Hope and Love.

Faith – what are we putting our faith in today? What are you trusting God for today? What is it that's not covered by wealth and prosperity or by career but only by trusting God?

Hope – am I longing for the new world? Am I looking for that new world coming where justice will be done? There'll be no poverty or disease, but we will do by nature what pleases God. Am I fixed in my hope that I will finish the race free of encumbrance?

Love – who do I love? And who do I love because God loves me? Do I love those who love me? The love of God was brought to us while we were yet enemies. Let's claim the power of the Spirit, the resurrection power of Christ to step outside our comfort zones in the name of the Gospel and take the love of God to those who have nobody else to love them and make them our friends because Christ has loved us.

Paul says that whether he is rich or whether he is poor, he has set his face on Christ. He has learnt to be content in whatever state he's in. Generosity, simplicity, contentment. Faith, hope, and love. God calls us to be distinctive in a materialistic world, distinctive in that we live for God and not for money.