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The Sneaky Side of Prosperity

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I was speaking with a respected friend recently on the issues of the day, and he made the following observation (paraphrased): “The more I think about what is plaguing our society, I keep coming back to affluence. It seems to be the common denominator of various ills affecting fellow Christians.” So, here are some thoughts growing out of that conversation.

When we think of materialism, words like greed or covetousness come to mind – and rightly so. These are roundly condemned in both testaments. “You shall not covet” is the tenth commandment of the Decalogue. Jesus warns, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Lk 12:15). The Hebrew writer directs, “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (13:5).

Further, Jesus counsels, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:19-21).

Such passages are perhaps read too shallowly; we tend to think in limited terms about materialism. We imagine amassing wealth or spending extravagantly on ourselves. We might not *feel* greedy, so we conclude we are not so. Or we think, “Money is not my god; I don’t intensely crave more things. I know my my possessions don’t make me happy.” All of that is well and good, but it may not thoroughly assess our relationship with worldly things.

Consider these additional perspectives:

Am I willing to spend money generously in service to God? It may be that we have a completely different mindset regarding worldly expenditures than we have for the Lord’s work. We might not flinch at spending thousands of dollars on electronics, cars, furniture, clothing or travel, but what about buying books or online study aids to help us build a Bible library? Where does our weekly contribution stack up against the regular bills and financial obligations of life? Have you considered the possibility of personally finding an indigent preacher to support, either in this country or abroad? (My mother, a widow on a limited income, supported a Filipino preacher for many years as well as other preachers in the U.S. She didn’t have much to give, but it was her way of thinking outside the box in her service to the Lord.)

In the parable of the rich man who built bigger barns, here is the punchline: “‘You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, **and is not rich toward God**” (Lk 12:20-21). It wasn’t the barns and the crops per se that ruined this man’s perspectives but his neglect of investing in spiritual things.

If I can, does it mean I should? My friend told about a youngish family who sold their home, bought a motor home and took off for a year of travel around the U.S. I know of another young family who recently did the same thing. Is this sinful? No. Is it educational? Yes. Could one argue that they are exposing their children to churches in various locales and broadening their spiritual horizons? Yes. Granted, such an undertaking appeals to the adventurous, inquisitive, exotic, even restless spirit in us. There is nothing wrong with travel per se.

But because we can, does it mean we should? In other words, are there downsides that we might overlook because we are only thinking of desirability and affordability? On the negative side, a vagabond lifestyle does not allow one to deeply participate in the local church. (Please don't cite the apostle Paul as a counterpoint. He was not traveling for leisure.) It takes time to get acquainted, build relationships, earn trust, learn the local culture and the needs of others, etc. It's not that nothing at all can be contributed in this scenario, but it does foster perpetual "visitorism" and will not provide the kind of growth that comes from the intimate relationships and service opportunities among those who know each other well. We must earn the capital to offer sympathetic, compassionate service.

Have I subtly shifted my trust from God to my IRA, 401(k), mutual funds, insurance plans and advanced medical treatments? This is a fine distinction, for there is nothing wrong with prudent investments to cover potential future needs or medical intervention. But to borrow a line from the Eagles, what if it "all fell to pieces tomorrow?" When all is well – when the market is up; when the annual statements are increasing; when the test results are normal – it is easy to say, "But my trust is really in God, not my investments or my health."

Surely one of the lessons from Covid should be to not rely on human control of earthly matters. We think we are smarter, more innovative and stable than previous generations. This is not because we are but because we have managed to avoid grave catastrophe for several decades. We should be humbled by the challenges of the pandemic. Our best minds have devolved into political gamesmanship; expert medical organizations have issued contradictory directives; businesses have been crippled or destroyed by voluminous, oppressive regulations. Many efforts to deal with one aspect of the pandemic has caused unexpected havoc elsewhere.

The things of this world – necessary to our survival and productivity – are deceptive and intoxicating. Wealth fosters self-reliance, undermining trust in God. It stokes our interests in exploring and indulging in fun. Family relationships are destroyed by fights over inheritances, alimony and debt.

Prosperity also expands choices and options. There is so much on offer; we have the resources to buy and amass and expand. This can create a perpetually immature state of mind. We over-reward ourselves for our hard work with pleasure and play. Duty to God can take a back seat to frivolous distractions. "Let's see, I can study the Bible, or I can play World of Warcraft. I think I'll ...". How would you likely answer? Instead, maybe we should learn to say with Mary, "I *can*, but I *won't* because I want to choose that good part that will not be taken away."