

Prosperity Gives
November 12, 2006
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2 Corinthians 9: 6-12

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

Hear Paul again: “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

It’s November, this is a stewardship sermon, and I have a confession to make. I’m one of the occasional listeners to National Public Radio, NPR who changes the channel whenever I hear the word “pledge drive.” Perhaps some of you have done the same? It’s not that I don’t believe in NPR; I have contributed to it in the past. What really turns me off is the interruptions.

When I want news or music I have to listen too long to the pitches for more members and more money before I hear what I tuned in for in the first place. The other reason is I’m invisible. I change the channel because I can and no one but me is the wiser. I’m not condoning my own behavior, just observing it. Inevitably NPR seems to always come up with the funds they need and I breathe easier, knowing my little ritual has not been the undoing of something I actually enjoy.

Ironically, it’s my turn to try and get your attention in the midst of another season of pledging. Cuba Gooding who played in the film Jerry McGuire had a famous line that took on a life of its own...anyone remember it? Yup! “Show me the money.” Too many folks when confronted with a church pledge drive think this is what’s being asked of them...”show me the money!”

Let me turn that kind of thinking on its head... I am not saying “show me the money”; I’m hoping you “show me the message”. I’m hoping you get the message that stewardship is not about giving money, it’s about *giving God*. Giving to God is one aspect of stewardship, but the underlying point of stewardship is *giving God*. When we open ourselves to the wonder of our deep connectedness to God, we look at life through the lens of love.

Too many of us, though, only look through the lens of separation and see what's missing. Our life experience has taught us that there is not enough to go around so we have to grab for it (whatever that *it* may be for us) wherever we can. Sometimes the consequences of our grabbing are minimal, but sometimes, as was the case with corporations like Enron or WorldCom, a whole lot of suffering is visited upon innocent bystanders. Materialism in all its forms seems to be everywhere today. We need lots of stuff to fill our lives with a sense of well-being. The more we have, the more it seems we want, even as a deeper void goes unnoticed.

In evangelical Christian circles today, the notion of materialism is front and center. A September cover of *Time* magazine showed a Rolls Royce with a cross as the hood ornament along with the caption, "Does God want you to be rich?"

Some megachurch preachers say "yes", others call the gospel of wealth heresy. Joel Osteen, the primary target of wrath on this subject doesn't believe God wants us to be rich but he does believe God wants us to be prosperous. "I think God wants us to be prosperous. I think he wants us to be happy, I think he wants us to enjoy our lives," Osteen argues.

This is the abundant life position- that looks to the biblical message and finds that Jesus came to give life in abundance. Others, like Rick Warren of the *Purpose-Driven Life* argue that our self-worth should not be measured by our net-worth.

Those who hold Warren's view, that God isn't calling us all to be wealthy, look to Jesus' teachings on camels for their theological arguments. You know the one...it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Like many things in life, the notion of prosperity is more nuanced than it appears at first glance. Being rich is not the goal of a prosperous life. Giving is. More to the point *giving God*.

Have heard about the secret? The Secret is a film that attempts to teach us the secret to everything - the secret to unlimited joy, health, money, relationships, love, and youth: everything you have ever wanted. According to the film's promotional trailer: For the first time in history, the world's leading scientists, authors, and philosophers will reveal The Secret that utterly transformed the lives of every person who ever knew it... Plato, Newton, Carnegie, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Einstein.

If you see this film, the filmmaker's argue, what you learn could change your life forever. How many of you know the secret? How many of you want to know it? In its simplest terms it's the Law of Attraction (LOA)

We attract what we think because every thought has magnetic energy. If you watched Larry King Live recently you would have seen several proponents of this kind of thinking who also have a role in The Secret. One of whom is Michael Beckwith the founder of the Agape International Center in Culver City.

The flaw that is often attached to this perspective is the suggestion that even as we attract well-being, we also attract sickness which invariably puts the onus of illness on the ill person—a recipe for guilt like no other! I don't believe we choose cancer, or Parkinson's, or heart disease, or, in my case as a 4 year old, tuberculosis, but I do believe that our unconscious thoughts can conspire to make us vulnerable to that which may harm us. I repeat: our unconscious thoughts can conspire to make us vulnerable to that which may harm us.

How many of you have experienced this way of looking at the world with positive results? Would you like to share your experience? (Pause as people share)

I've had several experiences with this Law but it has only been when I have looked backwards that I have seen it in action. They have related to Annie's presence in my life, Samantha, homes I've looked for, and my call to this church. One could call it the law of clarity; focus on what you love and what you love will appear. Others call it the law of prosperity

Richard Bach's book *Illusions: Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah...* is very much in this genre. Bach writes "Every person, all the events of your life are there because you have drawn them there. What you choose to do with them is up to you"

"Argue for your limitations, and sure enough they're yours."

"You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true. You may have to work for it, however."

Bach's views seem closely tied to the religious ideas categorized as New Thought which originated in the 19th century. Several religious denominations emerged from this movement and are actively growing today: Religious Science, the Universal Foundation for Better Living and the Unity Church. For the past few years, I have been walking around the edges of Religious Science thought, dipping my foot in deeper every time. Each time I do, I understand that prosperity thinking is not about materialism it's about recognizing that God and we are part of one life.

I also understand that when I live in this life and am fully aware that God is as much in me as I am in God I embrace fullness not emptiness. When I embrace this fullness I am clear that the fullest expression of being human is the full expression of God's grace—again, I repeat: the fullest expression of being human is the full expression of God's grace. The Christian message has often been confused with suffering and restriction and the notion that grace is costly, because it cost God, in traditionalist words, "God's only son". I no longer believe that grace is costly, because I no longer believe that Jesus died for our sins. On the contrary, I believe that Grace greatens us. When God is fully present in our lives, without any sense of separation –we live in the fullness of divine plenty.

From this vantage point, we know our every need will be met not in terms of material goods but in terms of divine energies of well-being. Paul calls these energies the fruit of

the spirit- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness and faithfulness. To prosper in the spirit is to live with these energies at the core of our being and to realize that God is not some old man in the sky but in essence God is these divine energies.

In this sense prosperity is not about what we receive, but what we give. When we know ourselves as one with God, we know the abundance of being, not the abundance of things. Abundant life is not about what we have, it's about the fullness of Spirit that spills out in our presence blessing those around us and transforming the larger worlds of meaning that we embrace in Jesus' name.

None of this happens automatically or without intention. It takes effort to release ourselves from old habits of fear and emptiness. Likewise it takes a community of like-minded believers to help us see the fruits already present in our midst. In Paul's words "Each of us must give as we have made up our mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." When we allow our thoughts and feelings to be free of fear and want we truly become a cheerful giver. We give from a sense of prosperity, not lack. Then God is able to provide us with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, we may share abundantly in every good work.

So dear friends, don't show me the money, show me that you get the message...*prosperity gives*. If all of us pledge this year from this truth and from our hearts, we truly will be able to share abundantly in every good work God calls us to undertake. May it be so. Amen.