

A Theology of Prosperity or Plenty?

Matthew 6:25-34

November 22, 2009

I'm going to change things up a bit this morning. I'm going to share several thoughts or stories related to the day but I'm not going to try and join them with my own reflections. It's sort of a smorgasbord of related sermons if you will. I'm going to pause for a brief time of silence after each one for you to digest or process or meditate on the thought.

Rev. Ike was a proponent of what many refer to as the "Prosperity gospel." The prosperity gospel teaches that it is God's will that we be wealthy. Rev. Ike claimed the diamond rings he wore and the mansion he lived in and his yacht and Mercedes Benz were all things God wanted to bless everyone with.

"Just send money to my ministry. For your love offering, I will send you a prayer cloth over which I've personally prayed. This prayer cloth will be your ticket to Prosperity."

The Prosperity Gospel is alive and well. Some who share Rev. Ike's beliefs are very popular preachers and their churches are deemed successful as the world defines success. Some of us can't believe people can take such a perversion of Jesus' gospel seriously. But it's obvious many do – and not too far from where we sit.

The Prosperity gospel proclaims that we are favored by God and so much so that God will supernaturally intervene to give us an advantage over others. The Prosperity gospel says, "God will cause persons to give you preferential treatment: grocery store clerks will open up a new register so that you won't have to wait in line; waiters will seat you ahead of others at restaurants; parking spaces close to the door will appear as you drive by; stewardesses will select you to move from coach to First Class."

The Prosperity gospel promises that if you give more to God, God will give more to you.¹

So, during this first time of silence and personal reflection I invite you to maybe make a mental list of some of the ways you sense elements of your way of thinking about God to be suggestive of the Prosperity gospel.

Many offer this critique of the Prosperity gospel: it's not biblical. Whatever Prosperity gospel preachers are basing their teachings on, it's not the teachings of Jesus. If Jesus had been touting the Prosperity gospel he wouldn't have been crucified. According to Jesus: God doesn't play favorites – life isn't fair – the good die young – winners get persecuted.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned that being prosperous could be an obstacle to holy living: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up treasures in heaven. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." "No one can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and wealth." And in this morning's text: "Don't worry anxiously about stuff." "Be satisfied with what you have and who you are." "Be satisfied with the plenty that is yours and quit concerning yourself with having more than you need – with prosperity."

"There's a difference between using your faith to get what you want from God and God's using it to get what God wants from you.

“There’s a difference between using your faith to meet your needs and God’s using it to change you so profoundly that you come to see that what you thought were your needs really aren’t.

“There’s a difference between using your faith to get what you have your heart set on and God’s using it to change your heart so that it becomes the heart of Christ.”

Question to ponder in this moment of silence: “What do you need to stop worrying about and in what ways do you need to acknowledge that you have plenty?”

Some have suggested that Thanksgiving and worry are incompatible. They are mutually exclusive. They are unable to occupy the same space. So, why do we worry so? One reason is because we focus on our wants and not on our abundance.

We worry because we live as if there is never enough. The way some people live if they accumulate a thousand dollars they want a million. If they have one million, they want two. If they have a Toyota, they want a Lexus. If they have a Lexus, they want a Ferrari. Most of us are rich in comparison with half the people alive in this world, and yet, for many of us, it’s not enough. We focus on our wants rather than our abundance. We seek prosperity rather than being satisfied with the plenty.

Erma Bombeck had a way of delighting us with the humorous way she could look at life. She battled cancer at one point in her life. As a result, she wrote a book about children with cancer. I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I want to Go to Boise was the title of it. In the book she told how she was strengthened and encouraged by the comments and insights children offered. One of the voices that especially impressed her was an eight-year-old by the name of Christina.

Christina had cancer of the nervous system. She was asked what she wanted for her eighth birthday. She thought for a long time and then said, “I don’t know. I have two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll. I have everything!”²

Our question for this time with our own thoughts: “When is enough, enough? When is enough, plenty?”

Sometimes stories on the internet turn out to be true and not urban legends. Such is the story entitled “The Day I Met Daniel.” It actually was originally written in 1995 by an Indiana pastor. Here’s a summary of the story.

It was an unusually cold day in May. Two friends sat with Pastor Richard Ryan in a quaint restaurant off the corner of the town-square. As they talked they all noticed a man carrying what appeared to be all of his worldly possessions on his back and carrying a sign that read: “I will work for food.” A mixture of sadness and disbelief accompanied the looks.

When lunch was over all went their separate ways. Pastor Ryan had some errands to accomplish but knew he should also be on the lookout for the strange visitor. When he finished his errands he halfheartedly drove back through the square area before returning to his office. Then he saw him – on the steps of the storefront church. He stopped, got out of the car, and approached the town’s newest visitor.

“Looking for the pastor?” he asked.

“Not really,” the stranger replied, “just resting.”

“Have you eaten today?”

“Oh, I ate something early this morning.”

Then followed the pastor inviting him to eat some lunch with him and asking him some surface questions.

“Where you headed?”

“St. Louis.”

“Where you from?”

“Oh, all over; mostly Florida.”

“How long you been walking?”

“Fourteen years,” he replied. While the two dined in the same restaurant the pastor had left earlier, Daniel’s story unfolded. He had lived a rough life – made some wrong choices and suffered the consequences. While backpacking across the country he stopped in Daytona Beach. He hired on with some men who were putting up a large tent. He assumed it was to be a concert but turned out to be a revival. Life became clearer to him and he gave his life to God. He said that he felt God wanted him to keep walking and so he had.

Pastor Ryan asked if he’d ever thought of stopping. Daniel admitted that it was tempting once in awhile but the calling God had given him kept him going. Then he explained that he had Bibles in his sack which he gave out whenever the Spirit lead him to – that he worked to buy food and Bibles.

The next two hours went quickly as Pastor Ryan learned more about this homeless friend who was not homeless but lived the way he did by choice. He learned that the lifestyle was humiliating at first, especially when people stared and made comments. Daniel told of a time when someone tossed a piece of half-eaten bread at him and made a not so welcoming gesture. He learned also of Daniel’s realization that God was using him to touch others and to change people’s concepts about folks like him.

When they left the restaurant, Daniel turned to the pastor and said, “Come Ye blessed of my Father and inherit the kingdom I’ve prepared for you. For when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me drink, a stranger and you took me in.”

Pastor Ryan said it felt as if they were on holy ground. When they returned to the town-square, Daniel asked, “Would you sign my autograph book? I like to keep messages from folks I meet.”

Pastor Ryan wrote in his book how his commitment to his calling had touched his life and ended it with a verse from Jeremiah: “I know the plans I have for you, declared the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you a future and a hope.’”

“How long has it been since someone hugged you?” the pastor asked.

“A long time,” Daniel replied.

After they embraced, Daniel headed away with his sign dangling from his bedroll and pack of Bibles. But then he stopped and asked, “When you see something that makes you think of me, will you pray for me?”

“You bet,” Pastor Ryan shouted back.

When Pastor Ryan got into his car later in the evening he noticed a pair of well-worn brown work gloves laying over the length of his emergency brake handle. He picked them up and offered a prayer for his friend that his hands would stay warm that night. Daniel’s gloves continue to occupy a space on Pastor Ryan’s office desk for they help him see the world and its people in a new way and they remind him of the two hours he spent with a unique man and to pray for his ministry.³

What theology – prosperity or plenty – will help prepare us to meet God in the disadvantaged around us?

During a harvest festival in India, an old widow arrived at her church with an extraordinarily large offering of rice – far more than the poor woman could be expected to afford. The itinerant pastor of the church did not know the widow well. But he did know that she was very poor and so he asked her if she were making the offering in gratitude for some unusual blessing.

She replied, “Yes, my son was sick and I promised a large gift to God if he got well.”

“And your son has recovered?”

“No,” she said. “He died last week. But I know that he is in God’s care; for that I am especially thankful.”⁴

A pastor of a church received a rose boutonniere for the lapel of his suit every Sunday morning. At first he was really appreciative. Then, it sort of became routine. One Sunday morning, something happened which changed his attitude.

A young boy walked up to him at the conclusion of the service and asked him, “Sir, what are you going to do with your flower?”

The pastor was at first a little taken back by the boy’s question. When he finally figured out that the boy was referring to the flower in his lapel he asked, “Do you mean this?”

“Yes, sir. If you’re just going to throw it away, I would like it.”

The pastor smiled and told him yes. As he began to remove the flower he casually asked the boy what he was going to do with it.

The boy was about 10 years old. He looked up at the pastor and said, “Sir, I am going to give it to my grandmother. My mother and father divorced last year. I was living with my mother, but she married again, and wanted me to live with my father. I lived with him for a while, but he said I couldn’t stay, so he sent me to

live with my grandmother. She is so good to me. She cooks for me and takes care of me. She has been so good to me that I wanted to give her that pretty flower for loving me.”

The pastor couldn't speak when the boy finished his response. His eyes filled with tears and he knew he'd been touched by God. He reached up and unpinned the rose. With the flower in his hand, he looked at the boy and said, “Son, that is the nicest thing that I've ever heard, but you can't have this flower because it's not enough. If you'll look in front of the pulpit, you'll see a big bouquet of flowers. Different families buy them for the church each week. Please take those flowers to your granny because she deserves the very best.”

The boy then said something that the pastor said he will treasure forever. “What a wonderful day! I asked for one flower but got a beautiful bouquet.”⁵

It's about being thankful for the plenty that we have instead of desiring to be more prosperous than we are that is the point of Thanksgiving. We can do that when we stop worrying about what we don't have and start being satisfied with all that we do. It's the difference between a theology of prosperity and a theology of plenty. Which we live our lives by makes a difference.

Let us pray.

1. Mike Ripski, “An Unpopular Preacher,” esermons.com.
2. In Other Words..., edited by Raymond McHenry (Houston, TX), Vol. 5, Sept/Oct. 1995, Issue 5, p. 3; drawn from Reader's Digest, April 1993, pp. 96-98 quoted in “Greed – Putting Things In Their Proper Perspective.”
3. Jack Canfield & Mark Victor Hansen, compilers; Richard Ryan's piece, “The Day I Met Daniel,” A Third Serving of Chicken Soup For the Soul (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1996), p. 307 as quoted in Leonard Sweet's sermon “A Squirrely Holiday,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2009), 0-000-1415.
4. Traditional
5. John R. Ramsey, A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul. Adapted by Billy D. Strayhorn, “The Gratitude Attitude.”