

Problems with Prosperity

Deuteronomy 8:6-18; Ecclesiastes 5:10-19; Proverbs 30:7-8

Our scripture today comes from the book of Deuteronomy. This is a part of a speech given by Moses just before his death – his final words of advice to the Israelites he had led for so long and who were about to enter the Promised Land. We read Deuteronomy 8, verses 6-18.

⁶Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. ⁷For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

So, when Moses gives his final speeches to the people of Israel, the ragged group of refugees he’s led for forty years, who are still homeless in the desert, the most important thing he can think of to say is, “When you get rich, be careful. Don’t imagine that you did it yourself. Don’t forget that it was always God.” I imagine that warning going right over the heads of those people who had been living hand to mouth for so long. Rich? Who, us? But it turns out that Moses was right. As soon as they got settled, they moved away from God. In the book of the Hosea, a book that often echoes the Book of Deuteronomy, the prophet Hosea says over and over: “You know when Israel went bad? When it got comfortable.” Hosea 10:1 – *Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. But the more his fruit increased, the more idolatrous altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars to Baal.* So Moses’ words are confirmed: Be careful of prosperity.

This sounds odd to us “American Dream”- conditioned sorts, but it’s got solid evidence

behind it. We might think that having a lot of money is good, because then we can be more generous, but that's not how it normally works. The fact is, those who have the least money are nearly always more generous than those who have the most. Study after study shows this. One survey showed households making \$25,000 or less give away 4.2% of their income. Households making over \$75,000 give about two and half percent. Moses and the writer of Deuteronomy and Hosea seem to have something here. From the perspective of faith, there are problems with prosperity.

I'd like to look at these problems step by step by working through a passage in one of the best Old Testament books you've never read. Turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes. Go to Psalms, in the middle of the Bible. After Psalms is Proverbs, and after Proverbs is Ecclesiastes. Find chapter 5, verse 10. *The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.* This is how the best biblical proverbs work: they offer an insight that makes you think further. So think about this. The more you love money, the less satisfied you are with money. It's right. You see, there is no end to the quest for money, because there's always the possibility of more. Nearly everything else that we long for, we can get enough of: sunshine, blueberry pie, coffee, even chocolate. But not money. If it's money itself that you long for, there's no end point in sight, always someone else who has more, never any satisfaction. You can pretend. You can buy yourself a rocket ship and make some headlines, but with money there's no "enough." Yet another study asked people from all income levels how much money would be "enough," and they all had the same answer: a little bit more than they currently had. And how can we be grateful if we are never satisfied?

Next verse: chapter 5, verse 11. *When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to watch them eat?* Again, think about that for a moment. Have you ever noticed that as soon as you have more, you suddenly need more? It's not just greed. Some of it just happens. When you add wealth, you add possessions, add payments, add insurance and protection costs, all the expenses of living the life of people in your new tax bracket, and suddenly you find that you're still just getting by. People on the edge of poverty often dream of how carefree their lives would be if they had a six-figure salary. And it could be, if they continued to live as simply as they live now. But it doesn't usually work that way, does it? The more we make, the more we need, and the more we spend. And, as I've already pointed out,

the more we have, the less we give to others.

Verse 12. *Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the excess of the rich will not let them sleep.* Now on the surface, this seems like a trite observation about how the more you have, the more you worry about losing it. Okay. There's probably some truth to that, though if anyone thinks that poor people don't worry about money, they're crazy. Rich people have no monopoly on sleepless nights. But I think there's more in this proverb, especially when we look at it from the perspective of faith. How much we worry is one indicator of how much we depend on God. Let me illustrate from two incidents in the life of Jesus. In the children's sermon I told the familiar story of the widow's mite. All those rich people giving their 2.5% and making a racket about it, and meanwhile the poor woman gives her last two coins – 100%. If you're like me, you've probably wondered about that. How could anyone give away her last penny? What about her children, those cute little kids with large eyes who aren't mentioned in the Bible story but who appear in all the Sunday School illustrations? How could she do that? And I think the answer to that is that she already didn't have enough to live on. She already was going to have to trust God. When you start there, it's not that much harder to trust God all the way. On the other hand, remember the story of the rich young ruler, whom Jesus told to sell all he had and give it away? He couldn't. From his perspective, beginning in a place of financial security, he couldn't imagine depending on God instead. Trusting God is harder when you've never had to do it before. Sleep comes from trust, but *the excess of the rich will not let them sleep.*

So, to summarize so far – and as we saw illustrated last week in the story of Solomon – financial success has never been especially kind to faith. Wealth brings complication and anxiety and saps our dependence on God. Wealth inclines us to worry more about losing what we already have than to look forward to what God might do next. To use a modern example, it may well be that the worst thing that ever happened to the Methodist Church in America is that in the 20th century it got big and influential and wealthy. All that prosperity gave us quite a rush, but now that times are changing, those former riches are giving us a heck of a hangover, as we try to remember what we were doing before the boom times. There are problems with prosperity.

Having said all that, though, I need to nuance it a bit. Because it is not wrong to be wealthy. Yes, it can be dangerous, but it is not wrong. As the passage from Deuteronomy makes

clear, the material blessings that we enjoy are blessings from God. God gives physical stuff, too; not just spiritual blessings. When Deuteronomy warns about wealth, all it's saying is that *when* God blesses you, don't forget God. Keep on living a life of compassion and empathy, and regard your material blessings as further opportunities to serve God and others.

And enjoy those material blessings. Yeah, I actually said that. It's biblical. There are certain religious traditions that teach that salvation is to be found in separating ourselves from all material things, eliminating all pain and all pleasure, by separating ourselves from the things of this earth. And that teaching has made its way over into Christianity in the form of certain dour, joyless, duty-bound Christians who appear to feel that the mark of a true Christian is that she doesn't let herself have any fun. To those approaches to faith, the Bible says . . . *What are you talking about? God made the earth. It's good. Why shouldn't we enjoy it?* So let me conclude with one more reading from Ecclesiastes 5. *This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise, to all whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in all their toil – this is the gift of God.*

So, yeah. There are dangers in wealth. When God gives us the blessings of this earthly life, don't get too caught up in it. Don't forget God. Don't forget others, especially those in need. Don't forget to be thankful. And don't be a sourpuss. In poverty or in wealth, God is good. All the time.

Blessing: I have to close with one more proverb on money, a bit of wisdom from a non-Israelite named Agur that somehow made it into the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs 30, verses 7 and 8.

Two things I ask of you: do not deny them to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food I need,
lest I should be full and deny you, saying, "Who is the Lord?"
or I should be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.

Amen.