

THE PERIL OF PROSPERITY

This Thanksgiving, we can be truly thankful.

by Rev. Arthur Simon

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Do you wonder how so many people mired in hunger and poverty manage to be thankful? The New Testament poses a far more difficult challenge to most American Christians: How do people who are blessed with *material abundance* give deep and genuine thanks to God?

Do we thank God that we are not like others—poor, hungry, homeless, or even a welfare recipient? If so, we may be mimicking the smugness of the Pharisee who gave thanks that he was better than others (Luke 18:9-12). We give it a different twist, of course—thanking God that we are better *off* than others. But surely there is something much more, much deeper and much different in genuine thanksgiving than saluting God for our prosperity.

Prosperity: Success or seduction?

Prosperity puts us in grave danger. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry,” Jesus said (Luke 6:24-25). “You cannot serve both God and money”—you can’t have it both ways—he warned (Matt. 6:24).

He told his astonished disciples that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25). Like the disciples, we wince. Compared to the vast majority of the world’s population most of us who read this are rich. We like it that way. Prosperity is part of the American dream. We instinctively want to play *both* sides of the street: God *and* money.

The problem is not that the things we usually buy are bad. Some of them are stunningly good. The problem is that acquiring them becomes a seductive urge, an addiction, a way of life that begins to define us, to take control of us, and to cause us to neglect the suffering of others.

Snookered

Nelson Rockefeller, an heir to the Rockefeller fortune, was once asked, “How much is enough?” Rockefeller paused for a moment, smiled and replied, “Just a little bit more.” It was an honest answer. Whether we are rich or poor, one thing we can never seem to get is enough.

The culture of consumerism shapes us. So as people around us acquire new things, we are stimulated to do the same. Americans are increasingly working longer hours in order to earn more and spend more. Life becomes hectic and leaves less time for the

family. There may also be less energy and will for Christ-like parenting. Skimping on love and guidance for our children, we may buy things that give them temporary pleasure but long-term emptiness. We are what we have, our culture tells us, and we get snookered.

Studies show that growing affluence has not made us any happier. It has left in its wake increasing depression, substance abuse and broken homes. Despite a dramatic increase in the purchasing power of U.S. citizens over the last half century, polls reveal that we feel no richer than did our counterparts 50 years ago. Things bought last year are taken for granted, and things taken for granted do not evoke gratitude, which is the core of happiness.

God wants more for us

None of this should surprise us. Wealth cannot enrich the heart. Only God can do that. That is why Jesus urgently, incessantly drew people to God. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,” He said (Matt. 6:33).

The problem, please note, is not that we want *too much*, but that we want *too little*. God desires far more for us than we desire for ourselves. We are like prisoners on death row who want a sirloin steak for our last meal, while God wants to set us free!

Only in this context, in the light of God’s awesome love and high hopes for us, can we begin to understand Jesus’ call to discipleship. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself daily and take up his cross and follow me,” He said. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). He also urged, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33).

We tend to duck these words because they challenge our way of life. The call of Jesus sounds painful, like having our teeth pulled. In fact, however, it is more like a magnificent marriage proposal, because Jesus offers infinitely more than we are asked to give up. He offers us life with God. He tells us we are children of God, heirs of eternal life. He not only tells us these things, but He is the way for us to receive them. For He is the Son sent from the Father to live with us and reveal the heart of God to us. Above all, He came to give His life for us, to take upon Himself the sin of the world—*our* sin, *our* captivity to affluence—so that we might be reconciled to God. By rising to life again He sealed this work as God’s victory for us over sin and death. What love, and what a gift!

To receive this is to gain everything. And when the One who has done so much for us asks us to give up what we have and follow Him, doing so is like falling in love, not like having teeth pulled. It is the discovery of life’s purpose, because Jesus died and rose again so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for Him (2 Cor. 5:15). As children of God, baptized and born anew in Jesus Christ, the culture no longer defines us, and the love of money no longer holds us captive.

True Thanksgiving

This is where the giving of thanks really begins. Now it is our great joy to offer everything to Christ. *Everything*. Not just a tithe, which may imply that if we give God 10 percent the other 90 percent is ours, but give everything—our time, energy, ability, personality, possessions, family, work, play, relationships—everything. It belongs to God, who asks that we place all that we are and all that we have in service to Him. Doing so is our deepest thanksgiving.

Of course, we do this most imperfectly, so we live by forgiveness. But do we cheapen God's grace by using forgiveness as an after-life insurance policy that excuses us from offering ourselves to God now? Do we conform to the culture instead of being transformed by Christ? Consider, for example, that this year we Missouri Synod Lutherans cut one-fourth of our full-salaried overseas missionaries because of a \$4-million-dollar shortfall in mission contributions—roughly \$1.50 a year for every member of Synod, or about three cents per baptized member per week. Yes, the economic slowdown has been painful for many, but we still live in the richest nation in the history of the world. For the lack of two cents a week from each of us, must we dismantle much of our mission work? Do Jesus and the Great Commission to “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19) mean so little to us? Something is woefully wrong. Have we forgotten who we are and what our purpose is?

Radical generosity

Consider Jesus' New Commandment to “love one another,” and to do so “as I have loved you” (John 13:34 and 15:12). No tokenism here, not a few spare dollars or a quick prayer for hungry people, but an invitation to lay down our lives for others, because God in Christ laid down His life for us. The invitation fits perfectly Jesus' urging of radical generosity toward poor people.

Christian relief and development agencies report that the cost of a pack of gum can feed a refugee child for a day. The cost of a good shirt would buy fifty pounds of seed corn or school supplies for two children in Africa. The late James P. Grant, director of UNICEF, calculated that five hundred dollars spent on child survival saves a child's life, and that does not count benefits such as preventing blindness or other disabilities. Considering these things, does your desire for a new outfit or a new car look any different?

The good news is that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ not only covers the sin of ingratitude, but restores us to our true purpose in life, for to receive grace is also to show grace to others. That is the gist of what the apostle Paul wrote when he cited the generosity of the Macedonian Christians toward the impoverished believers in Judea. He praised their giving, despite their own poverty, as an “act of grace” (2 Cor. 8:6-7). Our grace is always a derivative grace that flows from the heart of God through Christ to us, and then from us to others. The grace of giving is dependent upon grace received; grace received instinctively embraces others.

“Give *us* this day our daily bread,” we pray, and in so praying we seek bread not only for ourselves but for others as well. This points us toward the common good and away from lonely acquisition. As part of Jesus’ prayer for the coming of God’s gracious rule in our lives, this simple petition casts a much wider net than we may suppose. It is a prayer for enough, a prayer for trust that God will provide whatever we need for this body and life so that we may seek first His kingdom.

We are afraid to let go, afraid we will lose things we love too much. That is exactly the problem. Both rich and poor prisoners of consumerism participate in the myth of scarcity, so there is never enough. But by trusting God, we shed anxiety about our needs and no longer covet excess. That is a great freedom. We can then receive God’s “enough” with a gratitude that moves us to share all we can of God’s grace and providence with others, so that they too may experience God’s “enough.”

This is the way of genuine thanksgiving.

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