

Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2011

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Wealth: Getting and Giving

Proverbs 10:1-5, 22-25; 11:24-25

10:1 A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother. 2 Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death. 3 The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. 4 Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. 5 He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

10:22 The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it. 23 A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct, but a man of understanding delights in wisdom. 24 What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted. 25 When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

11:24-25 One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

1. Wealth as blessing

In itself, wealth is good, a sign of God's blessing. Proverbs assumes what the whole Bible teaches: Wealth is a covenant blessing. In general, God promises prosperity to those who obey him. The Lord placed riches in this earth since creation, riches he expects mankind to develop. He gave Adam and Eve seed-bearing plants and trees: "You shall have them for food" (Gen 1.29-30). He placed fruit trees in the garden and told Adam and Eve to tend them. He gave Eden water, valuable stones and metals (Gen 2:10-15).¹

Sin, death, weeds, toil and frustration entered this world, but wealth remains a covenant blessing. When Israel is faithful, Moses says, "The LORD will send a blessing on everything you put your hand to. The LORD...will bless you" (Deut. 28:8).

Psalms 112:1-3 says: "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands. His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever."

Proverbs 10:22 says: "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it." We see this in lives of godly men like Abraham, Job and David. And wealthy people ministered to Jesus and disciples with their wealth (Luke 8:3).

It is healthy, not sinful, to desire and enjoy God's material blessings. Let us always remember: God created a world pulsing with flesh and blood, groaning with fruits of tree and vine. When he created man and woman, He chose to give us intelligence and strength. He created us with desires, deep hungers to taste new fruit, bear fruit, and be satisfied. Yes, desires are often distorted, but not always. Our legitimate

¹ Frame. *Doctrine of Christian Life*, pp. 808-9

desire to enjoy life drives our work and gives us wealth. Paul tell us, “God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment (1 Tim 6.17).

He created us with a knowledge of time, the interest in cause and effect that is the basis of all science, all technical skill. And everything coheres. We live in a universe, not a multiverse, not chaos. So then:

- ☐ Skilled **carpenters** do best when they *go with the grain* of the wood.
- ☐ Prudent farmers learn what the land wants to give, to follow its contours.
- ☐ Wise physicians learn how to harness the body's capacity to heal itself.
- ☐ Writers know that novels, poems, essays gain a life of their own. They want to go where it seems that they have to go.
- ☐ Engineers, builders, baristas, musicians either follow the creation or suffer.

It's exciting to discover these things by careful observation. When we discover the structures of creation, we honor the Lord in our daily labor. How I long for all of you to know this! To see that your work is so much more than an occupation, a way to earn our food and drink. Good work explores God's handiwork in creation. Good teachers know that students learn a certain way. Builders know that buildings go up the way creation lets them go.

We worship the Lord through the day when we see these things, give thanks for them. We can also plan with sound expectation. When our labor is successful, we have satisfaction in work well done and a desire to celebrate, give thanks.

This is part of Israel's fundamental law! God commanded Israel to bring tithes to the tabernacle for three causes: To support the work of priests and Levites, to give money to the poor and to feast in God's presence in Deut 12:6-7:

Bring your sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings... There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD ... has blessed you.

2. The sources of wealth

Clearly wealth is good, a sign of the blessing of the Creator. If we enjoy wealth, there are two reasons: First, hard work, according to the laws, patterns of God's creation. Second, God chose to bless our labors.

Recall Proverbs 3, last week: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. This applies to our wealth, as Prov 3:9-10 continues:

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing and your vats will brim over with new wine.

This is the message at creation, and Solomon says the same as he meditates on creation. The Lord promised that good work ordinarily brings prosperity:

- ☐ Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread" (12:11).
- ☐ In all toil, there is profit (14:23).
- ☐ The plans of the diligent surely lead to abundance (21:5).

□ The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it (10:22).

"Righteous diligence is the means of God's blessing, but his blessing does not depend on hard, strenuous labor alone." ² Psalm 127 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain."

Now it's not that simple. Several "counter-proverbs" say the righteous may be poor for a season. Why? Oppression, war, the tyranny of powerful. ³ Some get treasures by lying, wickedness (10:2, 21:6). Thieves can succeed for a time (1:10-19).

Still, that's not the norm. Proverbs sees goodness or righteousness as a force in this world. That force that has results. Therefore, proverbs says: "The wealth of the wise is their crown" (14:24). Again: "Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life" (22:4).

Proverbs 10 develops the theme that some do gain treasure by evil means – stealing, deception, oppression of the poor. But they bring no good in the end. On the other hand, "righteousness delivers from death" (10:2). Yes, the righteous face threats. But 10:3 says: "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry." Note: "What the righteous desire will be granted" (10:24). More, God "thwarts the craving of the wicked" (10:3b) – especially if they hope to harm the righteous.

These are sweeping statements: God cares for the righteous, but thwarts the wicked. We think: This isn't always true, is it? The righteous suffer at times. Yes. Still, Prov. 10:4-5 tell us how goodness and wealth go together. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." Or a translation closer to Hebrew: "A poor person is made with a slack palm. But the hand of the diligent brings wealth. (10:4)

The slack palm is careless, negligent, sluggish, lazy. The palm goes from wrist to fingertip. He can't even make *this much* of his body work hard. Therefore he is poor. In that culture, it means he doesn't have enough food, clothes or shelter.

Proverbs 10:4 contrasts the slack palm and the diligent hand. The second word for *hand* is different. It measures what *we* call the forearm – elbow to fingertip. The diligent hand or arm represents the person who is thoughtful, attentive, constant, resolute, persistent in labor. The result is wealth. Normally it's wealth that lasts. So "the hand of the diligent will rule" and "get wealth" (12:24, 27).

Meanwhile, Solomon says, "an idle person will suffer hunger." And Jeremiah curses one "who is lax in doing the Lord's work" (Prov. 19:15, Jer. 48:10). Therefore Proverbs 10:5 recommends timely labor:

*He who gathers crops in summer is a wise/prudent son,
but he who sleeps in harvest is a disgraceful/shameful son.*

So the son who works at the right season brings joy to his parents. He is *prudent*. He acts during harvest, when action is imperative. He is willing to do extra work in the season when it's necessary. Joseph was a wise son. He seized the opportunity to save his family from famine. The son who sleeps – Hebrew: heavy slumber, crashing, oblivious to surroundings – brings disgrace to his parents.

² Waltke, 473.

³ Waltke, 454.

Someone passed on this account to me. A certain man got a solid job at a good firm, but didn't really like it. He violated the dress code, coming to work in ripped jeans. Took long cigarette breaks and long lunch breaks. Showed borderline disrespect. He did the minimum. He tried to look no worse than the laziest person around. He half-hoped to be fired. Somehow he woke up: I have a good job! He started to show respect, work hard. Alas, no one seemed to notice. No one praised him. We think: Of course not. Don't expect praise for becoming normal.

"Lazy hands [slack palms] make a man poor" (10:4). Chaos always threatens in this world. Diligent labor keeps it at bay, otherwise it will destroy our hard-earned order and wealth. If you doubt it, look at your kitchen, office, or bedroom if you relax two days. You'll drown in stray cups, magazines, dirty clothes. Phone and keys will go missing. You don't need to do anything to achieve this. Just get lazy.

So the Lord seriously commends diligent labor. Many of you work hard at your craft or profession. You focus. You stay on top of your field. You don't run from long, hard work. You believe in what you do, as a service to God and man, and you strive to do it well. The Lord is pleased.

I have four weddings in thirty-one days this fall. I know each bride, each family well. I could save labor by giving the same homily each time. Who would complain? But the families and brides are attending each other's weddings. Since I know each of them, I prepared four distinct messages. It's their one wedding. I want them to feel that their day is unique. It's work, but good work. You do the same in your field. That's good! Diligent labor makes a difference.

Again, it's complex. We can be tempted to work hard to show that we work hard. And sometimes hard work produces *no results*. Calamity strikes good people – consider Job, David, and Jesus. As James said, sometimes oppressors use their power to defraud their workers (Jas 5:4-6).

Nonetheless, Proverbs says industry and planning *normally* produce wealth. Add contentment and thrift and we gain wealth that remains, rather than money that dissipates. Yet there is more to it than work: "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it" (10:22). Precise meaning: God gives wealth without painful toil. Proverbs says, "Wounding labor comes from self-ambition. It's under God's judgment:

- ☐ The Lord thwarts the craving of the wicked (10:3).
- ☐ A stingy man is eager to get rich, unaware that poverty awaits him (28:22).
- ☐ What the wicked dreads will overtake him (10:24).

Proverbs 10:24 continues: "*What the righteous desire will be granted.*" Let's admit that we don't always *see* the righteous gaining their desires. So let's see how Proverbs 10:22-25 works.

First, God promises wealth without excruciating toil in verse 10:22. The blessing of the Lord, the great I AM, offers wealth *without trouble*. He says this because wealth does often bring trouble – envy, pride, worries. God offers wealth without the misery. It's God's blessing and does not "depend on strenuous labor alone."

So: If we toil endlessly, we must ask if we have missed God's wisdom. If we're gaining wealth at the cost of *exhausting* labor, we must ask if we're on the path of folly. There is a season for extra labor, but that season should end eventually.

Proverbs 10:23 says we should guard our spiritual status: "A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct, but a man of understanding delights in wisdom." The strong man delights in feats of strength, the wise man and woman love constructive work. We must watch our soul, so we find pleasure in the right activities. Don't take that for granted. Fools love evil conduct.

Proverbs 10:24-25 continues: The fool and wicked know they are doing evil. So they suffer well-founded dread of getting caught today and swept away forever. As the righteous desire good things they normally get what they want now and they stand firm eternally.

But Proverbs says it's a *lesser* blessing. We've seen this in Proverbs 8. Wisdom says, "With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity" and "I bestow wealth on those who love me and make their treasuries full." (8:18, 21). But, wisdom adds, "My fruit is better than fine gold [or] choice silver" (8:19). Wisdom is better than silver, gold. So physical wealth is good, but wisdom is better. That said, we are ready to consider the two dangers of wealth:

3. The dangers of wealth

Wealth brings two dangers. The first is pride and self-indulgence. The second is mistreatment of the poor – whether by oppression or negligence. Proverbs 3:27 says: "Do not withhold good...when it is in your power to act." Be generous!

The danger of pride appears in a prayer in Proverbs, 30:8-9: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or: 'I can take care of myself.'"

Proverbs 11:4 says, "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath." Wealth solves so many problems that we think it solves *all* problems, which surely is false. Proverbs 18:11: "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall." But Solomon says, "Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil" (15:16).

There is a danger in having and storing up too much. See this in the teaching on barns. When we walk with God, gaining wealth by honest labor: "The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and [your labor] in the land he is giving you (Deut. 28:8). "Our barns will be filled with every kind of provision" (Ps 144:13).

Yet barns and assets owned can't be our final security. Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matt. 6:26). So "Do not store up treasures for yourselves."

Oppression is the second danger of wealth. Wealth brings power, so that the rich can oppress the poor, bend laws to their purpose, as we saw in James 5. Proverbs 14:31 says, "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his maker."

We break with the dangers of wealth by giving generously, especially to the poor. Isaiah says this pleases God: "To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless [or "wandering"] poor into your house, when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood." See poor as your flesh! God promises to honor those who honor him in this way: A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor (Prov 22:9). Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely, who conducts his affairs with justice (Ps 112:5).

4. Wealth is a blessing, gained by hard work, God's favor. To avoid the dangers, God wants us to share our wealth freely.

Here we see that wisdom is more than a command, a good way of life. Jesus embodies and personifies wisdom. Proverbs 11:25: "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." Jesus is the generous man who "refreshes others."

When Peter preached the gospel of Jesus, he said "Repent... and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). There is nothing more refreshing than forgiveness of sins and follies, including sins we commit with wealth.

No one refreshes a tired, dry heart like Jesus. When we're down, a quiet season of prayer breathes life into our empty sails, our listless hands. He breathes a word of encouragement in his word or through a friend He sends. He bears our burdens. Even as he lamented Jeremiah had to interrupt himself to say: "His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!" (Lam 3).

Who ever gave more freely than Jesus? Paul: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). He gave up his prerogatives as creator, king, Lord of all. He humbled himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil. 2). Through his poverty, his suffering on the cross, He made us rich.

This is refreshment, a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Jesus calls, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink" (John 4:14, 7:37). Do you know that you need this refreshment from Jesus? If you've never tasted, talk to him about it. Talk to any disciple you know here until you know how to find that refreshment.

Fellow disciples, I hope you turn to Jesus daily for this refreshment and receive what he loves to give. The Bible compares God's gifts to flowing water. If grace has flowed into you, it should also flow out of you. You will not run dry when you give to others.

I got two letters about this recently. Letter #1: During the last recession I invested in a large industrial company. I thought I had it nailed as the investment briefly had returns in triple digits. Then it disclosed a sizeable deficits in the company's pension plan and my investment drifted back to earth. I'm reminded of Proverbs 23:5: "Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle."

What then? Letter #2: When we were first married, my husband and I lived on \$10,000 a year, but God provided through generous people who gave us food and a modest rent. We put ourselves through school without debt and faithfully gave as much as we could. Today, we make more than we ever dreamed. The tendency as income increases is to see how others lived and match them. But we focused on giving to others and living below our means. God has given us professions we love, a quality income, a lovely home, two reliable cars, a few luxuries and no debt.

Our greatest joy comes when can share this wealth with others. We've supported missionaries, given funds to large projects. Yet we have never lacked for anything we needed. We see God's blessings as a mandate to [share] the vast resources God provides while enjoying a few comforts that come our way. Many of our friends live in larger homes, drive newer cars, and have more things, but we have more than we need plus the blessing of sharing what God has given us with others. For the past five years, our

largest bill... is our giving. *When God is the biggest bill, there is a comfort in knowing that he is also in control of that bill!*

Our theme for stewardship season is Proverbs 3:27: Do not withhold good from those who *deserve* it when it's in your power to help them." Proverbs 19:17 adds, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done." That means giving is good for the poor, for the church, and for the giver!

My study has convinced me we should plan to increase our giving to the physically and spiritually poor. I'll share some ideas I have, but the starting point is simple: The best way to increase giving to the poor and to mission is to increase overall giving and give away the bulk of the increase.

When we give, we follow the Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:2). There are other reasons to give. Giving is an act of worship, a response to the Lord's grace in our lives. It lets us show that we trust God to provide for us. Above all, generosity follows the way of Jesus, who personifies sacrificial giving. We can and should enjoy God's gifts. He gave the blessing of wealth for our enjoyment. But we escape the danger when we also give freely – so that others can live – both in body and in spirit.