

Money And Balancing Prosperity

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In Ecclesiastes 10:19, Solomon said that "A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers all things."

Money is very important to one's life, and I think that one can tell this just by thinking a few things regarding its appearances in the Bible. The word money appears 140 times. Now that is quite a lot by itself, but the inferences to money appear in many, many other words. There are terms and phrases like debt, payment, reckon, accounting, poverty, poor, rich, riches, mammon, treasure, increase, goods, fine clothing, when you are a fool, no end of his chariots, full of horses, and even the word glory is used to indicate wealth.

But references to money do not end there because there are even more clear inferences in regard to shekels, talents, minas, denarii, gold, silver, and precious stones.

I have no idea what the total figure would be if the sum of all of those terms were added, but I think that you would understand that money is of considerable importance to us. The Bible shows that we put great confidence in it, and we desire it greatly because we think that it is the answer to many of our problems in life. And it is true that money is power, and nobody wants to relinquish power, the power to control. It is normal for us to desire an increase of it, and we will make efforts to get it. We normally consider wealth as being an indication that one is successful. But are they? Is *it* really?

Now if one took what Solomon said in chapter 10, verse 19 without qualification, one could easily come to that conclusion that wealth is the most important thing in life. However, that statement must be taken in context. This same man wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:12, "For wisdom is a defense [or a shade, a symbol of protection] and money is a defense, but the

excellency [or the advantage, the superiority] of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it." The inference is, of course, that money cannot give one life.

I think that one can discern that there is a difference between the Old Testament approach to money from the New Testament's approach. I think that we can generally say that the Old Testament's approach is a more "let's go for it!" and it is obviously used as a sign of God's approval. Now a general description of the New Testament's would be that it looks at money guardedly, almost as if it was a threat to someone's well-being. Now John 10: 10 says that the "Scripture cannot be broken." Therefore, both approaches are correct and they need to be balanced against one another.

Now the Old Testament pretty much assumes that prosperity is a reward and a sign of God's approval. This is not absolutely consistent throughout the Old Testament, just mainly so, but it is enough though that if one does not have a large enough overview, they can be easily misled into developing a kind of gospel of prosperity.

For example, the Genesis account of Joseph is one of the greatest success stories in all of history. The Psalms, especially, connect prosperity with God's favor, but at the same time, David in the Psalms complains of the prosperity of the wicked, as did Jeremiah when he wrote his book. So there is a necessity for there to be a balance and the Old Testament takes a hand in that.

Solomon's wealth was legendary, but Ecclesiastes shows him ambivalent about its value. Job deals with the inexplicable calamities that can befall the godly as his wealth is stripped from him. But the story ends with Job's fortunes restored when he passes the test. And this gives way to the thought that prosperity is evidence that God is pleased.

But in the New Testament, God's Son comes into the world, and He is certainly not known for His wealth. At one point He said that He had no place to lay His head. And also it can be perceived easily that His rejection is at least partly blamed upon the fact that He did not present the influential people of His day that He had any outward sign of wealth, and so they were not impressed. Now if Jesus is the model for the way the rest of God's

Family is going to appear, it gives some evidence of why so many in God's church are just barely skimming by and that the Scriptures would clearly state that not many mighty, meaning the wealthy, are called.

Now how can the biblical promise of prosperity, of success, and reward, most of which appear in the Old Testament, be reconciled with the basic Christian principles of unselfishness and sacrifice? Well, actually, the answer is relatively simple. There are two overall reasons, and both focus on what Christ taught as well as exemplified.

The first is that Christ greatly enlarged the concept of what can be considered success. The Old Testament approach to success by and large focuses on the individual achieving it. Now this is not necessarily wrong. So the Old Testament encourages us to pursue wealth, you know, prosperity, but always to do it within lawful ambitions.

There is a saying that "A child without ambition is like a watch with a broken spring. It doesn't run very well." Now the child in that saying is us. We are the child of God. And if we do not have ambition to increase prosperity, both physical and spiritual, you see, then we are not going to produce anything. We will be like a watch that is not running. So ambition is good in itself. But what Christ did teach was that the desire to succeed must include more than the self. Christ shifted the singular success, individual success, to group success. He chose to teach us to understand that we rise and fall together.

Now this is a matter involving cooperation and sharing. Personal self-assertiveness to become successful can easily become unbalanced, so it must be guarded and even cured by the process of outgrowing individual success into larger loyalties because in individual success, the focus is on the self. Jesus hammered home the concept of responsibility toward others, and that this responsibility includes our wealth.

There is very much contained within statements like "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We are to do all things to glorify God, and this reaches its zenith in terms of clarity in Paul's use of the body analogy in I Corinthians the 12th chapter. And in that chapter, Paul makes effective use of this to describe the church and the responsibility that each part of the

Body has toward all the other parts. So Jesus was teaching interdependence because the reality of life is that no man really is an island. Groupthink must become part of our operations.

Now I Corinthians 5 and also in Galatians 5, this time in verse 9, Paul put a negative twist to that same principle when he teaches that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." It works in both directions.

Please turn to Romans the 14th chapter, verses 7 through 9. This statement that we are about to read is actually a conclusion that Paul reaches to this point in the argument that he is making here. And I should add here that in the Greek, the beginning of this sentence is in the emphatic, which means that this is his subject. This is what he wants to emphasize to people as he goes through this argument.

Romans 14:7-9 For none of us lives to himself [That is hard to accept, get across, and use.], and no one dies to himself. For if we live [he is talking about Christians], we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died and rose and lived again, that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

Now in regard to personal prosperity, this is something that we are generally not taught to use. The sum of Paul's point then is that Christ drew from Israel's Old Testament example that personal success must be shared with, and a source of success for others, or it is not truly success.

That was the first point.

The second reason is more obvious and it is directly tied to the first. However, also it needs to be stated. Christ changed the conception of success from the physical to the spiritual. Now there is a cliché that says that "money talks." However, it is influential only as long as people listen. When people begin looking for true values in life, money loses its effectiveness because they are able to discern, as Solomon did, that money lacks the powers to make a major difference in one's sense of well-being. It works for a little bit but then it stops working if the approach to it is not correct.

This is what Solomon observed there in Ecclesiastes 7 when he stated that wisdom is better than money as a shelter. Wisdom, anybody can fall back on and use it properly. But not everybody can really rely upon money and use it properly to produce something that is good. So wisdom, meaning doing right, gives life. What does it do? It has the power to create an abundant life. I am not talking about being physically alive or spiritually alive. Solomon means that it produces an abundant life regardless of how much actual money or physical prosperity that a person has. Money simply does not have that power. People can have loads of money and be miserable. J. Paul Getty, for all of his vaunted wealth, said—this man was married five times—"I would give all of my wealth [I do not really know whether he meant it] for one good marriage." Living with those five women must have eventually become miserable to him because he divorced them all. And they took away a pile of his money anyway.

Now when the man came to Jesus asking Him to help get his inheritance, Jesus refused, and He warned him to beware of covetousness. Now why did Jesus do this? Because the spiritual problem was far more important to the man's well-being than a whole pile of money. So let us turn to this in Luke the 12th chapter. Verse 15 is where He says, "Take heed and beware of covetousness." But in verse 21 He says,

Luke 12:21 "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

In this parable Jesus is challenging the common conceptions of success and security. To be rich toward God is Jesus' conception of success and security and shelter, safety. Security is not found in the accumulation of things, but rather brethren, in the *triumph over things*. So true success is not an achievement of self-discipline even though self-discipline is part of success. Rather, true success is the fruit of a wholehearted participation in God's way of life.

Life does consists of an abundance, but an abundance of another sort than is normally thought of. It is an abundance of the Spirit of the life of God. And of Jesus, Paul said, "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes, He became poor, that through His poverty you might become rich." No one was ever more successful in life—and He was poor.

And so through His life and His death and His resurrection, He paved the way for us to have life through God's grace, and it is by His grace that we have the opportunity to become truly rich.