

THE PROSPERITY DOCTRINE REEXAMINED

1 Corinthians 4:8–13

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1 Corinthians 4:8–13 (NIV)

“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment, we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.”

My sermon title this morning is the “Prosperity Doctrine Re-examined.” Circulating in the body of Christ today is a teaching, which places emphasis upon Christians living a life of material prosperity. This emphasis comes with a variety of expression. All the way from the crass materialism of Dr. Ike to the subtle organ-toned voice of a radio or television evangelist or letters that come across my desk, imploring me to send a special ministry five dollars so I can get back twenty-five. I grant the fact and believe that the Lord does bless the generous giver, I’m not so sure that any ministry can give a money back or “double your money back” guarantee. The Lord makes it up sometimes in other ways.

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Christian personalities in the media sometimes justify extravagant and financially wasteful lifestyles on the basis of what is called “the kingdom doctrine.” That is, we are children of the King, so let’s live like royalty.

A favorite and basic text of this emphasis has been 3 John 2, “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that you may prosper, even as your souls prosper.” Without attempting an exhaustive discussion of 3 John 2, since that’s not our focus this morning, I might just note those words on prosperity were addressed to a man by the name of Gaius who was a financially prosperous Christian, but who, in the midst of his financial prosperity, had blessed the church of God and had entertained strangers and sent them on their way in ministry. He did not use his financial resources simply on consuming them on himself.

In contrast to Gaius in 3 John is a man by the name of Diotrephes, who is described as “liking to put himself first” (3 John 1:9). Here is a man whose emphasis was totally selfish, and totally selfish emphases are condemned in 3 John.

I. To what extent should a Christian be prosperous financially or in other ways?

I think that we’ve got to watch extremes. On the one hand, we must watch the extreme which says, “Being a Christian equals living in poverty.” The other extreme says, “Being a Christian equals living a life of wealth.” We recognize, from the New Testament itself, that there is a variety in the New Testament. There are some believers who are wealthy and there are other believers who are not. The New Testament is primarily concerned, not with how much a person has but with how they accumulated it, what their values are, and how they’re dispersing it. How are you accumulating money? Honestly or dishonestly? Or are you not accumulating it simply because you’re lazy? That’s the other side of the spectrum. The New Testament is concerned about how you accumulate. Is it done with honesty, integrity and diligence?

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Not only that, but the New Testament wants to know how important money is to you. Or the thought of money. Some people don't have much money, but it's very important to think about it an awful lot. How important is it to you? We remember the words of Jesus, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). If you have finances or if you have anything else that keeps you away from the Lord, is it really worth the attachment that you've placed on it?

On the other hand, if God has blessed you and you're using it for the glory of God, in the ways the Spirit is leading you, then no believer can sit in judgment upon you. For we all individually answer to the Lord for what we have.

II. How are you dispersing what you have? That's another important question.

When we come to the passage of Scripture for today, we find an instance when prosperity is wrong. It happens that the prosperity that is spoken of to the Corinthian church is not financial prosperity. It happens to be a spiritual smugness. I believe financial prosperity could be included in it. The Laodicean church, for example, in Revelation 3:17, says "We are rich and increased in goods and have need of nothing." This is a prosperity situation that is rebuked by the Lord. In Corinthians, the watchword is "we have every spiritual gift and, what other need do we have, seeing how wise we are"? Paul, in this passage, is attacking that spirit of smugness.

Prosperity is wrong, whether it is financial prosperity or whether it is "spiritual" prosperity—when it communicates in our spirit a sense that we have arrived, that we don't need to go past this point.

I'm reminded of the teenage boy who was out on a date and very proud of who he was. In the course of his date, he turned to his girlfriend and said, "I wonder how the other six wonders of the world are doing tonight."

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It's amazing how that spirit can creep into our feeling of coming into some spiritual possession or even financial possession. Charismatic experience can be very dangerous, although it is, as I bear testimony, very edifying. A person who says, in a boastful way, "I have received the baptism in the Spirit with speaking in tongues," and does this in a kind of way that says, "I've got it all. I have now got it made. There now waits nothing for now that I've had that experience. What more is there possibly left?"—exhibits a spiritual smugness.

Churches get new buildings up and think they have arrived. I have seen churches die after they have moved into new buildings. Because people looked around and said, "Look what we have done. Look at this really plush atmosphere compared to what we had. Isn't it wonderful?"

Spiritual smugness.

Literally, Paul is saying in 4:8, "Already you are satiated. Already you have all you want." The Christian life goes along in a balance between contentment and longing. Contentment becomes wrong if there is no further spiritual desire that is associated with it and we are simply at ease, as Amos says, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). And the Corinthians were simply on the contented level, without seeing that there was more room for spiritual growth. It's wrong, on the other hand, to simply never be contented all of the time and to be longing, longing, longing and become compulsive in your behavior, because you can never be satisfied with who you are or what God has given you in the financial resources He's given or the spiritual resources He's given you, so you become a driven and striving Christian. There's a delicate balance in the Scripture that allows us, on the one hand, to rest in Christ and, on the other hand, to follow after Christ and say, "Lord, as much of You as I've experienced, there is yet more of you that I want to experience." The spirit of smugness is rebuked.

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And financial prosperity, or the prosperity doctrine, when it fosters the kind of a spirit that “I have arrived and you haven’t, what’s the matter with you?”—it’s wrong. It brings with it kind of a spirit of exclusive privilege. This is what Paul is saying in the middle phrase of verse 8 to the Corinthians, “You have become kings and that without us.” That is, “You have advanced and we haven’t. You think it is natural and right that you should be spiritually smug and spiritually well-kept and we’re off still in the fray, in the contest, in the arena of the great struggle.” Paul is saying to the Corinthian believers, “It’s not right for one part of the body of Christ to feel it has arrived when another part of that body or another person in that body is under such great struggle.” The part that has arrived bears no responsibility to the part that is still struggling and, in fact, looks upon the part that’s still struggling and says, “You wouldn’t be struggling if you were obeying God, like me.”

I was talking to someone in the financial prosperity movement recently saying, “I don’t see how you square your belief with what the apostle Paul experienced when he talked about that suffering and abuse he had received. He doesn’t appear to live on this kingdom level of life that you talk about.” The response I got was, “Paul was a very great man. In many respects, he is without equal in terms of his presentation of the gospel. But you must remember that, although a great man, Paul had some deficiencies in his faith. One of the deficiencies that he had was that he didn’t have enough faith for his own healing. He didn’t have enough faith, as well, for his own financial prosperity. If he would have had more faith, he’d be in that better pattern, but simply because he was an apostle doesn’t mean we take him as a pattern in everything. We recognize that he was mortal and he had failures too.”

But that’s the Corinthian mentality! That’s exactly how they saw Paul. “Paul, you came and planted our church, but people have come after you and built on your doctrine and they have said

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so many more wonderful things than you have said, they've led us so much more into the deeper life than you led us. And there you are, the weak preacher. We've learned that there are better preachers than you. Paul, you weakling!"

A striking thing of what Paul does is in verse 16—if he was supposedly deficient in faith, why then does an apostle of Jesus Christ say, "Therefore, imitate me." That would sound kind of inconsistent, wouldn't it? Why are we being called to imitate a man who is deficient in faith? There is a difference between a picnic and a war. The Corinthian church was in a picnic. At a picnic, there is time for rest, leisure, enjoyment, playing games. There's another aspect to the Christian life that sees it as a war. Which sees it as conflict. Maybe in our life we need the dimension of both. Paul could say this on occasion, "I've learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Can we really rest in comfort in our spirit when someone else is paying a great price to serve God and I am resting and at ease?

Gerald Kennedy tells of a motel near the famous shrine in Lourdes, France, where people go to be healed. The name of the motel is Gethsemane. And like many motels in the area, this motel has a sign outside, under its name, that reads: "Gethsemane Motel, all the modern comforts." That may kind of describe the way we'd like to see the Christian life. We would like Jesus to have Calvary and Gethsemane, but "no thanks!" for us.

A VBS child, at commencement, was supposed to recite John 14:18 as his memory verse for the week. "I will not leave you comfortless." He got so nervous, that his tongue got tangled in the recitation and he said, "I will not leave you comfortable."

When in our spiritual experience we are in the position of exclusive privilege and rest and it doesn't faze us at all that others in the body of Christ are in need of our comfort, our support, our love, and our care. We then justify our inaction on the basis that they haven't yet discovered

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some “spiritual truth” that we’ve discovered and look down upon them. Then the prosperity doctrine is wrong.

In verses 9–13, we are given a pattern, an apostolic pattern that we are to follow. The key words in this pattern are the words “Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.” I urge you to mimic me, totally follow my example. Most of us, at one time or the other, have played Follow the Leader. That’s exactly what Paul is saying here in regard to setting forth his life as a model, which other Christians are to pattern after. He’s saying “follow the leader.”

In verse 9, he indicated through this strange statement, “It seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession like men condemned to die in the arena. We’ve been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.” What Paul is referring to is the practice in the first century of gladiatorial combat. Where gladiators were called upon—often they were from the criminal class and maybe some of them deserved to die—to come into the arena to fight other men or to fight wild beasts, like lions and tigers. It was sort of like going to the Coliseum to see the Rams; it was the first century equivalent of going to see the Rams—going to see the gladiators in the arena. A violent sport. They had a procession to start things off. The people bearing the banners and the instrumentalists would come in. At the end of the procession, the gladiators, upon entering the arena, would salute the presiding officer with the words “We who are about to die, salute you.” Paul says, “If you want to know where my place is in the world, it’s at the end of the procession.”

Paul is writing Corinth from Ephesus. He states, “At Ephesus, I fought with wild beasts.” There are many who would say this is just symbolic. It might very well be symbolic of wrestling with spiritual darkness, but it could have been literal as well. Perhaps in the arena at Ephesus, Paul himself had had one of those gladiatorial contests because of his faith and had emerged somehow

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successful. But he's telling these believers, in effect, "Although we apostles are last in the procession, we can't cop out on discipleship." I think that's really what he's saying in this phrase, which is a transferable concept to our life. It's a restatement of what Jesus says in Mark 8:38, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." The apostles are men in the arena. The world, angels and men gaze on the spectacle sitting in the stands. It is as though Paul is wrestling for his life while Christians at Corinth are sitting with their popcorn and candy in the stands watching the action. It's the condemnation of a church, which fails to identify with the suffering of its members.

In any area of our life, there is always the choice between our feelings and obedience to God. I would submit to you that the last thing the apostle Paul wanted to do was go into an arena and fight wild beasts. The only reason why he'd be in the arena is because of loyalty and commitment to God, which compelled him to be there rather than to deny his faith.

We're not called upon to make those same kinds of choices, given our type of government and the society in which we live. But we still confront the basic choice, whether we're going to live life on the level of our feelings and what is comfortable, or whether we are going to live life on the basis of our commitment and our loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ.

I am going to be raising a flag again today and I think, increasingly, in the days to come. God has put this on my heart, so very strongly, about myself as well as the Christians in Southern California. There is afloat, in the body of Christ today what I think is a heresy (I don't know what labels to give it). A heresy of "I will do it if I feel like it." "If I feel like it, I will remain with my commitments." "If I feel like it, I will stay married." "If I feel like it, I will be loyal to my children." "If I feel like it, I will get involved in ministry for Christ." "If I don't feel like it, I won't."

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Let me say that nothing in the kingdom of God ever gets done by people who feel like it. That's not to say that we don't have great feelings of the fruit of the Spirit in our life. But it is to say that we cannot as a Christian put great reliance on what we feel. There are times when I feel and times when I don't feel like praying, and we too easily give in to our feelings. Times when we do feel like giving to the Lord's work. If we live life simply on the level of whether I feel it or not, we are going to wind up living life in an absolute shipwreck. Somehow, you have got to, in your life, bring your commitment to Jesus Christ and put it front and center, and be true and loyal to that commitment, whether you feel it or not. Get your feelings to the cross and get them crucified with Christ. I know these are very strong words, but they are words from my heart, to myself and to you.

Patterning in apostolic ways of continually serving the Lord, regardless of what others think or how we are treated (verses 10–11). Paul says, "We are fools for Christ." The literal rendering is "We are morons for Christ." The world thinks it's stupid to live life on the level of commitment to a God who we cannot see. Rather than live life on the level of "take what you can get now and get it because it's gettable." "We are morons for Christ but you are so wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong. You are honored. We are dishonored. To this very hour, [all through our experience up to this present moment] we hunger and thirst, are poorly clothed and treated roughly [that is, struck with a fist] and are homeless, vagabonds and labor with our own hands" (verses 10-12). Paul has not built his life focusing on what's popular, but on what is right. And what is right has made certain requirements of his life.

Again, we may not be buffeted with fists, as was Paul. We may not be homeless. We may not be in rags. But we still have the choice in our life as to going along with what's popular or doing what is right. Kids face this in school. Kids in the secular school system, especially. I think it's

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more subtle in the Christian system, but it's there as well, facing the pressure of friends saying, "Why are you the way you are? Why don't you loosen up a little bit? Why don't you go with us to the kind of movies we're going to?" In the world today, Christians need to start drawing a line on some of the filth in the market, the filth in movies and the filth on television. We need to start taking some simple and honest moral stands. It is inappropriate for a Christian to continually be in a place where fornication, adultery, homosexuality, profanity are at every turn of the road. We are either going to choose to identify with Christ in His righteousness, or simply go where we will on the basis of "That's what everybody does." If Paul had built his life on the basis of "everybody does it"...everybody doesn't go to the end of the procession going to the arena! I take this as a symbolic attitude that creeps into my own life, and I don't preach this with any sense of "I'm righteous and you're not." But a sense of coming at my own life and saying that, as Christians, we are called upon to serve the Lord, even if our friends and the people we go to school with or work with say, "You are crazy! You're crazy for sticking with that marriage commitment! You're crazy, as a single person, for remaining sexually pure! Don't you know, today, that it is the style to live as you will?" Christians are called upon, out of loyalty to Jesus Christ, to take a stand in their life for what is right, what is moral, and what is godly. We must focus on what is right, not what's popular.

This brings us to patterning our life after Christ in a way that really responds to life in the Spirit of Christ. Verses 12 and 13 especially bring this out. "When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment, we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world."

This is not normal conduct. Normal conduct would be: when you are cursed, you curse back.

When somebody gives you a dirty deal, you give them a dirty deal. When somebody says, "I hate

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your guts,” you say back, “I hate your guts!” You respond to people the way they respond to you. But the kind of Christian life that models the presence of the Spirit is not normal. It is: when you are cursed, you bless. When persecuted, you endure.

How hard this is to get a hold of! I wish I could say to you, “I’ve always gotten a hold of this.

I’ve always blessed when I’ve been cursed, I’ve always responded in great love and kindness when I’ve been criticized.” But maybe the beginning of growth is recognizing there’s room for growth in our life.

I was reading, this last week, of a Christian counselor, Jay Adams. When a married couple comes to him for counseling, he asks them to take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns, left and right. In the left column, he asks the wife to write down all the things about her husband that are wrong, that really bug her. Likewise, he asks the husband to do the same about the wife.

They work on the paper for a while, come up with things. Then he says, “Now, what I want you to do is, on the right column, write down seventy-five wrongful responses that you make in your own life to these wrongs that you perceive in your mate.” For example: Suppose a wife comes in and her complaint is, “My husband works long hours away from home. I don’t see him enough. He forgets special occasions.” Then in the right column, the wrong responses. Things like, “I accuse him of not loving me.” “I feel sorry for myself.” “I compare him to ‘Jane’s’ husband and what a model father ‘Jane’s’ husband is to the children, and how he spends time and does things around the house.” Another wrongful response, “I complain to the children about their absentee father...” “I nag him...” “I show him the Scripture that he is worse than an infidel.”

This whole thing gets to the principle that Paul is dealing with—when cursed, we bless. That is meant to work, as well, in the close relationships in the family, the place where it’s most difficult

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to make it work. That exact kind of thing. We have things that happen to us all the time that we don't like. But it's how we respond to that counts.

Today's passage closes with Paul saying that the apostles are the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. The King James translation uses the term "off-scouring." That's probably more correct here. It's the dirt that's removed from the cleansing of the vessel, the dirt that remains after the cleansing. The Greeks use it to refer to worthless persons who were sacrificed to appease a god. Suppose there was a famine that didn't break. They'd take people who were most expendable and offer them as a sacrifice. They were the off-scouring, the refuse, the scum. Paul says, "This is how I feel."

It may very well be that the most significant ministry that we have will go unrecognized and the worth of our contribution will go unnoticed. You may even be in a position here, this morning, of being treated as dirt by those whom you love. So that this Scripture very personally applies to you: "We have become as the off-scouring of the world." But all these facts did not deter Christ from loving the world. And it did not deter the apostles from their mission of spreading the gospel. And it must not deter us from our responsibility of discipleship—to bless when cursed and to endure when afflicted. Hard words, but good words and good words that, when obeyed, bring real joy into life because we have been true to our commitments and not lived life simply on the basis of "does this feel good?"

Isaac Watts, in his hymn, raises this question, "Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name? Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this my world to grace, to

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help me unto God? Sure, I must fight if I would reign. Increase my courage, Lord. I'll bear the toll, endure the pain, supported by Thy word.”

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we confess the reality of Your life in ours and Your love, which wins us for yourself. We want to be more than Your converts, Lord Jesus. We want to be Your disciples, who come under the impact of Your teaching, who hear the Word of God and do it. Help us, Lord, to remember that prosperity is not something that we wear on our back. Nor is prosperity something that is outside of us. But prosperity is within us. It is having the richness of Your life living in us, reproducing Your character, Your personality, and Your glory in our lives. Prosperity is being filled with Your love, and loving those that are closest to us and loving Your world and the last and the least in that world. And that following You is not a matter of going down some primrose path, where people are strewing bouquets in front of us so that we might walk upon them. But it is often a trial and a struggle, with rocks upon the trail. Our commitment, at times, seems like it's going to flag and our interest is going to wane. But I pray that, by the power of Your Spirit, You would galvanize us in our inner life to commit to You. There may be, Lord, and there are persons in this church sanctuary this morning, whom You are a calling today anew as You have never called them before, to count the cost; whom You are calling to evaluate their style of life, their priorities, their goals, the easy sin into which they have fallen. You are calling us, in these moments, to the cross and to repentance and to renewal. Lord, I pray that, as this communion proceeds, there will be a great healing and cleansing wave of Your Spirit upon our lives that will issue and renewed discipleship and dedication to You. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.