

## Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

### L. Biblical Wisdom in Everyday Life

#### 36. Generosity vs. Materialism

In the previous lecture, I read from Deut 6 which includes in its child-rearing advice to Israel's parents and community, this counsel about the dangers of materialism. "When God blesses you by giving you a home and many other good things to go with that," Moses says, "do not forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of slavery."

This warning is repeated in Deut 8. Here are excerpts from vs. 10-18. *When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.*

*Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.*

Moses wants God's people to understand that, as it is with worship, what we do with our possessions is a matter of the heart. Even though this passage doesn't give a lot of specifics on how we are to manage wealth, the basic principle is as clear for us as it was for Israel. We are called to remember that everything we have—possessions, as well as the ability to increase them—everything good is a gift from the Lord our God.

If we remember that single thing, which is the thrust of this and many other scripture passages, then we have a chance at pleasing God with how we handle the resources he's given us. But if we forget that God is the source of all our blessings—including the wealth that we have—then we're certain to stumble and fall.

Israel became a case in point. In later years the hearts of Israel's kings and people did in fact become proud and they did in fact forget how dependent upon God they were for their land and their lives, with the result that God eventually allowed Israel to be overthrown by her enemies and the people sent into exile.

I indicated that the thrust of this Scripture passage is duplicated many other places in the Bible; indeed the Scriptures are filled with instructions, promises, warnings, and threats regarding money and its uses. Central among these are many warnings against greed, which is closely tied to materialism.

According to one of its most simple biblical definitions, greed is "the love of money." And, of course, money refers to more than cash; it's any material possessions. To be sure, we are allowed to acquire and possess things; they are important to sustain and enhance life. But neither possessing nor possessions are what life is all about. Nor is the act of loving appropriate to be applied to possessing and possessions. Despite the goodness and helpfulness of money, "love" should really only be used where a two-way relationship is possible: as between two people or between God and people.

Money can't love you back. So to "love" things is to let appreciation for it go beyond what is proper; when this happens, then possessions or money have in some sense replaced God as one's master. That's why the love of money—greed—is a form of idolatry. The love of money is a love without proper boundaries and a proper focus.

One of the ways greed is manifested in our society is in the tendency to accumulate irresponsible debt. This is debt which the borrower has no reasonable expectation of being able to repay. But other debts can also be irresponsible: over-large home mortgages, use of credit cards to finance household furniture and entertainment equipment, and finance contracts on vehicles (Some might say all finance contracts, but certainly those that are drawn out so long that the vehicle ends up being worth less than the balance of the loan).

To be financially responsible, you need to live within your means. And to live within your means, you must both spend less than you make and set aside money for emergencies and future needs. By this measure, many Americans fail, since almost half of us have more credit card debt than we do emergency savings.

And our government certainly fails, since we continue to pile up debts that will inevitably burden future generations even more than they do our own. Such piling up of debts that one cannot repay is a form of wickedness according to Psalm 37:21: *The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously.* But even those who do intend to repay may find that they cannot, for they end up in a sort of slavery. Prov. 22:7 puts it like this: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender."

However, even those who never spend more than they can afford, can still be led astray by the love of money, as the author of Ecclesiastes observes. Listen to this excerpt from ch. 5:10-17:

*Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.*

*I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.*

*This too is a grievous evil: As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.*

Here is biblical wisdom on the matter of greed: Those who love money more than they should never have as much as they want to have. Furthermore, the more possessions one accumulates, the more attention one has to give to how those possessions will be kept and used. The extra responsibility may be a bad trade-off for extra possessions. This is especially the case when, as it often does, increased anxiety accompanies increased abundance—the more you have, the more you have to worry about losing.

And in the end, even if you manage in your life to escape the misfortunes that accompany the hoarding or loss of wealth, your children probably won't. And regardless, you still can't take any of what you've accumulated with you when you die.

Even so, not too many people criticize greed so long as it does not exceed what's legal. In fact, greed, called by nicer names, is often touted as something good, as the motor that drives our economy. Nor is it only the rich who are affected, for greed is found in every social class, driving the poor to be rich and the rich to be richer, and too often, to the self-inflicted harm of both. Of course, this is not the end that our society likes to imagine for those engaged in the unrestrained pursuit of wealth, or their substitutes: fame and power.

Before I leave this topic of greed, let me mention one more problem with it, namely, that it is a major cause of injustice in our world. Biblical examples abound.

- Remember Achan, who, contrary to God's command, coveted and took some of the spoils of Jericho for his own. His greed led to the death of 36 men in the failed attempt to take the little town of Ai, and eventually, to the death of his entire family.
- King Ahab's greed for the vineyard of Naboth, led to the deception of his people, the perversion of the judicial system, and the very law of God, and thereby to the death of an innocent man, and finally, to God's judgment upon his household.
- And then there are examples from the prophets, who were particularly hard on those who had the position and power to take the most advantage.
  - Jer 6:13, *"From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit."*
  - Micah 2:2; 3:11 *They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance... Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us."*
  - Isa 56:11 *They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.*

We could add many modern examples as well. No profession is immune to greed. Police on the take allow criminals to flourish. Because of the greed of some contractors, buildings and bridges collapse. Then there are Savings and loan scandals, and drug sales, etc. And even pastors and church treasurers who skim money for greed.

And even if laws are never broken, the truth of Prov. 15:27 has been seen too often: *A greedy man brings trouble to his family...*

By God's grace, there are a couple of strategies that will help people to escape the lure and the fallout of greed. The first has already been alluded to in the opening segment of this lecture. In sum: "Don't forget the Lord your God, the source of life and every good blessing you enjoy. God has a plan for this world and you're part of it. Make his priorities your own. That's the only way you'll be able to participate fully in the life he has made possible for you. Don't get sidetracked by his gifts to you, but accept them and use them to help you fulfill your purpose."

At the best of times, this shouldn't be that difficult to remember. But God has an opponent who persists in trying to undermine God's work with us--Satan. He also has a plan and a purpose. He's out to get us, and money is one of his favorite ways to do it. Unless we're careful we get just like the Israelites in the wilderness. "If I don't get it in my hands and in my mouth now, I'm leaving and going back to Egypt. God is not real unless I get my belly filled - on my terms."

That's what tempting God means. Satan is behind that. He seeks to make us worry about our wealth, to worry about what we have and what we wish we had. So don't worry! When you worry about wealth, you reveal that you don't believe God who promised to provide your needs. And when you don't believe God, does that not affect your soul? Don't underestimate Satan. Also, do not underestimate your own vulnerability to the love of money and things. Don't under-estimate how resistant you are to swallow the lures of the world and forget God.

If anything, be overcautious about your vulnerability. There's a story in Genesis 14 about Abraham going to the rescue of Sodom and Gomorrah (cities that were later destroyed by God, but this was before that). Abraham's intervention saved these cities and so, in gratitude, they tried to give him a big reward of money and possessions. Abraham said, "No." Why? Most likely because he Abraham wanted everyone to know that he was dependent for his life and livelihood upon the Lord God, and upon nobody else.

Our vulnerability to the idolatry of greed extends beyond how we pursue wealth to how we use it. Remember that there's not a dime in your pocket or bank that is not regulated by the Scripture and to be used in God's service. You have no right to say, "This money is mine" - even after you've tithed on it. No! Everything you have belongs to God, and its use is all regulated by Scripture. Some is certainly to be used to purchase the necessities and enhance the joys of everyday life. But even such things are subject to God's approval and re-evaluation in the face of other needs in the Kingdom of God.

In the prophet Haggai's day, the returning exiles had their hands full providing for themselves in a ravaged land and among unfriendly neighbors. So much so, that they had neglected work on the Lord's temple, the symbol and testimony to God's presence and help. So God sent Haggai to warn them (selections 1:5-9): *"Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it... What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house."*

The result was that the people rededicated themselves to work on God's house, by which we are to understand not only their temple rebuilding efforts, but also their dedication to all that God wanted to do in and through them, including his reclamation of a world lost in sin.

One particular practice which helps immensely in keeping priorities straight and in keeping greed at bay is the cultivation of generosity. God had commended this from Israel's earliest days. For example Deut 15:7-8,10: *"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need... Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to."*

I'll mention a couple other scriptures about generosity: Psalm 112:5 *Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.* And Prov 11:25 *A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.*

Nor was generosity to be extended only to Israel's native born, but also to foreigners living with them Lev 19:34-- *The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.*

True generosity is unselfish and thus counteracts the excessive self-concern which lies at the heart of greed. Such sharing doesn't come naturally, either to children or grown-ups. It is more natural that we think ourselves more generous than we are and that our generosity often involves giving from leftovers. What's more, our concept of what's essential and what's leftover constantly changes to reflect our own circumstances. If we have a little, we think we would be satisfied with "so much more" and could "afford" to be generous. However, when we get there, we find that we aren't satisfied after all, and we recalculate that mythical contentment figure, once again putting God off until our greed is satisfied.

Often we're like the man in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, "who looked no way but downward." This poor creature was groveling on his knees in the dirt and filth, working constantly with a rake, trying to unearth some choice jewel that would enrich his life. All the while a bright crown of great worth was in reach just above him. The truth is that the only way we can conquer the sin of greed is to keep looking up, at God, remembering how generous he has been with us.

"This business of Christianity," as someone so aptly put it, "is just one continuous give, give, give." That's what Jesus modeled, and if we're keeping our eyes on him that's what we'll practice: a lifestyle of thankful giving of time, money, help, and prayers.

The world gives in order to get. We give because we already got; we got everything we have as a gift. And so, keeping that truth in front of us as well as remembering that we can't take anything with us when we die, we can live a life characterized by generosity and so also be helped to be delivered from slavery of the deadly sin of greed.

True Christians never ask: "How much do I have to give to keep God off my back?" but "Where can I find additional resources with which to praise God and serve Him and contribute to His work?" If you're not giving richness toward God from the heart, you are an idolater. You will perish unless you repent and turn from that. You can't serve God and money. You've got to do one or the other. If you're faithful in the little, you'll be faithful in the great. If you're not faithful, you'll be unrighteous. You can't have it both ways.

Our attitude to, and use of, possessions directly affects the glory that God receives and our Christian testimony. What you do with your money when you spend it on food, movies and other entertainment, cars, Bibles, cd's, or whatever you do with your money—whether you save it, waste it, spend it, give it, how you earn it, your attitude about how you earn it, your resentment against those that give it to you when you earn it—all of this bears witness to the battle between materialism and generosity within you and directly affects your Christian testimony as well as your eternal destiny.

This brings us to the end of the time we have for this course. May God continue to help you grow in the understanding and application of his Word so that you may bless others and that he may be honored.