



“The Original Prosperity Gospel”

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1 Timothy 6:6–19 (NRSV)***

Stephanie and I have recently been reviewing our travel rewards programs and cashing in points to book our trip back to Virginia after Christmas this year. In reviewing the fine print about these programs, we were reminded of how much the terms and conditions of these programs have changed over the years, particularly since 9/11 and more recently since the downturn of the global economy.

We first enrolled in frequent flier and other travel benefits programs when we were working in the UCC National Offices, and flying around the country and around the world on church business.

I recall that one of the companies whose program I participated in touted the slogan: “Membership has its rewards.” You probably remember that one, too. The slogan not only was designed to draw customers into the company’s credit card program, but it inadvertently characterized the marketing initiatives of the major credit card and travel companies around the globe.

Even though economic circumstances have changed, these rewards programs were (and still are) being used by corporations to compete for global market share. The gimmick, of course, is to buy customer loyalty with the lure of member benefits, and the marketing message is: be our loyal customer, and we will reward you with free products and services, or discounts on the same.

One of the unfortunate outcomes of these rewards programs for corporations, no doubt, is that patrons have now come to expect member benefits, so that the rewards they offer are now seen by customers as a right rather than a privilege, and a commodity rather than a blessing.

Perhaps neither we nor the corporate marketing executives who invented these programs should be surprised that a program built on a capitalist business model has produced a capitalist outcome.

But what may be a little more surprising is that the expectation of rewards runs deeper in the human psyche than corporate marketing experts may have plumbed or that economists like Adam Smith may have imagined.

The expectation of membership rewards seems to be an inherent part of human nature—maybe not our best nature—but definitely part of our nature, at least that is the impression we get from reading I Timothy, chapter 6, which was written to a young apostle serving a prosperous congregation in Ephesus located in what today we know as Western Turkey.

II

Here Paul (or an associate of his who was signing his name) wrote words of encouragement to young Timothy about how to deal with a troubling number of people in his congregation who expect material rewards to flow from their membership in the Christian community.

The Apostle's instructions included encouragement to correct the false teachers who, he said, in verse 5, have "robbed [the faithful] of the truth, and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain" (I Tim. 6:5, *NIV*).

Did you hear that? The Apostle tells Timothy to denounce bogus ad campaigns that promise material rewards in exchange for loyal patronage to the church.

As surprising as it may sound to us, this first-century campaign of promoting material rewards in conjunction with church membership has been recycled many times throughout the history of the church, including in some Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the US since the close of World War II.

Oral Roberts, the evangelical televangelist from Tulsa, Oklahoma, has been the leading champion of what is now known today in the US as "the prosperity gospel." Other modern proponents of the prosperity gospel, whom you may be familiar with because of their TV ministries, include Robert Schuler, Joyce Meyers, and Joel Osteen.

In modern times, the so-called prosperity gospel is based on the notion that God provides material prosperity to those whom God favors, and advances the view that believers have a right to health and wealth, and that these blessings can be obtained through a confession of faith and financial contributions to the proponent's ministries which propagate their prosperity gospel.¹

The father of one my high school classmates, for example, was a lesser known preacher of the prosperity gospel. I'll never forget how in our junior year in high school, my classmate's dad told his congregation that God wanted him to be wealthy, and in particular that God wanted him to have a swimming pool in his backyard.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_gospel

It doesn't take much imagination to understand how modern iterations of the prosperity gospel have taken hold in our country. Such views find fertile soil in our culture, which keeps alive the "American dream" of material prosperity, and that sometimes blames the poor for their poverty, and that affirms those who create economic systems that depend on keeping a portion of the population permanently in poverty.

The Apostle Timothy believed that there was something deeply flawed in the materialistic rewards system that was propagated by the false teachers in his congregation.

I suspect that we, like Timothy, find these false teachings equally troubling, and that this is in part why we are here at Eden Church this morning rather than watching one of the proponents of the prosperity gospel on TV at home.

III

"What is to be done in light of the prosperity gospel's lure?" we may ask.

Paul (or more likely someone using his name) advised Timothy and his congregation to emphasize the value of spiritual gifts over material gain, and to see material wealth as a *means* to advancing Christ's mission rather as an end in itself.

In the Apostle's view, material wealth is neutral. It is neither good nor bad. How we acquire what we have, and what we do with what we have is what matters. It is our means of acquisition of our assets, and stewardship of these that determines whether our behavior is good or bad, right or wrong, or fitting or unfitting.

I think the Apostle is right on target with his instructions to Timothy and the church at Ephesus in offering a very different kind of prosperity gospel—one which I call "the original prosperity gospel." And I argue that we would do well to embrace this apostolic teaching in our time.

The Apostle's writing style and the translation process that the pericope has been through leaves us with a rather convoluted rendering of the text, so I've taken the liberty of paraphrasing the first two paragraphs in today's lesson, from I Timothy 6, so that the meaning comes through more clearly. Here goes:

We all know that there is great gain in living a good life and being content with what we have, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take any material possessions with us when we die. So if our basic needs are being met, we would do well to be content with these.

Those who seek material wealth as an end in itself are doomed to a life of unhappiness and spiritual deprivation. For the love of money for its own sake is a root of all kinds of evil.

For example, the love of money has led some to abandon their spiritual life and communities that would have otherwise been a guide and a comfort in times of difficulty. But as for you, Timothy, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; set your sights on things that are eternal—namely on God’s vision of a world in which everyone’s basic needs are met, and do your part in bringing this vision to fruition, and you will experience a sense of abundance that the world cannot give or take away.

IV

Getting clear about the Apostle’s theology of stewardship—his original prosperity gospel—is particularly important these days, because we live in a time of growing material and spiritual poverty, and we, as Christians, have an opportunity to avoid spiritual deprivation and practice a spirituality that promotes a very different way to be in the world: a way that is grounded in spiritual abundance, a way that is faithful about how we acquire material rewards, a way that is reflective and intentional about what economic systems and practices we support, and a way that utilizes our individual and collective resources for the good of all.

Here’s why practicing the Apostle’s original prosperity gospel matters:

Time magazine reported earlier this week that the US Census Bureau results from 2009 reveal that more people are poor in the US today than ever before.²

The *Time* reporter, Stephen Gandel, who prepared this article, titled “Why are a Record Number of Americans Living in Poverty?” summarized US Census Bureau data and explained that: “[Today]...more than 1 in every 7 Americans live in poverty.”³ And, “In 2009, 43.6 million people lived on the equivalent of less than \$5,500 a year.”⁴

Gandel goes on to explain that two of the most significant contributing factors to increasing poverty levels at this time in the US are the jobless recovery and income inequality.

Gandel explains further that while unemployment is always a marker of a recession, what is particularly troublesome in the US right now is that half of the people who are unemployed have been unemployed for more than 6 months, which is more than double the amount of time that people have been unemployed in the previous six recessions in our country.

So the jobless recovery has been one of the major contributing factors to the increased number of people living in poverty in the US at this time. The other major contributor is income inequality. The growth in income inequality is the result of employee compensation continuing to trend up for the highest-paid employees and down for the

² <http://curiouscapitalist.blogs.time.com/2010/09/16/why-are-a-record-number-of-americans-living-in-poverty/#ixzz10a28z37Q>

³ <http://curiouscapitalist.blogs.time.com/2010/09/16/why-are-a-record-number-of-americans-living-in-poverty/#ixzz10W2CKN9K>

⁴ <http://curiouscapitalist.blogs.time.com/2010/09/16/why-are-a-record-number-of-americans-living-in-poverty/#ixzz10W2CKN9K>

lowest-paid employees. Hence, as Gandel elaborates, "...when you have more people living on the edges of the income scale, unemployment can quickly push the people on the bottom into poverty."⁵

As discouraging as our national poverty statistics may be, they pale in comparison with global data on poverty. A United Nations study conducted in 2004 on global poverty showed that half of the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day,⁶ and that amount of money doesn't provide for the basic necessities of life even in the poorest nations.

The study also reveals that the income gap between the richest and poorest countries has continued to widen in the past five decades, and that the vast majority of the world's population has been negatively affected by globalization.

A United Nations declaration issued the same year as the study on global poverty was released (2004), summed up the reasons for global poverty best in this sentence: "The greatest scandal is not that hunger exists, but that it persists even when we have the means to eliminate it."

V

As our nation and world continue to grapple with the growth of poverty at home and abroad, you will hear our national and global leaders working out their individual and collective theologies of stewardship in the public square, whether they are aware of their behavior or not.

Some will blame the poor for their plight saying that the poor are morally flawed or victims of their own bad decisions. Others will blame the wealthy for creating unjust systems that depend on keeping a certain percentage of the population in poverty, and they will call for systemic change. Still others—the most meritorious in my view—will call the rich and the poor to take responsibility for their individual behavior, and work collectively to dismantle unjust systems and to create more equitable systems for all.

The goal and the mark of good stewardship in our nation looks like this: children, seniors, and dependent adults no longer live in poverty, and every adult who is able to work has meaningful employment, a safe work environment, and receives a fair wage. This is the goal. This is the vision. Operationalizing the Apostle's theology of stewardship will help us progress toward the fulfillment of this vision in our lifetime.

Here's the Apostle's theology again in a nutshell: material wealth is neutral. How we acquired what we have, and what we do with what we have is what matters. It is our stewardship of the resources entrusted to us, individually and collectively, that defines our ethical behavior as good or bad, right or wrong, or fitting or unfitting.

⁵ <http://curiouscapitalist.blogs.time.com/2010/09/16/why-are-a-record-number-of-americans-living-in-poverty/#ixzz10W4nFJzi>

⁶ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

My prayer for us—and particularly for the poor—is that we learn and embrace the Apostle’s original prosperity gospel, set our sights on Christ’s vision of a world where everyone’s basic needs are met, and use our material rewards to fulfill Christ’s vision of a world where everyone’s basic necessities are met this side of heaven. Amen.