

January 6, 2018
Rick Myatt

HOW TO PROSPER Proverbs 22:9

According to Webster the word prosperous means, “Auspicious, favorable, marked by success or economic well being, enjoying vigorous and healthy growth, flourishing.” Laurie has long wanted plumeria trees in our back yard. She finally has a couple. One of them is doing well and flourishing. The other was a stick she bought at a store at the airport in Maui about 6 months ago. It is still just a stick about the same size it was when she bought it. It is starting to remind me of an avocado tree we were given once. We had dreams of picking ripe avocados in our own back yard. It never happened. No matter what we did the leaves withered and fell off. After many months we did not have an avocado tree. We had an avocado stick. It was a barren, lifeless pole sticking out of the ground. It was pitiful. I don’t want my life to be like that, a barren fruitless thing worthy only of being dug up and thrown away. I want to prosper.

Don’t we all want lives that are prosperous? Marked by success and financial well being, enjoying healthy growth and flourishing. We all want that. But how do you get it? In our culture people usually start with finances. That’s the key, they think, to flourishing. But prospering financially is not the same as having a prosperous life. It is possible to flourish financially but still have a life that bears a strong resemblance to our avocado stick. If you want to be prosperous in life, you had better see what God has to say about it.

The book of Proverbs is really about prospering. It is about mastering life. If we master life we will flourish. Psalm 1:3 describes a wise or righteous, person, as being “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.”

So let’s think about prospering. Our minds tend to think about money when we think of prospering. Proverbs says there is a money component to prospering in life. It talks about not being lazy, but working diligently. It says it is wise to save for the future. It tells you to be leery of debt. But none of those are key to prospering in life. Today we are going to look at a verse that has instruction that is essential for a prosperous life. It is surprising. But it is about way more than money, it is about the whole tenor of your life. Let’s see what God has to say about becoming prosperous, beginning with Proverbs 22:9.

GOD WANTS US TO BE GENEROUS

Proverbs 22:9 says, “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.” Who is doing the blessing? God is the one who blesses. The people whom he will bless are those who are generous, the ones who share what they have, especially they share with the poor. So clearly this is something God wants. Why does God want this for us? To answer that, think about why he wants anything for us. It is because he loves us. He commands us to live in certain ways because he wants the best for us. That’s what it means to love. So this verse tells us that God wants us to be generous because generosity plays a big role in mastering life. It is how we are blessed with a full and prosperous life.

There are a number of verses in the Bible that tell us this is so. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

Those verses are loaded with powerful truths. Paul says the issue is being arrogant and putting our hope in wealth versus putting our hope in God. If we put our hope in God then we will be rich in good deeds and will be generous and willing to share with others. Then we will take hold of life that is real life. This is what we want, to take hold of the life that is truly life. God wants this for us too, so he tells us repeatedly to be generous.

In 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul wrote to the Corinthians about a fund raising effort he was engaged in to raise money for impoverished Christians in Judea and said, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” God is thrilled when we gladly share out of what he has entrusted to us. The Greek word translated “cheerful” is *hilaros*. We get the word hilarious from it. So God loves hilarious givers.

We don’t take offerings during our worship services specifically because we do not want anyone to give under compulsion. We don’t want to put anyone in the position where they feel pressured to put something in an offering plate. So we just put a box out near the entrance to the chapel that people can put money in if they so choose. Suppose I took a survey asking people what they like most about our

church. I assume if they come here there must be a reason. I am pretty sure no one would say, “The thing I love most about the church is the offering box. Every time I put something in there I break out in laughter. It just makes me feel giddy.” But God would love that if someone did, because he loves hilarious givers.

In 2 Corinthians 9:10-11 Paul pointed out a crucial truth. “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion and your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” It is important to note the words “so that.” Those words say God has a purpose in supplying us with food and with other possessions. What is it? It is so that we can be generous! It is not so that we can be financially secure. It is not so that we can control life, or be comfortable. It is so we can give and be generous.

This is consistent with what we see in other passages in the Bible. In 1 Peter 4:10 Peter discussed the various abilities and gifts God has given us. He said, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.” Why does God give us gifts and abilities? Is it so we can feel good about ourselves? Is it so we can use them to elevate our status? Is it so we can impress others? No, God gives us gifts and abilities so we can use them to serve other people. It is obviously consistent that this is also true of the money he gives us.

Laurie and I have several IRA’s that were set up either by the church we used to work for or by the Anchor. Two of them are with Christian financial firms. I recently came across a story on the CNBC show *American Greed* about how much fraud is perpetrated by people in supposedly religious institutions ripping off people in churches. There’s a guy named Ephren Taylor who stole \$16 million from church members in 43 states. He took their money, issued reports about how much they had in his investment accounts, then used their money to fund his lavish lifestyle. The show quoted Jenice Malecki, a New York securities lawyer who said flat out, “You shouldn’t be in a faith based...institution getting investment advice about hard dollars you’ve earned your whole life.” Uh oh. I realized I get quarterly reports from these institutions, but I have no hard evidence that the money is actually there. They could be using it for their own purposes for all I know. My point here is we consider it a crime if I entrust funds with someone to invest on my behalf and they use them for their own personal benefit. God entrusts resources to us to use for his purposes. If we use them for our personal benefit are we not also guilty of a crime?

God's economy works very differently than ours does, and to live by his economy we must have a completely different way of seeing things. The natural human perspective is about making life as comfortable and as secure as possible by amassing as much wealth as we can. But God says life should be about honoring him by loving and serving people. In Psalm 119:36 the psalmist says to God, "Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain." There having a heart set on selfish gain is the opposite of having a heart set on obeying God. Let's be real clear that amassing wealth is selfish gain.

In Leviticus 25:36-37 God set down some laws for his people regarding financial dealings with their fellow Israelis that are quite likely the most disobeyed commands in all the Bible. "Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit." Deuteronomy 23:19 said the same thing. "Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else." Yikes. Don't make a profit off them. Don't lend them money at interest. God was saying that the relationship between brothers is what matters. It must never, ever be compromised or used to personal financial advantage. This is radical. It is a way of viewing life and people that you will find nowhere else in this world. It is so radical that even today followers of Christ have trouble coming to grips with this mindset and its implications. There is little evidence God's people ever lived by that law consistently. It certainly is ignored today. God was putting people and relationship squarely in the center of priorities and telling us not to sacrifice them for financial gain.

In Leviticus 25:38 God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God." In other words, remember what I have done for you. Remember that I have given you what you have and that I always have and always will provide what you need. His point is their ability to have sufficient in life did not hinge on being smart business people or on the world's ways of making money, but on God's provision. Be faithful to him, live his way, even if it is radical in the world's eyes, and he will insure that you have what you need.

So the basis of this generosity is that God will provide for us. We should focus on being faithful to him, especially by loving, serving and giving to other people. That is what matters. God says he has a totally different scoreboard for life. It is about how you have obeyed him by loving other people and trusted him to provide for

you, not about how large your investment portfolio and land holdings are. This is a completely different way of looking at life than the world's way, and frankly, to the world it's going to look crazy.

The world's scoreboard is about how much you can accumulate. God's scoreboard is about how much you can give away.

But generosity is in the eye of the beholder. I had an aunt that was quite well off financially. At one point years ago she let it be known that she was considering making a significant contribution to a particular ministry. Some people from that ministry encouraged her and clearly anticipated a big gift. She did eventually give her significant contribution. It was \$25, which she apparently considered a big deal. Considering her large net worth no one else would consider that anything other than a sum so paltry as to be a joke. But somehow she thought she was being generous. So what is generosity?

GOD'S STANDARD FOR GENEROSITY IS SACRIFICE

One of the world's richest men, Warren Buffet, made big news when he donated billions of dollars to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But he said this about it. "My gift has not changed my lifestyle one bit. I still go to the movies I want to go to and dine at the restaurants I want to dine at. But what about the person who gives a gift that requires they can't go to the movies or eat out. They are the true givers, the true heroes of generosity."

He is exactly right. There is a well known story from the life of Jesus that makes that precise point. Mark 12:41-44 tells the tale. Jesus was sitting near the offering box at the temple watching as people put money in. Some made some impressively large donations. Then a poor widow came by and put in two small coins worth only a few cents. In verses 43-44 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."

This is easy to understand. Laurie once received as a Christmas gift from a member of our extended family a couple of coupons for movie tickets. That seems like a nice useful gift. Except it was obvious they were not something she had bought. She had been given them and she had just regifted them to us. To top it off when we read the fine print we learned they were not valid where we live. This family member had given us something she didn't especially want that cost her nothing to give. She sacrificed exactly zero to give us that gift. We got a laugh out of it. But the truth is, that said something about how she values us.

I've said it before, you can measure love by sacrifice. What is a person willing to sacrifice for another? That tells you how much that person loves the other. That's why Jesus said there is no greater love than to lay down your life for another person. You are making the ultimate sacrifice, giving up everything for that person. And that means you love them more than anything else.

The principle behind giving is the same. It is really about love. When your gift involves no sacrifice, it also involves no real love. That's why God says that the measure of generosity is sacrifice. We see people lauded all the time for huge charitable donations, often in the millions of dollar range. They put the names of those donors on buildings. We recently spent an evening at a local hospital. I was amazed to see that they had names of donors on everything. The emergency department, the waiting room for the emergency department, the entry lobby, the plaza outside and so on were all named for donors. I wondered if I could maybe give some money and they could have the Rick Myatt toilet handle in the bathroom or something. It is wonderful that people give to fund such things. But let's be clear. Though they might give large sums, most of the time those wealthy donors are not sacrificing anything. That doesn't mean what they've done is bad or worthless. But it does mean that God isn't impressed, for inevitably they've kept so much more for themselves that they don't even notice the sum they've donated is gone. That's not genuine generosity because true generosity is costly.

Gerda Weissmann was 15 years old when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. She and her family managed to survive in a Jewish ghetto until 1942. That year the Nazis tore her family apart, sending them to camps. She was separated from her parents, whom she never saw again, and sent to a concentration camp where she struggled to survive for the next 3 years. She was eventually liberated by American troops. She weighed a skeletal 68 pounds when they found her. Amazingly she would eventually marry the soldier who discovered her, Lieutenant Kurt Klein. She has written and spoken extensively about her ordeal. One story she wrote is about a friend she made in the camp named Ilse. Ilse somehow found a raspberry one day. She put it in her pocket and kept it all day. That night she presented it as a gift to Gerda. Gerda wrote, "Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you gave it to your friend. The true measure of a gift is what you gave up to give it. One raspberry isn't much unless it's all you have. Then it's not next to nothing, it's everything."

Generosity is really the measure of the largeness of our hearts. When we have large, open hearts that love God, we will inevitably become generous people who are quick and eager and willing to give, even if it is costly to us. What a beautiful quality generosity is. Isn't that something we all want?

APPLICATION

Hopefully we do, indeed, want to be generous. But we are often stymied by preoccupation with self and by fear. We are so concerned with making sure we are all right that it blocks our ability to share with others. What can we do to help us be more generous?

REMEMBER THAT WHAT YOU HAVE IS FROM GOD

We start to think that we have earned and deserve everything we have. This is my stuff, and it is my prerogative to decide what I do with it. Last year a member of the church who was going to be out of town for several months and knew that we potentially had some transportation issues, offered to loan us his car while he was gone. It was an extremely gracious thing to do. What would you think of me if while he was gone I decided that the car belonged to me? I would drive it however I pleased without regard to his wishes. And when he came back and asked us to return the car what would you think of me if I said, "What do you mean? This is my car now." I suspect you would think I'm a jerk and an idiot.

In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul asked, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The answer to that is "nothing. I was given everything I have by God. I did not produce life for myself. God gave me life. God gave me the ability to function, to breathe, to see, to hear, to learn, to grow. Yes, but I worked to earn the money I have. True, but how is it you had the ability to work? God gave that to you. How is it you had a job? I worked hard to prepare for it and to find it. Yes, but you didn't control whether you got the job. God did that, and God gave you the ability to prepare and find the job. Everything we have is ultimately a gift from God. Remember that 1 Timothy 6:17 says, God "richly provides us with everything." Whatever you have God provided it.

Psalms 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." I give to help others, and I give to the Lord. I give him his share, and the rest of the money is mine to do with what I decide. Really? Is it on the earth? According to that Psalm everything on this planet belongs to God. That means everything you have is

God's. Every possession, every dime you own, and even your own body and life all belong to God. It's all his, and he's just letting you use it for a while.

This is actually quite freeing. The recent drastic drop in the stock market had an unpleasant effect on our retirement fund. But who does that belong to? It belongs to God. It's his money. If that's what he decides should happen to it then that's his business. Of course it is obvious that if all that we have belongs to God then we should do with it what he wants us to do.

REMEMBER THAT GENEROSITY LEADS TO LIFE

Proverbs 22:9 says that a generous person will be blessed. Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." Hey, being blessed and prospering sound good. That sounds like you're going to actually be blessed with more money if you generously give to others. In Luke 6:38 Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." That sounds like God will give to us the way we give to others, so if we give super generously then God will pour out stuff into our laps super generously.

There are people who make giving generously into a formula for getting rich. You can't out give God. He says he will give to us in the same measure that we give to others. So give to my ministry and watch God pour riches into your lap. This makes generosity a sort of divine get rich quick scheme.

We ought to suspect that kind of thinking. In 1 Timothy 6:9-10 Paul wrote, "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Does it seem reasonable that God would give us a magical formula for getting rich when wanting to be rich causes us to fall into a temptation and the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil? I'd say that is highly unlikely at best. It sounds to me like people are turning God's instruction to care for other people into a clever way to try to serve self. It is amazing that there is a whole branch of the church committed to the idea that God wants you to be rich when God says wanting to be rich is a trap, and the root of all kinds of evil. Sounds to me like somebody's not reading the book.

Recall again what the material blessings promised in the Old Testament were all about. They were intended to be a picture, not of physical abundance, but of

spiritual abundance. To prosper represented prospering spiritually. In other words, being rich in stuff was a picture of being rich in spirit and in life.

Let's go back to 1 Timothy 6:19. It says we should be generous in order to store treasure in the coming age and, "take hold of the life that is truly life." God tells us to be generous because that is how we take hold of the life that is truly life. The life of God is generous, and the more generous we are, the more we will be freed from the tyranny of possessions and able to live in the glorious joy of giving to others.

I was talking to someone this week who told me about a person they knew who had committed to do a gracious, generous act. But then the stock market went haywire recently, and this person panicked. The truth was that he has lots of financial resources and the stock market upheaval might have cost him so money. But he has so much that the sum he said he was going to give away was a drop in the bucket compared to what he had left. He did give some, but not close to what he had committed to do, because his money and his fear of losing some of it trapped him.

We all understand this. Our possessions don't always free us. They usually tie us up. Laurie and I are enormously grateful for our house. But we recently had a leak in our kitchen that resulted in much of it having to be torn out and restored. A friend put it succinctly when he said the problem with that is you end up having to spend a couple of thousand dollars just to get it back to where it used to be. We have to replace some flooring that is starting to get embarrassingly bad. We have issues in a couple of bathrooms that are going to have to be addressed. Yes, having it is great, but it adds a lot of stress to our lives. The latest is our furnace has been balking. Yesterday I woke up to the sound of Laurie furnace fighting like Mr. Parker in A Christmas Story. I could hear her banging on the furnace, saying, "mondang noodle, filthy, dumb frattin house snickle viper." We are very thankful for our home. But our home doesn't give us life. It doesn't set us free. It gives us things to have to deal with, and typically they come in swarms to add to the stress. Our stuff tends to get a hold of our hearts and chain them up.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus told us to be generous to the point of real sacrifice? It is because he wants to break the iron grip our stuff exerts on our hearts. We believe stuff is what gives us peace, joy and life. And that's a deadly lie. Peace, joy and life come from God himself. Giving away that which tends to possess our hearts turns away from it to God, who is the true source of what we want. It frees us and blesses us.

Imagine that we put in some new carpet in part of the house, then our grandkids come over and spill something that stains on it. The problem is, I want our grandkids to feel free at our house, not be afraid of making a mess somewhere. I have to choose what I want more, the spotless house or the grandchildren that love being at Nana and Yapaw's house.

At the end of Acts 20:35 Paul said that we should remember, "the words that the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" We often see that and think, "okay, that means it is holier to give than to receive." We often interpret that to mean, "I've done a really blessed thing," or "I've done something really good." That is true, but that's not what the word "blessed" means here. When we say, "I've really been blessed" we mean "something really good has happened to me." We know when we receive something, when someone graciously gives us something, that a really good thing has happened to us. At our youth and children's ministry appreciation lunch a few weeks ago we had a gift exchange where you could "steal" a gift someone else had. This is the one occasion when it is biblically permissible to steal. Apparently in the Talmudic writings of the ancient Jewish rabbis there is an exception clause to "you shall not steal" that says, "except in white elephant gift exchanges." Well someone else got a gift of these toy rockets that I thought was cool. When my turn came I stole it from him. But later through some shady maneuvering and horse trading the gift was stolen from me and ended up back with the original owner in such a way that I could never get it back. The Sunday before Christmas the Turners gave me a gift. It was toy rockets just like the ones I missed out on. I felt blessed. I didn't do anything. Something was done for me and it was a blessing. When Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive, he wasn't saying you're doing something really good, though that is true. He was saying something even better than receiving happens to you!

Do you believe that? When I was a kid I don't think I did. Giving was what you were supposed to do, but getting was the best. Getting presents was by far the best thing about Christmas. The fevered anticipation of opening those gifts under the tree was almost unbearable. It's funny, but I'm not like that anymore. Maybe it's because I'm so old I don't do anything fun anymore and thus don't get any fun toys as gifts. Or maybe when you become an adult your toys are so expensive no one can afford them so you just get boring stuff like clothes. But I like to think it's mostly because I've learned the truth about life. I find that what I anticipate most by far now is people opening gifts that I have given to them. The real fun is in giving something that brings joy and delight. That's when we experience real joy.

TRUST THAT GOD WILL SUPPLY

In 2 Corinthians 9:10 Paul wrote, “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” The promise is that seed and bread and everything else is supplied by God. And he will supply what you need. Verse 11 goes on to say “you will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” God will give you what you need so you can always be generous. He will not punish you for being generous.

LET THE SPIRIT OF JESUS RULE IN YOUR HEART

This past Christmas season we were reminded again of the story of the Grinch and how he tried to steal Christmas. He was a bitter creature with a heart two sizes too small. But when he sees that for the people of Whoville Christmas wasn't just about presents and food, but about joy and love, he is transformed. His heart grew 3 sizes that day, with the result that he gave back all the wonderful stuff that he had previously stolen.

The message is similar to that of the lesson of Scrooge. The problem of the human race is that all of us have hearts that are at least 2 sizes too small. Generosity is about more than money and it is more than an act of giving some dollars away. It is about the state of our hearts. When we have large, generous hearts, the sharing of our resources, including but certainly not limited to money, will be inevitable. We will have generous attitudes toward others. We will give because that's what generous hearts must and will do.

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 Paul wrote, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.” Jesus was rich to a degree that is impossible for humans to grasp. Yet he gave away all of that so that we could be enriched. That is the heart of Jesus.

For us to be truly generous, the most important thing we can do is ask Jesus to rule, to own our hearts, to transform us from the inside out so that our hearts grow way more than 3 sizes. When our hearts are enlarged, when they become generous hearts like he had, acts of generosity and sharing will inevitably follow.

Sometimes when pastors talk about generosity there is an ulterior motive of guilt-tripping people into giving more money. That is not the goal here today. My desire

is that we all have hearts that are like the heart of Jesus, so large, so full of grace, so loaded with love for our Father that we desire to make others rich, whatever that may require of us.

Dutch theologian Heiko Oberman told a story of something he saw when he visited various churches in Nanjing, China. One of the group he was with was an older Chinese woman who was living in Los Angeles. She visited a poor rural church across the river from Nanjing. Most of the people in the church were subsistence farmers with little or no money. There were 900 people there the day she visited. They insisted they wanted to hear a word from their visitor from the States. So she gave greetings from her church in LA and talked about how many were coming to faith in Christ there, so many that they were building a new addition. Then after giving them a word of blessing she sat down. At the end of the service the pastor called her back to the front of the church. He told her that they were thrilled by her words that God was working in her church. They wanted her to have the morning offering to help with the new building in LA, about \$140. That was all they had. If you do the math you will see it works out to a bit less than 16 cents per person. That's not because they were miserly, it's because it was all they had. And remember the pastor's salary depended on offerings, and he was giving it away. They were poor, but that did not stop them from being generous. Generosity is not a function of how much you have, it is a function of the state of your heart.