

St Martin's CONNECT 9th-23rd Feb 2011

Prosperity and suffering: Challenges and questions

Leader's notes

Series Introduction

Well good evening and welcome to session 1 of a short series where we are going to be thinking about prosperity and suffering. This is designed as a prelude to Mike's Lent course beginning on Ash Wednesday. Let me preface what I'm going to say in the next few weeks with this

- 1) The issues surrounding prosperity and suffering and the questions it provokes are sometimes very difficult but not especially new. When we deal with the topic of evil and the goodness of God these are to some extent age old problems that the church has wrestled with for the last two millennia. Therefore there tend **not** to be straight forward simplistic answers. Tom Wright the Bishop of Durham has sometimes been called the 21st century C.S. Lewis says this 'if you think you can solve the problem of evil then please go away and lie down for a bit and have something strong to drink until the moment passes.' So what I'm saying is beware of very straightforward answers because as Christians we are called to wrestle intellectually and spiritually with these questions. The name God (Yahweh) gave to his people Israel means to wrestle. Jacob wrestled with the Lord. That doesn't mean there are no answers but answers are found in the crucible, in the working out of faith with fear and trembling as Paul tells us Philippians 2:12..
- 2) Secondly each of these sessions is 25 minutes long yet each session I could do a 6 week series on which means we are just dealing with the bare bones of argument so I encourage you to continue to think through these issues in your cell groups and I have additional resources in articles and books and video clips. Email you PDFs etc.

2 snapshots. 1) My first night in America 2) A church of 12 on the Island of Bukasa, Uganda

WEEK 1

1. God wants you rich?! Prosperity theology has a great hold on many churches in Africa. If God loves us he surely wants to bless us? How do we square material blessing with the model of Jesus as suffering servant? Many churches are under the impression that Jesus was wealthy and he basically wants you to be very wealthy too. This is quite a recent development really. Post world war two America. In many ways it's the American dream baptised!

The question is: is God's primary purpose for your life to make you wealthy or to transform you into the likeness of his son? Jesus spoke numerous times in the gospels about mammon/wealth but what was Jesus' own attitude to money? Was Jesus himself rich? Were his disciples and inner circle? Some church leaders have suggested Jesus was indeed rich! Riding on a donkey, they say, was like driving a Mercedes.

Does God want to make you look like this (prosperity preacher in a beautiful suit) or this (beaten bedraggled 1st century monk)? How we square the idea that following after Jesus will mean carrying a cross (Matt 16:24, Mark 9:34) laying down our lives, our possessions, our everything for him with the idea that he will reward us for faithfulness. He will bless us abundantly (Mark 10.30).

This evening we are going to unpack some of these ideas before you discuss them together in your groups. Let me start by saying this. We have largely domesticated the radical nature of Jesus message for our own ends. We have made Jesus often polemical and quite frankly scary challenges into a 'this is the bare minimum you can do to be safe' kind of message. This does a great disservice to the gospel of Jesus and the challenges of God's word. Because behind the question of wealth are two more profound questions 'Who do you trust?' and 'How do you view the cosmos?' But we'll get to these at the end!

Wealth in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word for wealth is related to the idea of faculty, power and ability. The underlying message in the OT is that since Yahweh is the creator and sovereign all things belong to him. Yahweh gives Israel the Land he has promised them. But moreover he gives wealth to individuals like Abraham and Solomon. Wealth was seen as an extension of Shalom. Yet coupled with this throughout Israel's history there are grave warnings about the misuse of wealth about attaining wealth

through greed, trickery, treachery and warnings against pride and glory in possessions. Proverbs strikes a balance by declaring 'Give me neither poverty or riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' (Proverbs 30:8b/9a) The book of Job strongly diffuses the notion that goodness brings wealth and wickedness brings poverty. Indeed David often cries out in the Psalms for God to give him some kind of explanation as to why evil men prosper. Wealth in the Old Testament can be categorised in the following way.

- OT wealth was an occasion for idolatry.
- OT wealth was a fruit of injustice. This is clearly seen in the prophets Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Jeremiah warn against wealth that is gained through injustice means. Amos is particularly explicit (Amos 1:3, 1:6, 1:9, 1:13, 2:1, 2:6-8, 4:1, 5:7, 5:10-12, 8:4-6).
- OT wealth was a blessing to the faithful (Leviticus 26: 3-5) This was in the context of the covenant. When the covenant was broken there were consequences.
- OT wealth was a reward for Labour.

Wealth in the New Testament

Jesus statements in the New Testament regarding wealth generally make painful reading if you are rich. The prevalent view in Judaism when Jesus was preaching about the Kingdom of God was that riches were a mark of divine favour. Which is why the disciples were so confused in Mark 10:25 when Jesus says it's easier for a Camel to go through the eye of a needle than for rich man (woman) to enter the kingdom of God. In fact Jesus teaching on wealth needs to be understood in the context of the Kingdom. Jesus was inaugurating a new era, an upside Kingdom where the old was passing away and the new was to coming/to come. Jesus sees money as having zero value in the sense of having or not having was basically unimportant when it came to the kingdom. On top of this Jesus was carrying on the OT prophetic tradition of revealing God's care for, and preferential treatment of, the poor. Jesus was **not** advocating a form of communism but of Kingdom community. Jesus is frankly pessimistic about the ability of men and women who possess wealth not to be enslaved by it. Jesus believed that possessions invariably led to bondage that it was almost impossible for riches to be neutral.

Jesus himself was not rich but he didn't live in abject poverty. In Luke 2:24 Jesus family could only afford the most basic sacrifice required by the Law. Jesus reminds his follows that the son of man had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20). It seems however that some fairly significant woman contributed to Jesus ministry activities in Luke 8:3. Wealth in the NT can be summarised as follows

- NT wealth as a stumbling block. Mark 10:17-31. Jesus interaction with the rich man is an interesting one. The primary goal is not poverty but of discipleship. Discipleship is costly. The man's face fell when he realised perhaps how his riches had a hold on him (v22). The disciples were clearly shocked that the rich were not first to inherit the Kingdom. Jesus reminds them that everything is possible with God but with righteousness there is no guarantee of wealth. Jesus response to Peter in v28 should be seen in the light of the Kingdom. The promise of 100 fold return in houses and property was not an investment portfolio but the community of faith sharing all things in common in Acts. Individual wealth and security was replaced with community abundance.
- NT wealth was a competing object of devotion. Luke 12:22-34.
- NT wealth was a symptom of economic injustice. James 5:1-6. Mirroring OT prophets
- NT wealth as a resource for the Christian community. 1 John 3:16-17, Luke 14:12-14.

Our response

Father Albert Nolan (1988) says, 'We worship money – only we call it our standard of living. Jesus called it Mammon. It is an idol, a false god, a demon. The prophets of the OT condemned the worship of Baals. In Jesus time there was only one form of idolatry, only one alternative to the worship of the true God. The choice was between God and Mammon. Money has become an object of devotion that bewitches people and casts a spell on them. Money has become the measure of all value.' Jesus spoke so directly about Mammon because it has the power to undermine the radical trust which God calls us to in Himself. The early church pooled resources so as not to be distracted by the trapping of stuff. The way we view money, finances, property reveals the true nature of our devotion to God.

- **Who do you Trust?**

Jesus call to radical trust in God and his Kingdom is the alternative to trust in the world and its financial systems. Storing money up, by into insurance schemes having second homes was not prohibited by the new community of believers but it did cause an issue. When things went wrong it was the community in which one had invested that took care of needs. Money allows pulls us into deception. We deceive ourselves that if we have so much we are insulated from problems, pain and unforeseen disaster. It's not about the amount R1000 can breed as much arrogance as R1 million.

- **Our view of the Cosmos**

The way we view money or store up for ourselves says something about our view of the Cosmos and God's abundance too. If we have a fear of the future, that without substantial savings and policies we may well find ourselves in trouble we reveal implicitly that there is a general lack of resources that there isn't enough to go around. The Biblical world view paints a picture of God as the source of all. That God is abundance. The Godhead reveals an endless self giving generosity. The Cosmos is not in lack God's goodness and abundance and his promise to care for those who live in him reigns.