

Series: Making Life Work in a Screwed Up World

September 4, 2011

THE GIFT OF PROSPERITY

Proverbs 10:22-25; 11:23-26

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. How many of you would agree with this statement: **Prosperity is *THE* most sought after thing in the world!**

-Okay, we're agreed on that, right? Second statement: **I have been *tempted* to compromise what I know to be true and right to save money, make money, or get something I wanted.**

-I have! If you've never even been ***tempted*** to be dishonest, or somehow manipulate the truth when it comes to getting money—or saving money—then you're ***way*** above the crowd. You ought to go to Calcutta and serve the poorest of the poor—and we'll call you ***Saint!***

-Our world is obsessed with prosperity. Even if you were to travel to the most remote part of Irian Jaya and visit people who still live in the stone age, you'd find the ***Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous***. There, people talk about the legend of Ukamheric, Bill Gates of the jungle—who was so filthy rich he had 150 pigs and 27 wives—and so many cowry shells, they couldn't be counted! And people think, ***That's what I want!***

- a. Solomon, author of most of Proverbs, was the Bill Gates of 1000 B.C. If he was good at ***anything***—he was good at making and spending money. For example, his annual ***cash*** income would be close to a billion dollars a year. And that didn't even count the other streams of income he had. History tells us that the other wealthy people in his day came around just to ***see*** this guy—and find out if what they'd heard was true! It ***was!***
- b. Given his wealth, what he writes in his journal as an old man is odd:

**Oh how I prospered! I left all my predecessors in Jerusalem far behind, left them behind in the dust...Everything I wanted I took--I never said no to myself. I gave into every impulse, held back nothing. ...Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.
(Ecclesiastes 2:9a, 10a, 11 MSG)**

-Apparently cash flow, prestige, and the accumulation of all the typical signs of prosperity over-promises and under-delivers!

- c. This morning we're going to look at what Proverbs, a massive accumulation of wisdom, says about prosperity. See, what we truly believe about prosperity will make a huge difference in how we live—and in the people whose lives we

touch. I don't think the wisdom of God on this issue is hard to understand. Not at all. I think the challenge for me and you is having the faith to **live** it—or at least **try** it. See, if Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived can be fooled into defying it—my guess is that I can be fooled too. And so can you!!

2. The first challenge, believe it or not, is **defining** what true prosperity is. Let's do a little word association. What's the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word **prosperous**?

-Most people, when they think of being **prosperous**, think in terms of having **plenty**. Food. Water. Space. Options. Having **plenty** means not having to worry all that much about the future—which means having plenty of **money**.

-Two weeks ago we talked about work—which most people have to do to **earn** money. How you work affects your prosperity, right? How you **handle** your money may affect it even more. Proverbs says some wise things about **borrowing** money.

The poor are always ruled over by the rich, so don't borrow and put yourself under their power. (Proverbs 22:7 MSG)

- a. The clearest explanation of debt is this: When you **borrow** money, you are **renting** money—and if you can't pay the rent, you have to give it back! And it is true: When you owe money to someone—you've in essence given them the right to tell you what you can and cannot do. In our world, money is easy to borrow—hard to pay back. People today can be divided into three groups: the **haves**, the **have-nots**, and the **have-not-paid-for-what-they-haves**.

-If you don't mind, I will translate what Proverbs says about debt from the original Hebrew: **Get out as fast as you can!** And it suggests that, when it comes to money, you follow the example of the **ant**—store up, or **save**—and get interest flowing toward you instead of away from you. Does that make sense?

- b. Solomon also backs up one of the core ten guardrails God has given for life. You could put it like this: **Don't covet! Don't look at your neighbour's house, land, car, spouse, stuff—and base what you get on that.** Let me give you some amazing insight. **Advertising works!** And it's **very** easy to get sucked into thinking you need what the ads **say** you need. Proverbs says:

A pretentious, showy life is an empty life; a plain and simple life is a full life. (Proverbs 13:7 MSG)

- c. One more principle in Proverbs—it's about the word **enough**. Contentment. Something that Solomon never quite learned. I mean, you'd think that after his 300th wife, Solomon would've thought, "Maybe that's enough wives to please?" Or at 25,000 pounds of gold a year, he would've said, "You know—I **think** that will do!" But he didn't.

-Have you ever noticed that **all** the people coming back from the mountain of money, success, accomplishment and stuff are saying: **It's not what you think it is! More is never enough!** Be we're slow learners!

-There's a law in the universe that just as true as the law of gravity. It's called the **law of diminishing returns**. Has anyone here ever noticed the pattern; you really want something, you get it, you're really excited, you show it off--pet it--play with it--polish it; when the newer, better, more powerful model rolls of the line—you feel **contempt** for it—and start the mental process of **why** the old one just won't do! Am I right?

-Proverbs is blunt:

Sinners are always wanting what they don't have; the God-loyal are always giving what they do have. (Proverbs 21:26 MSG)

The leech has two daughters named 'Gimme' and 'Gimme more.'
(Proverbs 30:15 MSG)

3. Some of you may be thinking, "Okay, I get it. You're trying to tell me that the Bible sees prosperity as **evil**." And I would have to say, **Absolutely not!** Abraham, Job, David and many other great people who loved and served God were very prosperous. What the Bible **warns** us about is how deceptive prosperity can be. The **drive** to be prosperous can cause us to do really crazy things—and risk our souls.
 - a. First, just a simple observation. It's very easy for us humans to get pre-occupied by money—to the point of bizarre behaviour. One wealthy man I knew fairly well turned off the hot water heater at night to save money—forcing family members to take cold showers in the morning. As William Shatner would say, "Is that weird...or what?"

-See, we **worry** about having enough. Proverbs says:

The rich think their wealth protects them; they imagine themselves safe behind it. (Proverbs 18:11 MSG)

-That's great imagery, isn't it? Living in a little fort—or gated community—made of money. But Proverbs goes on to say:

A thick bankroll is no help when life falls apart, but a principled life can stand up to the worst. (Proverbs 11:4 MSG)

- b. It seems that prosperity can go one of two ways—depending on what we do with it. It can do a **lot** of good and carry a blessing, or it can bring a curse. For money to **not** curse our lives, we have to **put it in its place** and **keep it there!** If it gets into our hearts it will either complicate or compromise our ability to love God and love others. See, our calling is to **use** prosperity to love God and others. Our greatest temptation is to **use** God and others to become more prosperous.

-Anyone here who has ever thought, “Man, if I could win the lottery—my problems would be solved! Of course I’d give a **lot** of it to God!” History says that winning the lottery actually creates problems. I once watched an interview with people who had won millions in the lottery—and to a **person** they talked about the loneliness their money created. Basically, relationships with friends, relatives and spouses disintegrated. Know why? Money tends to twist people’s motives. Money attracts people for the wrong reason.

Wealth attracts people as honey draws flies, but poor people are avoided like a plague. (Proverbs 19:4 MSG)

Lots of people flock around a generous person; everyone's a friend to the philanthropist. (Proverbs 19:6 MSG)

- c. Money is dangerous in another way; it can make you think you’re better, more important, more worthy than you are. It’s quite subtle. Anyone here who’s ever bought another car—and looked at the rusted out Hyundai Pony rumbling and blowing smoke next to you and felt just **slightly** superior? Does anyone here **own** the Hyundai?

-See, when your money allows you to dress better, smell better, drive nicer cars and get a superior education—you can begin to actually think you **are** better, smarter, and more worthy! **You** expect better treatment—but treat others **worse!** Listen to this:

The poor speak in soft supplications; the rich bark out orders. (Proverbs 18:23 MSG)

- d. Money carries another disease—and this one will kill you. Money has a way of turbo-charging the pace at which we live our lives. Truth is, most people who have money work long hours for it. So life is already busy. The thought is, “If I’m going to work **so hard** to get this stuff, I need to enjoy it a little. The **experiences** suck time out of our lives—as to the **possessions**—which all need to be stored, insured and maintained.

-It’s an amazing things, really; cottages, boats, cars, rental properties and planes **refuse** to take care of themselves—or even **protect** themselves! A number of years ago our sons loved street hockey. Well, we had a guy on our street who became the street Nazi. He spent a **lot** of time and energy patrolling the streets, yelling, calling the police and, in general, being obnoxious. He even installed a surveillance camera! **Why!?** Well, he had about \$150,000 worth of polished cars sitting in this driveway!

-Friends, the question we **all** have to ask when it comes to our possessions and stuff is, “Who’s the master and who’s the servant?”

Proverbs says:

A pretentious, showy life is an empty life; a plain and simple life is a full life. The rich can be sued for everything they have, but the poor are free of such threats. (Proverbs 13:7-8 MSG)

- e. The question we have to ask ourselves is—does all the energy we put into creating, maintaining and displaying our lifestyle cause us to say, "Wow, this is the life! Why, I think I'm more grateful and contented and relaxed than I've ever been--and it's all due to the lifestyle I'm able to afford."

-That's not what I see. I see tired people. Hassled. Hurried. Worried. Kids and parents doing this balancing act; crabby from not getting enough sleep. And no time to even ask the question, "Is all of this worth it?" Prosperity isn't evil at all—but it **can** be dangerous. Our **possessions** can possess **us!**

4. The wisdom of Proverbs—and the wisdom of Jesus is consistent. The kind of blessing God offers has the power to make how much you own **totally** irrelevant!"

God's blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God. The nightmares of the wicked come true; what the good people desire, they get. When the storm is over, there's nothing left of the wicked; good people, firm on their rock foundation, aren't even fazed. (Proverbs 10:22-25 MSG)

-We've watched this past week and a half as Hurricane Irene moved up the East coast. [pics] President Obama, governors, police—all had the same message: **Get out!** Fascinating, isn't it, that no one said, "Better stick around and save your house and cars!" This passage says, "The storms **will** come! They only have the power to steal your blessing if all you have is wrapped up in what they sweep away!"

-All this makes us ask what **is** the blessing of God? What does it mean to prosper? **Really?** There are a **lot** of people in our world that have a **ton** of money! BTW—did you know that Justin Bieber made **54 million dollars** last year? Yikes! Is he prosperous? Well, that depends, doesn't it? True prosperity is feeling the blessing of God on your life. True prosperity is knowing in the core of your life that God is in control—and **you're going to be just fine!**

- a. Prosperity is being content; at peace. It's having shelter--enough food and people who love you. Prosperity is having a sense that you're solidly in the will of God and making a difference in other's lives. It's knowing that all you **truly** value is safe—whether or not you have insurance or surveillance camera. The kind of prosperity God brings to our lives ultimately transforms us into grateful, joyful and loving people.
- b. So, let me ask you: What is it that **really** makes your life worth living? Psalm 23, written by David, says **...Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** Now, we're used to those words—and we autopilot right through them. But what they're describing is what **every** person on this planet wants; to leave goodness and love in the wake of their lives, and then go home when life is done. **That** friends—is a wealthy, prosperous life! As Proverbs says,

**God's blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God!
(Proverbs 10:22 MSG)**

5. I'll tell you where I think a lot of people are when it comes to this issue of money. It's not that we just don't understand what God says about it; it's having the guts to actually **try** it. The best analogy I could come up with is **splinters**. When money makes it's way into our hearts, it's like getting a splinter. Anyone ever had a splinter? The only thing worse than you or I getting a splinter—is having a **kid** with a splinter!

-See, as a kid—if you get a nasty splinter, well **then** you're in a quandary. It hurts! You know, theoretically, that it has to come out. But there is something truly horrifying about seeing your parents—who are usually kind and loving—come at you with a pair of tweezers and a needle. **A-a-ugh! They're going to torture me!** So we run and hide and cry! But there **is** something worse than getting a splinter out. **Not** getting it out! Left to themselves—they get nasty and infected.

—The **overwhelming** testimony of God's Word and his people is that when you allow a love for money and accumulation to lodge in your heart—it gets infected and causes pain. See, our hearts were made to be like God's—and He's generous, full of compassion—loves to give. The only thing that can heal our hearts of the love of money—and break the back of self-pre-occupation—is giving. Like, **truly** giving until it stings—like pulling a splinter. Proverbs says:

The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller. The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped. (Proverbs 11:24-25 MSG)

- a. The universe, see, was set up to please and copy God. What do fruit trees do? They give. What do fields do? They give. What do mountains filled with ore and coal do? They give. God owns it all—what does **He** do? He gives—generously—right? And **we** were made to give, too.
- b. That runs contrary to the world system, doesn't it? See, according to the world system we live in—if you work hard, earn it and hold the title—**you're** the owner. But God says we're **managers**. Now—is there a difference between an owner and a manager? If you're an **owner**—you're only accountable to yourself. But **managers**—while they have a great deal of authority and responsibility—ultimately know that they're responsible to someone else. And we are accountable to God. Smart people get that. It's the **unwise** people ignore it.

-The best imagery I've been able to find on this is...you know this so well you're sick of it...the **teapot**. We're a container for God's blessing. All teapots have three things: Spouts, handles and lids. The spout is...to pour out what's been put in—hopefully, tea. The handle is for the owner—to pour it out where he or she wants it. The lid is...well, to put more tea in. The point of a tea pot is not to become a mass storage tank for tea. It's—in, out, in, out, in, out. The handle ultimately belongs to God; "What I have is Yours—you pour it where it's

needed most!” Easy to say—but **very** tough to live, isn’t it? Especially in a world where the public worship of accumulation is shoved down our throats every single day!

- c. Now, tell me: What do you think is the biggest barrier to living with a spout? It could be selfishness. But I think, for most of us, it’s **Fear**. “If I live with open hands—will there be enough for me?” The **world’s** message is one of fear: ***Better hold on tight!*** God says, “It’s okay! I controls it all! I work both shipping **and** receiving! It really is **more** blessed to give than to receive!” Who are you going to believe—and will you invest in what God is up to?

-What **is** God up to? Let me take a stab at that with something I learned a few weeks ago. Five words:

***Love**

God is love. He loves us—He loves the world—and HE wants **us** to love it.

***Evil**

This includes greed and self-centeredness—and is cause of all the pain and sadness we see

***Rescue**

God has stepped into history by **giving** his Son, Jesus, to rescue that which was lost

***Choice**

Everyone has to choose whether or not they will receive the gift of life and join the rescue

***Restore**

God’s plan is to restore everything to ***what it ought to be!***

- d. Our choice is to either **join** God in the rescue—and throw what He’s given us behind it...or **not**. The promise—the blessing follows those who will:

Honour God with everything you own; give him the first and the best. There's a promise that accompanies this: Your barns will burst, your wine vats will brim over. (Proverbs 3:9-10 MSG)

6. And living with open hands to God and what He’s up to also involves us using what we have to love, rescue and live with compassion towards those in our world who get bullied and stepped on.

-My Mom had a favourite story. She told it **so often** that you would sometimes see our lips moving as she talked. When she was probably about 10, her family moved to a rougher neighbourhood—and the neighbourhood bully picked on Norma, her little sister. It was not a **wise** thing to mess with Betty Lou Kelly’s kinfolk! Well, she found this guy—and chased him down a cinder alley in her bare feet—and beat the snot out

of him! Mom said, “Whenever he saw **me** coming—he went to the **other** side of the street!”

-How many of you had a neighbourhood bully? How many of you **were** the neighbourhood bully? Most neighbourhoods have one. And most neighbourhoods have someone who is **mercilessly** picked on. Maybe they’re small or timid or geeky or relationally awkward. And sometimes people join the bully—and terrorize the weak and small. But sometimes neighbourhoods have heroes. A hero, in this case, is some person called Betty Lou—or Mongo—who is bigger or tougher than the bully. And it becomes clear—if you mess with the weak—you will have to deal with **them!**

-There are bullies in this neighbourhood called **Planet Earth**. You know it—and I know it. Sometimes they’re personified as dictators of small nations—and they steal food, water, safety and freedom from the vulnerable. Sometimes, however, the bullies have names like AIDS. Or drought—and lack of clean drinking water. Or famine. Or stupid, unnecessary poverty. Or lack of basic education and medical care—or freedom. And it’s in **this** kind of context that Proverbs says:

You insult your Maker when you exploit the powerless; when you're kind to the poor, you honour God. (Proverbs 14:31 MSG)

-The bottom line in this is something I’ve already mentioned earlier. If you mess with—hurt, exploit, use, or make life more painful for people who are victims of the bullies in the world—you are insulting God. You are basically flipping Him off—and **daring** Him to do something about it. **No intelligent person wants to do that, right?**

a. Now, here’s the question; **Is it enough to not bully the weak?** Some of you may remember a story from NYC where a woman was publicly beaten and robbed—while people watched and did nothing. If that wasn’t bad enough, the guy came back—and **finished her off**—and still, people did nothing! **Is that okay?** I mean, **they** hurt her—or approve! Is it okay to just **watch** something like this happen?

-A **lot** of people in our world say things like, “Hey, I’m not a bad person! I’ve never **hurt** anyone!” Like—is that the bottom line? Not **hurting** someone? Maybe the **real** question is—**is it okay to know about the bullies of injustice, need, pain, and death—and watch?** Or does God call us to engage. Be heroes.

-How many of you like the thought of being a hero to someone in need? I like that thought! The barrier to being a hero is called **pain**. My grandfather’s half-brother witnessed a woman being molested by a guy on a streetcar in Pittsburgh back in the early 1900s. So, he intervened—and stopped the guy—who pulled a pistol and shot him. He went home that night—and died in his bedroom. **No one** likes the thought of pain—so sometimes we pretend that we just don’t know...or see.

If you stop your ears to the cries of the poor, your cries will go unheeded, unanswered. (Proverbs 21:13 MSG)

It's criminal to ignore a neighbour in need, but compassion for the poor—what a blessing! (Proverbs 14:21 MSG)

Be generous to the poor—you'll never go hungry; shut your eyes to their needs, and run a gauntlet of curses. (Proverbs 28:27 MSG)

- b. I see a fascinating trend that seems to be going on these days—especially among some of the well-known wealthy people in our world. Know what it is? It's throwing the lives and resources behind helping those in need. Bill Gates **[pic]**—2nd wealthiest man in the world—has devoted the vast majority of his money and time to ending poverty. Warren Buffet **[pic]** 3rd wealthiest man in the world has pledged the vast majority of **his** wealth to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. And there are a lot of others doing the same thing.

-Why? Did they decide to love and follow Jesus? I don't think so; I think they've been to the top of the mountain of more—and found out that giving is **more** fun than accumulating! I think they have found that there is a deep, **deep** joy in loving and helping others!

When we see the plight of others, and extend our help, we are doing exactly what God does:

Never walk away from someone who deserves help; your hand is God's hand for that person. Don't tell your neighbour, "Maybe some other time," or "Try me tomorrow," when the money's right there in your pocket. (Proverbs 3:27-28 MSG)

-Did you know that **God** notices what we do? Listen to this:

Mercy to the needy is a loan to God, and God pays back those loans in full! (Proverbs 19:17 MSG)

-You may be thinking, "So...what if don't feel I can? What if I don't?" To just ignore the pain and need and brokenness and lostness on this planet—that God cares **so** deeply about—you'll have to ignore God. You'll have to plug your ears, cover your eyes and pretend you and those around you are the only ones on this planet that matter. And **that** by it's very nature is a cursed path.

-Ultimately—you and I have to make a conscious decision. Is God telling the truth or not? If I give, will He make sure I have enough? God says, "Why don't you try giving a tenth of what you have to what I'm up to—and **see what happens? Go ahead! Try it! Test Me!** And, ultimately—one way or another, we do test Him, don't we? We either find the blessing of generosity—or the curse of fear and pre-occupation with ourselves.

Q & A

7. So—how do we get started? One more analogy—with your permission. The day before we were to move to Kentucky so I could attend seminary—33 years ago—I broke my ankle playing volleyball at our farewell party! Dumb, eh?

-So, Lori and my brother moved our stuff while I had a cast put on. I noticed when I got my cast off—that I limped. Walking on my ankle still created pain. And I was **still** limping after a couple of months. So. I started running. It hurt at first—but eventually, there **was** no pain! I ran on and off for the next few years. I found when I stopped—there was **always** pain starting up again. Not necessarily in my ankle—but in my legs, feet, lungs—wherever.

-When my Dad had by-pass surgery—a friend who assisted with by-pass surgeries said, “Ken, you’d better get some cardio-vascular exercise; this stuff travels in our genes—and you’ll be the next one in the OR. So—I started playing racquetball; and when that wasn’t an option—more running. And there was **always** pain—at first. But once I worked through that—I felt **great!**

-Here’s my point. **No one** becomes generous—and compassionate—and God honouring—without the initial start-up pain it causes. But heart disease of another kind runs in the human family—and the **only** way to deal with it is to **face** the pain, move through it, and do what God asks—with what He has given...as a **GIFT!** And when you do—you find out something amazing. God really does take care of you! So—I want to challenge you to **test God**. Try giving? I mean, what could you possibly lose—if all of creation has been centered around the fact that **it is more blessed to give than to receive?**