

Seek Prosperity, Not Riches

*I wanna be a billionaire so freakin' bad
Buy all of the things I never had
Uh, I wanna be on the cover of Forbes magazine
Smiling next to Oprah and the Queen
Oh every time I close my eyes
I see my name in shining lights
Yeah, a different city every night oh right
I swear the world better prepare
For when I'm a billionaire*

—Travie McCoy

Many people dream of becoming rich. This desire is as old as mankind, no doubt stretching back to the time when people first began to separate themselves from the animals and create material goods. Archaeologists studying the earliest human settlements have noted that some of the inhabitants lived in larger dwellings with more refined household implements. The ancient writers tell many tales of the pain and suffering that resulted when the desire for riches became an obsession. Unfortunately, the lesson has proved difficult to learn even up to the present time.

Yet even the animals will do everything in their power to better their circumstances—seek shelter from the rain and the cold, find the best sources of food, and a suitable mate. Human beings surely cannot be blamed for having a similar drive. Although many great philosophers and religious teachers have readily identified greed as a vice, they have also pointed out that a simple desire to better one's circumstances through hard work and discipline is a virtue. It's not too difficult to distinguish the difference between a desire to get rich and a desire to prosper. The former leads to all sorts of maladaptive attitudes, bad decisions, and undesirable behaviors—neglecting one's family or health in the obsessive pursuit of financial gain, risk taking, excessive frugality or extravagant living. The latter leads to positive attitudes, good decisions, and desirable behaviors—a healthy balance between work and other responsibilities, caution, and moderation. Furthermore, riches ultimately prove to be elusive for most people, no matter how persistently they may pursue them.

Prosperity, on the other hand, is within the reach of everyone. Prosperity should not be equated with being wealthy in the sense of a Rockefeller or a Bill Gates or a movie star. It means having relative wealth—or, having more money than you otherwise would if you didn't work hard and save. You are not comparing yourself to the Joneses, but rather to yourself. The goal is not to become a multimillionaire, although a few might achieve this status. The goal is to achieve a good quality of life and have adequate financial reserves for emergencies, children's college, and retirement. By cultivating the right attitude about money, you will be spared from the *distress* of the person living in poverty but also spared from the *stress* of the person consumed with riches.

The formula for achieving prosperity is straightforward and simple. You will not need an MBA degree and you will not need to understand the complex array of financial instruments that Wall Street is constantly trying to sell to Main Street. Actually, one of the most important decisions to make is to avoid the poisonous products of the financial industry. But just because achieving prosperity is simple does not mean that it is easy. For most people, it will be difficult and it will take a long time—perhaps even an entire lifetime. It will require hard work, focus, and discipline. There will be constant pressure to conform to a consumer society—and numerous enticements to take shortcuts by investing in risky business ventures and financial products. But those who persevere in the time-honored principles of financial prudence will almost assuredly be much better off at the end of their journey than they were at the beginning.