

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

How have you seen God bless you? I often think of monetary and physical blessings when I am asked this question, because God has brought great things into my life. A couple of examples are when I moved to seminary in Denver, CO with less than \$1000.00 in my bank account believing God would provide a way, and God did. Bill and I needed tires on our cars with no extra money in sight, and a check appeared in our mailbox from something we didn't expect, just enough to cover the expense of the tires. I do believe that a person cannot outgive God, but I don't believe that God's blessings come in monetary values because of our faithful giving to God. That's the prosperity gospel, and it is a false gospel. Joel Osteen uses today's passage from 2 Corinthians to say, "God has promised that your generous gifts will come back to you...that because of your generosity, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of" (*Your Best Life Now*, pp. 260, 262). In other words, 'give money to God and God will give more money back to you.' The prosperity gospel believes that God wants you to prosper, that it is God's will that if we name our desire, we can claim it. That isn't the gospel promise.

Yes, God does want to bless us. There is no doubt about that, God's blessings are seen throughout the Bible. Paul even said in verse 9 of today's reading from Corinthians that God wants to make us rich. However, Paul says a lot more than what most of us hear. Paul said that it is through Christ's poverty that the Corinthians have become rich. Poverty is an ingredient in the treasures Christians have in at least two ways.

Martin Luther said that "Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in His works should honor Him as He is hidden in His suffering" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, p. 52). Luther's belief is that we need to come to the riches God has for us through Christ's poverty and suffering in order to remove all our pride. It is prideful to believe that God gives in return for our gifts to God. That falsely means that we are looking at what we are doing to deserve blessings; that we have earned God's blessings. When we see Christ in His suffering and yet we receive His gifts, it is apparent how undeserved they are. Jesus came to earth from a place where there was no pain, no sin, no graft, or corruption. A place where he was King, one held in great esteem. He gave all this up to be born in a manger, to live a human life, to be scoffed at by the religious leaders, beaten by the Roman soldiers, and hung on the cross to die. Jesus paid a huge price for our blessings, and money had nothing to do with it. So how much value do you think God puts on our possessions?

John Chrysostom, a great preacher of the early church, explains the reference to verse 9 to our becoming rich as "the knowledge of godliness, the cleansing away of our sin... the countless good things which He bestowed upon us..." (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First series, Vol 12. p. 360). The countless good things that God has bestowed upon us... breath, friends, forgiveness, what else can you think of? This focus on God and Jesus that results from encountering others like Christ who suffer loosens us up from the material gifts we have received. Money and material wealth fall away when we think of the blessings of life.

Martin Luther explains that when we give in our generosity we are really giving to Christ, saying, "Christ says: "If I suffer hunger or thirst in the person of my apostle or of

any Christian, yes of a Christian child or of any person poor and in want, and you are aware of this situation, you are truly an archmiser if you close your eyes to this. I want you to know that I am the One who is suffering hunger and thirst. If you feed this person, you are feeding Me..." (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 22, p. 520). Christ's suffering and poverty make us realize that he is present in the suffering and poverty of others, and loosens us up to give away the riches we have been given. But if we received what we had asked for and deserved (like the prosperity gospel teaches) we would not be so inclined to give away our riches, because we would not be so thankful to God for them. When riches come through the Cross you are a lot more thankful, and thankfulness makes you more generous.

Thanking God at least in some way is the essence of generosity. There is an old Estonian proverb that says, "Who does not thank for a little will not thank for much." In thanking God, the little we have becomes a whole lot more in our own eyes (the little becomes a lot). That's another sense in which all you have from God makes you rich. There's an insurance commercial where Flo, the insurance representative, stands next to a beautiful, secluded lake with a young man who is insured by that company. He says something about wondering how long it will be before others find the place, and before they even turn around there is a young woman asking them to move on. The woman takes a video of herself as she says, "I'm here at this lake I just discovered practicing gratitude." Of course, it's supposed to be a slam on that sort of behavior, but in actuality, practicing gratitude to God is a spiritual discipline, something we all should practice. When we practice gratitude, we realize how very blessed we truly are.

How is it that God makes us rich through Jesus' sufferings? Why is prosperity better when it comes through the Cross? Thankfulness makes you content with what you have, makes you feel rich. And the more grateful you are, the more likely you are to be content. Twentieth-century American journalist and humorist Robert Quillen had it right when he said: "If you count all your assets, you always show a profit."

When we see that all we have comes undeservedly from the sufferings of Jesus, we are far more grateful, we are far more content, and we are far more generous. It is good to recognize that our wealth comes through the cross. All glory be to God.