

PIETY BRINGS PROSPERITY PROVERBS 3:9-10

(NKJV) "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine."

INTRODUCTION

Money concerns, having enough to get not only what we need to live but to get what we think we can't live without, have been with us nearly as long as our memories of anything. Stand-up comic Jackie Mason, now 85, quips, "Money is not the most important thing in the world; love is. Fortunately, I love money." He also says, "I have enough money to last me the rest of my life – unless I buy something." Comedy actor Bill Murray (*Ground Hog Day*) observes, "The best way to teach your kids about money is by eating 30% of their ice cream" (so they'll learn about taxes?). Spencer Tracy (1900-67) twice won the Best Actor Oscar and enjoyed a thirty-year career as one of Hollywood's leading men. But earlier in life, Tracy admits, "There were times my pants were so thin I could sit on a dime and tell if it was heads or tails." Pleasingly plump Sophie Tucker (1887-1966), was one of America's most popular entertainers in the first half of the 20th Century. Her advice to girls is, "From birth to age 18, a girl needs good parents, from 18 to 35 she needs good looks, from 35 to 55 she needs a good personality, and from 55 on she needs cash."

Is our Heavenly Father aware of our material needs? Yes! **Jesus** proclaims in **Matthew 6:31-33** (NCV): "Don't worry and say, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'³² The people who don't know God keep trying to get these things, and your Father in heaven knows you need them.³³ Seek first God's kingdom and what God wants. Then all your other needs will be met as well." Does this mean God owes us a living? No! "In fact," as the Apostle Paul told early converts in **II Thessalonians 3:10**, "when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: 'If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat.'" We have a duty as followers of **Jesus** to demonstrate our devotion to Him by maximizing the abilities God has given us and earning the best living possible for ourselves and those for whom we are responsible, as **Colossians 3:23** (NCV) makes clear: "In all the work you are doing, work the best you can. Work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people." But, as comedian and social critic George Carlin (1937-2008) comments, "Most people work just hard enough not to get fired and get paid just enough money not to quit." To *receive* God's best in this life we must *give* Him our best in this life.

In 1876, W. L. Douglas, at age 31, founded a shoe factory in Brockton, MA. It soon made 20,000 shoes per day that were sold in 78 cities. With his finances secure, he sought to serve God through politics. He was elected to the MA Legislature in 1884. In 1905, Douglas became the State's 42nd Governor. Yet, years earlier, he'd been out of work for so long he was down to his last dollar. On a Saturday, he heard he might find work in a town some distance away. The ticket cost \$1; exactly all the money he had left. He knew he had yet to tithe 10% of the last \$5.00 he'd earned. If he gave .50 in church Sunday, he'd not have enough left for the full train ticket. What would you do if faced with such a situation? We might think, "What's most important is to get this job; I'll catch up on tithing later." W. L. Douglas felt a greater priority. When the plate was passed, he promptly put in .50. Monday, he took the other .50, bought a ticket halfway to his destination, got off the train, and prepared to walk the rest of the way. The devil whispered to him, "You are a fool." Many would have agreed with him. But before he'd gone one block, he saw a "Men wanted" sign for a factory job in that town. He got the job. It paid \$5 more per week than the other job would have paid (equivalent to \$80/week today, \$4200/year), and he cut his travel time and expense in half to boot!

The title of today's message is Piety Brings Prosperity. You will not hear a sermon filled with the false assertions of what is often called the Health & Wealth Gospel. To be "prosperous" simply means we have *adequate* means to meet all of our financial obligations. God promises to provide for the *needs* of His children when we are obedient to His will. God does not promise to provide for our *greeds*.

"Piety" is "devotion to God demonstrated by fulfilling our duties toward the Lord, our family, and our country." Piety is the opposite of lip service; of merely going through the motions of devotion. We may not need an increase in our pay as much as we need an increase in our piety. A cartoon shows a Dad's face blushing after his young son hollers out in a restaurant, "How come the waitress gets 15% and God only gets 10%?" In another cartoon, a church usher looks like a mafia hitman. He stands at the end of the pew holding out the offering plate with one hand while his other hand is stuffed inside his bulging pocket. A man tells his wife, "This looks like an offering we can't refuse." Albert Alexander (A.A.) Hyde, of Wichita, KS, had done well as a Christian businessman by investing in real estate. He'd always contributed to God's work, but never consistently. Then, the collapse of the real estate market in 1888 left him with debts of \$100,000 (over \$1 million today). Repentantly, he promised he would begin tithing to confirm his new commitment to God's will. Many told him it was dishonest to give God a tenth of their income while in debt. Hyde had agreed with them until one day it flashed in his mind God was his *first* creditor. After he began to pay God first, God led him into a partnership in a new soap manufacturing company. Eventually, he had enough to pay his creditors in full. In 1894, after years of experimental research, he hit upon the formula for Mentholatum. Hyde faithfully tithed the millions of dollars that resulted from Metholatum's successful marketing. Our two Outline points are The Responsibilities of Piety and The Rewards of Piety.

I. THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF PIETY

As Christians, we exhibit "piety" in time spent with God in prayer and Bible study. We also display pious devotion to Christ by acts of kindness and charity toward others, as when, for **Jesus'** sake, we forgive those who wrong us. More generally, piety is living with a God-centered worldview that recognizes *all* we are and have, including our money, is God's and not our own. Martin Luther placed his life fully into God's hands by bold acts that launched the Protestant Reformation in 1517. He commented late in life, "I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess." John Wesley (1703-91), an English evangelist and father of Methodism, observed, "Any temporal possession can be turned into everlasting wealth. Whatever is given to Christ is immediately touched with immortality." Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933), our 30th President and a follower of **Jesus**, wisely pointed out, "No person was ever honored for what he received. He was honored for what he gave."

Proverbs 3:9-10 states a proven principle for success: "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine." "It should be obvious," says Solomon, "God promises to meet and exceed your material needs if you demonstrate God has priority over everything else in your life by how you use your finances." **Proverbs 3:5** provides this added advice, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding." God knows that honoring His rightful claim upon our possessions often requires "trust" in Him that defies our "own understanding." Pastor Leland Patrick tells of a woman in his church whose husband died back in the 60s leaving her with four small children to raise. She struggled, at times, financially. But she remained committed to tithing her income, trusting God to care for her family as she'd trusted Him with her eternal soul. One week, after paying all her other bills, she had \$20 left; the exact amount due for her tithe. She went to church the next Sunday with a heavy burden over food for her children. But she allowed her faith in God's care to conquer her fears and honored Him with her tithe that day. After church, a church member walked up to her to say, "Here's the \$50 I owe you." She had no memory of this debt, but she gratefully received it as God's provision for her at a time of great family need!

Did you know **Jesus** had a lot to say about the use of money? Chuck Swindoll, heard on *Insight for Living*, pointed out that 1/6th of the Gospels and 1/3rd of Christ's parables "dealt with money matters because" **Jesus** knew "money matters." Is how we use the money that comes into our hands one of the truest indicators of our character and of the place God has in our lives? Two well-worn bills arrived at the Federal Reserve Bank to be retired – a \$100 bill and a \$1 bill. As they traveled down the conveyor belt, they struck up a conversation. The \$100 bill reminisced about the interesting life he had: "I've been to the

finest restaurants, theater shows, sporting events, and amusement parks. I even went on a Caribbean cruise. Where have you been?" "Oh," said the \$1 bill, "many places. I've been to a Methodist church, an Episcopal church, a Baptist church, a Catholic church. . . ." "Church," interrupted the \$100 bill. "What's a church?"

Let's look more closely at **Proverbs 3:9**. The Hebrew word for "honor" is the root for "glorify," as in **Psalm 86:12**, "I will give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and will glorify your name forever." Both "honor" and "glorify" signify, "to recognize God's weighty importance." "Possessions," in Hebrew, denotes, "what stands ready," meaning, we have at hand the resources to meet any need. Thus, "Honor the Lord from your possessions" means from all the increase God lets come into our hands for *our* use, we should put into God's hands for *His* use an amount worthy of our gratitude and devotion to Him. The last half of **Proverbs 3:9** reinforces the first half: "and with the firstfruits of all your increase." "Firstfruits" translates a Hebrew word for "first" that does not mean just "before anything else" but also "the choicest" or "best part" of anything. Thus, we display a God-centered piety when our contributions to God's work recognize His claims to the best part "of all our increase" that He allows us to acquire.

Just before His words in **Matthew 6:31-33**, which we read earlier, **Jesus** declared, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (**6:24**, NASB). There's a story of a rich old skinflint in declining health who finally gets serious about his eternal state. He goes to the community church to ask the pastor what he must do to atone for never giving God much time or giving a church a dime. The pastor is about to tell him of the free gift of salvation God can offer because of Christ's sacrificial death for us on the Cross, when this old miser suggests, "How about if I agree to give the church nearly every cent I have? Will that do it; will that guarantee I'll go to heaven when I die?" The pastor pauses a moment, then replies, "Well, it's worth a try!" Did the miser and pastor both display conflicting loyalties between God & wealth? Yes!

When we offer God a worthy portion of our increase, He receives this as an act of threefold worship. First, we signify we want to live for Him; not for ourselves or worldly gain. Secondly, we recognize these blessings are gifts from His hand. As **Acts 17:25** reminds us, God "Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things." Thirdly, we demonstrate faith in the Lord to meet all our needs; not just financial ones.

II. THE REWARDS OF PIETY

This brings us to **Proverbs 3:10**: "So your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine." Bread and wine were staples in Biblical days, not luxuries. Wine often became necessary where water was unsafe to drink. "Plenty" speaks of being well-supplied with life's necessities. "New wine" is what drips from vats even before winepresses are trodden. This means God's blessing will cause our prosperity to "overflow" what's normally possible. Thus, as a general rule with some exceptions, **Proverbs 3:9-10** promises that if we honor God's claims upon what we gain of this world's goods, He will multiply our "increase" so we will have "what stands ready" to meet our needs and the needs of others.

Abraham won a great victory in battle 2100 years before **Jesus'** birth and **commenced** the Biblical practice of tithing by honoring God with 10% of his gain (**Genesis 14:17-20**). Jacob, Abraham's grandson, **continued** the practice. He pledged to return to the Lord "a tenth" of everything God blessed him with (**Genesis 28:20-22**). About 700 years after Abraham, God **commanded** through Moses all who desired to be His special people should demonstrate their devotion to Him by tithing (**Leviticus 27:30**). In **Malachi 3:8-12** (NASB), among the Old Testament's final words written about 400 years before **Jesus'** birth, God strongly **confirmed** the practice. God declares we "are robbing" Him when we withhold "tithes and offerings," and He promises if we put Him to the "test" by tithing, we'll discover He will "open the windows of heaven" to protect us against many losses and to prosper far greater than if we don't. In **Matthew 23:23**, **Jesus** then **commended** tithing as a practice that should continue among His followers.

Is God stating if we contribute to His work, we can sit back and prosperity will rain miraculously upon us without effort? A young man told *Insight for Living* preacher Chuck Swindoll one Sunday he'd decided to follow his Dad's example and start giving to their church. He'd been negligent to do so until then. That night, he rushed up to Pastor Swindoll exclaiming, "I put a dollar in the plate this morning and, would you believe it, I just found a dollar in the parking lot after the service? Next Sunday, I plan to give \$20!" Is this why **Jesus** commended tithing among His followers, for the joy of *getting* more materially than we give, or for the joy of watching how God cares for us when we trust Him to provide what we need to live?

CONCLUSION

A recent nationwide survey reveals pastors are increasingly reluctant to preach sermons on giving and tithing because of the negative feedback this generates from their members. It's true any local church or mission's activity relies upon the contributions of God's people. But God commends and commands tithing to enrich the depth of your trust in and devotion to Him; not primarily for a church's benefit. When you, "honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase," you commit yourself to serve God with your possessions and protect yourself from making a god of your possessions. Secondly, you affirm these blessings are gifts from God's hand; reminding you He will hold you accountable for how they are used. Thirdly, you demonstrate faith in the Lord to meet all your needs; not just financial ones.

To give you assurance our recent sermons on responsibly handling money and giving are not driven by a current financial crisis in our Church and are truly for your benefit, here are Ten Signs to look for to help you know when our Church is in desperate financial straits: 10) There are goldfish bowls on the piano and organ for tips; 9) Meters are being installed in the parking lot; 8) There's a cover charge at the door; 7) Pews in the front are \$1; pews in the back are \$5; 6) You must lease a Kindle reader from the church for all Bible study materials; 5) Everyone who gives that day receives a ticket for a raffle at the end of the service; 4) Those who give the most each Sunday get to choose the music the following Sunday; 3) The pastor's wife is wearing a dress made from feed sacks; 2) All services are now strictly by candlelight to reduce utilities; and 1) Donations for the pastor's booklet, *Praying Tips for Winning the Lottery*, is the new door-to-door mission's outreach. We can thankfully rejoice none of these signs are true of our Church today!

I often refer to our Church as, "A Small Church with a Big Heart." We give a far greater share to ministries outside our Church than do most churches. Corona de Tucson Baptist Church also pools money into what is called the Cooperative Program with 47,000 sister Southern Baptist Churches nationwide. Robert Polk, director of the Cooperative Program Promotion for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, carefully analyzed expenditures of the leading TV ministries in 1986, compared to the Southern Baptist Convention. These figures are a bit outdated but the contrast would be as startling today as it was then!

First, Polk studied how **\$684 million** given to six leading TV ministers was used. Besides paying for TV time, these donations supported 4 schools, 1 hospital, 3 churches, 2 ministries to needy children, 1 ministry to others in need, and 1 home for unwed mothers. Admirable? Yes. Polk then studied how **\$635 million** given to Southern Baptists was spent. Our Southern Baptist donations supported 52 children's homes, 48 hospitals (including 23 overseas), 67 colleges and universities (enrolling over 200,000 students), and 33 nursing homes. We also supported 3,756 foreign missionaries, 3,637 U. S. missionaries, and ministries to students on 1,100 campuses. These funds also supported six seminaries (enrolling a fifth of this country's seminarians). This overview of remarkable, God-honoring, stewardship among Southern Baptists should assure you it's entirely true when we say a portion of what's given in our weekly offering reaches literally across our country and around the world with the love and light of our Savior, **Jesus Christ**. We are "A Small Church with a Big Heart!"

