

"THE PERILS OF PROSPERITY"
November 22, 1987

TEXT: Deuteronomy 8:17-18 "Beware lest you say in your hearts, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord, your God, for it is He who give you power to get wealth"

We are not sure who wrote those words. Traditionally they have been ascribed to Moses, though many modern scholars would argue against it. But whoever wrote them, he was certainly a perceptive student of human nature. For who of us would not agree that, logically at least, the more we have, the more grateful we ought to be. It only stands to reason, does it not?

Those who enjoy good health ought to be more grateful than those who are sickly. The man who has a good job --one that gives him not only a good income, but also the chance to use and develop his God-given talents-- ought to be more thankful than those who are out of work. And we who are privileged to live in this wonderful land of freedom and opportunity ought to be more grateful and more appreciative than the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe or the impoverished masses of the Third World.

By any standard you could possibly name, you and I ought to be the most thankful people on the face of the earth. More grateful than any others for the infinite richness of God's loving care. For one thing, we are certainly among the wealthiest people who have ever lived. Even the poorest among us are unbelievably rich compared to most of the world. Consider, for instance, that the average income in the Peoples' Republic of China is about one hundred dollars per year. And, poor as they are, they are still better off than many others.

Moreover, we are the freest people who ever lived. Free not only politically, but in other ways as well. Think of our relative freedom from disease and other health problems. Here in Milwaukee, if we get sick or have an accident, we have easy access to a clinic or emergency room, never more than a few minutes away. There we can expect to be treated with the finest medical knowledge and technology the world has ever known. Compare that, for instance, to those who live around our mission in Honduras, where there is only one doctor, working half-time, to provide medical care to over 40,000 people.

And, more than any people who have ever lived, we are free, too, from drudgery and over-work. In fact, we have so many labor-saving devices that one of our major needs today is finding ways to get enough exercise for good muscle-tone and

cardio-vascular health. At the flick of a switch or the turn of a key we have at our disposal electric or gasoline powered servants to perform daily miracles such as the greatest monarchs in all history never even dreamed of. And, through the miracle of television, we have at our command the most spectacular entertainment the world has ever known. All in all, our standard of living today is so unbelievably high that our main problems seem to be those of over-consumption and waste disposal. Surely no people in the world ever had more reason to be grateful than we.

But are we? Do we even remember that it is really God, our Creator, and not we, ourselves, who has provided us with all this bounty? A few minutes ago we sang these words together:

"We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land. But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand. He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain, the breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain. All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord; O thank the Lord, for all His love. He only is the Maker of all things near and far; He paints the wayside flower, He lights the evening star. The winds and waves obey Him. By Him the birds are fed; much more to us, His children, He gives our daily bread. All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord; O thank the Lord, for all His love."

We sang them. And, I would guess we meant them. After all, we probably would not be here this morning unless we did. But that is this morning, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, here in church with all these reminders of God's bounty arrayed before us. What about tomorrow? Or the day after? Or sometime next week when we have had our fill of roast turkey, and turkey sandwiches, and turkey hash? When the last of the cranberry sauce and the pumpkin pie have finally been consumed. When we are no longer here in this place set aside for worship but out there in the places where we work and play? What will happen then? Will we still be grateful? Or will we, like so many others, fall prey to the perils of prosperity?

As the author of Deuteronomy so wisely recognized all those centuries ago, there seems to be something very perverse about human nature. We have a saying that there are no atheists in fox-holes. And when danger and hardship strike, whether on the fields of war or on some other battleground of life, we find ourselves brought face to face with our human frailty and our consequent need for God. But, when life is good and everything goes well, then, instead of being grateful, we so often tend to forget God, to pat ourselves on the back for our own cleverness and our own accomplishments. Perhaps even to become a bit petulant that life is not still better than it is.

Some years ago I saw a Dennis the Menace comic strip that must be something of a parable. It appeared at Christmas time, and it showed Dennis coming down the stairs to a Christmas tree

surrounded by an immense assortment of beautifully wrapped presents. One by one he opened his gifts until, at last, he was almost buried by a mountain of ribbons and wrapping paper. Around him lay toys and games of almost every kind and description. And in the final frame, Dennis, surrounded by this superabundance of parental generosity, looked up at his father and mother and with child-like innocence inquired, "Is this all?"

Or think, if you will, of the recent National Football League Players strike. Is it any wonder that it never really produced much support from either the fans or the general public? There was something almost obscene about the spectacle of athletes, averaging \$235,000 a year, showing up at the picket lines in their Mercedes Benz sedans. And if you really believe their claim that money was not the issue then I have some ocean front property in Nebraska I would like to talk to you about. There they were, with almost everything anyone could ask for -- money, fame, excitement. And, yet, they wanted more.

But are we really any different? Most of us, of course, do not have as much as they do. And we are not on strike. But we are just as human as they are, and subject to the same temptations. Like them, the more we have the more we want, the more we seem to think we deserve whatever we can get --and more. Prosperity has a way of doing that to us --if we let it. And we, too, need to hear, loud and clear, the words of this morning's scripture reading:

"Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God. Lest when you have eaten and are full and have built goodly houses and live in them and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord, your God . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the Lord, your God, for it is He who give you power to get wealth."

We need to hear that, not only now in this sheltered environment of worship, but tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after that. Since it seems so easy to forget, we need to keep reminding ourselves, day after day, of how just abundantly God has blessed us. Morning and night, every day of our lives, we need to get down on our knees, figuratively if not literally, and thank God for His incredible generosity.

But we need to do more than that. Words are cheap, and, by themselves, they count for little. If we are really grateful, and not just conventionally so, we will do our best to use our blessings in ways that honor the God who gives them. Ways that reach out in love to all who are precious in His sight. We do that in a small way this morning by this gift of food and by the offering which will soon be received. But the real Thanksgiving

is not this morning, not even next Thursday, but every day for the rest of our lives.

Some years ago, in the city of Glasgow, in Scotland, there was a minister by the name of George McLeod. One day he looked up at one of the stained glass windows in his church on which were written the words, "Glory to God in the Highest." But the glass on which the "e" was written had become broken somehow, and he saw the words, "Glory to God in the High st." That is what real thankfulness means, to give glory to God in the High St. And Water St. and State St. and Vliet St. On all the streets where we live, and work, and play.

"Beware lest you say in your hearts, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord, your God, for it is He who give you power to get wealth." Let us give glory to God in the High Street, today and every day of our lives. AMEN.