

Under the Influence of Affluence

Written by Bob Stone

Money can be intoxicating. Whether taken straight or mixed with cars, sound systems, clothes, and apartment furnishings, money is heady stuff—it can leave you stoned, high, drunk, blotto. Like any intoxication, the first taste of wealth may bring an exhilarating rush, but eventually it can take over a person's life, leaving that person under the Influence of Affluence.

Either way, it can deaden insight and perception. Affluence is often the perfect anesthesia for helping someone forget the pain of others—the pain they might cause or might be experiencing.

Money also has the power to isolate a person from God and other people. It's common for people who are down, abused, or depressed to take a few dollars and try to cure the problem. A number of years ago when I was depressed, I took some money and went to the store and bought all the things I liked to snack on—cheese, chicken wings and popcorn. I got in my car and took a long drive. You should have seen me. I put praise music on my cassette player, and ate. When I ran out of food I felt only a little better, so I prayed and praised God as hard and as loud as I could. The snack food didn't help, but the praise and prayer finally lifted my spirit enough to go on.

The parable of the sower reminds us that money can choke out spiritual life. Mark 4:18—*"Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19] but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."*

There is a universal equation in life—The more money we "get," the more money we "need." And soon in getting and "needing," we find ourselves in a vicious cycle. Does it have to be that way? Can't money be used for good? Proverbs talks about both the benefits and the dangers of wealth. In this study we will attempt to move beyond addiction, by looking at the dangers and the benefits of our resources.

The effects of our resources

God is concerned about money's effect on us. Prov. 11:28 says, *"Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf."*

At first glance, it seems like a strange comparison, like the comparison should be riches vs. poverty, or righteousness vs. wickedness...but not riches vs. righteousness. Has God confused the issue? No! He is not mixing apples and oranges. He is clarifying priorities. The issues of riches and righteousness are interwoven. God is asking, "Which is more important to you?"

One author writing on this passage recalled how this verse applied to his life in the following way.

"I'm not wealthy. But I have been poorer. When I was struggling through college, I used to sign letters to my parents, 'Your son in abject poverty.' The plan was to get them to send more money. Seldom did it work. Since that time, through traveling and reading, I've realized that my 'poverty' was nothing compared to the misery experienced by millions around the world.

But even in my brand of abject poverty, I noticed an interesting thing. I felt free to serve Christ. After all, I wouldn't be sacrificing much by 'giving all' to Him. In the first years of our marriage, my wife and I lived on a shoestring budget.

Both of us felt free to accept any call God would offer. But as the years passed and both of us got jobs and our combined salaries escalated, we lost some of that freedom. After all, we certainly couldn't expect God to call us to someplace where we would be making less. Suddenly, money had influenced a decision to follow God faithfully and obediently. Wealth had

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become a corollary issue to righteousness."

As this verse in Proverbs says, riches and righteousness are interwoven. So which is more important to you? If God put his hand on a possession—a job, a resource, a lifestyle—and said "That needs to go because it is too important to you," what would you say? When God calls you to missions or to give to missions or to your church, do you say, "No, I can't go, I can't give because it would be too much of a sacrifice to my security, my luxuries, my lifestyle—I can't do it."

Which is more important to you, riches or righteousness? Is there a conflict? God says clearly and forthrightly that the meaning of life is not discovered in wealth. Wealth is fleeting, and can lead to pressure, dishonesty, and friends you can't trust. Proverbs repeatedly says that it's better to trust God than to trust finances.

The earning of our resources

God is also concerned about how we earn what we earn.

Prov. 20:21—*"An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end."*

This suggests that if money is gained when we are young, we may not be mature enough to value and use it wisely. Thus we will not be blessed, it will be squandered, or there will be no satisfaction because we have not worked for it or waited for it.

Prov. 16:8—*"Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice."*

Prov. 13:11—*"Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow."*

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These verses remind us that business practices must be just and equitable. We need business ethics, responsible consumerism, and integrity in getting and/or spending our money. In God's priority system, ends do not justify means. If we use the wrong means to get wealth, we will ultimately lose it. *"He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor"* —Prov. 28:8.

Somehow justice will be done. God will not allow exploitation by a believer to go on forever. He wants us to ethically proceed in the workplace, even if that means going slowly. One thing that upsets our God a great deal is to see a pious Christian businessman/woman exploiting others:

- in the way they treat their employees.
- or in the shoddy products they produce for sale to unsuspecting customers.
- or through discriminatory hiring practices.

God will ultimately correct this. If we show patience, rather than try for the maximum/quick return at the expense of others, we will be successful—Prov. 16:8; 13:11. This is a lesson for the businessman, and for the person who doesn't have what he/she needs now. Save little by little. Don't despise steady accumulation even if it is slow.

Proverbs 23:4-5 says, *"Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. 5] Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle."* This implies we are not to labor for our resources to the point of collapse through fatigue. We are to show restraint in our work, to have enough wisdom to see the fleeting value of money, which flies off to the sky like an eagle/vulture.

This is really a cartoon picture of a wasted individual who loses his money to a bird/vulture due to weakness caused by exhaustion and overwork. The guy is on the ground weakly reaching for his money, but the bird/vulture is so quick, it flies away with the money in its mouth.

The stewardship of our resources

God is also concerned with what we do with our resources after we've earned them.

The promise of God concerning stewardship is that He will bless the one involved in giving, tithing, or just plain generosity, but He opposes the greedy.

Prov. 28:25—*"A greedy man stirs up dissension, but he who trusts in the Lord will prosper."*

The Principles of Good Stewardship

Prov. 3:9-10; 3:27-35; Prov. 22:9; 21:13; 11:24-25; 19:17; 21:26; 14:31.

The generous will prosper and be surprised in many ways.

If we give, we will get something in return—a greater capacity to give:

Prov. 11:24—*"One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty."*

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Prov. 11:25—*"A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."*

This giving is unrestricted, and it means distributing widely, generously, perhaps brashly. The capacity of these types of givers increases, not so they can spend it on themselves but so they can continue to give. This refreshing of others is like having an artesian well, so that while we are pumping water into other people's lives, we have an endless supply ourselves—11:25.

If we give to the poor, we are lending to God, and He will pay us back. Prov. 19:17 says, *"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done."* The words mean that they will be giving a loan to God; and the reward in the Hebrew means He will pay back a fair and accurate recompense.

If we give generously, we will also escape the sin of covetousness—Prov. 21:25-26. *"The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. 26] All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing."*

One great gain of generosity is that it protects us from the destruction and preoccupation of greed.

Giving is like farming—Prov. 3:9-10.

Prov. 3:9-10—*"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; 10] then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine."*

A parallel passage is found in 2 Corinthians 9:6-8. *"Remember this: 'Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7] Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for*

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God loves a cheerful giver. 8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

Giving is like farming. You harvest in proportion to planting. If you plant a few seeds, you won't get much of a harvest. If you plant a lot, you'll reap more. God wants us to be big farmers. He wants us to give cheerfully. "Cheerfully" in 2 Cor. 9:7 would better be translated "hilariously"—a person who enjoys the experience. God doesn't want us to operate out of compulsion or external pressure. He wants us to do what we feel good about doing.

It's important in giving not to compare ourselves with others. Maybe your neighbors are even stingier than you are, so you might get a false sense of satisfaction in comparison. Or perhaps your neighbors give more than you do, and you feel guilty. Your giving, in reality, is between you and the Lord. God wants you to give cheerfully, not comparatively. God wants us to use our wealth, no matter what we have to honor Him—Prov. 3:9-10. *"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops..."*

Giving to the work of God through the local church should be consistent, regular and generous.

Prov. 3:9-10—*"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops..."* Mal. 3:8-10; Lk 11:42. In the Old Testament the tithe—or 10 percent of the crop—was required, and it was to be the first and best of the crop—Prov. 3. In the New Testament, that tithing principle was never done away with. Jesus made it clear, however, that our attitude in giving the tithe and our lifestyle of love and justice can undermine how God receives it and its value.

Lk. 11:42—*"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone."*

In the New Testament, giving varied and was not limited to 10 percent. In Mark 12, the widow

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gave all she had, and Jesus exalted her. In Acts, some members of the church sold their land and gave the proceeds to God. Ananias and Sapphira, however, died trying to keep up with their friends. Their mistake was attempting to live up to what their neighbors were doing and then lying when they couldn't do this cheerfully.

In the church today there are a number of significant ways we can give. Ten percent is a good starting point:

Mal. 3:9-10—*"You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. 10] Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'"*

In addition, I believe we should prayerfully consider between us and God whether we want to be a channel for a "faith promise" to missions. Also, Proverbs speaks very clearly about showing compassion to the needy, so giving through the benevolence fund or directly is a needed thing. Proverbs 22:9 says, *"A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."*

God makes His promises not to entice us to be generous, but to explain a working principle: he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully. (See Prov. 11:25.) How is all this possible?

The priority of the giving of our resources

2 Cor. 8:5—*"And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will."*

The Priority

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" . . .they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us..."

The Purpose

" . . .in keeping with God's will."

What a wonderful privilege it is to give.