

At Least as Dangerous as Porn

By: Jon Bloom

When you think of the kind of trials that test your faith (James 1:2), do you ever think of material prosperity as one of them? Most of us don't. We tend to think of suffering, adversity, and loss that put us in places of significant need.

And we try to avoid experiencing such needs if at all possible. If such experiences come, we really want, and therefore pray, for God to deliver us from the needy seasons as soon as possible. For surely a God who loves his children would not want them experiencing need, right? He'd want to bless us, right? Right. Unless *need* happens to hold greater, richer spiritual blessings than *plenty*. In that case, needy seasons would be greater gifts to God's children than plenteous seasons.

Think about the testimonies you've heard of people's powerful encounters with God. Ask yourself how many of those stories of powerful, transformational, life-altering, love-producing, sanctifying encounters with God were the result of being lavished with worldly prosperity. If you're like me, you come up empty. But if you know any, you can probably count them on one hand with fingers left over. On the other hand, how many of those stories involve people in some way being, as we say, brought to the end of themselves? Let that sink in for moment: we tend to encounter God more profoundly in our places of need than in our places of prosperity.

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In fact, if we take the Bible seriously, material prosperity should frighten us, in some sense, because the Bible says frightening things about it:

- Jesus: "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:24–25)
- Paul: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things." (1 Timothy 6:10–11)
- James: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire." (James 5:1–3)

Not to diminish the dangers of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:9–11), but have you ever noticed that the New Testament issues more dire warnings against the spiritual dangers of material prosperity than sexual immorality? Jesus didn't say it's harder for a sexually immoral person to get into heaven than a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye. He said it about rich people. And most people who read this live in one of the richest nations in the history of the world.

Do we tremble? Why is it that prosperous Christians aren't forming accountability groups like crazy to help us keep our lives free from the love of money (Hebrews 13:5)? We know that desensitization to sexually immoral images or videos is dangerous to our souls, but are we at all in touch with the effects of wealth after many decades of being immersed in a prosperous culture? How has it affected us? How desensitized are we — especially in light of the fact that, according to the Bible, prosperity is at least as spiritually dangerous as pornography?

Trial of "Facing Abundance"

Another thing to notice: listen to how Paul speaks of abundance when writing his thank-you letter to the Philippian Christians for providing for his needs in prison:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11–13)

Does it strike you as strange that Paul speaks of *abundance* in the same way he speaks of *need*? He speaks of both as requiring faith, which means both are distinct kinds of faith-trials. Over years of trial and testing, he learned the secret of facing *both* circumstances. We know that being materially "brought low" is a trial. But do we think of materially "abounding" as a trial? If we don't, it may be that we are too accustomed to it, too comfortable with it — desensitized to it. And if this is the case, we're in a dangerous place.

Abundance easily obscures our vulnerabilities, giving us a misleading sense of security, and often a false sense of independence. The danger lies precisely in the fact that it doesn't feel dangerous. We tend to like the feeling it gives. Being people whose sinful, self-centered pride is far more pervasive and powerful than we are usually aware of, we love the sense of autonomy and indulgent opportunities wealth affords. We love not feeling needy. We consider that normal.

But according to Jesus, we are completely needy. We need him like branches need the vine (John 15:5). The problem is that prosperity has a tendency to mask that need. And this is why for most people, abundance is spiritually harder to face faithfully than need. In need, we are likely to be more in touch with our true need before God. Need has a way of humbling us. But in abundance, we are less likely to be in touch with our true need and it has a way of fueling our pride.

Strength to Abound

If we live in prosperity, we must take the Bible's warnings earnestly to heart. For the sake of love, we must help each other keep our lives free from the love of money and what that means for us. We must be as vigilant to be prosperously pure as we seek to be sexually pure. Both money and sex are gifts from God, but both can also destroy us if we are not careful. It takes tremendous spiritual strength to not be seduced by material wealth, to not transfer our trust in God to the material abundance wealth affords. Stay alert for prosperity's seduction. It promises happiness and security and independence, but without the grace of God — without a mature, wholehearted faith in God — it will lead to many pangs (1 Timothy 6:10). For money is as seductive as sex, perhaps more so.

Remember Paul's lament over those whose love of money caused them to wander away from the faith (1 Timothy 6:10). Remember Jesus's lament over the rich man who could not follow him because he owned many possessions (Mark 10:21–23). And remember Paul's example:

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12–13)

We need strength to abound. We need strength to resist prosperity's siren song. And therefore, we need as much of God's strength in abundance as we do in need, and very likely more.



Life Group Study Guide
January 27-28, 2018
Not For Polite Conversation - Materialism
Dr. Kurt Bjorklund

Message Notes:

Reference:

Open in prayer and read John 4:1-30.

Review: What was one thing from this weekend's message that challenged, confused, or stood out to you?

Reflect:

1. Do you agree with Jon Bloom's article, that materialism is *At Least as Dangerous as Porn*?

2. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 and discuss the significance of Paul's words with regard to materialism. Why do you think Paul writes about the dangers of *loving money*?

3. Are there any purchases (major or minor) you make where you seek the advice of others beyond your immediate family? Why or why not?
 - a. Who helps you keep your materialism in check?

 - b. Share about a time where you made a purchase you ended up regretting.

4. What do you believe is God's attitude regarding our discretionary (non-essential) spending?

5. How would your life be different if you were content with what you have?

Respond/Reinforce:

Meditate on Hebrews 13:5-6 and take inventory of your financial behavior. Are you content or do you see evidence of materialism? You may want to discuss this with your Life Group Leader, a pastor, or someone else you trust.