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Through the Needle's Eye

By David Servant

Chapter Eleven

The Old Testament View

Although I rested my case at the close of the ninth chapter, it occurs to me that there are many professing Christians who resort to various Old Testament scriptures to justify their disobedience to Christ's commandments. I've already limitedly exposed the more common fallacies of those kinds of justifications, but I thought it might be helpful to examine a number of relevant Old Testament scriptures, anticipating that I might be accused of ignoring them. Thus the reason for this appendix. It can be used to better equip those who are defending the truth against those who are perverting it. The Old Testament, taken as a whole, absolutely annihilates the doctrines of modern prosperity preachers and condemns the self-indulgence of most Western evangelicals.

Allow me to begin by first asking a question. If we discover an Old Testament scripture that contradicts (either real or imagined) what Christ clearly taught, does our discovery give us the right to nullify Christ's and His apostles' teaching? Certainly not. If we can't find a way to reconcile what Jesus taught with what the Old Testament teaches, we would be foolish not to give prerogative to Christ. We are, of course, living under the new covenant and are supposed to be obeying Jesus' commandments.

We should also acknowledge that the New Testament upholds a somewhat higher standard of holiness than the Old, and from us to whom much has been given shall more be required (see Luke 12:48). For example, God obviously permitted the polygamy of some Old Testament leaders such as Jacob, David and Solomon, but New Testament overseers must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). We don't we justify having multiple wives and concubines based on Old Testament scriptures. Is it not because we have more divine light?

God permitted His old covenant people to acquire slaves from surrounding pagan nations (see Lev. 25:44). Shall we justify doing the same based on what God allowed them to do? Is God telling Christian believers to invade neighboring nations as a means of His judgment upon them as He did the people of Israel? Obviously not.

We who are indwelt by God's Spirit have a higher capacity to live godly lives. Jesus gave us a *new* commandment, which is to love each other even as He has loved us (see John 13:34), a very high standard indeed. Why would we ever imitate some patriarch, wealthy only by the standards of his own day, who did not have the spiritual revelation, spiritual help, or God-given responsibility that we possess, when we have Christ, our sinless Shepherd and Lord, to follow and imitate?

Moreover, by a very large majority, the people who lived before and during the Old Covenant were not wealthy. They generally lived by similar standards that many citizens of the developing world do today. What grounds do prosperity preachers have to single out a few Old Testament kings from among millions of other Old Testament people and use them as examples of God's will for all New Testament believers?

Throughout our Old Testament survey, we'll discover ancient endorsements of what Christ taught, but every person about whom we read will not necessarily attain to His new covenant standards. Some scriptures will answer a few nagging questions that remain or tweak our understanding more closely to a perfect biblical balance. This survey will also help us to identify the Old Testament scriptures that are so often misused to support modern prosperity teaching. A careful and honest examination of those passages will expose the many modern fallacies that are used to justify greed.

A surprising amount of information is found in the Old Testament that is relevant to our topic of money, possessions and stewardship. Hundreds of scriptures could be listed under the heading of "Personal Stewardship." I have thus avoided commenting on a number of those scriptures that added nothing to balance or enhance truths we've already learned. I've also avoided quite a few scriptures that are accountings of offerings to God, even though they certainly buttress Christ's teaching on stewardship. I have not, however, avoided scriptures that could be considered contradictory to what Christ taught. I think it will be well worth your time to read this entire appendix.

Genesis

2:4-3:24 From the first pages of the Old Testament, we note that when God created the first two humans, He gave them only what they needed—food, and human and divine companionship. Later, after their fall when they needed it, He provided clothing. The climate in the garden of Eden must have been perfect, the temperature fluctuating only slightly through the day and night (see Gen. 3:8), so Adam and Eve needed no clothing. Perhaps God gave them or they constructed some kind of a dwelling, but we have no record of this. Their water was pure¹ and all the food they needed was waiting to be picked nearby. Their time would have been occupied by enjoying God's creation, fellowshiping with Him and one another, cultivating the garden of Eden, perhaps some limited animal husbandry, and a few other necessities—eating, bathing and so on. In short, they would have been subsistence farmers living in a tropical paradise, having very few, if any, possessions.

Obviously, having just the essentials must not be so bad, because that is all God gave Adam and Eve. We have been duped by our materialistic culture into thinking that happiness is made possible by owning material things. Adam and Eve could have been perfectly happy with what God gave them. And what God gave them was essentially all that most people have had over the past 6,000 years, and all that most people in the world have today. Why do we believe we need so much to be happy? Why do we buy more of what we don't need when there are so many people who are lacking basic essentials whom we could help? Why are we discontent even with all we have?

Indeed, discontentment was Adam and Eve's undoing. The serpent seduced Eve into believing that there was something beyond what God had given her that could make her happy. So she ate what God forbade, expecting to find fulfillment, and her husband followed suit. Neither trusted that the Lord had told them the truth in His previous warning, and their unbelief and discontentment resulted in their expulsion from Paradise. How many of us have suffered because of our own discontentment? I suspect all of us.

¹ Note that their water would have been pure because it was unpolluted by industry that produces all the products we love. The cost of modern products is much more than the money we pay for them at the cash register. Much of the creation is being destroyed as we crave more stuff.

4:2-5, 20-22 We read in verse 2 of the very first sector economy. For some reason, perhaps natural inclination, survival, mutual benefit, or material gain, Abel and Cain are found in different vocations. By the time we come to 4:20-22, it seems that diversified economics had established a course of no return in early civilization. Technology also had its beginning, and here are the roots of capitalism. Enterprising individuals could benefit by providing some useful goods or service to others.

It has been suggested that the parents of Cain and Abel learned about bringing God offerings of animal sacrifices when He clothed them with the skins of slain animals after their fall. Perhaps He gave them a lesson on how their sin and shame could be covered and what they needed to do if they sinned again. Regardless, Cain and Abel obviously knew about bringing the Lord offerings, something stipulated later in the Law of Moses by God Himself. Offerings could be brought to God for various reasons—for thanksgiving, atonement and so on—but in every case there was an acknowledgment of the worshiper's stewardship and God's ownership. The worshiper relinquished something he possessed and would watch his offering go up in smoke "to God" as it were. Regular offerings were a regular safeguard against attachment to material things and a continual reminder of God's lordship over one's possessions. This practice is something that God established from the dawn of human history, and it was practiced prior to the Law by Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Gen. 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7), making it no insignificant concept.

13:1-12 Abram was an elderly chieftain who headed a nomadic community of perhaps more than one thousand souls (he was able to muster an army of 318 fighting men from among their number according to 14:14). He probably inherited his leadership position and much of his wealth at the death of his father, Terah.

Abram's community lived in tents because they would have needed to move periodically to find pasture for their livestock, the basis of their livelihood. They would have been sustained by eating their animals and consuming or utilizing the animal products, and by selling some of their animals or animal products, using the money they gained to purchase other necessities.

They apparently were able to graze their animals on land they didn't own or lease, and as their herds and flocks naturally multiplied, Abram and Lot found that they needed to separate out of necessity. The arid land simply could not sustain their combined livestock, which must have numbered in the thousands of animals.

Thus we read that "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold" (13:2), but one could hardly call his lifestyle luxurious or self-indulgent. The entire community lived in tents pitched in remote areas, sleeping on some sort of mats or rugs on the ground. They had no running water, refrigeration, electricity, and so on. They ate, not at tables, but sitting on rugs or mats. Perhaps they had a few tents they used as toilet tents. I always have to chuckle when I hear some prosperity preacher talk about how we can be rich "like Abraham." Would you trade places with Abram to have his wealth?

Compared to others in his community, Abram was the richest, being the owner of the livestock. But to maintain and gain wealth, he needed his community, and the community needed his wealth to survive. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, Abram was comparable to an owner of a modern, mid-sized business. Using his God-given resources, he created jobs. He hired people to take care of necessary responsibilities, and they joined his community for their economic wellbeing and physical safety. Abram had great responsibility—hundreds of people depended on him for their lives, and he took care of them all. It was not as if Abram was living in a luxury palace along the Mediterranean Sea, collecting weekly profit checks that were mailed from his slaves who eked out a living in the wilderness. He was not like modern CEOs who make 400 times the salary of their average employee. He gained his wealth justly, and used it for the benefit of an entire community. In that respect, Abram was a wonderful example for modern Christian business owners to imitate.

Neither does it appear that money was Abram's God. He graciously offered Lot his choice of pasture when they needed to separate their flocks and herds (see 13:8-12). He paid tithes to

Melchizedek the priest from the spoils of his just war with the four kings (see 14:20), and he wouldn't accept payment from the king of Sodom for his invaluable service to him (see 14:21-24). We really don't have any conclusive information from Scripture that this blessed man whom God commanded to "be a blessing" (12:2) was greedy.

But was not Abram's wealth "in silver and in gold" (13:2) the equivalent of earthly treasures? Even if it was, how much of the New Testament had Abram ever read? (In fact, how much of the Old Testament?) Are we to follow Abram's example or Christ's? We know that Abram twice lied about his relationship with his wife, saying she was his sister (see 12:10-20; 20:1-5). Moreover, Abram had a sexual relationship with his wife's Egyptian maid (see 16:1-4) and kept concubines (see 25:5-6). Shall we follow his example in those cases in disregard of Christ?

Finally, here are a few questions for which we don't have certain answers: How many (if any) of Lot's flocks and herds came as a gift from his uncle, Abram? Were there any impoverished people in Abram's day, and if so, did Abram know about them, and if so, did he ignore their plight?² How many of the hundreds who lived with him had perhaps been destitute before he offered them employment? In regard to his silver and gold, how much capital did he need to have in liquid assets in order to continue to operate his business, like any other modern business owner? Could his wealth in livestock, silver and gold have been the equivalent of a modern person's business capital, when perhaps millions of dollars are tied up in inventory, equipment or buildings, while the owner has little personal wealth by comparison? (Meanwhile, because of his initiative, hundreds of people are employed and providing for their families.) And why is Abram chosen by modern prosperity preachers as the norm when Abram clearly was not the norm even among his own people? Why don't they mention that he lived in a tent all his life?

14:17-20 Hundreds of years before the Law of Moses was given, we find Abram paying tithes to an authentic priest and king of Salem (the future city of Jerusalem). Tithing was originally either a human or divine idea. Since its practice was later stipulated in the Law of Moses, I would prefer to think that tithing was a divinely-given concept rather than a pagan one that God adopted for His worshipers. Archeological discoveries reveal to us that the Chaldeans of the city of Ur, the hometown of Abram and his father, Terah, actually tithed to their pagan priests. So perhaps tithing was something Abram learned in Ur. Abram's example of tithing was passed down to his posterity, at least, to his grandson, Jacob (see Gen. 28:22).

Tithing was always an acknowledgement of God's ownership and the worshipper's stewardship. Since God is the source of all provision and blessing, He deserves to be honored by the giving of tithes. Tithing isn't a new covenant practice, but certainly not because God expects less devotion from His new covenant children than from His old covenant servants. Tithing is a great starting place in stewardship, but the Christ who indwells Christians whom He abundantly blesses will not be satisfied only to tithe. He who indwells us is not any more greedy than He was when He walked the earth two-thousand years ago.

15:13-14 More than half a millennium before it occurred, God revealed to Abram that his descendants would become a race of slaves in a foreign nation (not exactly a promise of prosperity). But the God of justice would judge their oppressors, and His settlement with the oppressing nation would include their having to pay "back wages" to the slaves whom they exploited to enrich themselves. God kept His promise, and at the Exodus, the Israelites "plundered the Egyptians" (Ex. 12:36).

Certainly there are many parallels between the Exodus story and New Testament redemption. Like the Israelites, we have been released from slavery and an oppressing kingdom. Our slavery, however, was to sin; the kingdom from which we were set free was

² If there were no impoverished people, or if there were some that Abram wasn't aware of, he was under no obligation.

Satanic, not Egyptian. Prosperity preachers like to add, however, that we, like the Israelites, should expect to become rich once we're delivered from the kingdom of darkness.

The delivered Israelites, however, weren't exactly made wealthy to the point of being able to live in luxurious self-indulgence as they wandered in the wilderness, or even once they settled in Canaan. During and after the Exodus, God provided what the Israelites needed to live and what they needed to construct the Tabernacle for Him. But they ultimately complained about the food that He supplied in the wilderness, and in Canaan, they lived like people do today in the developing world.

We too should expect that our new Father will take care of our needs and equip us for every preordained good work, just as He did for the Israelites in the wilderness. But most likely, we've been wealthy all our lives, always having much more than we needed. We are much more like the Egyptians, who became rich at the expense of others, than we are like the impoverished Israelite slaves. Thus, we should not expect that God will make us richer. Rather, like repentant Egyptians, we should be using the wealth we already possess to help set oppressed people free from sin and supply their needs. If God entrusts us with even more money, then we have even more to use for His purposes.

18:1 Here is *wealthy* Abraham (formerly *Abram*), still living in a tent, twenty-four years after the Lord first spoke to him (see 12:4; 17:1). His nephew, Lot, has a house in the city (see 19:1-11) that will soon dramatically depreciate in value when God rains fire and brimstone upon Sodom, forcing him to retreat to the comfort of a cave (see 19:30).

20:14-16 With Abimelech's gift, Abraham now has even more sheep and oxen to look after, which is probably why Abimelech also gave him servants (employees), knowing he needed more help to take care of his new livestock. Abraham's community is growing, and he now has more people than ever who are dependent upon him for their livelihood. Perhaps Abimelech also gave Abraham those 1,000 pieces of silver knowing that he would need it to cover the new expenses associated with his growing community. Or perhaps God was blessing Abraham through Abimelech because Abraham was a blessing to so many people. God had previously said to Abraham, "I will bless you....so you shall be a blessing (Gen. 12:2), or literally, "so be a blessing." God blesses people to make them a blessing to others.

Incidentally, Abraham returned some of those sheep and oxen to Abimelech in 21:27.

23:3-20 If wealthy Abraham owned any other real estate from age 75 until his death at age 175, scripture is silent about it. His wealth consisted of livestock, silver, gold and servants (see 24:35).

24:22, 35, 53 See my comments on 13:1-12.

26:12-17 Isaac's God-granted wealth, like his father Abraham's, consisted of livestock and "a great household" (26:14), that is, a large community of people that he headed. Like his father, he also lived in tents as a nomadic chieftain. I doubt that any reader would want to trade places with him in order to have his wealth.

There is no indication that Isaac hoarded his growing wealth or used it to live in luxury. Like his father, he would have been somewhat comparable to a modern owner of a mid-sized business who continually reinvests his profits into his growing operation. Isaac provided a living for many people. There is no evidence that he misused his stewardship.

Even if Isaac wasn't a good steward of his wealth, that wouldn't change what Jesus commanded His followers to do with their wealth. Scripture never states that Isaac is a model that New Testament Christians should imitate. Why do prosperity preachers set Isaac up as a standard for Christians, yet ignore, for example, Isaac's many servants, who owned much less? And why have we never heard any prosperity preacher say, "Have faith in God so that you can

be rich like Isaac, living in a tent in remote areas as you follow your herds and flocks from place to place!?”

28:20-22 Although one could easily critique the merits of Jacob’s vow as well as his character, to his credit it can be said that he only hoped that God would supply his basic needs of food, covering and safety. Also to his credit, Jacob promised that if God did provide those things, he would tithe. Jacob apparently knew about tithing hundreds of years before its practice was stipulated in the Law of Moses.

30:43 Like his father and grandfather, Jacob’s prosperity also consisted of an abundance of livestock and servants who worked for him. According to his testimony before his wives and father-in-law recorded in 31:4-13, 36-42, God justly transferred to him the wealth he produced for dishonest Laban (see 30:27-30).

Because Jacob owned many sheep, goats, camels, oxen and donkeys, does that prove it is God’s will for every Christian to own many sheep, goats, camels, oxen and donkeys? If not, then what gives anyone the right to say it proves it is God’s will for all of us to hold more modern forms of wealth purely for the sake of self-indulgence, especially in the light of all Christ and His apostles taught? Because Jacob had two wives, does that prove it is God’s will for every Christian man to have two wives?

Similar to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob also was somewhat equivalent to a modern mid-sized business owner. His servants were his employees and his business was raising livestock. He could consume the products of his animals, sell their products or sell the animals themselves and thus make a living. He may have been wealthy by the standards of his day, but would you trade places with him? Note how he described his “luxurious life” of tending Laban’s flocks and herds: “By day the heat consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes” (31:40).

34:25-29 Who would maintain that Jacob’s sons acquired this wealth legitimately? This was nothing less than cold-blooded murder and thievery, motivated by revenge. Even worse, it was an unjust revenge, as an entire city was punished for one man’s misdeed. I wonder, why don’t prosperity preachers use these rogues as examples for us to follow to attain divine prosperity?

39:2-6, 21-23 God prospered Joseph and made him successful in Potiphar’s house and in prison, yet there is no indication that his success resulted in the increase of his personal wealth in either place. Rather, it was Potiphar’s wealth that seemed to have increased because of God’s blessing on Joseph (see 39:5). Even if Potiphar did reward Joseph financially, Joseph lost it all when he was thrown into prison, where he spent several years, at least (see 41:1).

Why do some prosperity preachers use thirty-year-old Joseph as a model of God’s will for all Christians? What about the first twenty-nine years of his life? Was there some deficiency in his faith for his first twenty-nine years that stopped him from experiencing “God’s best”?

Joseph was indeed successful in all that he did, always increasing in favor before his superiors as he faithfully fulfilled his responsibilities. He was obviously a man of high character who maintained a good conscience before God. In regard to any money that the Lord may have entrusted to him, I suspect that Joseph was just as faithful in his stewardship before God as he was before men.

41:42-49 Joseph was now a rich, powerful man with a pagan wife, the daughter of the priest of On. He also had the most important job on the face of the earth, administrating the greatest relief effort to that point of history and perhaps of all time. Joseph was responsible to store huge quantities of excess grain for seven years in order to provide food for the world during the seven years of famine that would follow. He knew that he had been given much, and from him much would be required, later declaring to his brothers, “God sent me...to preserve life” (45:5).

He recognized, unlike so many of us, that God gave abundance, not for self-indulgence, but in order to meet the pressing needs of others.

How sad it is that some prosperity preachers focus on Joseph's wealth while ignoring his service to the hungry, his extraordinary generosity (see 42:25; 44:1; 45:21-23; 47:12), and his prophetic significance, as he stands out as preeminent type of Christ found in the Old Testament. Here was a man who was rejected by his own, sold for some pieces of silver, but who was received by and exalted among the Gentiles, becoming their "savior." Joseph's rule foreshadowed the time when Christ will rule over the entire earth from Jerusalem, when "all the nations will stream to it" (Is. 2:2), just as the nations streamed to Egypt to buy grain (see Gen. 41:56-57).

Joseph is indeed a model for any Christian who has been entrusted with much. His story, however, is certainly not recorded in the Bible to encourage rich North Americans to "believe God" for more wealth with which they can further indulge themselves, while millions starve and face eternity without Christ.

47:13-26 Did Joseph become greedy, shrewdly taking advantage of desperate people to gain immense wealth for himself? Why didn't he give away grain rather than sell it?

Perhaps because it wasn't his to give. It belonged to Pharaoh, considered a god by the Egyptians, and Joseph worked for him. The profits belonged to Pharaoh as well, not Joseph (see 47:14, 19-20, 23, 24). As the famine continued year after year, Pharaoh eventually owned all the money, all the livestock, the majority of the land, and practically all the people of Egypt. Amazingly, the Egyptian citizens did not hate Joseph, but appreciated him for saving their lives (see 47:25). They didn't consider what he did to be unfair.

Everyone agrees that Joseph's story is a marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's story, as the similarities are unmistakable. Is it not possible that this section of the story foreshadows the time when Christ will rule over the kingdom of His Father, when everyone will personally own nothing, true stewards of what rightfully belongs to Him, glad to be servants of the one who has saved them? The events of the historic story are so remarkable that one can't help but wonder if God orchestrated them precisely only to that end.

To use the story of Joseph to prove that God wills for all His children to be immensely wealthy is unwarranted. Why not also say that God wants all His children to be sold into slavery by their own families, or be falsely accused of attempted rape? Where does Scripture teach that we are to be imitators of Joseph? And even if any of Joseph's actions stand in contradiction to what Christ taught, does that relieve us of responsibility to obey our Lord?

One truth that surfaces in this story, a truth that is consistent with the rest of Scripture, is that God supplies the needs of His people. Long before the seven-year famine, God made plans to preserve the lives of Israel and his sons through an unselfish man named Joseph. God cares about us, and we don't need to worry about food, drink or covering, just as Jesus taught (see Matt. 6:25-34), even in the midst of famine.

Exodus

3:7-8, 16-17 God's goodness is revealed in His plan to deliver His people from their Egyptian taskmasters and to bring them into a land where they could be free to enjoy the fruit of their labors. The Lord would abundantly supply all their needs in the Promised Land. Although it "flowed with milk and honey," ultimately the Israelites would still have to run the risk of getting kicked by a hoof or stung by a bee to enjoy that milk and honey! God wasn't promising an idle life of ease, but one of productive opportunity. Then, however, they would face a new danger. Later on, He would sternly warn the former slaves not to forget Him once they prospered (see Deut. 8:7-20).

3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36 Here is an unmistakable example of God blessing His own materially. I like to think of the silver, gold and clothing that the Egyptians gave to the Israelites

as being the payment of “back wages,” since the Israelites had worked as slaves for so many years. The Egyptians had enriched themselves by the Israelites’ hard work; now God acted in perfect justice. But their blessings were given to them for another reason as well: God would soon be commanding Moses to receive offerings from the people of Israel in order to construct the Tabernacle in the wilderness (see 25:1-9).

Should we expect, once we’ve become Christians, that God will make us wealthy like the Israelites, as some prosperity preachers claim?

First, I don’t see that the Israelites became instantly wealthy when they plundered the Egyptians. They received clothing and articles of silver and gold. Yet at the Exodus, they left their homes and any large possessions behind. They would be living in tents in the desert as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Would you trade places with them so you could enjoy their wealth?

Second, as I’ve previously stated, the large majority of North Americans are much wealthier than any Israelite was even after the Egyptians had been plundered. We are much more like the Egyptians in the story, who profited from the labor of slaves. Thus, we ought to be sharing our abundance with the needy among God’s people, not expecting that God will give us more so that we can indulge ourselves to an even greater degree.

Third, if the Israelites’ plundering of the Egyptians at the Exodus is the pattern for New Testament Christians, why don’t the prosperity preachers encourage their followers to request clothing, gold and silver from their neighbors, as God did the Israelites? Have you felt led to plunder your neighbors?

What we should expect, once we become Christians, is that God will take care of our true needs, because that is consistent with all of Scripture. And if God adds to that blessing, then we have the blessed opportunity to be a blessing to others.

15:22-25; 16:2-3, 12-35; 17:1-6 In the hot desert, God supplied Israel’s need for water and food, yet He first allowed them to become thirsty and hungry, testing them (see 15:25; Deut. 8:3).

God’s instructions regarding the gathering of manna reveal His desire that they trust Him for their “daily bread,” as He provided only what they needed for one day. The exception was on Friday morning, when the Israelites would gather twice as much as they needed for their households, and the extra manna didn’t become foul the next day, which was the Sabbath rest. The Friday gathering required trust as well.

The apostle Paul found new covenant application in this story, mentioning in his second letter to the Corinthians that when the Israelites gathered the manna for the first time, some gathered much and some gathered little (see 2 Cor. 8:13-15). Yet when each Israelite’s gathered manna was measured, each had exactly one omerful. It was a miraculous redistribution, a clear reminder of God’s love for every Israelite.

Likewise, the Corinthians, from whom Paul was requesting monetary gifts on behalf of poor saints in Jerusalem, should understand that God has the right of redistributing His provision through their generosity. God loves all His children, and thus it should be obvious that His children who have more than they need should share with His children who have less than they need. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the time might come when their roles would be reversed with the Jerusalem saints (see 2 Cor. 8:14), not exactly something any modern prosperity preacher would teach.

20:17 The tenth commandment, prohibiting covetousness, reveals that God is not only concerned about our outward actions, but also our inner attitudes and hidden thoughts. The sins of theft and adultery begin with the desire to possess what belongs to another. Resentment, jealousy and hatred may also have their roots in covetousness. Contentment is the cure.

The tenth commandment also indicates God’s sanction of the private ownership of property. There is nothing wrong with having a house, livestock or even servants. (Note that there were many other commandments in the Law regarding how one treated his servant, revealing that servants were much closer to employees than slaves.)

Keep in mind, however, that when God spoke these words to Israel, there was no great disparity in wealth between individual families of Israelites. At the exodus, there is no indication that there were rich and poor Israelites. All of them had just come out of slavery and all of them had just plundered the Egyptians. In the wilderness, God gave each family equal portions of daily manna. In Canaan, God divided up the land equally among the tribes and families. And finally, knowing that there would inevitably be disparity of wealth among the Israelites, God made provision in the Law for a regular release of debts and the restoration of one's property previously sold out of economic necessity. God leveled the playing field, as it were. What else would we expect from our loving God?

All this is simply to say that the tenth commandment cannot legitimately be used to prove God's sanction of the selfish amassing of wealth. It is simply a prohibition of covetousness.

21:2-6 Certainly this ordinance concerning the release of Israelite slaves after six years of service indicates that God considered such slavery to be less desirable than freedom. Keep in mind that Israelites could only become slaves by choice, not by force. And the only reason one would become a slave of a fellow Hebrew was due to economic necessity. If one incurred debt that he could not repay, for example, he could always sell himself as a slave in order to pay his debt, and he would have a fresh start in six years. Thus this ordinance was given because of God's concern for those facing financial hardship.

It is also clear that such arrangements were nothing similar to the kind of slavery of which we are familiar from American history. At the six-year release date, a slave might love his master so much that he might decide to serve him permanently. He was more like an employee who loved his job rather than a slave.

Why would a Hebrew buy another Hebrew as a slave? Most likely because he needed another person to take care of his crops or livestock. He knew very well that the initial purchase and on-going expenses of keeping his slave would cost him money. Thus his decision to purchase a slave required the same kind of foresight needed by modern employers. Economic forces bearing on available slaves and prospective buyers would determine the price of a slave.

21:33-22:15 Like the tenth commandment, these ordinances regarding individual property rights also reveal God's sanction of privately-owned property. They do not, however, sanction selfishness. The early Christians held private property, but "not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them" (Acts 4:32). Note that individual Christians had things that belonged to them, indicating private ownership, but they shared to the degree that they considered their private belongings to be common property. This was not the forced collectivism of communism, but the free expression of Christ-like love, born from hearts that were released from selfishness.

22:21-27 God's special concern for strangers (foreigners, refugees and travelers), orphans, widows, and other poor people was (and is) so strong that the man who oppressed such people had committed a capital offense. Moreover, the Israelites were forbidden to charge interest on loans made to the poor, as that would be profiting by another's misfortune, a violation of the second greatest commandment.

One could, however, receive from a poor borrower a "pledge" of repayment, some token of good faith, held as collateral until the loan was repaid in full. But in the case when the borrower was so poor that he had nothing better than his own cloak to give as a pledge, the lender was required to return his cloak before the sun set, as the cloak was the poor borrower's only means of keeping warm as he slept. Clearly, such a borrower was one who was extremely poor. Money that he borrowed would be for absolute necessities to sustain him until his fortune changed, or for capital to be used to begin making a living.

22:29-30 We will eventually read the many laws regarding the offerings of the first-fruits, which belonged to God, just as did the first-born animals and sons (who weren't sacrificed, but redeemed).

Imagine making your living by raising sheep and one of your sheep giving birth to a first-born lamb. You are required by God to sacrifice it, offering it up to Him. You would be losing your lamb, and if you had much intelligence, you would probably realize that God wasn't gaining a lamb. What then was the reason for such a requirement? The offerings of the first of the harvest and flock served as a continual reminder that God was the source and rightful owner of every material thing, and that those entrusted with such blessings were His stewards. God wants our hearts in heaven with Him, not on earth with material possessions. One's relationship with God is not right if his attitude and actions regarding his possessions are not in line with these facts.

23:3-8 All injustice is a violation of the second greatest commandment. Although the poor are often robbed of justice by the rich, the rich can also be robbed of justice from those whose compassion for the poor influences them to be partial in a legal dispute. God declares that rich and poor are entitled to equal justice. Being poor does not give one the right to steal what belongs to another, for example. If a poor thief was caught, he could be sold as a slave, and his selling price used to make restitution if he had no other means (see 22:3).

Even one's enemies are entitled to fairness, and just because the livestock of my enemy wanders into my field, I have no right to keep them (see 22:4). I would be stealing, regardless of my justification. (This commandment certainly stands in contradiction to the playground ethic of "Finders: keepers, losers: weepers.")

Using money as a bribe also violates God's justice.

23:10-11 Here God states that the primary reason He required the people of Israel to allow their land to lie fallow every seventh year was so "the needy of your people may eat" (23:11). Certainly this reveals God's special concern for the very poor and His plan to provide for their needs through the sharing of those who had more. God still cares about the poor, and it is still His intention to supply their needs through those who have more than they need.

Note also that, in the wisdom of God the poor were required to gather food for themselves from the fallow fields. People who lacked food because of laziness received nothing. Neither were the industrious poor completely stripped of their dignity by receiving handouts. In most cases, providing opportunities for the poor to earn their living is better than simply giving them what they need.

23:23-33 God, the owner of all land, certainly has the right to take away anyone's land and give it to someone else. In this case, His reason for doing so was because of the sins of the inhabitants of Canaan. He used the Israelites as the means of His judgment upon them, not driving them from their land, but destroying them on their land. The Israelites would then receive the land as God's gift.

This passage, among many others, also illustrates God's desire that His people all have some capital by which they can make a living. In an agricultural economy, people need land. In an information/technological economy they need an education.

25:1-9 How is it that the Israelites, who had been slaves a few days earlier, now owned gold, silver, bronze, scarlet material, fine linen, and so on? Most of those things were likely gained when God granted them favor among the Egyptians, who freely gave them valuable items at the Exodus (see 12:35-36). God intended that at least some of that plunder would be used for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. He blessed His people so they could be a blessing (see also 35:20-36:7).

Note, however, that God only wanted those "whose heart moves him" (25:2) to give, that is, those who had a heart-felt desire to make a contribution because they loved God. God still

wants His people to give as they “purpose in [their] heart[s], not grudgingly or under compulsion,” because He “loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Those who give cheerfully are those who give because they love God and fellow man.

34:21 God’s commandment to rest from labor each seventh day served to safeguard against becoming too focused on work and gaining wealth. Here we read that even during critical times of planting and harvest, when the temptation to work seven days was especially strong, the Sabbath rest should be observed.

Leviticus

1:1-7:38 The burnt, grain, peace, sin and guilt offerings all had at least one thing in common—they all cost the worshipper something. It was *his* sheep, goat, bull or agricultural produce that went up in smoke “to the Lord” (2:9). This practice continually helped the Israelites maintain the proper perspective of their possessions in relationship to God. Each time they brought an offering, they were saying to Him, “You are the source and rightful owner of my wealth and possessions. You have the right to direct the use of what you have entrusted to me. You are worthy to be honored by my relinquishing material things to give them to you.”

19:9-10 As in Exodus 23:10-11, we again read of God’s means of providing for the poor through His own people’s obedience. Note that God expected the poor to work for their food. Although they didn’t have to plant crops, they did have to harvest or gather them. God does not want to subsidize laziness. So much of modern charity encourages irresponsibility, thus sustaining what it should be eliminating. When the poor are able to work and work is available, they should be expected to work. Paul wrote, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thes. 3:10).

19:18 This commandment that Jesus said is the second most important commandment (see Mark 12:31) is found in the Old Testament only once, whereas it is found in the New Testament eight times. Using ratios for comparison, it is found once every 23,145 verses in the Old Testament and once every 994 verses in the New Testament, or 23 times more frequently in the New than in the Old. Paul wrote that this one commandment summarizes the whole Law (see Rom. 13:9; Gal 5:14). James called it the “royal law” (Jas. 2:8).

As the commandment is found here in Leviticus 19, it seems to be a summary of verses 9-18. Loving my neighbor as myself includes doing none of the following: bearing a grudge, taking vengeance, hating my brother in my heart, slandering, showing partiality, disrespecting the handicapped, mistreating employees, stealing from, oppressing or lying to my neighbor, and neglecting the poor.

“Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) asked a Jewish lawyer of Jesus. Are neighbors only people who live in our neighborhood? Are they only “our kind of people”?³

Jesus responded by telling him the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30-37), a man who loved his neighbor, and it cost him time and money. Jesus made it clear that neighbors may be members of groups of people that are hated by our closest neighbors. Moreover, neighbors may not live in our neighborhood. They may live many miles away from us. Today, in our global community, our neighbors are everywhere on the Earth. Would it not be foolish to think that in a world where our selfishness affects people on the other side of the globe that we have no responsibility to love the people on the other side of the globe? For this reason, those of us who claim to be lovers of God and neighbor must live as simply as possible, sharing our excess by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and so on, as well as supporting the spread of the gospel to those who have never heard it yet. If we don’t, how can we claim to be obeying the

³ The Jewish lawyer could have found his answer by reading Lev. 19:34.

commandment our God considers to be the second most important commandment that He ever gave?

25:10-17, 23-34 The year of Jubilee was instituted by God to safeguard every Israelite from temporary and life-long financial destitution. It also prevented economic domination by a few who might amass all the capital, which, in an agricultural economy, is the land. The Jubilee clearly expressed God's desire for economic justice. Every fifty years, the playing field was supposed to be leveled again.

When the Israelites conquered Canaan, each family was given a portion of land, the basic capital from which they could derive their living. If an Israelite met with financial hardship, he could sell part of his land, but God did not allow land to be transferred permanently. If the man had a relative who was able to purchase it back for him, that relative was expected to do so. In the event that there was no "kinsman redeemer," at the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, all land that had been sold over the past fifty years reverted back to its original owner or his heirs. Thus, land values were based on the years left before the Jubilee, and purchasers were more like renters than owners. Additionally, if a person who had been forced to sell his land out of necessity recovered the means to redeem it, he had that right at any time.

Let us imagine an Israelite who finds himself facing a financial crisis. He is unable to feed his family. His problem is solved by selling part of his land to a fellow Israelite for ten years, the number of years that remain until the Jubilee. Let's say he sells a portion of his land for \$10,000, which would amount to \$1,000 for each year left until the Jubilee. He can now feed his family with his cash. He then hires himself out or hopes that next year will bring a bumper crop on his remaining land. At the end of one year he has the right to repurchase his land for \$9,000. If his expenses over the past year did not exceed his income plus \$1,000, he can redeem his land.

Note that God declared that the land was His (see Lev. 25:23). He graciously lent it to His people, and from it they derived their food, fuel, animal feed, and building materials for homes and tools. God never wanted any of His people to lack what they needed. But they had to work.

Everyone needs some capital from which he can earn his livelihood. Capital can be land, a piece of machinery, or a marketable inventory of goods, a skill, or knowledge. Realizing this, we can help lift the poor if we provide them with some kind of capital. Many Christian organizations are doing this around the world by the means of micro-loans, money lent to impoverished yet industrious people at interest rates that match inflation. Micro-loans have proven to be a very successful way of helping the poor help themselves, preserving their dignity while improving their lives. All of us can help the poor by giving to the micro-loan funds of Christian ministries.

25:35-55 Here we read of further provisions God made to assist Israelites who faced financial difficulties. All Israelites were commanded to sustain fellow Israelites (as well as strangers and sojourners among them) who met with hard times. If they lent such a person money or food, they were not permitted to charge any interest (see 25:35-38).

A person meeting severe financial hardship (apparently having had to sell all his land out of necessity to pay debts) could, as a last resort, sell himself as a slave to either a fellow Israelite or to a stranger or sojourner among Israel. For a price, he would agree to serve as a slave for six years or until the year of Jubilee (see Ex 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18), when he could rightfully reclaim "the property of his forefathers" (25:41), getting a fresh start. In essence, he would be renting himself for a specified time and would receive a lump sum that was equivalent to an advance on his full wages. His Israelite purchaser was forbidden to sell him or treat him severely, and was required to treat him, not like a slave, but like a hired man. According to Deuteronomy 15:18, a slave did twice the work of a hired man.

Selling oneself as a slave to a stranger or sojourner among Israel would be done only as a very last resort, and God compassionately made additional provisions for such a desperate person. His relatives had the right to redeem him fairly at any time, freeing him from his

obligation to his purchaser. Also, if the man's fortunes reversed, he had the right to redeem himself fairly at any time.

All of these regulations reveal God's special concern for the poor and His desire for economic justice.

We also note that the Israelites were permitted to acquire male and female slaves from surrounding "pagan nations" and from "the sojourners" living in their midst (see 25:44-46). Particularly in regard to the "sojourners," keep in mind that there were other laws that made provision for their compassionate treatment by the Israelites (see Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:9-10, 33-34; Deut. 26:12). Thus we can safely assume that sojourners who became slaves of Israelites did so voluntarily and out of economic necessity, rather than by force.

26:3-5, 14-15, 20, 26 Here we see the obvious correlation between obedience and material provision. If the people of Israel obeyed God, He assured them that He would supply their material needs. They would have sufficient food from their harvests. If they did not obey Him, however, they would suffer scarcity of food as well as many other hardships. Likewise under the new covenant, God promises to supply our need for food and covering if we seek first His kingdom (see Matt. 6:32-33).

Numbers

7:1-88 I've passed over a few previous passages that mention the giving of offerings, but this one can't be overlooked. It, like those I've passed over, once more illustrates that devotion to the Lord under the old covenant involved the giving up of material things. In fact, such giving was central to old covenant worship. *It cost something to have a relationship with God.* Here we find an entire chapter devoted to enumerating the specific offerings that the tribal leaders brought at the dedication of the Tabernacle. That this was recorded in Scripture reveals that God must have taken notice and considered their sacrifices significant.

8:24-26 Here is the only passage concerning retirement in the Old Testament. We are told that individual Levites were only to serve in the Tabernacle until they reached the age of fifty. After that, they were permitted to assist the younger men who worked in the Tabernacle, but they were prohibited from performing the work itself, which is somewhat of a vague commandment.

We are not told the reason for this commandment. Perhaps it was because the work was too strenuous for the average person over fifty. Regardless, we should certainly not assume that retired Levites were unproductive and lived idle, self-indulgent and meaningless lives. They were still obligated to serve the Lord like any other Israelite.

How does the modern concept of retirement compare to this? When people lived simple lifestyles and were sustained by their own land, there was no great need to save money for retirement. One owned his house, field, and animals, and his capital sustained him until death. Even if one may have become gradually incapable of working in his field and taking care of his animals, he could likely hire someone to do it for him or could easily be sustained by his grown children who would have inherited his land.

Modern retirement differs in that we do not live modestly and thus need continued large incomes to sustain luxurious lifestyles during retirement. Moreover, we most often retire out of desire rather than necessity, and so we race to save huge amounts of money in order to retire as soon as possible. Beyond that, we rarely retire gradually due to old age, but fully retire on a given day. Finally, modern retirement is often considered to be a time for daily self-indulgence and personal entertainment and amusement. How tragic it is that those who should be wise with years, who know they are closer to eternity than most, should spend their final years in continual testimony to their atheism.

The follower of Christ should consider God's will in the matter of retirement.

If you are currently retired, you are highly privileged, more privileged than the majority of people who live in the world today, as well as the majority of people who have ever lived. To

have been able to save enough money so that you don't have to work any longer in order to earn a living is a testimony to your wealth. In developing countries, most people work until they die, and their life spans are much shorter than ours. If they become unable to work, they rely on their families to support them.

A principle of stewardship that certainly applies to retirement is, "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48). The retired person, if in good health in mind and body, has much more discretionary time than one who must earn his living. Therefore, he will have to give account for that time, and God will expect that he use it for His glory. He may even consider going back to work in order to have more to give and share. If he isn't using his time to earn money to share, he should use his time in other ways that serve God's kingdom.

But what about those who are not yet retired? Is there anything wrong with saving money for retirement? This is not the simplest question.

First, the non-retired person should consider his reasons for wanting to eventually retire. If it is so he can spend all his time in the pursuit of leisure and self-indulgence, then he needs to repent and be born again. He is no disciple of Jesus Christ.

If one hopes to retire in order to spend the majority of his time serving others and God, that is certainly more virtuous.

It would seem impossible, however, to save money for retirement without laying up earthly treasures. (Obviously, Social Security and many non-optional company retirement plans relieve one's individual responsibility in this matter.) Thus it would seem advisable that working persons plan to retire only out of necessity, remaining financially fruitful until death in order to always have something to share. This does not require that every believer remain in a job that he hates until his death.⁴ Rather, if he is older, out of debt, and has no children to support, he can probably find a way to sustain himself working part time and thus have more time to devote to ministry and service. If he has had his own business in operation for many years, he may be able to continue earning his living with much less effort than when he began it, or he may be able to scale down his business but still have sufficient income.

It could be argued that saving money for retirement is wise in our modern non-agrarian economy, because most of us do not own land that is our capital, nor do we own our own businesses, things that could support us when we are unable to work. Additionally, saving for a time when one is unable to earn a living so as not to be a burden on others is a way of loving one's neighbor as one's self (see 1 Thes. 4:11-12; 2 Thes. 3:12).

Both of these arguments, however, are based on the assumption that one will eventually experience a time when he will be unable to work. If you expect that will happen to you, then I suppose that you should make plans to be sustained by some means. Personally, I prefer to trust God's promises in this regard, not the least of which is Psalm 92:12-15:

The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree,
He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
Planted in the house of the Lord,
They will flourish in the courts of our God.
*They will still yield fruit in old age;
They shall be full of sap and very green,
To declare that the Lord is upright;
He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him (emphasis added).*

The key to enjoying the benefit of yielding fruit in old age is righteousness. To expect to become incapacitated and unable to earn a living is not exactly an evidence of one's faith in God! Many insurance salespeople make their living from people young and old who dwell

⁴ In my opinion, the person who hates his vocation should find one that he enjoys. Too many stay saddled to jobs they hate only because they love the money those jobs provide.

upon fears of what the future holds. Do we ever consider how much money Christians spend on health insurance, for example, money that often ultimately does nothing more than keep us suffering in hospital beds when we could be in heaven? That same money could be used to spread the gospel and feed orphans, laying up treasure in heaven.

11:1-35 Here is a classic example of discontentment followed by greed. Forgetting God's goodness in their deliverance from slavery, the Israelites complained about manna and wished for meat. We don't have to wonder how God felt about their discontentment, as "the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (11:1).

Prosperity preachers sometimes like to point out the great abundance of quail that God provided, but they fail to see that the quail were more of a punishment than a blessing. God warned that He would give them meat "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you" (11:20). And when they greedily gathered much more than they needed, "the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague" (11:33) so they died. God considered people to be greedy if they gathered more food than what they reasonably needed, and He killed them for it. Why don't prosperity preachers mention that fact?

18:8-28 By receiving certain offerings as well as the tithes of all the people of Israel, the Levites were sustained and enabled to perform their ministry at the Tabernacle. Clearly, it was the duty of every Israelite to tithe and thus insure the continuation of God's intended ministry. Surveys show that the large majority of professing evangelical Christians in America do not come close to attaining even this old covenant standard of giving.

22:4-9 Here is yet another story that illustrates God's view of discontentment. Suffering His judgment, Israelites died because of their discontentment. How must God feel about prosperity preachers who fuel the discontentment of people who are already among the world's richest?

22:1-24:25 Balaam was obviously tempted to fulfill King Balak's request to curse Israel and thus gain riches and honor for himself (see 22:17), but throughout these chapters, he resisted. Scripture reveals, however, that he soon gained the riches he had forfeited by counseling Balak that the only sure way to cause Israel to fall was by getting the Israelites to sin and thus incur God's wrath (see Num. 31:16; Rev. 2:14). Balak followed Balaam's advice, and his plan worked to some degree—24,000 Israelites who yielded to the temptation of idolatry and immorality lost their lives (see 25:1-9). Shortly thereafter, Balaam was killed in battle, and he is remembered in Scripture as a fool who traded God's approval for earthly wealth (see 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). Beware of the deceitfulness of riches!

33:54 True to His love and justice, God commanded that Canaan's land be divided fairly among the families of Israel. No one was favored. Then what must be God's view of the great disparity of wealth that exists today among those who profess to be His children, some of whom have much more than they need, and others of whom are lacking basic necessities?

Deuteronomy

6:10-15 Here is a promise of prosperity coupled with a warning. If the people obeyed God, they would inherit the homes, cisterns, vineyards and orchards of the evil Canaanites whom they would dispossess. They would then have more than they needed. But there was a real danger that their prosperity might distract them from their devotion to the Lord. We, too, need to guard against that same danger.

7:12-13 Just as Jesus promised to supply all the material needs of His followers if they would seek first for His kingdom, God promised Israel blessing on their agricultural pursuits if they

would obey Him. But should we conclude that God would want Israelites who were blessed with superabundant harvests to tear down their barns and build bigger ones so they could retire early? (If you don't know the answer to that question, see Luke 12:16-21.)

8:1-20 Again we find a promise of prosperity joined with a warning. If there was danger of forgetting God due to prosperity during a time when prosperity could be defined as having food without scarcity, "good houses" (that had no running water, glass windows, air conditioning, electricity or appliances), multiplying herds and flocks and multiplying silver and gold, then how much more danger exists for people living in the kind of prosperity to which we are accustomed? God wanted the Israelites never to forget where they had come from and who had brought them out of Egypt. It is sad that modern prosperity preachers often use God's words in 8:18, "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth," as a means of proving that God wants to prosper us, but they ignore the context, neglecting to mention what God was warning of before and after that verse. So many of the modern followers of such preachers have forgotten God and His Son's commandments relative to stewardship as they pursue greater wealth in order to lay up more earthly treasures, proving their devotion to mammon. They consequently set themselves up, not for more prosperity, but to perish, as God promised in 8:19-20. We should understand, however, that if God is the one who gives us the power to make wealth, then God has the right to tell us what to do with the wealth He has empowered us to make.

11:13-17 This is more of a promise of provision rather than prosperity. As long as Israel obeyed God, they would have plenty to eat. Otherwise, they would face deprivation.

12:6 Again we see how stewardship under the old covenant included so many different kinds of giving by those who worshipped the Lord: burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes of every agricultural product, heave offerings, votive offerings, freewill offerings, and the giving of the firstborn of every animal.

13:12-18 I can't help but wonder why prosperity preachers pick and chose what they want from the Old Testament to find application for their modern audiences. One could just as easily find application from verses like these to justify killing prosperity preachers who are trying to lead us astray to follow the god of mammon! And why do prosperity preachers not find some message for New Testament believers in the material goods that were "under the ban" and to be publicly burned in 13:16-17? Is there nothing "under the ban" for us?

14:22-29 These instructions regarding tithing seem contradictory to what we have previously read in Numbers 18:21-28, where God said that all the tithe of Israel belonged to the Levites. Here we read of tithes being used by tithers for a big feast, and of every third year the tithe being given not only to Levites, but also to aliens, orphans and widows. Commentators debate how to reconcile these apparent contradictions. I speculate that, because there was no way for a family to eat a tenth of all their annual increase in one feast, each family used a small portion of their tithe for a feast that included Levite guests, and then all of the remainder was given to the Levites. Then, as believed by some Jewish commentators, every third year a second tithe was received that was given to the Levites, aliens, orphans and widows in one's own town.

15:1-18 This passage gives us a balanced picture of God-pleasing prosperity and stewardship. First, note that every seven years, every indebted Israelite became debt free. God leveled the playing field, because He is a God of love and justice. He didn't want some to grow richer as others grew poorer. Keep in mind that Israelites only went into debt because of necessity, not because of purchasing luxuries.

Second, note that Israel's prosperity depended on their obedience (see 15:5), which would include their obedience to His laws in this very chapter that relate to remitting debts every

seven years and taking care of the poor. *Prosperity was promised only to those who cared for the poor* (see 15:10).

Third, note that lending money to a poor person could easily become an act of giving if the year of remission was near. In such cases, God forbade prosperous Israelites from hardening their hearts against their poor brethren.

And fourth, any Israelite who became a slave (which would have been only because of economic necessity) was to be set free after six years of service, and at that time, his master was commanded to provide him liberally with food and animals to sustain him. This, again, reveals God's concern for the poor and for economic justice.

16:9-15 At the annual, one-week Feast of Weeks, we see that the Israelites, blessed with abundance, were to remember the less fortunate and include them in their celebration. When there are so many scriptures in the Old Testament that speak of God's concern for the poor, why do prosperity preachers focus on those that speak of God's promises of prosperity?

16:16-17 All Israelite males were required to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem three times a year, but never "empty-handed." God expected them to bring an offering according to His blessing upon them. This was giving beyond the tithe, and another reminder to the Israelites that they were only stewards of all God had entrusted to them.

17:14-17 All of these things which God forbade the future king of Israel to do, Solomon did. He multiplied horses, wives and silver and gold for himself. The world's wisest man became the world's most foolish man, laying up earthly treasures, and he ultimately became an idolater.

20:10-14 One means God used to prosper Egypt's former slaves was through the plunder they gained when besieging pagan cities. Since some prosperity preachers find all the support for their doctrine in the Old Testament, why don't they encourage their followers to attack their pagan neighbors, kill the men, and take their women, children and possessions for themselves, so that they might prosper according to God's will? If you asked them, they would reply that such a practice is unscriptural under the new covenant, and they are correct. They rightly negate an Old Testament practice by considering New Testament truth. My question then is this: Is it safe to assume that the means have been negated but not the ends? Didn't Jesus forbid new covenant followers to lay up earthly treasures, telling them to sell what they have in order to give to charity? Did God ever say such a thing to the people of Israel?

24:10-13 The "pledge" mentioned here is what we would call collateral to secure a loan. God's special concern for the very poor is revealed by His prohibition against keeping a poor man's cloak, given as a pledge, overnight. For what purpose would such a poor man be borrowing money? Probably for the most basic essentials.

24:14-15 God's special concern for the poor is again revealed by His commandment to pay a poor worker before the sun sets.

24:19-22 We are certainly finding more scriptures in the Old Testament that speak of God's concern for the poor and His expectations for generous giving and lending than we are scriptures that promise prosperity. If prosperity preachers would simply read all that the Old Testament has to say on the subject of stewardship, they would have to make major adjustments to their theology.

Notice again the wisdom of God. The poor should be given an opportunity to work, and they must work if they are going to eat.

26:1-15 This is another beautiful passage regarding stewardship. In recognition that every material blessing came from God, Israelites were instructed to bring an offering of their first

fruits to the Lord. When they did, they were to make a declaration that contrasted their former lot in life as slaves with their present blessed position, and then share the first fruits with Levites and strangers. Similarly, when the second tithe was given every third year, a declaration was to be made after that tenth had been given to Levites, strangers, orphans and widows. This was followed by a prayer for God's blessing—blessing that was obviously contingent upon obedient stewardship and a genuine concern for the poor.

28:1-14 Here we find God's promises of national blessing to the people of Israel, contingent upon their corporate obedience. As the entire nation obeyed God's commandments, they would, as a nation, be "set...high above all the nations of the earth" (v. 1), defeat national enemy armies (v. 7), and "lend to many nations" (v. 12). Obviously, God was not promising individual Israelites that they, as individuals, would lend to many nations (see 28:13). However, as the nation was materially blessed, obviously all individual Israelites would be blessed. Take note that these blessings were contingent upon Israel obeying all of God's laws, not excluding His numerous laws of stewardship that we have already read.

Christians, unlike old covenant Jews, live in many nations of the world, and so it is impossible to find any direct application from this old covenant promise. And when we find so many scriptures in the New Testament that clearly show that very obedient people sometimes become or remain very poor, we know we would be abusing Scripture to use this passage to prove that God will give big houses and new cars to every Christian who has faith for prosperity.

28:15-68 In contrast to the national blessings in the first part of this chapter, we now read the national curses that are promised to Israel upon their disobedience. A popular modern doctrine promoted primarily by prosperity preachers couples this passage with Paul's words in Galatians 3:13, where it is said, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law." Because the curse of disobeying the Law included poverty (see vv. 31, 38-44, 68), we are redeemed from poverty, they say. We should thus expect more abundant material things.

Even if this particular interpretation is true, I must wonder how many Western Christians are suffering the kind of poverty described in these verses. I would venture to guess that none of them are, and that most are probably much, much closer to (if not far exceeding) the level of material blessing described in the first part of chapter 28. In fact, we've likely never found ourselves needing to be redeemed from the poverty described in chapter 28, and most of us have enjoyed a level of prosperity that exceeds what is described in the first part of chapter 28 even prior to salvation.

31:20 Note that God knew that when Israel became prosperous, they would then reject Him.

32:13-15 Here again, in the Song Of Moses, it is clear that God knew Israel's downfall would occur when they grew prosperous. Could the same thing have happened to the Western church?

Joshua

6:15-19, 24, 7:1-26 Here is a sobering Old Testament lesson in stewardship! What was Achan's sin? He kept some silver and gold, which was supposed to go into the treasury of the Lord, for himself. We should not assume that just because we are given an opportunity to enrich ourselves, God wants us to use that opportunity to do so. Nor should we assume that our only obligation is to tithe such material windfalls. God may bring such opportunities solely to enrich His kingdom. (Incidentally, at the conquest of the next city, Ai, the people of Israel were permitted to keep the spoil for themselves [see 8:2] as well as from subsequent cities [see 11:14].)

Ruth

2:2-17 Ruth's opportunity to glean was made possible, not only because of Boaz's kindness, but because God commanded Israel to care for the poor in that way (see Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22). In this case, the gleanings of a poor woman not only provided her and her mother-in-law's needs, but set the stage for a love story that would culminate in the birth of Christ, a descendant of Ruth the Moabitess.

1 Kings

3:5-14 Note that God promised to grant Solomon riches and honor because Solomon didn't request either, preferring wisdom to serve God's people. The Lord also granted him the wisdom he desired, but unfortunately Solomon didn't always walk in his divinely-given wisdom. Had he done so, he would have obeyed God's commandments concerning his wealth. In the Law of Moses, the Lord specifically said of Israel's future king, "He shall not multiply horses for himself...He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself" (Deut. 17:16-17). Solomon eventually did all these things, and his 700 wives and 300 concubines ultimately turned his heart from God and he became an idolater (see 1 Kings 4:26; 11:1-10). Thus it could be said that the wisest man who ever lived became the greatest fool who ever lived. Solomon's misuse of wealth was his downfall. He should have used his money to love his neighbor as himself. Instead, he made life easy for himself and hard for millions of others who at his death, were happy that he was gone (see 1 Kings 12:1-16). He loved himself and effectively robbed 999 other men of wives.

9:15-22 As I pointed out in the fifth chapter of this book, the only way for a person to become extremely wealthy is to profit, directly or indirectly, from the labor of others. Here we see a prime example of that very phenomenon, Solomon's "forced laborers" from among the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites and so on. I am not going to assume that just because God *promised* Solomon wealth that Solomon *gained* all his wealth according to God's will anymore that I'm going to assume that Abraham, although promised a son by God, became the father of Ishmael according to God's will. Solomon may well have abused his power to gain wealth just as he abused his power to gain hundreds of pagan wives in opposition to God's will (see 1 Kings 11:1-10). I think it is quite likely that a person who would be so selfish as to effectively rob 999 other men of their potential wives is also quite likely to have been equally selfish in how he gained and used his wealth.

10:21, 27 Like silver in Solomon's day, when something that was once scarce becomes abundant, its value decreases. The amount of silver that people previously would have given weeks of their labor to obtain, they would now give only hours for, simply because there was more of it on the market. Those who bought silver before the market was saturated watched their investment erode in value right before their eyes. This is a small picture of what will happen to everyone's wealth when they die. What they gave their entire lives to own will become utterly worthless to them in a moment.

We see that earthly value is determined by supply and demand. This is precisely why, for example, the flow of diamonds to the world market is carefully controlled, otherwise the greater supply would drive down the price of diamonds and the profits of those who control the supply. The actual value of diamonds is far below their current price. How foolish it is to give weeks or months of one's labor for what would be worth a fraction of its current price if the diamond supply were not controlled, and for what will ultimately be completely worthless when one dies, especially when one could have given the same labor in laying up eternal treasure in heaven.

17:1-16 Here are two inspiring examples of the Lord supplying the needs of Elijah in two supernatural ways while all of Israel languished in drought. Note that in both cases, Elijah had to obey the Lord's instructions in order for his needs to be met. Likewise, the widow whom God used to supply Elijah's needs had to obey Elijah's instructions and have faith, and she and her son consequently also benefited. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He said, "He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward" (Matt. 10:41). If so, in this case the reward was food.

21:1-24 Before Ahab broke the sixth and eighth commandments, he broke the tenth, which prohibits coveting (see Ex. 20:17). Evil deeds are born from evil desires, and so the way to avoid evil deeds is to extinguish evil desires. Greed always begins in the heart and then manifests itself in evil deeds. Thus Scripture warns against the *desire* to be rich and teaches contentment (see 1 Tim. 6:8-9). If we are content, greed has no garden in which to grow.

2 Kings

4:1-7 Here is another marvelous example of God's compassion on the poor and His miraculous provision. Prosperity preachers often encourage their followers to imitate the widow's faith as a means to greater prosperity, but they fail to point out the fact that she was not trusting God for more luxuries. Rather, her situation was tragic and desperate, and the Lord delivered her from the impending crises of her deep poverty, providing what she needed as she followed Elisha's instructions.

5:1-27 What was wrong with Elisha or Gehazi taking a gift from Naaman after he was healed? Naaman's owning the silver and clothing didn't prevent him from *being healed* of leprosy, so why would Gehazi's owning just a portion of it result in his *being stricken* with leprosy?

The answer is found in verse 26: it was the wrong time to receive such gifts. God didn't want Naaman or anyone who heard of his healing to think that such divine blessings could be purchased for a large sum. That would send the wrong message to everyone, and especially to the poor. God wants to be known as a God of grace, not as a God whose benefits can be bought with silver. The severity of Gehazi's punishment sheds light on how grievous this was to God. How must He feel about TV evangelists and prosperity preachers who continually sell God's blessings?

6:20-23 Here is an Old Testament example of loving one's enemies by means of feeding them. Apparently, the love that was shown had the desired effect, just as is promised in Proverbs 25:21-22: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you." One can't help but wonder what would happen if the money nations spend on war would be spent on providing the needs of their enemies.

6:24-7:16 The four lepers mentioned in this story felt guilty for hoarding their abundance with the full knowledge that other citizens were starving. The difference between them and so many of us is that they repented after a few hours, while year after year we keep on hoarding our prosperity, knowing full well the plight of our spiritual family in developing nations.

8:1-6 Here is another inspiring story of God's provision. Take note that the Shunammite woman had to obey God's instructions through Elisha in order for her needs to be supplied during the seven-year famine. Also note that it was obviously God's will for her to have some capital, in this case land to grow crops, as indicated by the providential way her land was restored to her. The very best way to help the poor is not to give them money, but to give them a means to earn a living.

20:12-19 Because this description of Hezekiah's personal wealth contains no moral commentary, should we assume that God preferred that Hezekiah hoard it rather than use it to love his neighbor as himself? That is doubtful, and this passage certainly does not give us who are under the law of Christ the right to follow Hezekiah's example. Clearly, Hezekiah "laid up" (see 20:17) "treasure" (see 20:13, 15) on the earth, something Christ forbade His followers to do. 2 Chronicles adds an interesting commentary about this incident:

Even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart (2 Chron. 32:31).

God left Hezekiah alone, that is, He didn't interfere or intervene. Rather, He simply observed Hezekiah's actions to learn what was in his heart. What do you suppose was revealed to God about Hezekiah's heart? What could have motivated Hezekiah to show his treasures to the envoys from Babylon? Do you suppose that God was pleased with what He observed?

Interestingly, God told Hezekiah through Isaiah that all his treasures would eventually be carried away to Babylon, an event that would occur because of God's judgment. Is it possible that this revelation was part of God's test of Hezekiah? Is it not possible that God was trying to help him understand that of all his treasures were temporal? Would it not have been wise if Hezekiah had thus concluded, "All of this will one day be carried away to Babylon and neither I nor my heirs will own it, so why should I cling to it any longer?" But Hezekiah had no such reaction to the divine revelation. Rather, his perspective remained selfish, as he thought to himself that the foretold loss would not occur within his remaining years. Do you suppose that Hezekiah passed God's test?

24:14 I can't resist pointing out that it was only the poor who were not deported by Nebuchadnezzar during God's judgment upon Judah. They were apparently considered invaluable and of no threat to Babylon. As the rich and middle classes were marched away in chains, I wonder if for the first time in their lives they envied the poor?

1 Chronicles

22:14 Obviously, no expense was too great for the temple that David wanted built for the Lord. I think it is safe to say that David could have kept all this wealth for himself, but he didn't because of his love for God.

29:1-17 Here we read of a high point of Old Testament generosity as David and other wealthy Israelites willingly gave for the embellishment of the temple. It appears that David gave all of his remaining personal silver and gold (v. 3), and his sacrifice inspired others to follow his example. He knew that his wealth and the wealth of his fellow Israelites had come from God (vv. 12, 14, 16), thus their wealth was actually belonged to God (v. 16) and should be used to glorify Him. David also knew that God was looking at his heart (v. 17), and he acknowledged the transience of life in his prayer (v. 15), both of which no doubt motivated him to give so generously. Wealthy professing Christians who continue to lay up earthly treasures will find no solace from reading passages like this! Prosperity preachers who hold David up as their model of wealth should read this!

2 Chronicles

1:15 During Israel's "golden era" under Solomon's early reign, all of Israel prospered. When we read that silver and gold in Jerusalem became as plentiful as stones, that did not mean that everyone was fabulously wealthy, because we read earlier that the abundance of silver

significantly lowered its value (see 1 Kings 10:21, 27). More likely it meant that everyone had plenty, and their needs were well provided. Consequently, there would have been less need to share. If no one is suffering poverty because everyone possesses all he needs, then the ideal has been attained. But that is just not the case in our day. Thus, when prosperity preachers cite this verse to prove that God wants their audiences to become rich while they make no mention of the needs of the poor among their own family, they do injustice to the truth. They should rather use this scripture to prove that God wants *all* His children to have their needs supplied, and so those who have more than they need should help those who have less than they need.

14:13-15 There isn't any doubt that after the invasion of Ethiopia that Judah prospered with plunder. But did this windfall give them the right to use that windfall selfishly and disobey the second greatest commandment? God's blessing carries with it responsibility.

17:5, 11, 18:1 All of these verses that speak of Jehoshaphat's increasing wealth are mentioned nowhere in the New Testament as being the exemplary standard for believers. Why then do prosperity preachers point to such verses to prove that there must be nothing wrong with believers growing wealthy and keeping the majority of their wealth for themselves? And why do they assume that is what Jehoshaphat did? If Jehoshaphat, who spread the Law's teaching (see 17:7-9), kept the Law himself, there is no doubt that he shared a significant portion of his wealth, as that is what the Law prescribed.

31:4-10 All times of true revival (see 29:1-31:21) are accompanied by revived giving because a true relationship with God demands it.

32:27-31 God did indeed make Hezekiah wealthy, but we read here that God tested him to know what was in his heart when he showed his wealth to the envoys of Babylon. If God increases your wealth, it is also a test of your heart. Do you love God or mammon? As I commented when we read the parallel passage in 2 Kings 20:12-19:

Interestingly, God told Hezekiah through Isaiah that all his treasures would eventually be carried away to Babylon, an event that would occur because of God's judgment. Is it possible that this revelation was part of God's test of Hezekiah? Is it not possible that God was trying to help him understand that of all his treasures were temporal? Would it not have been wise if Hezekiah had thus concluded, "All of this will one day be carried away to Babylon and neither I nor my heirs will own it, so why should I cling to it any longer?" But Hezekiah had no such reaction to the divine revelation. Rather, his perspective remained selfish, as he thought to himself that the foretold loss would not occur within his remaining years. Do you suppose that Hezekiah passed God's test?

Nehemiah

5:1-13 *Usury*, as the word is used here (see vv. 7, 10), was not the practice of charging exorbitant interest as it is often defined today, but was the practice of charging *any* interest on a personal loan, something that was forbidden by the Law of Moses for Israelites to do in regard to fellow Israelites (see Ex 25:25, Lev. 25:35-37, Deut. 23:19-20). Keep in mind that only those facing desperate personal misfortune and who lacked necessities borrowed money in that day, as exemplified in this story. Lending a fellow Israelite money at interest would be taking advantage of him and not loving one's neighbor as himself. Proverbs 28:8 warns, "He who increases his wealth by interest and usury gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor."

Because only those facing desperate personal misfortune borrowed money in that day, the ethics of the Mosaic Law regarding lending at interest should not be applied today to anything but loans made to fellow believers who are forced to borrow because of personal misfortune and who are lacking basic necessities. Additionally, the modern manipulation of currencies by

governments and their subsequent inflation, not a factor in ancient times, should also be considered by modern Christians who are trying to follow the ethics of the Mosaic Law in this matter. If a borrower repays a lender in currency that has lost some of its value, he should repay the equivalent *value* of the original loan, otherwise he is taking advantage of the lender.

5:14-19 Nehemiah turned down money that could have been his out of love for his fellow Israelites, not wanting to burden them as did former governors. Every opportunity to prosper is not necessarily from the Lord, but may well be a test from the Lord. Will you refuse to enrich yourself at the expense of others even when doing so is perfectly legal?

13:10-13 How quickly and predictably Israel backslid in Nehemiah's day. One of the first indications of their relapse was their neglect of tithing.

Esther

9:22 Although God's name is never mentioned once in this biblical book, we do find a reference to His concern for the poor, as sending gifts to them became part of the tradition of the Feast of Purim, established to commemorate the Jews' victory over their enemies during Esther's time.

Job

1:1-3 No one can debate that Job was a very wealthy man in his day, and yet God considered him to be the most righteous man on the earth. How was that possible?

First, Job gained his wealth righteously. Like some other patriarchs, Job's business was animal husbandry, and his wealth consisted mostly of his inventory, his livestock (see Job 1:3). His enterprise provided numerous jobs, and he and his servant-employees had a mutually dependent relationship. There is no evidence that Job exploited his employees (see Job 31:13-15, 31) or that he lived at a significantly higher level of comfort than they did.

Second, Job used his wealth righteously. There isn't any question that Job possessed a sincere concern for the poor. He said,

Some remove the landmarks;
They seize and devour flocks.
They drive away the donkeys of the orphans;
They take the widow's ox for a pledge.
They push the needy aside from the road;
The poor of the land are made to hide themselves altogether.
Behold, as wild donkeys in the wilderness
They go forth seeking food in their activity,
As bread for their children in the desert.
They harvest their fodder in the field
And glean the vineyard of the wicked.
They spend the night naked, without clothing,
And have no covering against the cold.
They are wet with the mountain rains
And hug the rock for want of a shelter.
Others snatch the orphan from the breast,
And against the poor they take a pledge.
They cause the poor to go about naked without clothing,
And they take away the sheaves from the hungry.
Within the walls they produce oil;
They tread wine presses but thirst.

From the city men groan,
And the souls of the wounded cry out....
Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard?
Was not my soul grieved for the needy? (Job 24:2-12, 30:25).

But Job did more than lament the plight of the poor. He served them with his wealth. He had no need, like the rich young ruler, to repent and liquidate those possessions that testified of his selfishness and lack of love for his neighbor. Job had continually liquidated his personal wealth to meet pressing needs, doing everything within his power to serve orphans, widows, the handicapped and strangers. In his final defense before his accusers, he testified of himself:

When I went out to the gate of the city,
When I took my seat in the square,
The young men saw me and hid themselves,
And the old men arose and stood.
The princes stopped talking
And put their hands on their mouths;
The voice of the nobles was hushed,
And their tongue stuck to their palate.
For when the ear heard, it called me blessed,
And when the eye saw, it gave witness of me,
Because I delivered the poor who cried for help,
And the orphan who had no helper.
The blessing of the one ready to perish came upon me,
And I made the widow's heart sing for joy.
I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
My justice was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind
And feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
And I investigated the case which I did not know.
I broke the jaws of the wicked
And snatched the prey from his teeth (Job 29:7-17).

If I have kept the poor from their desire,
Or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,
Or have eaten my morsel alone,
And the orphan has not shared it
(But from my youth he grew up with me as with a father,
And from infancy I guided her),
If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing,
Or that the needy had no covering,
If his loins have not thanked me,
And if he has not been warmed with the fleece of my sheep,
If I have lifted up my hand against the orphan,
Because I saw I had support in the gate,
Let my shoulder fall from the socket,
And my arm be broken off at the elbow.
For calamity from God is a terror to me,
And because of His majesty I can do nothing.... (Job 31:16-23).

Have the men of my tent not said,
"Who can find one who has not been satisfied with his meat"?

The alien has not lodged outside,
For I have opened my doors to the traveler (Job 31:31-32)

There is little doubt that Job, like other patriarchs, was wealthy because of God's blessing him as a reward for his righteousness. Yet everyone who has read the book of Job knows that God did not want Job to serve Him only because of the material benefits, and thus Job was tested by means of losing almost everything he had. Those whom God has so blessed would do well to check their own motives for serving God, and they should be prepared for the possibility of being similarly tested by Him.

22:5-10 Here Job's friend Eliphaz enumerated some characteristics of a wicked person, although wrongly assuming they belonged to Job. They included withholding clothes from the naked, bread from the hungry and water from the thirsty as well as neglecting widows and orphans.

31:24-25 Job recognized that trusting in his wealth for his security would be a sin, as it would result in his not trusting in God. He also realized the danger of becoming proud because of his wealth. These twin temptations are also mentioned by the apostle Paul, who recommends overcoming them by the only means possible—through generous giving. He wrote, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches [there are the twin temptations], but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed" (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Anyone who hoards wealth trusts in it and thus does not trust in God. Like greed, trusting in wealth is more than just an attitude. It is a condition of the heart that manifests itself by actions. Our father who feeds the birds and clothes the lilies will take care of us, so we have no need to place out trust in anything else.

Psalms

1:1-3 In order to experience the prosperity promised in verse 3, one must keep the conditions of verses 1-2, which would include keeping God's commandments regarding stewardship. And as he prospers, he will continue to use his prosperity for God's purposes, being "rich toward God" (see Luke 12:21), true prosperity.

15:5 See my comments on Nehemiah 5:1-13 regarding loans at interest.

17:13-15 Here David contrasted the purpose of his life with the purpose of those who don't know God. Their portion "is in this life," and they are satisfied with nothing higher than having children to whom they can pass on their accumulated material acquisitions. David, however, lived to see at the end of his life God's "face in righteousness," a goal worthy of imitation. Those who possess such a goal will of course lay up their treasure in heaven, not on earth.

34:9-10 Again note that the promise here is conditional. Those who seek the Lord and fear Him shall not be in want of any good thing. Of course, those who seek and fear Him will obey His commandments, including those that regulate their financial affairs. They alone are assured of not being in want. This then is not a promise of divine help to lay up earthly treasures.

35:27 This verse does not say, "The Lord delights in the prosperity of His disobedient and phony children." God delights in the prosperity of His *servants* because He knows their prosperity will be used for His glory.

37:11, 16 Jesus was perhaps quoting 37:11 when He said, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). Obviously 37:11 is not a promise that has come to pass for every humble follower of God during his lifetime, but God will keep His promise when Jesus rules the earth. Then "the righteous will inherit the land, and dwell in it forever" (v. 29). In the meantime 37:16 certainly applies, because the righteous, who in this life have little, can look forward to abundant prosperity, while any abundance that the wicked might have is only temporary.

37:21, 25-26 There is a definite difference in the financial affairs of the righteous and the wicked. God provides for the righteous so they have no need to beg. And He provides them with more than they need, enabling them to give and lend to others. If one is not graciously giving, he does not fit the description of the righteous here.

39:4-6 Note the connection David made in these verses between the transience of life and the foolishness of amassing riches.

41:1-3 An alternate translation of verse 1 is, "How blessed is he who considers the poor." Those who do can expect to be rewarded with protection and healing from God. Who would have ever thought that health could be a benefit of helping the poor? That means that sickness could be a result of not helping the poor.

49:5-6 "Trusting in wealth" and "boasting in the abundance of riches" are again both spoken of as negative characteristics. The sure way to avoid both is to give one's wealth away.

49:16-20 In the light of scriptures like this, why has the theme of "success in life" (a euphemism for "getting rich") become so dominant in so many so-called Christian circles? Every person who dies successful in the eyes of man (v. 18) dies a failure and a fool in the eyes of God.

52:5-7 The person condemned in verse 7 "would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches." Note the contrast. One cannot trust in the abundance of his riches while at the same time make God his refuge, that is, trust God. One who trusts in his abundant riches is one who believes that his future is secure because of his wealth. He has, he thinks, no need to trust God. Yet, as the psalmist makes so clear, his error is grave. It would have been better to trust God. Had he made God his refuge instead of wealth, he would not have hoarded his riches, as there would have been no need to hoard under God's care. Instead of hoarding, he could have shared his wealth and laid up heavenly treasure.

62:10 What does it mean to set your heart upon riches when they increase? Jesus gave us the answer. He said that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also (see Matt. 6:21). If we are laying up treasure on earth, it proves that our hearts are on the earth. If we are laying up treasure in heaven, it proves that our treasure is in heaven. So anyone who hoards his increasing riches has set his heart upon them in disobedience to the admonition here. Do not fool yourself, as so many have, into thinking that they have not set their hearts upon their increasing wealth as they cling to it.

73:3, 12 Prosperity is not always an indication of righteousness or of God's blessing.

112:1-9 Wealth and riches are in the house of the man who fears the Lord and who greatly delights in His commandments (vv.1-3), but for what reason? Note that as the psalmist mentions the specific godly characteristics of such a person, he focuses on his generosity and care for the poor, an indication of his greatly delighting in the second greatest commandment. He is "gracious" and "compassionate" (v. 4). He "lends" and gives "freely to the poor" (vv. 5,

9). As we have consistently witnessed throughout Scripture, those who give to the poor are blessed in return, and thus enabled to continue giving. The wealth and riches that God gives them are not for piling up in their houses, but for distributing to those in need. Prosperity preachers twist this biblical truth of sowing and reaping to make themselves and their ministries the object of giving rather than the poor. I can assure you, however, that God is not blessing people in order to repay them for enriching the self-indulgent lifestyles of prosperity preachers or for helping them spread their heresies.

119:72 How many Christians could honestly make this testimony?

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs contains hundreds of inspired axioms, none of which by itself is the sum of all truth. *Each contains one small aspect of truth.* That being so, it is quite easy to over-inflate a truth found in one proverb while ignoring the balancing truths found in others. Proverbs has thus become the preferred book of the Bible by prosperity preachers and Christian mutual fund salesman alike. It contains a gold mine of individual verses just waiting to be extracted, separated from their context, and selfishly exploited. You are much more likely, for example, to hear a prosperity preacher quote Proverbs 15:6, "Great wealth is in the house of the righteous," than hear him quote Proverbs 16:8, "Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice" or Proverbs 21:13, "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered." When the book of Proverbs is considered as whole, it harmonizes quite well with the rest of Scripture. For the sake of our study, I've divided just about everything that can be found regarding stewardship in the book of Proverbs into seven categories:

- 1.) Material blessing promised as an incentive for generosity and righteousness; material lack promised as an incentive against stinginess and unrighteousness.
- 2.) The believer's responsibility toward the poor and warnings against neglecting that responsibility.
- 3.) Observations regarding greedy behavior.
- 4.) Warnings against the desire to be rich and unethical means of gaining wealth.
- 5.) The superiority of wisdom, righteousness and contentment over riches.
- 6.) Admonitions to sluggards, slackers, the self-indulgent and stupid.
- 7.) Prudent business and financial practices.

Because these themes are found in so many of the Proverbs, I will not use space to discuss them all individually. Rather, I will consider some examples of proverbs that fall under each theme and then simply list the remainder of those that are similar. In that way we will cover every relevant scripture in Proverbs.

Stewardship Theme #1: Material blessing promised as an incentive for generosity and righteousness; material lack promised as an incentive against stinginess and unrighteousness.

Perhaps the most well-known and most abused scripture under this theme is Proverbs 3:9-10:

Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine.

First, to "honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce" can only mean to make stewardship your highest priority, using your wealth in such a way that it honors God. This theme, as you know, resonates throughout the Bible. God blesses the obedient, and

His blessing is what enables the obedient to continue to be a blessing. When your “vats overflow” as is promised in Proverbs 3:10, that means you have more than you need, and you have some to share.

Prosperity preachers always use this scripture to influence people to give to their “ministries,” which are not really ministries at all since they promote what God hates—the love of money and the worship of the false god Mammon. We are not “honoring the Lord from our wealth” when we enrich greedy prosperity teachers. Rather, according to the book of Proverbs, one way that we honor the Lord is when we are gracious to the poor: “He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but *he who is gracious to the needy honors Him*” (14:31, emphasis added).

Another proverb that falls under this same theme is the already-mentioned Proverb 15:6:

Great wealth is in the house of the righteous, but trouble is in the income of the wicked.

This is clearly written as an incentive to be righteous and not to be wicked. However, if one does not obey God’s commandments regarding stewardship, he is *not* righteous. This fact is endorsed in the book of Proverbs itself, as it tells us that one characteristic of a righteous person is that he is concerned for the poor, a characteristic not shared by the wicked (see Prov. 29:7, see also Ps. 112:1-9).

Thus only those who obey God as good stewards can expect to be rewarded materially. The wicked, and those who do not obey God’s commandments regarding stewardship, have no such hope. God is more likely to make them like the poor whom they ignore, that they might be encouraged to repent of their selfishness.

We can clearly see how prosperity preachers abuse such verses. Twisting the Scripture, exploiting people’s gullibility, piling up earthly treasures for themselves and not caring for the poor, they are not in the category of the righteous, but in the category of the wicked and greedy. Their wealth is not a blessing from God, but a consequence of their deception and greed, which leads me to another important point. This proverb was not given to us as a way to test who is righteous and who is wicked by means of measuring their net material worth. If that were the case, the Bible would be endorsing the delusion that drug lords, mafia kings, and prosperity preachers are examples of righteousness!

No, other scriptures found in the book of Proverbs and the rest of the Bible lead us to believe that it is not universally and always true that the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer lack. If such were the case, we would never find axioms in the book of Proverbs that say, for example, “Better is the poor who walks in his integrity, than he who is crooked though he be rich” (Prov. 28:6) or, “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and turmoil with it” (Prov. 15:16).

We should also consider the fact that wealth, according to the Bible, is not always measured in material things. For example, we also read in the book of Proverbs, “Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it” (Prov. 15:17). So according to the book of Proverbs, the true wealth of one’s household consists of the love enjoyed there.

Thus we should not always assume that when the book of Proverbs speaks of the “wealth” or “riches” of the righteous that it is speaking of their material prosperity. Jesus Himself once told some very poor believers that they were actually quite rich, and He could only have been speaking of their spiritual wealth (see Rev. 2:9).

Finally, and along these same lines, although it is true that not all believers always enjoy abundant material prosperity, they can rest assured that one day they will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). Then will Proverbs 13:22 be fully realized, “The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.”

The two primary proverbs we’ve considered under this theme (and others like them) were written to encourage readers to be generous and righteous so that they could experience the continued blessing of God’s provision, as well as the blessing of giving and being re-supplied by God to give again. They are the equivalent of Jesus’ words in the New Testament, “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:33)

and, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap." (Luke 6:38). So we've really learned nothing new. Perhaps the proverb that best sums up this biblical theme is 11:24-25:

There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, but it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered.

Other proverbs that fall under this same theme (at least to some degree) are 2:21-22; 3:13-16, 33; 5:8-10; 8:12-21; 10:3, 22; 11:6, 26, 28; 13:21, 22, 25; 14:11, 24; 15:25; 17:2; 19:17; 21:20; 22:4, 9, 16, 22-23; 24:3-4; 25:21-22; 28:20.

Stewardship Theme #2: The believer's responsibility toward the poor and warnings against neglecting that responsibility.

As I stated when we considered the first stewardship theme of Proverbs, it is only the righteous who can expect God's material blessing. Since God has commanded that we share with the poor, however, only those who do so are in the category of the righteous. Those who do not are in the category of the wicked. They are actually promised punishment for their lack of compassion.

This theme is repeatedly emphasized in the book of Proverbs:

He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed (Prov. 19:17).

He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered (Prov. 21:13).

He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor (Prov. 22:9).

He who gives to the poor will never want, but he who shuts his eyes will have many curses (Prov. 28:27).

The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, the wicked does not understand such concern (Prov. 29:7).

We are instructed in Proverbs to give to the needy whenever we have opportunity and ability:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it," when you have it with you (Prov. 3:27-28).

Proverbs tells us to be gracious to the poor even if they are our enemies:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you (Prov. 25:21-22).

This just-quoted verse and second stewardship theme of Proverbs reminds us of Jesus' well-known words:

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, *do good to those who hate you*, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you....*Give to everyone who asks of you*, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back (Luke 6:27-28, 30, emphasis added).

Other scriptures in the book of Proverbs that fall under this same stewardship theme are 14:21, 31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:2, 22-23; 29:14 and 31:20.

Stewardship Theme #3: Observations regarding greedy behavior.

As we've learned in earlier chapters, greed is not just an attitude of the heart, but is always manifested by outward actions. The book of Proverbs includes some observations regarding the manifestation of greedy behavior, but they are observations that, in light of the rest of Scripture, can only be considered critical. For example, we read in Proverbs 10:15 the observation, "The rich man's wealth is his fortress, the ruin of the poor is their poverty."

Although this observation includes no moral commentary, it hardly seems right to think that it has no moral objective. It seems to say to us, "This may be how it is, but this is not how it ought to be, because this is not fair. The rich man, who clings to his wealth as a means of security, would be better to trust the Lord for his security and share his abundance with the poor who are being ruined due to their lack."

A later proverb uses a very similar expression as this one, but it includes some additional words that can only be considered to be a negative moral commentary regarding the rich man and his fortress: "A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and *like a high wall in his own imagination* (Prov. 18:11, emphasis added).

The reason the rich man's wealth is like a high wall *in his own imagination* is because his wall doesn't exist anywhere in reality. His imaginary wall can't protect him from God's wrath, as other proverbs warn, "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death" (Prov. 11:4) and, "He who trusts in his riches will fall" (Prov. 11:28).

Other examples of "observational" proverbs that surely contain some negative moral implications regarding the love of money are,

Abundant food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice (Prov. 13:23)

The poor man utters supplications, but the rich man answers roughly (Prov. 18:23).

The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender's slave (Prov. 22:7).

All of these "observations" beg to have the words added, "And this is terrible and ought not to be, because the source of these sorrows is greed."

Under this stewardship theme we also find observations that, when read for their subtleties, reveal how the love of money motivates rich and poor alike to be deceptive. For example:

"Bad, bad," says the buyer; but when he goes his way, then he boasts (Prov. 20:14).

There is one who pretends to be rich, but has nothing; another pretends to be poor, but has great wealth (Prov. 13:7).

In order to drive the price down, the buyer pretends to believe that he thinks the item for sale is of poor quality. After the sale, however, he boasts to others of his bargain. The love of money motivates him to be deceptive to the seller.

And the reason some poor people pretend to be rich is because they hope to impress others whose wealth is real, win their favor and friendship, and perhaps profit. (Perhaps this is why certain proverbs warn about giving to or flattering the rich; see Prov. 22:16; 23:6-8). And the

reason some *rich* people pretend to be *poor* is because they want to keep all their wealth, and they don't want anyone expecting anything from them, nor do they want the kind of phony friends that rich people are plagued with. These phenomena are illustrated in other proverbs:

The poor is hated even by his neighbor, but those who love the rich are many (Prov. 14:20).

Wealth adds many friends, but a poor man is separated from his friend....Many will entreat the favor of a generous man, and every man is a friend to him who gives gifts. All the brothers of a poor man hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him! He pursues them with words, but they are gone (Prov. 19:4, 6-7).

The love of money makes people not want to associate with the poor, even if they are relatives, neighbors, or (former) friends, lest they feel an obligation to help them. All of these observations are obviously moral commentaries about the love of money.

Stewardship Theme #4: Warnings against the desire to be rich and unethical means of gaining wealth.

In the New Testament we read,

If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who *want to get rich* fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For *the love of money* is a root of all sorts of evil (1 Tim. 6:8-10).

Let your character be free from *the love of money, being content with what you have*; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

Thus we should not be surprised to read these same themes in the book of Proverbs. They can indeed be found there:

Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings, like an eagle that flies toward the heavens (Prov. 23:4-5).

Two things I asked of Thee, Do not refuse me before I die: Keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion, lest I be full and deny Thee and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or lest I be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:7-9).

One wonders how prosperity preachers can even dare to turn to the book of Proverbs and publicly read an out-of-context verse there when the danger exists that someone in their audience might accidentally read one of these two verses!

The way to avoid all the dangers that are attached with wealth is not to desire wealth in the first place. The many other sins mentioned in the book of Proverbs that fall under this fourth stewardship theme are only committed by those who have allowed a place in their heart for the love of money. Proverbs mentions many unethical means of gaining wealth, such as violence and murder (see 1:10-19), deception (see 11:18; 21:6), kidnapping (see 13:8), fraud (see 11:1; 13:11; 16:11), oppressing the poor (see 14:31; 22:16, 22-23), bribery (see 15:27; 17:8, 23; 29:4) and thievery (see 29:24). Only God knows how much of the wealth in the world has been gained, directly or indirectly, by these means. God promises that those who gain by these means will ultimately be the losers.

According to Proverbs, attempting to gain wealth hastily is also a manifestation of the love of money:

An inheritance gained hurriedly at the beginning, will not be blessed in the end (Prov. 20:21).

A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished (Prov. 28:20).

A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him (Prov. 28:22). (The “evil-eye” or “bad eye” expression is found in other places in Scripture, and it is clearly an idiom for a greedy heart; see Matt. 6:23 and NASB marginal notes for Prov. 23:6 and Matt. 20:15.)

Those who attempt to prosper by “get-rich-quick-schemes” will suffer for it. God wants us to be faithful and work in order to prosper. This will become even more obvious to us when we consider Stewardship Theme #6, *Admonitions to sluggards, slackers, the self-indulgent and stupid*.

Stewardship Theme #5: The superiority of wisdom, righteousness and contentment over riches.

Pursuing wealth above virtue is another manifestation of the love of money. It is a million times more important that we be righteous than rich, because “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (Prov. 11:4). You can go to heaven without riches, but you can’t without righteousness. Thus,

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and turmoil with it. Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred with it (Prov. 15:16-17).

Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice....It is better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud (Prov. 16:8, 19).

Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it than a house full of feasting with strife (Prov. 17:1).

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool....What is desirable in a man is his kindness, and it is better to be a poor man than a liar (Prov. 19:1, 22).

A good name is to be more desired than great riches, favor is better than silver and gold (Prov. 22:1).

Better is the poor who walks in his integrity, than he who is crooked though he be rich (Prov. 28:6).

The message is redundant and clear: Don’t pursue wealth; pursue holiness. This is not a new theme to readers of Scripture. Paul, writing about the love of money, admonished Timothy, “Flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness” (1 Tim. 6:11).

These verses in Proverbs obviously also dispel the idea that every believer should expect to become rich. Rather, each of them teaches that every believer should be content even with little. Again, I can’t help but wonder how prosperity preachers dare open the book of Proverbs to read one of their out-of-context proof texts in light of such scriptures.

Other verses in Proverbs speak of the superiority of wisdom over silver, gold and jewels, because wisdom leads to righteousness, which is the most important thing (see Prov. 3:13-14; 8:10-11, 19; 16:16; 20:15). “All things desirable cannot compare with her [wisdom]” (Prov. 8:11).

Stewardship Theme #6: Admonitions to sluggards, slackers, the self-indulgent and stupid.

The New Testament teaches, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thes. 3:10). The book of Proverbs repeatedly emphasizes that same principle, sometimes with sayings that seem intentionally humorous, what are sometimes referred to as the “sluggard scriptures.” Here is a sample, serious and comical:

Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”—and your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your need like an armed man (Prov. 6:6-11).

The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!” (Prov. 26:13).

As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed (Prov. 26:14).

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is weary of bringing it to his mouth again (Prov. 26:15).

Other “sluggard scriptures” are Prov. 10:4-5; 13:4; 19:24; 20:4, 13; 21:25-26; 22:13 and 24:30-34. Closely related to the sluggard, who does nothing, is the slacker, who does something, but very little: “He also who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys” (Prov. 18:9).

After the sluggard and the slacker is the self-indulgent. He loves pleasure too much. (Now we are getting into American territory.) Proverbs says of him:

He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not become rich (Prov. 21:17).

Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags (Prov. 23:20-21).

Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, lest you have it in excess and vomit it (Prov. 25:16).

Lastly under this theme, Proverbs addresses the “stupid,” those who follow foolish plans in hopes of profiting when they should simply labor:

In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty (Prov. 14:23).

He who tills his land will have plenty of food, but he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty (Prov. 28:19; see also 12:11).

Stewardship Theme # 7: Prudent business and financial practices.

Most of the scriptures that fall under this heading speak of the folly of “becoming surety for a stranger,” which is the equivalent of co-signing a loan (see 6:1-5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26-27; 27:13).

Beyond that, reasonable expectations, thoughtful planning, and acquiring of skill are also presented as desirable in business and financial affairs:

Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of the ox (Prov. 14:4).

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty (Prov. 21:5).

Prepare your work outside, and make it ready for yourself in the field; afterwards, then, build your house (Prov. 24:27; see also Prov. 27:23-27; 31:13-27).

Ecclesiastes

2:4-11 If there were ever an assertion of the emptiness of wealth by an authority on the subject, Solomon’s words here would take the prize. Late in his life, after years of backsliding, idolatry, and accumulating more material things, Solomon realized it had all been “vanity and striving after wind.” Yet prosperity preachers so often point to Solomon, during his vain years, as a model for New Testament Christians!

4:8 Here we find Solomon’s observation of the folly of the workaholic.

5:10-20 Paul likely had verses 15-16 of this passage in mind when he wrote Timothy saying,

For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:7-9).

Can you imagine a prosperity preacher quoting either of these passages? In regard to their doctrine and practice, they would be wise to heed Solomon’s overriding conclusion:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil (Ecc. 12:13-14).

Isaiah

Throughout the books of the major and minor prophets we find the recurring theme that disobedience results in material deprivation—primarily as a consequence of foreign invasion, destruction, and deportation. Similarly, we find God’s promises of better things, such as peace and bountiful harvests, for those who will repent and serve Him. This is nothing new for those who have read other portions of Scripture. I will therefore not comment on the many passages within the prophets that reiterate these familiar themes, leaving them for the prosperity preachers to exploit. Rather, I will focus on those specific scriptures that speak of individual aspects of godly stewardship, about which prosperity preachers are strangely silent. Part of the reason God’s judgment fell upon the nations of Israel and Judah (as well as other nations to whom the prophets addressed their words) was because of their poor stewardship. And God only blesses people who practice good stewardship and who continue the practice it as He continues to bless them.

1:16-17, 23 Defending widows and orphans is frequently listed in the prophets as a foundational aspect of righteousness. Older widows and younger orphans are especially vulnerable, having no means of self-support. Along with bribery, ignoring the needs of widows and orphans is an indication of the love of money, and this also attracts God's judgment.

2:6-8 Verse 7 can hardly be considered to be a positive statement in light of its context between verses 6 and 8. As they sought to enrich themselves materially, the Israelites had been influenced by the idolatry of neighboring nations. They ultimately used their gain to fashion idols.

3:15-23 I can't help but wonder if there is some continuity from verse 15 through verse 23. This passage, taken as a whole, may indicate that the excessive adornment of wealthy, proud and seductive Israelite women was made possible by means of "grinding the face of the poor." I happen to be in Pakistan as I write these words, a county where much of North America's clothing is manufactured. Garments workers here often work twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for as little as sixty cents per hour. Should we feel good about providing them with jobs (that is, until more desperate people can be found who will work for less)?

5:8-9 Although not as clear as we would prefer, these verses certainly condemn amassing wealth, in this case real estate, so that it results in hardship for others. When a few own a large percentage of the available land, others inevitably suffer. That is why God made provision in the Law of Moses for everyone's land to be returned to the original owner every fifty years.

5:16-17 Like the previous passage we considered, this one is also a condemnation of the rich amassing land. God promises to right this wrong in favor of the poor.

5:22-23 Bribery, here condemned in its more blatant form, is in its more subtle form characterized by any decision to compromise loving one's neighbor as oneself for the sake of material gain. Satan is continually offering bribes, isn't he?

10:1-3 Here is yet another condemnation of those who gain by means of oppressing the poor, particularly widows and orphans.

32:5-7 Neglecting to care for the hungry and thirsty are again listed as fundamental characteristics of the unrighteous. Where does this leave many professing Christians?

33:14-16 Those who excuse their unjust gain by claiming it is necessary for their survival have no legitimate excuse. Their unjust gain is only necessary to satisfy their *greed*. God promises here to supply the bread and water of those who resist this temptation, but only those who can be content with bread and water will resist.

39:1-8 See my comments on 2 Kings 20:12-19.

58:6-11 Here God attempts to help Israel, apparently overly-focused on fasting, to understand what He considers to be of greater importance. Not surprisingly, He mentions sharing food with the hungry, clothing the naked, and providing shelter for the homeless. God prefers that we fast from selfishness much more than that we fast from food. The Israelites were ignoring the former while practicing the latter and wondering why God was not responding.

Jeremiah

5:27-29 Here God credited the people of Jerusalem's deceitfulness, rather than their faith or righteousness, as being the reason they were rich and fat. Neither did the city's inhabitants care for orphans or the poor.

6:12-13; 8:10 Lacking contentment, the people of Judah were "greedy for gain," and practiced deceitfulness to acquire more. God promised to judge them by taking away what they possessed. Why don't prosperity preachers ever mention verses such as these?

17:11 The one who makes a fortune unjustly (by taking advantage of others), God promises to judge by means of taking away his fortune, making a fool out of one who was worldly wise.

22:13-17 Those who know the Lord do not take advantage of others and are not focused on bigger and better homes, what amounts to the laying up of earthly treasures. Rather, they are helping the less fortunate and laying up heavenly treasures. Have we heard this message before?

32:1-40 The purchase of his uncle's field was surely a bargain for Jeremiah, as property values would have significantly dropped due to the siege of Jerusalem by Babylonian armies. But more than that, Jeremiah's purchase served as a prophetic sign to the nation of Judah that God would eventually restore them to their land.

Ezekiel

7:19-21 When people are starving and no food is available for purchase, they gain a different perspective regarding the gold and silver that they had once so highly valued.

16:15-19 Here is a study in poor stewardship. The people of Judah took God's material blessing and used it for what He hated.

16:49 Until this point in the Bible, we would have thought that Sodom's only sin was sexual perversion. Single sins, however, are rarely found. Here we learn that Sodom's perverts had no concern for the poor and needy, and this also attracted God's wrath.

18:7-17 Once again we see that a sure characteristic of the righteous is their care for the poor, while a sure characteristic of the unrighteous is their lack of care for the poor.

22:12-13, 25, 27, 29 Another list of economic sins that all stem from greed. The love of money is indeed the root of all sorts of evil (see 1 Tim. 6:10).

34:17-22 Here we find a descriptive analogy of selfishness. There are likewise in the church today fat and lean sheep, and God will judge between them.

Daniel

4:27 It is illuminating that when Daniel told great King Nebuchadnezzar to break away from his sins in order to avoid inevitable judgment, the only specific action he mentioned to the king was that he show "mercy to the poor."

Hosea

2:8; 8:4 Another study in poor stewardship. The Israelites took the prosperity with which God had blessed them and used at least a portion of it to make idols. Professing Christians are no different when they use what God has given them for what pulls their hearts away from heaven.

Amos

2:6 It seems unlikely that any Israelites literally sold a needy person for a pair of sandals. This expression, however, certainly reveals God's perspective of the lack of concern the Israelites had for the poor and of their love of money.

4:1 Here God refers to the oppressive Israelite wives as "cows of Bashan," a picture of obesity and laziness. It is a rare person indeed in North America who views obesity as a sign of self-indulgence.

5:11-12 Here Amos contrasts the lifestyles of the poor with the rich who are wealthy at the expense of the poor. The rich can afford nice homes because of the high rent and taxes that they exact from their poor tenants.

6:4-7 These can hardly be considered words that are complimentary to the rich. Although Amos does not condemn here the means by which the rich gained their wealth, he does condemn them for the luxuries.

8:4-6 The love of money once more described.

Micah

3:11-12 When money becomes the driving motivation of spiritual leaders, the end is near.

Zephaniah

1:18 Although people who have hoarded their wealth feel secure, nothing could be further from the truth. They couldn't be more insecure, as they have been storing up wrath for themselves at the same time (see Jas. 5:3).

Haggai

1:2-11 The people of Judah were not "seeking first God's kingdom" as revealed by their priorities, spending their resources on their own paneled homes while the temple of God lay desolate. Because of their poor stewardship, God gave them lack, hoping to motivate them to repent.

2:7-9 Indeed, the silver and the gold, as well as the entire earth, is the Lord's (see Ps. 24:1), and thus He has the right to direct its use. In this passage, God reveals that He will one day direct it from the nations to Jerusalem to glorify the place of His temple and habitation. Prosperity preachers only quote verse 8, taking it from its context, and using it only to further their own greedy agendas.

Zechariah

7:8-10 Even as we come to the close of the Old Testament, God is still reminding us about the poor, the widows, and orphans.

Malachi

3:5-12 This classic and well-known text has often been rightly used to motivate Christians to give. It promises cursing for those who don't and blessing for those who do, certainly a recurring theme in Scripture.

What is often not said, however, particularly by pastors who are raising money for new buildings and various church programs, is that the tithes and offerings that were to be faithfully paid by the people of Israel, were not only to be given to the Levites in their service to the Lord, but also, at least in part, to aliens/strangers, widows and orphans (see Deut. 26:12-13). Notice that in this very passage that we are considering, the first verse (3:5) speaks of widows and orphans. (Verse 5 is rarely read publicly, and most pastors begin with verse 7.)

Pastors who teach that pastors are the modern equivalent of the levitical priests, and who thus monopolize the available funds for all ministry, should not forget that there are other ministries to which God calls vocational ministers, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers. If God-called ministers under the new covenant are the equivalent of old covenant priests, then apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers have just as much right to people's tithes as do pastors, as they are just as much called to equip the saints for the work of service as are pastors (see Eph. 4:11-12). It is this monopoly by pastors of the finances of the body of Christ that keeps so many God-called apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers *out* of God's will and serving as pastors, the only ministry for which they can be paid.

Is tithing required under the new covenant as it was under the old? See my comments on Hebrews 7:4-10 in chapter nine.