

## MATERIAL PROSPERITY AND SOUL PROSPERITY

Delivered by Dr. F. F. Brown, First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee,  
at the Southern Baptist Convention, Houston, Texas, May 12, 1926.

Text: 3 John 1:2

A note of tender devotion and personal appreciation breathes through the portion of this letter in which John speaks of the Christian character of Gaius. The heart of the aged apostle rejoices as he writes of his friend's fidelity to truth, his loyalty to the church, his fellowship with other brethren, his Godly walk, and his vital concern for Kingdom extension. The soul of Gaius was truly prosperous and John expresses the desire that his friend's material prosperity and physical health may be in balanced harmony with the full rich spiritual experience evident in his life. "I wish above all things that you mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." The text suggests the ~~and~~ spiritual as a standard of appraisal for the material and physical.

The thought is an arresting one! If such a prayer were made and answered for all the Christian people, many who are chained by poverty and drawn by pain would move into affluence and health. Numbers who enjoy every luxury and vigorous physical strength would take their places in the crowded circles of poverty and suffering—bankrupt in possessions and body. Today we linger with the thought of the text—"Material Prosperity and Soul Prosperity."

### I. CHRISTIANITY AND MATERIAL PROSPERITY

#### 1. Righteousness fundamental in progress

It would be a truism to say that Christianity is the basis of permanent progress and prosperity. More vitally associated than the economic law of supply and demand are the principles of righteousness and the stable progress of society. God himself has united them in

indissoluble wedlock, and man dare not divorce them. The Ten Commandments are God's efficiency rules. The Golden Rule of Jesus is His law for industry. The teachings of Jesus provide the foundation, furnish the motives, develop the qualities, emphasize the ideals, create, cultivate, and maintain the atmosphere through which progress moves with any guarantee of safety and perpetuity. Thoughtful leaders in the business world frankly recognize and openly declare this truth. Periodicals, like the Wall Street Journal and Manufacturer's Record; business organizations, such as the American Banker's Association and various life insurance companies; civic clubs, such as Rotary and kindred groups, are emphasizing the vital and fundamental place of righteousness in all progress, and warning us against the neglect of it.

The president of the Argentine Republic asked Mr. Babson why is it that South America with her natural advantages is so far behind North America. Then he answers his own question by saying, "I have come to this conclusion: South America was settled by the Spanish who came to South America in search of gold, but North America was settled by the Pilgrim Fathers who went there in search of God." This distinguished citizen and official of a republic south of us found the differences in the progress of the two neighboring countries was explained by the different life ideals that moved the hearts of the original settlers.

An official of one of the largest and strongest insurance in America said to a business man, "Every loan we have, whether on farms, city property, or what not, is underwritten by the church of Jesus Christ. If the church fails, our loans are not worth the paper they are written upon."

These conclusions but emphasize the clear teachings of God's Word:

"Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people."

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."

## 2. Perils of prosperity

Along with the fundamental fact of Christianity as the determining factor in material advancement, is the imperative truth of the perils of prosperity.

The Bible, history, experience, and observation all warn against this danger.

(1) This menace of prosperity hovers over our personal lives.

A few years ago the philosopher Bergson reminded us that man never had such a body as he now has. Science has elongated his vision until he looks upon hitherto invisible. Science has accelerated his speed until he hurries over the earth faster than the twelve-league booted one ancient fable. Science has increased his power of hearing until he listens to the whispered words from the ends of the earth. Science has lengthened and strengthened his arm until the blows of his fist are felt by the enemy seventy-five miles away. Truly man never had such a body as he now has. "But the greater spirits to handle the greater bodies, there," says the philosopher, "is the problem."

Dan Crawford relates a conversation he had with a native in Africa. Mr. Crawford describes the marvelous conveniences and inventions of America—subways, elevated trains, airships—all of these—and when he had finished the black man asked: "Do they have peace? Are they happy there?"

It is marvelous that we can fly from New York to San Francisco within a few hours. But it is a serious question as to whether we are any better

people after the rapid journey is made.

"As thy soul prospereth!" How these words search us!

"There is nothing on earth that looks good, that is so dangerous for a man or nation to handle as quick, easy, big money. If it does not get you the chances are that it will get your son. It is greater and finer heroism to dare to be poor in American than it is to charge an earthquake," so says the Wall Street Journal. Jesus cautioned us against material standards of success.

"A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Regardless of what Bradstreet and Dun say, or "Who's Who", regardless of your bank account or your position—"A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

The Bible repeatedly warns us against the materialism and pride that forgot God. Referring to King Uzziah we have these words: "But when he was strong his heart was lifted up;" In his prosperity his soul grew proud and small. Jesus gives us the portrait of another and underneath it he wrote "Thou fool!" The man thought that he could feed his soul on corn but his soul starved. Jesus wrote the epitaph, "This night is thy soul required of thee."

The supreme test of Christ's followers has never been poverty, adversity, persecution, or even martyrdom. The records always present the friends of Jesus meeting these situations with shining faces and hymns of faith. The supreme challenge is prosperity, advancement, success. Long ago the prophet of God exclaimed: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken the fountain of living water, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

Languishing by "broken cisterns" let us hear God's Spirit calling us to the "fountain" where with tired thirsty souls refreshed from the unwasted fullness of "living waters" we may join in the testimony:

"I've tried the broken cisterns, Lord,  
 But ah! the waters failed;  
 E'en as I stooped to drink they fled,  
 And mocked me as I wailed.  
 But none but Christ can satisfy,  
 None other name for me.  
 There's life, and peace, and lasting joy,  
 Lord Jesus found in thee."

(2) And the danger of prosperity is seen in our homes.

Practically every problem in American just now is ultimately a home problem. What wonderful houses we are building, how carefully planned, how elaborately furnished, and what conveniences, comforts and luxuries are now ours! We live in houses lighted by the touch of a button heated without hardship or exposure, in touch with the most distant neighbor by merely removing the telephone receiver. Messages of the world come to our living rooms every evening by radio. The children are in school or college. The automobile is in the garage.

What a contrast to the homes of our childhood! The life there was hard and meagre. No luxuries, no conveniences--only the necessities won by toil and hardship--were found in most of the homes of our childhood. But the contrast is more striking when carried into the realm of the moral and spiritual. What about the records of divorce and juvenile courts in our day? What about lawlessness and crime? What about the tides of immorality that roll through the land and break at our hearthstones? What about the spirit of recklessness and adventure evident in the whole field of morals?

When opportunity affords I visit the homes of my childhood--far back in the isolated section of North Carolina mountains. I stand with uncovered head by the decaying log cabin. Busy memory works while

voices now silent speak to me. I think of how my father chopped the logs of that cabin and with the help of the neighbors rolled them into place. I see him as he leads my mother to that crude home. How hard their lives, how barren, how meagre! But they brought to that hearthstone and kept alive there the great, white, eternal things of God. I think of the children scattered over the world and pray that with our advantages we may have the courage, devotion, and faith to give our children the spiritual ideals that our parents gave us.

They "acknowledged themselves strangers and pilgrims here." They "sought a city which hath foundation whose builder and maker is God." They were "not ashamed to be called the friends of God." They said with another, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

"They climbed the steep ascent to heaven,  
Mid perils, toils and pain.  
Oh, God, to us may grace be given  
To follow in in their train."

Henry W. Grady, at the height of his busy manhood realized that something big and fine had gone out of his life. Informing his associates that he would be away for a few days, he closed his office and hurried to the old mother in a rural community of Georgia. As the shadows gathered and deepened at the close of the first day of his visit he said to his mother: "I have lost something from my life, mother, and I have come to you to find it. I want you to let me be a boy again. I want to say my prayers at your knees. I want you to tuck me in bed, and kiss me goodnight just as you did when I was a child." And at his mother's knee he knelt and said the prayer of childhood's days:

"Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray, Thee, Lord, my soul to take  
And this for Jesus sake.—Amen."

He was a great orator, but in my judgment he was never so eloquent as when in manhood's prime he bowed his head in his mother's lap and repeated after her the words she had taught him in years ago. And at that holy shrine he found again the Christian ideals that had been somewhat obscured in the pressure of busy life.

God help us if we build elegant houses and fail to build Christian homes for our children! God help us if we seek to protect them from hardship by accumulating and passing on to them wealth and at the same time blight their lives with materialistic conceptions and ideals. God help us if we fail to give our children their rightful heritage—the heritage of a Godly home. This warning should be written over the door of every home in America: "Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God, in our keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day:

Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein:

And when thy <sup>herds</sup> ~~herds~~ and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied:

Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage."

(3) It is true of Nations.

With fascination we read the story of the Nations. Impressively, often majestically, sometimes even dramatically, many of them rise, develop and suddenly collapse. The highway of history is strewn with the wrecks and ruins of these once proud but now decadent empires. I do not call the names of these defeated civilizations—names familiar to school children. Any explanation of their downfall must give large space to

to two words---materialism and pride. The words descriptive of Greece might be appropriately used of most of them:

"The Niobe of Nations! There she stands,  
Childless and crownless, in her voiceless woe;  
An empty urn within her withered hands.  
Whose holy dust was scattered long ago."

Somewhere I have seen references to a poem published in an European paper during the world war. This poem praised the four elements of the universe: earth, water, fire, and air. It praised the earth because we can dig trenches in it, the water because we can use submarines in it, fire because it belches from the cannon's mouth, air because we can drop bombs from it. What a striking, ghastly comment upon modern civilization!

Is not our own nation---the object of our loyalty and devotion---  
powerful  
threatened by these insidious, ~~power~~ enemies which have wrought ruin with others? The most dangerous cloud hovering over our land today is that of materialism and pride. All that is priceless in our Republic is endangered by these colossal foes of mankind. Materialism, like a hydra-headed monster, lifts itself, striding in every direction, and breathing its poisonous breath over all the land. Pride---pride of achievement, pride of possessions, pride of position, pride of security---vaunts itself. We need to realize that national strength, national greatness, national perpetuity, are not secured by numbers, resources, strategic location, form of government, or the size of the army and navy.

"As the nations which the Lord destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the Lord your God."

"For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish."



"Lord God of hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget, lest we forget."

## II. Southern Baptists and Material Prosperity

God has placed us in a land of superior natural resources. Several years ago an eminent authority wrote: "The South has twice as much coal and iron as Great Britain, Germany and Pennsylvania combined. The South has more than one-half the standing timber of the United States. The South holds a world monopoly on cotton production. The South has the climate and soil for the support of a dense population and the creation of a vast amount of wealth." You and I live in a day when these marvelous resources are being developed rapidly and already prosperity has come to the South's material resources. What is the significance of it? Just this: When Archimedes discovered his law of the lever he said: "Give me a place to stand—a place off yonder somewhere to secure a footing, and I will take my lever and move the world." Southern Baptists have a place to stand—a combination of natural advantages rarely found in any land. They have the lever—New Testament truth. If we do not lift the world closer to God in our generation we have forfeited an opportunity which angels might covet.

Our prosperity is a fact of tabulated statistics. It is unnecessary to refer to income tax reports, various bank statements, Blue Book, etc. Many pastors here preach to congregations whose automobiles, in which they ride to church, represent a larger investment of money than the entire church property, plus the annual contribution of the churches for the promotion of the Kingdom of God. Our prosperity is a fact—our failure to use our possessions for the promotion of Christ's Kingdom is likewise a fact—a depressing, alarming fact—a fact written large in the reports that will be

brought to this convention telling of enormous debts on every board and almost every institution that carries the Baptist name. Face to face with the facts--the fact of our prosperity--the fact of our indifference and lethargy, I am raising the question of whether our growth of soul is commensurate with our growth of wealth. "I pray that you mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." Surely the Spirit of God moved in our midst with the admonition, "Thou shalt remember the Lord thy God for it is He that giveth Thee power to get wealth." "If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"

The most threatening peril before us is not poverty--griam and gaut. The most ~~threatend~~ peril is that of possessions--possessions without the touch of consecration--possessions with the personal, possessive pronoun encircling them--"mine, mine, mine"--possessions that carry with them a false sense of security--possessions that create self-sufficiency and pride--possessions that smother and paralyze the soul as they substitute things for God.

Southern Baptists should "Praise God from Whom All Blessing Flow" that they now have the means to carry out the divine program. Consecrated to God, our possessions--constituting our chiefest spiritual perio when held for selfish purposes--would be transformed into ~~de-~~ demp~~ti~~va agencies ministering to our enrichment of soul while advancing our Saviour's kingdom. Consecrated to God, the wealth of Southern Baptists, treating us with spiritual bankruptcy, would remove the enormous and growing obligations resting upon the denomination, answer every call of the Kingdom in the homeland and people the earth with missionaries of the Cross.

How, then, may we as followers of Christ transform our possessions from threatening enemies into friendly allies--allies that shall extend

joined  
the ~~joined~~ hands of comrades to us in the culture of our souls  
and in the promotion of Christ's kingdom? "Make unto yourselves  
friends of the mammon of unrighteousness."

"Ye cannot serve God and mammon," but you can serve God with mammon.

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all  
of these things shall be added unto you."

My answer to the question is:

1. Accept, cultivate, and practice the New Testament teachings  
of stewardship.

Accept—as we do the plan of salvation; cultivate as we do other  
Christian graces; practice—as we do any other virtue, the New  
Testament teaching of stewardship. "It is required of a steward that  
a man be found faithful." "See that ye abound in this grace also"—  
"This grace also" and the apostle is talking about giving. He has  
mentioned faith, utterance, knowledge, love. Now he comes to "this grace also"—  
the grace of beneficence, the grace that stands pale and weak and neglected  
in the midst of her sister graces.

We are not to shrink from the personal responsibility that is ours  
as trustees of our possessions. It is easy to lose ourselves in  
generalities here. The tendency is to shift the personal application  
by saying, "Yes, we are stewards of the gospel, stewards of our time,  
our talents, stewards of all that we have and are." I agree with these  
who make such statements, but just now I am urging the other truth—steward-  
ship of possessions. It is easy to admit the theory of God's ownership  
and say, "The cattle on a thousand hills are His." "The wealth of field,  
and forest, and mine—all is His." We sing with religious fervor:

"My father is rich in houses and lands,  
He holdeth the wealth of the world in his hands!  
Of rubies and diamonds, of silver and gold,  
His coffers are full, He has riches untold.  
I'm a child of a kind, the child of a king!  
With Jesus, my Saviour, I'm the child of a king!"

Are we willing to make the personal application of God's ownership? My bank, my store, my farm, my salary, are His and I am personally responsible for the administration of what my Father has committed to me. We sing without reluctance:

"Take my life and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

Are we prepared to sing:

"Take my silver and my gold,  
Not a mite would I withhold."

This personal application of stewardship measures and manifests the reality and vitality of our devotion to Jesus. No power except the transcendent power of the grace of God can conquer the inherent selfishness in our hearts and release our tightly clasped, reluctant fingers from money that belongs to God.

Much has been said of "Christianizing the social order." Frequently the question is raised: Is our gospel sufficient to regulate the vast economic and industrial systems of our day? We answer "Yes! unhesitatingly Yes! Our gospel is sufficient for every need, for every problem of our complicated world." But here I am raising a more practical question. Is the gospel of Jesus sufficient to deliver his followers from the curse of materialism and the blight of covetousness? Has the transforming power of his grace conquered our selfishness, our avarice? Will our methods of acquiring, holding, and distributing money stand the white light of the teachings of Jesus? Has the gospel made of me a faithful trustee, or do I remain a proud proprietor? Do my possessions minister to my spiritual growth, or do they call about my soul and with ever tightening grasp stealthily and steadily paralyze and destroy all that is highest and holiest within? Our own spiritual welfare demands that we accept, cultivate and practice the New Testament

teachings of stewardship.

2. My second suggestion is that we must adopt some method in this practice of stewardship.

If material possessions are to be spiritual allies, there must be some definite plan in the expression of stewardship. The New Testament clearly outlines the plan: Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay be him in store, as God hath prospered him." But just what proportion of my income does that mean, is the question from many honest hearts. Well, to many of us it means the tenth as a minimum. Numerous pastors do not hesitate to practice and preach the tithe as the least scriptural proportion to be used in the expression of stewardship. These pastors quote and emphasize: "Bring ye the whole tithe into the storehouse." "The tithe is the Lord's." "Even the Pharisees tithe."

Others do not agree that the scriptures teach tithing. They are sincere followers of Jesus, some of them giving regularly more than the tenth. I do not enter an argument with them. My appeal is for the absolute necessity of setting aside some definite proportion as belonging to God. My appeal is for some worthy method in the application of our stewardship. So far, no better method than the tithe as a minimum has been suggested. Until some better plan is wrought out, why not accept this one—clear, simple, definite; tried by <sup>numbers</sup> ~~members~~ of Christian people and found a source of spiritual culture while fruitful in Kingdom work.

You will permit this observation! The tithers in my congregation are, for the most part, the regular attendants upon all church services. They are the deacons, the Sunday school teachers, the active workers in the W.M.S., in Training Union, and in personal workers' bands. If tithing, as some fear, binds those who practice it in formal legalism, I fail to note any disastrous results to the Christian experience of

those to whom I minister.

Moreover, it is noticeable that those who practice the tithe as a minimum are the ones who go on to larger proportions in their giving—even to the entire income. Three years ago I sat with two men at lunch, both of them tithers, and we talked of our church and our denomination. Presently one of them called the other by name and said: "I am about ready to say to you 'Enough money.' We have sufficient income to support our families. We may ruin our children by leaving them too much. Let's covenant together to join \_\_\_\_\_ who is giving his entire income. Let's spend the rest of our lives making every dollar possible, and give every cent of it." I told this story to a group of friends as we were on the way to Stockholm. The next day a gentleman sent for me and said: "I heard your story yesterday and couldn't sleep last night. I was a poor boy and worked my way through college. God has been good to me and I am prosperous. For years I have been giving the tithe, and more. But I am thinking of what your friend said. What if money should ruin my family? I am praying that one of my children will be a missionary." I talked with him for sometime and asked him to see Dr. Mullins who was on the ship. The last time I saw him he shook my hand in Stockholm and said: "It is settled. I am going home to make every dollar possible and am going to give it all to the promotion of Christ's Kingdom." That man may be in this convention. He is too modest to speak, but I am sure that he should bear any testimony it would be one of the peace, the joy, the growth, the prosperity of his soul. If one hundred men from this convention would join him today they would inaugurate a movement that would shake the earth.

The book of Acts tells of a conference which the followers of Jesus held in the city of Jerusalem immediately after the ascension of their Lord. They had been with him on the rounded top of Olivet. They had

watched him as he pointed with his arm, his eyes, and his heart, and they had heard him say, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." After He left them they went, in obedience to his command, to the upper room and remained in prayer for ten days. It is my opinion that they said very little to each other. They were talking to God, Then Pentecost came. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and with His power flooding their lives they moved into their world and claimed it for Jesus. They were few in number and without the resources upon which we count so largely--- wealth, or ganization, and influence. The centuries have come and gone, but history holds no record which matches the achievement of that Spirit-filled group. Historians say that within one hundred years the Grecian cities of Thessalonica, Philippi, Smyrna, Ephesus, and Corinth contained more followers of Jesus than the whole of his native land at the time of his death. In two hundred years more the message had gone to imperial Rome: the eagles were removed from her banners, and the Cross was emblazoned there, a thing no longer of shame but of regal honor. In five centuries more that Cross had marched to the end of ~~the~~ Europe, had passed over the channel and set up its dominion in the British Isles. Through the centuries since the message of the Cross has brought a salvation of joy, hope, inspiration, and transformation to millions and millions of souls.

"Askest thou in exultation,  
 What the Cross of Christ hath done?  
 Ask the splendors of creation  
 If they feel the noonday sun.  
 Ask reviving vegetation,  
 Springing forth on joyous wing,  
 If it feelw the inwpiration  
 Of the breath-enchanting spring."

As we follow the triumphant march of those who left the upper room in Jerusalem we must not overlook this significant word written of

them, "Neither said any of them aught of the things which he possessed was his won." Their spirit-filled lives united and pleaded a vital, practical stewardship; passionate, personal evangelism; unwearied missionary zeal, and radiant Christian joy. In proportion as these qualities, with other great centralities of our faith, dominate the followers of Jesus, his cause advances.

We, too, are messengers---messengers from our churches, but messengers of Jesus. This gathering here in Houston ought to be another Olivet where we will stand by our risen victorouis Lord and hear him outline for us our supreme mission. Let us pray that Pentecost may be repeated here. Let every heart and life be so surrendered that the Holy Spirit may abundantly enter, gloriously guide, and divinely empower us for our challenging task. The most persistent and persuasive call of God today is the call to a consecration that will bring our possessions to the feet of Jesus to be used in carrying out his divine program. The personal and practical response to this call of God is for each of us to give undivided loyalty to the unified budget of our denomination---commit ourselves wholeheartedly to regular, systematic, proportionate offerings, with the tenth as a minimum, for the support of that budget. Our own spiritual interests are involved in the response we make to this call. The manifest blessings of God upon us and upon our work emphasizes the call. The needs of every mission field, every institution, envery enterprise that we foster in the name of Christ, await our response. May the answer from every listening heart be:

"Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."



"The great world's heart is aching, aching  
fiercely in the night,  
And God alone can heal it, and God alone  
give light;  
And the men to bear that message, and to  
speak the living word,  
Are you and I, my brothers, and millions  
that have heard.  
Can we close our eyes to duty? Can we fold  
our hands at ease?  
Can we shut up our compassions? Can we  
leave our prayer unsaid,  
Till the lands which sin has blasted have been  
quickened from the dead?  
We grovel among trifles, and our spirits fret  
and toss,  
While above us burns the vision of the Christ  
upon the cross."