

Dear friends and members of St. John Lutheran,

If you look, today, at the countries of the world where the Gospel is taking hold in powerful ways, you won't find these nations to be particular prosperous. Central Africa, South America and other regions are seeing tremendous growth in church attendance, and yet, economically they're hurting. Peter wrote his epistles to the churches in Asia Minor. They were undergoing severe persecution and poverty for confessing Jesus as LORD. And still the church grew. The message of a Suffering Servant who would willingly take on the punishment of men, and offer His life as a sacrifice for them – seems to ring louder and truer in regions that know what suffering is all about.

So while persecution and poverty can actually help the Gospel spread, is the opposite also true? **Does prosperity lead to people to ignore the Gospel, and walk away from church?** The following text may shed some light on this subject.

[Jesus] told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21, ESV)

Man is a dependent being. We like to imagine ourselves as self-sufficient. We like to see ourselves as able to survive off the land, if we had to. But the reality is that none of us would last long without the help of others. It's in the dream of self-sufficiency, of being our own god, that we see the farmer in our text relax with what appears to be an abundance. But he forgot one simple thing: This life doesn't last forever. He made preparations for his mortal body, but forgot about the preparations needed for the soul. Prosperity has a way of blinding people to the reality of their existence: death is coming.

There are many factors that affect church attendance. The prosperity of the people is just one of those factors. But we must be on guard to **destructive nature of "prosperity"**, and that it comes in many forms. When 9/11 occurred, there was an upswing in people attending church. There seemed to have been a collective need for God, in that time of great despair. How long did that increase in attendance last? About one month! It's as if people took stock of their situation and said to themselves, "You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Looking at America today, and in particular church attendance, and you will see a nation that has abandoned the one true God for many false gods. Eighteen to 29 year olds are the least churching generation in the history of America. Has prosperity blinded us to the reality of life? Has the evil message that 'everyone goes to heaven' so saturated the land, that people ignore God's voice, calling them to repentance and life?

The latest generation of adult Americans may be the least 'sold-out' generation in the history of America (by that, I mean 'sold-out' to the trappings of blatant capitalism). Their pursuit of happiness (above everything else) has made them 'prosperous' in different ways than previous generations. **They understand that wealth doesn't necessarily mean happiness, so they seek happiness through other forms of 'prosperity':** shorter work weeks, deeper relationships with fewer individuals, a moral code that is centered on each person deciding for himself what is 'right and wrong,' and a communing with nature that often turns mother nature into their god. What have they forgotten? This life will come to an end one day.

So how do we reach out to our neighbor in this land of false prosperity? There is only one way that people are brought to faith: Through the saving message of Jesus on the cross, and His empty tomb, three days later. The reality of death can't be ignored forever. People need to remember that happiness is fleeting. Life is not within our control. Suffering and disease happens to everyone. The Law is found in the reality of a life that is anything but heavenly. The answer to this pain and suffering is for them to receive the guarantee of eternal life from the only true God. We don't need to change the message of Christ. We just need to be a friend to our neighbor when personal suffering opens the door to the reality of life. Pray for them. Cry with them. Hurt with them. And share with them all that our Lord has to offer: New life that never ends. When the reality of false prosperity hits, God is just waiting to bring healing and love to our neighbor. May we never forget to share this with them.

Pastor Travis