

What Does God Promise?

The Christian and Money

Deuteronomy 28:1-14

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Bethany Church

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Have you ever been confused by statements people make? The famous baseball player and manager Yogi Berra was good at that, so was a Florida State assistant football coach when he told his players: “*You guys, line up, alphabetically by height.*” What do you do? He also said, “*You guys, pair up in groups of three, then line up in a circle.*” To give instructions that confusing and paradoxical is a gift. It’s almost genius except that former NFL quarterback and television commentator, Joe Theismann said, “*Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.*” Norman? Joe makes his point very well, doesn’t he?

Comments like that may cause us to laugh, but they also can leave people confused and frustrated. I think many people feel confused and frustrated by Christian teaching on money. Some TV evangelists have left the impression that preachers will say anything to manipulate money out of people. Some Christians preach a prosperity gospel where they call believers to give money to God in order to get money from God. Other pastors, however, take a far different perspective. They quote Scripture and say: “*The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,*” and “*It is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.*” Methodism’s founder John Wesley spoke of how dangerous wealth is to the soul. He treated money like a hot potato that you want out of your hands before it burns them.

How do you reconcile wealth and luxury with Christ’s call to forsake all? What does it mean for you to embrace Christ’s call when he said, “*Deny yourself, take up your cross daily*

and follow me”? On the other hand, what do you do with promises like *“Give and it will be given to you, pressed down, shaken together and running over,”* and *“Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”* Don’t those promises recognize and endorse a profit motive? Don’t they depend upon a person’s desire to profit?

Is the Bible telling us to line up in a circle? Are we being told to pair up in threes? Are we called to stand alphabetically by height? In the next four weeks, we will examine what God actually promises about money, what Christ actually teaches, and what God desires believers to know about managing and giving money? My aim is to clear up the confusion and offer practical steps that will help you with your financial situation.

In Genesis 28, we get a glimpse of God’s will for you and me in Jacob’s partnership with God. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, ran away from home. He had pursued financial gain dishonestly at the expense of Esau his brother. He feared retribution. He feared his brother would kill him. You think you have family problems? However, God had mercy on this Jacob. He had a revelation. In a dream he saw the entrance to heaven where angels come and go. He saw how God was involved with what was happening on earth. Then he saw and heard the Lord promise to protect and prosper him. Jacob made a covenant of partnership that involved returning a tithe or a tenth of all his income to God.

The question begs to be asked. Why was God ready to bless a greedy, dishonest man like Jacob? Certainly, God did not single out Jacob because he liked him better than Esau. He did not single out Jacob because he favors him over any other human being. The New Testament teaches that God is impartial. God is not in the business of creating one to be cursed and another to be blessed. When we hear from the prophet Malachi or in the teaching of Paul the words,

“*Jacob, I loved, but Esau I hated,*” God was not being arbitrary or emotional. God had reasons. An important one was revealed immediately to Jacob. God told Jacob, “***All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring***” (Genesis 28:14). God singles out Jacob instead of Esau because God cares about all. Both were sons of Isaac and grandsons of Abraham; however, God’s blessings go where they can be multiplied through faith, not where they are hoarded in unbelief.

Consider the promise of Deuteronomy 28.

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. (Deut 28:1, NIV)

Why would God do that if he is impartial? Why would he elevate one nation over another?

The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. (Deut 28:9-10, NIV)

Is it obvious what’s going on? The blessing comes to bless, and not to curse.

The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. (Deut 28:12-13, NIV)

God honored and elevated Israel so that people would be drawn to God, the source of their life and blessing. I pray for the economic blessing of Rochester. I pray that God makes us the head not the tail in order that we may bless others. I want us as a people to excel in blessing others. I want us as a community to shine in serving and contributing to the well being of others.

Economic blessing never comes to any one because God likes him or her better than another. Prosperity comes for the blessing of all. God prospers individuals, communities, and

nations in order that they may convey that blessing to others. Thus, when Jesus promises “*Give and it will be given to you,*” that’s not a get-rich-quick scheme so that you can live in luxury. When Jesus teaches “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,*” he’s not giving you a formula for wealth enhancement. He’s saying, **“When you are connected with me in blessing others, I’ll fill you with blessing.”** What you sow you’ll reap. What you give will be returned in greater measure. “If you honor me, which means heeding my words, I will honor you.” It’s not an impersonal formula. It’s a personal relationship. God’s financial promises aren’t some bank formula or stock investment. They are his commitment to his children who choose to live as his partners.

Relationships are dynamic. I recall the lesson of Baruch. When God handed Israel over to their enemies and Jerusalem was in shambles, Baruch complained. He had faithfully obeyed God’s commands in tithing and in recording the words of Jeremiah the prophet. He wanted to know why he wasn’t rich. God spoke these words in Jeremiah 45.

Say this to him: “This is what the LORD says: ‘I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.’” (Jeremiah 45:4-5, NIV)

Baruch took God’s promises as impersonal formulas. While everybody around suffered disaster, he wanted no part, he wanted complete insulation. But God gives blessings to bless, for God’s impartial. Baruch needed to concern himself more with the welfare of his people than his individual advancement. Nevertheless, God honored his faith.

Jeremiah made this link even more explicit. He wrote captives in foreign cities, telling them to pray for the prosperity of their cities. If those cities prospered, they would too.

So what does God actually promise you in the Bible? **First, God promises you that He cares about your financial situation.** It is on his scope of concern. God desires to bless you. **Second, God promises to be your economic partner and bless you.** God's out to bless you rather than blast you. **Third, God promises to respond to your actions.** You can enter into partnership with God if you will. However, if you don't work, don't expect anything. If you are lazy, expect hardship. If you hoard, don't expect blessing. Instead, give and it will be given to you. Seek first the kingdom and your needs will be provided. **Fourth, God promises to deal with you distinctly, but not in isolation.** God does not deal with you in isolation. Your welfare is tied to your community and region. God wants you to seek the blessing of other people. He wants you to seek the welfare of your community. He's linked much of your blessing to theirs.

One day I sat down with a Christian businessman. We had been college friends. He had gone off into business while I continued on to seminary. His industry was in terrible distress. It was contracting with a great sucking sound. Many of his competitors and associates had gone bankrupt; most were fighting to stay solvent. I asked about his situation. He had eschewed much of the conventional thinking in his industry. As a Bible student, he had gleaned from the Scriptures promises and principles that would apply to his work. Indicative of his industry he was not overly wealthy, but his business was one of few that was healthy and thriving. Both the lesson of Baruch and the partnership of Jacob were evident in his life. God was faithful to him.

God will be faithful to you too. God gives you promises because he both loves you and desires to love others through you. God gives you promises so that you will have direction for your activity and also enjoyment of his generosity. Don't be ignorant of his promises. Read the Scriptures. Claim the promises. Pray over them. Let them direct you, for they will disclose both God's generosity and his purposes for your life.