

# A New Kind of Prosperity

“Measure your wealth by justice.”

Luke 1:67-79

*Third in the Advent series, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”*

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## I Want

Once when Laura and I visited some friends they took us to their entertainment room where they had a new television with a screen that covered just about a whole wall. Speakers stood next to the console, and behind us, and beside us. It looked like a miniature movie theater. My friend took out a tape and loaded the VCR. He turned on the system and dimmed the lights and advanced the tape. I think that he had given this demonstration before. He was proud; I would have been; I would have shown off.

It was a scene from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where they are on a motorcycle with a side car, chased by German tanks and dangerous people on horses. We sat there with the larger-than-life scene excitedly unfolding right there in our laps, shells exploding – spraying dirt that I thought would hit my face. Sound effects enveloped us from every side. I could feel them in the pit of my stomach. This was total entertainment.

And I thought to myself, “I’ve *got* to get me one of these!”

It’s been 15 years, and I guess I still don’t have *one of these*. My televisions have become bigger, the sound quality clearer, the recordings more sophisticated; but I still don’t have a theater.

For me, a home theater might be the sign that I have finally become rich. How do you know if you’re wealthy? If you own a state-of-the-art entertainment center? Have a vacation home that’s larger than 10,000 square feet? Keep a yacht docked at Boca Raton? Drive a Lincoln unless it’s sunny when you can bring out the vintage Stutz Bearcat?

We all have our own lists and standards. And people have a tendency to measure the extent to which a lavish life on the basis of rich foods, expansive homes and exotic vacations. Isn't that what's meant when we say, *wealthy* or *rich*?

Now, I don't think it's bad to own a high-def TV. But it's sure to be unhealthy to pursue one as your goal in life. A home theater, or whatever else it is that you think that you have to have in order to have arrived. Because whatever it is, I can guarantee that once you get it, it will cease to be your means of measurement.

We live in a world where the pursuit of happiness is synonymous with the pursuit of wealth. And wealth is always elusive. Once you get you want to get more and so we reach for more; and in this day of easy credit at high rate APR's you can find plenty of people who end up driving themselves into poverty trying to be rich.

### **Two Cloaks and a Fair Wage**

I remember a photograph on the back cover of a paperback biography of Mahatma Gandhi which displayed the sum total of all Gandhi's belongings at the time of his death. Placed on the blanket was a rice bowl and a spoon, a book and a pair of eye glasses, a walking stick. That's it. And I have wondered, "How could he manage on that?" Yet, in his own way Gandhi was so rich, was he not?

The problem does not lie in owning things. It's *obsessing* on owning things – especially when it's at the expense of others who really are poor. That's what had people like John the Baptist so concerned. It's why he came announcing the coming of the Messiah, calling on people to make straight the way of the Lord, repent, and believe the good news. Then he applies this to what you do with material things.

If the Kingdom of God is at hand, as he says, then the surround-sound is not going to be all that important. What's going to be important is whether you do your part to feed the hungry and work so that the prosperity of the world is something everyone gets to share.

So the coming of the Messiah is going to be a shake-up of cosmic proportions. It's no longer business as usual. In the face of what glory is to take place and what justice is to be enjoyed world-wide, getting your home theater isn't going to be anywhere near as important as someone else getting a hot meal.

So John says if you have two coats in your closet and you see someone shivering in the cold and all they've got on is a light hoodie, give him your extra coat. If you have a freezer-full of turkeys and Swanson's® pot pies and you happen live near any of the 49 million Americans without enough then by all means share some. And his point about tax collectors collecting only what they're supposed to instead of intimidating people into filling their pockets with much more and soldiers not extorting money or services is all about living in a beloved relationship with others, no matter what you do for a living.

Since Christ is coming and the Kingdom of God is at hand it's no longer the time to abuse your power or chase after more than your fair share. This is turning the world upside down. It's time for *everyone* to enjoy the world's riches.

And none of us will really enjoy prosperity until we all do. This is beloved community, globally. That's what the Kingdom is. And since John says, "Here he comes:" the Kingdom is now.

Back in the '80's Laura and I were raising our young family in a town and country setting. Our church was a little congregation that had a big ministry helping people in ever new and creative ways. There were a lot of people living around us who didn't have enough for a decent Christmas dinner and not much to give their children; and Laura was determined that they should have a chance to celebrate Jesus' birth with a good meal. So she worked with members of the church and the Department of Social Services to give some people in need a Christmas feast at church. Invitations went out and there was a good response. We were expecting a full Social Hall.

These were the people of the day who were down and out. Today, they would be some of the first-time homeless you might have read about this week in the *Detroit Free Press*. Like one who once had a decent job and a middle-class income. But laid-off and faced with mounting medical bills and a heart condition that keeps him from work, now he's staying at a Royal Oak motel on disability checks.<sup>1</sup>

Oakland County's had over 2,400 people homeless; and this year about 45% of the people South Oakland Shelter (SOS) is helping are first-time homeless. Their 30 bed shelter is at capacity and 765 people – including 333 children – had to be turned away in October alone.<sup>2</sup>

This is what John is talking about: when Jesus comes I may or may not get my surround-sound; but they will get their meal. And I will be rich when I share in their feast.

That's what Laura had us doing. We were about to enjoy the new prosperity: not by pursuing the elusive next toy but by sharing the wealth.

### **Our Wealth**

Snows came with a vengeance on Christmas Eve. Blizzard conditions closed down the Interstate. Roads were drifted over and somebody called to say that their road had been plowed but they couldn't get out of their drive,. "No problem," Laura said, "my husband will be glad to come get you." Dutifully...I got into our low-riding sedan and drove out to their county road, made a turn and, just as I turned, realized that the sharp wind had undone the work of the plow. I managed to steer into some fresh truck tracks and kept the wheels turning, dragging bottom and pushing snow all the way. The family lived adjacent to a rise in the road where the snow wasn't so deep, so I was able to stop and tell them that they'd better not get in. There was nowhere for me to turn around and I had no idea how I was going to get out. I went on, down a hill and around a curve along a lake where a drift rose well-over the hood of the car. That's where I stopped. Permanently.

It was close to 0°. I waded up the hill through the snow and knocked on the door of the home of an old lady with cats. Lots of them. Surprisingly she let me in. I called the church where dinner was being served. Some church guys were there, ready for an adventure. One of them had a blade on the front of his pick-up and after a while, he pulled up to the house. I got in the truck and we drove down to my buried car, fixing ropes to the rear end. After a several attempts to free the car we yanked off the bumper. Then the pick-up got stuck.

We were helped by a friend of a church member who owned a construction business and had a huge front loader. Heaven was coming when I saw its huge headlights approaching as he came, bucket down, clearing a 10 foot path in his wake. Properly hooking up the chains, he pulled both the car and the pickup out of the drift. We were free and clear...dangling bumper and all.

We who thought we were the haves so quickly became the ones who needed have-nots. We were in need and we were given a taste of someone else's wealth.

We are all needy people in the midst of needy people. All of us need rescuing like that.

Rescue from the curse of insufficiency; rescue from the curse of too much affluence and constant dissatisfaction.

When we got back to church we shared the feast: it turns out all of us were in need; all of us, by the power of the newborn King, were rich.

That's what happens when Jesus comes to you. A new prosperity enjoyed by sharing what you've got.

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<sup>1</sup> "Shelters cope as demand soars", The Detroit Free Press. ©December 7, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.