

Sunday after Pentecost – Year C – October 3, 2010
Based on Revelation 2:8-11 - written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Limited Prosperity - Unlimited Poverty”

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. “I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

I am tired... of the advice on saving and investing. Because it makes me think that there's something more I can do with my money to earn more money. I am tired... of trying to fill a hole in my identity, that big ticket purchases and everyday costs don't fill. I am tired... of feeding a hunger to be someone the world says I need to be. I am tired of myself. We've repented for the live-for-the-moment lack of faith, for short-sightedness, trying to buy happiness. We've all confessed with the words of Ecclesiastes 5.10, “Whoever loves money never has money enough.”

And I've heard the stories. The lottery winner who wastes it all and becomes poorer than before, I laugh and say, “I'd never do that.” I've counseled folks who don't want to curb sinful behavior and I say, “I'll never do that.” I see people who work too hard, too many hours, too many jobs, just to give themselves and their kids what they want, not necessarily what they need, and I've said, “I'll never do that.” I've heard about this television show called “Hoarders.” A camera crew walks into a home, but they have to follow the path through the piles of junk. I laugh and say, “I'm glad I'm not like that.” And then I walk into my own home and look in my garage and closets. And then Satan laughs... when I do all those things. He drives the knife of my sin deep into my soul, he knows I know better. Do you hear his

laughter in your guilt and shame? He know that you knew better.

I'm tired because I know better, but knowledge doesn't help the problem. Try teaching the 4th commandment to your kids. Have them recite it when they wake up. Send them to school with the 4th commandment embossed on their lunchbox. Have them recite it backwards and forwards before and after supper. Tuck them into bed with pajamas and sheets and a room covered in wallpaper that says, "Honor your father and mother," and they will still disobey. Why? They knew better. But knowledge is like a surgeon's scalpel. It cuts you but it doesn't heal. You need the hands of a skillful surgeon, recovery and rehab, and blessing from God in order for your body to heal completely.

In the same way I need a surgeon to work on my heart which is set on money and possessions and earthly treasures. Jesus works on my heart with his holy Word. When Bible talks about money, and there are over 1,000 passages in Bible that do, it's more than financial advice from Suze Orman. It's spiritual surgery. We need that surgery, because we are filled with deadly greed, deadly self-delusion about true treasure, deadly lack of faith. We need an operation... more than that, a transplant, a new life, a resurrection. The problem is, we're high risk.

Try to apply for loan when you do not have the best credit score, and the bank won't even look at the application. Even if they do, they impose a credit limit. That seems like an oxymoron, because credit card companies keep on raising it thousands of dollars. Is there a limit? Sure there is. At some point we become too much of a risk even for a credit card company. Even our great American prosperity is limited. Money can only buy you so much. American prosperity is limited. "They" say that to be prosperous in America you have to go into debt. How does that work? Debt buys you more interest and depreciation. Debt obligates you to more cost than what you paid for the purchase. Debt buys you unwanted stress. We buy into this idea of the American dream, which is so often filled with nightmares. That is why I am sick and tired of myself, chasing after the wind, which I will never grasp.

You do the math. How much of a spiritual risk are you to Jesus? He knows your past spiritual credit history. He knows what your future spending habits will be. Go to him and ask for a spiritual loan – for some faith, for some love, hope, some heavenly value or spiritual treasures? At what point will he say, “You’re too much of a risk?”

And yet He answers, “I know your afflictions and your poverty.” He has full access to your spiritual credit report, your bad debts of sin, your late payments of not trying hard enough, your poor past performance, your risky future, and yet he says, “You are rich!” How can that be? Listen to three solid reasons from Revelation 2...

Jesus Christ is “the First and the Last.” Before MasterCard or Capital One, before crowns and kingdoms and church offerings, before mountains stood up to praise him, oceans rolled before his feet, before the beginning, Jesus Christ was God.... He needed none of creation’s wonders to make him God. Believers need none of the world’s wealth to make us rich. After the world’s powers crumble, after the world’s economy collapses for the final time, after your home and bank and your safe deposit box and your satin-lined casket all burn up on the Last Day, Jesus will still be God, and you will be rich. You don’t need the inheritance of this earth to be rich forever in heaven. For...

Jesus Christ is the one “who died and came to life again.” Jesus said previously that he knows our afflictions and our poverty. And we know this: we know Jesus’ afflictions and poverty. We know his sufferings and death. Jesus became poor even before his sufferings and death, when he set aside the riches of his glory for the dirty manger, the unclean leper, the filthy adulterous woman. When he died he didn’t leave these poverties behind, like a bad chapter in his life. He brought them to the cross. The wood of the manger saturated with animal spit saw its fulfillment in the wood of the cross,

soaked with God's blood. The leper lived clean of leprosy, but also clean of sin, because Jesus took the anger of God for him and paid the price at the cross. At the cross your sinful self died. There at the cross, your sinful nature died, with its greed and lust for money. At the empty tomb your new spirit came to life. By Jesus' poverty you have become rich! You are rich because...

Jesus Christ is the one who says to you and to me, "Don't be afraid. Be faithful." Those spiritual riches pay the bills when we suffer, and we will suffer when we trust God, not riches. Saving and spending with a faith that trusts God above all else brings suffering. Because we will not always feed our wants when they cry out. We will not keep up with the Joneses even though our ego complains. We will restrict ourselves with discipline and it feels like we're in prison. He who is the First and the Last, the one who was dead and is alive, says to you, "Don't be afraid." Don't be afraid if you suffer when you trust in God instead of your riches.

Instead, Jesus commands you, "Be faithful." And he adds a promise... he always adds a promise, "and I will give you the crown of life." Prosperity is limited. But poverty is unlimited. Poverty, living like Jesus, trusting God the Father and following his way, that is unlimited. Someone once said, "Live like no one else now, so you can live like no one else later." (Dave Ramsey) Trust God now, and live like no one else later for all eternity. Hosting a bake sale to raise money for the women's group to do more ministry, walking to raise money for cancer research, donating 10% of your eBay sales to charity or 10% of your income to the Lord might be seen by your tax preparer as depleting your limited resources, but it seen by your God as tapping into his unlimited blessings. The richest man in the world, King Solomon, wrote, "One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly (excessively), but

comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper.” (Proverbs 11:24,25)

I hope nobody here today will go home and activate the free credit card in that pile of mail that promotes itself by offering “Free and unlimited credit!” What is free today won’t be free tomorrow, and the unlimited credit will seriously limit your lifestyle when the interest is charged. Prosperity is limited when we live “under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 5.18) chasing riches like people without faith. We will look instead at what Jesus limits. He limits death and afflictions, he limits Satan and suffering. These will come, but only on Jesus’ time and on his terms, and then only in serving his gracious purposes. We live in what looks like poverty to the rest of people, when we follow our Father’s will like Jesus, we find life to be unlimited. How unlimited for you? Well, how far are you willing to explore? “Do not be afraid, be faithful. And he will give you the crown of life.” Amen.

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