

# Initiated into the Secret of Enduring Prosperity

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Dear Brethren:

When the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians concerning their gifts, he makes a statement that we have taken for the theme of this essay. As one reads that section, it becomes evident that the Apostle's first interest is with the nature of givers, not gifts. His need to receive is secondary to the need of the believer to be what the redeemed and sanctified vines in God's vineyard are intended to be—and that is fruitful.

The Apostle realized that God had accomplished this in his very own case. Where there is the certainty of forgiveness in the obedience and sacrifice of the Son of God, where there is the sure hope of everlasting life with the living Christ, there the self-centered, short-term, selfish view of life is cut off, and there is grafted in a long-range God-centered view of existence. It is filled with adoring gratitude for His mercy that has to express itself in devotion and dedication to the will and pleasure of God. This is so well expressed in Romans 14:7,8:

For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

and in II Corinthians 5:15:

And that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.

It is evident that Paul would raise others to the height that experiences the same soul-satisfying philosophy of life. When he writes to the Philippians he does not merely exhort, rather he expresses a key thought and invites others to emulate and enjoy that same truth. He uses striking words in Philippians 4:12, according to the King James Version: "I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Now Paul is using a word that does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. While the translation "instructed" is in place, it flattens out the connotation. In classical usage the word meant, "initiated" into the secrets of the mysteries. Paul's verse can be paraphrased by saying that he has *learned the secret* of enduring hard times and prosperity. Everybody knows that enduring hard times is a real test for Christians. May I suggest here in 1965 that we pastors and leaders direct our attention to the secret of enduring abundance.

## I.

There is no need at this point to belabor the fact that the Christians in the congregations we represent are by and large to be numbered among those to whom much has been given. Physically and spiritually this applies. In the spiritual realm each of us would have experiences to relate that would include us with the Apostle Paul as making many rich, being privileged to offer the gem of grace and the pearl of salvation to converts in our midst, and those from outside our churches who have been defrauded of Christ and the riches in His Word.

Physically we are not Lazaruses; we are rich. How many will there be in our congregations who will be perplexed at Christmastime, not knowing what gift to give some member in the family who already seems to have everything! King Solomon never had a chariot to compare with the ones parked in our driveways. Lydia

never had frozen orange juice in her freezer. Philemon was poor in comparison to the comforts and pursuits enjoyed by the people you and I represent here. And we are here for their benefit—to lead them by example and encouragement in faithful stewardship of the Lord’s rich blessings—to help them endure prosperity, and this is no small task. We recall Proverbs 30:8: “Feed me with food that is convenient . . . lest I be full and deny Thee.” There is a danger in riches, and the exclamation point at the end of that sentence is the eye of a needle. Let us this morning view our undertaking as initiation into the secret of enduring prosperity.

One of the most persistent indications that this is needed is, to my mind, the disconcerting degree of complaining that we hear from our people about their needs and shortages, about not being able to make ends meet. Making allowances for the fact that our age has translated many former luxuries into the category of necessities, isn’t there even so an inordinate amount of static among believers about things, especially about *things* that we don’t have, in the midst of plenty?

Might not the Prophet Haggai stand before our generation and say what he said to his people: “Consider your ways. You dwell in fine houses, but you don’t find satisfaction. You eat and drink, but you don’t find satisfaction. Your wages are gone and you have nothing to show for it.” They were putting off God’s work on the temple; they said they couldn’t afford it just now. They were not of a mind to put first things first, and there *never* were enough leftovers. The self-centered view of life and possessions will always have enough wants to negate satisfaction in what is possessed. It was evident that they had not learned the secret of enduring their measure of prosperity.

We quote Paul again when he says: “Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content.” The point is that food and raiment is not all that we have. In our verse from Philippians he precedes with the word: “I have learned in whatsoever state I am to be content.” And he follows our verse with these words: “I can do all things through Christ.” He could endure anything, even prosperity, because his real treasure was Christ.

A valid and driving sense of values comes into existence when the sinner sees the enormity of his debt brought on by insult and offense against the will of God, and then the still more enormous price paid by God incarnate, obedient and dying. For such a sinner who has come to realize that free forgiveness was not cheap, for such a sinner, brought to trust in Jesus Christ, justification is not a mere doctrine; it is a treasure of grace, wealth without equal or rival. It becomes the spring of contentment that adoringly exults: “God is my Portion!” It finds satisfaction in God, a meaningful and satisfying purpose in living with God and for our God.

## II.

To you and me, leaders and pastors among the congregations of God’s people, comes the invitation from God to share the wonder of being initiated into this joyful, worshipful attitude toward the treasure that we have in Christ, a faith that is alive seeking to express itself through dedication of life, talents, and possessions. This is an initiation that is not to keep secrets. We are to display with Paul that joy of possessing all things in Christ. It will keep our service in the Lord’s congregations from becoming routine or humdrum, or even worse, drudgery. If we sometimes catch ourselves giving way to complaining about the difficulties of the work that God has laid before us, maybe even inclined to carping about the sluggish appreciation and low level of interest evident in some of the people with whom we have to deal—and I will admit to such—and if you do, then I invite you to let Malachi speak to the situation, or rather, to let our God speak through Malachi. He spoke to an age that was guilty of shoddy stewardship, and he lays a particular message upon the hearts and consciences of those stewardship leaders of his day, the priests. Here we quote from Taylor’s paraphrase in *Living Prophecies*, Malachi 1:6–11:

6. “A son honors his father, a servant honors his master. I am your Father and Master, yet you don’t honor Me, oh, priests, but you despise My Name.” “Who? Us?” you say. “When did we ever despise Your Name?”

7. “When you offer polluted sacrifices on My altar.” Polluted sacrifices? When have we ever done a thing like that?” “Every time you say, ‘Don’t bother bringing anything very valuable to offer to God!’
8. “You tell the people, ‘Lame animals are all right to offer on the altar of the Lord—yes, even the sick and the blind ones.’ And you claim this isn’t evil? Try it on your governor sometime—give him gifts like that—and see how pleased he is!
9. “‘God have mercy on us,’ you recite; ‘God be gracious to us!’ But when you bring that kind of gift, why should He show you any favor at all?
10. “Oh, to find one priest among you who would shut the doors and refuse this kind of sacrifice! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept your offerings.
11. “But My name will be honored by the Gentiles from morning till night. All around the world they will offer sweet incense and pure offerings in honor of My name. For My name shall be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.”

Let Malachi give each of us a new realization that we have a responsibility for setting the pace for God’s people in the matter of the quality of worshipful stewardship. We, you and I here, need to pray and with the Holy Spirit’s power to strive to have our hearts and minds so filled with the majesty of God, His holiness and saving grace, that in adoring dedication we seek only the best for Him.

This He desires in *our* lives first of all, and this He desires in the lives of the *people we serve* in His name. When we have been initiated into that contentment in Christ, we have a call by example and encouragement to induct our fellow believers into that same fraternity that can endure prosperity because we have our real treasure in Christ, and with that contentment can put first things first, and reflect it in joyful stewardship of life, energy, interest, ambition, resources, and material things.

### III.

Doesn’t this call for branding into the minds of our rich generation that there are basically two religious views of life? One *uses God to enjoy the things of life*. The other *uses things in the enjoyment of partnership with God*. Our generation is to be summoned to see that it cannot avoid choosing. *Each* of the members in our congregation needs to be reached. *Every one* of the redeemed and sanctified people of God in our congregations *is* a steward; God has conferred this distinction and responsibility upon him. Now the task remains to seek to lift each one to a high plane of worshipful stewardship with a proper view and evaluation of things. A stewardship program can set no better goal than to reach each member with the realization of his status under God. Let God’s people be reminded again and again that life is empty when it is only full of things. Let them sense the undulled edge of God’s truth that describes wealth as temporary, uncertain, unsatisfying, corruptible, fleeting, perishable, and last but by no means least—deceitful. A generation is growing up that recites, but does not learn, that man shall not live by bread alone. It must be initiated into the secret of enduring the plenty around us.

Our congregations have, by the grace of God, been spared a social Gospel, but not a one of us is immune to the attractions of that private enterprise known as serving mammon.

Part of our calling is to let the compulsion and glory of God’s truth in our sermons and classes make of our churches de-secularizing chambers, where the glamour of what the world holds out is peeled away. On Sundays and at every other opportunity let us so enthrone the Redeemer, reigning and returning, that the household gods in the lives of our people shrivel into dust. Lot’s wife is still to be recalled, and let the Holy Spirit show God’s people how much of their energies and interests are involved in painting and polishing the scaffold of this world, so that they begin to take a new interest in the building eternal.

Indeed let us offer the milk of the Gospel, but let us not remain at the Pabulum stage. Each of God’s people is to be brought to maturity in faith, led to digest the meat of the Word, thereby receiving an indelible awareness of the long-range view of our existence. Let the Gospel be preached so pure and sure that we have

every right to call for commitment on the part of those who hear it. Let us make it impossible for our parishioners to miss the vein of true riches in the purpose and election of God.

While shallow Christians may only in time of adversity raise the question: “Why me?” let our fellow Christians be so deeply inducted into the fact that they have by election from eternity been chosen by God, ordained to believe, that in humble adoration at the marvels of His unsearchable grace they may take a new look at themselves and say: “Why me—saved from the consequences of my rebellion and disregard for His will?” Let sinners be led to marvel at the grace of God that has called them back from the edge of the eternal punishment for their horrible, disgusting insults against God’s will.

In the sanctum of that heart, brought to deep, repentant, believing gratitude for the unsearchable redeeming mercy of God in Christ—in that heart’s shrine the initiation has begun, and the moment has arrived for progress to new degrees of awareness, from all of Scripture, of our high calling, our high responsibility, and our high privilege as stewards of God. The Scriptures are able, and the Scriptures are profitable; let a growing percentage of our members be thoroughly furnished.

Such a heart is ready for stewardship talk. Such an appreciation of the mercy of God cannot take the price of our redemption for granted; neither can it regard the purpose of our redemption as a hobby. That heart will not want to play at stewardship. It is sensitive and responsive to the requirement for stewards—“Be found faithful!” That heart is constrained to a wholehearted dedication to the service of God.

That heart will not have to be handled with synthetic kid gloves, as though giving were something unpleasant for a child of God, and had to be gingerly coaxed or subtly prodded. That heart is ready to be shown avenues for expressing its personal devotion that is already asking: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all of His benefits toward me?”

That heart is prepared for stewardship *life*, not just a program of fits and starts that can only hinder the planting God seeks to nurture.

That heart’s prayers do not merely seek to use God by persuading Him to do its will; rather, it prays: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? What wilt Thou have me to be?”

Such a heart will have come to realize that Christ has enlisted him in a battle, not a game. It will not be content or deceive itself with a wax-model Christianity. It will have its concern in contending for purity of doctrine because it is contending for souls. And a synod composed of such hearts will not invite the criticism that it is just a theological historical society for the preservation of pure doctrine.

#### IV.

As we now aim to broaden within our congregations and our Synod the awareness of God’s claim on time and talents, and to increase familiarity with the Scripture’s outline for worshipful and planned stewardship, we can well keep in mind that God can get along without the Wisconsin Synod. He will be no poorer if our stewardship is poor. But Christians are poorer if they are deprived of a Scriptural view of prosperity and possessions.

In this time of prosperity, we need to bring each one face to face with God’s claim to all that we are and aspire to, lest our prosperity in our hands become a snare of many sorrows. The members of the Wisconsin Synod will not be able to endure prosperity unless they are motivated and guided to employ it, and that not so much as a duty, but as a privilege in grace.

Here we have the basis for a continuing synodical stewardship program. Couple this with the special privileges and opportunities that are in our hands in these days of distress in the Church visible, and we must sense that we are being spurred to greater efforts to keep mammon our slave, not our master.

About a year ago a young man in our congregation was slowly approaching death from nephritis. His mother and brothers had offered to give a kidney for a transplant as a last resort. They were put through a long series of tests in a large and prominent research hospital concentrating on finding a remedy for such kidney victims, and they became very familiar with the goings-on there. One night one of the brothers confided in me that it was extremely disconcerting to him to see the number of man-hours spent in coffee breaks and smoke

breaks at that clinic. With his brother dying, he said he was almost moved to step up to the relaxing researchers, shake them, and urge them to get into their labs and get going.

He who once urged: “Go, and do thou likewise” was talking about readiness to incur cost, inconveniences, and risk for another’s bodily welfare. How much more pressing the dire condition of souls!

Surely we cannot hold back from stepping up to God’s people, who have in their hands the only remedy for cursed mankind, and making clear to them that the situation demands: “Get going!” If the pastors and stewardship leaders do not, who will?

## V.

This initiation we speak of is not to be isolated from the entire realm of the sanctified life of God’s holy nation, who are at the same time His royal priests and designated stewards—priests to proclaim the mercy and grace of God, and at the same time stewards and His peculiar possession to show forth His praises. He made something out of us when we were nothing, created us in Christ Jesus, and ordained us unto good works—good works which are to lead others to recognize the glory of God. This matter of stewardship is not so much *what we do with things*, as *what we aim to do for people*. It is the whole realm of life that cannot but show forth to other men the way of salvation.

This is the call to each one of our members, and we are glad for a stewardship program that prevents the idea from developing in our midst that some can be ignored. We are grateful for an approach that does not allow us to say of a single member: “Well, if he doesn’t want to participate, that’s no concern of mine.” Let us continue to step before our congregations, or into every member’s home, with a spirit that says: “We have the promise of living in partnership with God in eternity, why not now?”

Too easily a static concept of Christian life settles upon our people. Christian life is comprehended in terms of Church attendance and avoidance of gross sins. A synodical stewardship program can help keep in focus that the Christian’s life has direction and purpose—to win souls. It can augment and underscore that the motto: “Saved to Serve” is complemented by: “Serve to Save.”

It is obvious to all of us that Christian stewardship is not discharged by an offering, but as soon as we begin to draw up comparisons and evaluate past performances, we so easily seem to concentrate on finances, to the exclusion of about everything else. Every time that we read: “First be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer up thy gift” the thought suggests itself that maybe we ought to make out in triplicate and file with the proper parties a form that would indicate performances (per communicant) in barrels of kindness to the needy, bushels of patience for restoring the erring, and bales of steadfastness to reach hearts with the real Gospel.

You and I well know that it is only by administering Law and Gospel that these forms of stewardship are cultivated and nurtured. Information alone will not accomplish God’s purpose. Recognizing this helps the people of our congregations to appreciate that while there are other ways of producing money, it is only by preaching sin and grace that hearts are initiated into genuine stewardship.

And there is a wide range of application and appeal to the heart of such an initiated steward. What about the stewardship of recreation? In our prosperous day with time and money for recreation, don’t our people have to be initiated into a stewardship of recreation that begins to view it as something to be employed in line with our high calling to be salt and light, rather than to let it become an end in itself? “Rejoice in the Lord” is what the Scriptures call out. Do we need to initiate our people more deeply into this joy? What is it that our people really get a kick out of?

What about initiating them into a stewardship of adiaphora? Don’t a greater portion of our people need to be led more deeply into the Scriptures than merely to be informed that it is OK for a Lutheran to have a beer? Doesn’t stewardship imply a continuing growth and increasing depth that aims for the employment of Christian liberty, and not the mere enjoyment of adiaphora? We have all heard comparisons made about the amount a church member spends on tobacco in relation to what he offers for missions. This has its place. Similarly, one might make a man-hour study regarding card-playing and kingdom effort, but what we are getting at here really

goes deeper. In the stewardship of adiaphora the key word is consideration. Have we inducted God's people into Romans 14 so faithfully that they catch the principle of being ready to lay aside the enjoyment of rights out of consideration for another's welfare? Does their manual of Christianity include the page that indicates that it is possible to go wrong doing what one knows is all right?

And what about the stewardship of ambition, career, employment? The old Adam belongs to that union whose motto is self-interest and least effort. We pastors and parents have a major project before us in seeking to pledge young people to that fraternity of God's redeemed who have the odd notion that God is our real employer, and who undertake a day's work as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. We can accomplish this only by continual leading to the Scriptures to direct our classes to see that a job is a blessing from God, to be conducted under Him, and that the chief object of a job is not a paycheck, but the worship of God in the way we do our work, to see that worship is not merely what you do on Sunday morning, but how you perform the rest of the week. Worshipful stewardship implies that before we talk about what we do with money, we will talk about how we make it. I know of nothing that will develop this attitude toward labor and life but the Word of God.

This gets down to wrapping up the theme of this paper. We would paraphrase initiation into the secrets of enduring prosperity something like this: Development of a God-centered attitude toward material possessions in loving appreciation for the treasure we have in Christ. We recapitulate:

- a. This is accomplished only through teaching the Word.
- b. It is the creation of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ.
- c. It centers in unselfish contentment and satisfaction in Christ.
- d. But, as with any aspect of sanctification, there is to be growth, progress, maturing, and development.
- e. All this we pastors and leaders are to encourage and encourage and encourage. This undertaking in God's name is never finished.

We need to direct ourselves to earnest self-examination, and then leadership of others, so that there is continual narrowing of the gap between what we ought to be and what we are.

As I see it, that is where stewardship conferences and circuit meetings come in, and where the Board for Information and Stewardship comes in. These are to be service agencies to us pastors and for the benefit of our people, providing us with aids helpful toward the goals and consistent with the principles reviewed above. This will aid us in continuing and carrying on the vital initiation process.

## VI.

I stand here now, not so much as an essayist but as a pastor, and I would like to have you consider this concluding portion as a pastor's open letter to the Board for Information and Stewardship.

Out in California some of the nut ranches use a tractor-mounted tree vibrator to shake nuts from the trees. And it gets results. What it does for the trees I am not certain.

With the cost of kingdom work what it is, we know how easily you could begin concentrating only on the quantity of offerings, rather than the quality and welfare of the givers. Continue to supply the kind of materials that are concerned not only with getting results, but also with developing healthy vines that will naturally bear fruit.

Our mail boxes are already full of materials from the motivation research bureaus that advise us that pale green or blue envelopes will get better results than pink or salmon ones.

My Sunday School teachers can sense the pathetic shortsightedness of unbelieving parents who nudge their unconverted children with the reprimand: "Come on now, be *good*." And my church council got the point when I told them about Johann, who stood up in a serious congregational meeting and proposed, "I make a

motion that Schultz be repentant.” But it doesn’t seem to be quite so clear to some of our lay leaders that the Lord’s purpose is not achieved by handing a man a brochure and an envelope, implying: “Hey, get grateful!”

Continue to help us approach God’s people through the Word. Continue to supply us with materials that will further a congregation’s program of spiritual life and growth. We’re asking for more than just a scriptural motto, or a spiritual theme. In our congregations we are attempting to go up on an escalator that is headed down. That descending motion is ever active in the flesh. Let your programs help us consistently to weave in the fibers of the Word to lift and supply upward pull in our struggle.

Broaden the trellis of information upon which the vines of God’s planting can develop, but try to help our people realize that the trellis is not the life of the vine.

Set goals, if necessary, but keep before our eyes that the real goal is the initiation into worshipful stewardship that dare not put a ceiling on devotion to God. Increasing the Synod’s budget by 12% is no substitute for worshipful stewardship.

Urge systematic, planned giving, but don’t blur the fact that tithing is no substitute for worshipful giving.

Direct our attention to specific needs, but don’t substitute fulfilling of a specific need for the living spontaneity that advances beyond obligation and that is implied in the words: “Lord, *when* saw we Thee thirsty and gave Thee drink?” And give us meaningful materials to help break through that curtain that seems to screen off a certain percentage of our congregations from awareness of the stewardship life. Help me to reach the unreached, to initiate them to endure the wealth of blessings they *call* their own.

Keep us mindful of the need for growth on the part of the already informed members. Keep before our eyes the facts that will prevent us from getting complacent in this regard.

Review past efforts and performances, but don’t make it more difficult for me than it already is to keep God’s people from getting proficient in self-satisfaction. Help me in demonstrating to my flock that doing what Christians are supposed to do is no substitute for repentance and faith in Christ.

You can get water from some wells if you use a pump and employ atmospheric pressure; you can get water from some other wells if you let down a bucket and crank it up to overcome gravity; but a spring gives you water because it is a spring. When God creates a spring, it flows. Let us never fail to approach WELS as though it spelled spring—a spring created by God.

My God promises that His Word will accomplish the miracle of creating unselfishness in the hearts of His people. Let us rely on His Word to accomplish His purpose. He does. Let’s not slacken our efforts to bring the Word and Will of God to bear upon the hearts to which we minister. He can initiate them to endure prosperity by drawing them, and us, through His love to a dedication of this passing life in view of the incorruptible inheritance ahead.

In Jesus’ name.