

**October 28, 2018**  
**Economic Progress and Blessing**  
**2 Corinthians 9:6-15**  
**Michael Stanfield**

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,<sup>14</sup> while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! *The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, Our rock and redeemer, Amen.*

An Indian guru had a disciple who had made such spiritual progress that the guru decided to leave him on his own. Living on his own meant living in a little mud huts begging for his food. He owned only one piece of clothing – a single loin cloth and each morning, after his devotions, the disciple washed his loincloth and hung it out to dry.

One day, he came back to discover the loincloth torn and eaten by rats. He begged the villagers for another and they gave it to him. But the rats ate that one, too. So he got himself a cat. That took care of the rats, but now when he begged for his food he had to beg for milk for his cat as well.

“This won’t do,” he thought. “I’ll get a cow.” So he got a cow and found he had to beg now for fodder. So he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm. But overseeing the laborers became a chore, so he married to have a wife to help him. After time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village.

Well his old guru was traveling by there and decided to stop in. He was shocked to see that where once stood a simple mud hut there now loomed a palace surrounded by a vast estate, worked by many servants. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked his disciple.

“You won’t believe this, sir,” the man replied. “But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth.” Mark Buchanan, “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing,” Christianity Today, September 6, 1999, 66.

Of course this story is absurd; but it is actually not far off from what happens every day here in America. Christian writer Mark Buchanan calls it the “Cult of the Next Thing.” And every one of us automatically belong to it unless we consciously, intentionally resist it. But it is hard because there is a kind of religious fervor around this perceived need to have the next best thing. *And* the ability to get the next best thing is seen as progress – religious progress of a sort. But before I go any further I have a question:

Why are you here this morning? Why are you here?

I am going to assume that since you are here in this sanctuary with me on a Sunday morning when you knew that it was stewardship season and today was dedication Sunday in particular, that you are a religious person... And as your pastor I am also going to assume that at the heart of your religious devotion is God.

And I know, as you do, that at some point in this service we are all going to affirm that at the heart of our devotion is God as revealed in Jesus Christ – Christ as both the revelation of God and the example of how we humans are to live...

So, if we are taking our religion seriously we are looking to make progress – progress in becoming more Christ-like – right? It is why many persecuted Protestant Europeans came here in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to settle this Land. And so, this theological tenet is buried deep in the American psyche – whether one considers oneself religious or not.

It is in the air we breathe: *Progress is next to Godliness.*

And how do you measure Godly progress? Well the first hearty Protestants who came here used Calvin and the other reformers as their guides here. And what Calvin said was that one sure sign of being on the road to being sanctified – that is, making spiritual progress as one of the saints of God was *industry* – that is throwing oneself into work – work related to one’s God-given gifts that not only supported one’s family but also supported God’s community on earth. So if *Progress is next Godliness* and industry is a sign of that progress then *Progress is measured by what we make.* In other words, *economic progress is divine progress.*

And so, my friends, *that* is at the heart of all the real religious devotion in America – whether you are a member of a church or not – and even whether you consider yourself a Christian or not. It is why the super-rich are revered and given a pass for behavior that the rest of the world would be jailed for – even if their money was inherited. It is why those who have really *not* seen much economic progress in the last twenty years are now rising up against the system threatening to bring the whole thing down.

But devotion to God in Christ is no longer the center out of which industry flows. That has not been the case for quite some time. Hence the religious devotion is still there but in our culture, that devotion has nothing to do with Christ whatsoever; vocation and industry as a sign of genuine devotion to him has been completely lost from the equation. Work and making money have become religious ends in themselves – arguably they have taken the place of God altogether.

Last week, just before the stock market tanked, the New York Times published an article commenting on a most recent poll – a poll revealing that educated suburban white men in this country overwhelmingly support President Trump, while educated suburban white women overwhelmingly support anyone but Trump.

But the interesting thing is the arguments from both genders. They are both moral in character. Most of those men who say they support Trump, report that they don't approve of Trump's behavior, and, in fact, are loathe to admit, openly, their support of him. But they see that under Trump, overall unemployment is down and the stock market up. They feel more freedom to expand their industry and to make more, which reads – I am more able to show my family and my community that I am a better person. Because remember – buried deep in the American psyche is that the more you work and the more you are able to make – the more religious progress you are making as a human being. In other words, economic progress, no matter how it happens, equals religious progress.

The women, however, site the president's blatant lying, his racism, his cruelty towards victims of sexual assault (among other groups), his misogyny and their perception of him as completely lacking in moral character as both the primary source of the deep divisions that are tearing this country apart, as well as the dark mood of large minorities across the country.

What gives? Well, we have to understand that this idea of economic progress being next to godliness is a patriarchal theological position. In great measure, Western men still measure their worth and quite frankly, have their worth measured by others, in terms of their job and how much they make. Women have their worth measured by what they look like and how supportive they are of others – especially of powerful men.

But today I am talking specifically about this idea of economic progress being synonymous with religious progress.

Mahatma Gandhi addressed this head on way back in 1916 when he when was lecturing to students of Allahabad University. There he began with the question, "Is economic progress equivalent to moral progress?"

He does not answer the question directly. Instead he goes on to say that economists point out that there can be no moral progress unless there is economic progress, so that the poor can satisfy their daily needs. Gandhi's reply to this line of reasoning is that, of course, no one has ever suggested that grinding pauperism would lead to anything short of moral degradation: that all human beings have a right to live decently and therefore must find a means to feed, clothe and house themselves.

"But," Gandhi added, "We need no assistance from economics or their laws when it comes to morality."

He then continues: "I venture to think the religious scriptures of the world are far safer and sounder treatises on the laws of economics than any of the modern economics textbooks. And," he said, "I believe that Jesus was perhaps the greatest economist of all time."

Gandhi proceeds to tell his audience that the people who have exercised the greatest lasting influence on their lives and molded the lives of millions were people like Jesus and the Buddha, who deliberately embraced poverty – along with others like Mohammed the founder of Islam, Ramakrishna, the famous Hindu and St. Francis, the most beloved example of the teachings of Jesus. They all embraced poverty. And, he adds, the world has been made richer for their having lived in it.-Kamla Chowdhry, "Is this progress?" Resurgence, May-June 2000, Resurgence.gn.apc.org/issues/ chowdhry200.htm. Reprinted with permission of Resurgence Magazine, a journal of ecology, spirituality and the arts. Visit Resurgence.org for a free sample copy.

Now, I am not suggesting that everyone embrace poverty as a viable practical answer. However, indicators these days reveal that even among many of those for whom economic progress continues, fear and unhappiness are as high as those whose situation has remained the same or gotten worse.

The worship of things and ideas about how best to get those things has taken the place of worship of God across this country and profoundly affects even the most faithful of us disciples of Christ.

But when the economy becomes our God, issues of justice become little more than a nuisance and the super-rich are treated as God's most faithful disciples. And the result is what we are seeing: A tower of Babel that teeters on the brink. Because unlike at any other time in the last two-thousand years, we have shifted from a place of relative humility in an assumed God-centered universe that – both makes sense and is valued by the majority – to an ego-centered world that has become unmoored from roots that are any deeper than this morning's stock-market news and unemployment stats.

And what has this equating of eternal spiritual progress to economic progress done to us exactly? First, it has led us to feeling our worst, because it has contributed to an increasing denial of our own darkness – what the scriptures call sin. Fixing the economy does nothing to fix the human soul. Thus the kinds of violence perpetrated are more heinous, and the bad news a lot more sinister than it was in generations past.

Second, the reliance on economic progress for salvation means that *we tend to be full of envy no matter how much we have*. Awards shows, feature films, celebrity internet sites, *TMZ* magazine and programs such as *Housewives of Beverly Hills* are constantly bombarding us with information about how the most fortunate members of society live, and this tends to make us feel envy or resentment — even when our lifestyle is really quite comfortable.

And finally, reliance on economic progress for salvation has led many of us to believe that the ends justify the means. It doesn't matter if our political leaders lie, cheat, steal, and threaten common human decency, not to mention the very fabric of our democracy, as long as they are able to deliver the economic goods today to me, my family and my community.

For these reasons, and others, many of us are feeling constantly anxious while living better than most people a century ago could even have dreamed, while at the same time we are witnessing an upheaval of the whole idea of "economic progress." So, what are we to do?

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to Christians in the wealthy, progressive Greek city of Corinth. And the first thing he does is to reconnect them to who they *really* are first and foremost: God's own children; and as God's own he reminds them of the practical measures they are to take: "Be generous, remembering your poorer Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem by offering a bountiful gift."

Paul's day and time was no less a time of upheaval than the one in which we live. The transformation that was taking place was radical – a fading of the great Roman Empire and movement away from widespread polytheism to monotheism and the Christianization of the West. And that old way, by no means, was going gentle into that good night.

So what is Paul's answer to a culture in turmoil? Compassion and generosity that is born of a deep personal connection to Jesus Christ. For Paul, true happiness and depth of fulfillment are found in what you give out of the love and blessings you have been given ... not in what you receive or in the economic progress you make.

"God loves a cheerful giver," he tells them.

"Do you want to be enriched in every way?" He asks. Then in the midst of unsure times, let us show "great generosity".

Are you interested in inviting others to *spiritual* progress as a deeper more valuable way of being than that of a complete focus on technological and economic progress? Then, says Paul, show your brothers and sisters "the generosity of your sharing".

Are you looking for God to provide you "with every blessing in abundance"? asks Paul. Then don't hold tight with fear to the miserly attitude fostered by our culture — instead, "share abundantly in every good work".

The apostle is laying out for us an antidote to the progress myth:

*Share abundantly with others no matter how much you have.*

Paul's point is that you receive the most in this world by gladly giving the most – especially when it looks like you have the most to lose.

What we give to the church, Christ's body, or the body's various arms in the world, really has less to do with programs or building needs, or mission projects than it does in participating in some much needed soul work – in the *spiritual* progress of growing generosity regardless of whether or not there is ever hope of further *economic* progress.

There is absolutely nothing that causes one to deal with one's own darkness, one's own sin, like the soul-searching that it takes to consider what one has, and how one is spending and/or investing that in the most Christ-like manner.

And I have never met anyone who gives generously, without expectation of return, who was not also deeply aware of his or her own darkness and deep need for God.

Paul writes finally that “God loves a cheerful giver.”

Cheerful giving as a sign of our ultimate commitment to God and not the US economy or its acolytes the politicians: It is contagious and creates an atmosphere of generosity and gratitude – a bubble that grows and includes.

Cheerful giving: It is at least one helpful solution to the progress conundrum that we are living with every day, an antidote to the unhappiness and the fear we often feel as we spend our days in the middle of our self-obsessed secular society with its news reports of corrupt, cruel politicians and the latest violence perpetrated by fanatics.

We would all be better off if we were more grateful, more forgiving, and more spiritual. It would perhaps help us reclaim a more hopeful view of the world and our future.

And that is the opportunity you are being given again this fall here at Trinity as you consider what percentage of your income you are going to give to God in the coming year. We can all capture a more hopeful view by learning to give with joy and laughter and a sense of the absurdity of it all. As we make financial sacrifices for God and others, rather than do what we can to hold onto to what we have, we will come to see that economic progress cannot guarantee happiness, but maybe, just maybe generosity can.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, help us to reflect on our lives, on who we are, what is truly in us, and yet what we have been given – so that we may feel your calling to the generous possibilities that are out there – possibilities that may lead us to *your* joy and ours. (pause)

And now bless this portion of what you have given us that in returning it to you it might create a kind of contagious, joy-filled gratitude. Amen.