



“Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father,” I Thessalonians 1:3.

Diligent Service: Promotion

Covenant: We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit . . . to promote its prosperity and spirituality.

Aim: To note that advancement can only result from right promotion

Text: Revelation 3:14-22; I Thessalonians 1:2-3, 6-10

INTRODUCTION — Material prosperity and spiritual prosperity are not incompatible. The church needs both and can have both. The member of a Baptist church has made this solemn pledge; “We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit . . . to promote its prosperity and spirituality.”

The spirituality of a church cannot be determined by her financial record. Yet, spirituality will certainly manifest itself in concern for the material prosperity of the church. Members who neglect the material welfare of the church are manifesting spiritual immaturity.

As the church is advanced in “knowledge, holiness and comfort” (as studied last week), she will be promoted in “prosperity and spirituality.” To “promote” means “to raise or to move forward to a higher or better position; to work actively and stir up interest for the accomplishment of something.” Baptist church members have covenanted to dedicate their best efforts to promote the prosperity and spirituality of their church. This solemn commitment must not be neglected.

A church may experience either of three situations. (1) She may prosper materially while in poverty spiritually. (2) She may prosper spiritually while in poverty materially. (3) She may prosper spiritually and prosper materially at the same time. It is hoped that this is the condition of your church.

EXPOSITION

I. PROSPERITY WITHOUT SPIRITUALITY, Revelation 3:14-22.

It is possible for a church to be prosperous in material goods while she is in the direst poverty in spiritual things. The letter of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea reveals she was such a congregation.

1. Activity without allegiance, verse 14. If one could have visited the church in Laodicea he might well have been impressed with their appearance of busy devotion. When Jesus said, "I know thy works," He admitted they were busy. Their busyness was not in the right channels, however.

As Lord of the church, Jesus examined her spirit as well as her energy. He saw all her activity lacked true devotion to Him. A pronouncement of judgment was necessary so He identified Himself to the church in such a way that there would be no question concerning His authority: "the Amen, the faithful and the true witness, the beginning of the creation of God." As "the Amen" He is incapable of failure. As "the faithful and true witness" He is the source of all certainty and truth. As "the beginning of the creation of God" He is the source from which all created things came.

So the Lord approaches that church as One whose rank is beyond that of prophet, priest, or king. He speaks with the truthfulness of a faithful witness and authority of the Creator. Surely the church will hear and respond to such a Person. Yet, they had not done so previously. This is why they were in spiritual poverty. They had ignored the Lord of the church while professing to serve Him in the church.

2. Religious duties without spiritual dedication, verses 15-16. Any congregation with religious forms but no spiritual power is sickening to the Lord. A church can be active, energetic, wealthy and popular and still displease the Lord. Such a people lose their conviction, no longer delight in the Word, have no zeal to pursue the work, and lose their holy love for the brethren. These lacks make invalid whatever good the congregation may boast.

Jesus said He had rather a congregation be ice cold than for them to be lukewarm. Religion without sanctified zeal is a dead religion. It is most difficult to revive it to true life. "Jesus Christ would prefer us to boil or to freeze, rather than that we should simmer down into a tasteless tepidity." — John Scott. Jesus expects His church to be aflame for God. Those who are spiritually lukewarm will be rejected of the Lord as His own true church. A loving dedication to Jesus is essential to spiritual prosperity.

3. Emphasis on material things alone, verses 16-17. The church in Laodicea would have been glad to have folk look at their treasurer's report. **"I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,"** so they reasoned. Their lukewarmness had blinded them to the spiritual aspects of their ministry. Because they lacked the spiritual part, all their energy and wealth was as nothing.

The story is told of a certain man who found a cache of Confederate money. At first he thought himself rich. Then he discovered that as the Civil War had just ended the money was worthless. Just so, the church which is content with material prosperity alone will find herself with no wealth at all when the Lord examines her. The material part of Christian service is important but it is not all-important. What advantage is there if a congregation boasts of her wealth when Jesus declares her a pauper? Could this ever happen in our own congregation?

4. Finds its remedy in Jesus, verses 18-20. The church which finds she has neglected spiritual things is not without hope. This letter to Laodicea offers help if that congregation will repent. To these who turn He offers true wealth, pure clothing, healing, and freedom from shame. True wealth does not lie in stocks, bonds, and bank accounts but in spiritual resources.

For her poverty the Lord offers gold which has been tried by fire. For her blindness the Lord has eye salve. For her nakedness, the Lord has pure white raiment. If the spiritually poor church will only open her heart's door by repentance, she will find true wealth in the Lord. He urges abandonment of the false standards which had guided them before. If their supreme interest were transferred to spiritual things they would find true wealth.

5. Material prosperity is second best to spiritual prosperity, verses 21-22. The church at Laodicea had everything it needed except the approval of the Lord Jesus. So she lacked the most important thing of all. In Him alone there is spiritual victory. To open the door to Him is to share His glory and fellowship. It is to share His throne just as Christ shares His Father's throne. It is to overcome the world and the devil just as Christ overcame them. It is to gain victory just as Christ gained victory.

Now which is better: material prosperity or spiritual prosperity? If one must choose between the two, spiritual prosperity would be most preferred. Its treasures are enduring. There is no substitute for whole-hearted devotion to Christ Jesus.

Yet, there is no contradiction between material prosperity and spiritual prosperity. Many wealthy people are dedicated Christians. Many churches with large budgets and beautiful buildings are sincerely dedicated to serving Jesus in missions and evangelism. If there must be a choice between the two,

spiritual prosperity is preferred. But there need be no demand to chose one or the other. Let the church enjoy both and find her ministry greatly enlarged thereby.

II. PROSPERITY AND SPIRITUALITY, I Thessalonians 1:2-3; 6-10.

The church in Thessalonica was established in A.D. 52 by the Apostle Paul. He was on his second missionary journey. Passing through Asia, he was directed to Macedonia by a vision at Troas. After he had preached in Philippi, opposition arose against him and he was cast into prison with Silas. Persecution continued against the work there and Paul and Silas journeyed on to Thessalonica, a chief city of the region. The church established as a consequence of their work was made up largely of pagan Gentiles who were converted. Their dedication to the Lord Jesus and zeal in His service still stands as an example and challenge to churches everywhere. They well picture a church with both material and spiritual prosperity. 1. Internal dynamic, verse 3. True prosperity is expressed in an inner urge to serve the Lord. This internal dynamic expresses itself in a three-fold manner; “work of faith; labor of love, and patience of hope.” Observe the joining of faith, love and hope. Compare this with I Corinthians 13:13.

(1) The work of faith carries on Paul's insistence that true faith is busy. In Galatians 5:6 he speaks of “faith which worketh by love.” In the present passage the term “faith” has definite article. Thus suggesting that it is not just any kind of faith, not a blind, faltering faith, but that which is planted in the heart by God and which is exercised in the Lord Jesus for salvation. That kind of faith has outward expression in doing the business of God and is said to be “the faith that works.” It is well to remember the words of James, **“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also,”** James 2:26. The “work” of faith is simply that task which faith finds needing to be done.

(2) The labour of love is more striking. “Labour” means hard work marked with toil even to the point of fatigue. It is labourious, painful exertion. Only love could motivate such effort. Even the “love” here mentioned is that kind which is self-sacrificing. It is God's own kind of love which agrees with His nature (1 John 4:8), has been broadcast in the believer's heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), and demonstrated at Calvary, Romans 8:8. This is evidence of spiritual maturity. How beautiful a picture of a Christian putting himself out for the good of man and glory of the Lord Jesus, Philippians 1:21.

(3) The patience of hope keeps the Christian faithful. Patience is made up of two words which mean, “under” and “to remain.” In the New Testament it refers to “a man who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to the faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings.” It is never the resignation of the passive sufferer, but the fortitude of the stout-hearted soldier. It is akin to “hope” since it always has an air of certainty concerning the outcome. Hope is “joyful expectation full of confidence.” It always looks forward to the coming of Jesus and the victory He gives His own.

These three blessed graces — “the work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope” are experienced only by the spiritually mature. They never belong to the novice or to the backslidden. They are marks of spiritual maturity.

2. Example to others, verses 6-7. The spiritually mature person is always an example to others. Not because he wants to be but because spiritual maturity attracts and challenges. The original messengers of the gospel became examples for new converts. So Paul writes, “Ye became followers of us . . .” In turn, the new converts grow to maturity in spiritual things and become examples to others. This is as it should be. Blessed is the man who follows the example of his religious teachers. Twice blessed is the man who is not only an imitator of his teacher, but is himself an example to others. This evidences growth in grace which should characterize every believer. Spiritual prosperity cannot be kept a secret. Paul said the Thessalonians had become “ensamples” (the singular form is “example”) to others. The word means a great compliment to the church in Thessalonica. Within less than a year from their conversion and organization into a church they had become a model for believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The word of their spiritual maturity had spread abroad so that all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (covering the territory we now call Greece) knew of them and were challenged by their spiritual growth and energy. No other church does Paul call an example. This is high praise for the Thessalonians.

Spiritual prosperity depends upon one's relationship with the Lord. Paul was in Thessalonica for only a few months. Persecution drove him away almost before these believers were settled in the faith. Yet, what they lacked in human leadership was made up in spiritual relationship. They grew to be an example for other believers!

3. Missionary in practice, verse .8. From the church of true spiritual prosperity there will reach out an evangelistic ministry. So from the Thessalonian brethren the word of the Lord “sounded out” throughout the surrounding provinces. Paul says they gave such a powerful and emphatic

witness of the gospel that it was like a clarion call or the roll of thunder. It was a loud and unmistakable proclamation, still going on in ever recurring waves. It was no passing whim with them. Does not this evidence a church of spiritual prosperity and vitality?

Macedonia and Achaia were the first to hear the gospel from Thessalonica but the witness did not stop there. Thessalonica was a commercial center of the ancient world. The Christians there dealt with foreigners who came to their city to trade. Thus their testimony sounded out “in every place,” meaning “through the whole known world.” Behold what one church can do when she sets her heart to serve the Lord! The apostle says he does not need to testify about the work in Thessalonica because everyone has already heard about their faith.

It is always so. When you see a congregation enjoying true spiritual prosperity they will be interested in missions and evangelism. The narrowing of interest to the immediate members of the church is indicative of lack of spiritual maturity. What are you doing to promote missionary evangelism in your church?

4. Expectation for Jesus, verses 9-10. Word had gone out from Thessalonica that here was a congregation who had turned from idolatry to become active Christians. Their lives had formerly been marked by superstition and sin. Now they were devoted to continuous service day by day. Their present service was not devoted to many gods but to the one “living and true” (genuine) God.

Spiritual growth and dedicated service will have far-reaching effect on the heart of the believer. While one serves the Lord on earth he keeps on looking for the Lord to appear from heaven. Daily watchfulness for the return of the Saviour is a spiritual exercise that brings great blessing and comfort daily. They waited for God's Son from heaven as One whose coming is known and foreseen,

A woman in a certain city was marked by the habit of looking repeatedly up into the sky. She explained that this was her way of looking for the Lord. This was not the way the Thessalonians looked for Him. They looked with joyful anticipation in their hearts as they were busy winning others to Him by their testimony. This kind of waiting honors the Lord indeed. The more spiritually minded and mature a person becomes the more precious and real the return of the Lord will be.

CONCLUSION — “We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit . . . to promote its prosperity and spirituality.” The church needs to prosper materially and spiritually. She can prosper in both areas as members fulfill this Covenant obligation.

You can promote the spiritual prosperity of your church by growing toward personal spiritual maturity. You can promote the material prosperity of your church by faithful stewardship in your finances. Both areas are important to the church. Indeed, the more spiritual a person becomes the more conscious he is of his stewardship responsibilities. On the other hand, the more faithfully one exercises his stewardship the more he will grow in grace. God does not separate these two. Neither must we.

As the church members devote themselves to promote the “prosperity and spirituality” of their congregation they will be maintaining her “worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines” as well. This is the subject of next week's study.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the “material prosperity” of a church?
2. What is the “spirituality” of a church?
3. Why should each of these be promoted?
4. What is the danger of prosperity without spirituality?
5. Is there a contradiction between material prosperity and spiritual prosperity? Explain.
6. How does spirituality promote service?
7. Where does love and patience enter in here?
8. How do spiritual Christians become an example to others?
9. Why does spirituality encourage missions?
10. Why does spirituality make one look for Jesus to return?