



RECESSION

WHAT? ME WORRY?

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The economic news in the United States seems to be worsening every day. We've been struck by a number of reports in the various media which continue to predict higher costs for energy, transportation, government services (which require higher taxes), food and consumer goods. Others herald the recession, the failing Stock Market, and the increasing unemployment rate. Still others speak of the mortgage crisis spreading through foreclosures on home loans. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the two government-backed purchasers of mortgages, pressured by the Clinton Administration to create loans for people with low incomes and bad credit, have been threatened with bankruptcy. Although gasoline prices have dropped, we can't hold our breath in hopes that they won't spike again to even higher levels than before.

There are many reasons given by government and industry for the decline in America's economy, and there are no short-term or easy solutions. Until the evidence could no longer be ignored the government has been reluctant to say we are in a recession. But that's been small comfort to those who are struggling to make their house payments and to put food on the table in the manner to which we've become accustomed in this coun-

try. And the less people have to spend, the fewer goods that are sold, and the more jobs that are lost because manufacturers have to lay off more employees.

We can take little encouragement in knowing that this recession is not limited to the United States. Because of the global nature of our economy it is a worldwide phenomenon.

On top of this there is a Chicken Little hysteria that predicts gloom and doom for the planet if we humans (especially Americans) don't all crawl into a hole and die so we can't continue to destroy the earth. We are being fed bogus environmental theories that offer anecdotal surmising in place of empirical evidence. Follow the money and you will see.

It's all bad news and getting worse all the time. So how do believers in Jesus cope with this? To hear some Christian leaders tell it, God wants us all to have great wealth if we will only plant our "seed faith" into their "ministries." Other Christian leaders say we have to give up the American dream in order to save the planet. The "Green" Christian movement is proficient at laying on guilt trips, and many pastors are jumping on the bandwagon. We are told, "Jesus would never drive an SUV." And He would be a vegetarian if not a vegan (contrary to all scriptural evidence).

Although the "prosperity" preachers are dead wrong in their message of greed, the faithless Green Christians are just as dead wrong. They have forgotten (or never knew) God's promise to Noah:

And YHWH smelled a sweet aroma, and YHWH said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground anymore for man's sake, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I anymore again kill everything living as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22)

This doesn't mean that we should have a cavalier attitude about how we treat the environment, but we cannot allow the hysteria of unbelievers and duped Christians to cause us to fear. With his inflated ego man may think he has the means to destroy the earth, but he doesn't. Only God can do that. And He has promised not to do so until the end of all things when He recreates the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-8).

In the meantime, however, tribulation upon the earth will increase as we draw

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near the end. And it will affect believers as well as unbelievers, not only in the United States, but worldwide. It is for us who believe in the true God and His Word to remain faithful and not allow the circumstances of the world to dissuade us from our service to our Lord.

The enemy of our souls wants us to worry rather than trust God. This is the real reason for such disconcerting news. It is the real reason that the media panders to man's natural tendency to focus on the evil rather than the good. If there were ever a time when those who follow Jesus need to be reminded of His words of warning and of comfort, it is now.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupt, and where thieves do not break through or steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

"The light of the body is the eye. Therefore, if your eye is clear your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is blind your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

"No man can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon." (Matthew 6:19-24)

This is a startling statement if rightly divided. Jesus is saying that we cannot store up treasures on the earth and in Heaven at the same time. Otherwise we are trying to serve both God and Mammon.

Does this mean that we cannot have a savings account? Does it mean that any-

thing above zero for a bank balance is sin? Of course not. He is speaking about the degree of covetousness that places any trust or affection upon earthly things. This is why He says next:

"Therefore I say to you, take no thought for your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor yet for your body, what you shall wear. Is not the life more than food, and the body than clothing?"

"Look at the birds of the air, for they do not sow, neither do they reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they?"

"Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature? And why do you think about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they do not toil, neither do they spin, and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

"Therefore, if God so clothes the grass of the field which exists today and is cast into the oven tomorrow, shall He not much more clothe you, oh you of little faith?"

"Therefore take no thought, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we be clothed?' (For the Gentiles seek after all these things) for your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things.

"But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

"Therefore, do not think about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought for its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own evil. (Matthew 6:25-34)

Look at verse 25, which follows Jesus' statement that we cannot serve both God and Mammon. The connecting word "therefore" references both together: You cannot serve God and Mammon. Therefore, do not think about your life, what you will eat; what you will drink; what you will wear.

This means that serving Mammon is not merely storing up treasures on earth; it is not merely living a greedy lifestyle. Serving Mammon also involves worrying about having the necessary things to sustain our lives. That's pretty startling, when you think about it. But it all has to do with whom we trust.

When we were children—especially as infants—we didn't have a care in the world about where our food, clothing and shelter were coming from. Somehow, "mysteriously," it was there for us every day. We trusted our parents to provide those things without understanding how they were acquired. We didn't understand money, or how the economy works, or how our parents labored to get the things we needed. Worry about these things didn't enter our minds until we grew older and had to shoulder the responsibility for them ourselves. The problem is not that we must work to get these things (if a man doesn't work, he should not eat [2 Thessalonians 2:10]). The problem is that we became more trusting of the world's provision than of God's provision. Our trust must be in God rather than in Mammon. So to worry about these things is to surrender to Mammon—to trust Mammon rather than God for our sustenance.

This is why Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter into it" (Mark 10:15).

Our heavenly Father wants us to trust Him just as we trusted our parents when we were little children. This doesn't mean we shouldn't make the effort to work or to better our lot in life. It means that we should not worry about temporal matters.

It also means that our motive should be not only to provide the necessities of life for ourselves, but to have enough to provide for others who cannot provide for themselves.

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There is a reason that many in the Body of Christ struggle financially, and it isn't always because they lack "faith." The "prosperity" teachers want us to believe that God wants all believers to be wealthy. That's how they themselves get wealthy—through their false teachings. But God allows lack within the Body of Christ in order to give opportunity for the "haves" to demonstrate their love by giving to the "have-nots." Our first responsibility is to our brethren in Christ; it is not to the unbelieving world. We may help unbelievers, but our calling is not to chase after the social gospel of "good works." Our calling is first to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom to the world. It is also to bless those whom God has chosen from out of the world by sharing our abundance with them.

What does it profit, my brethren, though a man says he has faith and has no works? Can faith save him?

If a brother or sister is naked and lacking daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," yet you do not give those things that are needful for the body, what does it profit?

Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being alone. (James 2:14-17)

We must not judge those in the Body of Christ who have great wealth. God knows how they got it and what they do with it. We need those with wealth as much as we need those who are poor—the wealthy to help the poor; the poor to give occasion for the wealthy to bless and be blessed by giving. There are enough poor people in the world to suit God's purpose for His people to help the poor regardless of belief. He doesn't need the poor in the Body of Christ unless He has a higher purpose for them and for those who minister to them.

Unfortunately, some of the poor are envious of the rich, while some of the rich look upon the poor as lazy or "faithless." God knows the heart; we must always give the benefit of the doubt to others and not judge God's servants.

Now, if one is obviously taking advantage in the assembly by purposely not working and expecting to be supported, then 2 Thessalonians 2:10 should be invoked for his benefit as well as for the benefit of the assembly. But unless we know such a reason for one's lack, we should invoke the law of love and give until we know a scriptural reason not to do so.

By the same token, we should not judge the wealthy as worshipping Mammon unless we know for a certainty that they are hoarding treasures for themselves and are not being generous toward others. In all cases we must examine our own hearts to be sure that we are not judging unrighteously. It is better to make no judgment than to judge erroneously and create division or dissension within the Body of Christ. In most cases it may be better to keep all judgments to ourselves anyway, and judge our own motives about what we have or desire. Otherwise we should not judge, lest we be judged.

That said, it is still necessary for all believers to consider the harshness with which the Lord Himself judges those whose concerns are more on earthly things than on heavenly things. To worry about earthly things is to worship Mammon. It is to place our trust in Mammon rather than God for our wellbeing. One cannot worry and exercise faith in God at the same time. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

The context of this Scripture has to do with eating and drinking in doubt about whether or not something is permissible. But the issue of faithlessness being sin ap-

plies to all circumstances. Unfortunately, many people do not even consult God for their sustenance, and if they do, they wish only for their own benefit:

From where come wars and fighting among you? Do they not come from here: even from your desires that war in your members?

You desire and do not have; you kill and desire to have, and cannot obtain; you fight and war, yet you do not have because you do not ask.

You ask, and do not receive because you ask wrongly, so that you may consume it upon your lusts.

You adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy"?

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says, "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Therefore, submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up. (James 4:1-10)

These are strong words, but they deserve our careful attention. The "spirit in us" is not a reference to the Holy Spirit; it is a reference to our own spirit. Man's fallen nature lusts to the point of envy; it wishes to exalt itself above all others just as Satan desired to exalt himself above the throne of God.

We may not recognize ourselves in such admonitions, but to different degrees James' indictment may be applicable to everyone.

Although we won't physically kill someone to get what we desire, the same attitude may be in our hearts. Even legitimate competition in business or to attain a better position within our company may prompt us to do things that do not honor

God. Some Christians may wish to destroy, or at least hamper, their competition in order to gain an edge over them. Sometimes that competitor is a brother in Christ. Yet it should not matter whether or not he is a brother in Christ because the attitude of the heart is still sinful.

Even if we may not do anything to harm the other, if our desire is not for his good but ours, then we are acting unscripturally:

Let there be nothing done through strife or self-conceit, but in humility of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.

Do not every man look on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-5)

If our hearts are truly trusting God then we will not wage warfare to gain advantage over others. Sadly, such warfare is found even between ministries that claim to be serving the same Lord (who is supposed to be the ministers' example of humility).

Is our trust in earthly things, or in heavenly things? Are we swayed to the point of fear because of the economic and political news? Are we worried about our next president, fearing that his policies will negatively impact our way of life?

If so, then we are forgetting that God rules in the affairs of men and decides who will be in authority over us. (Daniel 4:17)

We are told to honor all authority, even that of Satan and his servants among men who govern our nation:

Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers; to obey magistrates; to be ready for every good work; to speak evil of no man; to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all humility to all men.

For we ourselves were also sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving diverse lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, He saved us—not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy—through the washing of regen-

eration, and renewing by the Holy Spirit whom He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:1-7)

Should we honor even Satan's authority? Well, are we better than the Archangel Michael who, when contending for the body of Moses dared not bring a railing accusation, but merely said, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 1:9)?

Consider how Jude speaks about those who despise authority:

Likewise also, these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise authority, and blaspheme the Glory.

Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil, disputing about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

But these revile those things of which they know nothing. But they corrupt themselves in those things they know naturally, as brute beasts.

Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and have run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the disobedience of Korah.

These are spots in your feasts of charity when they eat with you, feeding themselves without fear. They are clouds without water, carried around by winds; trees whose fruit withers; without fruit; twice dead; plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea foaming out their own shame; wandering stars to whom the blackness of darkness is reserved forever.

And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, "Look! The Lord comes with ten thousand of his saints to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard words which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.

These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts, and their mouths speak great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. (Jude 1:8-16)

What causes us to rail against ungodly earthly authorities but lack of faith in God who established those authorities?

I'll be the first to admit that it galls me to have to endure their evil and mindless decrees. I have to continually remind myself that they are God's emissaries who do His will even without their own knowledge and understanding. But for true believers who claim that the Word of God is their final authority we have no choice but to respect them. Either that or we are defying God's will.

We may kick against the goads, but the goads are from God. The bad news regarding politics and economics should roll off our backs as we trust our heavenly Father with our wellbeing.

Are we not confident that He will bring about all things for our good? Do we not recognize that His judgment upon the world is found in these things? If so, then we must know that they will only get worse until Jesus returns to set things right.

Perhaps it's time for us to return to the stature of children when we were not at all concerned about the things of the world. Politics and economics were boring to us then. We had no cares because we trusted those who loved us.

During this time of economic uncertainty, let us trust the One who loves us more than did our earthly parents.

This is not a "Pollyanna" attitude. Certainly we should take note of the things that are happening around us. But we should not worry or be in fear for ourselves. Rather, we should be in fear for others who do not know the One who offers comfort in the storms of life.

And when He had entered into a ship His disciples followed Him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves. But He was asleep.

And His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us; we perish!"

And He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?"

Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. (Matthew 8:23-26)

It is my hope that I will not be admonished as one who is of little faith. ❖