

(Through the Needle's Eye) 11 - the Old Testament View

by David Servant

The sermon critiques the misuse of Old Testament scriptures by prosperity preachers, emphasizing the higher standards of stewardship and holiness expected in the New Testament.

Scripture: Genesis 2:4, Exodus 3:7, Leviticus 25:44, Numbers 11:1, Deuteronomy 8:1, Deuteronomy 15:1

Topics: "Biblical Stewardship", "Godly Prosperity"

Description

David Servant preaches about the Old Testament scriptures that address obedience to God's commandments, the dangers of greed and discontentment, the importance of stewardship, and the provision for the poor. The sermon emphasizes the need to reconcile what Jesus taught with the Old Testament scriptures, the higher standard of holiness in the New Testament, and the significance of God's ownership of all provision and blessing. It also highlights the principles of sharing abundance, caring for the needy, and the balance between prosperity and obedience to God.

Transcript

Although I rested my case at the close of the ninth chapter, it occurs to me that there are many professing Christians who resort to various Old Testament scriptures to justify their disobedience to Christ's commandments. I've already limitedly exposed the more common fallacies of those kinds of justifications, but I thought it might be helpful to examine a number of relevant Old Testament scriptures, anticipating that I might be accused of ignoring them. Thus the reason for this appendix. It can be used to better equip those who are defending the truth against those who are perverting it. The Old Testament, taken as a whole, absolutely annihilates the doctrines of modern prosperity preachers and condemns the self-indulgence of most Western evangelicals.

Allow me to begin by first asking a question. If we discover an Old Testament scripture that contradicts (either real or imagined) what Christ clearly taught, does our discovery give us the right to nullify Christ's and His apostles' teaching? Certainly not. If we can't find a way to reconcile what Jesus taught with what the Old Testament teaches, we would be foolish not to give prerogative to Christ. We are, of course, living under the new covenant and are supposed to be obeying Jesus' commandments.

We should also acknowledge that the New Testament upholds a somewhat higher standard of holiness than the Old, and from us to whom much has been given shall more be required (see Luke 12:48). For

example, God obviously permitted the polygamy of some Old Testament leaders such as Jacob, David and Solomon, but New Testament overseers must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). We don't we justify having multiple wives and concubines based on Old Testament scriptures. Is it not because we have more divine light?

God permitted His old covenant people to acquire slaves from surrounding pagan nations (see Lev. 25:44). Shall we justify doing the same based on what God allowed them to do? Is God telling Christian believers to invade neighboring nations as a means of His judgment upon them as He did the people of Israel? Obviously not.

We who are indwelt by God's Spirit have a higher capacity to live godly lives. Jesus gave us a new commandment, which is to love each other even as He has loved us (see John 13:34), a very high standard indeed. Why would we ever imitate some patriarch, wealthy only by the standards of his own day, who did not have the spiritual revelation, spiritual help, or God-given responsibility that we possess, when we have Christ, our sinless Shepherd and Lord, to follow and imitate?

Moreover, by a very large majority, the people who lived before and during the Old Covenant were not wealthy. They generally lived by similar standards that many citizens of the developing world do today. What grounds do prosperity preachers have to single out a few Old Testament kings from among millions of other Old Testament people and use them as examples of God's will for all New Testament believers?

Throughout our Old Testament survey, we'll discover ancient endorsements of what Christ taught, but every person about whom we read will not necessarily attain to His new covenant standards. Some scriptures will answer a few nagging questions that remain or tweak our understanding more closely to a perfect biblical balance. This survey will also help us to identify the Old Testament scriptures that are so often misused to support modern prosperity teaching. A careful and honest examination of those passages will expose the many modern fallacies that are used to justify greed.

A surprising amount of information is found in the Old Testament that is relevant to our topic of money, possessions and stewardship. Hundreds of scriptures could be listed under the heading of "Personal Stewardship." I have thus avoided commenting on a number of those scriptures that added nothing to balance or enhance truths we've already learned. I've also avoided quite a few scriptures that are accountings of offerings to God, even though they certainly buttress Christ's teaching on stewardship. I have not, however, avoided scriptures that could be considered contradictory to what Christ taught. I think it will be well worth your time to read this entire appendix.

Genesis

2:4-3:24 From the first pages of the Old Testament, we note that when God created the first two humans, He gave them only what they needed--food, and human and divine companionship. Later, after their fall when they needed it, He provided clothing. The climate in the garden of Eden must have been perfect, the temperature fluctuating only slightly through the day and night (see Gen. 3:8), so Adam and Eve needed no clothing. Perhaps God gave them or they constructed some kind of a dwelling, but we have no record of this. Their water was pure^[1] and all the food they needed was waiting to be picked nearby. Their time would have been occupied by enjoying God's creation, fellowshiping with Him and one another, cultivating the garden of Eden, perhaps some limited animal husbandry, and a few other necessities--eating, bathing and so on. In short, they would have been subsistence farmers living in a tropical paradise, having very few, if any, possessions.

Obviously, having just the essentials must not be so bad, because that is all God gave Adam and Eve. We have been duped by our materialistic culture into thinking that happiness is made possible by owning material things. Adam and Eve could have been perfectly happy with what God gave them. And what God gave them was essentially all that most people have had over the past 6,000 years, and all that most people in the world have today. Why do we believe we need so much to be happy? Why do we buy more of what we don't need when there are so many people who are lacking basic essentials whom we could help? Why are we discontent even with all we have?

Indeed, discontentment was Adam and Eve's undoing. The serpent seduced Eve into believing that there was something beyond what God had given her that could make her happy. So she ate what God forbade, expecting to find fulfillment, and her husband followed suit. Neither trusted that the Lord had told them the truth in His previous warning, and their unbelief and discontentment resulted in their expulsion from Paradise. How many of us have suffered because of our own discontentment? I suspect all of us.

4:2-5, 20-22 We read in verse 2 of the very first sectorized economy. For some reason, perhaps natural inclination, survival, mutual benefit, or material gain, Abel and Cain are found in different vocations. By the time we come to 4:20-22, it seems that diversified economics had established a course of no return in early civilization. Technology also had its beginning, and here are the roots of capitalism. Enterprising individuals could benefit by providing some useful goods or service to others.

It has been suggested that the parents of Cain and Abel learned about bringing God offerings of animal sacrifices when He clothed them with the skins of slain animals after their fall. Perhaps He gave them a lesson on how their sin and shame could be covered and what they needed to do if they sinned again. Regardless, Cain and Abel obviously knew about bringing the Lord offerings, something stipulated later in the Law of Moses by God Himself. Offerings could be brought to God for various reasons--for thanksgiving, atonement and so on--but in every case there was an acknowledgment of the worshiper's stewardship and God's ownership. The worshiper relinquished something he possessed and would watch his offering go up in smoke "to God" as it were. Regular offerings were a regular safeguard against attachment to material things and a continual reminder of God's lordship over one's possessions. This practice is something that God established from the dawn of human history, and it was practiced prior to the Law by Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Gen. 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7), making it no insignificant concept.

13:1-12 Abram was an elderly chieftain who headed a nomadic community of perhaps more than one thousand souls (he was able to muster an army of 318 fighting men from among their number according to 14:14). He probably inherited his leadership position and much of his wealth at the death of his father, Terah.

Abram's community lived in tents because they would have needed to move periodically to find pasture for their livestock, the basis of their livelihood. They would have been sustained by eating their animals and consuming or utilizing the animal products, and by selling some of their animals or animal products, using the money they gained to purchase other necessities.

They apparently were able to graze their animals on land they didn't own or lease, and as their herds and flocks naturally multiplied, Abram and Lot found that they needed to separate out of necessity. The arid land simply could not sustain their combined livestock, which must have numbered in the thousands of animals.

Thus we read that "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold" (13:2), but one could hardly call his lifestyle luxurious or self-indulgent. The entire community lived in tents pitched in remote areas, sleeping on some sort of mats or rugs on the ground. They had no running water, refrigeration, electricity, and so on. They ate, not at tables, but sitting on rugs or mats. Perhaps they had a few tents they used as toilet tents. I always have to chuckle when I hear some prosperity preacher talk about how we can be rich "like Abraham." Would you trade places with Abram to have his wealth?

Compared to others in his community, Abram was the richest, being the owner of the livestock. But to maintain and gain wealth, he needed his community, and the community needed his wealth to survive. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, Abram was comparable to an owner of a modern, mid-sized business. Using his God-given resources, he created jobs. He hired people to take care of necessary responsibilities, and they joined his community for their economic wellbeing and physical safety. Abram had great responsibility--hundreds of people depended on him for their lives, and he took care of them all. It was not as if Abram was living in a luxury palace along the Mediterranean Sea, collecting weekly profit checks that were mailed from his slaves who eked out a living in the wilderness. He was not like modern CEOs who make 400 times the salary of their average employee. He gained his wealth justly, and used it for the benefit of an entire community. In that respect, Abram was a wonderful example for modern Christian business owners to imitate.

Neither does it appear that money was Abram's God. He graciously offered Lot his choice of pasture when they needed to separate their flocks and herds (see 13:8-12). He paid tithes to Melchizedek the priest from the spoils of his just war with the four kings (see 14:20), and he wouldn't accept payment from the king of Sodom for his invaluable service to him (see 14:21-24). We really don't have any conclusive information from Scripture that this blessed man whom God commanded to "be a blessing" (12:2) was greedy.

But was not Abram's wealth "in silver and in gold" (13:2) the equivalent of earthly treasures? Even if it was, how much of the New Testament had Abram ever read? (In fact, how much of the Old Testament?) Are we to follow Abram's example or Christ's? We know that Abram twice lied about his relationship with his wife, saying she was his sister (see 12:10-20; 20:1-5). Moreover, Abram had a sexual relationship with his wife's Egyptian maid (see 16:1-4) and kept concubines (see 25:5-6). Shall we follow his example in those cases in disregard of Christ?

Finally, here are a few questions for which we don't have certain answers: How many (if any) of Lot's flocks and herds came as a gift from his uncle, Abram? Were there any impoverished people in Abram's day, and if so, did Abram know about them, and if so, did he ignore their plight?[2] How many of the hundreds who lived with him had perhaps been destitute before he offered them employment? In regard to his silver and gold, how much capital did he need to have in liquid assets in order to continue to operate his business, like any other modern business owner? Could his wealth in livestock, silver and gold have been the equivalent of a modern person's business capital, when perhaps millions of dollars are tied up in inventory, equipment or buildings, while the owner has little personal wealth by comparison? (Meanwhile, because of his initiative, hundreds of people are employed and providing for their families.) And why is Abram chosen by modern prosperity preachers as the norm when Abram clearly was not the norm even among his own people? Why don't they mention that he lived in a tent all his life?

14:17-20 Hundreds of years before the Law of Moses was given, we find Abram paying tithes to an authentic priest and king of Salem (the future city of Jerusalem). Tithing was originally either a human or divine idea. Since its practice was later stipulated in the Law of Moses, I would prefer to think that tithing

was a divinely-given concept rather than a pagan one that God adopted for His worshipers. Archeological discoveries reveal to us that the Chaldeans of the city of Ur, the hometown of Abram and his father, Terah, actually tithed to their pagan priests. So perhaps tithing was something Abram learned in Ur. Abram's example of tithing was passed down to his posterity, at least, to his grandson, Jacob (see Gen. 28:22).

Tithing was always an acknowledgement of God's ownership and the worshiper's stewardship. Since God is the source of all provision and blessing, He deserves to be honored by the giving of tithes. Tithing isn't a new covenant practice, but certainly not because God expects less devotion from His new covenant children than from His old covenant servants. Tithing is a great starting place in stewardship, but the Christ who indwells Christians whom He abundantly blesses will not be satisfied only to tithe. He who indwells us is not any more greedy than He was when He walked the earth two-thousand years ago.

15:13-14 More than half a millennium before it occurred, God revealed to Abram that his descendants would become a race of slaves in a foreign nation (not exactly a promise of prosperity). But the God of justice would judge their oppressors, and His settlement with the oppressing nation would include their having to pay "back wages" to the slaves whom they exploited to enrich themselves. God kept His promise, and at the Exodus, the Israelites "plundered the Egyptians" (Ex. 12:36).

Certainly there are many parallels between the Exodus story and New Testament redemption. Like the Israelites, we have been released from slavery and an oppressing kingdom. Our slavery, however, was to sin; the kingdom from which we were set free was Satanic, not Egyptian. Prosperity preachers like to add, however, that we, like the Israelites, should expect to become rich once we're delivered from the kingdom of darkness.

The delivered Israelites, however, weren't exactly made wealthy to the point of being able to live in luxurious self-indulgence as they wandered in the wilderness, or even once they settled in Canaan. During and after the Exodus, God provided what the Israelites needed to live and what they needed to construct the Tabernacle for Him. But they ultimately complained about the food that He supplied in the wilderness, and in Canaan, they lived like people do today in the developing world.

We too should expect that our new Father will take care of our needs and equip us for every preordained good work, just as He did for the Israelites in the wilderness. But most likely, we've been wealthy all our lives, always having much more than we needed. We are much more like the Egyptians, who became rich at the expense of others, than we are like the impoverished Israelite slaves. Thus, we should not expect that God will make us richer. Rather, like repentant Egyptians, we should be using the wealth we already possess to help set oppressed people free from sin and supply their needs. If God entrusts us with even more money, then we have even more to use for His purposes.

18:1 Here is wealthy Abraham (formerly Abram), still living in a tent, twenty-four years after the Lord first spoke to him (see 12:4; 17:1). His nephew, Lot, has a house in the city (see 19:1-11) that will soon dramatically depreciate in value when God rains fire and brimstone upon Sodom, forcing him to retreat to the comfort of a cave (see 19:30).

20:14-16 With Abimelech's gift, Abraham now has even more sheep and oxen to look after, which is probably why Abimelech also gave him servants (employees), knowing he needed more help to take care of his new livestock. Abraham's community is growing, and he now has more people than ever who are dependent upon him for their livelihood. Perhaps Abimelech also gave Abraham those 1,000 pieces of silver knowing that he would need it to cover the new expenses associated with his growing community.

Or perhaps God was blessing Abraham through Abimelech because Abraham was a blessing to so many people. God had previously said to Abraham, "I will bless you....so you shall be a blessing (Gen. 12:2), or literally, "so be a blessing." God blesses people to make them a blessing to others.

Incidentally, Abraham returned some of those sheep and oxen to Abimelech in 21:27.

23:3-20 If wealthy Abraham owned any other real estate from age 75 until his death at age 175, scripture is silent about it. His wealth consisted of livestock, silver, gold and servants (see 24:35).

24:22, 35, 53 See my comments on 13:1-12.

26:12-17 Isaac's God-granted wealth, like his father Abraham's, consisted of livestock and "a great household" (26:14), that is, a large community of people that he headed. Like his father, he also lived in tents as a nomadic chieftain. I doubt that any reader would want to trade places with him in order to have his wealth.

There is no indication that Isaac hoarded his growing wealth or used it to live in luxury. Like his father, he would have been somewhat comparable to a modern owner of a mid-sized business who continually reinvests his profits into his growing operation. Isaac provided a living for many people. There is no evidence that he misused his stewardship.

Even if Isaac wasn't a good steward of his wealth, that wouldn't change what Jesus commanded His followers to do with their wealth. Scripture never states that Isaac is a model that New Testament Christians should imitate. Why do prosperity preachers set Isaac up as a standard for Christians, yet ignore, for example, Isaac's many servants, who owned much less? And why have we never heard any prosperity preacher say, "Have faith in God so that you can be rich like Isaac, living in a tent in remote areas as you follow your herds and flocks from place to place!"?

28:20-22 Although one could easily critique the merits of Jacob's vow as well as his character, to his credit it can be said that he only hoped that God would supply his basic needs of food, covering and safety. Also to his credit, Jacob promised that if God did provide those things, he would tithe. Jacob apparently knew about tithing hundreds of years before its practice was stipulated in the Law of Moses.

30:43 Like his father and grandfather, Jacob's prosperity also consisted of an abundance of livestock and servants who worked for him. According to his testimony before his wives and father-in-law recorded in 31:4-13, 36-42, God justly transferred to him the wealth he produced for dishonest Laban (see 30:27-30).

Because Jacob owned many sheep, goats, camels, oxen and donkeys, does that prove it is God's will for every Christian to own many sheep, goats, camels, oxen and donkeys? If not, then what gives anyone the right to say it proves it is God's will for all of us to hold more modern forms of wealth purely for the sake of self-indulgence, especially in the light of all Christ and His apostles taught? Because Jacob had two wives, does that prove it is God's will for every Christian man to have two wives?

Similar to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob also was somewhat equivalent to a modern mid-sized business owner. His servants were his employees and his business was raising livestock. He could consume the products of his animals, sell their products or sell the animals themselves and thus make a living. He may have been wealthy by the standards of his day, but would you trade places with him? Note how he described his "luxurious life" of tending Laban's flocks and herds: "By day the heat consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes" (31:40).

34:25-29 Who would maintain that Jacob's sons acquired this wealth legitimately? This was nothing less than cold-blooded murder and thievery, motivated by revenge. Even worse, it was an unjust revenge, as an entire city was punished for one man's misdeed. I wonder, why don't prosperity preachers use these rogues as examples for us to follow to attain divine prosperity?

39:2-6, 21-23 God prospered Joseph and made him successful in Potiphar's house and in prison, yet there is no indication that his success resulted in the increase of his personal wealth in either place. Rather, it was Potiphar's wealth that seemed to have increased because of God's blessing on Joseph (see 39:5). Even if Potiphar did reward Joseph financially, Joseph lost it all when he was thrown into prison, where he spent several years, at least (see 41:1).

Why do some prosperity preachers use thirty-year-old Joseph as a model of God's will for all Christians? What about the first twenty-nine years of his life? Was there some deficiency in his faith for his first twenty-nine years that stopped him from experiencing "God's best"?

Joseph was indeed successful in all that he did, always increasing in favor before his superiors as he faithfully fulfilled his responsibilities. He was obviously a man of high character who maintained a good conscience before God. In regard to any money that the Lord may have entrusted to him, I suspect that Joseph was just as faithful in his stewardship before God as he was before men.

41:42-49 Joseph was now a rich, powerful man with a pagan wife, the daughter of the priest of On. He also had the most important job on the face of the earth, administrating the greatest relief effort to that point of history and perhaps of all time. Joseph was responsible to store huge quantities of excess grain for seven years in order to provide food for the world during the seven years of famine that would follow. He knew that he had been given much, and from him much would be required, later declaring to his brothers, "God sent me...to preserve life" (45:5). He recognized, unlike so many of us, that God gave abundance, not for self-indulgence, but in order to meet the pressing needs of others.

How sad it is that some prosperity preachers focus on Joseph's wealth while ignoring his service to the hungry, his extraordinary generosity (see 42:25; 44:1; 45:21-23; 47:12), and his prophetic significance, as he stands out as preeminent type of Christ found in the Old Testament. Here was a man who was rejected by his own, sold for some pieces of silver, but who was received by and exalted among the Gentiles, becoming their "savior." Joseph's rule foreshadowed the time when Christ will rule over the entire earth from Jerusalem, when "all the nations will stream to it" (Is. 2:2), just as the nations streamed to Egypt to buy grain (see Gen. 41:56-57).

Joseph is indeed a model for any Christian who has been entrusted with much. His story, however, is certainly not recorded in the Bible to encourage rich North Americans to "believe God" for more wealth with which they can further indulge themselves, while millions starve and face eternity without Christ.

47:13-26 Did Joseph become greedy, shrewdly taking advantage of desperate people to gain immense wealth for himself? Why didn't he give away grain rather than sell it?

Perhaps because it wasn't his to give. It belonged to Pharaoh, considered a god by the Egyptians, and Joseph worked for him. The profits belonged to Pharaoh as well, not Joseph (see 47:14, 19-20, 23, 24). As the famine continued year after year, Pharaoh eventually owned all the money, all the livestock, the majority of the land, and practically all the people of Egypt. Amazingly, the Egyptian citizens did not hate Joseph, but appreciated him for saving their lives (see 47:25). They didn't consider what he did to be

unfair.

Everyone agrees that Joseph's story is a marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's story, as the similarities are unmistakable. Is it not possible that this section of the story foreshadows the time when Christ will rule over the kingdom of His Father, when everyone will personally own nothing, true stewards of what rightfully belongs to Him, glad to be servants of the one who has saved them? The events of the historic story are so remarkable that one can't help but wonder if God orchestrated them precisely only to that end.

To use the story of Joseph to prove that God wills for all His children to be immensely wealthy is unwarranted. Why not also say that God wants all His children to be sold into slavery by their own families, or be falsely accused of attempted rape? Where does Scripture teach that we are to be imitators of Joseph? And even if any of Joseph's actions stand in contradiction to what Christ taught, does that relieve us of responsibility to obey our Lord?

One truth that surfaces in this story, a truth that is consistent with the rest of Scripture, is that God supplies the needs of His people. Long before the seven-year famine, God made plans to preserve the lives of Israel and his sons through an unselfish man named Joseph. God cares about us, and we don't need to worry about food, drink or covering, just as Jesus taught (see Matt. 6:25-34), even in the midst of famine.

Exodus

3:7-8, 16-17 God's goodness is revealed in His plan to deliver His people from their Egyptian taskmasters and to bring them into a land where they could be free to enjoy the fruit of their labors. The Lord would abundantly supply all their needs in the Promised Land. Although it "flowed with milk and honey," ultimately the Israelites would still have to run the risk of getting kicked by a hoof or stung by a bee to enjoy that milk and honey! God wasn't promising an idle life of ease, but one of productive opportunity. Then, however, they would face a new danger. Later on, He would sternly warn the former slaves not to forget Him once they prospered (see Deut. 8:7-20).

3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36 Here is an unmistakable example of God blessing His own materially. I like to think of the silver, gold and clothing that the Egyptians gave to the Israelites as being the payment of "back wages," since the Israelites had worked as slaves for so many years. The Egyptians had enriched themselves by the Israelites' hard work; now God acted in perfect justice. But their blessings were given to them for another reason as well: God would soon be commanding Moses to receive offerings from the people of Israel in order to construct the Tabernacle in the wilderness (see 25:1-9).

Should we expect, once we've become Christians, that God will make us wealthy like the Israelites, as some prosperity preachers claim?

First, I don't see that the Israelites became instantly wealthy when they plundered the Egyptians. They received clothing and articles of silver and gold. Yet at the Exodus, they left their homes and any large possessions behind. They would be living in tents in the desert as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Would you trade places with them so you could enjoy their wealth?

Second, as I've previously stated, the large majority of North Americans are much wealthier than any Israelite was even after the Egyptians had been plundered. We are much more like the Egyptians in the story, who profited from the labor of slaves. Thus, we ought to be sharing our abundance with the needy among God's people, not expecting that God will give us more so that we can indulge ourselves to an

even greater degree.

Third, if the Israelites' plundering of the Egyptians at the Exodus is the pattern for New Testament Christians, why don't the prosperity preachers encourage their followers to request clothing, gold and silver from their neighbors, as God did the Israelites? Have you felt led to plunder your neighbors?

What we should expect, once we become Christians, is that God will take care of our true needs, because that is consistent with all of Scripture. And if God adds to that blessing, then we have the blessed opportunity to be a blessing to others.

15:22-25; 16:2-3, 12-35; 17:1-6 In the hot desert, God supplied Israel's need for water and food, yet He first allowed them to become thirsty and hungry, testing them (see 15:25; Deut. 8:3).

God's instructions regarding the gathering of manna reveal His desire that they trust Him for their "daily bread," as He provided only what they needed for one day. The exception was on Friday morning, when the Israelites would gather twice as much as they needed for their households, and the extra manna didn't become foul the next day, which was the Sabbath rest. The Friday gathering required trust as well.

The apostle Paul found new covenant application in this story, mentioning in his second letter to the Corinthians that when the Israelites gathered the manna for the first time, some gathered much and some gathered little (see 2 Cor. 8:13-15). Yet when each Israelite's gathered manna was measured, each had exactly one omerful. It was a miraculous redistribution, a clear reminder of God's love for every Israelite.

Likewise, the Corinthians, from whom Paul was requesting monetary gifts on behalf of poor saints in Jerusalem, should understand that God has the right of redistributing His provision through their generosity. God loves all His children, and thus it should be obvious that His children who have more than they need should share with His children who have less than they need. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the time might come when their roles would be reversed with the Jerusalem saints (see 2 Cor. 8:14), not exactly something any modern prosperity preacher would teach.

20:17 The tenth commandment, prohibiting covetousness, reveals that God is not only concerned about our outward actions, but also our inner attitudes and hidden thoughts. The sins of theft and adultery begin with the desire to possess what belongs to another. Resentment, jealousy and hatred may also have their roots in covetousness. Contentment is the cure.

The tenth commandment also indicates God's sanction of the private ownership of property. There is nothing wrong with having a house, livestock or even servants. (Note that there were many other commandments in the Law regarding how one treated his servant, revealing that servants were much closer to employees than slaves.)

Keep in mind, however, that when God spoke these words to Israel, there was no great disparity in wealth between individual families of Israelites. At the exodus, there is no indication that there were rich and poor Israelites. All of them had just come out of slavery and all of them had just plundered the Egyptians. In the wilderness, God gave each family equal portions of daily manna. In Canaan, God divided up the land equally among the tribes and families. And finally, knowing that there would inevitably be disparity of wealth among the Israelites, God made provision in the Law for a regular release of debts and the restoration of one's property previously sold out of economic necessity. God leveled the playing field, as it were. What else would we expect from our loving God?

All this is simply to say that the tenth commandment cannot legitimately be used to prove God's sanction of the selfish amassing of wealth. It is simply a prohibition of covetousness.

21:2-6 Certainly this ordinance concerning the release of Israelite slaves after six years of service indicates that God considered such slavery to be less desirable than freedom. Keep in mind that Israelites could only become slaves by choice, not by force. And the only reason one would become of slave of a fellow Hebrew was due to economic necessity. If one incurred debt that he could not repay, for example, he could always sell himself as a slave in order to pay his debt, and he would have a fresh start in six years. Thus this ordinance was given because of God's concern for those facing financial hardship.

It is also clear that such arrangements were nothing similar to the kind of slavery of which we are familiar from American history. At the six-year release date, a slave might love his master so much that he might decide to serve him permanently. He was more like an employee who loved his job rather than a slave.

Why would a Hebrew buy another Hebrew as a slave? Most likely because he needed another person to take care of his crops or livestock. He knew very well that the initial purchase and on-going expenses of keeping his slave would cost him money. Thus his decision to purchase a slave required the same kind of foresight needed by modern employers. Economic forces bearing on available slaves and prospective buyers would determine the price of a slave.

21:33-22:15 Like the tenth commandment, these ordinances regarding individual property rights also reveal God's sanction of privately-owned property. They do not, however, sanction selfishness. The early Christians held private property, but "not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them" (Acts 4:32). Note that individual Christians had things that belonged to them, indicating private ownership, but they shared to the degree that they considered their private belongings to be common property. This was not the forced collectivism of communism, but the free expression of Christ-like love, born from hearts that were released from selfishness.

22:21-27 God's special concern for strangers (foreigners, refugees and travelers), orphans, widows, and other poor people was (and is) so strong that the man who oppressed such people had committed a capital offence. Moreover, the Israelites were forbidden to charge interest on loans made to the poor, as that would be profiting by another's misfortune, a violation of the second greatest commandment.

One could, however, receive from a poor borrower a "pledge" of repayment, some token of good faith, held as collateral until the loan was repaid in full. But in the case when the borrower was so poor that he had nothing better than his own cloak to give as a pledge, the lender was required to return his cloak before the sun set, as the cloak was the poor borrower's only means of keeping warm as he slept. Clearly, such a borrower was one who was extremely poor. Money that he borrowed would be for absolute necessities to sustain him until his fortune changed, or for capital to be used to begin making a living.

22:29-30 We will eventually read the many laws regarding the offerings of the first-fruits, which belonged to God, just as did the first-born animals and sons (who weren't sacrificed, but redeemed).

Imagine making your living by raising sheep and one of your sheep giving birth to a first-born lamb. You are required by God to sacrifice it, offering it up to Him. You would be losing your lamb, and if you had much intelligence, you would probably realize that God wasn't gaining a lamb. What then was the reason for such a requirement? The offerings of the first of the harvest and flock served as a continual reminder that God was the source and rightful owner of every material thing, and that those entrusted with such

blessings were His stewards. God wants our hearts in heaven with Him, not on earth with material possessions. One's relationship with God is not right if his attitude and actions regarding his possessions are not in line with these facts.

23:3-8 All injustice is a violation of the second greatest commandment. Although the poor are often robbed of justice by the rich, the rich can also be robbed of justice from those whose compassion for the poor influences them to be partial in a legal dispute. God declares that rich and poor are entitled to equal justice. Being poor does not give one the right to steal what belongs to another, for example. If a poor thief was caught, he could be sold as a slave, and his selling price used to make restitution if he had no other means (see 22:3).

Even one's enemies are entitled to fairness, and just because the livestock of my enemy wanders into my field, I have no right to keep them (see 22:4). I would be stealing, regardless of my justification. (This commandment certainly stands in contradiction to the playground ethic of "Finders: keepers, losers: weepers.")

Using money as a bribe also violates God's justice.

23:10-11 Here God states that the primary reason He required the people of Israel to allow their land to lie fallow every seventh year was so "the needy of your people may eat" (23:11). Certainly this reveals God's special concern for the very poor and His plan to provide for their needs through the sharing of those who had more. God still cares about the poor, and it is still His intention to supply their needs through those who have more than they need.

Note also that, in the wisdom of God the poor were required to gather food for themselves from the fallow fields. People who lacked food because of laziness received nothing. Neither were the industrious poor completely stripped of their dignity by receiving handouts. In most cases, providing opportunities for the poor to earn their living is better than simply giving them what they need.

23:23-33 God, the owner of all land, certainly has the right to take away anyone's land and give it to someone else. In this case, His reason for doing so was because of the sins of the inhabitants of Canaan. He used the Israelites as the means of His judgment upon them, not driving them from their land, but destroying them on their land. The Israelites would then receive the land as God's gift.

This passage, among many others, also illustrates God's desire that His people all have some capital by which they can make a living. In an agricultural economy, people need land. In an information/technological economy they need an education.

25:1-9 How is it that the Israelites, who had been slaves a few days earlier, now owned gold, silver, bronze, scarlet material, fine linen, and so on? Most of those things were likely gained when God granted them favor among the Egyptians, who freely gave them valuable items at the Exodus (see 12:35-36). God intended that at least some of that plunder would be used for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. He blessed His people so they could be a blessing (see also 35:20-36:7).

Note, however, that God only wanted those "whose heart moves him" (25:2) to give, that is, those who had a heart-felt desire to make a contribution because they loved God. God still wants His people to give as they "purpose in [their] heart[s], not grudgingly or under compulsion," because He "loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Those who give cheerfully are those who give because they love God and fellow man.

34:21 God's commandment to rest from labor each seventh day served to safeguard against becoming too focused on work and gaining wealth. Here we read that even during critical times of planting and harvest, when the temptation to work seven days was especially strong, the Sabbath rest should be observed.

Leviticus

1:1-7:38 The burnt, grain, peace, sin and guilt offerings all had at least one thing in common--they all cost the worshipper something. It was his sheep, goat, bull or agricultural produce that went up in smoke "to the Lord" (2:9). This practice continually helped the Israelites maintain the proper perspective of their possessions in relationship to God. Each time they brought an offering, they were saying to Him, "You are the source and rightful owner of my wealth and possessions. You have the right to direct the use of what you have entrusted to me. You are worthy to be honored by my relinquishing material things to give them to you."

19:9-10 As in Exodus 23:10-11, we again read of God's means of providing for the poor through His own people's obedience. Note that God expected the poor to work for their food. Although they didn't have to plant crops, they did have to harvest or gather them. God does not want to subsidize laziness. So much of modern charity encourages irresponsibility, thus sustaining what it should be eliminating. When the poor are able to work and work is available, they should be expected to work. Paul wrote, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thes. 3:10).

19:18 This commandment that Jesus said is the second most important commandment (see Mark 12:31) is found in the Old Testament only once, whereas it is found in the New Testament eight times. Using ratios for comparison, it is found once every 23,145 verses in the Old Testament and once every 994 verses in the New Testament, or 23 times more frequently in the New than in the Old. Paul wrote that this one commandment summarizes the whole Law (see Rom. 13:9; Gal 5:14). James called it the "royal law" (Jas. 2:8).

As the commandment is found here in Leviticus 19, it seems to be a summary of verses 9-18. Loving my neighbor as myself includes doing none of the following: bearing a grudge, taking vengeance, hating my brother in my heart, slandering, showing partiality, disrespecting the handicapped, mistreating employees, stealing from, oppressing or lying to my neighbor, and neglecting the poor.

"Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29) asked a Jewish lawyer of Jesus. Are neighbors only people who live in our neighborhood? Are they only "our kind of people"?[3]

Jesus responded by telling him the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30-37), a man who loved his neighbor, and it cost him time and money. Jesus made it clear that neighbors may be members of groups of people that are hated by our closest neighbors. Moreover, neighbors may not live in our neighborhood. They may live many miles away from us. Today, in our global community, our neighbors are everywhere on the Earth. Would it not be foolish to think that in a world where our selfishness affects people on the other side of the globe that we have no responsibility to love the people on the other side of the globe? For this reason, those of us who claim to be lovers of God and neighbor must live as simply as possible, sharing our excess by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and so on, as well as supporting the spread of the gospel to those who have never heard it yet. If we don't, how can we claim to be obeying the commandment our God considers to be the second most important commandment that He ever gave?

25:10-17, 23-34 The year of Jubilee was instituted by God to safeguard every Israelite from temporary and life-long financial destitution. It also prevented economic domination by a few who might amass all the capital, which, in an agricultural economy, is the land. The Jubilee clearly expressed God's desire for economic justice. Every fifty years, the playing field was supposed to be leveled again.

When the Israelites conquered Canaan, each family was given a portion of land, the basic capital from which they could derive their living. If an Israelite met with financial hardship, he could sell part of his land, but God did not allow land to be transferred permanently. If the man had a relative who was able to purchase it back for him, that relative was expected to do so. In the event that there was no "kinsman redeemer," at the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, all land that had been sold over the past fifty years reverted back to its original owner or his heirs. Thus, land values were based on the years left before the Jubilee, and purchasers were more like renters than owners. Additionally, if a person who had been forced to sell his land out of necessity recovered the means to redeem it, he had that right at any time.

Let us imagine an Israelite who finds himself facing a financial crisis. He is unable to feed his family. His problem is solved by selling part of his land to a fellow Israelite for ten years, the number of years that remain until the Jubilee. Let's say he sells a portion of his land for \$10,000, which would amount to \$1,000 for each year left until the Jubilee. He can now feed his family with his cash. He then hires himself out or hopes that next year will bring a bumper crop on his remaining land. At the end of one year he has the right to repurchase his land for \$9,000. If his expenses over the past year did not exceed his income plus \$1,000, he can redeem his land.

Note that God declared that the land was His (see Lev. 25:23). He graciously lent it to His people, and from it they derived their food, fuel, animal feed, and building materials for homes and tools. God never wanted any of His people to lack what they needed. But they had to work.

Everyone needs some capital from which he can earn his livelihood. Capital can be land, a piece of machinery, or a marketable inventory of goods, a skill, or knowledge. Realizing this, we can help lift the poor if we provide them with some kind of capital. Many Christian organizations are doing this around the world by the means of micro-loans, money lent to impoverished yet industrious people at interest rates that match inflation. Micro-loans have proven to be a very successful way of helping the poor help themselves, preserving their dignity while improving their lives. All of us can help the poor by giving to the micro-loan funds of Christian ministries.

25:35-55 Here we read of further provisions God made to assist Israelites who faced financial difficulties. All Israelites were commanded to sustain fellow Israelites (as well as strangers and sojourners among them) who met with hard times. If they lent such a person money or food, they were not permitted to charge any interest (see 25:35-38).

A person meeting severe financial hardship (apparently having had to sell all his land out of necessity to pay debts) could, as a last resort, sell himself as a slave to either a fellow Israelite or to a stranger or sojourner among Israel. For a price, he would agree to serve as a slave for six years or until the year of Jubilee (see Ex 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18), when he could rightfully reclaim "the property of his forefathers" (25:41), getting a fresh start. In essence, he would be renting himself for a specified time and would receive a lump sum that was equivalent to an advance on his full wages. His Israelite purchaser was forbidden to sell him or treat him severely, and was required to treat him, not like a slave, but like a hired man. According to Deuteronomy 15:18, a slave did twice the work of a hired man.

Selling oneself as a slave to a stranger or sojourner among Israel would be done only as a very last resort, and God compassionately made additional provisions for such a desperate person. His relatives had the right to redeem him fairly at any time, freeing him from his obligation to his purchaser. Also, if the man's fortunes reversed, he had the right to redeem himself fairly at any time.

All of these regulations reveal God's special concern for the poor and His desire for economic justice.

We also note that the Israelites were permitted to acquire male and female slaves from surrounding "pagan nations" and from "the sojourners" living in their midst (see 25:44-46). Particularly in regard to the "sojourners," keep in mind that there were other laws that made provision for their compassionate treatment by the Israelites (see Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:9-10, 33-34; Deut. 26:12). Thus we can safely assume that sojourners who became slaves of Israelites did so voluntarily and out of economic necessity, rather than by force.

26:3-5, 14-15, 20, 26 Here we see the obvious correlation between obedience and material provision. If the people of Israel obeyed God, He assured them that He would supply their material needs. They would have sufficient food from their harvests. If they did not obey Him, however, they would suffer scarcity of food as well as many other hardships. Likewise under the new covenant, God promises to supply our need for food and covering if we seek first His kingdom (see Matt. 6:32-33).

Numbers

7:1-88 I've passed over a few previous passages that mention the giving of offerings, but this one can't be overlooked. It, like those I've passed over, once more illustrates that devotion to the Lord under the old covenant involved the giving up of material things. In fact, such giving was central to old covenant worship. It cost something to have a relationship with God. Here we find an entire chapter devoted to enumerating the specific offerings that the tribal leaders brought at the dedication of the Tabernacle. That this was recorded in Scripture reveals that God must have taken notice and considered their sacrifices significant.

8:24-26 Here is the only passage concerning retirement in the Old Testament. We are told that individual Levites were only to serve in the Tabernacle until they reached the age of fifty. After that, they were permitted to assist the younger men who worked in the Tabernacle, but they were prohibited from performing the work itself, which is somewhat of a vague commandment.

We are not told the reason for this commandment. Perhaps it was because the work was too strenuous for the average person over fifty. Regardless, we should certainly not assume that retired Levites were unproductive and lived idle, self-indulgent and meaningless lives. They were still obligated to serve the Lord like any other Israelite.

How does the modern concept of retirement compare to this? When people lived simple lifestyles and were sustained by their own land, there was no great need to save money for retirement. One owned his house, field, and animals, and his capital sustained him until death. Even if one may have become gradually incapable of working in his field and taking care of his animals, he could likely hire someone to do it for him or could easily be sustained by his grown children who would have inherited his land.

Modern retirement differs in that we do not live modestly and thus need continued large incomes to sustain luxurious lifestyles during retirement. Moreover, we most often retire out of desire rather than necessity, and so we race to save huge amounts of money in order to retire as soon as possible. Beyond

that, we rarely retire gradually due to old age, but fully retire on a given day. Finally, modern retirement is often considered to be a time for daily self-indulgence and personal entertainment and amusement. How tragic it is that those who should be wise with years, who know they are closer to eternity than most, should spend their final years in continual testimony to their atheism.

The follower of Christ should consider God's will in the matter of retirement.

If you are currently retired, you are highly privileged, more privileged than the majority of people who live in the world today, as well as the majority of people who have ever lived. To have been able to save enough money so that you don't have to work any longer in order to earn a living is a testimony to your wealth. In developing countries, most people work until they die, and their life spans are much shorter than ours. If they become unable to work, they rely on their families to support them.

A principle of stewardship that certainly applies to retirement is, "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48). The retired person, if in good health in mind and body, has much more discretionary time than one who must earn his living. Therefore, he will have to give account for that time, and God will expect that he use it for His glory. He may even consider going back to work in order to have more to give and share. If he isn't using his time to earn money to share, he should use his time in other ways that serve God's kingdom.

But what about those who are not yet retired? Is there anything wrong with saving money for retirement? This is not the simplest question.

First, the non-retired person should consider his reasons for wanting to eventually retire. If it is so he can spend all his time in the pursuit of leisure and self-indulgence, then he needs to repent and be born again. He is no disciple of Jesus Christ.

If one hopes to retire in order to spend the majority of his time serving others and God, that is certainly more virtuous.

It would seem impossible, however, to save money for retirement without laying up earthly treasures. (Obviously, Social Security and many non-optional company retirement plans relieve one's individual responsibility in this matter.) Thus it would seem advisable that working persons plan to retire only out of necessity, remaining financially fruitful until death in order to always have something to share. This does not require that every believer remain in a job that he hates until his death.[4] Rather, if he is older, out of debt, and has no children to support, he can probably find a way to sustain himself working part time and thus have more time to devote to ministry and service. If he has had his own business in operation for many years, he may be able to continue earning his living with much less effort than when he began it, or he may be able to scale down his business but still have sufficient income.

It could be argued that saving money for retirement is wise in our modern non-agrarian economy, because most of us do not own land that is our capital, nor do we own our own businesses, things that could support us when we are unable to work. Additionally, saving for a time when one is unable to earn a living so as not to be a burden on others is a way of loving one's neighbor as one's self (see 1 Thes. 4:11-12; 2 Thes. 3:12).

Both of these arguments, however, are based on the assumption that one will eventually experience a time when he will be unable to work. If you expect that will happen to you, then I suppose that you should

make plans to be sustained by some means. Personally, I prefer to trust God's promises in this regard, not the least of which is Psalm 92:12-15:

The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree,

He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

Planted in the house of the Lord,

They will flourish in the courts of our God.

They will still yield fruit in old age;

They shall be full of sap and very green,

To declare that the Lord is upright;

He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him (emphasis added).

The key to enjoying the benefit of yielding fruit in old age is righteousness. To expect to become incapacitated and unable to earn a living is not exactly an evidence of one's faith in God! Many insurance salespeople make their living from people young and old who dwell upon fears of what the future holds. Do we ever consider how much money Christians spend on health insurance, for example, money that often ultimately does nothing more than keep us suffering in hospital beds when we could be in heaven? That same money could be used to spread the gospel and feed orphans, laying up treasure in heaven.

11:1-35 Here is a classic example of discontentment followed by greed. Forgetting God's goodness in their deliverance from slavery, the Israelites complained about manna and wished for meat. We don't have to wonder how God felt about their discontentment, as "the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (11:1).

Prosperity preachers sometimes like to point out the great abundance of quail that God provided, but they fail to see that the quail were more of a punishment than a blessing. God warned that He would give them meat "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you" (11:20). And when they greedily gathered much more than they needed, "the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague" (11:33) so they died. God considered people to be greedy if they gathered more food than what they reasonably needed, and He killed them for it. Why don't prosperity preachers mention that fact?

18:8-28 By receiving certain offerings as well as the tithes of all the people of Israel, the Levites were sustained and enabled to perform their ministry at the Tabernacle. Clearly, it was the duty of every Israelite to tithe and thus insure the continuation of God's intended ministry. Surveys show that the large majority of professing evangelical Christians in America do not come close to attaining even this old covenant standard of giving.

22:4-9 Here is yet another story that illustrates God's view of discontentment. Suffering His judgment, Israelites died because of their discontentment. How must God feel about prosperity preachers who fuel the discontentment of people who are already among the world's richest?

22:1-24:25 Balaam was obviously tempted to fulfill King Balak's request to curse Israel and thus gain riches and honor for himself (see 22:17), but throughout these chapters, he resisted. Scripture reveals, however, that he soon gained the riches he had forfeited by counseling Balak that the only sure way to cause Israel to fall was by getting the Israelites to sin and thus incur God's wrath (see Num. 31:16; Rev. 2:14). Balak followed Balaam's advice, and his plan worked to some degree--24,000 Israelites who yielded to the temptation of idolatry and immorality lost their lives (see 25:1-9). Shortly thereafter, Balaam was killed in battle, and he is remembered in Scripture as a fool who traded God's approval for earthly wealth (see 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). Beware of the deceitfulness of riches!

33:54 True to His love and justice, God commanded that Canaan's land be divided fairly among the families of Israel. No one was favored. Then what must be God's view of the great disparity of wealth that exists today among those who profess to be His children, some of whom have much more than they need, and others of whom are lacking basic necessities?

Deuteronomy

6:10-15 Here is a promise of prosperity coupled with a warning. If the people obeyed God, they would inherit the homes, cisterns, vineyards and orchards of the evil Canaanites whom they would dispossess. They would then have more than they needed. But there was a real danger that their prosperity might distract them from their devotion to the Lord. We, too, need to guard against that same danger.

7:12-13 Just as Jesus promised to supply all the material needs of His followers if they would seek first for His kingdom, God promised Israel blessing on their agricultural pursuits if they would obey Him. But should we conclude that God would want Israelites who were blessed with superabundant harvests to tear down their barns and build bigger ones so they could retire early? (If you don't know the answer to that question, see Luke 12:16-21.)

8:1-20 Again we find a promise of prosperity joined with a warning. If there was danger of forgetting God due to prosperity during a time when prosperity could be defined as having food without scarcity, "good houses" (that had no running water, glass windows, air conditioning, electricity or appliances), multiplying herds and flocks and multiplying silver and gold, then how much more danger exists for people living in the kind of prosperity to which we are accustomed? God wanted the Israelites never to forget where they had come from and who had brought them out of Egypt. It is sad that modern prosperity preachers often use God's words in 8:18, "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth," as a means of proving that God wants to prosper us, but they ignore the context, neglecting to mention what God was warning of before and after that verse. So many of the modern followers of such preachers have forgotten God and His Son's commandments relative to stewardship as they pursue greater wealth in order to lay up more earthly treasures, proving their devotion to mammon. They consequently set themselves up, not for more prosperity, but to perish, as God promised in 8:19-20. We should understand, however, that if God is the one who gives us the power to make wealth, then God has the right to tell us what to do with the wealth He has empowered us to make.

11:13-17 This is more of a promise of provision rather than prosperity. As long as Israel obeyed God, they would have plenty to eat. Otherwise, they would face deprivation.

12:6 Again we see how stewardship under the old covenant included so many different kinds of giving by those who worshipped the Lord: burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes of every agricultural product, heave offerings, votive offerings, freewill offerings, and the giving of the firstborn of every animal.

13:12-18 I can't help but wonder why prosperity preachers pick and chose what they want from the Old Testament to find application for their modern audiences. One could just as easily find application from verses like these to justify killing prosperity preachers who are trying to lead us astray to follow the god of mammon! And why do prosperity preachers not find some message for New Testament believers in the material goods that were "under the ban" and to be publicly burned in 13:16-17? Is there nothing "under the ban" for us?

14:22-29 These instructions regarding tithing seem contradictory to what we have previously read in Numbers 18:21-28, where God said that all the tithe of Israel belonged to the Levites. Here we read of tithes being used by tithers for a big feast, and of every third year the tithe being given not only to Levites, but also to aliens, orphans and widows. Commentators debate how to reconcile these apparent contradictions. I speculate that, because there was no way for a family to eat a tenth of all their annual increase in one feast, each family used a small portion of their tithe for a feast that included Levite guests, and then all of the remainder was given to the Levites. Then, as believed by some Jewish commentators, every third year a second tithe was received that was given to the Levites, aliens, orphans and widows in one's own town.

15:1-18 This passage gives us a balanced picture of God-pleasing prosperity and stewardship. First, note that every seven years, every indebted Israelite became debt free. God leveled the playing field, because He is a God of love and justice. He didn't want some to grow richer as others grew poorer. Keep in mind that Israelites only went into debt because of necessity, not because of purchasing luxuries.

Second, note that Israel's prosperity depended on their obedience (see 15:5), which would include their obedience to His laws in this very chapter that relate to remitting debts every seven years and taking care of the poor. Prosperity was promised only to those who cared for the poor (see 15:10).

Third, note that lending money to a poor person could easily become an

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