

What's Wrong With "Prosperity Christianity"?

As I said in the last chapter, I don't believe we are all called to be Mother Theresa. We're not required to give up every earthly belonging and live in poverty. As a matter of fact, we need to make money and give a good amount of it to the Church, ministries, and charities so we can support the evangelical efforts Christ calls us to do. We know that for three years Jesus's ministry was supported by donations. It wasn't every day that He turned a few loaves and fishes into enough food to feed the masses. No, Jesus used someone else's money to further his ministry, so I am certainly not against raising money to do His work.

As I see it, the problem arises when Church leaders conduct what becomes like a weekly telethon pleading and convincing people to give, and then returning few of those gifts, proportionate to what is collected, to His work. Sadly, those church leaders often live far, far beyond their means on the backs of their flocks. Many of these preachers espouse what is called "Prosperity Theology."

"Prosperity Theology" or "Prosperity Gospel" is the teaching that wealth is a divine reward for one's faith in God and emphasizes God's promised generosity for those believers who claim it. The doctrine holds that material prosperity—financial prosperity as well as success in business and personal life—should be *expected* as evidence of God's favor.

Though the concept of Prosperity Gospel started in the early 1900s, it gained momentum in the 1980s with the help of "televangelists" and has since moved into mainstream Christianity. According to a 2006 *TIME* poll, 17 percent of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61 percent believed that God wants people to be prosperous. The survey also stated that nearly one third agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.

A September 2006 *TIME* article titled, "Does God want you to be rich?" said,

In a nutshell, it [Prosperity Theology] suggests that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. Its signature verse could be John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

So what's wrong with thinking that God loves you and wants you to prosper? In my opinion, nothing. The Bible tells us that our Heavenly Father loves us, and what father among us would not want the best for his children? But nowhere in the scriptures do I find that we should pray for a BMW and a six-bedroom estate and they just show up simply because we believe. There's nothing wrong with owning a Beemer, mind you, but if you have the money to buy a \$75,000 car and multimillion-dollar home, I believe you need to have already sewn hundreds of thousands of dollars and even more in sweat equity into Jesus' work of blessing the meek, the poor, and the

unwanted. *The more money you have, the greater the percentage you should be selflessly giving.* Those blessed with financial wealth have a much higher calling to help those who don't. Luke 12:48 tells us that to whom much is given, much is required.

Furthermore, there is biblical evidence for being financially secure here on earth, and that is to care for one's family. The Bible tells us that it is admirable to leave an inheritance even to our grandchildren.

A good [man] leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner [is] laid up for the just.—Proverbs 13:22

Yet, I believe prosperity preachers spend too much time emphasizing accumulating material things, and far less time on His work. It's materialism masquerading as theology. Here are a few scriptures to help you understand why I think placing such emphasis on prosperity and gaining wealth is really false teaching:

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.—I Timothy 6:7-10

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.—Matthew 6:19-21, 24; Luke 16:13

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.—I John 2:15

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.—I Timothy 6:3-5

Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."—Matthew 19:21

Mega-church Pastor Rick Warren, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and a noted critic of the prosperity churches, is quoted as saying, "I don't think it is a sin to be rich, it's a sin to die rich. I want people to make as much money as they can as long as they give it away as much as they can." I couldn't have said it better. Warren went on to add, "This idea that God wants everyone to be wealthy? There is a word for that: baloney."

Like Warren, I believe this heresy is a form of idolatry. You can't measure your self worth by your net worth. There are millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty, and if God wants

us all to be rich, why isn't everyone in the Church a millionaire?

Please note that I am not suggesting that every priest, preacher, or pastor who has appeared on TV is up to no good. As a matter of fact, I have heard no one more prophetic than Charles Stanley who has a massive TV- and Internet-based ministry. But Stanley's preaching is far more about educating people about the scriptures and the love of Christ than it is about prosperity. He has helped me understand faith at a much higher level.

I struggle with the lifestyles of many of the prosperity televangelist pastors, and believe they spend little time "carrying the cross." By and large, their messages appeal to those whose knowledge of scripture is minimal, and instead call out to their vanity and desire for wealth and success. I also believe their well-staged and slickly produced "shows," which are more entertainment than real preaching, take advantage of the poor and working middle class, especially when the economy is not doing well. It becomes like a lottery ticket as these folks sow what little they have, but it is the Church that does most of the reaping.

As their followers watch from their modest homes, condos, and apartment buildings, these televangelist prosperity preachers go home to \$10 million estates. In my opinion, a \$1 million or \$2 million home should be comfortable enough, and the other \$8 million or \$9 million could help a lot of people. Similarly, do TV evangelists need private jets to carry out God's work? Wouldn't flying first class be adequately comfortable, leaving a lot of extra money to feed and clothe the poor?

Remember, I don't believe Jesus is against money, He just wants us to use it well and for His work, not our own glorification. Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus urging those blessed with wealth to give a significant portion to the less fortunate. As shown in the earlier scripture references, He speaks often about how chasing wealth is not godly and is dangerous to your eternal salvation.

Perhaps the most interesting scripture one could use to judge the prosperity preachers is this:

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.—II Corinthians 2:17

We read in II Peter about a "false teacher" who came in the name of Jesus Christ:

But there were false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.—II Peter 2:1-3

The New International Version (NIV) reads the first part of II Peter 2:3 as:

In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up...

The NIV Study Bible note says:

In their greed: They will be motivated by a desire for money and will commercialize the Christian

faith to their own selfish advantage.

In total contrast to the claims of the prosperity-preaching money-men, the Bible tells us not to give money to the wealthy. On the contrary, the Bible says that to give to the rich will lead to poverty.

He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty.—Proverbs 22:16

Finally, instead of stressing the importance of wealth, the Bible warns against pursuing it. Believers, particularly leaders in the Church, are to be free from the love of money because the Bible tells us clearly that the love of money is the root of all evil. Remember, the one showing up to preach a false gospel could look like an angel, but that doesn't make his words true—his words will be damned:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!—Galatians 1:8–9

The *Bottomline* is this: it's okay to be financially successful—okay with the Bible, okay with God—but wealth is not guaranteed simply because you believe in Christ. Those who do realize financial and material success, however, are called by God to sow their financial rewards into good, Godly works.

In my opinion, that doesn't mean sending a demanding TV preacher \$58 because he claims there are 58 blessings in the Bible, or \$90 because he promises you'll get a raise in 90 days, or any other such cockamamie scheme, especially when that preacher is living an indulgent, lavish, and sinfully luxurious lifestyle thanks to your donations.