

## Does God Want Me Wealthy?

Perhaps no doctrine is as popular today in the professing church as what is commonly called 'Prosperity teaching'. This teaching, promoted by best-selling authors and televangelists, grows in popularity every day. It goes something like this: "God is rich. Fabulously rich. If you are related to him, then those same riches are yours, by birthright. If you are not living in such wealth and success, then you are falling short of what is rightfully yours. You are supposed to act in faith, and claim the wealth that belongs to you."

Often, this faith is to be shown by sacrificial giving, which will unlock God's floodgate of financial wealth for you. Basically, this teaching says, living beneath this life of luxurious wealth is sinful for a child of God, Who is fabulously rich.

This teaching finds devoted supporters, not surprisingly, in the poor who see this as a guaranteed spiritual lottery ticket. Thousands crowd Prosperity-gospel churches, 'Amening' at the stories of how God changed the financial fortunes of people in those churches. People drive up in flashy cars, flash their jewellery, as signs of how spiritual they are, God's favourites, true examples of faith and blessing.

But is this blessing? Is this faith? What about the fact that very dynamic, intelligent, persuasive speakers teach this? Some of them are doctors in theology. Well, ultimately, the final authority is the Bible. We must get the Bible's perspective on the Prosperity gospel.

First, the prosperity gospel has an unbiblical view of my position as a believer. The logic of these messages is always: "God owns the cattle of a thousand hills. I'm his child. I own them too, and can claim them whenever I want". It sounds almost logical, but it has not correctly described the position of the believer.

Remember, the position of a believer is always one of redeemed sinner. We have been graciously invited into His family, and then crowned with blessings and position. But beware: there is a world of difference between saying, 'I'm a child of God' to saying 'I own everything God does'. The Bible does not teach that I own everything that God does, or that I have the right to demand what is mine whenever I want it.

The prosperity gospel makes a big deal out of the Bible's use of the word 'heir'. "We are heirs of God" – we inherit whatever is His!" But study the verses where the word *heir* appears, and you will see it most often refers to the fact that we now stand to inherit a place in heaven eternally. Yes, it's by birthright, having been born again, but it speaks of eternal heirship (1 Pet 1:4).

Being a joint-heir with Christ speaks of sharing the rulership and authority in the kingdom, as God promises His faithful saints. Consider though, that this aspect of heirship in the kingdom has a price tag: "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with *him*, that we may be also glorified together'. Rom 8:17.

Another favourite verse is Galatians 4:7 – ‘you are not a servant anymore but a son’. There, says the prosperity preacher, I am not a poor servant, but a prince!

Please read the context - You are no longer a servant to the law, but an emancipated son, a child of God. Does that mean we are no longer servants to God? Preposterous. The book of Revelation 22:3-4 describes how we will be servants in eternity: “And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his **servants** shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name *shall be* in their foreheads”. Even in our glorified state, we will not be exalted to where we are no longer dependant, grateful servants – it will always be that way.

The prosperity gospel proponents, though they deny it, inevitably demote God to being the servant of man, and promote man to the place of God. “You deserve wealth, prosperity and success, and God owes it to you. Now claim what is yours – demand it in faith.”

What a lie. God is sovereign. Daniel 4:35. Ps 50:21. The truth is, believers are servants of God, with wonderful birthrights, but none of them include a promise of unlimited physical wealth. That’s just reading into Scripture, and frankly, denying large portions of it. Scripture is very clear that our very prayers are to be based in submission to His will. Jesus taught us that in the disciples’ prayer. John echoed it in I John 5:14, so did James in James 4:13-15. This is not an attitude of proud cockiness, demanding things from God, like He is bound by you- a genie who must appear and do your bidding every time you rub the lamp with words of faith. By getting the wrong view of the believer’s position and thus birthright, the prosperity gospel has gone astray.

Some in the movement will say, “No, we are submissive to God’s will. But God wants me to be wealthy, so I’m just obeying His will”! Well, that leads us to the second problem in the prosperity gospel, and that is a **false view of physical wealth**. It’s no surprise that this gospel has arisen when it has, in the middle of a hedonistic, materialistic and greedy culture. It tickles everything the world’s marketers do everyday: “enhance your life with things, entertainment and happenings”. Pursue happiness at all costs. And this gospel insists that money is part of that, and God wants you happy and therefore wealthy. But once again, this is a flat denial of Scripture. Proverbs insists that we must not pursue wealth for the sake of wealth. Proverbs 23:5: “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for *riches* certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.”

Listen to the words of Agur in 30:7-9: “Two *things* have I required of thee; deny me *them* not before I die: <sup>8</sup>Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: <sup>9</sup>Lest I be full, and deny *thee*, and say, Who *is* the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God *in vain*.” Proverbs is filled with warnings against the one hasty to be rich, the one with a covetous eye, the one whose trust is in wealth and not God.

Is it a sin to be rich? No. Is it a sin to be poor? No. To borrow from a chapter where it speaks of how God dispenses spiritual gifts, “he giveth to each man severally as He wills”. Money is a tool, and in the life of a believer he gives exactly as much as He

deems right for that individual's life. Remember Paul's experience? Phil 4:12: "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."

It's part of His plan for that individual. Why did Jesus use three people in the parable of the talents – one with 5, one with 2, one with 1? To emphasise two points:

1) God is going to give more to some, less to other, little to others. It's part of His sovereign will.

2) Each person is supposed to bring back a return in keeping with what he was given. To whom much is given, much will be required. The one with three brought back another 3, which to the master was as good as the one with 5 bringing in another 5.

Greater wealth brings greater responsibility. It also brings greater temptation. I Tim 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows". Notice in that verse it is not money itself that is evil, but the love of money.

It is amazing how in the prosperity gospel, the sin of covetousness is just never taught – because that is exactly what they are encouraging. Materialism is not a sin, it seems, in this new gospel. Contradicting literally hundreds of Scriptures, the teaching suggests it is good to drool over a huge bank balance and a fancy car.

There is no sin in being wealthy. But there is sin in coveting wealth. There is no sin in having good things, but there is sin in envying others of their and living for physical wealth.

Let's add, being poor is definitely no sin either. How wretched of these men to mock believers who live sacrificially and near poverty and say they are there because of their fear and unbelief. Jesus lived in this human flesh as a poor man. Contrary to the outlandish claims of some, He did not live in a mansion here, or wear designer clothes. He grew up in a poor place called Nazareth. He was born in a stable, not a mansion, and it seems clear his parents were also of humble circumstances. He taught from a borrowed boat, borrowed a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, payed His taxes from a caught fish, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air *have* nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay *his* head." (Matthew 8:20) It is no sin to be poor.

Let us be quick to add that God encourages good stewardship of the finances He grants you. Often He may apply the principle 'You have been faithful over little – you shall be given more' Likewise, He will never give us more than we can handle; it would surely be the greatest stumblingblock in our lives. But looking at wealth and poverty as blessing and cursing respectively is simple-minded and never taught that way in Scripture.

What about 3 John 2? "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." This is a greeting, not a promise of unlimited financial prosperity, otherwise John was surely out of the will of God when banished to Patmos.

Another famous supposed 'proof text' is 2 Cor 8:9: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye

through his poverty might be rich.” Well, answering this leads us to our next and final point in dealing with the prosperity gospel.

**The prosperity gospel fails to see the distinction between the eternal/spiritual and the present/physical.** In this Scripture, Paul is speaking about giving. He speaks to the Corinthians who were wealthy in comparison to the Macedonians who gave generously. He now points out that Jesus, richer than all in one sense, gave it all up for the benefit of all. He is speaking about Jesus dying and rising so that people might inherit eternal life, i.e. ‘grace’. He does not mean that now we will all be physically rich, for if this is what he meant, he surely would have repeated such an important statement all over his epistles. But he didn’t. Instead, he repeats the same truth by phrasing it differently in Romans 5:8, Ephesians 2:4-9. He is speaking of the same kind of wealth Jesus mentions to the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:18, a spiritual wealth. It is interesting that the church at Laodicea was exactly like the prosperity gospel in that it was a materialistic church, focused on the physical, focused on materialism (v 17), and could not see the real spiritual equivalents, which were of far greater value. This is the problem. Prosperity teachers are famous for taking a Scripture dealing with spiritual blessings and calling them physical, or taking an OT promise of the kingdom to Israel and applying it to the believer. Everything eternal is made temporal, everything spiritual is made physical. But Jesus clearly taught us the distinctions.

Matt 6:19-24. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be 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. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

Notice, firstly, Jesus makes the distinctions between heavenly riches and earthly very clearly. Secondly, He points out how hard it is to balance a love for both. Indeed, He says – it is impossible! Jesus drove this point home with a parable in Luke 12 on the futility of trusting in a huge bank balance 17-21: “And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, *and* be merry.<sup>20</sup> But God said unto him, *Thou* fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So *is* he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Notice v 23. “The life is more than meat, and the body *is more* than raiment.”

Make no mistake, Jesus taught a lot about money, so much so, that you cannot read the Gospel and come out believing the lies of the prosperity gospel. He taught a lot on stewardship, but made it very clear that there was a distinction. Ultimately, unlike prosperity teachers who tell the ones giving their last pennies to their ministries, God does not want you money, He wants your heart.

He uses money to reveal where your heart is. Giving to Him sacrificially is to show Him that your heart belongs to Him, that you trust in Him for life and sustenance, not to bet on a spiritual racehorse that will triple what you put in the pot.

The prosperity gospel unashamedly puts its roots down into this world and this life and says God wants it that way. But listen to who God honoured in Hebrews 11 v10, “For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God” v13-16 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that *country* from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. <sup>16</sup>But now they desire a better *country*, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” v36-39: “And others had trial of *cruel* mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and *in* mountains, and *in* dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise”.

These heroes are a far cry from the loud-mouthed fast talking teachers that mock a life of sacrifice and praise their own materialism and self-indulgence. We can really illustrate it by remembering Jacob and Esau. Esau was the firstborn and had the birthright, which would have guaranteed him many things from his father’s household. Jacob, the younger, had no such, and wanted it. One day, Esau came back from hunting and was starving. Jacob had made soup. Esau asked for soup and shrewd Jacob offered it in exchange for the birthright. Esau’s words were, “what profit shall this birthright do to me?” and he sold it. We are not condoning Jacob’s shrewd ways, and God certainly cured him of that later on in his life, but the point is Esau’s sin. Esau was the picture of a fleshly man, focused only on the here and now, the physical the temporary. He could not see the point of a birthright if it didn’t affect him **now**. He gave it up for a few moments with a bowl of soup.

How that pictures materialistic believers today. “What do these eternal rewards profit me now? I want comfort now!!” and in so doing, we give up a walk of faith with eternal rewards. We do not forfeit our salvation, but we refuse to live like the heroes of faith on Hebrews 11, enduring poverty if necessary for a greater, future promise. God honours that. He does not honour the idea of grab what you can get now because it’s your right. He repeats over and over, “live in light of eternity. You can’t take it with you. Naked a man came, naked shall he go. Don’t lay up treasures here. Be rich toward God. Keep your hope in heave. Invest in things eternal.” Over and over, God is pleading with his near-sighted Esaus – don’t live for physical wealth. It is just a bowl of soup in comparison to heavenly rewards.

We’ve see three main problems with the prosperity gospel. One, it is unbiblical in its description of the believers position and rights. It demotes God and exalts the believer to a place which is never described in Scripture, a spoilt brat who demands his Father gives him everything he wants. Second, we saw the prosperity gospel is unbiblical in its teaching about wealth. Physical wealth is not evil, but coveting it is, and that is what they encourage. Third, it fails to make the correct distinctions between the

eternal and the temporal, between the physical and the spiritual. As a result, people are taught to get their roots down into this world and to never develop true Christlike character reaping eternal rewards.

We must make sure that the soil of our hearts is pure of false teaching. Jesus said that in some soil, the thorns of riches and pleasures of this world choke the seed and it becomes unfruitful. Let us guard against that.

Does God want me wealthy? It depends if that will make you more Christlike at that particular point in your life. The real question is, do you *want* to be wealthy, and why? Use that question to gauge where your heart is in comparison to God, and make sure you are free of covetousness. God grant us the wisdom to discern in this day of false teachers who think that “gain is godliness.” (I Tim 6:5)