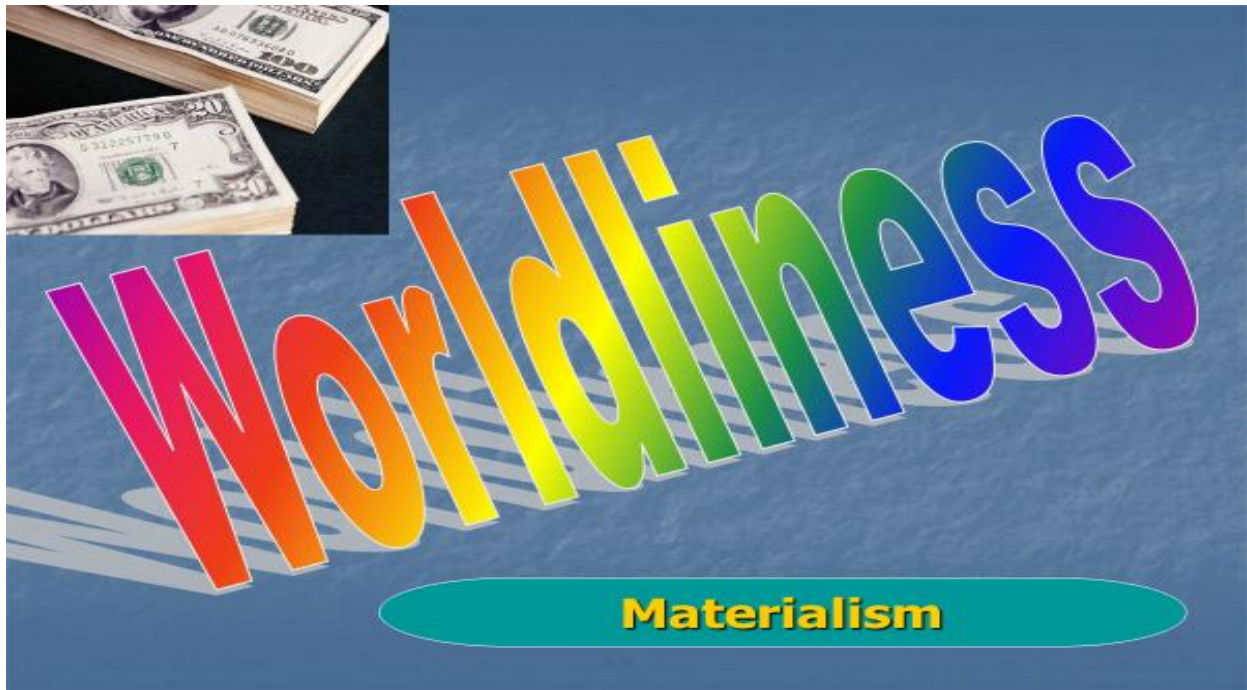


Worldly Materialism & The Prosperity Doctrine

<http://www.churchofchristatmemorial.com/sermons/2019/05/05/materialism>

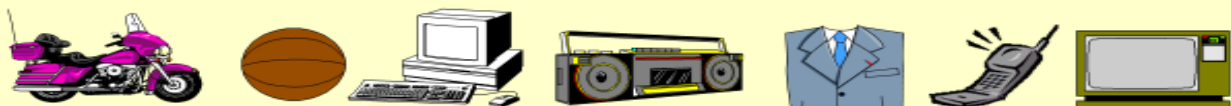


BY DAVID L. BURRIS



- All will admit that materialism is a problem
- Few admit – they are materially minded

- Can't live without money & material things
- Thus, easy to misplace our emphasis!



Prov. 13:7

There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing;
And one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches.



Some who have money
act like they are poor.

Some who have little
act as if they have money

What Is Materialism?

A. Defined:

“2. The theory or attitude that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life.

3. A great or excessive regard for worldly concerns.” (AHD).

“The tendency to give undue importance to material interests; devotion to the material nature and its wants” (Webster)

Wealth: Good & Bad

Rich - Yet Faithful

- Abraham (Gen. 13:2)
- Job (Job 1:3, 8)
- Joseph (Matt. 27:57)
- John (John 19:27)

Rich - Condemned

- Loved money (Matt. 19:16-22)
- Covetous (Lk 12:12-21)
- Selfish (Lk 16:19-31)
- Trust in riches (Rev 3:16-17)

What Is Materialism?

A. Defined:

B. It Is Not Wealth

C. Many Forms:

- *Seeking material things (Matt. 6:19-24)*
- *Worry, Anxiety (Matt. 6:25-33)*
- *Focus is money (1 Tim. 6:10)*

The Danger of It

A. Can forget God (Deut 6:12; Prov. 30:7-9)

B. Can choke the word (Lk 8:14; 1 Tim. 6:10)

C. Possible to trust riches (Prov. 10:15; 11:28)

D. Could be greedy for more (Prov. 15:27; 28:21)

E. Feel superior (Prov. 18:23; 22:7; 1 Tim. 6:17)

F. Have more than can afford (Rom 13:8; Prov. 22:7)

Things Worth More Than Riches & Money



- **Wisdom** (Prov. 3:13-20)
- **Fear** (Prov. 15:16)
- **Righteousness** (Prov. 16:8)
- **Integrity** (Prov. 19:1)
- **Good Name** (Prov. 22:1)
- **Soul** (Matt. 16:26)

How To Prevent It

- A. Understand that some things are worth more than riches
- B. Set affections on things above (Col. 3:1-2)
- C. Realize riches will not help in judgment (Prov. 11:4)
- D. Learn that material things is not what life is about (Lk 12:15)
- E. See that riches don't last (Prov. 23:4-5; 1 Tim. 6:7)
- F. Learn Contentment (Heb. 13:5; Phil. 4:11)



Questions

- Is money the main thing / first thing I think about?
- Do I think more about material things than spiritual things?
- Do I measure people by material possessions?
- Am I frustrated because I have less than others?
- Work harder to have material than I do spiritual?

Temptation's Lures

In 1 John we read of some very helpful categories for considering temptation. As you will see, they correspond well with what our first parents faced. We may call these categories lures. Satan fishes these lures in discontented hearts to draw them or keep them from God. The apostle John alerts us to these lures to help us better understand the battle for contentment. He does not want us to be enticed by colorful decoys or shiny wrappers. Instead, he wants us to rest in the sufficiency of God and find ourselves satisfied in him alone.

John writes, "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16).

Lure 1: The Desires of the Flesh

John first warns us of the "the desires of the flesh." The Greek word translated "desires" here (epithymia) could also be translated "lusts." When we say "lust," we automatically think in negative terms. However, the Greek word is neutral. Whether a desire is good or bad depends on the goodness and appropriateness of what it fixes itself on. Consider these two examples: "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." Here in 1 Timothy 3:1, the word is used for a man's good and noble desire for the office of elder. Now hear the same word used in Matthew's Gospel: "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Obviously here the desire is inappropriate; the woman in view is not the man's wife. It is sinful for him to desire or lust after her. Not every craving or desire is sinful in itself; however, when cravings are pursued at the expense of God's glory or contrary to his Word, they are sinful.

In 1 John 2:16, "the desires of the flesh" are the cravings that seeks to live independently from God and find satisfaction in created things. The flesh is considered the seat of opposition to God. We see how the desires of the flesh give birth to the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (5:19–21)

The Scriptures are showing us that worldliness expresses itself through the desire of the flesh, which craves self-fulfillment independently of God. This is the default human condition since we were banished from the garden of Eden. The apostle Paul offers this summary in Ephesians 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

Notice how Paul shows that prior to conversion it is the norm to live in the “passions” (the noun form of the same word translated “lust,” “desire”) of our flesh. But mark this key point: **this only happens when you believe you do not have what you need.** If we are truly content in God, the lust of the flesh is stymied. But if, like Adam and Eve, we fail to believe God’s promises, rejoice in God’s provision, and delight in God’s person, we too will be trapped in the vicious cycle of discontentment.

Lure 2: The Desires of the Eyes

Next, John warns us of “the desires of the eyes.” This expression could mean either the way we look at things or what we look at. In other words, we are lured into desiring good things we see, yet in a wrong way, or looking at sinful things. **The eyes of the soul become fixed on created things as the means to fulfillment and purpose.** Think of Esau. He gave up his blessing for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29–35). He saw something he wanted, and he was willing to sacrifice anything for it. What he saw became the consuming passion of the moment, and he forfeited God’s blessing to him.

This reminds us that contentment is inward and spiritual. It comes to us by grace. **To attempt to fill a void in the soul with created things is futile.**

We are instructed in the tenth commandment not to covet. But when our eyes latch onto what others have, we become discontent with what we’ve been given by God and jealously desire more. *To obey the tenth commandment is to be content*, even rejoicing in what God has graciously given us. Our hearts are deceptive, untrustworthy guides (Jer. 17:9).

Shiny wrappers catch the eye, but our souls are fed not by what is seen and perishing (1 John 2:17) but by what is unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). We thwart the schemes of the Enemy when we remember that the path to contentment is not through the physical and external but through what is spiritual and internal.

Lure 3: The Pride of Possessions

The final lure we are warned of is the “pride of life.” While the first two have to do with desires for things, this one has to do with pride in what you already have. The NASB translates this phrase in 1 John 2:16 as “the boastful pride of life.” It is a pride rooted in who we think we are as measured by what we possess or have accomplished. In the context of this verse, such pride is baseless.

Surely you have felt this type of lure. We all struggle to some degree with boasting in ourselves and taking pride in things we've done. Many people are oblivious to their own boasting. Have you ever met a professional bragger, what comedian Brian Regan calls the "Me-Monster"? This is the obnoxious person who trips over himself to talk about who he is and what he's done. No matter what you say, the Me-Monster one-ups you with a story of his supremacy. Every sentence is a chance to showcase his pride.

The Me-Monster may seem content with himself, but actually he's not. His clamoring for attention is a cry for legitimacy and acceptance. In other words, he's discontent. That's because a contented spirit is a quiet spirit. It is resting. It does not need to clamor for affirmation, validation, or amazement. A content person is able to sit quietly under the reassuring affirmation of God. The Lord is his or her sufficiency.¹

¹ Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

The Master On Materialism

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) August 20, 2012

By Harry R. Osborne

While in Lithuania last spring, I saw living conditions unheard of in this country. We had classes in homes that would have been condemned even in the slum areas of our inner cities. Many people had little to eat and only one or two outfits of clothes. They accepted it as a normal fact of life, but it made me think about how materialistic American culture is today.

Our society seems obsessed with wealth and material possessions. Whether young or old, that pattern is clear to detect in the people of our time. Among some young people, peers are judged on the basis of what label is found on their shirt and jeans. Among some adults, the basis of such judgments are too often made on one's perceived wealth and status.

Television has done much to reinforce this inflated importance of money and possessions. Commercials bombard us with the message that we can be "in" or respected if we just had the right car, fine jewelry, a more expensive house, and the list goes on. There is even a program exalting the extravagance of the wealthy, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

Is our life to be used in pursuit of material wealth? Is the amassing of things the priority in life? Jesus said,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19-20).

While Jesus was here upon the earth, he talked with two different men on separate occasions about the peril of riches. They show the pull of materialism from two very distinct directions. Though the events took place almost two thousand years ago, the truths presented are as relevant today as they were then.

The first man experienced the pull of materialism as one who was trying to acquire wealth. He was not yet rich, but was seeking to gain through an inheritance. He came to Jesus saying, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” To this Jesus replied, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” (Luke 2:14).

Jesus knew this man’s problem. The man had his priorities in the wrong place on the material things rather than the eternal things. Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). He went on to relate the following parable:

The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, “What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?” So he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry’” (Luke 12:16-19).

God, however, looked at these things in a different way. Jesus declared God's view saying, "But God said to him, 'You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:20-21).

Christ wants us to understand where the true treasure may be found. It is not to be found upon this earth, but in the eternal realm. The true treasure cannot be locked up in a bank or sheltered in an investment, but is found in service to God.

The second man experienced the pull of materialism as one who was already rich and desired to maintain that wealth. He even had some interest in spiritual things. He came to Jesus asking, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18). His problem was not a total lack of desire for heavenly things, but misplaced priorities.

Jesus, understanding the man's problem, instructed him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Luke 18:22).

The Bible then records, "But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:23-25).

Why is it so difficult for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom? Because it demands that they place the things of God as their first priority rather than themselves or their material possessions. The apostle Paul gave the following charge in this regard:

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

In this age of affluence, all of us need to examine our-selves to see how materialism is pulling on us. Let us be thankful for that which we have, but let us make sure that our true treasure is measured in spiritual terms. This will be accomplished only as we honestly and objectively examine ourselves by the standard of our Lord as revealed in his truth.

Guardian of Truth XL: No. 19, p. 14-15
October 3, 1996

Materialism: Thorns Chocking the Word

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) July 20, 2012

By Barry Mark Pennington

According to the New World Dictionary of the American Language, one definition of materialism is “the tendency to be more concerned with material than with spiritual goals.” Christ Jesus exposed the taproot of materialism in his statement about the “thorny soil”: “And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mk. 4:18-19). Christ Jesus thus explained to his disciples the destructiveness of material covetousness and worry. It is sad that the Lord’s explanation of the “thorny soil” accurately describes many who profess to be Christians today. Reader friend, because of (1) your worry about this life, (2) your being deceived by wealth, and (3) your lust for material things, you prevent the word of God from having free course in your life! Are you as fruitful as you know you should be?

Worries of this Life

Tremendous amounts of time and energy are drained off one’s life as a Christian because of anxiety, fretting, and despair. Certainly outside negative pressures influence the Christian’s inner thoughts, but the true disciple of Christ recognizes that it is possible to close the door of his heart (mind) to gloom and doom. Hear the Lord: “Therefore, do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34).

It has been stated that one man had been so accustomed to fretting that he often worried because he had forgotten what he was supposed to worry about! Reader friend, God does not want his people to worry. In Phillipians 4:6 Paul commands Christians to “be anxious for nothing.” “Cast all your anxiety on him (God), because he (God) cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7), Peter declares.

In the American culture Christians must especially be aware of and guard against destructive worry about material things. An old preacher once said that the most sensitive artery in the human body is the one which runs downward to the pocketbook or billfold. Americans are accustomed to having a pocket full of “plastic money.” Credit has almost ruined this country as America is fast falling behind in paying her national debts. How many people have you known personally during the last five years who have fallen as victims to the “credit system”? The typical story goes something like this: (1) Man gets a credit card, (2) Man gets many credit cards, (3) Man’s lust of the eye and the pride of life runs his credit accounts up to the limit, (4) Man suddenly realizes that the time has now come to “pay the fiddler” but the resources to pay are not there (meanwhile, the “new” has worn off the material things he thought he just had to have), and (5) Man worries.

If this scenario ended with worry it would be bad enough, but it does not stop here! Now the man must “moonlight” or convince the wife that she “needs” to work. She enters the work force and he gets several extra jobs “just to make ends meet.” On and on the story goes. Meanwhile the word of God is ignored and the work of God is neglected or forsaken altogether. Does this sound familiar?

Thus, Christians are often consumed by worries of this life. Worrying about finances will not add a single cubit to your life, reader friend (Matt. 6:27). Past financial mistakes should be repented of and a specific plan for restitution (payment of debts) should be forthcoming. A faithful child of God realizes that fretting is unfruitful. The sin of “over extending oneself” in the realm of credit must be acknowledged to God (I Jn. 1:9), and when God’s forgiveness is obtained the lingering consequences of past mistakes must be dealt with. Paul commands Christians to “owe nothing to anyone” (Rom. 13:8). If creditors are willing to work out an alternate payment plan this will help the Christian who is striving to do God’s will in all things. If the creditors are not flexible in payment options, then the Christian must simply do what he is able to do to pay the debt. Some today are striving to convince themselves that it is scriptural to avoid payment of debt. Meanwhile, subconscious guilt and worry proliferate in their minds.

The Lord’s classic text on worry is found in Matthew 6:24-34. Jesus shows that worry about necessities of life (food, drink, and clothing) is (1) unnecessary (“your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things”), (2) prohibited (“do not be anxious”), (3) futile (“which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life’s span?”), (4) heathenish (“for all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek”), and (5) faithless (“O men of little faith”). May all Christians in America obtain the wisdom necessary to get back to the basics of life.

Deceitfulness of Riches

Wealth is glorified in America. Satan deceives while Christians seek to obtain the goal of riches. It is “conceived and believed” by many that if enough money and worldly possessions are accumulated in a lifetime surely this will lead to happiness. In contrast, the Savior said, “Beware and be on guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Lk. 12:15).

Many today actually believe that luxuries are necessities. In order to biblically define necessities, consider Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:6-8: "But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content."

Most Americans have food and covering, but many are not content. Even Christians find themselves "slaving away" on extra jobs, working long and extra hours in order to obtain more money and possessions. Again, great amounts of energy are drained off the life of a Christian because of the love of money. Some have even "wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang" (1 Tim. 6:10).

Attempts are made to justify this obsession with inordinate pursuits of money and worldly possessions. Some well-meaning brother says, "I'll be able to do so much more for the Lord." However, in the final analysis, a great majority of all that extra money and those worldly possessions are used in the pursuit of more luxuries! How often have we heard of "get rich quick" schemes luring some brother away from the things of God? Sometimes entire congregations are affected by money-making schemes when unscrupulous brothers attempt to "make merchandise of the brethren" (2 Pet. 2:14-19). The Bible says that "those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare" (1 Tim. 6:9). In some cases, faithful Christians are wealthy and they consistently obey God's instructions to (1) not be conceited, (2) not to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, (3) do good, (4) be rich in good works, and (5) be generous and ready to share (1 Tim. 6:17-18). Every saint of God must honestly assess his own heart in the pursuit of money. Are you spending precious time pursuing riches and wealth while ignoring the work of God? Has the pursuit of money become a "thorn" in your life which is "choking" the word of God? Are you more concerned with money than you are with prayer, Bible study, and worship?

Desires For Other Things

The decade of the eighties, a world of materialism, offers many things which distract Christians from the word of God. Television, video cassette players and recorders, computers, video games, hobbies, sports, recreation, entertainment, ad infinitum lure the people of God away from fruitful work and service in the kingdom. Many of these things are not wrong within themselves. However, when an individual uses any of these things to go beyond the boundaries of God's law, he sins (1 Jn. 3:4). For example, watching lewd programming (pornography) on television (cable television, satellite dishes, and movie rental houses are easily accessible in this generation) which incites lascivious thoughts and actions, spending inordinate amounts of time and money on computers, video games, and hobbies, gambling on sport events, and involving oneself in sinful forms of recreation and entertainment such as mixed swimming, dancing, drinking parties, immodest dress, etc. are sinful! It is not the purpose of this article to go into detail proving the sinfulness of these things. It is the purpose of this article to state simply that "desires for other things" (generic thorns) choke the word of God and prevent a Christian from being fruitful. May all Christians everywhere determine to remove the thorns from their fleshly material lives. "No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life" (2 Tim. 2:4).

Guardian of Truth XXXIII: 15, pp. 454-455
August 3, 1989

Problems in the Church (III): Materialism

Cecil Willis
Akron, Ohio

In an article last month we discussed "Sensualism" as a problem in the church. Presently we want to consider another problem confronting the church. We speak now of "Materialism." Webster, in defining "materialism," breaks down his definition into at least three separate headings. We intend to permit these three definitions given by Webster to serve as topic headings for this second article, and for a second article to follow next month on the same subject.

Undue Importance Given to Material Interests

Webster says that "materialism" is: "The tendency to give undue importance to material interests." The emphasis in this definition should be on the word "undue." The Christian, as well as every other person, has to give some attention to material things. 1 Tim. 5:8 states that a Christian must give sufficient interest to material things to be able to provide for his own household. Eph. 4:28 indicates that the physical necessities of life are to be provided by the labor of one's hands. Paul further declares that the Christian that will not work ought also not to eat (2 Thess. 3:10.) This last cited passage is one that should be given special attention. God does not expect Christians or His church to support lazy "dead-beats," even though they profess to be faithful members of the church. In fact, He specifically prohibits this being done.

The passages just cited do prove that some attention must be given to material things. However, giving some attention to material things does not classify one as being materialistic. Materialism has one in its grip only when one gives "undue" attention to material things. Numerous passages speak concerning giving undue attention to materialistic interests. Jesus, in Matt. 6:19-21, teaches that one's treasures should be laid up in heaven, because there is never any real security in this life, regardless of one's material possessions. Moth and rust corrupt, and thieves break through and steal. But this is not true of heavenly treasures laid up (1 Pet. 1:3-5.) Furthermore, Jesus teaches that where one's treasure is, there will his heart be also.

It is certainly obvious that those brethren who are driving themselves to despair in an all-out effort to lay up earthly treasure do not have their hearts on heavenly things. Instead of worshipping God, they are bowing before the god of riches, who is called in the Bible "mammon" (Matt. 6:24.) Paul twice calls this excessive desire to acquire "things" idolatry (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5.)

In our article last month on "Sensualism," we had occasion to study 1 Jno. 2:15-17. John commands the Christian to "love not the world. " However, there are some who have given up the love of sensual things who yet violate 1 Jno. 2: 15-17. John says not only that one should "love not the world," but he also adds that one must "love not the things of the world." It is my opinion that a lot more brethren will be in hell for loving the ' things" of the world than will be there for loving the sensual sphere.

The acquisition of "things" of this world promotes pride in living. So John warns about the "pride of life." Some gather "things" of the world as though they expected to live here forever. They cling to their "things" so tenaciously that only in death will they release any of them, and then they do so only reluctantly. After death they then attempt yet to hold their "things" by proxy through their children.

There are numerous signs of materialistic attitudes in the lives of church members. Many brethren are working at two occupations, not because it is necessary to provide food, raiment and shelter, but in order that they might enjoy the luxurious "things of the world." They work these long hours at the expense of duties both to their family and to God. In other instances, the mother in the family also has secured a job. For what purpose? Was it because of physical necessity? In but very few instances. In most cases this was done in order that the family might live more lavishly and pridefully. The unnecessarily working mother does so at the expense of one's family responsibilities. Certainly the added strain of the responsibilities of an outside-of-the-home occupation interrupts and interferes with the family life. It without doubt is a hindrance to one's parental influence. In many instances, if couples would be honest with themselves, they would have to confess that they have reared no family at all simply because doing so would discontinue their "double income." They would have to live more conservatively than they have become accustomed to do.

Others indicate where their heart is when they stay home from worship services for most any cause, yet will hazard their health in order to be at work. Neither is it company loyalty that causes them to go to work under such adverse conditions. They have not the same sort of loyalty toward the Lord on the first day of the week. Instead, it is loyalty to their god, "mammon" or money, that causes them to press themselves so.

It requires no wizard to see that this "undue" importance given to material interests has interfered with the work that God would have his children to do. We are so busy preparing for this life that we have not time to think about the life to come (I Tim. 4:9; Matt.6: 21)

Use Made of Money

A second definition of "materialism" given by Webster is: "The ethical doctrine that consideration of material well being, esp. of the individual himself should rule in the determination of conduct." This definition indicates that materialism also can be reflected in the use that is made of one's material goods. Were the undue importance given to material interests, about which we have spoken, in order that one might have more to use for altruistic purposes, one's criticism might justifiably be lessened.

However, there are very few people, if any, who are unduly concerned with the acquisition of wealth in order that they might give it to others who are in need, or that they might more liberally give to the church. Instead, they hold to the "ethical doctrine" (Is such doctrine really "ethical?") that consideration of the material well being of themselves must rule in the determination of their conduct. In other words, they work so hard that they might expend what they receive for their own enjoyment. This Webster says is "materialism." But not only is it materialism, it also is rank "selfishness." Webster says, "selfishness" is "caring unduly or supremely for oneself; regarding one's own comfort, advantage, etc.; in disregard, or at the expense, of that of others." This is precisely what such people are doing.

Ours is an extremely rich country. We take for granted in this country comforts and possessions, which would be considered lavish in other countries. Those things in our living, which we consider "necessities," most people in most other countries of the world would consider luxuries belonging only to the elite.

When we make our money what do we do with it? Even what is our intention to do with it? We want a better automobile, a finer house, more expensive clothes, a longer and more expensive vacation, better education for our children, or to lessen our labor with some expensive modern convenience. In short, we are considering only our own "material well-being." This is materialism.

God looks at our material possession differently than do most of us. Though there is a sense in which we can call them our own (Acts 5:4), in another sense they are God's possessions committed to our care temporarily, and for the use of which we must give an account (I Cor. 4:2). In addition to what we must spend to provide for our own family, we have individual obligations as Christians. Further. God expects us to give as we have been prospered on the Lord's day (I Cor. 16: 1, 2.) He even states that we must give liberally (Rom. 12:8) and that we must "abound" in this grace also (2 Cor. 8:7).

In the Old Testament we read of some people that ceiled their houses with money that should have been used to build the house of God (Hag. 1:4.) We also read about people who robbed God of a part of that which they should have given (Mal. 3:8). And without doubt, some brethren today are driving new automobiles, living in expensive residences, enjoying luxuries, etc., that were purchased with money that should have been contributed on the Lord's day to assist in doing the work which God assigned His church to do. What is wrong with people who will do this sort of thing? They have simply become materialistic. Those that express their crass materialistic disposition by giving undue concern to the making of money are usually the very ones who again permit their materialism to show through in that they use all that they acquire for the well-being and comfort of themselves. All such are not on the road that leads to heaven.

In another article on "Materialism" we want to look at Webster's third definition of "Materialism": "Any theory which considers the facts of the universe to be sufficiently explained by the existence and nature of matter." We want to see how materialism of this sort also is reflected within the church.

Truth Magazine VII: 2, pp. 2-3,24
November 1962

Conquering Giants

1 Samuel 17:40-51

A series of sermons regarding some of the giants that we face today and the power that God provides to overcome them.



MT. BAKER
CHURCH OF CHRIST

Materialism

- **Definition:**

- “a great or excessive regard for worldly concerns.”
(American Heritage Dictionary)
- “The tendency to be more concerned with material than with spiritual goals.”

- **Christian faces no greater problem**

- Based on bulk of N.T. teaching on it
- Truly a “first principals” subject (**Matt.6:24**)

Clarifying The Problem

- **No inherent virtue or spiritual value in being poor...**

- Not advocating “theology of poverty”
- The poor may be very materialistic

- **No inherent virtue or spiritual value in being rich**

- (**Job 34:19**; **Psa.73:12**)

- **The problem is in our attitude toward money and material things**

Clarifying The Problem

- **Desire to better one's "station in life" is not in itself materialistic**
- **What distinguishes *materialism* from honorable work ethic?**
 - Selfishness
 - Excessiveness and covetousness

The Sin of Covetousness

- **Covetousness is harshly condemned in the Bible**
 - (Eph.5:3,5) (Col.3:5) (1Cor.6:9,10)
 - Yet we tend to ignore it
- **One of few sins specifically named as grounds for withdrawal of fellowship**
 - Yet never confessed and hard to identify

Materialistic Addiction

- **Pattern of behavior regarding material things often fits pattern of addiction**
 - Creates predictable, reliable sensations
 - Becomes the primary focus and absorbs attention
 - Temporarily eradicates pain and other negative sensations
 - Provides artificial sense of self-worth, power, control, security, intimacy, accomplishment
 - Exacerbates the problems and feelings it is sought to remedy
 - Worsens functioning, creates loss of relationships

Our Materialistic Addiction

- Pattern of behavior regarding material things often fits pattern of addiction
- Yet this addiction is applauded
- With materialism the “fix” never lasts
 - (Ecc.5:10)
- Material addiction leads to living beyond means, crushing debt, stress
 - (Ecc.5:12)

The Dangers of Wealth

- While not inherently evil, wealth does involve some real dangers
 - (Prov.23:4-5)
 - (Mk.4:19)
 - (1Tim.6:9-10)
- Able to see difficulties of being “hungry” but fail to see difficulties of being “full”
 - (Phil.4:11-13) (Prov.30:8-9)

The Dangers of Wealth

- Tends to draw our trust away from God
 - (Prov.11:28)
 - (Lk.12:13-21; 16:19-31)
 - (1Tim.6:17)
- The heart is devoted to the treasure
 - (Matt.6:21)
 - (Matt.19:23-24)

Desire For Earthly Success

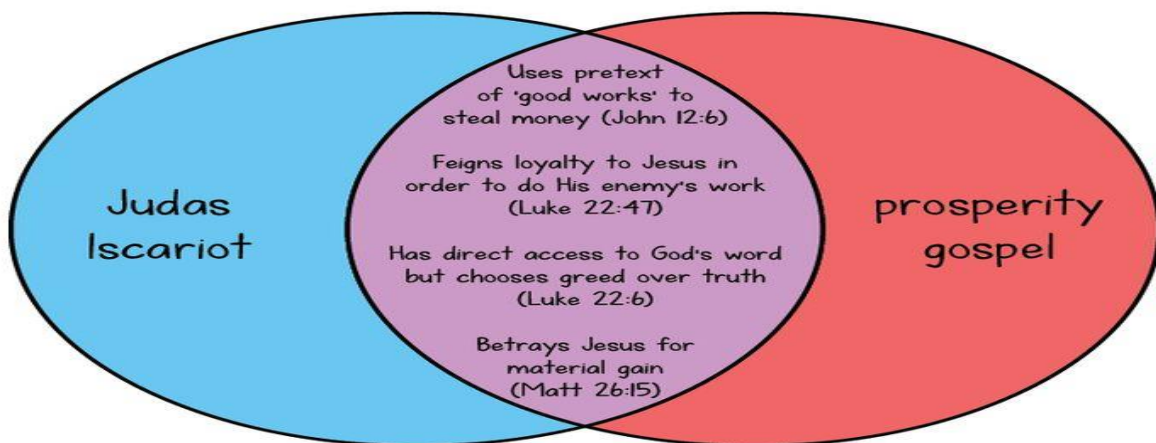
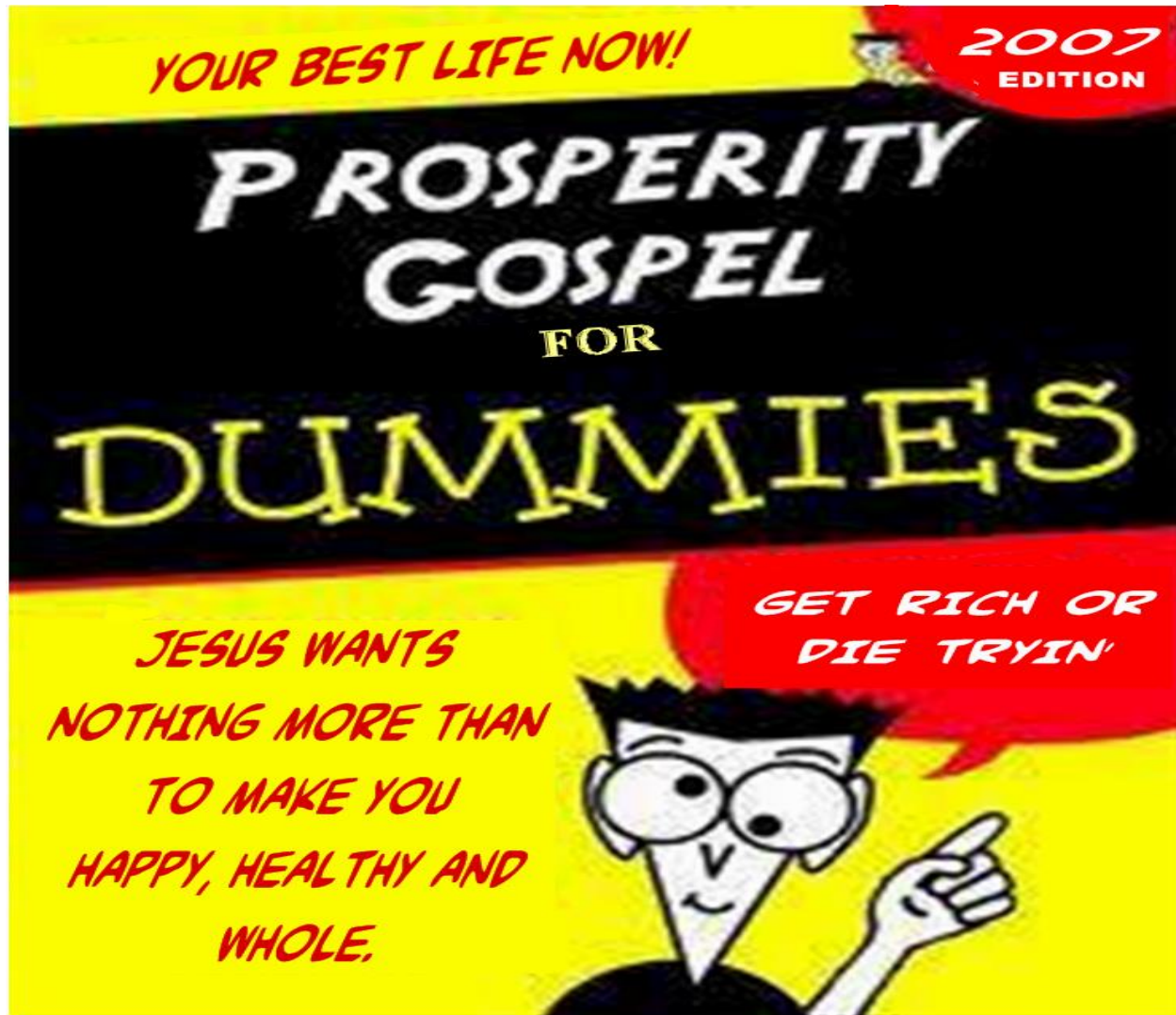
- **Great in God's mind or in man's?**
 - (Mk.10:43-45)
 - (Jn.5:44)
 - (Jn.12:42-43)
- **The Danger**
 - May have to surrender it (Matt.10:22-25)
 - Earthly success is intoxicating and deceiving (2Cor.10:12)

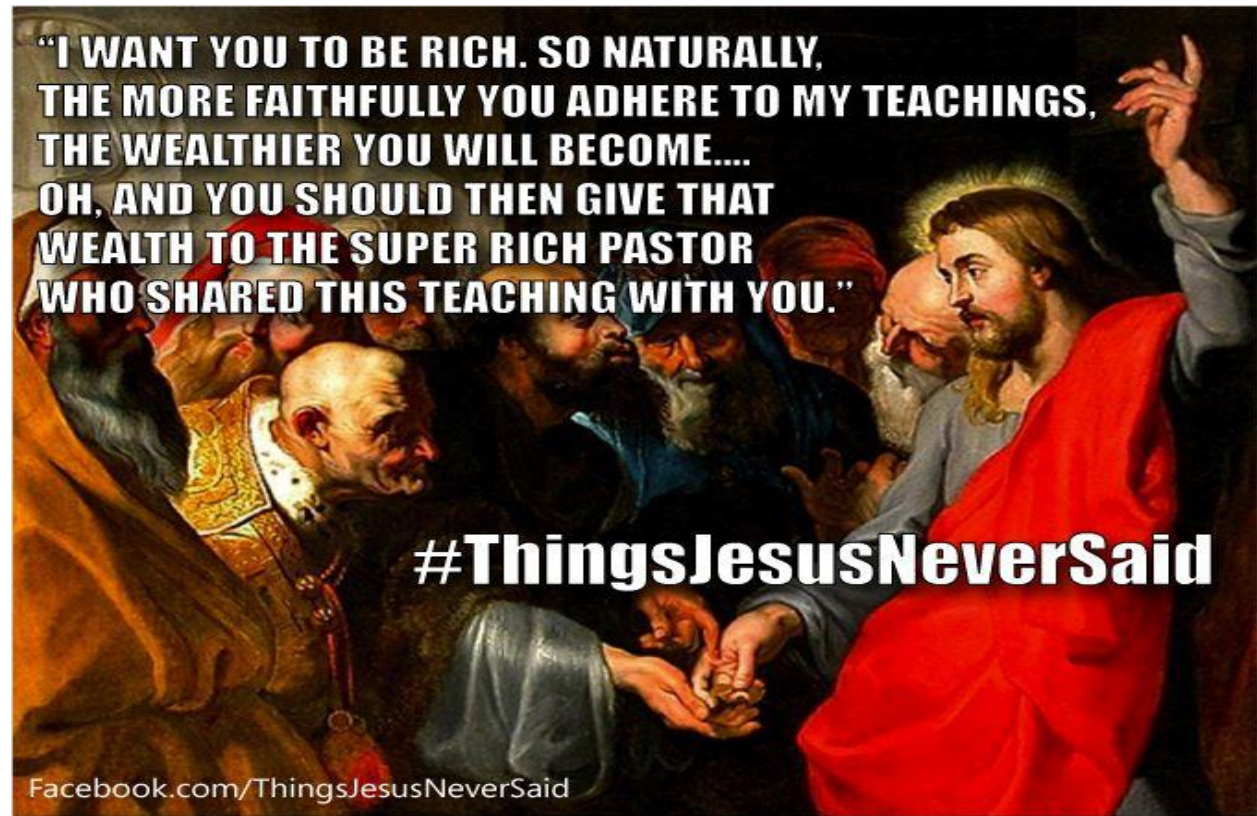
Desire For Earthly Success

- **Pursuing career at God's expense?**
 - Does career or school cause you to regularly miss assemblies? (Heb.10:25)
 - "Ox in the ditch"? (Lk.14:5)
 - Planning to devote self more fully in the future? (Jas.4:14)
 - No one can serve two masters (Matt.6:24)

Materialism – Our "Goliath"

- **So how do we defeat this Giant?**
 - Don't be deceived (Mk.4:19; Prov.23:4-5)
 - Learn contentment (1Tim.6:6-8)
 - Don't become "entangled" (2Tim.2:4)
 - Lay aside the weight (Heb.12:1)
 - Look unto Jesus (Heb.12:2)
 - Lay your treasures in heaven (Matt.6:24)





**THE FALSE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IS NOT NEW
IT HAS BEEN AROUND FOR 1000'S OF YEARS**

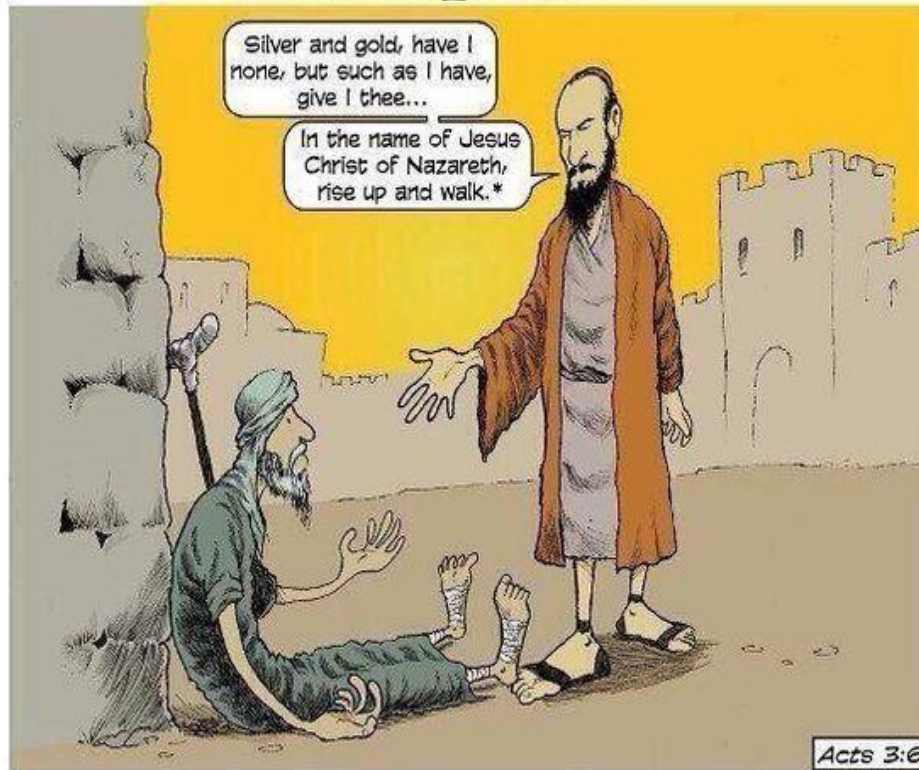
**... through
covetousness
shall they with
feigned words
make
merchandise
of you.**

2 Pet. 2:3



Eze. 34 www.endtimeprophecy.net

Christianity: Then...



Christianity: Now...



"For the time is coming when people will no longer endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions." - 2 Tim. 4:3



It's like I said before. "In truth I tell you, it is *hard* for someone *rich* to enter the **KINGDOM of HEAVEN!** Yes, I tell you again, it is *easier* for a *camel* to pass through the *eye of a needle* than for someone *rich* to *enter* the **KINGDOM of HEAVEN."**

(Matthew 19: 23-24)

Then there was that time -
Remember? The rich guy asked me -

GOOD MASTER,
WHAT MUST I DO
TO INHERIT
ETERNAL LIFE?

Why do you
call me
good?

No one is good but God Alone.
You know the *commandments*...

MASTER,
I HAVE KEPT ALL THESE
SINCE MY EARLIEST DAYS!

You need to Do
one thing *MORE*.

Go and **SELL**
what you own
And give the *money* to the **POOR**...

And you
will have
Treasure in
Heaven;
Then come
follow me.

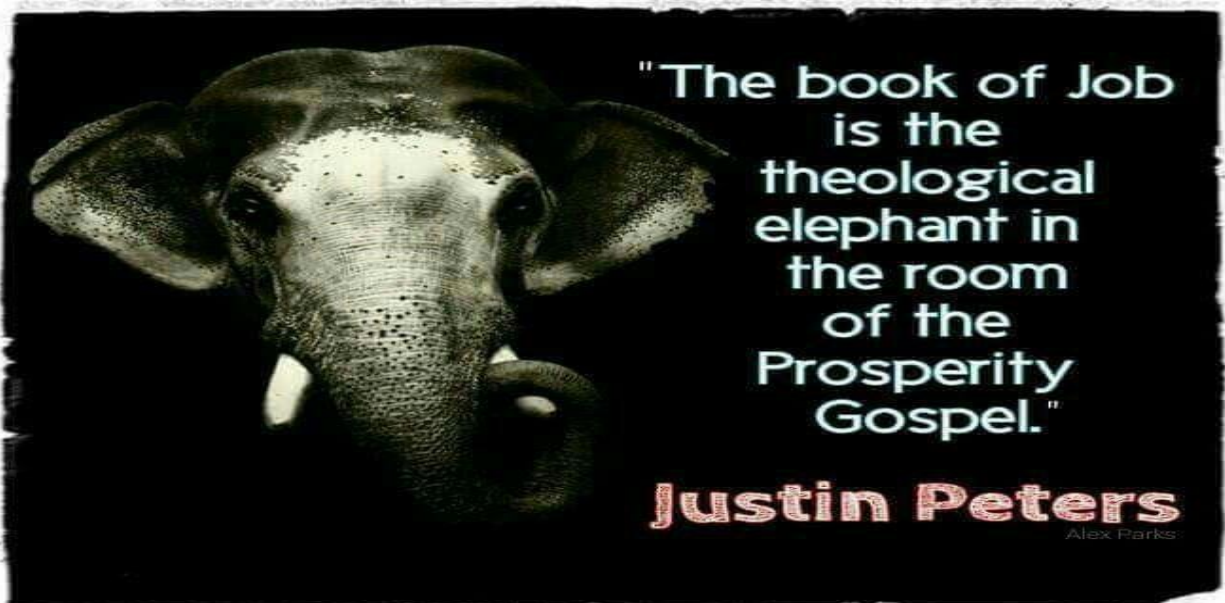
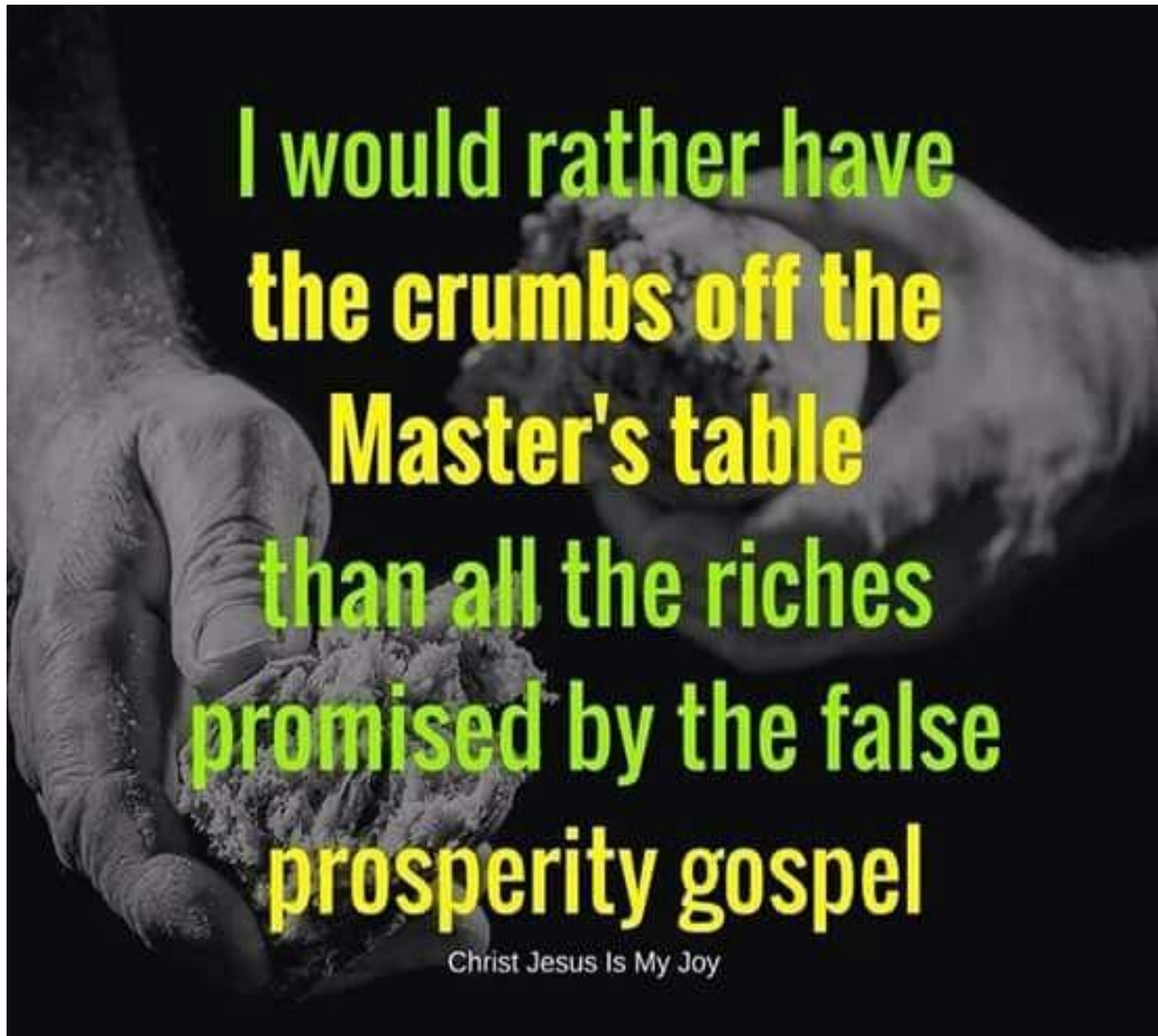
BUT HIS FACE FELL AT
THESE WORDS AND HE
WENT AWAY SAD FOR
HE WAS A MAN OF
GREAT WEALTH.

(MARK 10: 17-22)

C'MON! Doesn't That
RING ANY BELLS!

BUT, WAIT...
THAT'S NOT WHAT
YOU **REALLY**
MEANT... **RIGHT?**

Well, Dad...
I guess
I'm gonna
let **YOU**
sort *this*
one out...



Where Did the Prosperity Gospel Come From?

By Benny Hinn's Nephew

The prosperity gospel finds its theological roots in what is called New Thought, which is essentially a metaphysical healing cult founded on the idea that the mind is the key to unlocking your true reality. This movement goes back to the 1800s, and while several people played significant roles in its proliferation, Phineas Quimby (1802–1866) is arguably the most influential. The father of New Thought, he was an American philosopher, hypnotist, and spiritualist. He did not claim to be aligned with classic Christianity or the orthodox teachings of the Bible, but his philosophies invaded Christian theology. Quimby's beliefs that are relevant to this subject can be summarized as follows:

- All sickness and disease originates in the mind.
- Healing can be obtained with right thinking.
- Quimby believed *he* had discovered the secret healing methods of Jesus.
- Jesus was an ordinary man using mind-control methods to heal.
- Quimby denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus.
- Hypnotism is the key to healing.

Although Quimby was not a Christian or a pastor, his philosophies have spread through Christianity like wildfire. That is mainly because of the pastors who borrowed Quimby's ideologies to spice up their ministry material, starting with Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993), pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. Peale published a book in the 1950s called *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which helped New Thought beliefs spread even farther. American Christianity was witnessing the Trojan horse rolling right through the city gates.

Next came men like E. W. Kenyon (1867–1948), who was not explicitly New Thought in his theology, but its ideology is found in his teachings. Kenyon is the most influential teacher in the life of the infamous Kenneth E. Hagin (1917–2003), who became a Word of Faith theology icon and controversial preacher. Hagin in turn became the spiritual father to self-proclaimed billionaire preacher Kenneth Copeland (1936–). During the same time, Oral Roberts (1918–2009) steadily headlined the explosion of televangelism and rock-star prosperity preachers who claimed to heal the sick and rain down blessings from Jesus. These men became the household names for “name it and claim it” theology and the prosperity gospel. Today, they are revered as heroes in the faith by my uncle Benny, Joel Osteen (whose father, John Osteen, loved Kenneth Hagin), Joyce Meyer, Maurice Cerullo, and many others.

How Did the Prosperity Gospel Get So Popular?

This still doesn't quite answer the big question: how in the world did this scam posing as Christianity get so popular? It's one thing to know where it came from. But seeing how it came to fool so many people is equally as important. The prosperity gospel appeals to the deep longing of every human heart for peace, health, wealth, and happiness. There is nothing wrong with wanting a good and happy life, but the prosperity gospel uses Jesus Christ as a pawn in its get-rich-quick scam. The prosperity gospel sells salvation and false hope. But true and lasting peace can be found only through faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

The modern-day momentum of the prosperity gospel began in the 1950s.

Born in 1918, Granville “Oral” Roberts was, in many ways, the lead prosperity gospel pioneer of the modern era. He went from being a pastor to building a multimillion-dollar empire based on one major theological premise: God wants all people to be healthy and wealthy. Oral Roberts didn’t mince words about his version of Jesus or the gospel. He adamantly taught and defended his belief that Jesus’ highest wish is for us to prosper materially and have physical health equal to his peace and power in our souls.

Oral Roberts twisted the Bible to make his point. For instance, he taught that it was Jesus who said in 3 John 1:2, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV). First, it was John who wrote this, not Jesus. Second, John is not telling Gaius (the recipient of the letter) that God wants him to be healthy and wealthy. This was merely the apostle John’s loving way of greeting Gaius. John’s greeting is comparable to sending an email that begins with, “Hi! I hope you’re doing well.” Being from a Middle Eastern family, I’m very familiar with the elaborate greetings and farewells of that culture. It is not uncommon for us to greet one another and say goodbye to each other with deep expressions like John used. This verse is not anything to build an entire religious position on. It’s just a greeting!

Bestselling books by Oral Roberts often brought the two teachings of the prosperity gospel and the Word of Faith movement together under one roof. His books brandished catchy titles, such as *If You Need Healing Do These Things*, *The Miracle of Seed-Faith*, *A Daily Guide to Miracles*, and *Successful Living through Seed-Faith*. Desperate crowds could hardly resist his big promises. They ignored the fact that Roberts was butchering the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Big crowds and big money blinded both Roberts and those who followed him.

Meanwhile, the spread of the prosperity gospel was facilitated by numerous other factors, far too many to address here. But to shed some light for the reader, here are three to stir your thoughts:

1. *Technology*: Advancements in media enabled teachers to spread their version of the gospel faster than ever. From America to Africa, global audiences were being swayed by the wrong gospel on prime-time television, mainstream radio, and nowadays, in the palms of their hands. The message preached so often appeared legitimate and appealed to their material needs. How can a missionary on the ground floor of the mission field compete with a Rolex-wearing preacher convincing people night after night that the gospel of health, wealth, and happiness made them rich?
2. *Seeker Movement*: For the past forty years, seeker-driven churches dominated the Christian landscape in America. A seeker-driven church is one that targets the interests of people who don’t have an interest in church. This seems like a great idea, but the methods used to get people to come to church and keep people in church have little to do with the Bible. As the old saying goes, “How you get them in church is how you keep them in church.” For the seeker-driven church, entertaining Broadway-style shows all but replaced the sermon, and secular music was played in worship to make non-Christians feel more comfortable. And can you guess what leaked into the message of these churches? The prosperity gospel. Jesus, in the seeker movement, was a blue-eyed white man who made your life better by providing the American dream. Seeker churches didn’t talk about sin, repentance, or tough times. Hard truth (no matter how lovingly it was presented) was bad for business. A softer gospel meant softer messages. Everything was geared toward making people feel good. Like a friend who never tells you the hard truth, the seeker movement came up short in being faithful to preaching all that Jesus taught. As a result, churches exploded with record attendance.

People loved the seeker-driven Jesus because he was so easy to follow and offered a golden ticket to heaven. Caring for the flock of God by feeding them the truth became corporate pandering to keep people coming back. People weren't being challenged to grow deeper and exercise discernment. Instead, no matter how well-meaning the effort was, they sought unity at the cost of truth, and the results had dire consequences. Churches like Willow Creek openly admitted to creating biblically illiterate Christians for more than two decades before ever addressing it in 2008.² This is a microcosm of the bigger picture. Millions of Christians in America weren't being taught the Bible—they were being entertained. How could they stand against error unless they knew the truth? How could they take doctrine seriously if their leaders didn't? When would they know to stand for truth if their pastors avoided taking a stand?

3. *Compromising Consumerism:* Let's ask a really honest question here. How many prosperity preachers are now published by big name publishers? One major publisher had to pass on the manuscript for this book. Although they were interested, they would've had a storm of controversy on their hands because they have four globally recognized prosperity gospel authors who keep business booming. How many prosperity gospel books are on the shelves of major Christian bookstores and retailers? How many conferences bring in famous preachers, even if they preach the prosperity gospel, because it fills the seats? Ultimately, this is highly lucrative to corporate Christian entities. Books, followers, products, and influence equal profit dollars. It's the consumer-driven world we live in today.

Let me go one step farther than those three factors. This may sting a bit, but we need to rip the bandaid off here: we did this! By we, I mean all of us who profess to be Christians. We've collectively played some role in the rise of prosperity theology at some point. Whether by passive silence or active participation, we allow false gospels to get a footing. We need to take responsibility together, whether we believe we should or not, to eradicate evils like the prosperity gospel. That begins with committing ourselves to defending the true gospel at all costs.

How Far Does the Prosperity Gospel Reach?

The prosperity gospel used to be considered the cash cow of some fringe con artists posing as preachers. Today, the prosperity gospel has exploded to become one of the most popular teachings in the world. It has overtaken continents like Africa and South America as it continues to breed pastors and people who are looking to land a serious payday. It's now called the United States' number one export by Zambian pastor Conrad Mbewe, who has spent years dealing with the destruction that the prosperity gospel has wreaked in Africa.

Many of the largest churches and denominations in the US over the last thirty years have focused their efforts so heavily on attracting and retaining members that they've paid little attention to what was going on outside their church or denominational circles. Therefore, the prosperity gospel was not collectively pushed back by the most popular and influential churches and denominations. There are highly influential churches that have pushed back, but they're a rarity. Perhaps many of them simply have chosen to ignore the threat, thinking it was only a few crazy televangelists on TBN. But now the prosperity gospel is everywhere.

Recently one of the last exclusively Christian orphan-sponsoring organizations in the world contacted me with one of the most humbling invitations I'd ever received. They wanted me to travel a few times a year, share my story, talk about the power of the gospel, and then help their organization by inviting people to sponsor poverty-stricken orphans around the world. I was so honored that they'd ask me to help, and had my assistant put a meeting with their representative on my calendar as soon as possible. Since in my former days I had spent so much time exploiting people in the third world, I jumped at the chance to help orphans through this ministry.

During our meeting, the representative explained the role, how the organization works, and what she'd like me to consider. Part of her pitch was telling me that they are the last organization offering orphan sponsorships that is exclusively Christian. An uncompromising parachurch ministry *and* they help orphans? I was all ears.

Things were progressing well until about thirty minutes into the meeting when the representative asked if I had any questions. I didn't have many, but I did ask who they work with. Though I was in the Hinn bubble for most of my life, we dabbled in mainstream evangelicalism and I knew the system very well—if you can make people money, they'll generally look the other way when it comes to certain things. I wanted to know if this global Christian organization was partnering with prosperity preachers.

After I posed the question, the meeting got awkward.

"So . . ." There was a pause. "We know how you feel about the prosperity gospel, but we did just sign a prosperity preacher to a deal because he's a big name and can help us get orphans sponsored."

"Why would your organization knowingly go down that road and then invite me to join? That makes no sense," I questioned. "Are you aware of how confusing that is going to be for people who know he's a prosperity preacher?" "We completely understand, and I want you to know that we're asking that same big question as well. Our team has concerns, and we're seeking to address those." The way that response came off seemed a lot like Christian corporate lingo for "we're trying to avoid a direct answer because we know we're compromising, but it's too late."

I nodded and expressed my unwillingness to share a stage with that prosperity preacher at any event for any joint purpose. I also told her I understood their wanting to do everything they could to help get orphans sponsored, but that bringing on prosperity preachers simply because they are a moneymaker is a slippery slope for a Christian organization to be on. The prosperity preachers exploit the third world, then get paid by the first world Christian organization to solicit sponsorships from Americans, who then sponsor the orphans in the third world. What an ecosystem! I wanted desperately to help them get orphans sponsored, but after our discussion, I wasn't sure they'd be following up with me or that I would feel good about working with them. I never did receive a phone call after that. I was not surprised.

Driving home from the meeting that day, I was so disturbed. What used to be called heresy by all of mainstream evangelicalism was now being overlooked. It seemed like everyone was muddying the waters and compromising classic, biblical, orthodox Christianity. Our faith was on the line. The world was watching as Christianity was being made a mockery of.

My joyous honeymoon in leaving the prosperity gospel behind was over. I quickly realized that compromise was going to be everywhere, even on what was supposed to be the good side. The Hinn family, along with other prosperity gospel empires, had done a very good job spreading the poison of prosperity theology far and wide.

The prosperity gospel is even changing the landscape of Latin America and the world's most Catholic country—Brazil. In a story for the *Washington Post*, Sarah Pulliam Bailey writes,

Speaking from a stage encircled by twelve large wooden crosses, Gabriel Camargo held up wads of fake Brazilian money, showing his flock what could be theirs. “God will bless you if you give a lot more to the church,” said Camargo, a pastor with the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Then he extended an arm and pointed a large black pouch toward his parishioners in the working-class neighborhood of Osasco. Pick up your wallets and purses, he said, instructing his flock to look for Brazilian reais. About a dozen people hurried forward, dumping bills and change into the bag. Those without cash didn't have to worry: An usher held out a credit card machine. “You'll have so much money” by giving generously to the church, the pastor boomed, that “smoke is going to come out of the machine.” In a country struggling with the worst economic crisis in its history, with long queues at unemployment offices and public health clinics, perhaps it's not surprising that Brazilians are increasingly drawn to the promises of personal wealth.³

Nor is the American White House exempt. I received a call one afternoon from a producer at CNN who asked me to join Carol Costello on *Across America*. I had been on the show before, but this time they needed a talking head on an embarrassing issue for evangelicalism. Paula White, a known prosperity preacher and the spiritual advisor to President Donald Trump, had just publicly told people to give a special offering if they wanted God to bless them. She even suggested that giving the offering would protect them from divine consequences. This is nothing out of the ordinary for prosperity preachers, but with her public platform and influence on how Christianity is represented in the White House, it mattered immensely. After many pastors spoke up in outrage and a series of news reports covered the story, a spokesperson for Paula White went into damage control and released a statement saying things were taken out of context. The statement conveyed that Paula never intended for people to give out of fear of divine judgment and that she was speaking more of her own commitment to give firstfruits to God. In my humble opinion, having spent ample time with prosperity preachers and studying under them in the craft of fundraising, this was a classic example of going too far, then deflecting backlash. I believe the only thing taken out of context was Paula's interpretation of Scripture.

For now, the prosperity gospel is here to stay and is spanning the globe, doing damage to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. It is an evil that poses as blessing but is truly a curse. It appears to be a loving extension of God's goodness but is arguably the most hateful and abusive kind of false teaching plaguing the church today.²

² Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The Laws of Prosperity

Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

“Tonight is a special night. Jesus is here, and he always keeps his promises. I want you to lift up your hands and ask the Lord Jesus for anything you want—he will give it to you! He has come to give us life and life more abundantly!”

The sound of my uncle Benny’s voice echoed through the stadium as he finished his healing crusade message. The crowd of twenty thousand rumbled as people flooded heaven with their petitions. Some asked Jesus to give them healing, houses, and promotions at work. Others asked Jesus for the salvation of a loved one. Others just wanted cold hard cash. I couldn’t blame them—that was one of God’s biggest ways of showing his favor to people. My uncle had used the Bible to clearly explain that God promises to give loads of money to people who give loads of money to him. Who could argue with that?

At age fifteen, my adrenaline fired, my heart raced, and my imagination ran wild with big dreams. This was my moment! It was time to tap into the special anointing that Uncle Benny was channeling. With total assurance in the lesson we’d been taught, I closed my eyes and with every ounce of sincerity my heart could muster, I pleaded, “Dear Jesus, please let me play Major League Baseball and be wealthy so my family will never have any lack. And please keep me from ever being sick.”

What a special opportunity, I thought. Now, all I had to do was trust in God and wait for my dreams to come true.

No Money? No Miracle!

In 1999, Benny Hinn was the most famous and controversial prosperity preacher and faith healer in the world. But to me, he was my anointed uncle whom God was using to show us how to live a life of blessing and abundance. It was the way God intended everyone to live—we were living proof!

In one sermon I heard growing up, my uncle taught us that if we wanted God to do something for us, we needed to do something for him. This applied to everything—especially miracles. Whenever possible, Benny would preach to the masses that if they wanted a miracle for their sickness and disease, they needed to give money to God. No money? No miracle! Giving to God was the secret to unlocking your dreams. It was the secret to job promotions. It was access to our divine bank account. My uncle often told the story of how he got out of debt using this system of belief. His father-in-law had told him that in order to be debt free, he needed to pay God. Benny explained that once he started emptying his bank account and giving money away to ministry, money started showing up from everywhere!

This principle on giving was a serious one in our family. We believed we could be guilty of robbing God if we weren’t giving him enough, so there were times that retroactive payments were necessary. I remember thinking, *For all the time I have spent living for my own pleasures, I will need to devote nearly two years to God if I am to have my prayers answered and fulfilled.*

One of Uncle Benny's heroes who taught him about this system of believing, giving, and receiving was Oral Roberts. It seemed he could open the windows of heaven and cause them to rain down blessings on his own life. It was a simple money-in, money-out transaction, with God as the banker. Oral Roberts wanted to help more people understand it and take the risk to put it into practice. He taught that this way of thinking was used by Jesus and the apostles. For Roberts, it was faith that forced God to do what we wanted him to do. Believing enough, thinking positively enough, and giving enough could control the Creator! Roberts had used his teachings on money and faith to rise out of obscurity and into stardom, then helped others do the same.¹ Now, so was my uncle.

Over decades, Roberts coached my uncle Benny and they became close friends. Uncle Benny and Oral would shoot television programs together, share ideas, and promote each other within their respective ministries. This sort of "stage sharing" was how ministries exploded onto new frontiers. Oral's audience became Uncle Benny's, and vice versa.

Cancer in the Family

For a long time, things went well for the Hinn family. We were happy, healthy, and rich. But inevitably, real life intruded for my mom's side of the family. That's when we went into damage control mode. When I was in fourth grade, my uncle George was diagnosed with cancer. He was not an actual uncle but rather my mom's cousin's husband. He had been pastoring at our church after my dad hired him, and I thought the world of him. We were saddened by his diagnosis.

The situation worsened. After a skin graft, the best efforts of doctors, and our prayers for healing, Uncle George experienced a stroke, along with setbacks to his health that eventually led to his passing away. It was devastating. Sunday after Sunday, we heard from the pulpit, "God has guaranteed healing! Just have faith and God will do whatever you ask him to do." So many people had been brought up on stage and declared healed. So many people, but not Uncle George? Only one explanation could satisfy the confusing question that became the elephant in every room we occupied: *How in the world did he not get healed?*

Before I knew it, my auntie Debbie had distanced herself and my five second cousins from us and the church. Intense drama unfolded as other people left both before and after that time, including my mom's brothers. It was a mass exodus of people we were close to. *Why, God?* I wondered. *Was it because of Uncle George? Other reasons?* It hurt so bad to see Uncle George die, but why did all these people I loved have to leave the church as well? We were supposed to be family. And our family was supposed to be different—blessed and anointed.

Soon we were given an explanation for his death. We rationalized that Uncle George (and his family) must have done one or more of the "big four," which caused him to lose whatever declared healing he was guaranteed. The big four, or a short list of reasons why God didn't heal people, went something like this:

- Making a negative confession: using negative words about your physical condition would hinder your healing.
- Hanging around negative people: allowing the negative words of others about your physical condition would hinder your healing.
- Not having enough faith: not believing or giving enough money to prove your trust that God would heal you.
- Touching the Lord's anointed: speaking against or opposing a man of God who is anointed.

Turns out, as the story went, that Uncle George and the people around him did all four of these. Most of all, we were told that Uncle George had started to hang around with people who spoke negatively about my father and our church. There was a zero-tolerance policy in our belief system for this sort of thing.

The “touching the Lord’s anointed” teaching came from a biblical principle observed in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 24:6, King David had just held back from an opportunity to kill his enemy and attacker, King Saul. He sneaked up on him and cut a small piece of King Saul’s robe off and later showed it to him as a sign that he meant him no harm and could have killed him but didn’t. The principle that guided David was that King Saul was still an anointed king of Israel and it was not David’s place to kill him or “touch” him. On this Old Testament principle of not killing kings, our church took touching the Lord’s anointed very seriously.

The story I was eventually told is that Uncle George started playing softball on Sundays to try to stay active during his battle with cancer, which was a serious no-no in our church. When my father confronted him about this, Uncle George did not follow orders and perhaps had a few other opinions as well. Since Uncle George had begun to hang around with negative people who weren’t mesmerized by my father, they had corrupted his life and removed him from God’s favor. While playing softball one day and rounding third base, Uncle George had a stroke and collapsed, doctors could do nothing for him, and he eventually died because he let negative people into his hospital room and into his life. That was the simple explanation. Whether or not this was true, it was the simple explanation.

Many people left the church over the following years, and if they died anytime after leaving the church, they also joined the illustration file of those who had touched the Lord’s anointed. Many others, however, chose to stay, believing that God’s favor and protection were contingent on their staying under my father’s leadership. Throughout the nineties, the same storyline was revealed in my uncle Benny’s ministry as well. Some of his ex-employees were dying, and others, like my aunt Karen, who had voiced her displeasure with his ministry antics and handling of money, were suddenly struck with illness. All of this served as proof that we were anointed by God. Mess with us, and you’ll be under a divine death sentence. Despite the exodus of church members and dwindling Sunday attendance, my family knew no lack. Somehow money kept pouring in and blessings kept raining down.

Putting Seed-Faith into Practice

By the time I reached high school graduation, I had dreams of my own, and I was determined to see those dreams become a reality. But first, I needed to put into practice one of our theological beliefs: that of sowing my seeds of faith. I believed that if I sacrificed something now for the kingdom of God, I would reap untold benefits later on.

Kenneth Copeland, a self-proclaimed billionaire prosperity preacher and one of my childhood heroes, said, “There are certain laws governing prosperity revealed in God’s Word. Faith causes them to function. They will work when they are put to work, and they will stop working when the force of faith is stopped.”² Gloria Copeland, his wife, taught that God’s will is always prosperity and that not only does Jesus give a hundredfold return to sacrificial followers on earth (Mark 10:29–30), but we can tap into the hundredfold return on earth. The hundredfold return works like this: “You give \$1.00 for the gospel’s sake and the full hundredfold return would be \$100. Ten dollars would be \$1,000. A hundredfold return on \$1,000 would be \$100,000 . . . Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.”³

With my eyes set on achieving my dream of living the abundant life God intended for me to live, I knew I had to put my faith into action to make things happen. The Copelands' teaching on the hundredfold return for giving would guide my way.

According to Kenneth, the whole kingdom of God operates according to the principles of planting, seedtime, and harvest. The hundredfold return is God's principle of return on your giving. What are you planting in the kingdom of God? Expect a hundredfold return on whatever you give, whether it be words, faith, money, or any other seed you plant. So how much is a hundredfold exactly? We often think of it as a hundred times the amount of seed sown, but it can be much greater than that. The hundredfold return is simply the greatest possible return on any seed sown.⁴

I had heard about and witnessed many stories that seemed to corroborate the Copelands' teaching. I'll never forget how, as a young boy, I went with my parents to pay a pastoral call on a widow named Marina. While I played, they talked for hours, and at the end of the meeting, she gave my parents one million dollars. Stories like this were common. As long as we were faithful to God and sowed seed into good ministry soil (or to anointed leaders), God would give us back a harvest that was far beyond what we gave.

At the time, I thought, *God will give me a hundred times or even more back if I give him something! The only reason people must live in poverty or mediocrity is because they lack the faith it takes to live in abundance.* I was the master of my own destiny—the captain of my soul! It was time to tap into the hundredfold blessing by living out my faith and sowing my time as a seed. I wasn't going to be riding on the coattails of my parents' faith. This would be striking out on my own to give and receive.

My uncle had been asking me to work with him for a couple of years, but I kept telling him I was going to college to play baseball. But now, I had learned what it means to go all-in for God. Maybe it was time to really put God first and sow some seed-faith into the soil. Surely God would unleash his blessings upon my dreams if I gave up an entire year of college baseball to serve Uncle Benny.

Luke 6:38 is a proof-text I used for this transaction. Proof-text is the term [used] for taking a passage from the Bible out of its context in order to prove your point. It's a lot like interpreting a document the way you want to and not the way the author intended. This particular proof-text says, "Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you in return." In my mind, serving Uncle Benny was my first step if I wanted to achieve my dream of becoming a Major League Baseball player.

Soon, I was excited to hear affirmations of my decision. To sow my seed of faith into my uncle's ministry over other ministry options was a wise one because of the fertile soil it provided. "He is the greatest man of God in the world," one family member declared. "Nobody is as anointed as he is. God is going to bless your life in a powerful way for serving your uncle Benny," another family member told me. I had taken the leap of faith that would seal my future.

In that moment, with my dreams for a career in baseball on hold, it felt like I was giving up my life for Jesus just like the disciples did.³

³ Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

A Life-Changing Passage

John 5:3—“ . . . a *multitude* of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered . . .”: Jesus saw a multitude of sick people but only healed one man in this story. Why didn’t he heal them all? What was so special about this man? Did he have more faith than others? Was he a friend of Jesus?

John 5:6–7—When Jesus asked the man, “*Do you wish to get well?*” The man answered with a sort of complaint and a sob story. He didn’t say, “YES! JESUS, HEAL ME!” Or, “I HAVE FAITH TO BE HEALED!”

John 5:8–9—“Jesus said to him, ‘*Arise, take up your pallet, and walk.*’ And **immediately** the man **became well**, and **took up his pallet** and **began to walk.**” This shows Jesus’ creative power. The healing was immediate! No process. No music. No special service. No offering. No fanfare. He healed the sick man with a word. Arise!

John 5:12–13—“They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, “Take up your pallet, and walk”?’ But he who was healed **did not know** who it was; for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place.” The Greek word for “know” that is used here is *eido*. This word means “to know, to perceive, be aware of.” That means that the man didn’t even know who Jesus was. How could he have faith to be healed if he didn’t even know who Jesus was? How could he even believe in Jesus if he didn’t know Jesus? Was faith involved at all? How could faith be involved if he was passive in receiving his healing and ignorant of who the Healer was? Was any money involved? There is no indication of this man doing anything for Jesus to get a healing. Jesus seems to have healed the man out of his own volition and desire to do so.

Each one of these observations put a devastating crack in the foundation of my theology within the first couple of hours of study. I couldn’t believe what I was reading, but at the same time, it was all starting to become clear, like a camera slowly shifting focus from blurry to high-definition resolution.

First of all, Jesus healed one man out of a multitude of sick people. I always believed and was taught that everybody was always supposed to get healed. Prosperity theology teaches that it’s always God’s will to heal everybody, and that if they are sick, it’s their own fault because they don’t have enough faith or haven’t given a special offering to get healed.

Healings in my world were also said to be a process sometimes. That way we could take their money and say something like, “Keep on believing in faith that God will do it in a day or so.” But Jesus healed this man immediately. We always had hours of music, special healing lines, healing products like oil, and special commands given to people in order to get their healing. It was as though we were offering a menu for people to get their healing, but Jesus just went in and healed without a problem. He most certainly didn’t have catchers, nor did he knock people over repeatedly or tell the man to give him a seed-faith offering to receive his healing.

My heart was racing. I needed to know more and do some digging, so I reached for the commentary Pastor Tony had given me. I opened the commentary and began to read John MacArthur’s notes on the passage:

Unlike many alleged modern healings, Jesus’ healings were complete and instantaneous, with or without faith. This one proves the point, since the man exhibited no faith in Jesus at all. Yet

he was healed instantly and wholly. John records that “immediately . . . he became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk.” One of the cruelest lies of contemporary “faith healers” is that the people they fail to heal are guilty of sinful unbelief, a lack of faith, or a “negative confession.” In contrast, those whom Jesus healed did not always manifest faith beforehand (cf. Matt. 8:14–15; 9:32–33; 12:10–13, 22; Mark 7:32–35; 8:22–25; Luke 14:1–4; 22:50–51; John 9:1–7), and this man is a prime example. This incident perfectly illustrates God’s sovereign grace in action (cf. v. 21). Out of all the sick people at the pool, Jesus chose to heal this man. There was nothing about him that made him more deserving than the others, nor did he seek out Jesus; Jesus approached him. The Lord did not choose him because He foresaw that he had the faith to believe for a healing; he never did express belief that Jesus could heal him.

I had traveled the world, seen all there was to see, and lived like royalty, but this moment outshone the brightest diamonds we’d ever owned. The words seemed to leap off the page, and the once-blurry picture of who God is and what the gospel is suddenly came into sharp focus. He doesn’t heal *if* we just have enough faith. And he most certainly does not require money, special music, and a mystical healing televangelist to accomplish his divine purpose. I saw in my mind the faces of so many hurting people and was broken to pieces over the role I had played in exploiting them with false hope. For so long, I had wanted answers but couldn’t find them. Now I could finally see the full truth. Over the course of what seemed to be hours, I repented of my sins, false teachings, and life of hypocrisy. I confessed to God that I had twisted his gospel for greedy gain, and I asked him to forgive me and give me a fresh start. I committed to studying the truth, preaching the truth, and standing up for the truth no matter what the cost.

From a Heavenly High to a Humbling Low

“It was a lie! We twisted Scripture! We manipulated people! We smeared the gospel!” I was in high gear without any sign of slowing down. “I have to do something about this! Innocent people are being hurt. Worst of all, Jesus is being misrepresented. I know things no one does, and everything makes sense now. I’ve got to do something about this!”

He began to talk me down off the ledge. “No, you’re not going to do something. At least not yet. Jesus has a good handle on his gospel, and you’re not the first to realize these truths.”

His words deflated my bubble of zeal. “Serve the church, be faithful, study hard, and *if* God decides to open a door for you to do something about this evil, then go for it.”

I knew exactly what he meant, but it was a tough pill to swallow. No matter how much I wanted to confront the evils of the prosperity gospel, my efforts would prove futile if I wasn’t faithful in what God had put in front of me. I needed to keep my mouth shut, do my job, serve the church, and rebuild my theology based on a proper interpretation of Scripture. Even though I was aware of the deception I had been a part of, I needed to grow in the truth.⁴

⁴ Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Why Is the Prosperity Gospel So Dangerous?

One of the reasons that people are blind to the dangers of the prosperity gospel is they are blissfully unaware of just how anti-Christian it is. If we truly understand how evil it is, it isn't difficult to see the satanic nature of it and the reason why every church, every pastor, and every Christian should stand against it. Volumes have been written about this topic, but I've done my best to boil it all down to a top-ten list that you can use when navigating this subject with friends and family. Each item on the list contrasts some biblical truths with prosperity gospel deception.

1. The prosperity gospel distorts the biblical gospel. The biblical gospel can be properly understood by looking at some gospel-saturated passages. In Romans 5:8–10, Paul declares, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

In Romans 3:23–25, we read that sin is something we all have committed, and that the glory of God is something we all fall short of. Paul writes, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

Finally, in what is perhaps the most comprehensive gospel passage in the entire Bible, Ephesians 2:4–10 contains explosively truthful statements regarding what God accomplished in Christ and what our purpose is in this life. Paul writes, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

When you look at these passages, what do you notice? Is the gospel about the gifts or the Giver? Is the gospel about the redeemed or the Redeemer? Is the gospel about earthly riches or eternal reward? Is the gospel about monetary gain or the glory of God? Is the gospel about obtaining my materialistic desires or using what I have to do good works for God? I bet, if you're a biblically discerning Christian, you answered those questions correctly.

The prosperity gospel distorts the biblical gospel by making the Good News all about you and all about stuff. The abundant life of John 10:10 is smeared to mean that God's will is for you to have Bentleys, mansions, and job promotions. I've got news for you—no, actually, I've got *good* news for you: the abundant life is about the security of your soul for eternity. The abundant life is not a comfortable seventy years, courtesy of the prosperity gospel and leading to infinite suffering in hell if you don't follow the biblical Christ as your Savior.

2. *The prosperity gospel insults God's nature.* God is divinely infinite and beyond our human comprehension. Still, he has made himself known to us through divine revelation (Scripture) and his Son, Jesus Christ. His attributes are such that he is beyond human control. He cannot be made into a formula. He cannot be manipulated. He is holy, the definition of perfection. He is eternal; time cannot hold him. He is sovereign, the majestic ruler of the universe.

Psalm 115:3 reminds us, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). John 4:24 minces no words: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." We have to realize that God's nature is not something we manipulate; it's something we must submit to.

In stark contrast to this truth, the prosperity gospel teaches that God can, like a cosmic magic genie, grant our wishes. The prosperity gospel teaches a version of the nature of God that is so skewed it scarcely communicates one iota of who he is. This is dangerous and abusive because it does not introduce people to their Creator, whom they desperately need to know. His love is not bought, and his blessings are free. His servants are ambassadors who represent who he really is.

3. *The prosperity gospel confuses the atonement.* The atonement can be defined simply as what Jesus did when he went to the cross, bore our sins, and conquered death by rising from the grave (1 John 2:2). To atone for something means you pay for it and make amends. Jesus provided redemption for lost sinners like you and me. He was the atonement lamb who paid the penalty for our sins.

The benefits of the atonement are eternal, but the *joy of expectation* can be experienced on earth. For example, Jesus died for our sins and gave us eternal life, but we're not living eternally—yet (John 3:16). Jesus promised his disciples that he would prepare a place for them (John 14:3), and that everyone who sacrifices to follow him will receive one hundredfold and eternal life (Matt. 19:29), but is everyone getting their hundredfold yet? No. Furthermore, the atonement provides for a heaven with no sickness, no tears, no sin, and no pain (Rev. 21:4), but on this earth are we all disease free, sinless, never to cry again or wince in pain? No. Finally, the atonement means that those who inherit everlasting life in heaven will receive a glorified body (1 Cor. 15:42–53), but are we floating around in glorified spirit-bodies yet? Again, no.

Prosperity preachers write checks with their mouths that the Bible doesn't cash. They use and abuse the atonement to mean that God guarantees your healing because of the atonement for your soul. Worse, they promise that Jesus' death on the cross didn't provide just eternal life; it provides earthly riches. All you have to do is, by faith, tap into those things he already paid for. This is a damaging lie that takes something beautiful about our Savior's work on the cross and turns it into a petty transaction for fleeting pleasures.

4. *The prosperity gospel demeans Jesus Christ.* Paul says, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). John the Baptist says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Over and over the Bible expresses the glory of Jesus Christ as the be-all and end-all for the Christian. Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and sustainer of all things (Heb. 1:3), whoever has Jesus has life (1 John 5:12), and he is the only way to heaven (John 14:6). Without Jesus, heaven would be hell. All the health and wealth this world can offer can never compare to the vast riches of abiding with the Son of God for all eternity. Jesus is everything. The prosperity gospel makes human satisfaction to be material and Jesus to be the cherry on top. If it makes Jesus a central focus, it's that he is the main avenue to getting what you want. This version of Jesus is a shell of who he really is. The prosperity gospel promises people the abundant life that Jesus offers only to deliver a gospel with no Jesus at all.

5. *The prosperity gospel twists Scripture.* The Bible is a big book and can seem really intimidating. But upon investigation, we find out it is simple to understand if we approach it the right way. The

Bible is a compilation of Spirit-inspired writings by authors, to an audience, with applications. For example, when we read Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we need to keep in mind the intent of his letter and what his audience was experiencing at that time. Only then, and after we've properly understood those things, can we effectively apply the Scriptures to our lives today. It's never a wise plan to read things into the Bible that aren't in the text. It's also never a wise plan to say things about the gospel that the Bible doesn't say.

James 3:1 is a sobering reminder for those who teach the Bible. James writes, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." The prosperity gospel takes the age-old interpretative strategies that scholars have used for generations and turns them upside-down. The rules for hermeneutics (how to interpret Scripture) are tossed out the window! It takes passages that are plain in meaning based on what they literally say in Scripture and makes them to mean something completely different. Like an evil imposter taking a heartfelt letter from a king to his royal subjects and twisting it for self-serving purposes it was never intended to be used for, prosperity preachers take the Bible and twist it into a tool for abuse.

6. *The prosperity gospel is motivated by love for money.* Money is like a microscope, magnifying what's really going on inside of us. God, knowing that money would be no small issue in the hearts of human beings, gave instructions in the Bible for both using it well if you do have it, and keeping the right perspective if you don't. Proverbs is full of wisdom that can save you a lot of health-and-wealth-gospel headaches. As it notes, wisdom is better than riches (Prov. 3:13), so it's worth paying close attention to what the Bible says. Trusting in riches does little good (Prov. 11:28), money gained by deception doesn't last (Prov. 10:2), and it's better to have a little but keep your integrity (Prov. 16:8). Beyond Proverbs, the Bible says that the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). The prosperity gospel is obsessed with money and material gain. To argue that is to argue that gravity does not exist. It's a fact that we need to keep in mind when we're tempted to buy in to the lies. Nothing good comes from the love of money.

7. *The prosperity gospel produces false converts.* If the prosperity gospel Jesus is not the real Jesus, and the prosperity gospel is not the real gospel, and many people chasing the prosperity gospel aren't real Christians, then what is going on? Without broad-brushing every human soul who is involved in the prosperity gospel, it is no stretch to say that there are millions of false converts in the world today who think they are saved, but they are being deceived. That's why our mission is so vital. Jesus is not done changing lives, but he uses people to present the truth to other people. He said if we love him, we will obey him (John 14:23), and that knowing the truth brings freedom (John 8:32). The prosperity gospel fills pulpits with imposters and the pews with people who either want to be fooled (2 Tim. 4:3) or are being deceived (2 Tim. 3:13). This kind of bondage is not evidence of Christ's involvement and makes for a messy situation both inside and outside the church. Nor is this confusion the mark of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's resume shows a faithful track record of guiding us into truth (John 16:13).

8. *The prosperity gospel overcomplicates faith.* When it comes to our salvation, faith is a monumentally important thing to understand. Our salvation, our faith, and our ability to do good works on this earth are all gifts from God (Eph. 2:8–10). Having faith in Jesus Christ is what saves us, and the evidence of that faith being genuine is a life that follows after him. Jesus doesn't make being his follower complicated. Though it may not be an easy life, it is a life full of freedom in him! He promises that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30), and that his people can cast their anxieties on him because he cares (1 Peter 5:7).

Faith isn't giving money to get his love. Faith isn't paying a fee for his saving grace. Faith isn't going broke to get healed. Faith isn't traveling to a special service to get his anointing. Faith is repenting of your sins and turning to him, believing that he is the Son of God. Any religion that says you need to

do good works, give enough money, or speak enough positive declarations to unlock God's saving grace or abundant blessings on your life is a false religion. Christian faith is believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life and experiencing the joy, freedom, and blessing of knowing Christ for free!

The prosperity gospel turns faith into a works-based system and confuses it by adding burdens that people cannot carry. The Pharisees did the same thing when they were manipulating and exploiting people (Luke 11:46).

9. *The prosperity gospel ruins Christianity's witness.* Jesus said, "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33), to make his point that worship of stuff is not the mark of his followers. Yet the prosperity gospel worships material goods, and the world knows it. The prosperity gospel couldn't be worse for our Christian witness. Men and women who preach the prosperity gospel on Sunday are laughing all the way to the bank on Monday. The world looks on as it makes a mockery of Jesus, the pastoral leaders of the church, and the Bible as the foundation we stand on for teaching. Unfortunately, many people are leaving the church because of this abuse of power. Christian leaders are expected to be free from the love of money (1 Tim. 3:3), not obsessing over how to raid the offering buckets. Christian leaders are expected to care for people as loving, humble shepherds (1 Peter 5:2), not act as manipulative salesmen. Finally, Christian leaders are expected to use their God-given authority to protect people from deception and boldly steer the church into truth (Heb. 13:17), not exploit and control desperate people.

10. *The prosperity gospel abuses vulnerable people.* The prosperity gospel attracts those who are looking to get rich off of people desperate for hope. What these desperate, vulnerable people need is a pastor who will love them, protect them, and give them real hope. Too many churches are being overrun by charlatans, and the church at large has got to say, "Enough is enough." Vulnerable people should be targeted by the church for the purpose of serving their spiritual and physical needs, not squeezing every dollar out of them in exchange for empty promises.

It's time for Christianity to send the message that the prosperity gospel will not poison our witness and win over the hearts of the hurting. We must stand firm in our faith and trust the truth to win the day. That starts by telling the truth, no matter how uncomfortable that may be. True healing can begin when we've got the right diagnosis. The prosperity gospel is a disease.⁵

⁵ Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Don't Put God in a Box

Whether I was witnessing thousands of people speaking in tongues without interpretation, or talking with someone from our inner circle who admittedly faked being slain in the Spirit by flying through the air at the wave of the white jacket (to make it look *really* powerful), questions were quenched by several key phrases. The first of which was, "Don't put God in a box." What this means is that if you didn't accept or agree with what was being taught or the antics that were being displayed, you shouldn't assume God wasn't behind such a thing or you could be found guilty of limiting God. Sometimes it seemed like we were being forced to accept insanity. Other times, what we witnessed was so opposed to the Bible it seemed like we were rewriting it altogether!

One Sunday during a healing service, we declared everyone healed, even though half the people were still sick when they left. *Don't put God in a box. We must believe something is true even if our eyes don't see it.* At another service, people were being ripped out of wheelchairs left and right and barely limping across the stage. An elderly woman winced in pain as she was forced to walk in front of the crowd and told, "Just move your legs in faith! Don't limit God with your unbelief! He is healing you right now!" She was still in her wheelchair the next time I saw her. *What's the problem here?* I wondered. *Did God really just curse that old lady back into her wheelchair because she was boxing him in with her weak faith?* During another service, a woman had a brace ripped off her body as she screamed in pain. The pastor shouted, "That's the devil of infirmity coming out of her!"

Our faith healing heroes of the past had set the course for this behavior, so I wasn't about to go against them. Smith Wigglesworth, a British evangelist who ministered in the early 1900s, was the pioneer of using physical violence as a form of healing. He allegedly walked into a mortuary and threw a man's corpse up against a wall in an effort to raise him from the dead. While many of the more outlandish stories can't be verified, in one of his books, Wigglesworth admitted to beating on people to heal them and said he was attacking the devil in them.²

I often cringed at the stories I heard about Wigglesworth, but I was intrigued by the risks he'd taken. That risk factor, I was told, was the hallmark of a faithful Christian. We even celebrated Wigglesworth's violent antics. "Sometimes, you need to throw away your medicine, fire your doctor, and dare God to heal you!" my uncle would roar from the platform. "Wigglesworth had crazy faith!" my father would tell me as he explained the audacious moves we needed to make to tap into God's power.

Were we abusing people? Were the heroes of our faith false teachers we'd followed into infamy? Or was I guilty of putting God in a box because I doubted what appeared to be insanity?

Don't Touch the Lord's Anointed

We loaded into the cars as the California sun burst through the marine layer coming off the ocean. It was a typical Monday morning for the Hinn family as we joined my uncle on a drive to Beverly Hills for some shopping, meeting first at his home on the Pacific. I got in the driver's seat of his G-Class Benz. I was the chauffeur on this day. The rest of our entourage, about four men (including our executive protection team), got into the chase vehicle. They were to follow closely behind, ensure we could change lanes with ease, and provide protection if we were stalked by the paparazzi.

As I started the car and pulled out from Uncle Benny's driveway, the sound of a familiar voice began to play through the speakers. It was Kathryn Kuhlman—we'd listen to her and reminisce about her powerful ministry in days gone by. This famous leading lady of the televangelist circuit loved to spend donations on the finer things in life. She was a staple in our ears and the model for our ministry, both on the stage and in the stores.

Within an hour or so, we were pulling up on Beverly Street, just parallel to world-famous Rodeo Drive. After a brief walk, we spent some time in Monsieur Bijan's store (by appointment only), where a single suit can easily cost upward of ten thousand dollars. He designs some of the finest clothing in the world, and the prices reflect his unique style and rare talent. Presidential photos are scattered throughout the store. This was where the richest of the rich and the leading men of our nation shopped. I'd been here more times than I could count and had never felt an ounce of guilt.

Suddenly, for a split second, my mind flashed back to certain criticisms I'd heard about our ministry. *Is this what they're referring to?* I wondered. *Should a pastor be spending more money on clothing in a single shopping spree than the average annual salary of the people he's preaching to? How many sick and desperate people did it take to pay for that suit?* I needed to be careful. Such thoughts could get me in trouble with God for questioning an anointed leader.

Our visit concluded and purchases made, it was off to visit Leon's Jewelry for watch shopping. Photos lined the walls of celebrities who wore his watches at awards shows in Hollywood. On this particular day, as I left with another diamond-encrusted watch, I asked myself, *What are we? Pastors? Celebrities? Both?* It just didn't add up. I was beginning to think that there was a difference between being well known for faithful ministry and behaving like this. *Shouldn't money be a tool for doing more ministry? I'm sure it's okay for a pastor to own a home and be paid an adequate salary to care for his family, but tens of millions of dollars are going into our houses, cars, jewelry, hotels, and shopping. Could the critics be at least just a little bit right?*

Those questions were strictly locked away in my mind, never to be voiced, as I remembered the last time I questioned our lifestyle. I could hear my family members' rebuke as they cautioned, "Touch not the Lord's anointed, Costi! Judge not lest you be judged also. In the same manner in which you judge, so too you will be judged!"

One sermon I heard went something like this: "When a man is anointed by God, don't touch him! Even if that man is a devil, the office he functions within is anointed. Don't speak against him or you'll be cursed!" I was caught between wondering whether this was the ultimate gag order or the divine decree of God. Was it possible that the family I loved was abusing people with their power and influence? And if so, shouldn't they be held accountable?

With no one to turn to, and no way to find answers—so I thought—silence and submission were my only options.

Unfulfilled Prophecies

Another aspect of the prosperity gospel is an emphasis on prophecy. I knew this side of our ministry quite well. People would fly in from all over the world to seek out prophetic wisdom from my father and uncles. Hanging on their every word, these desperate people based every decision they made on the prophecy given. We used a strategy we called shotgun prophecy, firing off numerous predictions in the hope that one of the prophecies might hit the target and we'd be considered accurate and reliable.

One day, while browsing at a Christian bookstore, I came across a thick book titled *The Confusing World of Benny Hinn*. Its authors spent many years putting together hundreds of quotes by my uncle, then biblically explaining why he was a heretic.

I sighed. *Here go the Christian watchdogs again.* I'd already heard the "Bible Answer Man" Hank Hanegraaff criticize my uncle on the radio. And I'd witnessed the mockery of friends at school as they pulled off their jackets and knocked each other down with them. I figured this was just another attempt by someone to slander my family. But something inside me was curious. I bought the book.

Up to that day, my confidence abounded, money was not a problem, and criticisms rolled off my shoulders because of the global influence my family was privy to. *Who cares what people say?* I would tell myself. *Our family is the most anointed in the world.* But as I stared at the book in my hands, it felt like it weighed one hundred pounds. That night, my entire house was dark but for the reading light next to my bed. Alternating between my favorite yellow highlighter and a fine-tip pen, I pulled an all-nighter and devoured the book.

The thrust of the book taught that God does not take kindly to leaders going around lying to people in his name. Deuteronomy 18:21–22 specifically instructs the children of Israel not to trust or fear someone who falsely prophesies: "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." Then the authors detailed a number of Uncle Benny's unfulfilled prophecies.

One unfulfilled prophecy stood out to me. The authors had gotten ahold of the cassette tape for the December 31, 1989, Sunday-night service. In the service, Uncle Benny prophesied, "The Lord also tells me to tell you that in the mid-nineties, about '94 or '95, no later than that, God will destroy the homosexual community of America." Hinn's declaration was greeted with loud applause from his congregation. Uncle Benny continued, "But he will not destroy it with what many minds have thought him to be. But he will destroy it with fire. And many will turn and be saved, and many will rebel and be destroyed."³

As I read, my mind exploded with shock, but denial quickly rushed in. I began to reason, frantically trying to process emotions and facts. *God was going to burn all gay people by 1995? It has been more than twenty years since then, and we've yet to see fire come down from heaven on them.*

This was no typical Christian viewpoint on marriage being defined as between one man and one woman, nor was it one of those angry demands for homosexuals to repent. This was an unfulfilled prophecy, which meant Uncle Benny would be considered a false prophet by the Bible's standard.

I remembered hearing my uncle tell us that God frequently changed his mind about certain prophecies if people prayed hard enough. *Maybe that's what happened?* I reasoned, trying to understand why his prophecy hadn't been fulfilled.

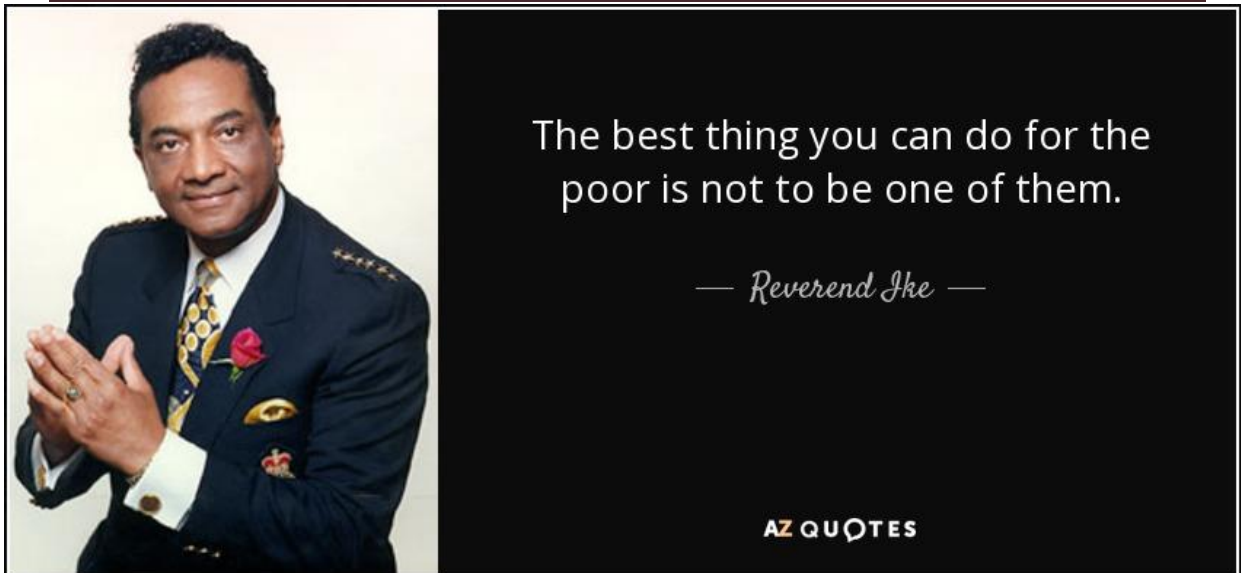
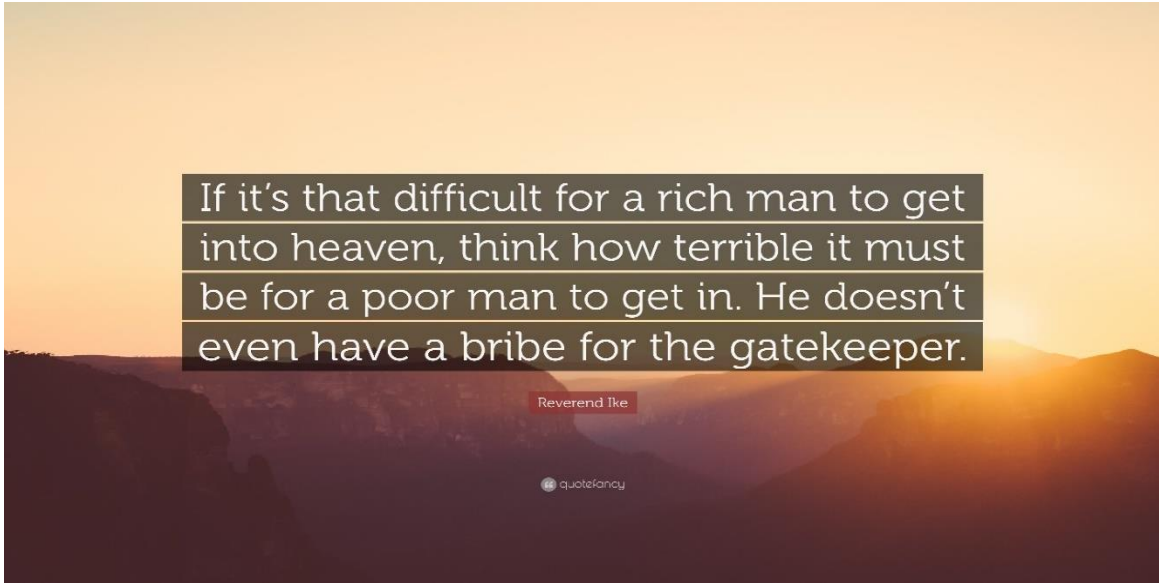
My whole life was in danger of falling apart. But I wasn't ready to face what that would mean. How could I ever stand up to an empire without being crushed? Was I supposed to confront my family? What would my father say if I finally pushed back hard enough to make waves? Would I lose the people I loved? End up homeless? Dead? How would I survive?⁶

⁶ Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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REV IKE'S TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MONEY!

I. Thou shalt not think that money is evil.

But rather, think and say:

Money is totally good. My desire for money is totally good and right.
I want and use money only for good purposes. Thank God for money!

II. Thou shalt not speak evil of money. Thou shalt not say that "money is hard to get, or to hold." Money hath ears and will flee from thee.

Think and say:

Money is wonderful stuff. I see and feel myself having and enjoying more money. I see money flowing into my life with ease.
I see and feel money coming into my life in new exciting ways. I am open and receptive to new, honest money-making ideas.
Thank God for money!

III. Thou shalt do right about money.

Think and say:

I am willing to do right about money. I have no need to do wrong about money, or to do wrong to get money. Thinking right and doing right about money draws more and more money unto me. I pay my bills with joy. I use money with joy. Money has no power over me to make me do evil. I have ALL POWER over money.

IV. Thou shalt give right about money.

Think and say:

I give money to good causes that I believe in. The money that I give becomes Money-Seed and is multiplied back to me many times and in many ways. I give regularly and with a system. Therefore, I am blessed regularly. My giving does not cause me to have less. My giving causes me to have more.

V. Thou shalt not serve money, rather, money shall serve thee.

Think and say:

I am not the servant of money. Money is my loving, obedient servant.

VI. Thou shalt be aware that money loves thee, money loves to fill thy hands and pockets.

Think and say:

Money loves me. Money loves to fill my hands and pockets. Money will not stay away from me. Money loves to serve me. Money loves for me to enjoy it. The more I use and enjoy money correctly, the more it flows into my life. I love money in its right place. I love the good that I can do with money.

VII. Thou shalt not fear money, that it will corrupt thee. "Only the corruptible can be corrupted." If thy religion cannot stand money, then thy religion is bad – not money.

But rather, think and say:

I have no fear of money. I am not afraid that money will corrupt me. Money cannot make me a worse person.
I am a better person because I have money to meet my needs, to enjoy, and to share. Money is not against my religion. Money cannot come between me and God. I can serve God better with the convenience of money.

VIII. Thou shalt not deny money. If thou deny money, money will deny thee. If thou art accused of having much money, deny it not. Never say, "I don't have any money," even if you don't. "Let the weak say 'I am strong.'"

Think and say:

I make it my business to think, act, and look like I have money. I must become that which I say I am. Therefore, I boldly declare I AM rich! I see it and feel it. I AM rich in Health, Happiness, Love, Success, Prosperity, and Money.

IX. Thou shalt see to it that thy money makes money, no matter how much or how little you have. Thou shalt have "Money Making Money!" Money loves to increase and make thee rich. Money shall work for thee.

Think and say:

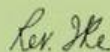
I see and feel myself having "Money Making Money!" I see myself having money drawing interest.
I see money working for me; bring me more money in honest, exciting ways.

X. Thou shalt not seek "something for nothing." However, thou shalt make the most of the money.

Think and say:

I realize that there is no such thing as "something for nothing." I avoid all offers that promise "something for nothing." Therefore, I don't get caught in losing deals. I realize that I cannot get "something for nothing" from God or man. I serve God by right thinking, right doing, and right giving. And I am rewarded "according as my works shall be." I serve mankind in my work – whatever it is. Life pays me according to my thinking, doing, and giving.

Love and Peace,



(January, 1996)

These commandments are from Rev. Ike's classic "Master of Money" audio lessons. To listen to a free sample, and to learn more about this powerful teaching available on MP3, [click here](#).

A Balanced View on Health and Wealth

Abundance isn't God's provision for me to live in luxury. It's his provision for me to help others live. God entrusts me with his money not to build my kingdom on earth, but to build his kingdom in heaven.

—RANDY ALCORN

The Bible on Health

Principle 1: God still heals today. No matter how careful a Christian may be on their position on healing gifts, both cessationists (believing certain gifts have ceased) and continuists (believing all gifts continue today) must agree that, biblically speaking, God still heals today. The Bible gives a clear picture of what the church should be: a vibrant community of faith led by qualified leaders who are anxious for nothing, thankful, prayerful, and full of peace (Phil. 4:6–7). We ought to trust God with our prayers, knowing that he heals according to his will and purposes. His sovereign hand in healing moves in his own time. Sometimes people are sick for years before experiencing healing. Other times, people seem to pray just once and receive a healing. Sometimes he uses a doctor to heal. Sometimes, people do not get healed on earth, but they will be free of sickness and pain for all eternity in heaven (Rev. 21:4). In every circumstance, God is a healer. It's just not always his will to heal right now, on earth. When and how he heals is up to him.

Principle 2: Health isn't guaranteed on earth. If being a Christian guarantees that you will have health, then either there is something wrong with tens of millions of Christians around the world or there is something wrong with that line of thinking. I'd offer that there is little wrong with them and would even go farther to say that the physical limitations and trials of this life are normal. Yes, there are times when sin is linked to sickness (James 5:13–16), but overall, sickness is a part of life on a broken earth. We can thank God for creating our bodies to fight sickness and recover on their own, for medical science that in many instances helps restore the body, and for the trials that make us stronger and cause us to lean on Jesus, experiencing his comfort in ways we never thought possible (Ps. 34:18).

Principle 3: Christian joy is not dependent on circumstances. None of this talk about joy means that there isn't pain. Nor is this some religious coping mechanism to avoid reality. No, Christians do not count it joyful to experience trials in this life—it is the results that we find joy in. God is at work, making our pain matter and using our stories to encourage and strengthen someone else. That is still good (Rom. 8:28).

Principle 4: Suffering and trials are a part of life. No matter how wonderful we believe this world should be, and no matter how perfect a prosperity preacher says your life will be if you give a big enough offering, suffering and trials are a part of life. Ask around or reflect on your life right now. Have you gotten sick? Lost a loved one? Been hurt by others? Been lied about and accused of things you never did? Been abused? Rejected? Of course. We all have in one way or another. Jesus promised that in this world there will be trouble (John 16:33), that you will be hated if you follow him (Matt. 10:22), and that families will divide over him (Matt. 10:34–36).

The Bible even says that all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). But Jesus also promised rest for weary souls (Matt. 11:28–30) and a peace that this world cannot give (John 14:27).

The Bible paints a beautiful picture for the Christian who endures suffering and trials. No matter what we go through, nothing can separate us from God’s love (Rom. 8:38–39), and he’ll provide us ways to escape temptations along the way (1 Cor. 10:13). God has a glorious future prepared for those who love him and remain faithful (1 Cor. 2:9).

Principle 5: Physical limitations do not limit ministry impact. Paul preached when his body was failing him (Gal. 4:13), and he ministered when he was being tormented and feeling weak and defeated (2 Cor. 12:7). Yet God by his grace worked through Paul’s weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Just like Paul, we aren’t limited by the fact that God doesn’t always heal when we demand he does.

God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things, and that often includes those others would consider weak. Prosperity preachers miss out on one of the greatest privileges of the gospel when they live in a bubble of false hope: real hope for real people as the real gospel transforms lives through their ministry.

The Bible on Wealth

Money tests our hearts like little else on earth. Whether it be the test of poverty or the test of prosperity, money brings out the best and worst in us.

Principle 1: God owns everything. When we think of wealth, first we have to understand that God owns everything! God doesn’t owe you and me anything, he isn’t shocked by the state of the world, and he never “lost the deed to the earth” when Adam sinned, as prosperity preachers and Word of Faith enthusiasts will preach. God doesn’t just hold the deed to all land, he is the Creator of all land.

God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10); he owns everything under heaven, for that matter (Job 41:11). The psalmist declares, “The earth is the LORD’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps. 24:1). There is no arguing with the Bible on who owns everything. God does. So, if God is the owner of everything, what does that make us? When we understand this first principle, we quickly realize we are simply managers. One day, we’ll give an account for how we’ve managed what he’s entrusted to us (Matt. 25:14–30).

Principle 2: Wealth isn’t guaranteed on earth. The Bible is equally as clear that while God owns everything, wealth isn’t guaranteed for everyone on earth. Jesus told his disciples that the poor would always be with them (John 12:8). We can gather from his words that people are naturally going to struggle financially in this broken world. No wonder Scripture is so adamant that the poor be cared for—they are some of society’s most vulnerable people. Assuming, of course, that they are not poor because they are lazy (the Bible has much to say on laziness, but we’ll have to cover that another time), God cares greatly for those who are in need. The book of Proverbs contains wisdom on serving the poor because wealth is not always going to be evenly spread around the world. Because of that, we should:

- Not oppress the poor but rather be kind to them (Prov. 14:31)
- Lend to the poor and trust the Lord with the results (Prov. 19:17)
- Be generous and share food with the poor (Prov. 22:9)
- Give to the poor and not ignore them (Prov. 28:27)
- Protect the rights of the poor (Prov. 29:7)

Caring for the poor is necessary because wealth is not guaranteed for all. Beyond that, Scripture shows us what God wants for all of us. Contentment, not riches, should be the goal of every believer. We must maintain balance in our understanding on wealth and poverty. With his intelligence, extensive religious training (Acts 26:5), and Roman citizenship (Acts 22:27), the apostle Paul was certainly deserving of great wealth, but clearly he missed out on whatever the prosperity preachers of today are selling. On the topic of the haves and the have-nots, Paul writes, "I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need" (Phil. 4:12).

God accomplishes his purposes in and through both the poor and the rich. **In the end, contentment is the key to a happy heart (1 Tim. 6:8).**

Principle 3: Wealth is a tool for gospel advancement. Even though wealth is not guaranteed on earth, God does give the opportunity to gain wealth. You may say, "Nobody gave me wealth—I earned it!" The children of Israel thought the same thing, but Moses reminded them that it was God who was blessing them based solely on his sovereign will. Deuteronomy 8:17–18 says, "You may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day." If God has blessed you with wealth, you ought to humbly thank him and realize that you have a great responsibility. Speaking to the rich, John writes, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:17–18).

The Bible is hardly silent on what rich people are supposed to do with all that money. Sure, it's biblical and prudent to leave an inheritance for your children (Prov. 13:22), and it's good to work hard and save for the future (Prov. 6:6). But you know what the greatest purpose of wealth is? To advance the gospel and do God's will! Paul told Timothy that rich people are to do this very thing. In a straightforward passage, he says, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed" (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

There you have it. Wealth is not a sin. You're allowed to enjoy it. But don't for a second fix your hope on it. It's a tool for ministry, not materialism. Jesus offered one of the best investment strategies in the universe when he said to store up treasure in heaven where nothing can destroy it (Matt. 6:19–21). This is done by putting your resources to gospel-centered use. You can't take it with you. There will be no U-Haul behind the hearse.

Principle 4: Wealth is not a sign of elite spiritual status. Prosperity preachers will tell you that wealth is a sign of an elite spiritual awakening. As in, "You have finally realized your full identity as a child of God when you step into the wealth God has for you." Or some nonsense like that.

Again, check the Bible on this. It is estimated the Bible contains upward of two thousand references to money. Approximately 50 percent of Jesus' parables deal with stewardship of money and things, and nearly three hundred verses in just the gospels alone deal with money. Doesn't this tell you that money and wealth are a serious subject to God? Nor do all of these verses contain exciting affirmations about being wealthy; rather, many of them contain warnings about being wealthy. Wealth is often a distraction from what really matters, so it takes a lot of discipline and biblical teaching to keep your heart from being sucked in by money's malicious pull.

The wealthy are often in a tug-of-war between their affection for earthly things (Phil. 3:19) and the eternal life to come. Wealthy believers can overcome temptation and use wealth as a tool for good, but more than likely there will always be a battle in the heart between giving generously and the natural inclination to keep, keep, keep.

Does the Bible paint wealth as a mark of the spiritual elite, or does it warn of the dangers of having all the things your heart desires? Look at what the Bible warns about wealth and decide for yourself:

- You can't serve two masters (Matt. 6:24).
- The deceitfulness of riches chokes out fruitfulness (Mark 4:19).
- It's difficult for rich people to choose Christ over wealth (Luke 18:22–23).
- It's difficult for rich people to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25).
- The love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10).
- Your soul is your most important asset (Luke 12:20).
- You can gain the whole world yet lose your soul if you do not have Christ (Mark 8:36).

In the Bible, the poor and afflicted are given special attention when it comes to spiritual care, and they often are able to worship more freely because they are free of the entanglements of riches. Revelation 2:9 illustrates this perfectly and tells us what real riches are. Jesus calls the church of Smyrna rich because even though they are in poverty and tribulation, they have held fast to their faith no matter the cost. They receive the highly esteemed crown of life for their faithfulness and suffering on earth (Rev. 2:10). Paul said that he considered anything he gained as loss for the sake of Christ and that all things are loss compared with knowing Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:7–8). What a powerful truth! Wealth is not a sign of elite spiritual status—having Christ is.

Don't buy the lies the prosperity preachers sell. You and I are going to be surprised one day when heaven's "Hall of Faith" is not lined with bigwigs and wealthy executives. Rather, it will be filled with the poor who gave what they could but never had what we have. They will have stood for their faith but paid with their lives. They will have been the nameless and faceless here on earth, but God will call them faithful.

Principle 5: Wealth is an immense responsibility. If you're wealthy, you were meant to build God's kingdom, not your earthly empire. Jesus said not to be anxious about any kind of provision but instead to seek his kingdom and his righteousness and that everything else will be taken care of (Matt. 6:31–33). We are all called to live generous lives with whatever means we have. Jesus said that when a widow gave two cents, she had given more than the wealthy who had given large amounts (Luke 21:1–4). He doesn't see the size of our gifts; he sees the state of our hearts. When we give, we must give willingly, not under compulsion (2 Cor. 8:12; 9:7). Wealth is to be stewarded, trusting that God has blessed us to be a blessing and that he will keep blessing us as he sees fit. Our job isn't to keep; our job is to work hard, invest, and give generously (again, see Matt. 25:14–30).

Prosperity gospel preachers want you to give to them to make them rich, but God wants you to give to faithful gospel ministries to help them reach. There is a world of hurting and broken people, and money can make a huge impact in ways that will long outlive you. You will be accountable for how you managed the wealth God has given you. That is an immense responsibility.

God is not trying to take away all you have—he's the one who gave it. He is, more than anything, testing the affections of your heart and offering you a joy beyond this world with him in glory.

Wealth is not a sin; it's a responsibility. Use it well.⁷

⁷ Hinn, C. W. (2019). [*God, greed, and the \(prosperity\) gospel: how truth overwhelms a life built on lies.*](#) Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Healing: A Doctor In Search of a Miracle by William A. Nolen M.D. (1974)

Nolen, an M.D., explores healings outside of regular western medicine and concludes that he can find not a single example of organic healing, i.e., healing in which a visible external difference is made in the patient, e.g., the disappearance of a tumor or a cancer, or the healing of a withered leg.

Christians will have no problem with his exposé of Philippine psychic-healers. Depending on their position on such matters, they may be disappointed to learn that his (admittedly incomplete) investigation of Kathryn Kuhlman's ministry resulted in a conclusion that no organic healings could be confirmed despite (evidently sincere) claims to the contrary. As in other research I have done, there seems to be a sizable gap between the sweeping claims made and the on-the-ground reality.

His book is cited favorably by atheist skeptics and Christian cessationists, i.e., those who believe that apostolic-grade healings have ceased.

From a miracles-investigation point of view (POV), this book is valuable for:

- * his methodology for investigation, e.g., letters, phone calls, soliciting permission to speak to a patient's doctor, direct on-the-ground investigation, etc.

- * its categories of medical conditions, e.g., functional - "ailments caused by the malfunction of an organ or system under the control of the autonomic nervous system"; hysterical, e.g., mind-induced; and organic - such as a broken bone, cleft palate, cancer, or gall stones. According to Nolen, the first two categories respond well to the suggestive nature and nurture of faith-healing, the third does not.

Another set of categories he uses is: self-limited, e.g., a cold, which goes away of itself anyway; cyclical, i.e., diseases which ebb and flow in their intensity and symptoms, and, once again, psychosomatic or hysterical.

- * his observation that medical doctors are in a better position to evaluate miracle testimonies than laypersons. For example, being able to breath deeply on stage is NOT evidence that lung cancer has been cured!

- * his findings in exposing fraudulent miracle workers and the deficiencies of an evangelical ministry such as that of Kathryn Kuhlman.

Kathryn Kuhlman remains an important figure today because she is looked up to and used as a model by many modern-day miracle ministries. Notably, Bennie Hinn, John Arnott, and Bill Prankard.

Skeptics love this book because of its hard conclusion: modern-day miracles don't happen, and, when it appears they do, it is because they are "soft" miracles based on the power of suggestion rather than (necessarily) a supernatural act of God.

A question for miracle investigators is this: Is it true, as Dr. Nolen asserts, that there is no medically-credible evidence for an organic-grade evangelical miracle? Can his assertion be refuted?

Interestingly, Dr. Nolen, a nominal Roman Catholic, does not mention Roman Catholic miracle claims in his book. He essentially dismisses them without even mentioning them!

The intersection between faith and science is an interesting one. As are the intersections between the natural and the supernatural, and the material and the spiritual.

The Gospel of Health & Wealth

THE GOSPEL OF HEALTH AND WEALTH

Lonnie Branam

2 Corinthians 11:24-28

In the above passage, the apostle Paul said, "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep anxiety for all the churches." The bitter life-experiences depicted in this reading happened to one of the most devout and faithful Christians ever to live on the earth. In addition to being a faithful Christian he was also an apostle of Christ, but this did not shield him from the difficult and painful experiences of life.

Paul's experience contradicts a very popular message which is being proclaimed from books, the pulpit and on television today. It is the gospel of health and wealth. This message in the world today is the number one crowd-attractor, people-pleaser, and religious fraud. Television evangelists of all kinds are shouting to their audience, "God loves you, and He wills for you to enjoy perfect health and wants you to be wealthy. After all, the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God. Would an earthly millionaire make his own children eat poor food, wear shabby clothes, and ride in broken-down cars? Of course not! Neither will your heavenly Father give you anything but the very best. What is the desire of your heart? All you have to do is name it; claim it by faith, and it is yours. Your heavenly Father has promised it; it's right here in the Bible." Of course, you must show good faith by sending a financial gift to this preacher or buy his book which tells you how to get wealth from God. That is the gospel of health and wealth, not the gospel of Christ.

This is not the message of Christ or the apostles of Christ or the writers of the New Testament. You will not find such a promise in the New Testament. The autobiography of Paul, as recorded in the above passage of scripture contradicts the gospel of health and wealth, for Paul did not have either one.

Paul knew more about God's will than all modern-day preachers. If the gospel of health and wealth is true, why didn't Paul cash in on this promise? He didn't have enough money to buy himself a coat to keep him warm in the prison at Rome. (2 Timothy 4:13). The gospel of health and wealth is a perverted gospel, and the danger of it is that it makes false promises which, in turn, lead to unscriptural desires for material prosperity and to false hopes for perfect physical health. God loves us too much to give us everything we wish.

What then are the prospects for prosperity which belong to the Christian? Is there a promise of guaranteed prosperity for the Christian in the New Covenant? Health and wealth preachers say, "Yes." They refer us to 3 John 2 which says, "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers." Admittedly, in this passage John speaks of prosperity: money-wise, health-wise, and soul-wise. Health and wealth preachers misinterpret this passage to mean a universal promise, but this is to read something into this text which is not there. John was expressing no more than a wish, and it is a beautiful wish that we can express to all people. It is somewhat like the beautiful greeting Californians give to one another when they say, "Have a nice day." But this is not a promise that everyone will have a nice day. John wished for Gaius a material prosperity equal to his soul prosperity which was great. Well-wishing is most becoming to Christians.

Again prosperity teachers refer us to John 10:10 where Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly." Jesus was speaking of a higher spiritual life from God and not material affluence. He was speaking of the character, dignity, and happiness associated with the Christian way of life. Perhaps the greatest evil of this modern gospel of wealth is its complete reversal of biblical values. Wealth is not the Christian's goal. It is not sinful to be poor.

Christians are not to set a high priority on the well-advertised creature comforts that 21st century America makes possible. Jesus said, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). We learn from the Lord Jesus that the abundance of material possessions is not the measure of our true success. What most Americans call success is in God's eyes their downfall. Wealth and prestige is not God's great goal for us; our goal is goodness. Christians must not expect to drive the most expensive cars, wear fur coats from Neiman Marcus, live in a suburban mansion, and vacation each year in the Bahamas. These things are not wrong, but we must not make them into life's goals or special signs of God's approval.

Under the New Covenant, it is God's will that the right to prosperity belongs equally to everyone: the believer and unbeliever; the saved and lost. The blessing of prosperity has been incorporated into the natural laws, and the degree of prosperity to which we attain depends on how we use and apply these laws. If you want prosperity, choose carefully your livelihood and choose it as early in life as possible. Train our mind; educate yourself, and prepare yourself for some skill or service to your fellow man. If you don't, you are asking for hard times, whether you are a Christian or not a Christian. Don't quit school; if you do you will most likely live to regret it. Work hard, apply yourself and be diligent. We live in a difficult world. Prosperity depends much on individual initiative, and that is why the gospel does not guarantee prosperity to the Christian. However, the religion of Christ is an aid to prosperity because it teaches us to be honest, diligent, hard-working, and it ministers to health of body and soul.

Let us now turn to the other side of this subject and consider the gospel of health which is being proclaimed throughout the world. Health preachers, faith-healers and miracle workers are enjoying a success and popularity that is most alarming in our generation. No one disputes that a morally conscientious person, who recognizes that his body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, generally has better health because he takes care of himself physically. However, the religion of Christ makes no promise of guaranteed health to the Christian.

The healing and health preachers of our day take genuine promises of scripture entirely out of their context to give people false hopes of recovery from sickness. John 14:13 is an example. Jesus said, "And whatever you ask in my name, that will I do." The healers say, "Right there it is in the Bible. If you are sick pray to be healed, for Jesus said that whatever you ask in my name I will do it. Now this statement of Jesus is not a universal, unconditional promise. Jesus made this promise to the apostles, and it referred primarily to miraculous power which would be given them to overcome all manner of obstacles. When Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name," it does not mean merely to repeat a formula. Rather, it meant to make requests on his authority. Paul prayed three times requesting to be healed of a terrible physical affliction, but the Lord refused to heal him because it was not the will of Christ that he be healed (2 Corinthians 12:8).

It is only when we know that we are asking for what God wills that his promise holds. That is why in a parallel passage that makes the same promise, John reveals an important condition to all prayer. I John 5:14 says, "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of him." To take a promise out of its context is to force scripture to say what it does not say, and this turns God's promises into false claims that will only delude the gullible.

When people believe the health preachers who claim that John 14:13 is a universal promise with no conditions, the result can be disastrous. When these people pray to be healed and do not receive their requests, they may feel their faith is entirely destroyed and question the truthfulness of God. In anger they may rebel against God and feel that God has deceived them. Few people are harder to reach than those whose relationship with God has been twisted out of shape by the false gospel of health and wealth.

In saying these things, let me remind you that during the miraculous period of church history(33 A.D.-100 A.D.), many people did receive the recovery of their health by miraculous healing(James 5:14,15). Jesus, the apostles, and some Christians (with charismatic gifts) healed the sick by supernatural power. However, this was a temporary phenomenon to help prove the authenticity of the Christian religion and help establish this religion in an unbelieving and persecuting world.

The New Testament reveals that miracles ceased at the close of the first century, at the death of the apostles who conferred miraculous gifts by the laying on of their hands. (Acts 8:18; I Corinthians 13:8).

The New Testament reveals that miracles ceased at the close of the first century, and church history recognizes that they were not practiced in the early second century. All of the miraculous gifts that once existed in every congregation of the Churches of Christ passed away and ceased forever when the New Testament was completed because their purpose had been fulfilled. They are no longer needed. Believe the miracles that are recorded in the Bible, but don't believe the pseudo-miracles you see on television.

Finally, although the day of miracles is over, the day of God's providential activity is still here and available to Christians. Christians should distinguish between God's miraculous working and his providential working. If we do not know the difference, we often make the mistake of calling something a miracle. when, in fact, it was God's providence. God's healing activity has been incorporated into the natural laws. God does not have to work miracles to help us. God's providence is his watch-care over the universe and his superintendence of the natural laws. The Bible says, "In God we live, move and have our being." God can answer our prayers without working miracles. He made the natural laws, and he can use them in any way he pleases.

By the goodness of God, many people often come near to death but recover without asking for God's help. The natural laws, doctors, and medicine often save lives. If God does intervene and help us in answer to prayer, we can personally believe that he intervened, but we cannot prove it. Any providential help we receive from God is done behind the scenes. When God does something providentially in answer to prayer, there is no visible evidence to allow one to know that God worked supernaturally in our behalf. We can only believe that God answered our prayer, or aided the surgeon, but we cannot know for sure or prove that God intervened. That is the difference between miracles and providence. God has always been and is still providentially active, whenever he sees fit.

It is God's will that we pray for others who are sick and pray when we are sick, but it is also God's will that we use the very best medical care within our means to bring about the cure of the sick. Most of God's healing today is through his natural laws. Paul instructed Timothy to use a little wine [medicinally] for his stomach's sake and frequent infirmities (I Timothy 5:23). I think that statement teaches much on the subject of praying for the sick. The truth is quite evident that God expects Christians to use the very best medical knowledge and care within their means to get well, as well as offering special prayers for the sick's recovery. Before we ask God to heal us, let us visit the doctor first, and do all we can to bring about our recovery by the known laws of healing that God has provided. And let us always remember, "It is appointed to man once to die," and when that time comes no power in heaven or earth will save us from the common end of man.

The Gospel Of Prosperity

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) July 2, 2012

By Wilson Adams

In Matthew 19:23 Jesus discusses the perils of prosperity by saying, “It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” I’ve never really had trouble with that verse because I’ve always laid its application on the backs of the Rockefellers, the Kennedys, the Malcomb Forbes of society – you know, the Fortune 500 guys, the real money people. I’m not sure anymore. The more I think about it the more I am convinced that Jesus was essentially talking to me – and you (if you maintain the average middle-class American lifestyle). By the world’s standard of measurement we give a new definition to the concept of prosperity. We make more money in a week than much of the world makes in a year. We have homes, and cars, and the latest gadgets of our modern technological age. And what we can’t pay for we “charge” to a standard of living that is exceedingly expensive. All of this makes me take a fresh look at the Master’s warning. Maybe you should, too. The Bible has much to say about money matters because in God’s eyes money matters. How am I to view my prosperity? Should I pray for financial success? What about the wealthy wicked? Does the providential promise of Romans 8:28 include my monetary pursuits? – all are probing questions and real questions that constantly confront the Christian.

Prayer and Prosperity

God answers prayer. I believe that, preach it and have seen it happen. The question is: What should we pray for? It should be obvious that if we are told to pray for something then surely God will be involved in that area of our interest.

Scripture teaches us that we should pray for our spiritual needs, our health (2 Jn. 2), our safety (Rom. 1:9-10), the necessities of life (Matt. 6:11) and our national leaders (1 Tim. 2:2) - to name only a few. But should I pray for God's blessings in the area of my business or financial prosperity? Well, I do and I think you should, too. (I once heard a preacher say that if you are involved in an area of activity that you cannot pray about, then you had better quit it. Now that's a point worth pondering!)

Here is the passage: James 4:13-15. It says, Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow... Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that."

"This" or "that" what? He is talking about buying and selling and receiving financial profit. And just what is the point of the passage? Rather than say, "I'm going to do this. . ." or "I'm going to accomplish that . . ." - we must recognize that God is involved in our business activities and that it is not all our own doing. "But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil" (v. 16).

What about you? When you make business plans and monetary goals do you strike out on your own or do you ask for God's blessing and will to be accomplished? And when you have prospered and fared well financially, do you take the credit or do you take your thanksgiving to the Throne? It's a potent passage. I'm a firm believer that we should pray for the Lord to make us successful in all that we do. (Nehemiah understood the point when he prayed, "O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant . . . and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man" [1: 11]).

Nehemiah knew he could not have success in his rebuilding plans without the approval of the Persian potentate. Thus, he prayed for God to give him success as he presented his request before the King.) So it is with us. If I am going to find success with my family and the raising of my children in a wicked world, then I must have God's help. If I am going to experience success in reaching and teaching the lost, I need divine aid. And, if I am going to have success in the financial market place, I need the Lord's favor. Do you know what prayer really is? Prayer (among other things) is our asking for God's providence ("providing") in the areas for which we have prayed, conditioned upon His approval and will. And that brings up another question:

Will God Give Me Everything I Pray For?

Will God answer my every prayer? Yes! Will God give me everything I pray for? No! Here surfaces the problem. of the TV preacher. The TV kings of the electronic evangelistic circuit answer "yes" to both questions upon the condition that you include them in your financial future. (Doesn't this sound like the old "Send me \$10 and I'll send you my secret on 'How To Make A Million... scam? It sure looks suspicious to me)

A reading of passages like Psalms 5:12; 37:25; Matthew 6:25-33 and a host of others leaves one inescapable conclusion: God has promised to provide the needs of the righteous. That says three things:

1. God has promised to provide the needs of the righteous. The Bible doesn't say, "Well, maybe God will provide . . ." It says, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you." And look at Romans 8:28, too. That sounds like a sure thing.
2. God has promised to provide the needs of the righteous. The wicked have no such guarantee (Isa. 59:1-2).
3. God has promised to provide the needs of the righteous. Here is where the rubber of "TV theology" meets the road of reality. Yes, God will provide our needs as he defines them. Herein is the greatest problem area in dealing with the question of the Christian and his prosperity. It's up to God to define needs - not us! Often times we think we need what we really don't need. For example, I take my little five year old to K-Mart and he sees the Tonka trucks and the G.I. Joe action figures and he says, "Dad, I want that! " And, like every good father will do, I give him the daddy-can't-give-you-everything-you-want-but-only-what-you-need little talk - and then, do you know what he says? He says, "O.K. dad, then I need that!" (You've been there, right?)

Do you know that that is exactly what we do to the Lord? We just seem to want and/or need everything. Get the point: God will give us what we need (not always what we want) with the understanding that he defines our "needs" and not we ourselves.

And here are two other points worth our consideration: (1) My needs may not be my needs because it may not be the best for me. When I buy my kids a giant slurpee at the corner convenience store and five minutes later they want (excuse me, “need”) a snow cone from the ice-cream man, I refuse. And why? Because I know that it’s not best for them. In the same way I may pray, “Lord, I need to get this job promotion” or “I need to be more prosperous than I am” – God will answer that prayer but His answer may be “No” because He knows that greater financial prosperity may not be the best thing for me. Material prosperity is not always the best for people (1 Cor. 1:26). Some can handle it, others cannot. God knows what I need and He will provide according to his wisdom. And, (2) My needs may not be my needs because it may not be the best for others. I need to realize that God doesn’t work just for me. What I want may not be in the best interest of my family, my brother or somebody else that God cares for, too. (There is a lot to consider, here.)

What About The Wealthy Wicked?

That was the question that Asaph asked in Psalm 73. He said, “My feet came close to stumbling when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (vv. 2-3). Asaph’s faith was on thin ice. He said, “Hey, God, whose side are you on?” “Why are you blessing all these rich sinners?” God never answered his question. What He did do was to show the psalmist that while the wicked may seem to have an easier time on the road of life, the fact remains that they are going in the wrong direction I They are basking in the sunshine on the deck of the Titanic. They may have health, wealth, and worldly success but they don’t have God, and thus they don’t have anything.

When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight.

*Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end
(73:16-17).*

I may not understand why God blesses the wealthy wicked but I do understand one thing: I know that I wouldn't want every millionaire in America to go broke - would you? (Seems like that happened once before.) It may just be that God is blessing all the rich sinners so that through them He can bless me and give me what I need to maintain a comfortable life.

What Have We Really Said?

Does God want His children to prosper financially? (I certainly couldn't give a sweeping "no" to that question - could you?) It looks to me like one of those "Yes, but . . . maybe" questions. Yes, God would like us to prosper financially but, maybe He says "No" to too much too soon because in His wisdom it's not the best for us. He may bless some in more generous financial ways seeing that they can handle it better than others. On the other hand, He may choose to withhold financial blessings from some to see if their faith can be loyal while their pocketbook is lacking. (Now does that mean that such a person is any less righteous than the other guy? The book of Job answers that one.) Truthfully, I don't know what God always does. A better question would be: Does God want what's best for His children?" I do know the answer to that and it is an unequivocal: Yes! And what is best for His children may not always be financial prosperity. But that's God's decision and not the decision of the "plug in preachers."

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The “Miracle” of Seed-Faith

Posted by [Mark Mayberry](#) July 2, 2012

By Mike Willis

I stand amazed at the financial empires which the TV evangelists have been able to build. Through their abilities to raise funds from their listening audiences, they have been able to purchase television time, erect buildings for their corporate offices, build a recreational facility (Heritage Park), operate a university (Oral Roberts University), operate a hospital (City of Faith medical center), and many other bold financial enterprises.

At the heart of the message of the TV evangelists is a gospel of financial prosperity that is tied to one’s giving to the Lord, the TV evangelist serving as the point of contact with the Lord. The covenant of giving may be called “The Key to Prosperity” (Evelyn Wyatt, *Wings of Healing*), “The Laws of Prosperity” (Kenneth Copeland), or “The Miracles of Seed-Faith” (Oral Roberts). Inasmuch as some of us are unfamiliar with the message being taught by TV evangelists, I want to present their message in sufficient detail for us to grasp their message:

1. Evelyn Wyatt. Claiming to have received a direct revelation from God in a vision, Mrs. Wyatt wrote,

The Scriptural pattern for receiving is to give. . Too often people are inclined to reverse the principle by expecting to receive first, then give, but note the words of Jesus again. First He said, “Give,” THEN, “it shall be given unto you.”

The plan that God showed me is simple and direct, and carries a promise of continued blessing for everyone who will make a covenant with Him to give a special offering each month for a year (“The Key To Prosperity”).

2. Kenneth Copeland. In *The Laws of Prosperity*, Copeland wrote,

You begin to know that God is the source of your success, that He is the one giving it to you, that there is an endless supply behind you and an endless supply in front of you. All you must do is be a channel for it, and giving is the key that opens the door Do you want a hundredfold return on your money? Give and let God multiply it back to you. No bank in the world offers this kind of return! Praise the Lord! (pp. 66, 67)

You give - then it will be given to you again. The key is to give continually. As you are working in the Word and God’s prosperity is being produced in your life, you will reach a point -when your bread is coming back to you on every wave. It is your job to put it on the water. It is God’s job to see that it comes back! You do your job and let God do His; then you will be continually receiving. The more you give, the more you will get; the more you get, the more you will have to give. God intended for these things to work this way. When you get to this point, more will be coming in than you can give away! (p. 34)

3. Oral Roberts. The three steps to Oral Roberts’ plan are (1) look to God as your source, (2) give that it may be given to you, and (3) expect a miracle. He claims to have discovered this plan of giving through a study of Jesus.

He began everything He attempted with giving first. He connected giving with seed and laid down the example as the Christian's life-style. I was forced to change my thinking. Before this I had given after I received. But I redirected my principle of giving from a debt owed, to a seed I sowed. It was revolutionary but entirely scriptural (The Miracle of Seed-Faith, p. 28).

In a conversation with Jesus in his prayer tower, Oral learned more about "seeding" a miracle.

This was a whole new thought to me. Although giving was a key part of the Blessing-Pact, it had not become quite clear that giving was the seeding for our miracle from which God our Source would multiply back with such an increase it would be bigger and more powerful than our mountains of needs and problem (A Daily Guide To Miracles, p. 63).

Through statements such as these and testimonials on TV shows, the TV evangelists are communicating to their audience that financial prosperity can be obtained by showing enough faith in God to make a donation to their ministry.

Fundamental Flaws In Seed-Faith Giving

1. Poverty is cured by the atonement. Many faith healers have preached that in the atonement Jesus provided healing for the body (Isa. 53:5 - with his stripes we are healed). Some have gone a step further to say that the atonement also delivers us from the "curse of the law - poverty." Kenneth Copeland said,

Jesus bore the curse of the law on our behalf. He beat Satan and took away his power. Consequently, there is no reason for you to live under the curse of the law, no reason for you to live in poverty of any kind Poverty is under the curse of the law, and Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the curse and has established us in abundance, not bare necessity! (The Laws of Prosperity, pp. 51, 54)

Oral Roberts wrote that Jesus meets our present needs – water for thirst, food for hunger, strength for weakness, riches for poverty, kiss for sorrow, gladness for misery, and love for loneliness. “So Jesus reached up and took heaven and kissed the earth with it and opened it and gave to the children of men. He came with outstretched hands filled with God’s blessings, with an open heaven behind Him. He came into people’s lives at the point of their need, performing miracles and setting them free” (A Daily Guide to Miracles, p. 227).

The atonement on Calvary did not cure our financial woes. If I am in debt when I obey the gospel, I will be in debt the day after I obey the gospel. Jesus has not promised to deliver me from financial bankruptcy through obedience to the gospel. The blood of Jesus is no more a cure for my financial woes than a cure for my physical hunger and thirst. Promising men that their financial woes will be cured by obedience to the gospel is to promise them more than God promised.

2. Giving for selfish reasons. The teaching of seed-faith giving encourages one to give in order to get something from God. This is demonstrated by these chapter titles in Oral Robert’s book the Miracles of Seed-Faith:

How I Learned a Lesson Early in My Ministry to Look To God As My Source For A Loan

How Two Young Men Through Applying The Principles of Seed-Faith Became Tulsa's Third-Largest Builders; How A Friend Got His Dream Job Through Applying The Key Principles of the Blessing-Pact

The TV evangelists promise their audiences that their problems (whether they are financial, physical, emotional, marital, etc.) will be solved when they have enough faith in God to plant a seed for God to multiply back in his harvest. The "seed" should be planted in the TV evangelist's particular "garden" (ministry). The desire for something from God is used to motivate the listener to make a donation to the TV evangelist's ministry. The motive of giving to God is reduced to selfishness - one gives to God in order to receive a greater gift from him.

In *The Health and Wealth Gospel*, author Bruce Barron demonstrated how this message is being used as follows:

Jerry Savelle, in one service recorded for cable television and designed to help raise money for Copeland's proposed World Outreach Headquarters building in Fort Worth, invoked a literal application of the hundredfold return in an unusual and potentially exploitative manner. With a live audience watching, Savelle handed Copeland ten checks for one thousand dollars each and stated:

Each of these \$1,000 checks I am now giving to you will return one hundredfold to me, according to God's word. One for my church, one for my school, one for my mission work.... and this last one for my wife and myself personally. Folks, these checks will return a total of \$100,000 each! Can you say "Praise the Lord"? What are you waiting for? Get on your feet and get in on this! Let's take the biggest offering ever! I want it now! Who will do what I did! Who will sow in famine and reap one hundredfold? Well, come on! Come running, you sower!
(p. 140)

In *Abundant Life* (July 1980, p. 4), Roberts wrote, “Solve your money needs with money seeds.” This teaching on giving appeals to man’s carnal greed as his motive for giving and thereby undermines the gospel.

3. Through seed-faith giving one manipulates God. One distinction between magic and religion is this: in religion one submits himself to the higher will of God; in magic man manipulates a higher power to get things for himself. In seed-faith giving, one plants a seed (a financial gift) which God must cause to grow into a harvest (one’s desired result). Hence, one is able to get anything he wants from God by seed-faith giving. He manipulates God through seed-faith giving.

4. Financial poverty becomes a proof of spiritual poverty. Should one have a financial need which is unmet, he either does not know about seed-faith giving or lacks the faith to practice it. In either case, his own financial needs manifest his spiritual poverty.

5. The doctrine of seed-faith giving is believable only to those who live in an affluent society during a period of inflation – a period during which the general affluence of the country touches the lives of all citizens, including those who send donations to TV evangelistic. In such a society testimonials of success are easily found. If one could persuade thousands of people through TV preaching to donate money on the promise that they will receive a unexpected return on their money, he would expect that someone would write saying that he had received unexpected money. Such letters are then used as testimonials to encourage other to participate in seed-faith giving.

The Seed-Faith Concept Misapplies Scripture

The TV evangelists have appealed to Scripture to teach their message of seed-faith. In so doing, they have abused Scripture, twisting and perverting its context to fit their message. Here is a partial list of Scriptures which have been abused:

1. 3 John 2. “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” Oral Roberts said that this Scripture was “the greatest discovery Evelyn and I ever made about health, prosperity, and spiritual blessings” (A Daily Guide To Miracles, p. 35). John’s personal wish for Gaius is distorted into a divine promise of financial prosperity for all believers. There is nothing in the text that promises financial prosperity upon the condition of faith in seed-faith giving.

2. Mark 10.29-30. “And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.” This passage was literally interpreted by Jerry Savelle on Kenneth Copeland’s broadcast which was mentioned earlier. Savelle’s \$1,000 check was expected to bring \$100,000 back to him. If Savelle was as literal with all things mentioned in this verse as he was with money, he could donate his house to the ministry and receive 1000 houses back, donate his physical brother to the ministry and receive 1000 physical brothers, donate his mother to the ministry and receive 1000 mothers in return (would Savelle like to show how this could be done biologically?), donate his wife to the ministry and receive 1000 wives (shades of Joseph Smith), or donate one of his children to the ministry and receive 10W children in return.

I suspect that these TV ministers might understand brethren, sisters, father, mother, wife, and children to refer to spiritual relationships, not physical. However, when financial matters are mentioned, the meaning of the terms immediately shifts to literal houses and dollars. Their theology contradicts solid exegesis of the text.

3. Galatians 6.7-8. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” The reaping of this text has no reference to reaping in this life; it refers to life everlasting in the world to come (Mk. 10:30). The corruption is eternal damnation in hell. To use this verse to teach that one shall receive financial prosperity by making a donation to a TV evangelist’s ministry is to pervert this text.

4. 2 Corinthians 9.6-11. Rather than reproducing this text, I will encourage our readers to read it from the Bible. This text is more plausibly used than any other so far cited. Nevertheless, this text plainly states that the harvest which is reaped from sowing is “the fruits of your righteousness” (9:11). In his commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians, Fred Fisher correctly stated, “The result of their liberality would be progress in righteousness on their part. Thus, Paul revealed that he was not thinking of material rewards for giving, but of immaterial ones” (p. 393).

5. Old Testament texts. The TV evangelists cite a number of Old Testament texts to justify seed-faith giving – giving which is done in order to get a blessing from God. Several things need to be said about these texts in a general way: (a) Promises made to Israel as a nation are applied to specific individuals. God made many promises of prosperity to Israel as a nation on the condition that she would be faithful to God.

We are not to understand that every individual saint in that nation had to prosper in order for that promise to be fulfilled, for such is definitely not what happened. (b) General truths, such as in the Proverbs, are given specific application. The Proverbs condition many temporal blessings upon obedience to the word of God (e.g., diligent labor produces prosperity). The wisdom literature also recognizes that time and chance happen to all (Eccl. 9:11); consequently an individual may do all that the word of God says and still not be prosperous because of circumstances beyond his own control.

Hence, the Scriptures used to prove the doctrine of seed-faith giving are distorted and perverted by the TV evangelists.

Seed-Faith Teaching Ignores Scriptures

Those who preach the seed-faith principles of giving ignore “some plain statements from the Scripture which are not in harmony with their doctrine.

1. Scriptures which foretell that the righteous shall suffer for righteousness sake. Though he was a perfectly obedient Son, Jesus did not have a place to lay his head (Lk. 9:57). Jesus taught that the righteous might have to give up their lands and houses because of Christ (Mk. 10:29). The Hebrew Christians lost their possessions because of their faith in Christ (Heb. 10:34).

2. Some faithful saints were not prosperous people. The apostle Paul not only suffered persecution, he also experienced hunger and thirst and nakedness, even though he was a faithful Christian (2 Cor. 11:27). Saints suffered in the famines which struck the general populace (Acts 11:27-30), even as did the unrighteous.

Conclusion

Seed-faith giving is a fund-raising device created by TV evangelists to motivate the general populace to donate money to their ministries in order that they can pay their bills. The principle of seed-faith giving is not only absent from the Bible, it is also contrary to the Bible teaching about giving. In the biblical sense, these TV evangelists fit the description of the false teachers of 2 Peter 2:3 who “through covetousness ... with feigned words make merchandise of you.”

Seed-faith giving preys on the unfortunate. Those who are attracted to this message are the poor and desperate, who sometimes send their last dollars and “expect a miracle.” Like their Pharisee counterparts, the TV evangelists who preach seed-faith giving “devour widows houses” (Matt. 23:14), as they build their financial empires on contributions sent in by poor and desperate people.

Seed-faith giving is a doctrine of the devil which is causing the general public to lose confidence in religion in general. As such the doctrine must be opposed and resisted wherever it is taught.

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Making Merchandise of the Gospel

By **Wayne Jackson**

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The Scriptures clearly teach that one who labors extensively to study and teach the gospel, thus depriving himself of a regular income, has the right to be supported financially by those to whom the instruction is imparted. It is his “right” (1 Corinthians 9:4-6), and it is his students’ “responsibility.” Paul spends a considerable portion of the ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians in arguing the case for ministerial support. A similar, though briefer, point is made in the epistle to the Galatians (6:6).

It is one thing to receive a reasonable level of support for work done; it is entirely another matter when men (and women) make “merchandise” of people (2 Peter 2:3), or, as the New American Standard Bible renders it, they “exploit” you. Noted scholar D. Edmond Hiebert once observed that such charlatans are not concerned for the welfare of the sheep; rather, their aim is to shear them of their wool! Such individuals suppose that “godliness is a way of gain” (1 Timothy 6:3). Unfortunately, there are those who use the “gospel” as a way of lining their own pockets. Two cases have generated considerable interest of late.

John Hagee

First, there is the matter of John Hagee, the flamboyant “pastor” of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Hagee speaks to thousands each week by way of his Global Evangelism Television network that accesses 127 television stations and 82 radio stations around the nation. “Pastor” Hagee’s doctrinal positions stand in opposition to New Testament teaching in numerous particulars. On occasion, however, he does present some commendable lessons against the moral corruption that has engulfed our nation.

The Hagee enterprise brought in more than \$18 million in revenue in 2001. Mr. Hagee's personal salary/benefit package amounted to more than \$1.25 million—according to a recent article published on the *San Antonio Express-News* website. The gentleman's personal holdings, and a John Hagee Rabbi Trust, include a six-bedroom home in San Antonio (worth about \$688,900), and a 7,696 acre ranch valued at some \$2.1 million.

In addition, Hagee's wife, Diane, also draws a salary in the neighborhood of \$127,000 annually from the Cornerstone/GETV ministry. Is this what hard-working folks sacrifice their money to support?

Joyce Meyer

Joyce Meyer has been described by one sympathetic journalist as the woman preacher who "sounds like a gravely-voiced waitress in a greasy-spoon diner." The sixty-year-old female version of Hagee (contra 1 Timothy 2:12), operating out of Fenton, Missouri, admonishes her disciples not to "get too attached to possessions." She wants her people to give their prosperity "back to God"—which, ideally, is to be detoured through her.

Joyce and her husband, Dave, live in a 7,000 square foot house (eight bedrooms and seven baths) valued at \$521,000. Not too shabby for Fenton, Missouri. She zips about town in her \$62,000 silver Lexus SC340 sports car (a gift from a supporter).

As head of "Joyce Meyer Ministries," she presides over a \$57 million teleministry empire. Her broadcasts reach out to 2.5 billion people over 400 television stations and 300 radio stations. Meyer's recent campaign in Detroit was expected to draw some 40,000 people. At some of her convention meetings she charges a \$50 per-head registration fee. Not bad for a few presentations that, for the most part, represent a stand-up comedy routine interspersed with a smattering of Scripture (a considerable portion of which is misapplied).

It is no small wonder that "Christianity" has a bad name with many, who see some of these hucksters as being more in touch with "Cash-anity" than anything genuinely identified with him who had no place to lay his head.

Christ vs. Corrupt Commercialism

There is no place in the Gospel records where the anger of Jesus Christ is more evident than in his dealings with religious leaders who were fleecing people in the name of God. On two occasions he cast out of the temple those who were bilking the common folk under the guise of spirituality (see John 13-22, and Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Two classes of “church crooks” received his wrath: those who bought and sold sacrificial animals and those who exchanged Greek and Roman coinage (with their idol images) into currency acceptable in the temple—with extravagant fees charged for the services. William Barclay observed that it “was a rampant and shameless injustice—and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion.” The acquisition of extravagant wealth under the guise of “ministering” on behalf of Christ has become a smear upon the “Christian” image in this nation. And there is no reason to believe that the abuse will subside. If one may be permitted to borrow some of Paul’s phraseology: the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, which some (“clerics”), reaching for, have perverted the faith, and, eventually, will be pierced through with many sorrows.

A Concluding Word of Caution

There should be a note of caution here for every genuine preacher of the gospel. Ministers must be especially careful as to how they are involved with church funds. No solitary person needs to “keep the books,” with no accountability to responsible brethren. Church finances ought to be monitored by elders, or, when there are no elders, a plurality of faithful brethren. This is the prudent way to protect one’s reputation from the charge of impropriety, and to protect the church from mishandling or incompetence.

The Christian will attempt to “take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17). It would serve one well to study Paul’s example of the careful handling and disposition of church funds (2 Corinthians 8:20ff). The misappropriation or misuse of church funds is a problem that has troubled many a congregation, and a word to the wise should be sufficient.

I'm a Good Christian. So Why Am I Sick and Poor?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

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A gentleman who professed identification with the Lord became quite disenchanted with Christianity. When an interested friend asked as to the nature of his problem with faith, he replied:

According to the Bible, God promised that those who follow him will be blessed with health and prosperity. As I observe Christian people, I see vast numbers who are sick and poor. I can no longer believe, therefore, in the promises of God.

What response should be made to this troubled man?

Who's To Blame?

There are three possible ways to evaluate the argument stated above.

“It’s God’s Fault ...”

God has failed in his promises. Either he is unable to complete his pledge (in which case he is impotent), or else he had no intention of fulfilling his bargain (which would make him deceptive). In either event, the fault would lie with God.

“If I were a better person ... ”

God is both willing and able to bless humanity with physical/material health and wealth, and, invariably, he does. Those who enjoy wholeness and prosperity are the righteous; those who do not are flawed in character. Any lack, therefore, is with man.

“Maybe I’ve misunderstood ...”

The third possibility is that the assumptions of the argument cited above are grounded in a misunderstanding of certain passages relating to physical and material well-being.

In this case, the problem would be with the critic’s misinterpretation of certain passages.

Let us give consideration to each of these possibilities.

The Skeptical Theory: God’s to Blame

The first of the above-listed propositions partakes of the nature of that ancient argument employed so often by skeptics.

If God **cannot** do it, he is powerless, hence, not God. If the Creator **will not** do it, he is malevolent, thus, not God.

If he has both the power and the will, why then is someone sick or poor?

The assumption in this position, of course, is that ignorant mankind is qualified to pass judgment upon divine actions. And, if the Maker of men is not operating consistent with how “we” might do it, he is blamed as lacking either ability or will.

But the “ways” of Heaven are beyond human analysis (Job 9:12b; Is. 55:8; Rom. 11:33).

The fact of the matter is, God, in real history, has demonstrated both his ability and integrity in keeping his promises.

Twenty centuries before the birth of Christ, Jehovah promised Abraham that through his “seed” all nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). The prophecy pointed to the coming of Christ (Ga. 3:16).

Even though Abraham and Sarah were aged, and without offspring at the time, the patriarch never wavered concerning the promise, for he knew that “what [God] had promised, he was **able** to perform” (Rom. 4:21).

Too, God’s integrity was never suspect, for, as the writer of Hebrews noted (in discussing this very circumstance), it is an immutable proposition that it is **impossible for God to lie** (Heb. 6:13-18).

The messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, combined with the facts relative to Jesus of Nazareth, confirm both the integrity and ability of the Almighty.

The Character Argument: “If I were only good enough ...”

The idea that one’s character can be determined by his physical well-being, or material prosperity, though widespread, reflects an erroneous generalization.

While it occasionally is the case that the Bible provides some examples of prosperity as a result of righteousness, that is far from the rule.

Consider two cases from the Old Testament.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar insisted that Job’s plight (during which he lost all his material resources, and his health) was a result of his lack of spirituality. The patriarch supposedly had committed grievous sins. If he would only repent, God would restore his well-being.

The truth was otherwise. Job's losses were the result of his **goodness**. He was Jehovah's unique servant (Job 1:8; 2:3). The Lord permitted Job's deprivation because he was proud of him, and knew he could maintain his integrity (Job 13:15).

Or consider the case of Asaph (Ps. 73). He surveyed society and noted the "prosperity of the wicked" (Ps. 73:3). He almost abandoned his faith at this seeming inequity — until Jehovah showed him the "latter end" of evil people (Ps. 73:17), and he learned the lesson that godliness cannot be judged by material status.

Then these New Testament examples.

Jesus' circumstances during his earthly sojourn were those of the impoverished (2 Cor. 8:9). The Son of man did not even have a place to lay his head (Mt. 8:20). Did these meager conditions reflect God's lack of fidelity?

Paul frequently was in situations where he lacked material prosperity (2 Cor. 11:27). In addition, he was afflicted with a terrible physical malady (2 Cor. 12:7). Surely it will not be suggested that these difficulties were the result of the apostle's evil way of life.

Misunderstood Texts: What Does God Promise?

Without a doubt, there are biblical passages that promise prosperity and well-being, in **some sense**, to those who are faithful to God.

When the nation of Israel left Egypt, Jehovah informed them: "I will put on you none of the diseases which I have put on the Egyptians: for I am Jehovah who heals you" (Ex 15:26). And Isaiah declared that "by [Christ's] stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:5).

Solomon affirmed that the one who honors God with his substance, with his firstfruits, will have overflowing prosperity (Prov. 3:9-10), and Malachi described the Lord as opening the "windows of heaven" and pouring out a blessing too bountiful to receive (Mal. 3:10).

How are these passages to be explained? There are a number of scriptural truths that will help bring balance to this oft misunderstood subject.

Principles of Well-Being

Death was visited upon man because of his transgression of divine law (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12). In this earthly environment, therefore, humanity will never be exempt from sickness and death.

Be that as it may, there are principles within sacred Scripture that will enhance longevity as a general rule.

There were many sound principles in the Mosaic code that facilitated the good health that Israel generally enjoyed. Dr. S. I. McMillen has discussed this theme in his book, *None of These Diseases* (Revell, 1963). See also our chapter, "The God Who Heals," in *The Human Body — Accident or Design?*.

As a rule, it is assumed that parental love will motivate mothers and fathers to train their children in sound health principles, so that it "may be well" with them, and that they "may live long upon the earth" (Eph. 6:3).

This certainly does not mean, though, that the Christian's children are immune to illness, or will never die prematurely. This is a **principle** — not an inflexible law.

The proverb cited above (Prov. 3:9-10) contains a secluded truth supplied by the subsequent context. Derek Kidner has observed that generously giving to God, of one's **first** and best, in "the face of material pressures" is, in truth, a test of faith, and is a vivid commentary on a man's character (*Proverbs*, 1964, Tyndale Press).

Such a person, who so selflessly serves God, will be honor-bound to treat his fellows fairly. The practice of noble ethics in business (discussed in vv. 27ff) will generate respect, and rebound to the righteous man's personal prosperity.

Again, though, this is not an iron-solid rule. Obviously, there will be times when the generous and honest Christian becomes the victim of those who take advantage of him. Such cases, however, do not invalidate the principle.

The Use of Figurative Language

The Bible abounds with figures of speech. Hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) is common (cf. Jn. 21:25), and metonymy (one thing put for another) is a frequent technical device. In his classic book, *Hermeneutics*, D. R. Dungan consumed more than forty pages in discussing this latter figure alone.

How does an understanding of this type of expression fit into our discussion?

There are occasions in scripture when **spiritual** concepts are conveyed in physical or material terms. A failure to recognize this teaching mode can result in the misinterpretation of important biblical texts.

When Isaiah declared that “healing” would result from the benefits of Jesus’ death, he was not speaking of **physical healing**, but a healing (forgiveness) from sin, as the immediate context reveals (Is. 53:5-6 — note “transgressions,” “iniquities”), and as was confirmed by Peter (see 1 Pet. 2:24-25).

The prophet Joel spoke of “those days” when Jehovah would pour out his Spirit, and supernatural phenomena would result (Joel 2:28-30). In Acts 2, Peter informed his Hebrew auditors that the events of that day (the apostles being overwhelmed by the Spirit’s power — Acts 2:4; 1:5) were a fulfillment of Joel’s oracle (Acts 2:16).

This was the commencement of the Christian age.

In connection with this wonderful era, Joel announced that “the mountains shall drop down sweet wine and the hills shall flow with milk,” etc. (Joel 3:18ff). The prosperity here described is not an agricultural boon. Rather, the **material** is used to depict the **spiritual**.

Those who attempt to literalize all the prosperity passages should take note of this idiom.

A survey of the terms “rich” and “riches,” as used in the New Testament, will demonstrate that these words are employed far more frequently of spiritual prosperity than they are of material wealth.

The Mysteries of Providence

We do not deny that God blesses his people in a physical and material way, consistent with his own will, by means of his providential activity upon the earth.

God had mercy on Epaphroditus, who had been “sick to the point of death” (Phil. 2:25-27) — with apparently no miracle involved.

This does not mean, though, that every child of God will recover from terminal conditions. To draw general conclusions from isolated Bible examples can lead to a variety of errors.

The Lord providentially directed his ravens to provide Elijah with bread (1 Kgs. 17:4, 6), and he has urged us to petition him for our daily sustenance (Mt. 6:11), but that does not mean that the child of God will never be bereft of food. He may be in need due to self-sacrifice, persecution, natural disaster, or plain laziness (see: 2 Cor. 11:27; Acts 11:28; 27:21; 2 Thes. 3:10).

One’s level of physical or material well-being, or lack thereof, is:

- Not a reflection upon God’s ability or his concern;
- And such is not the measure of a person’s standing before the Lord.

A Concluding Point

There is a strong argument that may be made against the position being reviewed, that almost seems too obvious to mention.

If it were the case that an inflexible rule obtains, in the divine order of things, that spirituality produces health and wealth, the following would clearly result.

Little children, the purest of earth's society, would never get sick and die; yet, in many third-world nations, sweet children starve, their bodies are racked with disease and they prematurely go to God.

The wicked of the earth generally are more prosperous than the godly, and the righteous do not significantly outlive the non-Christian population.

If wealth was the direct result of becoming a Christian, men would be prone to accept the gospel, not because of their convictions regarding God's Son, but merely out of materialistic self-interest. Such would bring no honor to either the Creator or the creature. The Almighty expects motives nobler than this.

One should never allow life's difficulties to distort his view of God.

Covetousness Versus Contentment

You Are Not Yet Home

“Are we there yet?”

How do parents handle this situation? They usually start by explaining that the trip is going to take some time while reassuring children that they are in fact going to the beach. Perhaps parents entertain the kids with stories from previous trips or specific plans of fun things to do. But even as parents and older siblings do this, they themselves begin to get restless. Thinking about the ocean can heighten the longing all the more.

As Christians we often experience discontentment by forgetting that we’re not “there” yet. We are moving ahead to our destination and must not settle at the rest stop. To forget our true journey’s end would leave us in a disappointing place. But in this ultimate road trip to our new home, God is leading us to a new city. He has given us a taste of this new world through the Holy Spirit. We have these precious promises laid before us to remind us that we are not yet home. Knowing that we are passing through and where we are going allows us to be content in the world. We are like pilgrims making our way to another land.

We Are Pilgrims

Earlier we looked at Hebrews 13, where God reminds his people that they are to be content with what he has given them rather than grumbling, coveting, and worrying: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (13:5). You’ll notice that the writer references something that God has said elsewhere in his Word. The quoted passage is Joshua 1:5. Joshua was preparing to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. The sustaining truth for these believers in their wilderness walk was the fact that God would not leave them.

The writer of Hebrews, seizing upon the historical narrative, makes his point about contentment. Likening our Christian experience to a journey through the wilderness, he urges believers to be content with what they have. This recapitulation of the believer's journey to the Promised Land is a regular theme in Hebrews. The writer calls our destination "rest" (4:11), "a city" that God has built, "a better country . . . a heavenly one" (11:16), "the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22), "heaven" (12:23), "a kingdom" (12:28), and "the city that is to come" (13:14).

As we believers are marching resolutely toward our heavenly country, God is with us and protects us. Quoting from a couple of familiar psalms, the writer of Hebrews continues,

So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?" (13:6)

We are not left alone as pilgrims. As we go on in faith, God goes on with us. Learning from the errors of the many faithless Israelites, we are reminded to continue in faith, that we may enter that rest (Heb. 4:11).

We Have a Dual Citizenship

With such an emphasis on where we are going, an objection may be leveled, "Do Christians live in an ethereal world detached from the pressing realities of everyday life?" Definitely not! We have work to do here. Simon Kistemaker comments:

Christians are to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13–14). Wherever God in his providence has placed them, they are to be Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). They are to represent Christ by boldly speaking the Word he has given them. Yet they know the brevity of life and the fleeting nature of this world. Therefore, they look and long for their eternal dwelling: "a city that is to come."

This definitely presents a tension. We are to be living faithfully now—trusting in God's promises, resting in God himself—while looking ahead to where we are going. In his letter to the Philippian church the apostle Paul reminded his readers of the believer's ultimate loyalty and longing: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20–21).

Here we can see both the loyalty (our citizenship is in heaven) and the longing (we await our coming Savior) that mark our dual citizenship. We are citizens of heaven, and we live here as citizens of this world. Ralph Martin explains:

The apostle here indicates the double allegiance of the Philippian Christians. As Roman subjects they are citizens of the far distant, capital city of Rome, where the emperor has his residence. As servants of “another king, one called Jesus” (Acts 17:7), they are citizens of that capital city, where the King of kings has his domicile, and whose advent to establish his reign on this earth and to rescue his people (1 Thess. 1:10) is awaited. Here on earth, meanwhile, they are resident aliens who dwell temporarily in a foreign country, but have their citizenship elsewhere.

Like Christian in Bunyan’s classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, we are passing through, making our way to the Celestial City.

This dual citizenship informs our identity; it shows our orientation. In the same section of Philippians 3, Paul contrasts true and false worship by showing that there are those whose “god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (3:19). The natural religious disposition of humanity is orientated around this world. It is no surprise, then, that at the very center of their being, “where their life finds its direction, where attitudes and tendencies are fashioned which subsequently influence decisions and govern likes and dislikes—at this vital centre the world and its ways are the whole object of attention,” says J. A. Motyer. “The mind is set upon earth.” In contrast to this, says Paul, we are citizens of heaven. In fact, our minds and our affections are calibrated by heaven’s King, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are awaiting his return even as we aim to live faithfully for him.

Contentment in God Is Characteristic of This Dual Citizenship

After drawing this key distinction about our identity and orientation, Paul makes a startling statement in the next chapter: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). Often this verse is torn from its context and its meaning is inflated. It becomes a blank check for whatever we want. But as Nathan Busenitz points out:

The irony is that, by taking this verse out of context, many people have actually turned it on its head—making it mean the opposite of what it actually means. They have turned it into a slogan of personal empowerment—a declaration of self-achievement, ambition, and accomplishment. For many, this verse has been trivialized into some sort of motivating motto for material prosperity, career advancement, or athletic success.

However, the context of the passage is about contentment. The verse is not about everything going well but about trusting God when things don't go well. It's not about being rich and happy but about being content whether you are rich or poor.

In other words, what is so striking about Philippians 4:13 is not that we can achieve everything we wish for but that God enables self-centered people to find their identity, joy, and purpose in him rather than themselves. In all that we do, he makes us content in him.

Circumstances That Unsettle Us

We are well aware of times when we find ourselves unsettled and knocked a bit off balance. Like a rush of dizziness when we get up too quickly, rapidly changing circumstances can leave us reaching for something stable. This is when our dual citizenship can refresh and remind us of who we are and where we are going. There is a reorienting stability in the truth that we are not yet home. Let me highlight a number of situations and show how we can find our way back to contentment by remembering the truth that we are not home.

The Sting of Broken Relationships

Few things are more painful than having a meaningful relationship broken. When we've formed close personal bonds with people, the sting is particularly acute. Sadly, even in the church Christians experience this sting. This is especially troubling because two important requirements for membership are acknowledging personal sin and humbly seeking peace and unity.

We must remember that we are not the first to experience this. David knew this firsthand.

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.
We used to take sweet counsel together;
within God's house we walked in the throng. (Ps. 55:12–14)

It was also true of the greater David, Jesus Christ. Remember, our Lord was betrayed by one of his own disciples. We are certainly not promised a better reception than our Lord received, and we should not be surprised when we encounter divisions.

We must also remember that we are heading to a place where there will be no more painful breaches and all past hurts will be properly healed. The hymn “Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand” captures it well:

O then what raptured greetings
On Canaan’s happy shore;
What knitting severed friendships up,
Where partings are no more!
Then eyes with joy shall sparkle,
That brimmed with tears of late;
Orphans no longer fatherless,
Nor widows desolate.

When the sting of broken relationships unsettles us, we can remember what Christ went through and where he is taking us. He is taking his people to a new city where all things—even relationships—are restored.

The Moral Revolution

This is not our home. For centuries Christians have lived in communities that did not welcome them, however they survived and the gospel thrived. Remember the words of the writer of Hebrews as he tried to encourage a community of believers feeling the pinch of the culture around them: “Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

As Christians we have the responsibility (and privilege) to be greatly burdened for our neighbors (Matt. 9:35–37), jealous for our King (Matt. 6:9–10), and longing for the city to come (Heb. 13:14). Often this last one rattles our contentment. Even through this moral revolution, God is gracious to lift our eyes above the headlines to see the promised gates of the Celestial City. Here we have no abiding city. Everything here has an expiration date; it is only a matter of time before it is gone.

We have to remember this as Christians living in the West (or anywhere else in the world). While I may have a physical address where I lay my head at night, I am not home, because we as Christians seek the city that is to come. This seeking is an ongoing, intentional pursuit. It is to characterize our lives and fuel our contentment. We are looking ahead to the city that will come down from heaven where we will dwell with God and all his blood-bought saints forever! There will be no feelings of being unwelcome there when we are gathered round the great table to enjoy feasting and fellowship with the church. Christ will be there, ruling and reigning with all his people giving themselves to him freely (Revelation 21–22).

In a strange twist of providence, the moral revolution that knocks the wind out of us can also serve to put wind in our sails. By making us feel like we are not home, it reminds us of our true home. What a surprising providence and lesson in the school of contentment!

The Prosperity of the Wicked

It is a perennial temptation to become discontent when things are not going as well as we might prefer, but this becomes more pronounced when we see unbelievers seemingly doing better than we are. Something seems to be off in our salvation equation. They don't love God, but they appear to be doing great. I love God, and my life is much harder.

This is not a new temptation for believers. The psalmist wrote,

For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Ps. 73:3)

In fact, he says that this observation was such a temptation that he almost slipped himself.

Certainly, you have felt this temptation as well. How do you deal with it? Perspective is key. Remember that as a believer you are simply passing through and are headed to the new and perfect city. But for an unbeliever this is everything. There is nothing better because there is nothing further. Friends, our response to seeing unbelievers prosper should not be envy but pity and compassion. This is all the heaven they will ever have, and this is all the hell you will ever have. Look ahead and interpret things in light of the end, and you will find yourself made more content even though you lack and others overflow. Yours is coming, and it will be more and far better than you could ever have envied here on earth!

Persecution

As we have seen, God often uses surprising means to loosen our grip on this world and refasten our grip on him. He takes away our comforts to make us take comfort in him. On occasion he uses persecution to bring this about. Persecution, in general terms, is opposition to believers and their message. It can be expressed mildly (dirty looks, rudeness, etc.) or more intensely (ostracizing, prison, or even death). Jesus told us to expect this; if the world persecuted him, it will persecute his followers (John 15:20). Peter, writing from the context of intense persecution, reminded fellow believers to not be surprised by the fiery trial that awaited them (1 Pet. 4:12). This is part of what it means to count the cost.

Peter's reminder is also grace. Doesn't this sound strange? It is grace because it reminds us of who we are and where we are going. When we are undergoing persecution, we are reminded of the aroma of grace. No matter how bad the suffering, we should remember it is never as great as our sin deserves. After all, if it were not for God's saving grace, we would not be receiving the stroke and might even be the ones giving it. Further, it reminds us of the age to come. Suffering is purposeful, and it produces glory (2 Cor. 4:17).

Chase Contentment in Light of the End

What we are after as Christians is to fully embrace Christ and everything he has earned for us. Doing this displaces our discontentment and settles us upon him. To that end, I have found the following four practices immensely helpful on a daily basis.

Take a Look Around

Look around and see your brothers and sisters in Christ. See some struggling, and pray for them. See others doing well, and rejoice for them. Taking our eyes off ourselves and looking at others can remind us of how God is working in the lives of his people.

Take a Look Back

Do you remember what it was like before you came to Christ? Paul describes our former state as being without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12). When the message of the gospel came to us and was united with faith, a new world was opened to us. It was like going from two-dimensional in black and white to three-dimensional in living color! God had truly opened our eyes and captivated our longings with his grace. We were taught to rest in him. Like looking at old wedding pictures, remember that day with all its excitement, hope, and joy. And then let it fuel contentment in the present, knowing that by God's grace you will endure until the end.

Take a Look Ahead

Much of this chapter has been looking ahead, so I urge you to continue doing this, even as you look back and around. Believer, this is not your home. You are headed to a new world where righteousness dwells and joys are yours forevermore (Ps. 16:11).

Take a Look at Christ

Looking upon Christ and the glorious promises that he has secured for you will bring you to a place of contentment. Charles Spurgeon makes this point with vivid contrast:

The believer is like a man in a sailing vessel, well content with the good ship for what it is, and hopeful that it may bear him safely across the sea, willing to put up with all its inconveniences without complaint; but if you ask him whether he would choose to live on board in that narrow cabin, he will tell you that he longs for the time when the harbor shall be in view, and the green fields, and the happy homesteads of his native land.⁸

⁸ Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

A Four-Dimensional World

Sinclair Ferguson helpfully describes contentment in God as four dimensions of knowing Christ.

Dimension 1. “Everything we need and everything we lack is found in Christ.” When we truly grasp and experience this truth, it is a game changer. Echoing Edwards, Ferguson warns against merely having the “notion” of this sufficiency in Christ. Too many “have the idea, but the reality does not touch our affections.” All Christians would say that we are saved by Christ alone, but still they often seek happiness, identity, and purpose elsewhere. When we realize that the gospel has brought us home to God, we realize too that he has brought us there by the all-sufficient Christ.

Dimension 2. “This all-sufficient Christ is with us.” This truth of Christ’s sufficiency is not simply a theory; it is an abiding reality. He comes and abides with us. The force behind the exhortation to be content (Heb. 13:5–6) is the truth that God will never leave nor forsake his people. “The Greek text here contains an entire handful of negatives—bad in English grammar, permissible in Greek, but glorious in theology. The message is: this all-sufficient Lord Jesus is with you; no way will He leave you. This is all you need.” This is powerful truth. We don’t have to look elsewhere, for Christ is with us.

Dimension 3. “We are in this all-sufficient Christ.” This means that we are united to Christ. The union of Christ to his people is a legal and a spiritual union. Legally, we stand on Christ’s merit, and spiritually we enjoy communion with the triune God. To be in Christ means that “we are united to him in the eternal counsel, in the federal union, by his incarnation and through faith.”

Dimension 4. “This all-sufficient Christ is in us.” Though we still sin, we have the privilege of Christ living in us (Gal. 2:20). God the Holy Spirit has come to make his home with us (John 14:17, 20, 23b; 17:23).

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At the beginning of the chapter we asked, “Why should we be content in God?” The answer is threefold: because this is what we were created to be, this is what Christ died to make us, and this is the privilege of those who are indwelt by God the Spirit. God’s design for us to be captivated and calibrated by his glory was once lost because of sin, but now has been won through the gospel. We become content by trusting in the God who is content.⁹

⁹ Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

The Curse of Covetousness

By **Wayne Jackson**

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Though many modern critics deny that Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, I believe that a strong case can be made for his authorship. In this book, the wisest king of Israel explored the various avenues that men pursue in their quest for happiness.

One area of particular interest was that of **material wealth**.

Many believe that if a man accumulates wealth, he can be contented. The richest man of the antique world repudiated that assumption!

On Riches Kept

The wise man declared that a grievous evil that he observed was “riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt” (Eccl. 5:13). He concluded his discussion by suggesting that the covetous man spends his days in darkness. In other words, in gloom and misery.

Why would money and wealth cause someone to become depressed?

He is often **suspicious** that those who befriend him, suspecting base motives. He frequently **worries** over what will happen to his fortune after he is dead.

Solomon concluded that the covetous man is sore vexed and is consumed with **sickness and anger** (Eccl. 5:17).

This inspired passage suggests that those who hoard money rather than using it wisely as stewards of Heaven's kingdom will be afflicted with sorrow and sickness.

Covetousness and Physical Health

Some years ago, Dr. Irene Hickman, an associate professor of psychology at California State University, prepared a report based on hundreds of case studies reported in various medical journals. Dr. Hickman declared that nine out of ten illnesses in this country are **money related**.

She stated that "economic insecurity and preoccupation with making more and more money is a national illness within itself." Professor Hickman asserted that the average income in America is adequate to house, clothe, and feed our families. But our citizenry is **obsessed with wanting more and more luxuries**.

In his fascinating book, *None Of These Diseases*, Dr. S. I. McMillen tells the story of John D. Rockefeller. As a youngster, Rockefeller was a strong and husky farm lad. But he drove himself to make money.

At thirty-three, he was a millionaire. At forty-three, he controlled the largest business in the world. At fifty-three, he was the world's richest person. By then, though, he was but a shell of a man.

He developed a condition called **alopecia**, where the hair falls out. It was said that he looked like a mummy.

His income was \$1 million a week, but his digestion was so bad that he could eat only milk and crackers. He was despised by many, upon whom he had trampled in his climb to success. He was immersed in **anxiety**. He couldn't sleep. He was a wreck.

Here was a man whose life seemed to be over at fifty-three. It was generally agreed that he could scarcely live more than a year or so. Many newspapers already had his obituary on file, ready for his imminent demise.

But something dramatic happened. One night it suddenly dawned upon Mr. Rockefeller that he could take none of his treasures with him to the grave. After all, funeral shrouds have no pockets.

So he made the decision to start **helping others** with his great fortune. He poured millions of dollars into hospitals, universities, and missions. He became interested in the underprivileged. He provided vast sums for medical research. His contributions aided in the discovery of penicillin. His focus of interest turned from inward to outward.

As a result of this change in disposition, something marvelous began to occur in the physical life of John D. Rockefeller. He could sleep again. His digestion improved. Rockefeller actually began to **enjoy living**.

And note this. He did not die at fifty-four, nor even at sixty-four. Rather, he lived to the ripe old age of **ninety-eight years!**

Christ Teaching on Covetousness

There was an interesting case chronicled in one of the Lord's parables (Lk. 12:16ff). It had to do with a certain rich man whose land produced such a bountiful harvest that his barns could not contain it.

But he had utterly no concern for others. Instead, he conceived grand plans for hoarding it all.

His philosophy was "get all you can, and can all you get." His daily consolation seemed to be, "Soul, take it easy. You have vast possessions laid up for many years. Eat, drink, and be merry."

He omitted the final phrase, “for tomorrow you die,” in that well-known saying. He had no plans of dying tomorrow!

But where men propose, God can dispose. His observant Creator said: “You fool, this night your soul is required of you” (Lk. 12:20).

There is an interesting turn to this rebuke in the Greek text, reflected in the footnote of the American Standard Version. A possible rendition is: “This night **they** shall require your soul.” The impersonal form may suggest that the very possessions that the rich man treasured were his undoing!

Paul affirmed that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil: which some reaching after have been led astray from the faith, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:10).

Material prosperity can be a great blessing if employed in the service of God.

But covetousness is a curse everyone should avoid (cf. Lk. 12:15).

How Is the Battle Plan Executed?

If you were Satan, how would you labor to make people discontent? You would have to get them to distrust God as the one who can truly meet their needs. And then you would have to build their hopes to find happiness, purpose, identity, and satisfaction in things that cannot bear the freight of humanity's need. If contentment is learned by resting in what we cannot see, discontentment results from seeking rest in physical things. The Evil One's tactic appeals to our desire to assess the benefit of something by what we see. It appeals to our own perception of need and desire for pleasure. This was the tactical plan of Genesis 3, and it is the ongoing plan today. Remember, Eve saw that the fruit was a delight to her eyes (Gen. 3:6). Satan hasn't needed to contrive a new tactical plan; the old one is working just fine.

C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* is an extended dialogue between Screwtape, a senior demon, and his young nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter. Screwtape is passing on advice for ruining people; or, we might say, making them discontent:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's [i.e., God's] ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is his invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. . . . There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least—sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be twisted before it's any use to us.

This work of twisting and alluring is called temptation. However, when we talk about temptation, there is often confusion about where the temptation comes from. Is it from people and things or is it from within?

Using language that represents Satan's overarching strategy for promoting disobedience, John Owen shows us that the battleground is in the heart and mind. This is where the work is done. How does it work? Owen: "Temptation may suggest evil to the heart, or draw out the evil that is already there. It is also a temptation to a man if something is by any means able to distract him from his communion with God, or the consistent universal obedience that is required of him."

Temptation draws us away from obedience to God. This is another way of saying temptation is about drawing us away from worshiping God. And if the heart of worship is rejoicing in God's matchless worth, **temptation draws the heart into discontentment**. You can see the deceptive fingerprints of the Serpent here. Temptation aims to make us discontent in God by flirtatiously luring us to pursue contentment in created things instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:25). We are thereby tempted away from the only true source of contentment. This vicious cycle only gets worse and our condition more and more bleak as the heart is trained to turn away from God. The result is a heart that is locked in the dungeon of discontentment.

This is basically what we read in the first chapter of James:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (1:13–15)

Notice that it is not God who tempts us, but we are tempted from within. Our desires or lusts lure and entice us. James uses picturesque language to make this point. The word translated "lured" is a hunting term used of luring an animal into a trap. The trap is baited and the animal is lured in. The term translated "enticed" is a fishing term that describes catching a fish with bait. But notice how the luring and enticing actually work: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." It is our desire or our lust that makes the bait look good. We want something. We feel like we need something. We crave something, and so we are susceptible to temptation.

We saw in Genesis 3 that Eve's heart desired something. She was tempted by a promise of more. She lusted after the shiny wrappers that falsely promised life, satisfaction, and liberty. But like cheap holiday candy in slick packaging, the thing so much hyped and so much desired sorely disappointed. **False promises only leave us wanting more. They cannot deliver.**

This is the way temptations work. They are personal rather than universal. Each heart is filled with desires and has its own vulnerabilities. What is universal is the desire to be content, and so we are lured and enticed by created things, though not necessarily the same things.¹⁰

¹⁰ Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

THE “S” WORD

We have dragged down the idea of surrender and of sacrifice,
we have taken the life out of the words
and made them mean something sad and weary and despicable;
in the Bible they mean the very opposite.

— Oswald Chambers

The soul is but a hollow which God fills.

— C. S. Lewis

A Mysterious Connection

The “S” word. For much of my life, I found myself subconsciously treating it like a swear word — something to avoid dwelling upon if I could help it. The “S” word is a basic teaching of Jesus Christ, but it is a topic you never see on top of the Christian book bestseller charts. The church gives lip service to the “S” word, but we have a hard time actually living it out in our daily lives. The word I am speaking of is, of course, *surrender*.

Surrender means that I give up my interests, agenda, priorities, and needs and hand them all over to Jesus Christ. This deliberate, decisive action is at the heart of what discipleship is all about. Jesus tells us so in Mark 8:34 – 35, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” As I read this passage, I can’t help but think that Jesus would have made a lousy salesman or marketing exec. Notice the sobering nature of the verbs he uses: deny yourself, take up your cross, follow him to Golgotha, and lose your life. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts Christ’s call in even more stark terms: “When Jesus calls a man he bids him ‘come and die.’ ”

Since most of us are not going to die martyrs’ deaths, the apostle Paul helps us get practical by urging us to offer up ourselves as “living sacrifices” to God. In Judaism, a sacrifice was a most sacred act performed to symbolize the cost of sin and our need for atonement. A sacrificed animal was killed and cut into pieces, and then parts were thrown into a fire. The burnt pieces were placed on the altar and offered to God by the offender or the priest. Therefore, to become a living sacrifice, I figuratively throw myself into the fire and then place the remnants on the altar as an offering. Seen in this light, surrender is more than just giving up sin; it is giving up any claim I have to myself.

Burnt offerings. Living sacrifices. Carrying crosses. That’s tough stuff. Surrender ends up sounding like something akin to a trip to the dentist for a root canal — necessary, but utterly painful. Since pain is something we instinctively avoid, it is not surprising that surrender becomes much like a swear word to us.

Lessons from Punxsutawney

My decade-long search for joy is reminiscent of the journey that Phil Connors takes in the 1993 romantic comedy *Groundhog Day*. In the film, TV weatherman Connors arrives in the small Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney to report on the annual Groundhog Day festivities. After a sudden snowstorm forces the cynical and unbearable Connors and his crew to stay in town an extra night, Phil wakes up the next morning to discover that something very strange has happened. Déjà vu — it's Groundhog Day all over again. When the same thing happens on the following day and then the next, Phil realizes that he is helplessly stuck, reliving the second day of February over and over and over in Punxsutawney.

Phil is initially convinced he is going crazy. But after he gets used to the situation, he adapts and actually begins to enjoy himself. After all, since there are no long-term consequences to his actions, he can do whatever he pleases. Munching down a table full of high-calorie desserts. Chasing after women. Stealing money. Taking the police on a wild-goose chase around town. Anything goes, because when he wakes up the next morning, it is as if nothing has happened. Yet as time goes on, Phil realizes that none of these guilty pleasures satisfy him. So, he sets his sights on conquering his coworker, Rita. After she sees through his slick romancing attempts day after day, however, he ends up completely hopeless.

As the months drag on, his attitude becomes bleaker and bleaker. In the monotony of constantly reliving the same day, he begins to lose all reason to live — so much so that he tries to take his own life several times. But no matter what he does to himself, Phil wakes up the next morning “without a dent in the fender” and as healthy as ever.

As the story continues, Connors finally comes to the end of himself. Hitting rock bottom, he slowly begins a transformation into a new man. After a lifetime of selfishness and cynicism, he realizes that pursuing his own selfish interests only leads him to despair. However, when he forgets about himself and lives for others, life begins to have a new purpose and hope.

Groundhog Day may be intended as a heartwarming, fun film, but I consider it more than that: it is a vivid reminder of a fundamental Christian truth — humans are incapable of experiencing meaning and joy unless we fully give up our claim to ourselves and live for Christ and others around us...

The intimate connection between surrender and joy was hard for me to believe initially. After all, for most of my life, the two almost seemed as if they belonged on opposite sides of the faith spectrum. Surrender was gritty — obedience, discipleship, and the cross; joy was about delight — peace, celebration, and hope. But as I started to consider what joy really is — the nature of God flowing through my spiritual bloodstream — then the mystery not only started to make sense, but emerged as the only real way to experience joy that lasts.

Consider, after all, the parallels with an actual human circulatory system. When a person has high levels of cholesterol, a hard, pasty substance forms on the artery walls and slowly narrows the passageway of the arteries. Over a period of years, the buildup can become so severe that a clot forms and prevents the blood from flowing through — leading to a heart attack. Just as cholesterol can block the blood flow into my heart, my claim to myself obstructs the Holy Spirit from working in my life. However, when I surrender all, then my spiritual arteries are opened, so to speak, and his joy is able to flow abundantly through me.

Jesus Christ backs this up when he delivers his great promise of joy in John 15:11: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Notice that his promise doesn’t stand on its own, however. **Jesus links his promise of joy to “this” — the sermon he has delivered in the first fourteen verses of the chapter. When you look at what Jesus has been talking about in this passage, his message amounts to call to all-out surrender — remain true and steadfast in him and live in full obedience to his Word.** Seen in light of John 15, joy is not a “Shangri La,” an elusive, mystical destination reserved for spiritual gurus. Instead, joy is the natural result of any believer who earnestly follows Christ’s commands.

Jesus wasn’t just pushing off the cause-and-effect nature of surrender and joy to his followers either. Hebrews 12:2 tells us, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross.” Yes, even Jesus Christ himself experienced joy as he sacrificed himself for the sins of the world.

Joy’s dependence on surrender closely parallels grace’s dependence on repentance. Both grace and joy require a deliberate action in order to receive them: to accept God’s grace, I repent; to accept his joy, I surrender. On first take, repentance and surrender sound an awful lot like strict demands from an overbearing Lord. Nothing, however, is further from the truth. C. S. Lewis points out that repentance “is not something God demands of you before He will take you back . . . it is simply a description of what going back is like.” In the same way, when we understand what joy really is, the need for surrender becomes rather obvious: God’s joy is only possible to experience when I get rid of all the personal stuff in its way.

Similarly, Christ’s joy can’t be poured into a life filled with personal leftovers.

In the end, I discovered that surrender is not a miserable act at all. Instead, it becomes my way out of misery. Rather than giving up my identity, surrender actually enhances it. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, when God talks about my losing myself, he only means abandoning the clamor of self-will; once I have done that, he really gives me back all my personality, and he promises that when I am wholly his, I will be more myself than ever. That’s the blessed promise of joy...

If I had been alive during Jesus’ earthly ministry and followed him around, I am sure I would have considered Peter to be my role model for living a surrendered life. Peter, after all, was the gung-ho disciple, the most loyal and diehard of them all. He was the only one of the twelve who attempted to walk on the water toward Jesus. He was the first disciple to proclaim Jesus as the “Son of God.” The ever-confident Peter told Jesus just before his arrest, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Matt. 26:35). And yet, hours after making that bold statement, Peter failed miserably; his brash talk and attitude drowned in a pool of bitter tears. Peter had not yet reached the point where he was willing to give himself up fully to God.

Peter was what I call a “tweener” during that season of his life. A tweener is a believer who lives an in-between stage — wanting to live for Christ, but either unwilling to hand over all of oneself or feeling unable to do so.

Looking at the church today, I believe it is filled with far too many tweeners. We can boldly sing the praise song “I Surrender All” in a worship service, all the while having no clue whatsoever of the implications of what we are singing about. Oswald Chambers points out that “there is no bigger word and no word made more shallow than surrender. To say ‘I surrender all’ may be blathering sentiment, or it may be the deep passionate utterance of the life.”

“Just how *absolute* is absolute surrender?” we ask. After all, Jesus commands me to take up my cross and follow him. However, in one sense, this call cannot be taken literally — I am not going to pick up an actual wooden cross and carry it down around the town square to my crucifixion. As a result, I often found it easy to unconsciously treat Jesus’ symbolism as an excuse to water down the message. His call became mere sentiment. Consequently, I ended up twisting Paul’s idea of a “living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” into my idea of a “convenient sacrifice, wholly pleasing to myself.”

But when Jesus calls me to surrender everything to him, he means it. He wants us to listen, obey, and then get on with it. Bonhoeffer illustrates this point through a simple story. Suppose a father sends his son off to bed. The boy knows exactly what the intentions of his father are, but imagine the child rationalizing the way we often do with God. He might argue something like this: “My dad tells me to go to bed, but what he really means is that I am sleepy, and he does not want me to be tired. However, I can overcome my tiredness just as well if I go out and play. So, though dad tells me to go to bed, he really is saying: ‘Go out and play.’ ”

The rich young ruler in Mark 10 is one tweener who clearly understood the implications of Jesus’ specific call to him: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (v. 21). Judging by the man’s reaction, we can be certain that he knew exactly what Jesus was calling him to do. Jesus was not being an idealist, he was being extremely practical. Christ knew this specific, decisive action was the only thing that would cause true surrender in the man’s heart. Sadly, the young ruler rides joylessly away, realizing that he was not prepared to truly abandon everything he had for Christ.

Besides treating Christ’s words as an ideal, tweeners can also reduce the impact of Jesus’ call by giving only part of themselves to Christ. The Sunday morning chorus “I Surrender All” becomes “I Surrender Parts” by the afternoon, as we pick and choose what compartments of our lives we will give up.

Some tweeners, however, experience an altogether opposite reaction. Rather than treating Christ’s call lightly or reducing it, they become so overwhelmed that they feel powerless to actually pull it off. Surrender may be the journey to joy, but to this tweener, it sounds like an impassible mountain ascent.

Turning back to the Gospels, Christ himself says in Matthew 11:30, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Perhaps Christ is just being overly optimistic. Or perhaps he is driving at a key truth of surrender: I have to make a decision on my own to surrender everything to him. But I am *not* alone in actually carrying it out. God accomplishes the surrender in our lives as we are open to him. We achieve it in his strength. As Hebrews 11:34 says, we gain strength in weakness as we empty ourselves for him — not only in our hearts but in our livelihoods as well.¹¹

¹¹ Wagner, R. (2009). [The myth of happiness](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Providence and Contentment

Let's think about the doctrine of providence in reference to our understanding of contentment. You may recall that contentment is the inward, gracious, quiet spirit that joyfully rests in God's providence. This plays out in Scripture in several ways. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5). How does this text relate to God's providence? When the Bible says be content with what you have, it basically is saying, "Be content with what God has given you." In other words, rest in God's providence. This becomes pivotal to our pursuit of contentment.

If we are going to recover the experience of Christian contentment, we must recover the doctrine of God's providence. According to the writer of Hebrews, the two are inextricably linked. A heart that is content is a heart that rests in God's providence. To put it another way, the inward work of grace in believers gives them eyes to see and interpret what is happening in the world around them. Because the heart has been tuned by grace, is being filled with divine love, and is learning contentment, it rests in God's providence.

Since this doctrine is often underemphasized, it would be helpful to think through some aspects of providence with an eye toward our contentment in God.

Providence Comes from a Good God

God's providence extends to everything and you cannot thwart it. But what kind of God stands behind this providence? Is he good or malicious? How are we to understand our circumstances in light of who God is? These are key questions that must be answered before we can rest in the providence of God. In fact, doubting God's goodness is often a veiled symptom of discontentment. Like the wandering Israelites in the wilderness, we don't connect the dots and see that grumbling about our circumstances is grumbling about God's character.

The Bible teaches us that in addition to being all-powerful, God is both good and wise. The psalmist prayed, "You are good and do good" (Ps. 119:68). In fact, God's goodness is meant to evoke our praise (Ps. 107:1). We are to look at who God is and then evaluate what he does. Therefore, whatever we think about our circumstances, we must remember that no matter what, God is good and he has—for some reason, often unknown to us—allowed these things to come to pass. Resting in God's providence is resting in a good God.

Providence Comes from a Wise God

We can become restless and even question God’s wisdom when events just don’t seem to add up or another path looks more favorable. This is often the biggest struggle for me. So, I have to remember at such times that this God who stands behind all his works of providence is no less powerful, good, and wise. And this means that if another option were truly better, he would have ensured that it happened.

This is where we must remember that we are living in a post–Genesis 3 world. This world is cursed because of sin. It is a broken world—a world with death, disease, and disaster. Many of the things that happen in this world directly contradict what the Bible reveals as God’s will for morality and life. Does this mean that these things are a surprise to God? Of course not. Does it mean that God is the author of evil? No, definitely not. Then how can God be said to be sovereign over everything and yet not be responsible for the evil that people commit or the disaster that people endure? The simple answer is that these things are above our mental pay grade. They are beyond our understanding—but not beyond God’s. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children” (Deut. 29:29).

The Bible indicates that God stands behind all good in such a way that he is the primary cause of it, and therefore he is to receive glory for and through it (cf. James 1:17). However, he stands behind evil, not in a primary sense but in a secondary sense. People do what they want to do, and God, in his wisdom and power, is able to work these things together for his glory and our good. The most obvious example of this is the cross of Jesus Christ. God predestined it to occur, but those who committed the crime were responsible for the action (Acts 2:22–23). God is sovereign and men are responsible. God works from within a broken system to glorify himself and do good to people.

When we settle in our minds the issue that God is good and wise, we can truly rest in his providence. This means we can be content whether things go our way or God seems to have gone against what we have planned. We calm our hearts and rest in him. We sit still, knowing that he is the all-powerful, good, and wise God.¹²

¹² Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Contentment Comes from the Inside Out

Think with me about Paul and Silas sitting in a Philippian jail. The authorities had ordered them to be bound in the “inner prison” or dungeon, as we might say. Their feet were fastened in the stocks. These were the same stocks often used to torture prisoners in the ancient world. But to get an accurate picture we must remember how Paul and Silas got there.

The book of Acts tells us that earlier in the day, they were preaching the gospel in the town of Philippi and seeing fruit. In fact, the impact of their preaching was such that the local industry of fortune-tellers feared for their business. Feeling desperate, they attacked Paul and Silas and dragged them into court. Soon a mob of people began physically attacking them, and the rulers tore the evangelists’ clothes, stripped them naked, and ordered that they be beaten with rods. After Paul and Silas had been sufficiently beaten, the magistrates ordered that they be thrown into the dungeon and locked in the stocks (Acts 16:19–24).

By all accounts this was a rough day. If there was ever a day when we would expect Paul to complain or at least grumble a bit, this was it. But we don’t see that at all. In fact, we see quite the opposite. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

What we read in verse 25 is astounding in light of what we read in verse 24. Paul and Silas, after being stripped and publicly beaten with rods, were hauled off to prison and thrown into the dark, musty basement where they were fastened in the stocks. If this were a movie, the camera would zoom in on the missionaries and then fade out. They would look pitiable. These are horrible circumstances. The film would let us know that a few hours have passed when guards come in to check on the poor, beleaguered evangelists. Expecting to find them either dead or groaning, we’d discover them praying and singing hymns to God!

These guys not only had enough strength to live, but they had the will, the desire to sing and pray to God. When we read of them together like this, we can almost see the narrator’s smile as he includes this nugget: “and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:24). I bet they were.

Here’s the million-dollar question: How could people who had been through what they’d been through and then endured the circumstances they were enduring find it in themselves to lead a prayer meeting and a hymn sing? Here’s the simple answer: they were content. Paul says as much in a letter to the church he planted in this same town, **“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need”** (Phil. 4:11–12).

Contentment is not based upon circumstances. It can't be. Paul and Silas were content in some of the worst circumstances imaginable. Their singing in the midst of terrible circumstances shows that contentment works inside out. But doesn't this seem counterintuitive? So often we think that if we could just change our circumstances, we could be happy. We are restless because of what we perceive as difficult circumstances. We focus our attention on our jobs, health, relationships, children's behavior, problems at church, physical appearance, and so on. "If this would just change, then my life would be so much better."

This is where we see that contentment is far more powerful than a change of circumstances. Instead of being sourced on the outside and subject to changing circumstances, biblical contentment comes from within and endures through the spectrum of circumstances. How else can we explain the singing that filled the Philippian dungeon?

This is part of the tuning process that we need to undergo. If at the very outset we misunderstand contentment, then we can't possibly come to fully enjoy its immense blessing. On the other hand, if we realize that at its heart contentment is not primarily about what's outside us but about what's inside of us, we will be well on our way toward learning this lost art.

Contentment Is Quiet

Just as we can learn a lot about people by listening to them talk, we can learn a lot about ourselves by doing the same thing. When you talk about other people, are you generally charitable or complaining? When you discuss your job or church, are you prone to grumble or to emphasize what is good? If you are comfortable enough to cut through the fog of superficial politeness with people and answer the question "How are you doing?" do you tend to be negative? Jesus taught us that what we say comes from our heart (Matt. 12:34). What is in the well comes up in the bucket. If your heart were a body of water, would it be a peaceful lake or a stormy sea? A contented heart showcases itself by not grumbling or complaining (Phil. 2:14).

I should nuance this a bit, because there is a type of biblical complaining that is healthy. I am not saying that we should be numb or insensitive to the difficulties of life. Contentment does not mean ignoring problems or pretending they don't exist. Quite the opposite! A contented spirit is one that realizes the difficulty but can nevertheless rest in God in the midst of it.

Second, contentment does not mean that we don't voice our complaints to God. The Scriptures are full of prayers from godly people who cry out and complain to God (e.g., Pss. 3:4; 34:6; 55:16–17; 77:1; 142:1–3). In fact, we are commanded to cast our cares upon the Lord (1 Pet. 5:7).

The motive for this is that he cares for us. But mark the contrast; there is a difference between complaining to God (“How long, O Lord?”) and complaining about God. The first is supported by an enduring trust that God hears and loves. The second is betrayed by an eroding trust that God hears and loves. It is a privilege for Christians to bring their burdened hearts to their Father for soul medicine.

The complaining of discontentment includes grumbling. The grumbling is a distrust of God, an anxious concern that the future won't work out the way we want it to. Discontentment can also be characterized by bitterness. This is a frustration that the past has not gone the way we'd like. Further, discontentment can be characterized by distraction in the present. Unable to focus on what should be prized and prioritized today, the discontented heart rages amid its busyness and worldliness (1 John 2:16–17). Whether explicitly or implicitly, this type of grumbling is directed at the One who is sovereign over such things. Grumbling and complaining, then, are a theological issue that casts God as incompetent, unfair, or irrelevant. We can see why discontentment is considered unchristian. It may be helpful, when thinking about contentment, to ask those close to you if they think you often complain. Consider what you talk about. Inventory what you think about. Are you consistently embracing God's goodness in the valleys as well as on the mountaintops? Contentment knows how to sing in the stocks as well as at the banquet feast.

Contentment Is a Work of Grace

Earlier we saw that contentment works from the inside out. Now I want to push that a bit further along. The inward working of God upon the heart is the work of grace. How else can we explain such strange behavior?

The fact that Paul (and so many others) lived with contentment can give us hope. In other words, God has a track record of making people like you and me content in him. One of the functions of the gospel is to fix our hearts upon God. We move from restless to resting, from hurting to healed, and from hungry to satisfied. God makes otherwise restless people content in him (Ps. 73:26). This is a work of grace.

When the Philippian Christians first got the apostle Paul's letter, they would have recognized Paul's call to contentment as revolutionary. In their culture, contentment was a key topic of ethical discussion from the time of Socrates.

In Stoic philosophy it [contentment] denotes the one who “becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and in need of none else.” The goal for the Stoic was that “a man should be sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his own will, to resist the force of circumstances.” . . . By the exercise of reason over emotions, the Stoic learns to be content. For the Stoic, emotional detachment is essential in order to be content.

Contentment Joyfully Rests in God's Providence

Embracing the doctrine of providence is vital for learning the art of contentment. Providence teaches us that God is not disconnected from what is happening in the world today. An all-wise, loving, powerful God is upholding, governing, and ordering all things as if they come from his very hand.

A biblical example of where this doctrine reveals contentment is the story of Joseph. He was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Joseph's older brothers became jealous of him because of their father's favored treatment of him. Jacob had made him a special coat that Joseph no doubt proudly wore before his brothers. What's more, Joseph had a dream in which his brothers were all bowing down before him. And to make matters worse, he told his brothers about the dream. This led to their plotting to kill him. When cooler heads prevailed, they decided instead to sell him into slavery and tell their father that Joseph was tragically killed by an animal.

After all of this plotting, Joseph ended up in Egypt, where he was promoted through the ranks and became the lead guy for Potiphar. Things were looking up for Joseph until the king's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape after her failed efforts to seduce him. As a result, he was thrown into prison. While there, he interpreted dreams for some other prisoners and made a name for having wisdom. Later, Pharaoh called on him for this same purpose. Joseph shined in the moment and was given great honor in Egypt.

Meanwhile there was a famine in the land, and Joseph's brothers all felt its impact. So, they made their way down to Egypt to ask for food. Through a series of events Joseph, while keeping his identity veiled to his brothers, provided for them and persuaded them all to come to Egypt. At last he revealed his true identity to his brothers, and they were gripped with fear of his revenge. But Joseph spoke something profound in reply: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

Do you see the chord of the doctrine of providence empowering this verse? God used all of the trouble that Joseph endured, even the malevolence of his brothers, for God's glory and the people's good. Joseph was strengthened by this truth from the inside out.

What if providence brought you to a pit?

One thing is for sure; it would reveal whether your contentment were an inward work of grace or an external consoling by created things. Burroughs shows this contrast with an illustration.

He says that to be content as a result of something external is like warming a man's clothes by the fire. But to be content through an inward work of grace in the soul is like the warmth that a man's clothes have from the natural heat of the body. If he is in good health, he puts on his clothes and perhaps at first on a cold morning they feel cold, but after a little while they are warm. How do they get warm? They haven't been next to the fire or on the heater. Instead, the warmth comes from the natural heat of the man's body. On the other hand, when a man is sick, he often has difficulty staying warm as his natural body heat has deteriorated. When this man puts on his clothes, they won't get warm. He has to go and sit by the fire or next to the heater to get warm. Even so, after a little while they will again be cold.

This illustrates our spiritual health. Suppose someone loses his job or gets some very difficult medical news; his first reaction is probably going to be shock. His spirit will feel the chill of the matter, like the chill of cold clothes. But after a time, the healthy believer who is fueled by grace will begin to make the affliction more bearable. Grace will heat him up, so to speak. On the other hand, to someone who does not have the inward glow of the gospel, such news is cold not only initially but continually. Friends may help him reason through it and surround him with loving support, but like the heat from the fire, this warmth will soon fade. Only what comes from a gracious spirit will endure.

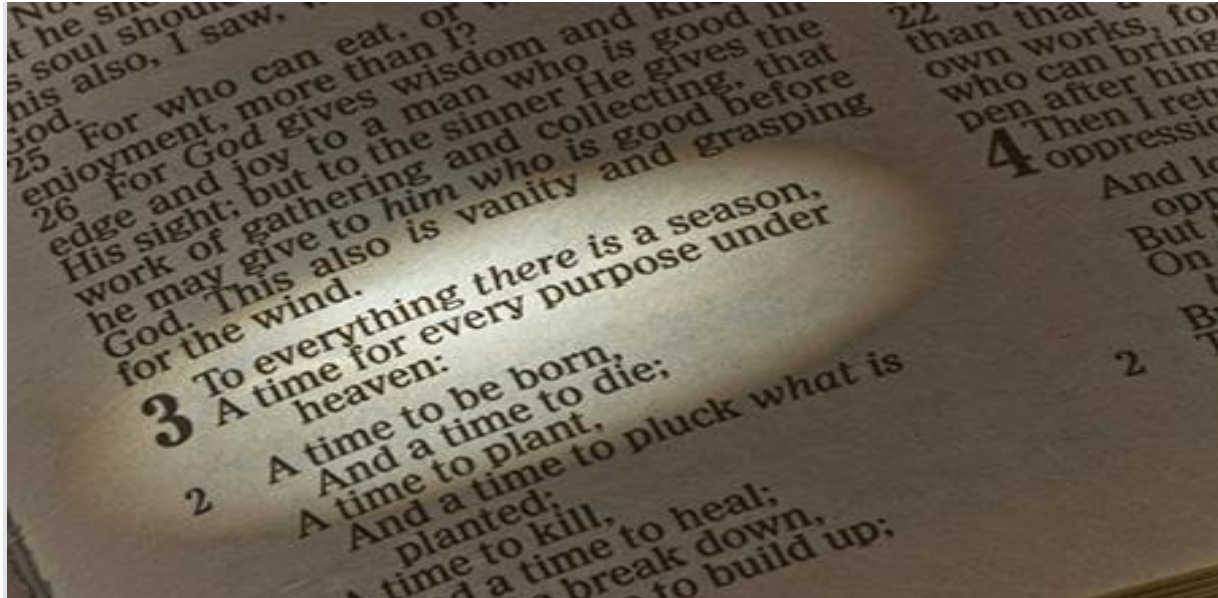
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The danger of an oft-neglected word like contentment is that we may not have a firm grasp on what it actually means. If we are going to learn the art of contentment, then we'll need to know what it is and what it is not. Here, early in our journey, we have considered that contentment is inward as opposed to external. It is quiet rather than complaining. It is a work of grace rather than a result of human effort. It rests in God's providence rather than complaining against him. With this we have the instruments of our minds tuned by grace.¹³

¹³ Raymond, E. (2017). [*Chasing contentment: trusting god in a discontented age*](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.



Ecclesiastes means “preacher” in Greek (a form of *ekklesia*, meaning assembly). The Hebrew form of the word, *Qoheleth*, means “one who speaks at an assembly.” Solomon is the author (1:1). The book is clearly taken from experiences in his own life because he discusses wisdom (1:16), wealth (2:7-8), fame (2:9), and accomplishments (2:4-6).

Central Theme:

Solomon repeatedly uses proverbial expressions (“under the sun,” “vanity of vanities; all is vanity,” and “grasping after the wind”) to show that life is meaningless, confusing, frustrating, and depressing—if life is lived without God. Although life will still sometimes have unexplainable situations and puzzling events, life with God has meaning. When seen in light of God’s will, life can be successfully lived with satisfaction, **contentment**, and enjoyment (2:24; 3:13,22; 5:18-20). Living life in obedience to God is the only way to live and understand life (12:13). After all, everyone’s actions and behavior will one day be judged by God (12:14).

Outline of Ecclesiastes	
1:1-3	Solomon's thesis statement
1:4-18	The vanity of the world's natural processes and pursuit of understanding
2	The vanity of indulgence, human achievement, and materialism
3	God's organized way of life for human activity
4	The vanity of human cruelty, toil, politics
5	The vanity of careless worship and misused wealth
6	The vanity of riches
7:1-11:8	Wise insights in the midst of life's vanity (mini-realities amid life's conflicting differences)
11:9-12:7	Onset of old age when the health and strength of youth passes
12:8-14	Conclusion: life's vanity can only be handled by devoting yourself to God

The Elusive Dream

Chasing happiness is a bit like trying to capture a butterfly. One boy observed a brightly colored lepidopteran flitting across the backyard. He watched in fascination as the beautiful creature moved weightlessly from flower to flower. *I must have it*, he thought. *My own butterfly!*

Abandoning a pile of toys—which only moments ago had been a source of contentment—the lad began to chase. Each time he inched near, some instinct seemed to warn the butterfly, and it skipped away. The harder he pursued, the faster the butterfly flew. Though never far away, it was always out of reach.

But the little fellow was determined. With a mighty effort he made one desperate, final lunge and grabbed it. Eagerly his little fingers squeezed the long-sought prize.

At last! he said to himself, *It's mine.*

But opening his fist, the child discovered that he held not the delicate creature he had been chasing, only its crushed remains.

Perhaps your own search for happiness has been like that. Contentment dangles just out of reach, only one inch—or one achievement, or one possession, or one relationship—away. Even as you grasp it, it evades you.

It's Never Enough

Someone asked financier John D. Rockefeller how much money was enough. “Just a little more,” he answered, “Just a little more.” Many are seeking that “little more” and finding that it's never enough.

Some seek happiness in a relationship. They're convinced that a certain marriage partner—or a new marriage partner—will bring happiness. They seek an “altar ego,” someone with whom to live happily ever after. But too often, the wedding bells fall out of tune, and *Here Comes the Bride* becomes a haunting melody.

Others wander from one relationship to the next with the media-driven image of an ideal partner planted firmly in their minds. They try to fill the emotional void with an illicit affair, and then another. But instead of a time-share in Utopia, they find that they've purchased only broken dreams.

Still others seek happiness in mind-altering substances. Alcohol and other recreational drugs may make for a great evening, but there's always a morning after.

Bruised lives.

Wrecked relationships.

Lost jobs.

Addictions.

In place of happiness, the searchers find despair.

Sigmund Freud said that the chief duty of a human being is to endure life, and many are doing just that. They grit their teeth and hold on like passengers on an endless subway ride. One weary day drags into the next, and the night offers no relief.

It's a Right Attitude

Much of modern religion is focused on external things—doing this or that, or not doing this or that. But you can do (or not do) a hundred things and still be light years away from the Kingdom. The Bible says that man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. The Pharisees shouted, Look at me! God says, Look *to* me.

Genuine happiness results from having a correct attitude of spirit.

On the control panel of an airplane there is an instrument that tells the pilot whether the plane is level. It indicates the plane's *attitude*. Another dial refers to the *altitude* of the plane—its height above the earth. Being poor in spirit has to do with attitude, not altitude. It is having a right orientation toward God.

D. L. Moody adds, "One of the strongest signs that a man is growing in grace, is that he is growing smaller and Christ is growing larger." The poor in spirit don't disparage themselves; they exalt Christ.

It's a Proper Self-Image

In an interesting study, one hundred people were handed a pen and a blank piece of paper. Ninety-seven of them proceeded to write their own name on the paper, perhaps indicating what was first on their mind. Awhile back, Herbert B. Wolfeschlegelsteinhausenbergerdorff of Philadelphia complained that the newspaper had left the "u" out of his name. Some people can see nothing but themselves in any situation.

The beginning of contentment is not self-abasement, but it's not self-aggrandizement either. You may think you have everything under control—even the newspaper. But "world controllers" don't meet the height requirement set by Jesus. He said the blessed (happy, contented) people are those who depend on a higher source than themselves.

The poor in spirit understand their *needs* as well as their *niceties*. They see themselves and their Maker clearly—and they know who's who!

But don't get the wrong idea. To me, poverty of spirit is not fear of success or clinging to the bottom rung of life's ladder. God has a higher view of you and me.

David, the songwriter of the Old Testament, had 20/20 vision about himself. He wrote, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:14).

Being poor in spirit means seeing yourself clearly, as God does. It means being humble before Him, yet confident, as one of His prized possessions.

Happiness Is a Confirmed Reservation

When I'm traveling and need hotel accommodations, I call a toll-free number and secure a room with my credit card. The operator gives me a confirmation number. Hurriedly I write it on the edge of a map or scribble it on a napkin. That number is seldom needed, but there is security in knowing that I have it. I have a confirmed reservation.

So do the poor in spirit.

“Happy are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, they can be happy because they have a guaranteed reservation. They know where they are going.

Many people are unhappy because their lives have no direction, no purpose, no goal. They don’t know where they are going. They’re on a merry-go-round that’s had brake failure. Trapped in place, they go round and round in the same circles. They work to make more money, to buy more things, so they can enjoy more pleasures—all costing more money. You’ve heard it said that the world makes way for a man who knows where he’s going. That may be because there are so few of them!

Runaways are a fact of modern life. Bored, listless, restless and unhappy, people drop their responsibilities in a pile and strike out for parts unknown. What is most disturbing is not what they are running from, but what they are running to—nothing.

Jesus said that the poor in spirit are happy. And they have reason to be. They know where they are going.

Happy Here and Now

I heard of a newspaper columnist who asked people what were the happiest ten years of their lives. Some said it was the time between the ages of twenty and thirty, when their children were babies and life’s major problems had not yet started. Others responded that it was the decade between thirty and forty, when as husband and wife they dealt together with daily dilemmas and looked forward to the future.

Interestingly, many said that their happiest time is now. One lady wrote, “I thought the best ten years were from thirty to forty, then forty to fifty. But it just kept getting better. Now I am seventy; ask me again in ten years.”

Another man—in his nineties—was heard to say, “No complaints. I am happy in the Lord and looking forward to what God has in store.”

Happiness is not freedom from pressure or pain, and contentment isn’t the absence of sorrow. In fact, as Jesus said, you can be happy even when you mourn, because in your mourning you will be comforted.

CHAPTER 3

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

—Matthew 5:5

LIFE LESSON

When I surrender my future to God, I discover His best for me.

As a child I played the game that went something like this: interlocking my fingers, I would whisper, “This is the church and this is the steeple; open the doors and see all the people.”

Understanding this beatitude is like opening the doors and seeing the people of God for the first time. It mirrors both the character of the Christ and the characteristic of the Christian.

Blessed (happy, contented) are the meek. Blessed are those who have discovered the joy of surrendering the details of their lives to God.

We live in an anxious world, filled with countless details. Winston Churchill commented that our anxieties are so many that “one cancels out another.”

Not quite.

Our moods can be like the weather—partly cloudy or partly sunny depending on the dynamics of the day. But almost certainly, one of those moods will be worry. Henry Ward Beecher said that worry is like rust upon the blade. We’ve all felt the rust of worry, grinding against the smooth flow of our lives.

This beatitude addresses the problem of anxiety and reminds every Christian that there is a solution. Happy are those who have traded their tension for trust, for they shall inherit the peace of God.

They shall inherit.

That’s not some pie-in-the-sky promise. It’s a bread-on-the-table offer, a present-tense reality. To those of Jesus’ day, traveling legalistic highways mapped by the religious elite, it was a welcome exit ramp. Jesus took His listeners back to the refuge of the Psalms:

Do not fret because of evil men
or be envious of those who do wrong;
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Delight yourself in the Lord
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

—Psalm 37:1–4

A mechanic and a heart surgeon were having a conversation. Both were bragging about their professions. The mechanic said to the surgeon, "I say the work we mechanics do is just as complicated as yours." The surgeon wisely replied, "Maybe so, but let me see you work on an engine while it's still running!"

The third beatitude is a promise to those whose engines are still running—running with the pounding pace of a society that worries about the future, yet lives as if there isn't one. To them, it promises peace.

The Surrender That Leads to Victory

The Greek word translated *meek* suggests *gentle* or *trusting*. Blessed are those who gently trust their Lord. It doesn't say, "Blessed are the wimps," however. It means blessed are those who quietly surrender to God.

We're Trapped by Ambition

The Scriptures describe two approaches to spirituality. Let's call them spiritual Type A and spiritual Type B. The Type A person is in charge—spiritually and otherwise. He or she is directing life's symphony—and usually playing first violin as well! Clinging to control, the spiritual Type A resents takeover attempts by anyone—including God!

The result is emotional and spiritual anxiety.

Paul describes that mental state: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7). Since *self* is in control instead of God, there is a natural hostility to His will and to His way.

"It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."

Trapped!

The person who is driving under the influence of self is trapped in life's fast lane—the lane that leads to a certain crash. James 1:14–15: "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

We're Set Free by Surrender

In contrast, the spiritually Type B person has surrendered the wheel to another. Some of the better advice that the Old Testament character Job received was to do just that—surrender. Job 22:21: "Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you."

I've found that I can be at peace in the turmoil of these times. How? By surrendering. That means laying down not only my "arms," but also my "harms"—placing my fears as well as my faith into God's hands. Romans 8:6: "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...."

Give up without a Fight

You've probably seen news broadcasts of hostage situations. Happily, the end is peaceful most of the time. The reporter often says of an apprehended culprit, "He gave up without a struggle."

Spiritual meekness means giving up to God "without a struggle." Jesus epitomized that attitude in Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...."

Jesus' life was one of complete surrender to His heavenly Father's will.

That was seen in His conscious act of surrender to the Cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He looked into the cup of death and saw the agonized end of His life—the sinless one suffering in the place of every sinner. His humanity begged to be spared. But this was Father's plan, and from the earliest days of Jesus' life, it was evident that Father's business was His business.

Matthew records, "He fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will' " (Matt. 26:39).

The inheritance of happiness comes only after fully surrendering to the heavenly Father's plan.

You can make a full surrender. You can wave the white flag over the rampart of works. And here's the difference between man's kingdom and God's: Once you surrender—once you declare your spiritual dependence on God—you won't be taken prisoner. You'll be set free! You'll receive the inheritance, forevermore.

An Inheritance of Joy

There's Joy in Receiving

This inheritance is a gift, not something you must earn. You simply receive what's coming to you by virtue of your birth—your spiritual birth.

Romans 8:16–17: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Sometimes those who inherit are not the children of the deceased. The beneficiary may be someone who worked for the benefactor, perhaps a faithful employee. Some leave large inheritances to pets. (There are several millionaire cats living on planet earth!)

But the inheritance that Jesus promises is reserved for members of the family—God's family.

Paul specified that in his letter to the Galatians: "So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (4:7).

There's Joy in Security

An inheritance brings security. You can just rest in the rest of it!

It is the nature of a loving father to do all He can for His children. And God has done precisely that. He has not only provided life itself, but an abundant inheritance as well. Through faith, we are joint heirs with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever Christ receives from God, His father, we, too, will receive!

Often, when a child inherits money, it is placed in a trust fund, some to provide for education, and some for living expenses and other needs. The concern is that the young person might not have the aptitude for managing wealth. It may be squandered or wasted, and before long there might be nothing left.

But ours is an inexhaustible inheritance—and we get it now as well as in the future! But the inheritance prepared for the children of God is inexhaustible. There is no decimal point. It will never end.

One of the American frontiersmen said, "I have inherited nothing from my father but an old cap, a worn out pair of britches, and a tendency to rheumatism."

You have more.

The testimony of countless Christians has asserted the truth: happiness is not found in material things. Inheriting a fortune would not make you any happier than you are right now. But you can be happy by surrendering control of your life to God. For when the will of the Father is read, you will inherit the earth.

You can surrender the struggles of life for the promises of eternity. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Because We Are Forgiven

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (Matt. 18:27). The servant wasn't in a bargaining position. He had a debt he couldn't pay. In days of old, people who couldn't pay their debts weren't sent to a credit counseling agency. They were sent to prison! "Go directly to jail!" wasn't a cute idea for the corner position on a game board; it was a fact of life. Imprisoned and unable to work, the debtor was not the only one who suffered. His family paid as well. To owe a debt was a serious matter.

But Jesus faced some religious folk who believed they had no debt to pay. They assumed that they were in a bargaining position with God and bristled like a porcupine at the Master's pointed parable. John 8:31–33: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?' "

They failed to understand the enormity of their debt.

With surgical skill, the Great Physician made an incision directly to the heart of the matter. "Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed'" (John 8:34–36).

V. Gilbert Beers said, "Forgiveness is the balm of healing that soothes and heals the wounds of error." Elvina M. Hall put a face to that philosophy with a gospel song:

Jesus paid it all;
All to Him I owe.
Sin had left a crimson stain;
He washed it white as snow.

Until I know that I have been forgiven, I cannot know the happiness that comes from forgiving another. Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Not only is God merciful, He holds the patent on mercy. "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort ..." (2 Cor. 1:3 KJV).

Robert Robinson wrote about that mercy in the great hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.

Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love.

We freely forgive because we have been freely forgiven.

No Record of Wrongs

The unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable had dollar signs in his eyes. He grabbed a fellow slave and demanded ransom money. "Pay back what you owe me!" (Matt. 18:28). It's as if he pasted a barcode on the debtor's forehead and said, "This is the price of your freedom!"

There's a classic story of two sisters who had fought for most of their lives. As one lay on her deathbed, she asked for her "sparring partner." The sister came to the hospital room, where the gravely ill patient motioned for her to come near. As the patient pulled her sibling closer, she said softly, "Sister, you know there have always been problems between us. I want you to forgive me."

Her sister quickly responded, "It's alright, sister, I forgive you."

Then the patient's countenance changed and she said, "I also want you to know that if I make it through this, the war's still on!"

Who won that war? The sister who was willing to forgive, no matter the cost.

Forgiveness is free, but it's not inexpensive.

Jesus didn't price it out, however. He simply laid down His life. He relinquished His heavenly power and privilege to reconcile us to God. Ephesians 1:4-8:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

I heard the story of a judge who tried a young father accused of stealing groceries for his family at Christmastime. He listened to the young man’s defense: “I can’t find work, and my children are hungry.” The judge debated the case in his mind for a few moments, then announced the sentence. He fined the man two hundred dollars plus court costs.

Heartless?

Here’s the rest of the story. The next day, the judge drove to the young man’s house with a van filled with groceries. “I can’t believe it,” said the astonished young father, helping the older man carry the groceries into the house.

The judge replied, “Young man, as a judge, I had an obligation to fine you. As a father, I wanted your family to have a merry Christmas.”

God the righteous judge had an obligation to fine humanity for its sin—and the judgement was most severe: death. But the Son of Man became the eternal supply of our forgiveness.

That is the attitude of this beatitude.

Happy are those who are willing to pay any personal cost to win back the estranged—because they know that their own forgiveness has been purchased with just such an unlimited price.

Loss of pride.

Restitution.

“Crawling back.”

Nothing on earth could equal the cost Christ was willing to pay for our forgiveness.

George Roemisch said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance of the violet which still clings fast to the heel that crushed it.”

Blessed are the merciful ...

Former president Ronald Reagan’s daughter Patti wrote about his attitude after the 1982 attempt on his life: “The following day my father said he knew his physical healing was directly dependent on his ability to forgive John Hinckley.”

... for they will be shown mercy.

The Canceled Debt

“In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed” (Matt. 18:34). The master had no choice; the servant had to pay the debt or pay the penalty. There were laws to be kept. The master’s own reputation was at stake. If he let this debtor off, others would default, and the law would become meaningless. Where there is no penalty, there is no law.

The unmerciful servant missed his chance. By withholding forgiveness, he missed the opportunity to be forgiven.

In the Old Testament, Israel’s rebellion earned a wage of judgment—even annihilation. But judgment was mingled with mercy. Nehemiah 9:31: “In your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”

Jesus explained why it is so important that mercy replace judgement. Luke 6:32–35:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” love those who love them.... But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

Jesus did more than just explain that concept. A short while later, He demonstrated it in a way that brought salvation to our guilt-ridden souls.

Guilt before Grace

Guilt can be removed, and must be, but it does serve a useful purpose. Just as physical pain can be the motivator that drives a person to seek medical treatment, so guilt is the prod that moves us toward a right relationship with God.

What makes people weep over their sin? It’s the *conviction* brought by the Holy Spirit, reminding them that they have exceeded God’s speed limit.

When you feel guilty, make a traffic stop. Use it as an occasion to examine your heart.

To remove guilt, you must acknowledge its source: sin. Only when you have confessed your sin before God can guilt be removed. Only then are you ready for a pure heart.

Happy People

Sons of God initiate peace first in their own attitudes.

If you dwell on peace in your mind, it will break out in your actions. Luke 6:45: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

But attitude alone won’t make peace. It must become an *action*. Peace is a practice, not just a principle. Peacemakers make peace just as piano players play the piano. They write that letter of apology, make that conciliatory phone call, send that E-mail of reconciliation.

They Follow the Right Example

Someone wrote of Jesus, “He loves us before we respond, he forgives us before we ask, and blesses us when we are undeserving.” That’s an accurate description of the Master. That’s the example we follow.

I heard the amazing story of eleven people who found themselves adrift on an ice flow that was headed for a waterfall. The brother of one stranded person arrived at the scene and begged gawking bystanders to mount a rescue. They refused. He offered money. They still refused. “It’s too dangerous,” they concluded.

So, the brother took this desperate step: he tied a line around his waist, waded into the water, and invited others to do the same. Four of the onlookers responded, forming a human chain. Inching their way into the cold water, they achieved what money couldn’t buy—the rescue of every person trapped on the ice.

Christ offered His own life as an example. He offered Himself as the rescuer, and then said to a watching world, "Tie yourself to me." Together with Him, we can reach those trapped in conflict. We can make peace.

Seeing the beauty of Christ's example, we must respond. We must tie ourselves to Him, embracing the peace that He offered through His death. We must acknowledge with the Apostle Paul, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ..." (2 Cor. 5:18).

Peacemakers are happy; they know that they follow the right example.

Children of God

The Father Provides for His Children

Jesus said it plainly: God's children have no need to worry. Matthew 6:31–32: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them."

Food.

Clothing.

Shelter.

Transportation.

Employment.

He knows.

Happiness is knowing that your Father will take care of you. Our heavenly Father knows our need and has promised to meet it. That goes for tomorrow as well as today.

And, as a father, He can distinguish between our needs and wants. Our "wish list" may not match heaven's delivery ticket. Occasionally, earthly fathers say no. A child may present a reasonable request (reasonable to the child, anyway!) for the one thing that will make him or her "the happiest person in the world."

"But Dad, everybody has one!"

"But Dad, all the kids are doing it!"

Yet a loving father exercises judgment. He knows that sometimes a granted request will bring more harm than good. So, he says "No." Or, "Not now."

Has God ever refused your request? You asked for health, wealth, position, or something you believed was in your best interest, and God didn't supply it.

Sad day? No.

Glad day!

You're His child. Father knows what you need, and He is supplying it in ways you don't understand.

The Father Forgives His Children

One of the greatest character portrayals in the Bible is that of the Prodigal Son's father. When his son insisted on settling the estate, the father gave him his share. When the son gathered his belongings and took that fateful journey to a far country—the "Siberia of the soul"—the father let him go.

Heartbreaking!

This man knew that his son was headed the wrong way. He knew, perhaps from experience, the heartache that lay at the road's dead end. But he embraced his son, then stood at the gate, watching him go.

Perhaps you are the child in that journey. You wouldn't be the first, nor will you be the last, to say no to God and go your own way.

But the story has a happy ending.

The Prodigal returned. "I will arise and go to my father," he decided. "I will own up to my disobedience."

Jesus said, "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Love's embrace proved stronger than the world's tug. There was comfort at home, and he knew it. There was forgiveness there, and he felt it deep within his heart.

Happiness is knowing a heavenly Father who waits by the gate—a Father who waits to forgive.

We Know That Persecution Has Limits

There are limits to what Satan can do. Job understood that principle also; he learned it during a hurricane. That's when God asked one of those "father questions"—you know the type, those that already have an answer. In Job 38:8–11 God asked: "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?'"

Can we be content in a crisis? Yes.

Heaven paints the sidelines in the game of life. And the Referee of all time tells Calamity when it is out of bounds—remember those waves on Galilee?

Paul said, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13). James added, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone ..." (James 1:12–13).

Blessed is the one who perseveres.

Where?

Down here on the playing field, not in the stands.

It Is a Kingdom Yet to Come

Children of God travel the earth on a temporary visa. Their true home is in another place. They are citizens of earth but heirs to heaven—a kingdom that is to come. Somewhere, out there, God has built an eternal dwelling that is free from the trials of time.

Free from setbacks.

Free from suffering

Free from sadness.

God has a place for us, and He wants nothing more than to “put us in our place.” It’s His final prize for faithfulness, the ultimate trophy for endurance.

Until then?

We persevere. Hebrews 10:32–36:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Eight beatitudes show us how to really live.

Jesus’ words are aimed at those who stand at the base of life’s mountain and those who are mid-way to the top. To timid travelers afraid of living and to weary climbers afraid of dying, heaven shouts this encouragement:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And blessed are you, weary pilgrim, as you live on earth and dream of heaven. Take these words to your heart, and keep climbing.¹⁴

¹⁴ Wilson, N. G., & Brecheisen, J. (2002). [*The Call to Contentment: Life Lessons from the Beatitudes*](#) (pp. 13–96). Indianapolis, IN: WPH.

Struggling with Life's Injustices

By **Wayne Jackson**

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A gentleman who professed an identification with the Lord, became quite disenchanted with Christianity. When an interested friend inquired as to the nature of his problem, he replied:

According to the Bible, God promised that those who follow him will be blessed with health and prosperity. As I observe Christian people, I see vast numbers who are sick and poor. I can no longer believe in the promises of God.

What response should be made to this troubled man? There are three possible ways to evaluate the argument stated above.

First, there is the charge that God has failed in his promises. This suggests either he is unable to complete his pledges (in which case he is impotent), or else he had no intention of fulfilling his bargain (which would make him deceptive). In either event, the fault would lie with God.

Second, one may suppose God is both willing and able to bless humanity with physical-material health and wealth; and, invariably, he does. Those who enjoy wholeness and prosperity are the righteous; those who do not are flawed in character. Any lack, therefore, is with man.

Third, another possibility is that the assumptions of the argument cited above are grounded in a misunderstanding of certain passages relating to physical and material well-being. In this case, the problem would be with the critic's misinterpretation—not with the texts of the Bible.

Let us give consideration to each of these possibilities.

The Skeptical Theory

The first of the above listed propositions partakes of the nature of that ancient argument employed so often by skeptics. If God **cannot** do it, he is powerless, hence, not God; if the Creator **will not** do it, he is malevolent, thus, not God. If he has both the power and the will, why the seeming injustice?

The assumption in this position, of course, is that ignorant man is qualified to pass judgment upon divine actions. Consequently, if the Maker of men is not operating according to how **we** might do it, he is faulted as lacking either ability or will. But the “ways” of Heaven are beyond human analysis (Job 9:12b; Isaiah 55:8; Romans 11:33).

The fact of the matter is, God, in real history, has demonstrated both his ability and integrity in keeping his promises. Twenty centuries before the birth of Christ, Jehovah promised Abraham that through his “seed” all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). The prophecy pointed to the coming of Christ (Galatians 3:16).

Even though Abraham and Sarah were aged, and without offspring at the time, the patriarch never wavered concerning the promise, for he knew that “what [God] had promised, he was able to perform” (Romans 4:21). Too, God’s integrity was never suspect, for, as the writer of Hebrews noted (in discussing this very circumstance), it is an immutable proposition that it is impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:13-18).

The messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, combined with the facts relative to Jesus of Nazareth, confirm both the integrity and ability of the Almighty.

The Character Argument

The idea that one’s character can be determined by his physical well-being, or his material prosperity, though widespread, reflects an erroneous generalization. While it occasionally is the case that the Bible provides examples of prosperity as a result of righteousness, that is far from the rule. Consider two cases from the Old Testament.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar insisted that Job's plight (during which he lost all his material resources and his health) was a result of his lack of spirituality. The patriarch supposedly had committed grievous sins; if he would only repent, God would restore his well-being. The truth was otherwise. Job's losses were the result of his goodness; he was Jehovah's unique servant (Job 1:8; 2:3). The Lord permitted Job's deprivation because he was proud of him, and knew he could maintain his integrity (13:15).

Reflect upon the case of Asaph (Psalm 73). He surveyed society and noted the "prosperity of the wicked" (v. 3). He almost abandoned his faith at this seeming inequity—until Jehovah showed him the "latter end" of evil people (v. 17), and he learned the lesson that godliness cannot be judged by material status.

And what of this?: (a) Jesus' circumstances during his earthly sojourn were those of the impoverished (2 Corinthians 8:9); the Son of man did not even have a place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). Did these meager conditions reflect God's lack of fidelity? (b) Paul frequently was in situations where he lacked material prosperity (2 Corinthians 11:27); in addition, he was afflicted with a terrible physical malady (12:7). Surely it will not be suggested that these difficulties were the result of the apostle's evil way of life.

Misunderstood Texts

Without doubt, there are biblical passages that promise prosperity and well-being, in **some** sense, to those who are faithful to God.

When the nation of Israel left Egypt, Jehovah informed them: "I will put on you none of the diseases which I have put on the Egyptians: for I am Jehovah who heals you" (Exodus 15:26). And Isaiah declared that "by [Christ's] stripes we are healed" (53:5).

Solomon affirmed that the one who honors God with his substance, with his first-fruits, will have overflowing prosperity (Proverbs 3:9), and Malachi described the Lord as opening the "windows of heaven" and pouring out a blessing too bountiful to receive (3:10).

How are these passages to be explained? There are a number of scriptural truths that will help bring balance to this oft misunderstood subject.

Principles of Well-Being

Death was visited upon man because of his transgression of divine law (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12). In this earthly environment, therefore, humanity will never be exempt from sickness and death. Be that as it may, there are principles within sacred Scripture that will, as a general rule, enhance longevity.

There were many sound principles in the Mosaic code that facilitated the good health the Israelites generally enjoyed. Dr. S. I. McMillen has discussed this theme in his book, *None of These Diseases* (1963). (See also our chapter, "The God Who Heals," in Jackson, 2000.)

As a rule, it is assumed that parental love will motivate mothers and fathers to train their children in sound health principles, so that it "may be well" with them, and that they "may live long upon the earth" (Ephesians 6:3). This certainly does not mean, though, that the Christian's children are immune to illness, or will never die prematurely. This is a principle, not an inflexible law.

The proverb cited above (3:9) contains a secluded truth supplied by the subsequent context. Derek Kidner has observed that generously giving to God of one's first and best in "the face of material pressures" is, in truth, a test of faith, and is a vivid commentary on a man's character (1964). Such a person, who so selflessly serves God, will be honor-bound to treat his fellows fairly. The practice of noble ethics in business (discussed in vv. 27ff) will generate respect and rebound to the righteous man's personal prosperity.

Again, though, this is not an iron-solid rule; obviously there will be times when the generous and honest Christian becomes the victim of those who take advantage of him. Such cases, however, do not invalidate the principle.

The Use of Figurative Language

The Bible abounds with figures of speech. Hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) is common (cf. John 21:25), and metonymy (one thing put for another) is a frequent teaching device. In his classic book, *Hermeneutics*, D. R. Dungan consumed more than forty pages in discussing this latter figure alone. How does an understanding of this type of expression fit into our discussion?

There are occasions in Scripture when spiritual concepts are conveyed in physical or material terms. A failure to recognize this teaching mode can result in the misinterpretation of important biblical texts.

(1) When Isaiah declared that “healing” would result from the benefits of Jesus’ death, he was not speaking of physical healing, but a healing (forgiveness) from sin, as the immediate context reveals (53:5-6; note “transgressions,” “iniquities”), and this was confirmed later by Peter (see 1 Peter 2:24-25).

(2) The prophet Joel spoke of “those days” when Jehovah would pour out his Spirit and supernatural phenomena would result (2:28-30). In Acts 2, Peter informed his Hebrew auditors that the events of that day (the apostles being overwhelmed by the Spirit’s power – v. 4; cf. 1:5) were a fulfillment of Joel’s oracle (2:16). This was the commencement of the Christian age.

In connection with this wonderful era, Joel announced that “the mountains shall drop down sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk,” etc. (3:18ff). The prosperity here described is not an agricultural boon; rather, the **material** is used to depict the **spiritual**. Those who attempt to literalize all the prosperity passages should take note of this idiom.

A survey of the terms “rich” and “riches,” as used in the New Testament, will demonstrate that these words are employed far more frequently of spiritual prosperity than they are of material wealth.

The Mysteries of Providence

We do not deny that God can, and does, bless his people in a physical-material way, consistent with his own will, by means of his providential activity upon the earth (see [A Study of Divine Providence](#)).

God had mercy on Epaphroditus, who had been “sick to the point of death” (Philippians 2:25-27)—with apparently no miracle involved. This does not mean, though, that every child of God will recover from terminal conditions. To draw general conclusions from isolated Bible examples can lead to a variety of errors.

The Lord providentially directed his ravens to provide Elijah with bread (1 Kings 17:4, 6), and he has urged us to petition him for our daily sustenance (Matthew 6:11); but that does not mean that the child of God will never be bereft of food. He may be in need due to self-sacrifice, persecution, natural disaster, or plain laziness (see 2 Corinthians 11:27; Acts 11:28; 27:21; 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

One’s level of physical-material well-being, or lack thereof, is: (a) not a reflection upon God’s ability or his concern, and (b) not the measure of a person’s standing before the Lord.

A Concluding Point

There is a strong argument that may be made against the position being reviewed that almost seems too obvious to mention. If it were the case that an inflexible rule obtains in the divine order of things, that spirituality produces health and wealth, the following would clearly result:

(1) Little children, the purest of earth's society, would never get sick and die; yet, in many third-world nations, sweet children starve, their bodies are racked with disease, and they prematurely go to God.

(2) The wicked of the earth sometimes are more prosperous than the godly, and the righteous do not always outlive the non-Christian population.

(3) If wealth was the direct result of becoming a Christian, men would be prone to accept the gospel, not because of their convictions regarding God's Son, but merely out of materialistic self-interest. Such would bring no honor to either the Creator or the creature. The Almighty expects motives nobler than this.

One should never allow life's difficulties to distort his view of God.
