

## GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT SERIES – PROSPERITY GOSPEL

### “Is the “Prosperity Gospel” the Gospel?” (1 Timothy 6:5; Mark 10:24-25)

Another area of danger in the charismatic movement is their false teaching of prosperity theology or prosperity gospel. This greed-driven theology has allowed them to expand rapidly across the world particularly in poorer and disadvantaged continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The largest and fastest growing Charismatic churches preach the prosperity gospel to a greater or lesser degree.

Central to prosperity theology is the mistaken idea that God wants every believer to acquire material wealth and happiness. If you have enough faith, they boast, then you can have whatever wealth you desire. Many believe that financial prosperity is the Christian’s divine right to be claimed by faith. The bigger your faith, they argue, the more you can claim. This false gospel has been called the “name it and claim it” gospel or the “blab it and grab it” gospel!

The prosperity message inflates wealth and man, but at the same time diminishes Christ. Prosperity preachers cite verses such as 3 John 2 for supposed proof, “*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.*” They delight in taking OT passages that promise wealth to Israel if they are faithful to God’s covenant and applying them to the NT Church by using linking verses like Galatians 3:14, “*That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ.*” (This verse is speaking of the spiritual blessings that come to the Gentiles through Christ!). They also misuse passages like Mark 10:30 and Luke 6:38 to entice their followers with the false hope that whatever money they give to the preacher and his ministry, will then be multiplied by the Lord to them.

Prosperity messages attract the crowds as they appeal to the basest of human instincts - the desire for wealth. TV and movie analysts reveal that the human eye always follows money when it is placed on a screenshot. As Christ warned that the poor would always be with us (Matt. 26:11), this message will always be popular. This craving for wealth is not new. Many of the Jews of Christ’s day believed that prosperity and spirituality were inseparable. Paul spoke of prosperity preachers in his day, “*Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself*” (1 Tim. 6:5).

Kong Hee the pastor of City Harvest Church in Singapore is a leading proponent of prosperity theology. He states at the C3 College Opening in February 2009,

The Laws of God are so incredible, so complete, so well thought out, if you as a people will follow them, then the world is gonna get envious of you. You will be a lender and not a borrower. In other words, you are going to be successful, you’re going to be the head and not the tail, you’re going to be wealthy and prosperous. And the truth is, the world will only get impressed by God when they see our wisdom in handling our finances. Our wisdom in running our marriage, our family; our wisdom in our relationships; our peoples skills; our wisdom in running the church and organization and community service, in every aspect of human society.

In a 2010 message *Nine Reasons why Jesus was Rich* he even claims that Jesus Christ was wealthy,

Jesus was prosperous. Very prosperous! Because He could easily obey His Father’s will, whenever the Father wanted Him to; however the Father wanted Him to. If Father God

wanted Him to go throughout all the cities and the villages in Israel – no problem. If Father God wanted Him to feed TENS of thousands of hungry people – no problem. If Father God wanted Him to pay for the taxes of Simon Peter – no problem. If Father God wanted Him to give generously to the poor – no problem.....Friends, because we become like whom we worship, if we worship a poor Saviour, we will always see poor. But if you worship a saviour who we know to be rich and prosperous and more than enough, we will be changed from glory to glory, into the image of the one that we worship.

Prosperity preacher, Fred Price even twisted the story of the theft of Judas to argue that the Lord Jesus and His disciples were rich in a TBN programme “Ever Increasing Faith” broadcast in 1990,

The Bible says that He [Jesus] had a treasurer (a treasury they called it “the bag”); that they had one man who was the treasurer, named Judas Iscariot; and the rascal was stealing out of the bag for three-and-a-half years and nobody knew that he was stealing. You know why? Because there was so much in it, He couldn’t tell. Nobody could tell that anything was missing. If He had three oranges in the bottom of the bag and he stole two of them, don’t tell me He wouldn’t know that some was missing. Beside that, if Jesus didn’t have anything, what do you need a treasury for? A treasury is for surplus. It’s not for that which you’re spending. It’s only for surplus-to hold it until you need to spend it. Therefore, He must have had a whole lot that needed to be held in advance that He wasn’t spending. So He must have had more than He was living on.

### WHAT SAITH THE BIBLE?

(1) The Bible never promises that a believer will be materially wealthy just because he faithfully tithes, lives a holy life, and works hard. We are explicitly promised that there will be troubles for every true saint, “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*” (2 Tim. 3:12). The Lord Jesus established this principle by pointing to His own example, “*Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you*” (John 15:20).

The Bible does not say that to be materially wealthy is a sin (Matt. 27:57) nor is wealth a sign of piety (Luke 6:24). However, money mixed with sinful hearts is a potent combination. It is like a loaded gun with the potential for great damage. Wealth can be a means of hindering people from Christ. That’s why Jesus revealed after the rich young ruler walked away from salvation, “*Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*” (Mark 10:24-25) It can plunge both believers and unbelievers into great temptation and spiritual ruin, “*For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*” (1 Tim. 6:10)

So prosperity preachers are actually fuelling the carnal lusts of mankind. They are encouraging people to seek those things that have the possibility to hinder them from Christ (Luke 8:14) and to be a great snare in their spiritual lives (1 Tim. 6:6-10). The Bible also makes clear that poverty is sinful if it is the consequence of irresponsibility (1 Tim. 5:8) or laziness (2

Thess. 3:6-15). Both prosperity and poverty must be seen in a balanced biblical perspective (James 1:9-11).

(2) The Lord Jesus Christ was far from the image of a prosperity preacher. He took on the form of a humble servant and not a successful entrepreneur (Phil. 2:7; Zech. 9:9). Christ was born in a stable at Bethlehem and grew up in a humble carpenter's home in Nazareth. His mother Mary was only able to sacrifice two turtle doves, which is the offering of a poor household (cf. Luke 2:22-24; Lev.12:2-8). He testified to His poverty, "*The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head*" (Matt. 8:20). Throughout His ministry Christ had to borrow boats, donkeys, a house for Passover, and was even buried in a borrowed tomb.

(3) The Lord Jesus Christ never called His disciples to one of seeking material wealth but to one of self-denial, "*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me*" (Matt. 16:24). Peter called every believer to suffer like Christ, "*For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps*" (1 Peter 2:21). The apostles lived such a life in their service. Peter had clearly not embraced the prosperity message when he declared, "*Silver and gold have I none*" (Acts 3:6). The apostle Paul had to set aside his preaching at times to weave tents just to provide for his own livelihood (Acts 18:3). He makes clear there were many times he experienced poverty (2 Cor. 6:4-5). He could testify that he had coveted no one's money or clothes (Acts 20:33). Paul did not boast in his wealth to attract people to the gospel but upheld his example of holiness as a gospel witness (2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Cor. 11:1). Ironically, the only disciple concerned with wealth was Judas.

There is a marked contrast in the NT examples of Christ and the apostles to the modern prosperity preacher. The former never served for wealth nor demanded wealth from his followers. The Gospel was preached freely and the life that accompanied this message was one of sacrificial service. Paul points out, "*For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile*" (1 Thess. 2:3). By contrast the prosperity preachers make lucrative careers out of their perverted theology. The only ones being blessed are the preachers who ride at the top of the ponzi scheme and enjoy lavish lifestyles! Their lust for wealth is glaringly obvious in what they say as well as how they live. Peter labeled them false prophets with a "*heart they have exercised with covetous practices*" (2 Peter 2:14).

A prominent example is the founder of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Paul Crouch. He called on his followers to plant a financial seed in his personal ministry and God would return them a greater financial blessing. The irony is that these prosperity preachers don't practice what they preach. For if this scam worked as they claim, they would be sending *you* money! John MacArthur is scathing,

For Crouch and others at the top of this pyramid scheme, prosperity theology works flawlessly. Viewers send in billions of dollars, and when there is no return on investments, God is the one held liable. Or the people who have sent money are blamed for some defect in their faith when the sought-after miracle never materializes. Disappointments, frustration, poverty, sorrow, anger, and ultimately unbelief are the main fruits of this kind of teaching, but the pleas for money only get more urgent and the false promises grow more exaggerated.

(4) Prosperity is not a right, but a providential privilege and a responsibility (1 Tim. 6:17-19). It is not always bestowed because of faith, holiness or industriousness. Many unbelievers are lazy and prosper yet many godly believers work hard and never get rich. Believers are to be content and live faithfully within God's sovereign appointment for their lives, "*for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*" (Philip. 4:11; cf. Heb. 13:5). Prosperity comes from the Lord alone.

All wealth belongs to God (Psa. 24:1) and everything we have comes from His sovereign appointment, "*For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?*" (1 Cor. 4:7). God is the true owner of everything and everyone. Ultimately we are not owners but merely stewards of the resources a sovereign God gives us.

God is never to be reduced to some celestial vending machine! A sovereign God can remove all our wealth at any time despite our faithfulness and godliness. Job is a classic example that God has the sovereign right and power to remove or add to our wealth. This was acknowledged by Job when he lost everything, "*Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21).

(5) Believers are called to live a life of trust in God and not material riches. We are told it is better to pursue wisdom than material wealth, "*How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver?*" (Prov. 16:16). Our lives are not to be focused simply on accumulating wealth to squander on our lusts (Matt. 6:19; 1 Tim. 6:5, 9-11). We must focus on worshipping God and not on worshipping money as, "*Ye cannot serve God and mammon*" (Matt. 6:24).

Our resources are to be used to be a blessing to others (including our families – 1 Tim. 5:8; Prov. 19:17; 13:22) for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). It was the Lord Jesus who taught us by His example and words to give rather than take from others, "*I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). Rather than using God to get you what you dream about, the Bible teaches that we are to give our lives to God to do what He wants (cf. Rom. 12:1-2). We are His instruments. The prosperity gospel inverts God's plan and purpose for our lives. That is why it is a gross heresy!

## CONCLUSION

Many true believers are in relative poverty all over this planet. It is not an indication that they are in sin. Material wealth is insecure as we can lose it all from without in the twinkling of an eye by a recession, a theft, accident, illness, and ultimately by death. Solomon issued a damning rebuttal to the modern prosperity gospel when he declared, "*He that trusteth in his riches shall fall*" (Prov. 11:28).

Moses gave up a fortune in order to do the will of God, "*Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward*" (Heb. 11:25-26). If Moses were in a Charismatic church, he would be told he has made a mistake, as he can still be a spiritual leader and embrace the riches of Egypt. According to them, he could have the best of both worlds. One of the most prominent prosperity preachers is Joel Olsteen. He published a best-selling book *Your Best Life Now* (the title alone should have revealed that this is false

theology as the only people who can have the best life now are unbelievers who go to hell!). Olsteen claims in his book,

Anyone can create by faith and words the dreams he desires – health, wealth, happiness, success...If you develop an image of success, health, abundance, joy, peace, happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you.

Prosperity theology perverts faith and grace to exploit those craving wealth. It just uses God to get to the real god in your life – wealth. It is not in *God* they trust but in *Gold!* It takes the focus of a person away from God and onto the things of this world. If you focus on material wealth, you will never catch up with your wanting! Covetousness has put many in hell and destroyed the joy of many believers. Greed ruined Balaam, Achan, Gehazi, the rich young ruler, Judas Iscariot, Ananias and Sapphira, and Felix. Even Christians can be possessed by possessions!

One of the old Puritans sat down to eat and discovered that he had only a little bread and some water. His contented response was to exclaim, “What? All this and Jesus Christ, too!” Contentment with what we have is a rare thing today. The writer to the Hebrews makes clear contentment in our circumstances is linked to the eternal promises of God, “*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee?*” (Heb. 13:5). Preaching over a century ago to the largest congregation in the world, the Baptist preacher CH Spurgeon rejected the modern prosperity message when he said,

I believe that it is anti-Christian and unholy for any Christian to live with the object of accumulating wealth. You will say, “Are we not to strive all we can to get all the money we can?” You may do so. I cannot doubt but what, in so doing, you may do service to the cause of God. But what I said was that to live *with the object* of accumulating wealth is anti-Christian.

True contentment can only be achieved by building your life on God and His promises. When it's just you and God, that's always enough. The poorest man is the one who has everything else but not the Lord.

Prosperity theology is a bankrupt theology! Indeed, it is the message of hell that appeals to base desires and is directly contradictory to the Gospel. God is dishonoured by it, professing Christians are becoming spiritually weaker by it, and souls are perishing because of it. It is not the message of Jesus Christ. He never died to make you rich on earth. It was Jesus Christ who warned, “*Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth?*” (Luke 12:15).

Today prosperity preachers argue that their wealth is one of the principal means to attract unbelievers to embrace Christianity. However, not once in the Bible did Christ or the apostles use financial enticements as a means to attract people to attend the church, get baptized, and join as members. If a pastor flaunts the fact that he owns a Rolls Royce or a mansion in Sentosa Cove, then all that will happen is unbelievers will attend his church in the hope of doing likewise! They will certainly not do so in order to have their sins forgiven or to live a life of service for others like Christ.

The prosperity gospel may be popular (even to the world) but it is not the true gospel. It only guarantees wealth for those at the top of the pyramid who are the 21<sup>st</sup> century Johann Tetzels! It devours the poor while enriching those at selling the repackaged indulgences that are

empty promises that rarely, if ever, deliver. Worse still it is a powerless gospel to save. It's hard to think of any form of teaching more destructive to true Christianity. In fact it is anti-Christian. We should avoid it at all costs.

*Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill:  
God's truth abideth still,  
His kingdom is forever.*