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THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND TITHING

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...” Matthew 6:21

A great deception is being promoted to Christians in these “last days.” Television evangelists are extremely successful in increasing the size of their congregations and treasuries by preaching what is termed the “Prosperity Gospel.” They teach that those who give abundantly to the church will be rewarded with generous financial success, and that this prosperity will continue as long as one keeps giving. Tithing ten percent, they implore, is not enough if someone really expects to get the financial blessing back from God. Testimonials from Christians who tout the success of this mega-tithing concept are paraded in front of congregations and on television programs such as the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and The 700 Club, Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer, to name just a few.

There is no question that this philosophy is making a substantial impact on the Christian community. It is such a controversial topic that *TIME* placed it front and center on their cover. The September 18, 2006 feature article stated that “61% of those they surveyed believe that God wants them to be prosperous, and 31% agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.” And these figures are on the increase, as is evidenced by Lakewood Church in Houston. Joel Osteen, Lakewood’s pastor embellishes the prosperity pitch with motivational sermons like “Faith to Change Your World,” “Develop Your Potential,” and “Make Your Dreams Come True.” These Christian self-improvement messages seem to be what more and more church-goers want to hear, as Osteen’s local congregation has grown to 20,000 and his television audience to 70 million.

Supposed support for this prosperity philosophy is interpreted from John 10:10—“I have come that they may

have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” Also quoted is Luke 6:38—“Give, and it will be given to you... for with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” Based on faith in these interpretations, Pastor Osteen boasts that he has been able to get the best parking spot in a crowded parking lot, a

first class seat on a crowded airplane with no boarding pass, and priority seating at restaurants. Joyce Meyer, another proponent of the *Prosperity Gospel*, sarcastically poses this question: “Who would want to get in on something where you’re miserable, poor, broke and ugly and you just have to muddle through until you get to heaven?”

Unfortunately, those who have accepted this philosophy and who are contributing great sums of money to these ministries are often doing so because they are financially desperate—enticed by the promise that giving will produce a financial miracle. It is not our purpose here to question the motives of the preachers who promote

the *Prosperity Gospel*, but by presenting the philosophy of giving equals getting as Biblical truth, they may be placing an undue temptation and burden upon many who are already financially strapped and desperately seeking to get rich quick. But, does this claim of financial prosperity for faithful Christians have any merit at all?

DOES GOD WANT CHRISTIANS TO BE RICH?

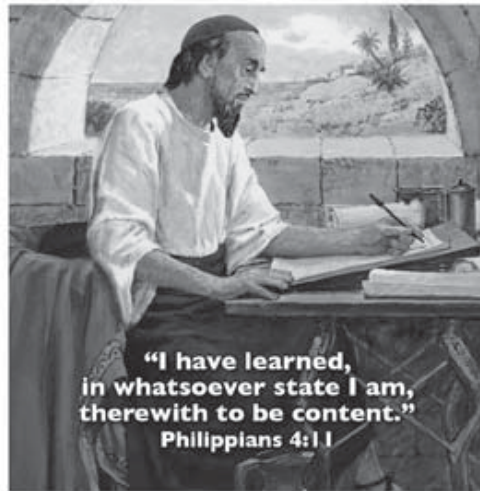
Does God promise that He will reward the faithful with material riches? No. In fact, the Scriptures teach that there are not many rich, not many great, not many noble, but chiefly “the poor of this world rich in faith.” 1 Corinthians 1:26-29; James 2:5



Considering the seriousness of their responsibility, it behooves those in a position as teachers of the Lord's little ones to heed the example of our Master and the Apostles. Indeed, even *"the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."* (Matthew 8:20) Furthermore, Paul, one of the most active of the Apostles in serving the church, did not ask for money, although he did appreciate the voluntary offerings when they were given. He even went to tent making when his funds were low. (Acts 18:3) In addition, the Apostle Peter urged the servants of Christ not to beg for money nor preach for *"filthy lucre [greedy gain]."* (1 Peter 5:2) This, however, is not to say that there was not a spirit of giving engendered by Jesus' teachings. Paul did speak of donations given to relieve suffering congregations, and he also spoke of the love and financial help sent to him from the Philippian church. (Acts 11:28-30; Philippians 4:10-20) Paul noted the fact that those brethren and congregations which exercised themselves most liberally in this grace of giving (under the guidance of reason) were the most blessed in *spiritual growth*.

A SPIRIT OF GIVING OR A SPIRIT OF EXPECTING?

The problem is not with the concept of giving, but with preaching that we should expect something back. The unstudied Christian seems to be easily deceived by this *prosperity now* claim—perhaps it excites the fleshly trait of greed. To the contrary, Christians should not *expect* prosperity now, nor should they pursue treasures on this earth, but patiently lay up treasures (spiritual blessings) in heaven. In reality, for every success story that the *Prosperity Gospel* preachers parade before their followers, there are millions who give and give, and still remain poor. It is implied that their lack of temporal blessing is that they don't have enough faith. To the contrary, the scriptural promise to Christians has always been that of *spiritual prosperity*—a contentment even through the storms of life. *"Godliness with contentment is great gain."* (1 Timothy 6:6) The *great gain* of Christians is to have peace of mind in whatever condition they find themselves. As the Apostle Paul put it, *"I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things... I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content... I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."* (Philippians 3:8; 4:11-12) In other words, Paul is encouraging those who abound, to learn



how to live righteously with these earthly treasures, and those who are poor in this world's goods to abound in the grace of God and the *spiritual* rewards He has promised.

Those who love God more than the things of this earth will rejoice in His providence surrounding their lives. These are rich in faith. And, as the Psalmist admonished, *"If riches increase, set not your heart upon them."* (Psalm 62:10) It is not a sin to have an abundance of this world's goods;

however, those who *desire* to be rich—who put the love of ease and wealth above the love of God—may find their hearts growing cold toward heavenly things. As Paul warned, *"...they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare... 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. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience meekness."* 1 Timothy 6:9-11

Thus, the question every Christian must ask is, am I giving out of generosity and love, or because I want to receive? Again, there is nothing wrong with giving, *"God loveth a cheerful giver,"* but it must be done for the right motive or the sacrifice will not be acceptable to Him. As the Apostle reminds us, *"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity [love], it profiteth me nothing."* (1 Corinthians 13:3) Yes, God is looking at the motive behind the giving.

THE SCRIPTURAL CONCEPT BEHIND TITHING

The giving of tithes was commanded under the Mosaic Law given to the nation of Israel. Israelites were told to give one tenth of the increase of all they had to the Lord to be used to support the priesthood, widows, orphans and all the needy. As the Law to Israel states: *"...concerning the tithes of the herd, or of the flock, even of whatsoever passeth under the rod, the tenth shall be holy unto the LORD."* (Leviticus 27:32) As a result of keeping the Law, the Lord would assure the prosperity of the Hebrews.

As for tithing today, Christians have not been commanded to tithe, nor have they been promised prosperity as was Israel. Christians are not under the Law Covenant given to the Hebrews, for that covenant was nailed to the cross of Christ—came to an end for those who have accepted Christ. As the Apostle Paul said, *"Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no*

longer under a schoolmaster [under the Law].” (Colossians 2:14; Galatians 3:24, 25) Therefore, there was no law of tithing given to the Christian. The Christian is under the *law of love*—a spirit of giving that would expect nothing in return. Matthew 22:36-40

More important than money, God desires our hearts, our time, our talents. He says, “*My son, give me thine heart...*” (Proverbs 23:26) A Christian’s entire life and being is given to God—not just a tenth—and he is then to be a steward over all of his time and possessions, to be used in God’s service as opportunity is presented. This does not mean to give all to a church organization, which may or may not make good use of it. It means that we should determine for ourselves how to best use our time, money and talents in the Lord’s service. In exchange, the faithful steward will receive *spiritual* blessings and a heavenly reward.

But why do the churches promote tithing today if it is not required? Tithing became common in the Christian church by about the third century to finance the large cathedrals and to support the complex organization of clergy. Although some of the money was put to good use, there was also much corruption in this practice. “*The priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money...*” (Micah 3:11) “*Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain...*” (Isaiah 56:10, 11) The plea for tithe-money today seems no different, as preachers solicit money to keep their TV evangelism or mega-churches functioning. In contrast, Jesus and his disciples never asked for money to support the Lord’s work. They did, however, receive unsolicited contributions from those who supported their efforts. Yes, it does take money and volunteers to spread the Gospel message today, but we should follow the example of the early church which did not have paid ministers, expensive buildings and large organizational expenses.

“LAY NOT UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURES UPON EARTH...”

Jesus said in Luke 9:23, 24, “*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.*” Yes, the Scriptures declare that “*if we suffer, we shall also reign with him...*” (2 Timothy 2:12) As Christians, we must exchange our hopes and loves of this earthly life and its riches for a heavenly hope of eternal life. This high privilege and reward will cost us something; in fact, it will cost us *all* of our earthly goods and even life

itself. And, although we are not obligated to be poor, the chief ambition in a Christian’s life is to accumulate *heavenly* treasures. Jesus admonished, “*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...*” In addition, Jesus said to his disciples, “*Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly*



enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 6:19-21; 19:23) The rich are often satisfied with the earth and find it difficult to give up their earthly riches. The snare of riches is that there can never be enough. There is no end to the lengths the heart will go when it is set on a desire for money. “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.*” (Jeremiah 17:9) Thus, to use prayer as a means to request of God worldly gain is to *ask amiss*. “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*”

(James 4:3 NAS) Instead of such things, we should be asking for spiritual gifts such as wisdom, peace, patience and the holy Spirit. James 1:5; Luke 11:13

Jesus said, “*...every one that hath forsaken houses... or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.*” (Matthew 19:29) Here Jesus plainly states that in order to gain the heavenly reward we must leave all. Jesus did not mean that we should literally sell everything we own, but that we would be gladly willing to sacrifice earthly treasures, ambitions and reputation, if God’s providence directs—so that He might be glorified in our lives. We must ask ourselves: are we ready to sacrifice our personal time to serve the Lord; are we ready to change our goals in life to better suit the service of the Lord; are we even willing to remove ourselves from a job if it interferes with our spiritual goals and principles; are we willing to stand for righteousness even if it means the loss of friendships? If we answer yes, and we find ourselves delighting in doing good purely for the purpose of pleasing God, then we are developing in godlikeness—becoming His agents in the distribution of the heavenly bounties which He has provided for all who will come into accord with Him. To be godlike is to be generous and unselfish—seeking the interests and welfare of others. “*Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth.*” (1 Corinthians 10:24) And, “*As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.*” Galatians 6:10