

The Preposterous Prooftexts of the Prosperity Gospel

The “Prosperity Gospel” is the notion that God wants His people to become rich.

Of course, the people getting richest are those preaching the prosperity gospel. Many of these are people you see on TV—Bob Tilton, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, Paula White, Eddie Long, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and Joel Osteen. How do they succeed in convincing their listeners that God offers them earthly riches?

Selective Quotation

Christians must realize that anyone can prove practically anything from the Bible if he quotes the right passages selectively. That’s the same trick that Satan attempted to pull on Jesus in Matthew 4:6. Satan quoted selectively from Psalm 91. Jesus put those verses back into the context of the Bible by saying, “On the other hand, it is written...” and quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16.

As a rule, if your interpretation of one verse contradicts the plain meaning of another, you are likely misusing it and should check the context.

Prosperity preachers quote certain passages that seem to support their doctrine; and they are fond of pulling the quotations from the translations that help them the most. For example, Isaiah 1:19 of the Living Bible says, “If you will only obey, I will make you rich!” That gets heavy rotation on Bob Tilton’s show. But most translations give the verse as, “if you only obey, you will eat the best of the land.” And of course, there is no mention of the fact that the blessings of the land of Canaan are equivalent, but not equal to, the spiritual blessings Christians are promised in Christ. The Old is but a shadow of the New (Col. 2:7).

Joel Osteen is especially fond of two verses: “For your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9) and “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). To imply that Jesus died on the cross so that we could drive Bentleys is so wrong it’s blasphemous. These passages are speaking of the spiritual riches of guidance, of forgiveness, of adoption, of the inheritance of heaven. In that sense, God truly has blessed us with “the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us” (Eph. 1:3-14, cf. 2:7).

If, instead, a person comes to the Bible with an open mind and searches for its message, there is a huge emphasis on denying the world and living a simple, contented life. Consider the following:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where

thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:23-24).

“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do; I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” ’

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you! Now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:15-24).

We have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it, either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:7-10).

Christians will always need to work hard and support their families, and share with others (Eph. 4:28, 2 Thess. 3:8-11, etc). But the priority must remain heaven (Phil. 4:11-12, Matt. 6:24-33).

Besides, physical wealth does not necessarily indicate God’s favor. Is Donald Trump a disciple? Was Job lost? Some do gain an abundance, and those who are godly will use it for the glory of the kingdom (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

—John Guzzetta