

Another View of the Prosperity Gospel

Jesus focused on the joy of giving, not on the promise of return. Yet what some ministers teach today about money often encourages greed.

During the last decade, I've spoken with numerous people whose lives have been negatively affected by unbalanced teaching on giving. The teaching has come from ministers who are using Scriptures on "getting the return" to appeal to the Western materialistic mind-set.

"Just give, and it will come back," these ministers tell the crowds, with a fervor that convinces many listeners. They refer to a thirty-, sixty- and hundredfold return in a way that implies the contributor can expect to receive an immediate blessing—presumably so his or her debts can be quickly eliminated. The fact that some people's spending habits and financial practices should be drastically altered is not even addressed.

I have counseled a number of individuals influenced by prosperity messages who gave to the point of bankruptcy. One notorious TV preacher literally wore out the phrase "Make a vow to God," encouraging viewers to make a \$1,000 vow and promising abundance such as that enjoyed by the widow of Zarephath, whose pot of oil never ran out (see 1 Kin. 17).

Some ministers believe they are teaching the truth, and they may be sincerely seeking to help the hearer. My intention is not to accuse anyone of deliberately misleading or manipulating those whom they impact. But I've seen firsthand the unhealthy consequences of this type of teaching, and the manipulation breaks my heart.

More Blessed to Give

Scripture points out that what we're seeing today is not new. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah talked about priests who were greedy for gain (see Jer. 6:13; 8:10). The prophet Micah grieved over the ruling classes of Israel, whose rulers judged for reward, priests taught for hire and prophets divined for money (see Mic. 3:9).

What a different spirit we find in the apostle Paul, who told the Ephesian elders: "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak.

"And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33-35, NKJV, emphasis added). Though the love of money was a hallmark of false teachers (see Tit. 1:11), Paul stood above approach.

Throughout Scripture Jesus puts the primary focus on the joy of giving, not on the return. He offers us the supreme example of what it means to give: He gave His life for us—knowing there was nothing we could give Him in return.

God wants us to express His heart when we give. That means we won't be asking, "What's in it for me?"

Ministers who use Luke 6:38 as their text ("Give, and it will be given to you") overlook the statement in verse 35, which emphasizes the importance of doing good, even lending, and not hoping for a return.

Those who give with undue emphasis on the return are often encouraging a self-centered focus. Unknowingly, they short-circuit a supernatural response from God and are not satisfied when they do receive a return. Selfishness never finds satisfaction but continually seeks gratification. On the other hand, if we ever come to understand how to properly focus on releasing what God entrusts to us, I don't believe we can stop

the return and positive results.

Think about the Good Samaritan who helped the injured man at the side of the road. He didn't put oil on the man's wounds hoping he would suddenly inherit an oil well. He didn't pay for the man's care at the local inn because he thought he would suddenly own the Hilton chain.

He was the true good neighbor Christ says we're to emulate. He came to the man's aid because the love of God flowed out of him freely.

Jesus came that we might have life more abundantly (see John 10:10). Those with less than pure motives, or perhaps a lack of clear understanding, mistakenly believe that Jesus came to give us abundance in life instead of abundance of life. If we understand the true nature of God, we know that He wants to bless and reward His children. God is not opposed to our having things, but He is deeply concerned that things not have us.

If your heart is set on the things of this world, you'll be going after worldly gain instead of heavenly pursuits. Jesus cautions us: "'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).

The reason Jesus deals candidly with worldly wealth is that He wants our hearts to be in the right place. He tells us, "'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'" (v. 21).

The fact is, where you invest your money says volumes about your desire and heart focus. Jesus says we cannot serve two masters (God on the one hand and "mammon," which literally refers to money or riches, on the other). God wants us to put our trust completely in Him.

Isn't it ironic that the words "In God we trust" are printed on the backs of our dollar bills? If we don't put our trust in Him, we'll put it in something else—most likely money.

Does that mean you can't have a nicer car? No, just don't let the nice car have you. Does it mean you can't have a big house? No, just don't let the big house have you. If you are holding on to an earthly treasure you love, you can expect to be personally tested. Many things I've loved have melted or vanished.

Listen for God's voice of caution: "Idol check!" Remember, it can all disappear or blow up in a moment.

The most rewarding thing you can do with your riches is bless someone else. Money used to help those in need is treasure laid up in heaven. Scripture says, "'If you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded'" (Matt. 10:42, NLT).

Christ's concern for the poor and outcasts is one of the most common themes in the book of Luke. Speaking to His followers, Jesus said: "'Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you'" (Luke 6:38, NKJV).

In Bible days people would go to the marketplace for grain. The grain was poured out, shaken down and filled to overflowing so that the buyer received the amount he paid for. Although we know that we "reap what we sow," some commentators have noted that in the above passage, Jesus was not necessarily promising a return of our gift in kind, but rather an equivalent in joy and blessing. The main point here is that those who have given generously will be blessed generously—God won't shortchange a cheerful giver!

But He gives intangible gifts as well as material blessings. Though I came from a dysfunctional family, my wife, Betty, and

I not only have been married for 40 years, but also have three children and 11 grandchildren who love one another dearly and put God first. My family blesses me!

Acquaintances have often told me, "James, you are a blessed man!" Honestly, I feel so rich in life that I need nothing more than for my wife to say "I love you" or for my grandchildren to go with me to a special place and allow me to spend time with them. These are blessings money can't buy.

Farmer or Miner?

The concept of sowing and reaping is an important aspect of giving. Unfortunately, it has become so distorted in recent years that many people have missed out on the intended meaning. Look at what the apostle Paul says about the law of harvest—and notice how the emphasis is on giving, not on receiving:

"A farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in a response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully.

"And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. ... For God is the one who gives seed to the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will give you many opportunities to do good, and he will produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched so that you can give even more generously" (2 Cor. 9:6-11, NLT).

Have you ever met a farmer? He prepares the ground, plants the seeds, tends the crop, prays for sun and rain—and no matter what happens, he will plant again. If he gets "droughted" out, hailed out, stormed out or stomped out, he's still going to plant again. Why? He's a farmer, not a miner.

A miner seeks to extract resources for his own benefit, and if he doesn't succeed, he abandons the mine, whereas a farmer continually invests in the ground, improving it and trusting God for the increase.

In addition, not all farmers yield the same amount of crops. One of the huge deceptions in some personal prosperity teaching is the notion that everybody is going to have a big house, big car or big income. This concept promotes a "sameness" mentality, and it simply is not scriptural.

No two farmers get exactly the same amount of rain and exactly the same yield in their crops. In fact, godly farmers may not have as good a harvest as their ungodly neighbors. It happens!

Some people—even righteous individuals—will be tested. They may seem to have problems, challenges and pressures that others don't battle. Through life's challenges, the Lord often gives people an opportunity to share a powerful testimony that will minister to others.

Where is your heart? If you're just looking for a return, you're a miner. God wants us to be farmers for kingdom purposes. If you are faithful, Scripture says "in due season" you will reap a harvest. "So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time" (Gal. 6:9, NLT).

This Isn't Spiritual Bingo

God has blessed Betty and me tremendously. We've never personally been in the bondage of debt or gone through the financial struggles that many people have experienced.

One reason is that we have never sought "stuff." Our philosophy has always been: "Can't afford it? Don't buy it." We have always lived below our means.

Our first home was a 10-foot-by-50-foot trailer. We had a

king-size bed in our room—and let me tell you, that bed was our room.

A few years later, we bought a small house. As I recall, our monthly payments were \$109. A short time later, our ministry had a need, and Betty and I decided to sell our house.

We gave the equity to the ministry—all of it. Though it represented a lot of money to us, we never expected to get it back “thirtyfold, sixtyfold or hundredfold.” In fact, Betty and I have never given with that focus because we live knowing God has focused His love on us and all His children.

Shortly after selling our home, I shared Christ with a local woman and her family. I didn’t expect to see her again, but within a few months, she walked in the door of our ministry with a check for the \$109,000 she had received from selling her small house, which was located on the property where the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport would soon be built.

“I want to help you start a television ministry,” the woman told us. She also said she had heard us talk about desiring to take care of the pastor and his wife who had given me a home for the first five years of my childhood, as well as for a couple of my high school years. “I want you to take care of them,” she said, “and I am buying you a house so you can do that.”

She paid cash for a home that Betty and I shared with my foster parents for a number of years. We later sold that house and gave all the money to the ministry, trusting God to take care of us.

Once again, God showed us favor. Twenty-eight years ago, He led us to the property where we built our next home and still live today. It was way out in the sticks, and the land wasn’t considered valuable. However, it was perfect because it had a nice yard where our children could play, and it gave our family privacy.

Would you believe that 25 years later, our suburb became one of the most sought-after areas in the Metroplex, with some land value multiplying up to 100 times? Only God could have known about the increase that was in store. Clearly, Betty and I did not choose the area for the return but rather to invest in our family's future—and God blessed us beyond our wildest imagination.

My intention is not to single out our family; I imagine that many of you reading this article could add phenomenal blessings to the list. My point is that until our hearts change and giving to get is no longer the major motivating factor, we are not hearing what God wants us to hear—we're hearing what the West and unbalanced ministers are teaching.

God doesn't want us to play the money game. This is not spiritual bingo or Bible lottery. Giving is the essence of life. If we release that which He has freely given us, He will increase it for His purpose—not so we can build bigger barns but so we can live life abundantly.

Those who focus on earthly treasures and receiving a blessing may get a lot of stuff, but they will not experience fullness of life. In the end, they will rot in their stuff. The Father wants to bless children who can be trusted to release His resources, which certainly includes money, for kingdom purposes.

Scripture says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9, NKJV). God promises you will receive much more than material gain.

Those who know Christ are rich beyond measure—rich in salvation, forgiveness, joy, peace, glory, honor and majesty. That, my friend, is true prosperity. Once you've received these blessings from above, I encourage you to share them with

others so they, too, can know what it means to really prosper.

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