

3 Things You Missed Over the Controversy About Prosperity

With all the stew and controversy many people are making over a minister believing God for a jet, we need to stop and think for a moment. What is this really about? What is the main issue here?

I believe we are skirting around the central point, and I see the general public falling into three main categories. There are those who will criticize these rich ministers and cast them off as complete reprobates—even referring to them as agents of Satan. Honestly, that is simply a knee-jerk reaction. Then on the extreme side, there are those who defend these ministers and their jets and will even defend their luxurious and extravagant lifestyles, calling them a blessing from God.

The majority, however, are probably somewhere in the middle of these two extremes with most just remaining silent. Many refrain from saying anything because they don't want to appear judgmental. Certainly, we can't judge their hearts, but we are to judge all things in the light of God's Word. We can judge their doctrine, and we can judge their character or their fruit. The Word is clear on that.

"Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit" (Matt. 7:15-16a). Jesus said it twice (v. 20). Here's the mistake we often make. We judge them by the fruit of their ministry instead of the fruit of their lives (Matt. 7:21-23).

Rules Change for Ministers

We need to understand that the rules change for ministers. We've been entrusted with the lives of people. We're under a

stricter judgment (James 3:1). To whom much is given much is required (Luke 12:48). We live in a glass house. Because of our position, our example impacts more people than the average believer. It's true that only God knows the heart and only God sees men's true motives. But the Word is clear. Even the appearance of evil must be avoided (1 Thess. 5:22). Ministers can't give people any grounds for accusation.

"Now a bishop (superintendent, overseer) must give no grounds for accusation but must be above reproach" (1 Tim.3:2a, AMPC).

"For a pastor must be a good man whose life cannot be spoken against" (1 Tim. 3:2a, TLB).

Peter says it this way when it comes to a minister's relationship toward money:

"Tend (nurture, guard, guide, and fold) the flock of God that is [your responsibility], not by coercion *or* constraint, but willingly; not dishonorably motivated by the advantages *and* profits [belonging to the office] ..." (1 Pet. 5:2, AMPC).

There are many advantages and profits that are obtainable from ministry today. It is much easier in this day of poor accountability to get rich through the gospel and to be motivated by that advantage. And a minister has no grounds to justify it and say it's nobody's business. It's a public trust!

The example we set speaks the loudest. This is the reason there are qualifications for ministers to even function as a leader or in an office in the church. We must be able to say no to many things that would be permitted in the lives of others. We must resolve not to be a stumbling block to the weak, thus sinning against Christ (1 Cor. 8:9, 12).

The Biggest Lesson a True Apostle Taught Me About True Financial Prosperity and Stewardship

When the elder board of the late Lester Sumrall made several attempts to persuade him to upgrade his ministry image by purchasing a luxury car, he gruffly responded by saying: "I like my Chevrolet, and I'll keep my Chevrolet!"

When I was a Bible school student, one of the first guest speakers we had was Brother Sumrall. In his introduction to a week-long seminar, he said that when he and his wife got married they made a vow of poverty. As soon as he said that, the students gasped because we were taught that poverty was a curse. Recognizing that the air had gone out of the room, and that he now had every student's attention, Sumrall explained himself. "I believe in prosperity, but not for my back pocket!" Boom! A big mental stronghold was knocked out of our minds and balance was restored.

To me, this is the godliest and most admirable position on financial prosperity. I'm glad I learned it early. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Sumrall saw millions of dollars flow through his hands and as far as I know, all without altering his own lifestyle. He built churches, schools, purchased radio and television stations and even had his own ship and airplane that he used for transporting food, goods and supplies to help the poor and needy around the world. I believe he also had his own ministry airplane, but when he came to the nation of Liberia to minister in our annual convention at 76 years of age, he and his wife traveled coach on a commercial airline.

I'm not saying it is sinful, carnal or wrong to travel first class or business. Actually, it can be a blessing and keep you refreshed on long trips so you can minister more effectively. I'm just saying that Sumrall stuck to the vow of poverty he made in his younger days all for the sake of the gospel. He was being a good steward. That is the greatest example for anyone to follow. I'm sure his reward is great.

God Is Not Opposed to His People Being Rich

I believe the more balanced view of financial prosperity is to have a full supply where there is no lack, and you have more than enough to be a channel of blessing to others. Part of a minister's testimony is to avoid excessive and extreme doctrine or a lifestyle that could potentially bring reproach to the gospel.

It's not that the Lord doesn't want us to enjoy His financial and material blessings. He is not opposed to His children being rich and owning a nice home or driving a nice vehicle. God Himself has no problem with money. For heaven's sake He walks on streets of gold! God is not short of money. It's just that He doesn't want those things to own us where we display an inordinate desire for them, which is manifested many times through poor stewardship. This means that if He tells you to give it away, you could do it.

Again, please hear me clearly, God is not opposed to His people having riches and being blessed for the Word tells us that God "richly gives us all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17, MEV). Many have prospered abundantly through successful businesses and financial investments, but the rules are different for ministers, and caution and discretion must be exercised. Did you notice the separate instructions Paul gave to Timothy concerning riches?

First to ministers, he told Timothy in no uncertain terms to flee the desire and love of money:

"For the love of money is the root of all evil. While coveting after money, some have strayed from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, escape these things" (1 Tim. 6:10-11a).

If this instruction applies to Timothy then it's also applicable to all ministers. "Flee" is a strong word. "Run from it!" Paul is telling Timothy to flee the love of money

and its destructive results.

Second, he told Timothy to warn the rich (non-ministers who do not stand in an office or place of church leadership/oversight):

“Command those who are rich in this world that they not be conceited, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who richly gives us all things to enjoy. Command that they do good, that they be rich in good works, generous, willing to share, and laying up in store for themselves a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

Notice that ministers are to warn the rich in this world—those who are part of their congregations—not to trust in riches. Question: How can any minister do that with any authority if he is rich and living in extravagance and luxury himself? How can he even preach the real gospel with any authority? Answer: They usually don’t. Instead, because of their own lifestyle, they compromise and resort to preaching the “gain is godliness” gospel. That’s the American gospel. That’s the way the American church has wandered in the last few decades.

I believe the Lord’s true ministers should be well taken care of. I guard my heart diligently against begrudging anyone whom God has blessed in any way. I know of one very godly minister who was given seven different homes throughout their lifetime of ministry. I rejoice in that. And if they want to use their personal money to build a million-dollar home and drive a luxury car, God is their judge, not me. But this leaves place to be scrutinized by the public and can hurt the cause of Christ. That’s my point.

My warning here is solely against the covetousness and the poor stewardship that is so glaring in many circles of the body of Christ today, which derives mainly from the teaching that “gain is godliness”. Paul denounced this perverted

teaching in the strongest of terms (1 Tim. 6). On the other hand, being rich doesn't mean you're sinful and carnal, just as being poor doesn't mean you're holy and spiritual.

The bigger questions we should be asking, as my friend Dr. Michael Brown so succinctly put it, and as I now paraphrase, are these: Do preachers who live in extravagance and luxury bring reproach to the gospel? Does it play into the image of the self-serving, manipulative televangelist? Does it make it more difficult for other Christian leaders to raise funds for their work? I would say a definitive and resounding yes to each of those questions.

And this is what this jet controversy is all about.