

Silverdale Baptist Church and the Prosperity Gospel

Most Christians have heard some of the following: "The reason you haven't been healed is that you don't have enough faith," "God wants you rich and healthy," "What is the desire of your heart? Name it, claim it by faith, and it is yours! Your heavenly Father has promised it. It's right there in the Bible."

Such statements reflect what is known as the Health and Wealth Gospel. It is a teaching that permeates most Christian media and originates from the Word of Faith movement. This movement defines faith as making a "positive confession" or thought-actualization, which stresses the inherent power of your words and thoughts.

The Gospel of Health

"I am fully convinced that it is the plan of Our Father God, in His great love and in His great mercy, that no believer should ever be sick;" (Hagin, Kenneth E., 1976, *Seven Things You Should Know about Divine Healing*, Faith Library Publications Tulsa, p. 21)

"I refuse to create a theology that allows for sickness ... it is a false gospel." (Johnson, Bill - 2010 August. Sermon presented at Bethel Church, Redding CA.)

Most Christians will readily agree on certain things in regard to healing. First of all, people who are morally conscientious and who recognize that the physical body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16) may generally have better health because they take care of their bodies. Secondly, the healing of the body is part of the redemptive work of God. The Bible does teach healing. It was part of Jesus' and the apostles' ministries. There were gifts of healing in the church's *charismata*, and in James 5:14-15, Christians are specifically encouraged to pray for the sick with the promise of answered prayer.

However, most Christians depart from the "Faith Movement" on healing when they say that healing is for everyone. And God always wants everyone to be healed. They get this from their understanding of Isaiah 53:5. *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5, NIV)* The Faith Movement interprets this to mean that healing is in the atonement and, just like you were forgiven of your sins, all you have to do is by faith claim it and you will be healed. But this passage never promises healing for everyone in this life. In fact Peter quotes this passage as a basis for living righteously, not physical healing (1 Peter 2:25).

Millions of faithful Christians throughout the ages have suffered and their prayers for physical deliverance have gone unanswered. There can only be three possible reasons. 1. God does not love these people. But we know that He does (Mt. 6:26). 2. God wants to heal them but they have sin in their life (Psalm 66:18) or they are not praying with enough faith (James 5:15) Both of these could be true and could block a healing. 3. Sometimes it is not God's plan to heal everyone exactly when we want that person to be healed. (Ex 4:11; Job 2:10; John 9:1-3; Heb. 11:35-39)

There are many times when a person is sick because of their sin. (Psalm 119:67-68, 1 Cor. 11:30) And we are told that when we pray we are to ask in faith and with the proper motives (James 1:6-8). Even though God may not heal someone because of their rebellion and their lack of faith, we believe that there are times when God sovereignly chooses to not heal people in this lifetime. All healing is ultimately up to God. And no amount of Bible claiming will force God, like a Jennie from a bottle, to do our bidding.

The best Biblical example of God not healing faithful Christians who pray in faith is the Apostle Paul. He had a thorn in the flesh that he prayed 3 times for God to remove. Yet God said no. ⁷ *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the*

revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.* ⁹ *But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor. 12:7-9, ESV)

There were many occasions where God used the Apostle Paul to bring healing to people. And yet with his thorn in the flesh, God said no. And Paul responded to God, not with disappointment, but with praise (2 Cor. 12:9-10). The fact is, God does not heal in every occasion. If he did, then why didn't Paul heal his fellow minister Trophimus? *I left Trophimus sick in Miletus* (2 Tim. 4:20, NIV). Or Timothy, who had obvious stomach problems, was not healed by prayer. So Paul gives him another remedy. *No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.* (1 Tim. 5:23, NASB) Why didn't Paul just heal him? Because contrary to the Prosperity Gospel, God does not always heal in this lifetime.

As Christians, we are to pray for healing. And we are to believe that God delights in healing His children (Mt. 7:7-8). So we should pray confidently, believing that God does heal in answer to our prayers. But even if God chooses to not heal our body in this lifetime, we know that as Christians we will experience the ultimate healing during the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:53). So Healing is not a divine obligation, it is a divine gift. And as the receiver of this gift, we can make no demands of God. And like that old hymn we come to that place of dependency and trust in God—"*Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, It is well with my Soul.'*"

The Gospel of Wealth

"It's a matter of your faith. You got one-dollar faith, and you ask for a ten thousand-dollar item, it ain't gonna work. It won't work. Jesus said, 'According to your faith', not 'according to His will.' He said, 'according to your faith be it unto you.' Now I may want a Rolls Royce and don't have but bicycle faith. Guess what I'm gonna get? A bicycle" (Frederick K.C. Price, "Praise the Lord" broadcast on TBN, 21 September 1990, taken from *Documentation for Christianity in Crisis* by Hank Hanegraaff).

The cardinal fault with the prosperity gospel is one central tenet: God wills the financial prosperity of every Christian, therefore, for a believer to live in poverty is living outside God's intended will. Normally tucked away somewhere is another affirmation: Since we are God's children, we should always go first class, we should have the biggest and the best. Only this brings glory to God!

To substantiate their teachings, proponents of the prosperity gospel distort the meaning of certain Bible passages. One such passage, frequently quoted is 3 John 1:2. John began his letter with a friendly greeting, expressing his desire for Gaius. *I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.* (3 John 1:2, NKJV) This verse is nothing more than John's personal wish for Gaius. And yet it is taken as a universal promise or guarantee of health and wealth.

Another popular text for the word-faith teachers, with regard to prosperity, is John 10:10. *I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.* (John 10:10, ESV) Yet this verse is referring mostly to our spiritual abundance, not some kind of material abundance (Eph. 1:3).

Many in the word-faith movement treat God as if He simply exists to cater to our every wish and to do our bidding. Charles Fillmore of Unity School of Christianity rewrote the 23 Psalm to reflect their understanding of God and their gospel. "*The Lord is my banker; my credit is*

good. He makes me to lie down in the consciousness of omnipresent abundance; He gives me the key to His strong box; He restores my faith in His riches; He guides me in the paths of prosperity for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk in the very shadow of debt, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me; You prepare a way for me in the presence of the collector; You fill my wallet with plenty; my treasure runs over. Surely goodness and plenty will follow me all the days of my life, And I shall do business in the name of the Lord forever." (*Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 1990, p. 45)

One cannot help but see that this kind of attitude is contrary to Scripture. *But godliness with contentment is great gain, ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.* (1 Timothy 6:6-10, ESV)

The reason why this prosperity gospel is so popular is because it feeds our fleshly desire for materialism and greed (2 Tim. 4:3). It justifies our covetousness. It exalts the idolatry of possessions. And yet we are told to be content with the basic things of life. We are told to be generous. And if God does bless us, it is not so we can spend these blessings on ourselves, but so we can use them to help others and support the Kingdom of God. *¹⁷ As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God ... ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.* (1 Timothy 6:17-18, ESV)

God blesses diligence and good work and honesty and integrity and generosity. When we give to his kingdom He does promise to provide for our needs (Mal. 3:10-11; Phil. 4:19). But this is a far cry from the prosperity gospel being promoted on many Christian networks today.

The root error of the gospel of health and wealth is that it seeks to apply a theology of future glory to the believer in the here and now. But the Bible does the opposite. We are taught that because of our future glory with God, we can now endure and even find joy in Christ. Despite the heartache and trials of this life we can experience God's abundant presence and peace.

In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33, ESV)

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22, ESV)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18, ESV)

We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. (2 Cor. 4:16, ESV)

Conclusion:

The health and wealth gospel is not the Gospel at all. It is a false gospel that needs to be condemned (Gal. 1:8). The disease of these false teachings is rampant in our culture and in the church. Christians have been inundated with messages that say our joy is inextricably bound up in our material prosperity, physical health and all the comforts and conveniences of Western society. For most people, joy and suffering are incompatible.

And yet the true Gospel says that we are to find our joy in Christ alone. We like Job need to come to a place that says in the midst of suffering, *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken*

away; blessed be the name of the LORD. (Job 1:21, ESV) The true Gospel says that it is Christ and His presence that gives us joy. We are to love and worship God for Who He is and not just for the blessings that He gives us.

The error of the prosperity gospel is that it overlooks God's purpose and plan for suffering. God uses hardship and tribulation to conform us into the image of Christ. *We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:2-5, ESV)*

Suffering exposes our idolatry and love of possessions. And when these material props are removed and when our physical bodies are wasting away, we find that God is enough. In fact, joyfully we say, God is more than enough. When we find that Christ is all we have, we discover that Christ is really all we need; because we have set our hearts on the exceeding treasure of God Himself and not on earthly prosperity.