



Excerpt from
WHAT PAUL MIGHT SAY TODAY
Critiques in the Practical Theology of 21st Century Western Christendom

Introduction

There is an insidious, subversive, false theology running rampant within the Western Evangelical Orthodoxy. It is not so much a systematic theology as it is a practical theology. Its origins can be traced back to the healing revival meetings of the Charismatic movement in the middle 1900s. Back then, mainstream evangelicals dismissed the teaching for the falsehood that it is. Today this erroneous doctrine is broadcast night and day by slick-looking, energetic, smooth talking televangelists on Christian television and radio networks. Consequently, it has found its way into the pews of many evangelical churches. Even in those churches in which it is not taught from the pulpit, there are very likely practicing parishioners covertly following and supporting at least one of these polished con artists—these thespians plying the roll of purveyors of truth.

The poisonous false doctrine of which I speak is the pervasive Prosperity Theology, the Health and Wealth Gospel or, as it is often called, Name-it-and-Claim-it-Theology; it is the idea that living godly will yield financial rewards. Godliness, at least in this arena, is exhibited by giving generous contributions to the ministry; giving with a positive “I shall prosper” attitude, while visualizing positive outcomes: perhaps a BMW and a Lexus filling the two-car garage, and plenty of steaks on the grill. Such material rewards are deemed God’s blessing because Christians are to have dominion and prosper. But it does not stop here. When these godly individuals congregate, God provides them an opulent building with

imported stained glass, expensive pews and a preacher in an \$800 Armani suit.

But this seemingly pious ideology is a decidedly anti-Christian theology, contrary to the teachings and experiences of both Jesus and his apostles. Metaphorically, believers often speak of receiving the meat of the Word from a Bible lesson or a particularly applicable sermon. Using this imagery, what makes this false teaching so insidious is that it is generally served with the Gospel, so that this sweet dessert is placed alongside the meat of salvation and good works, thereby making it appear as if they were all prepared by the same chef, or at least in the same kitchen. But they were not. As pleasing as this dish might be to the eyes and the palate, this sweet, intoxicating dessert is pure poison, and once it hits the bloodstream, recovery is most difficult.

The Manipulation of Scripture

This erroneous teaching stems from the poor exegesis of a few passages taken completely out of context. Malachi 3:10 is a prime example. The book of Malachi begins with God’s assurance to Israel that He loves and cares for them. The Lord’s wrath, which Israel had been experiencing due to their disobedience, had caused them to doubt His love. His anger had been kindled because the priesthood had been despising His name, offering imperfect sacrifices, making judgments with partiality, and violating the covenant with Levi, thereby causing many to stumble. The people had been withholding tithes and, in their faithlessness, divorcing their wives to marry idolatrous women.

For this, they received punishment rather than blessing.

When at last, they charged the Lord with being unjust, He promised to send a messenger to prepare the way before Him. But His presence will require judgment and change. In their sin they had lost trust in the Lord; they doubted that He would provide for their needs even if they were to keep His commandments. So He challenged them to put Him to the test. If they did so, the nations about them would understand that they have been blessed. Thus,

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it (Mal. 3:10).

To somehow derive from this specific reprimand and challenge to Israel the idea or conclusion that God will heap financial and material rewards on Christians who give heartily and envision a blessing is to twist the text in the manner of our enemy. At best, it is a prime display of ignorance, the epitome of a poorly executed exegesis leading to false doctrine. Certainly, it highlights the need for properly trained teachers—teachers who understand biblical theology and logical, historical, sound, hermeneutical and exegetical practices.

A couple of other passages aptly maligned to fit the purposes of these false teachers are Matthew 25:14-30, the parable of the talents, and John 10:10, in which Jesus explains that he has come to give life and to give it more abundantly. While the false teachers take the Malachi passage out of context and give application to those to whom it does not belong, they attempt to apply these passages from the Gospels to something to which they do not reference:

namely the material world. Each of these passages speaks to spiritual life: one, the multiplication of eternal rewards upon the correct use of spiritual gifts; the other, the absolute, eternal fulfillment and contentment attained in the new birth. Again, the misapplication of these simple passages underscores the need for a sound theological education.

“My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19), is yet another favorite passage among these treasure seekers. Here the issue is, what exactly is “all your need”? Do we need the BMW and Lexus? Must we have the grilled steaks? Just because the passage explains the means by which our Lord will supply our need, that is “His riches in glory” does not translate into our being lavished with riches in our temporal, non-glorious environment.

As for needs and the desire for financial rewards, I believe the Apostle Paul’s words speak for themselves: *“godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1 Tim. 6:6-8 NIV).*

Jesus also addressed this concept of God’s supplying our needs. In the same context, he warned against the desire for wealth and material possessions, for those with a heart toward such things cannot have a heart toward God. As we read our Lord’s sermon, let’s pay special attention to what he identifies as our needs. Somehow he overlooked the finer things of life: a golden chariot with a stable of fine horses, fancy, colorful togas, a spacious home with an atrium, courtyard, and garden. Instead, He pointed out that all these finer things possessed by King Solomon were no match for the beauty and fulfilled needs of even a

wild flower. Like Paul, Jesus' words speak for themselves.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Mat. 6:24).

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (Matt. 6:19-27 NIV).

Yet another favored passage for these teachers of wealth is 3 John 2, "*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou may prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prosper.*" This does not even deserve a rebuttal. One can grow weary of such misapplication of Scripture. It is an embarrassment to the faith that those calling themselves Bible

teachers would contort Holy Scriptures in such a manner, thereby giving credence to the naysayers who discount the Bible as something that says anything you want it to say. I say woe unto you thespians of theology, you manipulative preachers who entice the naïve to give you their hard earned money for the promise of more.

The reader might wonder how it is that I, the author of this treatise, can speak so condemningly of the teachers of this seemingly innocuous Prosperity Theology, calling them con artists, thespians and energetic smooth talkers. If you have this concern, I direct you to Paul's words to Timothy concerning an issue not dissimilar to this: that of wealth, and godliness, and financial gain. Speaking to slaves and masters, fellow believers in Christ, he admonished them to treat each other with respect and to have each other's welfare in mind. Very harsh words are given to those who have come to think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (1 Tim 6:3-5).

An Exhibition of Satan's Subtlety

While this seductive theology ostensibly promotes godliness, in reality, it advances a lie of Satan. These misapplications and distortions of Scripture are crafted with the same subtlety as Satan's plea to Eve, "*Yea, hath God said . . . ?*" Yea, hath not God said He will fill

your storehouses? Lavish you with riches? Build you a city with streets of gold? Give you all the desires of your heart? Yea, hath not God told you this?

Did not Jesus warn that we cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:24), that the deceitfulness of riches chokes the Word (Matt. 13:22), and that it is very hard for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom (Mk. 10:23)? And did not Paul warn against those who would pursue these lies and distortions?

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief's (1 Tim. 6:9-10 NIV).

Our Father will Provide

Unlike Israel (which had lost faith in God's willingness to provide) in the time of Malachi, we must trust in our Father's ability and desire to provide for us. Continuing his sermon, Jesus exhorted:

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these

things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matt. 6:28-34 NIV).

This unfounded inappropriate expectation of financial gain, hidden under the guise of righteousness, positive thinking and an ill-motivated generosity toward the ministry (reminiscent of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5) is nothing short of false teaching and erroneous behavior. Not only is such a desire for earthly wealth warned against time and again, it runs completely contrary to what we should truly expect as believers living in the last days. Rather than being showered with financial gain, Paul's counsel to Timothy was that those who would "live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12 NIV).

Do not be deceived

It is worth reading a passage of 2 Timothy 3, with a view toward these false teachers of Prosperity Theology. Is it not they of whom Paul is speaking? Certainly a good case could be made for it. The similarities are striking. We are in the last days. In many respects, these profit seekers seem to fit the bill. On the surface they appear to be godly but the true power of godliness, that is, sanctification, they deny. They weasel their way into homes and lead astray the gullible who, in their ignorance, are always looking for their ship to come in, always looking for the answer to comfort and happiness. While the righteous suffer persecution these deceivers advance their evil ploy, stubbornly denying the truth.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive,

disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone (2 Tim. 3:1-9 NIV).

In his first letter to Timothy, having described and warned of those who viewed godliness as a means to gain, Paul strongly warned him to get as far away from such teaching and practice as possible. Go in the exact opposite direction, and rather, pursue true godliness.

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim. 6:11-12 NIV).

The same charge holds true today. True believers must dissociate themselves from these imposters. We must not let our names be associated with them. We must not give them credence.

Wealth itself is not the issue

In closing this, the first letter, Paul makes it clear that riches themselves are not at issue. Nor is it that he expects everyone to be without wealth. He has simply said that the pursuit of riches, as a goal of life, is an issue. Viewing godliness as a means to riches is an issue.

Those who have been blessed with wealth have several responsibilities. This wealth must not go to their heads. They must remain humble. They must not assume their riches are a sure thing, something in which they can safely place their future. God alone is their hope. The good works and generosity of the rich must abound without expectation. By this, their future rewards, their real treasures, and life abundant, are assured.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Tim. 6:17-18 NIV).

A final admonition

So urgent is this warning, against viewing godliness as a means to riches, that Paul repeats himself, giving Timothy yet another admonition to distance himself from these false teachings, these vendors of insight to understanding.

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed

and in so doing have departed from the faith (1 Tim. 6:20-21 NIV).

How many times have I been asked through the years, by fellow believers, if I watch, like, support, a certain slick-looking, fast talking, money seeking, radio or televangelist? My answer is always the same. No! Even as a young man and new believer more than forty years ago I could not abide them. In retrospect, I do not know if this was because of intuition, a God-given discernment, or of the sound teaching I received under the late and beloved, Pastor Wilmer Bruner (though he never addressed these charlatans my name). Perhaps it was a combination of all. Whatever the reason, these slick talkers held no appeal for me. They did, however, elicit a visceral reaction that caused me to turn away even at the mention of their name. This has not changed to this day.

Woe unto you, deceivers, thespians, teachers of false doctrine, teachers of Prosperity Theology!