

### **13. THE LURE OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

Greed disguised as virtue in the name of God

In recent times, there has been a rise in the number of churches that preach the prosperity gospel. They emphasise that God wants to give spiritual and material wealth to His believers. The preacher claims that God wants us to make good use of the world's resources for our material welfare since He has entrusted the care of the world to us. Wealth gained is considered a blessing from God and man should eagerly anticipate it. Is this message congruent with the teachings of Jesus?

#### **What is The Prosperity Gospel?**

In the preaching of the prosperity gospel, wealth is regarded as God's blessings. Believers claim the "divine laws" of positive confession, visualization, and generous donations to obtain financial blessings. Pastors in these churches preach that wealth is a reward for carrying out the covenant with God. They interpret certain Bible verses to support their claim. For example, it is stated in 3 John 2:2, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." Based on this verse, the preacher affirms that God's will is for us to be successful, healthy, and wealthy.

Certain evangelists criticise traditional churches, especially the Catholic Church's teachings on accepting suffering. They advocate replacing the teachings on "poor in spirit" with the prosperity gospel. They believe that God's promise could not be any clearer than the following

verse, “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). This verse that has been interpreted as “material blessings” is used extensively by them. Their brand of theology pays special attention to the chapters in the Old Testament about God’s promises of blessings of material well-being such as longevity and possession of lands. In their opinions, desiring wealth and striving for it is not only right but also necessary!

Prosperity gospel churches place strong emphasis on the importance of “tithing”, quoting for example Malachi 3:10, “‘Bring to the storehouse a full tenth of what you earn so there will be food in my house. Test me in this’, says the Lord All-Powerful. ‘I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour out all the blessings you need.’” Thus, the claim that “the more you give, the more you will receive” is sustained.

Their worship gatherings usually consist of two parts: the first is a preaching based on the day’s topic; the second part focuses on the subject of “giving in exchange for prosperity”. Included in the preaching is also the idea of “positive thinking”. Believers need to confess the success they wish to achieve and fervently affirm their belief of “ask, and it will be given”. Leading the congregation in prayers, the preacher would ask for God’s blessings on their monetary offerings and for them to receive in return a hundred-fold rewards from God. Besides worship, such churches often organise seminars on “Financial Management”, “Wisdom for Wealth Growth”, “Success in Life”, and the like to actively help the worshippers manage and grow their wealth.

## **What is Wrong with The Prosperity Gospel?**

Theoretically, the prosperity gospel does not just advocate an egocentric pursuit of success but also propose extending charity to others after becoming successful. Their argument is that if Christians are not wealthy and powerful, how can they help the poor and the weak? They reason that one must first establish himself before he can help others, which means one can only help the poor when he has become rich. Some questions need to be asked: When is one considered successful? How many barrels of gold does one need to make before he can start helping others? Among them, how many are living for God and how many are self-absorbed? Is seeking God the motivation and goal of their faith, or are they after the economic well-being that God may grant? In theory, the prosperity gospel promises wealth to the subscribers and that it would in turn benefit the poor. However, how does it work out?

Many members of the prosperity churches are wealthy businessmen or successful professionals. They consider their wealth as God's blessings and believe that God will continue to bless them with status and wealth if they remain faithful to God. What if one of them fails in his business or loses a high-level job? Has he offended God in anyway? If not, why is he "punished" now? As for those who have yet to be rich, will they climb up the corporate ladder after making generous donations to their churches? If they do not, is their faith not strong enough or are their donations insufficient?

There are members who left these churches because the promises were not fulfilled in their life. However, the

church leaders would not mind. If these people are not successful, then based on the criteria of success and wealth as signs of blessings, they are considered cursed. If those who leave are successful people, then from their viewpoint, these are people who do not know gratitude. It is therefore not a pity to lose them as they are not useful to the long-term vision of growing wealth in the church. Members who stay behind are those who understand the principle of good returns. They are the like-minded people in quest for prosperity.

The theology of prosperity churches looks upon God as a “God of wealth” who generously desires to bless His faithful with prosperity. The test is to check your generosity to God, which is shown by your generous donations to His church.

### **Jesus’ Teachings on Wealth**

Preachers of the prosperity gospel also quote verses from the Gospels to support their view, as in Jn 14:13, “And I will do whatever you ask for in my name.” They believe Jesus is telling them not to be shy about asking for wealth. That is a gross misinterpretation of the words of Jesus. Jesus is not suggesting a mantra when he instructs his disciples to ask in his name. He is simply explaining that we should share his mind when we pray. That means when we pray about money, we must align our intention with his teaching on wealth

Jesus warned about greed far more often than his warnings on other matters. When he instructed the disciples on prayer, he taught them to ask for “daily bread”, not for excess bread. He gave a parable of a

wealthy man who said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'you have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' However, God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" (Lk 12:18-20). The message is clear: we enter this world with nothing and can take nothing with us when we leave. What is the purpose of accumulating money?

Jesus said, "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" (Mt 6:19-20). This verse serves as a warning to his disciples not to accumulate wealth beyond what is necessary for living. Many people do not distinguish between luxuries and necessities, and Jesus' advice hits the nail on the head.

Jesus also said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21). Indeed, if we want to know where someone's heart lies, just look at where he stores up his treasures. A person who sets his mind on accumulating wealth cannot place God at the centre of his life. He cares more about what benefits God can give him! A person who seeks God should "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt 6:33). Jesus' warning is clear, "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" (Mt 6:24).

## **The True Spirit of Christianity**

Jesus once lamented, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (Lk 18:22-25). It is challenging for the rich to focus on God, as their hearts reside where their riches lie.

St. Paul reminded us to know contentment, for man may easily be tempted by greed which leads them to corruption and destruction; the love of money is the root of all evil. St. Paul reminded Timothy, "Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grieves" (1 Tim 6:6-10).

St. Paul has also advised the rich not to be arrogant and not to place their hope in things as uncertain as wealth but in God who provides everything abundantly for our enjoyment. Money is given to us by God as a means for greater good. We are stewards of God who should use money for charitable purposes. We should be "rich in good works". Whether or not we are materially rich, we must be most concerned with seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness. If God blesses us with money, we must be willing to share with the needy, and thus storing up treasures for ourselves in heaven and enjoying our abundant life in Christ.