

god wants you to be rich | feature article

LUKE TATTERSALL takes a look at the prosperity gospel ...

The logic seems faultless: “A person who has more is able to help more.”^[1] If you have more money then you can do more good. Therefore, God must want me to have more money.

And it is an attractive message. It is a message that people are happy to hear. In fact, if success is measured by numbers then the message is a very successful message. People are flocking to hear this message in churches all around the world. Let’s face it, when there are books around with titles like “*God Wants You to Be Rich: How and Why Everyone Can Enjoy Material and Spiritual Wealth in Our Abundant World*”^[2] and “*God’s Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life*”^[3] people are going to sit up and take notice.

This thinking comes in a variety of forms – but the name generally given to it is “Prosperity Gospel”. In its simplest form the message is: become a Christian and things will go better in your life. At the more sinister end of the spectrum it says that: God will make you rich.

Those that preach the message claim biblical support. They quote verses like:

Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

As Christians we are going to face the constant pressure to want more. You only need to turn on your TV or open a magazine to experience it. And it is probably the greatest and most consistent struggle we will face as Christians in Australia.

We live in a country – while perhaps not the richest in the world – is very prosperous and comfortable. We are a rich country and a country that is only getting richer. They estimate that average household wealth in Australia grew between 1994 and 2000 by a whopping 45% in real terms. As Australians we are now richer than we have ever been – but we are still encouraged to say: “It’s not enough. I want more”. I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised to hear that message from the world we live in. It is depressing that we hear that message from churches.

As I have been looking through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians I couldn’t get this question out of my head: Why didn’t God want Paul to be rich? After all here is the Apostle to the Gentiles – our Apostle – and he isn’t rich. In fact look at how he describes himself in 1 Corinthians:

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in

Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. (1 Cor 4:9-13)

Paul says a similar thing when he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians:

We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Cor 6:3-10)

Paul seems to have a very clear idea about the importance of material

wealth in this life. He seems to suggest that he is destined to be poor – but it doesn't matter. When it comes to the things that really count – true riches – he is rich.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle. (Prov 23:4-6)

“Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. (Prov 30:7-9)

As Christians we need to make sure that we resist the “Prosperity Gospel”. But we also need to continually think about how we are handling the finances we have.

Now there is a balance in all this. It is not that the Bible is anti-money nor is the Bible anti-rich people. Job was an incredibly wealthy man. Abraham was also a man of some considerable wealth. Yes! Jesus does confront the rich young ruler and tell him that he needs to sell everything and follow Jesus (Luke 18:18-30). But it wasn't the man's money that was a problem. It was his love or trust in his money that was holding him back from following Jesus. He wasn't willing to exchange his riches on earth for riches in heaven.

The balance that we need to achieve is the one that Paul shows us in Philippians:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil 4:12-13)

We need to be content with what God has given us. And we need to use what God has given us to serve him and to serve others.

We need to take great care. We get sucked into thinking that if only our income was a little higher then our problems would be solved. By the world's standards we are among the “financially” richest people in the world. The question is not: Would you like some more? The question is: Are you content with what you have and are you using it to serve God and to serve others?

I don't think this is an issue that you deal with once in your life as a Christian. I think it is going to be a constant struggle. The temptation is going to be there at every stage of your life – no matter what your income.

You need to keep sitting down and thinking about how you are using your money. Ask yourself: Am I being greedy? Am I storing up treasure here on earth? Am I using what God has put at my disposal to build the Kingdom? How do I use what I have to advance the Gospel? How do I use what I have to help those in need?

[1] Brian Houston as quoted in the Good Weekend Magazine, 25/1/03, p.17.

[2] Author: Paul Zane Pilzer. The back cover of the book states: “A theology of economics, this book explores why God wants each of us to be rich in every way -- physically, emotionally, and financially -- and shows the way to prosperity, well-being, and peace of mind.”

[3] Author: Brian Houston

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