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Does God Want You to Be Rich? A Practical Theologian's Response to the Gospel of Prosperity

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INTRODUCTION¹

By training, trade, and temperament I am a practical theologian. In a lighter moment I will explain that means that I am a “jack-of-all trades and king of none” in a department devoted to the study of the Bible and theology. In a more serious vein I will suggest that my discipline concerns itself with the practical application of Scripture and theology in the local church. Put another way, we practical theologians are constantly analyzing the practices of the church, questioning whether they are biblically and theologically sound.

To be more precise, I am a practical theologian whose terminal degree concentrated on the study of homiletics. Consequently, I am most concerned about the church's preaching. Sound biblical preaching is a primary contributor to and indicator of any church's health.

Knowing my background explains why my attention was arrested by the September 18, 2006, edition of *Time* magazine with its provocative cover question “Does God Want You to be Rich?” The accompanying article reported:

Of the four biggest megachurches in the country, three—[Joel] Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston; T. D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta—are Prosperity or Prosperity Lite pulpits.... While they don't exclusively teach that God's riches want to be in believers' wallets, it is a key part of their doctrine.²

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¹ The following essay was first delivered as an oral presentation at the 2007 Spring Ministry Forum: “Understanding and Engaging the Prosperity Gospel,” sponsored by the School of Bible and Theology at Crichton College, Memphis, TN.

² David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to be Rich?” *Time*, 18 September 2006, 50.

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Here is a teaching that has presumably contributed to the growth of these congregations. A practical theologian such as I must ask, “Is this a good thing?” Is the Prosperity Gospel, a.k.a., Word of Faith Movement, Word-Faith Movement, Health and Wealth Gospel, and Positive Confession, a biblical message that God has blessed with significant church growth, or is it a modern-day fulfillment of Paul’s warning to Timothy — “The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4)?³

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Is the Prosperity Gospel theologically sound and based upon good exegesis, or is it culturally-driven and “proved” by selective eisegesis? If the Prosperity Gospel is not entirely biblical, what, if anything, can be learned from it and those who proclaim it that will enable an evangelical preacher to speak more effectively to a modern audience’s interests and needs, albeit in an exegetically and theologically responsible manner?

The following essay will subject the Prosperity Gospel to a three-part analysis. Part one analyzes the hermeneutics of the preachers of Prosperity. Part two analyzes the theological consequences of their gospel. Part three analyzes their homiletics. This examination will be based extensively, though not exclusively, upon Joel Osteen’s version of the Prosperity Gospel as presented in his book *Your Best Life Now* and in a handful of his broadcast sermons randomly audited by this essay’s author.

YOUR BEST LIFE NOW?

The influence of Osteen and his book in the propagation of the Prosperity Gospel are evidenced by the weekly broadcasting of his sermons into over 200 million homes across the country and 100 nations around the world.⁴ His book rose to number one on the *New York Times* list of bestsellers in the fall of 2004.⁵ This notoriety resulted in CBS’s *The Early Morning Show* representing Osteen as “America’s Pastor” during Hannah Storm’s interview with him in October 2007.

In the words of the book’s subtitle, *Your Best Life Now* presents “7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential.” The following is a summary of those steps presented in the same gentle hortatory style as found in the book.

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version* unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Joel Osteen Ministries, <<http://www.joelosteen.com>> (accessed 8 September 2010).

⁵ *The New York Times*, <<http://www.query.nytimes.com>> (accessed 8 September 2010).

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Step 1: Enlarge Your Vision

Enlarge your vision for life by raising your expectations. Expect more out of life from God, and expect favorable treatment from others because you already possess God's favor.

Step 2: Develop a Healthy Self-Image

How you see yourself determines where you will go and what you will get out of life. You will become what you believe. Believe yourself to be created in God's image and favored of God; develop a prosperous mindset; and be happy with your uniqueness.

Step 3: Discover the Power of Your Thoughts and Words

Believe that your situation will improve. Say so. "There is a miracle in your mouth. If you want to change your world, start by changing your words."⁶ "The moment you speak something out, you give birth to it. This is a spiritual principle ..." (129). Speak blessing over your life and the lives of all around you.⁷

Step 4: Let Go of the Past

Stop dwelling on past hurts and problems. Forgive those who have wronged you. Trust God to exact revenge and pay you back for your troubles.⁸

Step 5: Find Strength through Adversity

Determine to get back up after you have been knocked down. Trust God's timing to make things right and fulfill your dreams. Accept adversity as God's way of teaching and perfecting you. Continue to trust him even when things do not make sense.⁹

⁶ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), 125. Osteen's father John self-published a book entitled *There Is a Miracle in Your Mouth* in 1972.

⁷ The underlying belief is that faith is a force that is unleashed by the spoken word. This third step of Osteen's seven expresses quintessential Prosperity, or Word of Faith, thinking.

⁸ This is one of the most beneficial sections in the book. Many Christians are held back by bitterness. Sadly, Osteen does not explain that forgiveness is possible because the offended has already experienced Christ's forgiveness for him or herself. His call for forgiveness lacks grace-enablement and a Christ-centered impetus. Contrast Paul's admonition to forgive "one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" to Osteen's earlier explanation, "You are not forgiving for their sake, you are forgiving for your sake" (15). One wants to ask, "What about forgiving for Christ's sake?"

⁹ Despite his questionable exegesis of certain passages, Osteen offers sound, if unremarkable, advice in steps four and five.

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Step 6: Live to Give!

The “principles of giving are spiritual principles” (229) that apply to believers and unbelievers alike. Give now and watch God give to you in return. When you feel compassion toward another person, act upon it. “You sow some seed, and then God will bless you with more” (257).¹⁰



Step 7: Choose to be Happy

Do not wait for your circumstances to change in order to be happy. Be a person of excellence and integrity now, trusting God to reward you. Live life with enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, Osteen throughout his book speaks of God’s rewards solely in terms of what one should expect to receive in this life. The book says nothing about heaven (where the believer’s best life will be truly lived) and holds back on any discussion of salvation through Christ until the last page, following the endnotes.

HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS

Rather than plunge into a verse-by-verse exegesis of Deuteronomy 28, Isaiah 61, John 10:10, isolated verses from Proverbs, and other passages favored by the Prosperity movement, it will be more beneficial for purposes of this evaluation to analyze the general hermeneutical practices and point out the problems of Osteen and those like him. If the movement’s biblical hermeneutics were corrected in general, its preachers’ exegesis of select passages would right themselves.

A Mystical Treatment of Scripture

E. W. Kenyon, of the late nineteenth century, and Kenneth Hagin, of the twentieth, are the recognized founders of the Word of Faith, or Prosperity, movement. Both men denounced the use of exegetical tools and concern for historical exegesis in favor of Spirit-given interpretations to Spirit-filled men such as themselves or to the individual reader.¹¹ True to their legacy, today’s Prosperity preachers depend primarily upon “granddaddy

¹⁰ This “give in order to receive” philosophy is another form of the very selfishness that Osteen denounces on p. 221. Again, one wants to ask, “What about giving as an act of worship, as an expression of gratitude, or as a Christian duty?”

¹¹ *The Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), s.v. “Positive Confession Theology” points out that “the Rhema [Word-Faith] interpretation is their biased selection of biblical passages, often without due regard to their context. This approach not only does violence to the text but forces the New Testament linguistic data into artificial categories that the Bible authors themselves could not affirm.” Quoted by Craig Branch, *Veritas: “Wolves Among the Sheep,”* <<http://www.arcapologetics.org>> (accessed 9 September 2010).

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Hagin,” the Rhema Bible Training Center that he founded, and their own understanding when interpreting the Bible. Theirs is a reader-response approach to Scripture depending primarily upon personal illumination by the Spirit.

The movement’s mystical handling of the Bible goes beyond how it interprets the Bible to its performative, or declarative, use of Scripture. Writing about the influence of the prosperity gospel in Africa, Paul Gifford, author of *African Christianity: Its Public Role* and *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, observed that in certain African churches,

The words of the Bible have a performative or declarative use: the prophet declares the promises given in the Bible to be fulfilled in your life—you have the blessings of Abraham, the power of Joseph, the authority of Moses, the sovereignty of David, the exploits of Elijah, and increasingly the revival and restoration of Israel itself.¹²

Logically, if one believes that spoken words are conveyors of faith’s reality-shaping power, then it follows that the most powerful words one can speak are those that have come directly from God. Just reciting from Scripture what God has done for others and claiming it for oneself, regardless of other considerations to be addressed below, is enough to activate God’s power and blessing—even more so when the one who recites is a “prophet” of God.

Contextual Ignorance

Contextual ignorance, i.e., failing to determine the author’s intended meaning by ignoring the surrounding verses, historical background, the book’s purposes and themes, coincides with the movement’s mystical handling of Scripture. When studied in context, many of the passages cited by Prosperity preachers actually say something other or contrary to what is alleged.

For example, Osteen wrote, “It’s important that you program your mind for success. That won’t happen automatically. Each day, you must choose to live with an attitude that expects good things to happen to you” (13). To support his point he quoted from Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things above.” What he failed to realize or was unwilling to explain is that the entire verse actually reads, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” The preceding verse says, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” In context Paul directs believers to do the exact opposite of what Osteen claimed the verse to command.

¹² Paul Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” *ChrCent*, 10 July 2007, 20.

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Later Osteen wrote,

The Bible clearly tells us to speak to our mountains. Maybe your mountain is a sickness; perhaps your mountain is a troubled relationship; maybe your mountain is a floundering business. Whatever your mountain is, you must do more than think about it, more than pray about it; you must speak to that obstacle. The Bible says, “Let the weak say I’m strong. Let the oppressed say I’m free. Let the sick say I’m healed. Let the poor say I’m well off” (124).

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He cited Joel 3:10 as the reference for his quotation. There are two problems here. First, only the words “let the weak say I’m strong” appear in the verse. The rest is loosely based on a contemporary Christian song. Second, in the context God is speaking to Israel’s enemies, threatening judgment. He is in effect saying, “Get ready and bring it on! Turn your plows into swords, and gardening tools into spears. Psych yourselves up. Tell yourselves that you’re strong and come on down!”

Genre Insensitivity

The Bible’s contents were composed in a variety of literary genres—law, history, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, to name just a few. Just as one does not read a five-act play by Shakespeare and instructions for overhauling a six-cylinder engine in the exact same way, each genre of Scripture needs to be read differently if it is to be understood as the divinely-inspired author intended. The oversimplified hermeneutic of the Prosperity movement treats all genres the same.

History is routinely read normatively, i.e., as a record of what God can be counted on to do normally for his believing children. Joseph lets his brothers “off the hook” for their ill treatment of him by acknowledging in Genesis 50:20 that he saw the hand of God in it all. Osteen extracted from this historical statement the following promise: “The Bible says that God will take the evil that the enemy brings into our lives, and if we’ll keep the right attitude, He’ll turn it around and use it for our good” (179). Similarly, the record of Abraham’s prosperity obtained after leaving Ur is popularly held up as an example of what all believers can expect God to do for them in reward for their obedience.

Proverbs are short, memorable statements that encapsulate an observable principle of life. They were never intended to be read as divinely guaranteed promises, but this is precisely how they are often treated. Any proverb that teaches a fool will not prosper may be generally true, but it is not true in every case. Many foolish folks today live in mansions from Washington, D. C. to Beverly Hills, California! To take such a proverb and teach that its complement, i.e., the wise will prosper, is equally and absolutely true is to evidence a misunderstanding of the genre itself.

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Overextended Applications

Prosperity preachers tend to treat all biblical promises as personal. This practice accords with their declarative use of Scripture.

The promises found in Deuteronomy 28 are routinely stretched by their hands to apply to the NT church and her individual members. Such an application overlooks, among other considerations, the differences in eastern and Western mindsets. The OT Jews, a people of the East, were far more community-conscious than North Americans are today in the individualistic West. They heard the promises and threats of the Mosaic covenant with community-conscious ears. "If we obey God, God will bless us. If we disobey God, God will curse us."

The NT likewise focuses more on the community, in this case the Christian community, than today's Western believer might realize. The Christian faith is a personal faith that leads to community. Every believer is a part of Christ's body. Prosperity preachers have not learned to guard against overextending God's national and communal promises for personal application.

Unsubstantiated Claims

"God wants to increase you financially by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity" (5). Temporal blessings such as these (5) and good health, a better marriage, better relationships, good parking spaces, a college education for one's children, and tables in crowded restaurants are the sorts of prosperity Osteen claimed God wants to give. These blessings are allegedly available because the Law's "curse" of poverty has been lifted by Christ's sacrifice (24).

Did Paul have poverty in mind when he wrote in Galatians 3:13 about "the curse of the Law" from which Christ came to redeem mankind? Osteen affirmed as much, as did Kenneth Hagin who exhorted readers of his *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, "Believe His Word that says we are redeemed from the curse of poverty."¹³

To claim that God promised to prosper in temporal ways every individual OT believer is suspect when one considers that he gave directions to Israel on how to treat the poor in her midst, e.g., Leviticus 19:9–10. To claim that God wishes to so prosper every believer on this side of Calvary is unsubstantiated in the NT. Gordon Fee was willing to grant in

¹³ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity* (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1995), 30, qtd. in Gary Evans, "Spiritual Deviations: The 'Gospel' of Prosperity," *Affirmation & Critique*, January 2000, 55. In his critique of the Prosperity gospel Evans documented similar claims of other preachers within the movement.

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his booklet on *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* that possessions are often related to a life of obedience in the OT “but *never* in the New” (emphasis his).¹⁴ He proceeded to characterize the NT’s attitude toward wealth and possessions as “carefree,” held that this attitude “for which *neither* prosperity *nor* poverty is a value, is thoroughgoing in the New Testament” (emphasis his), and asserted, “[a]ccording to Jesus, the good news of the inbreaking of the Kingdom frees us from all those pagan concerns (Matt. 6:32).”¹⁵

A quick survey of the NT shows that faith in Christ was often costly, not rewarding, monetarily for the apostles and early church. James and John left their father Zebedee’s fishing business through which their family had gained wealth and social standing in order to follow Jesus. Their decision cost them socioeconomically.

Peter, speaking for the Twelve in Matthew 19, claimed that they had forsaken all to follow Jesus. Jesus did not dispute the claim.

Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 6 and 11 of the hardships that he endured after coming to faith and entering the ministry. His pre-conversion situation was socioeconomically more rewarding than that following his conversion.

The church at Jerusalem experienced a famine that concerned Paul enough during his missionary travels that he collected an offering for its members. Those believing Jews would have arguably found assistance tough to come by from their non-believing families and friends because of their identification with a crucified Messiah.

Hebrews 11 describes the hardships encountered by God’s faithful ones in the past. Verses 35–39 speak of torture, jeers, floggings, chains, imprisonment, stonings, destitution, persecutions of various sorts, and homelessness. The writer summarizes in verse 39: “They were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.” In the very next chapter he alludes to the suffering that his readers were then experiencing, not because of sin but as a sign of their divine sonship.

Out of the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2–3, only Laodicea was said to be rich in goods. Unfortunately, she was also declared to be poor toward God.

¹⁴ Gordon Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Frontline Publishing, 1985; repr., Vancouver, B. C.: Regent College, 1996), 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

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What about Jesus himself? Despite Prosperity preacher John Avanzini's interpretation of John 19:23 claiming that Jesus wore "designer clothes,"¹⁶ a close examination of the socio-economic reality of his earthly existence paints an altogether different picture.

Jesus was born into a poor home, as evidenced by the meager sacrifice that Mary offered at the time of her purification. The extravagant gifts of the magi were much needed and sovereignly provided to His poor family in order to help support them during their hasty flight and subsequent sojourn in Egypt.

He was known as "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). There were three common ways to designate a man in first century Israel: (1) by a nickname (e.g., James the Less); (2) as the "son of" so-and-so (used when the father had distinguished himself through deeds or riches); and (3) as being "of" a place. As Joseph had not sufficiently distinguished himself socioeconomically for Jesus to be readily identified by merely mentioning Joseph's name, he was more commonly identified by the lowly place of his rearing.

Jesus admitted, "The Son of Man has no place to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). He and the Twelve were supported in ministry by certain well-to-do women (Luke 8:3)—this in a culture where women enjoyed fewer privileges and lesser standing than men—and were often hosted in the home of Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany.

At the feeding of the five thousand, Philip gave some indication of how little Jesus and his disciples' treasury held (John 6:7). At the time of his crucifixion, the only remarkable possession Jesus owned was a seamless undergarment that the soldiers decided to gamble over rather than divide into pieces (John 19:23–24). The mentioning of his ownership of such a garment, far from illustrating the kind of wealth in which he customarily lived, actually underscored how little he possessed otherwise.¹⁷ At death his body was laid in a borrowed tomb.

Any claims that wealth and possessions are promised in this life to followers of Christ are not substantiated by the experiences of Jesus Himself nor of the NT church. To make any such claim demonstrates poor exegesis of the biblical text.¹⁸

¹⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 347.

¹⁸ None of this is meant to imply that God is unconcerned for the needs of his children. He is concerned, but he commands the believer not to worry over such matters (Matt 6:25–34).

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THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A number of theological problems can be discerned within Osteen's book and the larger Prosperity movement. Most, if not all, of these problems result from the hermeneutical and exegetical shortcomings identified above.

An Underdeveloped and Understated Hamartiology

Preachers of Prosperity tend to ignore the pervasive depravity of man. They seem to lack any real appreciation of how the fall has corrupted everything about man and the world he inhabits. As Alan Branch of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary observed, "[Prosperity] wants the positive but not the negative. Problem is, we live on this side of Eden. We're fallen."¹⁹

Osteen repeatedly throughout his book returned to the theme that man can count on God's love and desire to bless him because God created man in God's own image. "His love for you is based on what you are, not on what you do" (58). Although there is much to commend this statement, Osteen said nothing about how sin marred God's image in man, how God hates sin, or how God's love and blessings are now based upon what believers are in Christ (Eph 1:3–14).

The Prosperity Gospel understates the seriousness of sin by teaching that sin obstructs the blessings of a benevolent God, but saying little to nothing about how sin demands the wrath of a holy God. It is difficult to appreciate the goodness of the "good news" until one understands the divine judgment under which he lives without it.

Champions of the Prosperity Gospel follow a trail blazed decades ago by Norman Vincent Peale who emphasized the benefits of grace while de-emphasizing the necessity of repentance. It is this de-emphasis that contributes to the theological poverty of the Prosperity Gospel.

To be called a sinner and to be called upon to repent are offensive calls. Perhaps this is why Prosperity preachers and their brothers who promote self-esteem are slow to make such calls.

The crowds that flocked to Jesus after he gave them bread in John 6 quickly dispersed after the conditions for discipleship were made plain. Missiologists speak of "rice Christians," i.e., those who convert to Christianity for worldly benefits, such as a supply

¹⁹ Van Biema and Chu, "Does God?" 55.

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of rice to Indians. When professions of Christianity are born out of such temporal promises, not repentance from sin and faith in Jesus, converts come and go.

The final punishment for sin is eternal banishment from God's presence in hell. If Osteen in his book said little about sin, he said even less about hell. Is it unloving to speak of hell? Not according to Randy Alcorn who wrote in *Heaven*, "The most loving thing we can do for our friends and our family is to warn them about the road that leads to destruction and tell them about the road that leads to life."²⁰

A Distorted Soteriology

Gary Evans in his January 2000 contribution to *Affirmation & Critique* denounced the Prosperity Gospel as a "spiritual deviation" and "another gospel" such as Paul condemned in Galatians 1. He opened his assault with this salvo:

Over the last twenty to thirty years there has been an increasing promotion of the notion that it is a Christian's divine birthright to be materially prosperous. This outward prosperity is ranked as a New Testament bequest, and even more, as an element of the eternal redemption which Christ accomplished on the cross. It may rankle some advocates of this prosperity to hear their teaching labeled as a "gospel." They rarely, if ever, refer to it as a prosperity gospel. However, in elevating financial prosperity as one of the accomplishments and goals of the precious redemption of Christ, they are following the pattern of the Judaizers in Galatians. Although the Judaizers preached the work of Christ, they appended a foreign element to their gospel, the requirement of circumcision, compelling Paul to brand their teaching as "a different gospel" and "another gospel" (1:6-7). Similarly, the addition of the promise of material wealth to the work of Christ on the cross is in the principle of "another gospel," the gospel of prosperity.²¹

If any doubt that advocates of the Prosperity Gospel so corrupt the doctrine of Christ's salvific work, one need look no further than Kenneth Copeland who wrote in *The Laws of Prosperity*: "Jesus bore the curse of the law in our behalf. He beat Satan and took away his power. Consequently, there is no reason for you to live under the curse of the law, no reason for you to live in poverty of any kind.... Prosperity is a provision of the covenant."²²

²⁰ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 26.

²¹ Evans, "Spiritual Deviations," 55.

²² Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1995), 41, qtd. in *ibid.*

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Markus Bishop, *Our Covenant of Prosperity*, claimed, "He became poor in order to suffer and purchase this redemption for you, redeeming you from the curse of the Law, which included poverty. You can even say it this way: 'Jesus redeemed me from poverty so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon me.'"²³

In harmony with these men Osteen declared that his father's faith "broke the curse of poverty in our family" (64). The question that must be asked is, does Christ's death and one's entrance into the new covenant assure temporal prosperity?

I am unaware of any respected theological resource that identifies poverty as part of the "curse of the Law." Poverty is terrible. Poverty is often unjust. Poverty is real, but it is not deserving of the designation "curse of the Law." The "curse of the Law" is found in the fact that the Mosaic law reveals to man that he is a sinner and that death is the consequence. The law does not and cannot, however, help anyone to overcome sin or death. All it brings is bad news, i.e., a curse. Jesus, on the other hand, brings good news, i.e., the gospel.

A Diminished Christology

Gifford recalled listening to a sermon broadcast in Ghana. Afterward, his wife asked him, " 'Did you notice that Jesus wasn't mentioned in that sermon, but Bill Gates was twice?' " Gifford later confessed, "I hadn't noticed, because in this sector of Christianity [i.e., African Pentecostalism] that omission is unremarkable."²⁴

If sin is not so serious, it follows that Jesus' work on the cross was not so significant. Listening to the Prosperity Gospel, one gets the impression that the purpose of Jesus' death was less to appease the wrath of an offended deity than to secure the blessings of a benevolent Father.

With his emphasis on self-esteem, Osteen implied that Jesus' death says less about the holiness of God than the value of man. As a little known advocate of the Prosperity Gospel once preached in the audience of this author, "Jesus' death demonstrates how much God values us." While it is wonderfully true that God loves and values everyone, why did Jesus have to die to prove it? Answer: the holiness of God demanded the death of a sinless substitute.

Christ's work on the cross has been both distorted and de-emphasized by the Prosperity movement. As J. Alfred Smith Sr., pastor of Allen Temple Baptist Church, lamented in

²³ Markus Bishop, *Our Covenant of Prosperity: Crossing the Threshold to Supernatural Abundance* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1997), 20, qtd. in Evans, "Spiritual Deviations, 55.

²⁴ Gifford, "Expecting Miracles," 20.

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Speak Until Justice Wakes, "The god many seek today is the deity of upward social class mobility and middle-class prosperity. These listeners' hearts are not tuned to hear about the blood and gore of a Palestinian Jew dying helplessly and hopelessly on a Roman cross."²⁵

Besides failing to appreciate or at least articulate the real significance of Jesus' death, the importance of his life, i.e., what might be learned from the Jesus of history, is seldom mentioned. Jesus is treated more as a means to an end than the end itself. Neither in his book nor in his preaching that I have heard does Osteen mention Jesus very often.

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An Over-realized Eschatology

New Testament theology speaks of Christ's kingdom as being both "now and not yet." Believers on earth are already members of his kingdom and enjoy some of its benefits now, but the fullness of kingdom life will not be experienced until later. Pauline theology speaks of two periods: the "present age" marked by depravity, disease, and death; and the "age to come" marked by love, light, and life. Jesus' ministry ushered in the "age to come" but did not finally end the "present age." Christians currently live as people of the "age to come" in the midst of this dying "present age." To assist them, God has given his Spirit and grace. Prosperity preachers seem to miss this distinction, talking often about how God's blessings should be enjoyed now but saying little to nothing of heaven and eternity.

Within the Word of Faith Movement Jesus' miracles are assumed to demonstrate the kinds of blessings that God wants his people to enjoy presently—healing, abundant provisions, etc. Christians who fail to realize such blessings either do not know or are not properly exercising their covenant rights. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, offered a more orthodox view when he suggested that Jesus performed miracles to inspire his audience to look back and to look ahead—to provide a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be and as he will again one day make it.²⁶ Jesus miracles were thus "signs" given to create a sense of "wonder" and to illustrate the nature of his eternal kingdom.

Romans 8:18–25 speaks of how both Christians and creation groan under the curses found in Genesis 3 and in anticipation of future redemption/restoration. It has been forgotten by some that prosperity now can be a bad thing. In Deuteronomy 8 God warned the Jews before they entered the promised land not to let their imminent prosperity turn their hearts away from him. Aware of such a danger, Agur prayed in Proverbs 30:8b–9: "[G]ive

²⁵ J. Alfred Smith, *Speak Until Justice Wakes: Prophetic Reflections from J. Alfred Smith Sr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), qtd. in *Preaching Now*, <<http://www.preaching.com>> (accessed 9 September 2010).

²⁶ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 182.

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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." Temporal prosperity can cause one to lose sight of God now and heaven in the distance.

Milmon Harrison noted in *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* that disenfranchised African-Americans formerly looked forward to eternity as the place where justice would reign and rewards bestowed. The Prosperity Gospel has since replaced that expectation for many with the demand for heaven now.²⁷

Accompanying the loss of heavenly expectation has been a notable corresponding failure to address the injustices of this world. Contrariwise, C. S. Lewis observed:

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither.²⁸

An Unbalanced Theology

One of the major tenets of the Prosperity movement is that God has entered into a covenant with believers. Christians who know their rights as found in the covenant can exercise the same power as God by speaking into existence what they desire. The need to pray, fellowship with the Father, and seek the mind of the Spirit can be minimized, if not bypassed altogether. While the movement speaks much about the benefits of being God's child, it seemingly says less about developing that relationship. An impersonal theology that expects good things from God by virtue of exercising certain covenantal rights is closely akin to the positive thinking that was popularized by Norman Vincent Peale in the mid-1900s and repackaged by Rhonda Byrne as the "law of attraction" in her 2007 bestseller *The Secret*. Her work, promoted more than once by Oprah Winfrey, claimed

²⁷ Milmon Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford U P, 2005), 145.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 118. Van Biema and Chu, "Does God?" 56, reported that this criticism does not hold true for all proponents of Prosperity and cited Kirbyjon Caldwell as an example.

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that a person will naturally attract to himself more of the same sorts of things that he or she thinks about—whether good or bad.²⁹

I have twice heard interviews with Osteen conducted on national television by Hannah Storm and Larry King.³⁰ Both times Osteen was asked if he believed that people must profess faith in Jesus in order to enter heaven. Confessing that he believed and preached to his congregation the importance of faith in Jesus, he hedged his answer with several “I don’t know” responses—even telling King that “I don’t know if I believe they’re wrong” when asked if Jews and Muslims who do not believe in Jesus are wrong. He preferred instead to be positive and talk about how God is for everyone. Potentially divisive theological matters, particularly those that might be seen as narrow or exclusionary, are not preaching fare for Osteen himself. He is apparently unaware of Jude’s exhortation to “contend for the faith” (v. 3) or Paul’s example of declaring the “whole will of God” (Acts 20:27).

What about this preach-the-positives and mute-the-negatives approach to theology? According to Thomas Schreiner any preaching, no matter how heart-warming or edifying, that neglects its theological foundation allows the wolf of heresy to lurk ever more closely.³¹ When people know only what but not why—why this and not that—they lack the discernment that will keep them from false teaching.

In the chapter “Discover the Power of Your Thoughts and Words” Osteen gave evidence of another imbalance in his theology when he wrote, “God has already done everything He’s going to do. The ball is now in your court. If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you’re going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family” (132). Truly, God wants his children to be “doers of the Word and not hearers only,” but Osteen is demanding something more. Bob Hunter in his summary critique of *Your Best Life Now* observed,

Osteen implies that if you don’t receive the things you feel you are entitled to, it is your own fault because you haven’t spoken those things into reality, and God has already done everything He is going to do for you. This puts all the responsibility for receiving from God entirely on the Christian. Jesus promises, in contrast, that if we seek Him first, he

²⁹ Jerry Adler, “Decoding ‘The Secret’,” *Newsweek*, 5 March 2007, 53–58.

³⁰ Hannah Storm, “America’s Pastor,” *The CBS Early Morning Show* (October 2007); Larry King, interview with Joel Osteen, *Larry King Live* (June 2005).

³¹ Thomas Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” <<http://www.9marks.org>> (accessed 10 September 2010).

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will meet all our needs (Matt. 6:31–33) and He puts no other conditions on receiving from Him.³²

In a randomly audited 2006 televised sermon, Osteen treated diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, loss of sight, and loss of hearing in the same way as an addiction. He urged his congregation not to accept these things but to confess better things. He went on to claim that Jesus died to redeem people from these things and that they can set their family free from the curse of these things by declaring daily "I am free." The implication is that these are works of the Evil One that people allow themselves and their families to fall victim to—permitted, if not caused, by a lack of faith. Jesus encountered a similar naïvete in Luke 13 among certain people who apparently believed that the victims of Pilate's butchery had somehow brought their misery upon themselves. "Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish' " (vv. 2–3).

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Jesus, on occasion, rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith, but here in Luke 13 he clearly stated that the victims of two awful incidents were not at fault due to their being "worse sinners." Their faith or lack thereof was not the issue. Scott Bader-Saye, author of *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, called such an assumption a "simplistic equation of suffering and sin" and asserted, "Divine providence does not promise security in any conventional sense...."³³

Nothing in the doctrinal statement found on the website for Osteen's ministry suggests anything heretical—quite the contrary. Critical attention to his book, sermons, and televised interviews, however, finds a theology out of balance and at certain points teetering on dangerous precipices.

HOMILETICAL ANALYSIS

Separating entirely a minister's hermeneutics and theology from his praxis in ministry is a difficult, if not impossible, analytical task. Judgments of the former can cloud assessments of the latter. Nevertheless, an analysis of Osteen's practices, particularly those related to his pulpit ministry, is an important undertaking because it is here that the public has judged him a success by virtue of attending his church, tuning into his broadcasts, and purchasing his publications. What is Osteen doing that makes his

³² Bob Hunter, "A Summary Critique: *Your Best Life Now*," <<http://www.equip.org>> (accessed 9 September 2010).

³³ Scott Bader-Saye, "Security Check," *ChrCent*, 10 July 2007, 30.

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preaching so attractive? What can be learned from him and similar preachers of Prosperity?

Attributes to Be Applauded

Leroy Forlines is Professor Emeritus of Theology at the Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville, Tennessee, and coauthor of the booklet *Prophets of Prosperity*. In a personal conversation he expressed to me his bewilderment over Osteen's popularity. Forlines concluded that Osteen is not saying anything that Word of Faith preachers have not said before, and yet his ministry has exploded with unusual growth.³⁴ Perhaps the following can partially account for his unprecedented success.

Osteen exudes sincerity. The public fall of former Word of Faith personalities like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker created the impression that all of the movement's ministers, particularly those on television, were religious con artists. I am unaware of any significant evidence that suggests that Osteen is insincere or speaks with an ulterior motive of personal gain. Sincerity must never be equated with truth, but it is always refreshing to find and its influence should never be underestimated.³⁵

Osteen winsomely delivers positive messages that attract a racially and otherwise diverse audience. He reminds the hearer that life is to be enjoyed, not endured. That message strikes a responsive chord in the hearts of Christians who come out of repressive church backgrounds. His preaching appeals to modern audiences who do not want to be "preached at," which they equate with a scolding, but desire to be conversationally engaged and to leave a worship service feeling good. Interviewees told Harrison that one of the things that attracted them to their Word of Faith churches was their ministers' willingness to teach rather than preach. Their subsequent explanations indicated that they were less impressed with a minister's emotional histrionics than his creating the impression that he was presenting a reasoned message based upon careful study. Osteen's messages are clearly marked by such "sweet reason" filtered through a constant smile, laid-back persona, and simple, down-home way of talking.

He offers hope—the hope of rising above one's current circumstances. This is a welcomed word to Generation X, i.e., those born between 1965 and 1976. Gen Xers tend toward a pessimistic outlook on life, telling pollsters that they do not believe that they will fare better than their parents' generation. Prosperity scholar Harrison concluded that it is this

³⁴ Leroy Forlines, interview by author, December 2006, Nashville, TN.

³⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A Kennedy, with introduction, notes, and appendices by George A Kennedy (New York: Oxford U P, 1991), 1.2.4, appraised the audience's perception of the speaker's sense, character, and intentions as the "controlling factor in persuasion."

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sense of hope, in the form of sensed empowerment, that accounts for the attraction of the Prosperity Gospel to many African-Americans.³⁶

Osteen often shares testimonies from his family and people in his congregation to illustrate how God blesses faith and obedience. Postmodern hearers are deeply impressed by such personal testimonies.

In his book, as well as in select sermons, Osteen attempts to make only one point per chapter or message. He restates, illustrates, and applies the same point over and over. Homileticians have long maintained that a sermon should be about one thing, i.e., communicate one big idea. Osteen has succeeded in following this dictum.

Like the late Adrian Rogers, Osteen knows how to turn a memorable phrase, such as: "There's a miracle in your mouth." "Live to give." "When in need, sow a seed." "God can take your scars and turn them into stars." Hearers living in this age of the sound-bite appreciate such concise, easy-to-remember statements.

Flawed though his theology is, Osteen at least broaches the subject of money and attempts to do so biblically. Princeton University professor Robert Wuthnow faulted the American church for its willingness to talk only about giving but not address "broader financial concerns ... or the pressures at work." "There has long been a taboo on talking candidly about money," said Wuthnow.³⁷

Lessons to Be Learned

One question that has constantly bedeviled the church is how to be "in the world" without being "of the world." To borrow a phrase from Paul, how can the church be "all things to all men" without losing its biblical and theological integrity?

Osteen's ability to speak in a manner that is appreciated by the larger culture has already been commended. The Word of Faith movement has shown itself extremely flexible in cultural adaptation. Harrison suggested, "Because of its mutability and because there is no ideological or structural center, the movement and its ministries can combine elements from various realms of culture in order to attract new members by providing something they recognize as familiar but repackaged and redefined as 'new and improved' charismatic Christianity."³⁸

³⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 159.

³⁷ Qtd. in Van Biema and Chu, "Does God?" 52.

³⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 159.

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Today's minister needs to be aware of his culture, adapt his ministry where appropriate to the contours of that culture, but, at the same time, remain true to Scripture. While there is much to be learned from Osteen's methods in this regard, one must beware of parroting his message.

Because of temperament, interests, and various environmental influences, all ministers are naturally drawn to and effective at addressing certain issues and needs. Ministers must recognize and account for their natural inclinations as they plan their preaching. Osteen rarely mentions sin and says less about hell. Selective silence leads naturally to extremism and heresy. Today's minister needs to strive for balance in proclaiming God's wrath and God's mercy, repentance and faith, the temporal and eternal benefits of grace, the privileges and responsibilities of salvation, law and grace, the Old and New Testaments, heaven and hell, and patience in as well as the possibility of deliverance from suffering. The minister needs to address these matters through a balance of preaching and teaching.

Harrison observed, "The Word of Faith Movement offers a sense of personal, individual *empowerment* to those who have been left out of the mainstream of economic and social life, thus making it attractive to the poor who don't want to stay poor in America and elsewhere, particularly in developing nations" (emphasis in original).³⁹ Preachers need to open their eyes to the multiplicity of needs within their own communities, open their Bibles to discover what God has to say about those needs, and open their church's hands to assist people in meeting their needs.

Assuredly, the temporal benefits of following Christ must not be overstated. Paul declared, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor 15:19). Neither should those temporal benefits be denied or dismissed. Veteran missiologist Donald McGavran fathered the modern-day Church Growth Movement. In his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, he wrote about an observed phenomenon he termed "redemption and lift." He explained,

Every true church observes among its members a redemption due to Christ's saving activity in the human heart. When Christ comes in, they become new creatures. They repent and turn from their sins. They gain victory over pride, greed, laziness, drink, hate, and envy. They cease quarreling with their neighbors and chasing women. They turn from litigation to constructive activity. They educate their children. They learn what God requires of them, and worship regularly. They become more effective human beings.... They read or hear the Bible and realize that God is for them and is available to them. They realize they are children of God and begin to act as such. They begin to live for others.

³⁹ Ibid.

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Their community, in which many others have accepted Christ, becomes a better and better place to live.⁴⁰

Thus it is seen that the Gospel of Prosperity is not altogether wrong. Obedience to God's Word can result in temporal benefits to individuals, families, neighborhoods, and nations. The story of the Villacis family of El Pindo, Ecuador, beautifully illustrates as much. This family of twelve lived meagerly "in misery and spiritual darkness ... surrounded by hopelessness," according to daughter Luz.⁴¹ In 1966 the Free Will Baptist Board of Foreign Missions sent Ella Rae Jones into the region. She served there seventeen years—sowing the Word and providing basic medical care. Jones evangelized and disciplined the Villacis family and those in their village. She established an educational fund that enabled six of the Villacis children to complete high school. Luz and her younger brother Pablo later matriculated at Rio Grande Bible Institute, thanks to those who contributed to Jones's special fund. Eventually, Luz married her college sweetheart, earned a Master's degree in social sciences, and was appointed as a career missionary. An older brother became an elder in his church, a sister married a pastor educated in psychology, and Pablo became co-pastor of a church in Mexico. The rest of the family went on to serve God in other churches. Everything about Luz's testimony speaks of blessings and different types of prosperity. I served as Jones's pastor for four years, following her service in Ecuador. I can attest that she in no way would endorse the tenets of the Prosperity Gospel, and yet her sharing of the true gospel resulted in "redemption and lift" for the entire Villacis family.

Excesses within the Prosperity movement should not inhibit ministers from preaching God's promises. Isaac Watts, "Father of the English Hymn," called biblical promises "the constant food of a living Christian, as well as his highest cordials (medicines) in a fainting hour." He continued, "In such a world as this, where duties perpetually demand our practice, and difficulties and trials are ever surrounding us, what can we do better than to treasure up the promises in our hearts? Here are the true riches of a Christian, and his highest hopes on this side of heaven."⁴²

The key to preaching God's promises is to determine if, and to what extent, they apply to today's Christian. Believers should constantly exercise a general faith in God's goodness and protection. They can only exercise specific faith for a particular expression of his

⁴⁰ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 210.

⁴¹ Luz Villacis Quiroz, "Some Seeds Fall in Good Soil: One Account of Missionary Work by Free Will Baptists in Ecuador," *One Magazine*, February/March 2007, 16.

⁴² Isaac Watts, in recommendation of Samuel Clarke, *Precious Bible Promises*, <<http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com>> (accessed 9 September 2010).

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goodness and protection when they have a specific promise from God meant for them. Determining the applicability of any given promise demands attention to context, genre, later revelation (when the promise comes from the OT especially), and a comparison of what one perceives the promise to include with how that promise was or was not fulfilled in the lives of biblical characters. For example, Jesus promises provisions for life's needs in Matthew 6:33. That this should not be understood as an unconditional promise for every believer is proved by Paul's multiple experiences of deprivation.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his sermon "Unfulfilled Hopes" and later titled "Shattered Dreams," clarified that complacency must not be confused for contentment. One can perceive in Osteen's book and sermons an undercurrent of confusion on this point. "Contentment" is maligned as a sort of fatalism or willingness to accept the status quo. Paul spoke of his own contentment in Philippians 4:11–12: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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."

What is the secret to finding contentment? It is not found in possessing an abundance of things. Jesus warned, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). True Christian contentment is grounded in the conviction of God's absolute sovereignty. If God is in control, he is aware of one's circumstances. Beyond that, in the person of his Holy Spirit he accompanies the believer in those circumstances. In him the believer finds all he or she needs. How was Paul able to be content in times of hunger and want? Philippians 4:13 answers, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

In this fallen world, one will always find reason to be discontent. In Christ, one can find every reason to be content. Reviewing with God one's circumstances, a person may see failures, habits, relationships, or injustices that need correction. By his grace and for his glory, the believer can arise and work to right them, all the while remaining content in him. Contentment should be preached and pursued.

After Peter in Matthew 19 declared that he and the other apostles had left all to follow Jesus, he asked, "What then will there be for us?" Jesus did not deny that the Twelve had sacrificed, nor did he deny them hope of reward. He said, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things (i.e., following the renewal of heaven and earth [Rev 21–22]), when the Son of man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (v. 28). In short, Jesus pointed them beyond this temporal world for the time of their rewards.

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He did not stop there. He told a story about unemployed day laborers who were hired and deployed into a vineyard at different times throughout a twelve-hour work day. At the end of the day their employer paid them all the same amount regardless of how long they had actually worked (Matt 20:1–15). Out of that enigmatic story emerge two important truths. First, whatever it is that one does for the Master, he or she does because the Master graciously sought him out and gave him the opportunity to serve. Second, whatever one receives for any labor in Christ's vineyard, it is graciously given as far more than one deserves. From beginning to end, it is a story of grace. From beginning to end, preaching should retell the story of God's grace.

CONCLUSION

Setting aside this extensive analysis and returning to *Time* magazine's cover question, "Does God want you to be rich?" Assuming that the "you" in that question is an American citizen, it really is a stupid question. The average American is richer than the majority of this world's people. The average income for an American was \$37,000 in 2002. World Revolution reports that 3 billion (one-half) of the world's population live on less than \$2 a day.⁴³ As a citizen of these United States, "you" are already rich.

If the "you" in *Time's* question is an American Christian, then "you" are rich twice over. In addition to the blessings that this country offers her every citizen, every Christian possesses all of God's riches listed in Ephesians 1 that are found in a saving relationship with God's Son Jesus Christ.

Apart from any of that, no matter how much or how little one possesses, it must be remembered that all of it has been entrusted to him by God. One day, every man, woman, boy, and girl will be called upon to give an account of their stewardship. On that day God will be less concerned with how much anyone had than he will be in what they did with it to demonstrate their love for him and for their neighbors (Matt 25:14–30).⁴⁴

⁴³ *Global Issues, "Poverty, Facts, and Stats,"* < <http://www.globalissues.org> > (accessed 10 September 2010).

⁴⁴ Hollifield, G. K. (2011). "Does God Want You to Be Rich? A Practical Theologian's Response to the Gospel of Prosperity," *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 15, 15(2)*, 25–53.