

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Gospel Of Greed Versus The Gospel Of The Grace Of God

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Then he said to them, '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)

A pernicious and dangerous teaching is stalking our land. It has filtered into evangelical communication and thinking more than we realize. Unfortunately, we have exported it to Europe and the third world where it has brought dissension and even schism. I am referring to what we may call "the gospel of greed." It is the prosperity gospel, health and wealth theology, the grab it and get it, name it and claim it, God is for our gain message which has such widespread currency in our time.

One of the major textbooks of the movement is Mrs. Kenneth Copeland's *God's Will Is Prosperity*. On the far southside of Chicago, Dr. Johnnie Coleman preaches to the largest audiences within the city limits on the topic, "What is Your Dream? Peace? Health? Prosperity? Love? Your Dreams Can Come True."

A particularly blatant and brash expression of this message has been given by the Reverend Terry in San Diego. In an extended article, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that "The Rev. Terry has a Gospel to Cheer the Me Generation — Affluence is Your Right — Yuppies Take Notice." "You can have it all now! Being rich and happy doesn't carry with it a burden of guilt. If you are poor, you're irresponsible," she proclaims with gusto. Her parishioners have bumper stickers reading, "Prosperity is your divine right."¹

The Journal goes on to describe her as bouncy and relentlessly upbeat as she preaches her gospel of "happiness now." "Live fully now and create a heaven on earth. We are the cause of our own unhappiness. Our ministry isn't into sin, guilt, disease, pain or hunger. Truly religious people are happy and light instead of sober and serious." Her emphasis is on success. Attending these services is like a trip. One devotee testifies: "I feel great every time I leave a service." This is "the new Christianity... people don't need to change for the better but simply to realize that they are already perfect." She doesn't believe in

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¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, August 23, 1984, 5–6.

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sin or hell. "Sin is simply self-hatred." Her latest book is entitled *How to Have More in a Have Not World*. Adherents can take advantage of all kinds of seminars and workshops such as "Dressing to Win" (charge is \$200 a day) conducted by a fashion consultant who is also a member of the church board. He says, "My clients and Terry's congregation want the same things ... a more affluent life style and to live life more fully."

Beyond any question, this is what the Apostle Paul would call "another gospel." None of the rudiments of the NT Gospel of the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ are in any evidence. This teaching is a pathetic and tragic accommodation to the cultural mores of upwardly mobile American culture and life-style. Sadly, it has seeped into our thinking and motivation far more profoundly than we are aware. It is further a cruel hoax. Health and wealth are not promised to the believer in Christ. Many of the godliest Christians who have ever lived have enjoyed neither health nor wealth. G.K. Chesterton wisely said, "If prosperity is the reward of virtue, then prosperity is the mark and symptom of virtue" and that is manifestly not taught in Scripture nor confirmed in experience. Paul asserts concerning our sovereign God that "My God will supply all your need" (Phil. 4:19), not all of our greed.

It is important for us to analyze this message and this mind-set which have become so pervasive in our time. Several very critical components of "the gospel of greed" are seen in the parable our Lord told as he urged his hearers, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." The rich fool's delusions are in a sense paradigmatic for us today.

I. The "Gospel Of Greed" Is Rooted In Selfism

The patently and painfully "me-first" obsession of the prosperity gospel is by no means new. The rich fool in the parable of Jesus has serious "I-trouble." He suffers from severe "I-strain." Look at the prominence of the first-personal pronouns: "He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store *my* crops... this is what *I'll* do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all *my* grain and *my* goods... and *I'll* say to myself..." (Luke 12:17-19).

The physicians of our culture have spoken of ours as a narcissistic age. Narcissus was the Greek mythological character who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. Christopher Lasch, Aaron Stern and Robert Coles have written with special poignancy about the narcissism of our times. Robert Nisbet has a particularly searching analysis in which he argues that "in the twilight of authority" and its ensuing vacuum, modern man

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has turned to “obsessive concern with self.”² Selfism is at the bottom of health and wealth theology.

What we are seeing is the Copernican revolution in reverse. Whereas Copernicus determined that the earth and man are not at the center, we are once again seeing the assertion that man is at the center of the universe. Martin Luther argued that man’s problem is that he is “*incurvatus in se*” — turned in upon himself. God is no longer seen in his infinite majesty and holiness. He is no longer the point-of-reference, the center. Man wishes to be autonomous. This is the very essence of what sin is.

Sin is the assertion of self to the exclusion of God. Hell is the ultimate and final assertion of self to the ultimate and final exclusion of God. This was at the heart of Satan’s primal rebellion against God (Isa 14:13–15). This was the tempter’s appeal in Eden, “You will be like God” (Gen 3:5). This conceit drove the builders of the tower of Babel in their arrogant project, “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth’” (Gen 11:4). This misguided effort to achieve unity on man’s terms shows further the dangers and perils of being self-bound.

Allan Bloom in his epochal *The Closing of the American Mind* argues that no small part of our American problem today stems from an identity crisis which has arisen because we have made “the self the modern substitute for the soul.”³ Eugene Peterson quotes de Tocqueville a century and a half ago saying of America, “Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself.”⁴ He also quotes the eminent Cambridge historian, Herbert Butterfield, to the effect that “Concealed egotism is perhaps a greater cause of political conflict, a greater source of political problems, than anything else on this globe.”⁵

Thus, this perennial human problem has flowered and borne its malignant fruit as the inspired Apostle said it would: “But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, etc.” (2 Tim 3:1ff). What has always characterized our fallen natures will intensify and be exacerbated as history draws towards its climax. The “me-first” penchant has spawned religious

² Robert W. Glasgow, “The Obsessive Concern with Self,” an interview with Robert Nisbet, *Psychology Today* (December, 1973) 43ff.

³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987) 173.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Earth and Altar: The Community of Prayer in a Self-Bound Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985) 13.

⁵ *Ibid.* 65.

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progeny — it is the self-fixated “gospel of greed” in which our great God is seen as subordinated to the whim and satisfaction of the sinner’s bloated ego.

Wait Whitman long ago wrote his famous “Song of Myself” which begins with the lines, “I celebrate myself.” This epitomizes the mood of modernity. We used to sing:

Oh what a beautiful morning,
Oh what a beautiful day,
I’ve got a wonderful feeling,
Everything’s going my way.

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Again, notice the point-of-reference. Self is at the center. Scripture characterizes our stubborn and willful ways in terms of “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way” (Isa 53:6). This self-centeredness is our problem.

So John Lennon sang, “I just believe in me, that is reality.” The crooner sang, “I’ve done it my way.” We now have on the newsstands the periodical *Self*. The best seller of awhile back put it boldly: *Looking Out for Number One*. Other book titles with religious flavoring include: *Love Yourself*, *The Art of Learning to Love Yourself*, *Celebrate Yourself*, *You’re Better Than You Think*, *How to Write Your Own Ticket With God*. Consider the arrogance and the depravity of these sentiments.

The old biblical ethic of self-sacrifice has given way to grandiose notions of self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-aggrandizement as Yankelovich has shown so clearly in his book *Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside-Down*. Etzioni’s powerful *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the Twenty-First Century* cites our ego-centered mentality as the chief villain in our societal morass.⁶

Tina Turner lauds Buddhism as her new religion and has put up a new altar in her home. She gurgles, “What I love about my new religion is that every person decides for him or herself what is right and what is wrong.” The West German mountain climber, Reinhold Messner, has scaled the fourteen highest peaks on earth. He refused to plant his nation’s flag on any of them, sullenly explaining, “I do things only for myself.”⁷ That is the spirit that has infected our culture and is now infiltrating our own thought-categories as Christians. This is the root-cause of the obviously increasing reluctance of believers to make any long-range commitment to Christian service or involvement.

⁶ Amitai Etzioni, *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the Twenty-First Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982..

⁷ *World Press Review*, January, 1987, 49.

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Aesop said long ago: “It is easy for me to curry favor with myself.” Walt Whitman unashamedly and brazenly articulated the spirit of our times: “I find no sweeter fat than clings to my own bones.” Max Stirner in *The Ego and His Own* puts it as crassly as anyone: “Nothing is more to me than myself ... whether what I think and do is Christian, what do I care? Whether it is humane, liberal or inhumane, illiberal — what do I care about that?”

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This is a tragic reduction, because man is not the center nor the goal. God is not the means to our ends. “The chief end of man is to know God and glorify him forever.” Jesus said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). The anthropocentric corrosion of God in the “gospel of greed” is to make the everlasting God our errand boy. GOD WILL BE GOD!

II. The “Gospel Of Greed” Revels In Materialism

The appalling consequences of the acutely inflamed ego are to be observed in the rich fool of our Lord’s parable. Caught in the flypaper of self-preoccupation, his horizon is limited to his own material enhancement. More crops and bigger barns become the predictable extension of the greedy self. Things and possessions are self-maximizers and thus they are in the saddle. “And I’ll say to myself, ‘you have plenty of good things laid up for many years’” (Luke 12:19). “Greed is idolatry” (Col 3:5) and the foolish man is seeking from material substance the satisfaction that only God himself can give.

Our grave peril in the U.S. is that we do not worship G O D, but the G N P. Affluence has become our religion (and it might be said we are suffering from affluenza). Our consumptive orientation is without parallel in the history of the planet. Our credit-laden economy fosters greed and exposes us to the danger of excess. No people have ever had a higher standard of living than we. We are 7% of the world’s population who possess 50% of the real wealth of the world and annually consume 1/3 of what is consumed on space-ship earth.

Think of how the Scripture warns us of the danger of riches. “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men 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 griefs” (1 Tim 6:9–10). Some can remain unruined by wealth and they are good stewards, but money and goods are hazardous generally to spiritual health. In our movement, the days of our material poverty were the days of our spiritual vigor. History shows a correlation. The church in America has become increasingly well-to-do and increasingly Laodicean in outlook (cf Rev 3:17ff). The rich young ruler basically floundered “because he had great wealth” (Mark 10:22).

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How many of us are hooked like the rich fool? We want more and more and more, and then bigger and bigger and bigger. Impaled on the “Imelda Marcos syndrome” we are never satisfied. The “gospel of greed” goes hand in glove with this prevailing ethos of our time. “All this and heaven too!” President Eisenhower confessed: “I believe in the American way of life.” The secularization and privatization of faith effectively cut the Lordship of Jesus Christ out of our lives.

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The rising tide of materialism among us is shown in a recent study made by the Cooperative Research Program. It found young people in America to be “overwhelmingly materialistic; interested more than ever primarily in making money.”⁸ The objective of developing a meaningful philosophy of life as an essential or very important reason for going to college used to rank high. It is now the lowest in ranking that it has ever been in the twenty year history of the annual survey. To be “well off financially” is now at the top of the list. In this study of 290,000 college freshmen in more than 500 colleges, 75.6% indicated they were interested primarily in financial success. In 1966 83% said “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was at the top of the list. There is clearly a shift in student values. The study concludes that recent trends show an unprecedented concern for money, power and status.

The burgeoning of materialism in the upcoming generation is overtly the legacy of the older generation. Ivan Boesky, the Wall Street swindler, articulated the implicit premise of many when he announced to an investor’s group before he was indicted: “I think greed is healthy. I think you can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.” He was given a standing ovation. Contrast that wisdom of this world with the words of our divine Savior, “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).

Many of us who would take strong exception to the dialectical materialism of Marx and Lenin seem unaware of the degree to which we have been victimized by an equally vicious materialism in our society. We seem humbled by the greed factor. But greed is the engine which drives much that we do. I am convinced that opulent life-style and the acquisitive urge were the beginning of the end for several of our TV preachers and their families. Owning five cars and five houses and luxuriating in what they called “the blessing of God” was in fact capitulation to greed and theft. “Watch out!” Jesus says. Both those who have much and those who have little can alike be ravished by the compulsion to shop until they drop.

And it isn’t only money and possessions which may consume us. Our twitching, convulsive egos can be stroked by the lure of name and fame. John Dean of Watergate

⁸ “Changing Values of Young People,” *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Feb. 8, 1988.

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notoriety admits in his book *Blind Ambition* that “All my life I wanted to be in the oval office, at the right hand of the President of the United States.” As kids we loved to play “king of the mountain.” Who can get to the top and keep throwing the others down? *Pleonexia* or the striving after power is a familiar game to us in the church. We want bigger congregations and bigger buildings and bigger staffs and bigger budgets. Is it very clear as to just why church leaders and pastors want ever bigger and bigger domains? I have found that the pulpit is a dangerous place for a son of Adam such as myself. My pride loves adulation and applause. I can strut sitting down.

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Our sensate age fosters an appetite for the things that are seen. Jesus warned about the “days of Noah” when citizens were absorbed in eating and drinking and marriage — fine things, but they easily pre-empt the more important spiritual priorities of ministry and service for Christ. The grab for power and possessions is so unlike the Lord Jesus. The servant heart of the Master is in such contrast to the overbearing conceit and self-interest prevalent all about us. We used to want to keep up with the Jones. Now we are intent on being the Jones with whom everyone seeks to keep up.

The irony for those who put their eggs in this basket is pointed out by Jeremy Rifkin in *The Emerging Order*. In point of fact we are beginning to see the end of unlimited growth and wealth. Jacques Ellul reminds us of the trap of the technological society — the illusion that technology will solve the problems. The unparalleled abundance of our time has not addressed the deep and claimant issues in our society as our cities decay, the permanent underclass festers, drugs and substance abuse proliferate and every significant index of the health of our culture points to dissolution and disintegration.

Jesus unequivocally asserts the eternal bankruptcy of the person who “stores up things for himself” (Luke 12:21). Do we really believe him? Health and wealth theology mistakenly puts its emphasis on “things for self” but is not “rich toward God.”

III. The “Gospel Of Greed” Results In Hedonism

Engrossed with self-advantage, employed in the accumulation of what this world offers, the enthusiast for prosperity is relentlessly and inescapably bound and chained to an outcome. What is it all for? What is the bottom line? The rich fool drew the inevitable conclusion: “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12:19). The outcome is hyperhedonism. Have a good time. Maximize the present moment and its potential enjoyment and good feeling.

The Apostle Paul spoke of the pitfall of being “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:4). We seem to live in our country in one enormous Atlantic City in which fun and pleasure and indulgence are the highest priority. We see these values invading

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the church. We sense a rash of “upbeat Christianity,” in which the Gospel is seen as a giant cornucopia overflowing with good things. “God wants us to be happy” is the ruling principle.

What prosperity theology has forgotten is that God does not exist to make us happy. Our righteous God has no truck with the rising tide of appetite which brooks no restraint nor with our increasing unwillingness to defer gratification. The reality of God’s being with which we must come to terms is set forth in Holy Scripture:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and for your pleasure they are and were created (Rev 4:11).

God is more concerned to make us holy than he is to make us happy. “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). Something very heretical has lodged among us to the effect that a person can be a Christian and not follow Jesus. So Mickey Cohen talked about being a Christian gangster and Larry Flynt argued that there was such a thing as pornography for Jesus. The hedonistic agenda of the world cannot be the agenda for God’s people. Rather, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor 7:1).

Ours is an era of soft-living. Here is an actual bumper sticker: “Are we having fun yet?” There is the be-all and end-all. A T-shirt was inscribed: “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” The bumper sticker to top them all in capturing the temper of our times must be: “Jesus — open 24 hours to serve you.”

The summum bonum seems to be as the Rev. Terry’s congregant put it, “I feel great everytime I leave a service.” It is surely not “the comfort of the Scriptures” that this spiritual epicure seeks. Did people leave the ministry of Jeremiah or Elijah “feeling great”? Did those who attended the ministry of John the Baptist by the Jordan exit in euphoric bliss? “I don’t feel like it” is sufficient grounds today. Where is the sense of duty and the dedication to truth? “It can’t be wrong when it feels so right,” we hear it said. An unrepentant criminal and acknowledged pervert was so pleased with his minister because, as he said, “My minister helps me feel so good about myself.” Is that our high calling in the Christian ministry?

The paramountcy of pleasure with its primary pursuits of fun and pleasure (even in the church) will ultimately incarcerate us in the sarcophagus of self. Joseph Sittier used to tell of a woman at a church where he was the interim pastor. She worked at a hospital in

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Chicago. She often testified: "Every morning on my way to work, I pray to Jesus that he will find me a parking space. As you know, pastor, he always does." Sittier says that he kept asking himself what kind of God-relationship could be built on this parking-space-finding Jesus that could sustain this woman in profound deprivation and tragedy.

He asked the woman, "What if there was another woman driving to the hospital to take a sick child to the emergency room, and you drove right into the parking space that Jesus found for you, and this woman who is frantic with a sick child cannot find a space. How about her?" The woman retorted, "She didn't pray hard enough."

Something here is very distorted and very wrong. But this is precisely the hole into which "grab it and get it" has fallen most miserably. It reminds me of a hotel at Lourdes in France, called the Gethsemane. The twinkling lights say it all: GETHSEMANE: WITH ALL MODERN COMFORTS. Where is discipleship? Where are the examples of self-sacrifice? A psychologist recently lamented in an interview over TV the results of a survey: of 287 college youth she found that all wanted greatness or satisfaction in life but few understood that there was any connection between being great and serving others. "They are a generation accustomed to being served," concluded the psychologist, "not to serving."

God said to the rich fool, "This very night your very life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). The hedonistic lifestyle of the fool was a tragedy. Many today say it,

When we live, let's live in clover,
For when we die, we die all over.

The studies show that the greatest crisis right now is not the church in the world, but the world in the church.⁹ We Christians are lapping up our culture and demonstrating a conformity to this age which is rapidly enveloping us in the labyrinths of modernity.

There is no cross of Christ in the prosperity gospel. Even those of us who would glory in the cross are squeamish. We will go to the cross, but we don't want to get on the cross. Jesus dying for us is all right, but we are not too willing to die with Jesus. At this point, it seems to me, we must be counter-cultural with a vengeance. A dear young missionary said: "I have been invited to say goodbye to myself" as she left goods and kindred to go into the jungles of southern Mexico.

⁹ James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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George Mueller spoke of a truth we cannot find in the “gospel of greed.” “There was a day when I died,” he said, almost touching the floor. “Died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my friends or brethren.”

The greatest problem we have is the unsundered self. Our problem is pride. We do not want to acknowledge, “Vile and full of sin am I.” It is not flattering. It is not popular. The Pelagianism of the “gospel of greed” makes man big and God small. It caters to our conceit. When I was a boy I read about *The Little Engine That Could*. The heroic little train chugged and puffed up the steep grade, “I think I can, I think I can.” The reality is: THINKING YOU CAN JUST AIN'T ENOUGH! This typical American symbol, like Jonathan Livingston Seagull later on, embodies our vain and futile insistence that we are sufficient.

So a thoughtful interpreter of Jonathan Edwards insightfully analyzed the reason for Edwards' influence: “While others preached self-reliance and sang the song of the self, Edwards drove nearer the truth — that nothing can be saved without confronting its own damnation, that the way to gain one's life is to lose it.” The “gospel of greed” is truly another gospel. Let our loyalty and our fidelity ever be to the everlasting Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰

¹⁰ *The Trinity Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1988), pp 221-236.