

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Soft Prosperity Gospel

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What do you think of when you read the words *prosperity gospel*? Odds are that your stomach turns a bit as you think about the preachers on television who speak to very large crowds and appeal to even more people in their books. Queasiness is the reaction one should have to the brand of Christianity trumpeted by prosperity preachers. This is because the prosperity gospel is not a gospel at all but rather a damnable perversion of the true gospel. Its preachers herald a message of self-improvement that runs painfully contrary to several key biblical realities. They minimize the purpose of suffering, discourage self-denial, and make the Christian life about the accumulation of stuff. To do this they turn Jesus from the self-giving, sin-atonement, wrath-satisfying, guilt-removing Savior into an eager butler who fetches all of our desires and gives us our best life now.

The prosperity gospel shrinks the gospel down to an unfiltered pursuit of our desires. It shifts the message from the spiritual to the materialistic. Let's be clear about this: the prosperity gospel is about us rather than God.

This is nothing new. Many have tried to avoid the clear instructions of Jesus that are forever etched on the doorpost of the church: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to deny self. It's a costly call that expects and embraces suffering.

Martin Luther vehemently opposed those who would seek to marginalize the experience of suffering and self-denial in the Christian life. His contrast between the "theology of glory" and the "theology of the cross" showed a fundamental difference in the starting point for Christian thought and experience. Theologians of glory build their theology on what they think God would be like, while theologians of the cross form their knowledge of God in light of the cross. On the one hand, the theology of glory will craft a god that looks like the theologian. On the other hand, the one who stares intently at the cross will learn about God through the lens of Calvary.

Doubtless, you can see how this intersects with prosperity thinking. There is no way that people can hold to prosperity theology when they have a front-row seat to the cross. There upon the tree, the perfect Son of God suffered the triune God's accumulated wrath

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for all of His people. The Sinless One became a curse for us. As the hymn writer wrote, “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood.” And we should hasten to add that the cross was not plan B. It was God’s plan all along—even from eternity past. Christ was focused with unrelenting precision upon the cross that He might accomplish the work that He had been given. And this work that He accomplished serves as an example for us (1 Pet. 2:20–25).

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We would be naive to think that prosperity thinking is limited to those who cruise around in their expensive private jets or overtly speak in self-help platitudes fit for fortune cookies. No, prosperity thinking has gone viral today. Being more nuanced and subtle than you may think, prosperity thinking is very active in the church. And because it undermines our understanding and application of the gospel, its effect is cataclysmic. Like a computer virus, it drains the vitality and productivity of the covenant community. And you know the worst part? We may not even recognize where we’ve been affected by it.

Let’s call this the “soft” prosperity gospel. It is not so loud and ostentatious. It is more mainstream, polished, and even American. Here are a few ways that you can tell that you may be nibbling at the hook of a soft-prosperity gospel without, perhaps, even knowing it.

THE PLACE OF SUFFERING

When you encounter suffering, do you have an unresolved answer to the question of why? Do you find yourself beginning to question God’s goodness? Or have you become somewhat bitter about what you are going through? The Christian, of all people, should know that suffering is part of the Christian life (John 15:20; Phil. 1:29). Let’s not forget that we follow a Savior who was crucified. The soft prosperity gospel has shaped our thinking to see that suffering is an intrusion in our lives. We ask questions such as, “Why is this happening? How could God let this happen?” It is happening because we live in a fallen, broken world. But, it is also happening because God uses suffering to strengthen and sanctify His people. He makes us more like Jesus through our suffering (Rom. 5:3–5; Heb. 5:7; James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 1:6–9). As Luther observed, it is suffering that God uses to fashion our understanding of the gospel. Far from an intrusion, suffering is an instrument from God for our good and His glory.

THE ROLE OF GOD

The soft prosperity gospel teaches that if you work hard for God, then He should work hard for you. Many have bought into this lie. We go to church, keep our noses clean, and do whatever extra we can. Then we hope God will do His part and bless us with good

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kids, a nice house, a steady job, and plenty of money. But what happens when the company downsizes? When a kid starts taking drugs? When the 401(k) shrinks? We go into private litigation in our minds because God has not kept His end of the bargain. We want to sue God for the prosperity promises that we have signed on to. The trouble is, God does not stand behind this soft prosperity thinking; He stands behind His Word. And He has shown us how to understand His Word through the work of Christ. Do you think (even subtly) that God owes you?

THE SHAPE OF WORSHIP

Let's be honest, in one sense, the Lord's Day gatherings for the church are very unspectacular. We sing, read, and respond to God's Word together. We probably don't walk out of church like we walk out of a movie saying, "Wow! That was spectacular! I can't believe how it ended! I never saw that coming." No, we do the same thing every week with some variation of songs or Scripture. We do this because God tells us to do it; He says it is good for us (Heb. 10:25). We trust Him. But sometimes we want a little more. Dissatisfied by preaching, prayer, and singing, we want worship to be a little more "our style" and to fit "our tastes." Soon, we find ourselves looking for that perfect place for us rather than the faithful place to God. Somehow it becomes our show. This subtle shift shows that we are at least susceptible to soft prosperity thinking, if not fully on board with it.

THE FOCUS OF DEVOTION

Let's get right down to it: Christianity is spiritual before it is physical. If you are restless about what you see, you will never be content in the One whom you cannot see. There is an epidemic of Bible negligence and prayerlessness in the church today. It is not because we are too busy, too smart, or too whatever—it is because we do not want to have communion with God. I believe this is a demonstration of soft prosperity thinking. It is hard work and a real demonstration of faith and discipline to read your Bible and quiet your heart before the Lord in humble adoration, confession, and petition. We are very distracted by our stuff, and our craving for stuff, and not so drawn to God. Having or wanting stuff does not in itself indicate that we have accepted the prosperity gospel, but if we make the gospel and our faith all about material blessings on this side of heaven, we have bought into the prosperity heresy.

THE OBJECT OF AFFECTION

When so much of the emphasis is on the here and now and so little is placed on the New City that awaits us, we have to ask the question, "Do you even want to go to heaven?" Let's say I had the ability to make you a deal where you could stay here on this world

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forever. You would never die and the ability to enjoy this world would not end. You could play all the video games, watch all the sunsets, drink and eat whatever you wanted; there would be football, hunting, shopping, and whatever else you would want. You could just ride the merry-go-round of this world forever without ever having to put in another quarter. The only catch is this: no God. That's right—you can't pray, read the Bible, go to church, or anything. It is on the shelf. Would you take it?

The very thing that makes heaven so heavenly is God. That which makes Christians long for heaven is the lack of God—God's tangible presence here. Ultimately, we don't want more rides on the merry-go-round; we want fellowship with God unhindered by our sinful flesh. Soft prosperity thinking has sold us a way of life that is so seemingly improved by their "gospel" that we don't even want to go to heaven.

Many of us have been unwittingly lulled to sleep by prosperity thinking. In its subtlety, the soft prosperity gospel wears the uniform of honor, happiness, and achievement. These are all good things but not necessarily implications of the gospel. The entry point into following Jesus is a call for self-denial and cross-bearing. This is to be our ongoing expectation and priority. To the extent that we have dozed off and imbibed the assumptions of the soft prosperity gospel, we need to be awakened by the theology of the cross.¹

¹ Raymond, E. (2016). "Last Things: The Soft Prosperity Gospel," *Tabletalk Magazine: Islam*, 40(4), 72–75.