

July 4, 2010

Matthew 6:19-21 / I Timothy 6:6-10 / Hebrews 13:5 / Luke 16:13-15  
The Christian View of Wealth (#3)

In my first message on "The Christian View of Wealth" (two weeks back) I made mention of one particular view in the Church which has come to be called "The Gospel of Prosperity," or in some cases, "The Health and Wealth" or the "Name It Claim It Gospel" -- all of which make the bold assertion that "God Wants Everyone to be Rich!"

And if you're not familiar with what I'm talking about, simply watch Joel Osteen, or read his bestselling book "Your Best Life Now." He's one of the more well-known proponents of it, though it's been around in Pentecostal circles for decades now, through the teaching of people like Oral Roberts, Joyce Meyers, Kenneth Copeland, Robert Tilton, Charles Capps, Fredrick Price, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Haggin and a long list of others.

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In fact, Gordon Fee (one of my NT professors at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, who is himself an ordained Pentecostal minister), saw the dangers of that movement way back in the late 70's and early 80's and wrote a little booklet entitled "The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospel."

It was a booklet which showed how that "gospel" was not only unbiblical, but dangerous to the soul of any Christian that embraced it and the health of any church that proclaimed it.

In fact, one of my favorite quotes from that book says, ***"If you can't preach the same Gospel to the people who live in the dumps of Calcutta, that you preach in the churches of Orange County, California, then you are not preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ."***

He's right. A Gospel that can only be preached in a land of immense prosperity and financial opportunity is NOT the Gospel Jesus or Paul preached!

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So WHY is the Health and Wealth Gospel (or the "God Wants Everyone Rich Gospel") so dangerous to the soul of the Christian or the health of the church that proclaims it?

Primarily because it nullifies everything Jesus says in today's passage! How? By merging or blending together as one both the pursuit and service of God / with the pursuit and service of money. / Something Jesus says you cannot do!

Jesus couldn't be any clearer when He says in verse 13:

***"No servant can serve TWO masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. YOU CANNOT SERVE BOTH GOD AND MONEY."***

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Yet that's precisely what the Health and Wealth Gospel says one can do! It's dangerous to the soul and the health of the church (despite its immense popularity), because what it does is remove the divinely stated need to choose between the one or the other!

What you actually do when you say, *"God Wants Everyone To Be Rich,"* is merge the pursuit of riches with the will of God! You essentially tell people that by pursuing wealth and riches they are doing what God wants / or fulfilling God's stated will for their lives by doing so / and thus pleasing Him by their ardent striving to be rich / thereby making the pursuit of wealth an act of service to God or an ongoing act of worship!

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That's why it's also so dangerous to the Christian soul, and the health of the church that embraces or proclaims it! Because it removes from the hearts of people Jesus clear call to CHOOSE! Jesus says here is the ONE / and here is the OTHER -- you can't serve BOTH, so make your CHOICE! Which one will it be? Will it be GOD or will it be MONEY?

You see, the Health and Wealth Gospel says you don't need to choose! That's why people love the Gospel of Prosperity. It declares that we can now wholeheartedly pursue, love and serve BOTH MASTERS at the same time (both God and the idol of money) effectively nullifying this passage by removing the need to make a choice between the two!

It's similar to the Canaanite Fertility Cult of Baal Worship (which we read about in the OT) which made sex with temple prostitutes part of one's act of worship. Except the Gospel of Prosperity makes money an act of worship -- thus feeding idolatry in both the soul of the Christian and the church at large.

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My friends, there is NOTHING that would please the carnal, fleshly, sinful, sensual, greedy, idolatrous, worldly part of my nature MORE than to have someone say to me, "Jeff, God Wants You To Be RICH! Richer than you could ever imagine!" The sinful part of my nature would love it! That's why it fills churches! It removes the inner struggle that always occurs when one is forced to choose between something the carnal nature desperately wants and our renewed nature knows it needs to reject!

In fact, telling people "God Wants You To Be Rich" would be similar to telling a room full of college age Christian men, "God Wants You To Be As Promiscuous as You Can Be!" In God's eyes there's really very little difference between the two, because they're simply two different ways to feed sinful appetites and placate the carnal nature.

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"True wealth" or "True Riches," on the other hand -- according to Jesus -- come from giving and not getting! "It is more blessed to give than to receive," said Jesus, though the "Gospel of Prosperity" reverses those two categories.

And by doing so (by focusing one's attention on getting rich rather than giving one's riches away) it actually thwarts the attainment of "true wealth" -- the only wealth we can say without reservation that God WANTS us to have!

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So what's the **FIRST** thing Jesus shares in this passage in regard to His view of wealth? You must choose between serving it and serving God, for you CANNOT serve both money (or wealth) and God. It's just not possible!

Which raises the question: What does it mean to "serve" money? And the answer? It means one lives to make money. / It means that the desire to be rich or the pursuit of wealth is one of the controlling or driving forces in their life. / One that determines whether we will be generous or stingy.

It means that the pursuit of wealth plays a major role in determining their priorities and life choices; significantly dominates their thoughts and desires, and even determines how they view and treat their spouse, children, friends, acquaintances, business associates, and co-workers.

In fact, Jesus here suggests that when one "serves" or "makes it their life goal to get rich" (even if they never attain that goal or accumulate any significant amount of wealth), they have turned their backs on God. They have made their choice.

Why? Because the human soul (as Jesus says) does NOT POSSESS the capacity to serve two masters. **"No servant can serve two masters...You CANNOT serve BOTH God and Money."**

So what's at stake here? The issue of Lordship and the Worship of God as opposed to an idol. It's the issue of who will be your master and what you will love, pursue and value most in life.

By using the terms "servant" and "master" in the first part of verse 13, Jesus is making it clear that the issue is what controls you. / What dictates your actions and priorities in life, or holds the key to your heart. / It's about what captivates our affections. That is, what you will love vs. what you will hate, as He makes clear in the middle part of verse 13. / It's about what calls forth our wholehearted commitment or undying allegiance -- what we are "devoted to" or "despise" as He makes clear in the last part of verse 13.

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You see, what we sometimes forget, is that in Scripture, the word "serve" often functions as alternative word for "worship." In fact, the Greek word "*latreuo*" in the NT is translated "serve" ten times, and "worship" eight times -- almost a 50/50 split!

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So at a deeper level, what Jesus is saying is that we cannot WORSHIP two things at the same time (remembering as we must, that the word "worship" comes from the Old Saxon word "worth-ship"). Meaning we "worship" whatever it is in our lives that we attribute the most worth to!

You see, whatever we think is the MOST valuable or consider the MOST important / Whatever would make our hearts leap with the MOST joy at the thought of having it / or MOST heavily influence our priorities, goals and life decisions -- even if we never pray to it or bow down before it physically -- is the thing we "worship."

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And LISTEN, because this is Jesus reasoning! ***You CANNOT have TWO different things in your life that are BOTH the MOST valuable! / Two things that are BOTH of the GREATEST worth! / You can't have TWO different things that are BOTH THE MOST IMPORTANT AND INFLUENTIAL THING in your life!***

One will exceed or nudge out the other! One will hold GREATER sway over your affections and exercise MORE control over what you pour your time and energy into and call forth GREATER devotion in your heart and GREATER allegiance in your will and play a GREATER role in dictating your priorities and actions. One will be first, and one will be second -- even if you think otherwise.

And we often do think otherwise. In fact, many times the only way we can determine which one holds greater sway in our lives is to be made to CHOOSE between the one and the other! (Which is exactly what Jesus does in this passage!!!!)

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That's exactly what Jesus did to the Rich Young Ruler. It wasn't until Jesus made him CHOOSE between giving away all his money and following Him as Lord / or keeping all his

money and not following him / that he discovered he loved money more than God and wealth was the idol that held greatest sway in his heart.

The man couldn't bring himself to give his wealth away, because he placed more value in it than he placed in Jesus and His invitation to come and follow and serve Him.

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And he wasn't unique. He was simply one of many, many people who thought they "served and worshipped God," only to discover something else was more near and dear to their hearts when God's call came to them and they were forced to choose between home, and family, and house, and possessions, and a good secure job, or a sizeable inheritance or leaving it all behind to serve Him in some third world setting.

They THOUGHT they worshipped God, and valued Him above all else. But their inability to part with their "worldly possessions" and obey His call on the lives showed THEY LOVED THOSE THINGS more than HIM.

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What about you? Jesus may NEVER ask you to "give it all away." But then again, He might! And if He did, could you? / Would you? / Because until you can say "YES," it calls into question what you serve, value, worship or consider most important in your life.

Jesus said: "**WORSHIP the Lord your God, and SERVE only Him.**" It's a choice He lays before us that never totally goes away! You can serve and worship and love money and earthly possessions / or you can serve and worship and love HIM, but you CANNOT SERVE, LOVE and WORSHIP BOTH at the same time. / So make your choice! / Which one will it be?

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Which brings us to the SECOND lesson we can learn in regard to Jesus view of wealth -- and it is very telling! He has made it clear that one must CHOOSE between God and Money. There is no blending or merging of the TWO! It's either one or the other! Either GOD controls your heart, aims, goals, priorities and life decisions, or MONEY does.

And the PHARISEES knew exactly who he was referring to -- THEM! They may have been religious, but as Luke tells us in verse 14 - "**they loved money.**" That's why "**they sneered at Him**" (literally, "turned their noses up in sheer disgust") when he suggested they could not serve both God and Mammon.

That's one of the best ways to know if you have an idol in your life -- you get angry or deeply unsettled or upset and even despise someone when they happen to devalue it, challenge it or worse yet - suggest you must give it up!

You see, the PHARISEES tried to convince everyone they "loved God" and were zealous to "serve God," but Jesus saw they were really USING God or USING religion to get rich - like many today.

Their real love (as Luke points out) was money. That's most likely what Jesus means when he says of the Pharisees: ***"You justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your heart."***

They tried to make people think they loved God, but their "sneering" reaction to Jesus when He told them they must choose between serving God or serving wealth, simply proved that IN THEIR HEARTS they really "loved money" more than God.

They embraced and through their actions and attitudes they preached a "Gospel of Prosperity" which allows one to do BOTH! In fact, this passage suggests they did!

Which brings us to our **LAST** lesson in the last verse of this passage -- the "clincher" in terms of how Jesus viewed money, riches or worldly wealth. It comes in the last part of verse 15 where He says: ***"What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."*** Let me repeat that! ***"What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."***

What does He mean? He means that whatever the world "clamors after" or "highly values" (or as I've already pointed out, "worth-ships," "over-values" or "idolizes") is "detestable to God!" Literally, it's an "abomination to God."

Not the thing itself, but people's over-valuing of it! When God looks down at a pile of money He doesn't detest it -- it's just money -- a commodity of exchange. No, what He detests or considers an abomination is when people "highly value" (love or idolize) it.

When people do THAT it's an abomination to Him. It's MORE than hated in God's sight! / It's abhorrent to Him in every way! / It turns His stomach! / He can't even stand to look at it! / Nothing could be more displeasing or more unacceptable to Him!

That's why it's so amazing to me that so many Christians have embraced the Gospel of Prosperity! God despises the avid pursuit of riches / He detests the over-valuing of money! Yet so many do it, being told by false teachers that it's what God wants! All I can say is that they must be reading a different Bible than me!

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If "men" love it (and He means the world in general) / if they highly value it and are always clamoring to get more of it / if they would lie, fight, steal, swindle, scam people, deceive, betray, be dishonest or even kill to have bunches of it, THEN GOD DETESTS IT! That's what Jesus plainly says!

And obviously, in this context, though speaking in a general way of ANYTHING people over-value, he means money, wealth, riches or earthly possessions.

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Don't do it my friends! As Christians we must always guard against the incessant temptation to love and highly value that which God detests! / Don't be like the Pharisees who "loved money," thus showing they worshipped another god / took commands from another "master" or Lord / and embraced an idol in their hearts.

Jesus says we have a choice to make! Do we serve HIM or MONEY - since we cannot serve BOTH.

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You see, I wonder: If I were to go to the upcoming "Creation Music Fest," where thousands of Christians gather to hear Christian artists and speakers, and were to put ten million dollars on a table at the far end of one field, and then announce over the loud speaker: "*The first one to get to that table gets it all!*" Would I cause a stampede?

Would people make a mad rush or try to beat everyone else to get it? Or would they realize that THEY'RE CHRISTIANS who are NOT to highly value or clamor to get their hands on something which their clamoring after makes "***an abomination in the sight of God?! "***

In fact, if YOU were there, what would YOUR response be?