

The Prosperity Gospel: It is a False Gospel of Another Jesus, or, Is it a Part of the Real Gospel?

3 John:2; II Corinthians 11:4-5; Matthew 19: 23-26

Today's sermon topic was offered by one of our members. I take it as an earnest question, and I take it with seriousness in this sermon.

When I was a young teenager in Charlotte, on Saturday nights I would listen to the Carolina Basketball game on my clock radio, then set the alarm for the next morning. I'd be awakened by the clock radio tuned to the same channel, with the sound of Oral Roberts preaching his Prosperity Gospel in his intense, urgent, high-pitched siren-like voice. It was scary. That was my introduction to the Prosperity Gospel

Today the Prosperity Gospel is one of the most popular forms of American Christianity. So let's look at it. My sermon title pitches the question sharply. Is it a false gospel of another Jesus, or, is it a part of the real gospel?

The key verse of Oral Roberts' preaching and healing ministry was 3 John: 2. I can hear his voice quoting it in the King James Version, which most of us used back then:

Beloved, I wish above all thing that thou mayest prosper and be in health....

Is that what *God* wishes above all else? Another question: If God wants us to prosper and be well in body, mind and spirit, why do we suffer so? Are we getting our faith wrong? Is something wrong with us?

I

Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, is the leading scholar of the Prosperity Gospel. She spent a decade researching it, attending hundreds of its worship services and interviewing its preachers and followers. She published a book on it called *Blessing: A History of the Prosperity Gospel*.

In 2016, shortly after the publication of *Blessing*, she was diagnosed with stage four cancer. She, a young mother in her mid-thirties. What was she to make of all this? It was not an academic question. In February 2016 she wrote an Opinion piece in the New York Times which gained national attention. Its title was “Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me.” She was on her way to writing a best-selling book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I’ve Loved*.

Bowler was raised a Mennonite, with its lifestyle of simplicity. Then she watched a new Mennonite Prosperity Gospel super-church rise up nearby. On one Sunday, its pastor came onto the stage riding his brand-new, flashy motorcycle, bought with money the church had raised for Pastor Appreciation Day.

“What is going on here?” She asked herself. That question became a doctoral dissertation and the book *Blessed*. “Put simply”, she wrote,

...the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants healing and wealth to those with the right kind of faith.

Today the Prosperity Gospel has claimed and captured the word “blessed”. When American Christians boast about how well they are doing—some call it “humble bragging”—on Twitter, they use the hashtag #Blessed. And today the *wealth* part of the promise of health and wealth has become the greater part of that gospel, with “blessed” having more the sense of “reward” than “gift”.

You may not be surprised to know that a number of the people Kate Bowler had gotten to know during her Prosperity Gospel research began writing to her, asking what had happened to her faith, and giving her advice about how to get well again. There is the shadow side of the Prosperity Gospel. It can make a person feel that something is wrong with them or wrong with their faith if they are poor or get sick. It plants doubt, self-doubt when what they need is realistic hope.

II

Bowler traces the roots of the Prosperity Gospel to the late 19th Century “New Thought” movement which said that positive thoughts lead to positive

outcomes and negative thoughts to negative outcomes. There is some truth in there, but not all the truth.

We can also trace its roots to European Calvinism. It taught that God had chosen some, the Elect, for salvation and the rest for damnation. So arose the urgent question, how does one *know* that they are among the Elect? Material prosperity was one sure mark.

So when Calvinism came to America, it found fertile soil. One of the most famous sociological works of the twentieth century was Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which traced the connection between Calvinism and Capitalism. They went together hand and glove.

Kate Bowler comments that the Prosperity Gospel has contributed to "the ritualization and divinization of the American Dream: upward mobility, accumulation, hard work and moral fiber." It's a most "American" gospel.

III

So how are we to think about the Prosperity Gospel? And how does it impact our lives? Let's go back to the key verse, 3 John: 2. I think it is true that God wishes that we prosper and be in health. But what does prospering mean? I believe that God is committed to our thriving and flourishing and works with us toward that end, but what does flourishing look like, thriving look like to God?

What kind of flourishing, thriving, would you wish for your children?

Health, security, achievement, success, wealth, happiness?

For example, let's take wealth. The Prosperity Gospel has abandoned Jesus' teaching on the spiritual dangers of wealth. Jesus' ideas in the Beatitudes about being blessed would not qualify as #Blessed. Over and over Jesus warned about the dangers of riches, both to ourselves and to society. As in today's text from Matthew:

Truly I say to you, how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again [*Again!*] I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Or, in the Shoemaker Revised Version: "It is easier for a Ferrari to get through the night deposit box at *Blue Harbor* Bank than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!"

And yet in America we idolize wealthy people, consider them smarter than most and untouched by the dangers of wealth. One rode his way to the highest office in the land on his reputation of wealth—and was supported by many Christians because of his wealth.

I have posed the central question of today's sermon, "Is the Prosperity Gospel a false gospel of another Jesus, or part of the real gospel? It uses Paul's phrases.

In II Corinthians, Paul had been watching as those he called "super-apostles", literally, *hyper-apostles*, came to Corinth preaching their own version of the Prosperity Gospel. They were the kind who'd ride their motorcycles onto the stage. They preached a gospel of health, wealth and success. They paraded their "strength" and attacked Paul, mocking his health problems and his weak preaching style.

Paul called them "false apostles", literally *pseudo-apostles*, who preached a "another Jesus" and a "different gospel." He did not hold back; what he called "the truth of the gospel" was at stake.

Is this what the Prosperity Gospel is, a false Gospel of another Jesus, a Jesus formed more by our American culture than by the accounts in the biblical gospels? America has its share of false gospels and Jesuses shaped more by our cultural values than by the New Testament gospels.

And yet, does it have hold of a part of the real gospel, *the truth that God wants our good and is always on our side?*

Someone has defined a heretic as a person with a complete grasp of a half-truth. Is the Prosperity Gospel such a heresy?

God does not promise a life free of suffering. There is a tragic realm of life, and a contingency about our human lives. Things happen, no reason. There is dumb luck and blind misfortune. As the title of Kate Bowler's new book goes, there's "*No Cure for Being Human*".

In our lives we must deal with good fortune and dashed dreams. Faith is how we deal with it all.

Paul wrote of his own experience:

...I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.

(Philippians 4:11-12)

He wrote those words from prison!

We all want happiness for our children. Perhaps contentment is one of the greatest form of happiness.

What is the kind of prosperity, what is the kind of flourishing that God wants for us? Paul described it. He called them the fruit of the Spirit. God wants for your flourishing these nine things:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and
[even] self-control

That's the kind of garden God is helping us grow.

Amen