

Are all prosperity preachers charlatans and/or false teachers?

ANSWER

Before we can give serious attention to this question, we must first define the term prosperity preachers. Different ministries have different approaches to presenting the gospel. For example, relief organizations meet the physical needs of the destitute while giving credit to Jesus. Some could interpret that approach as preaching prosperity because many impoverished people equate Christianity with Western prosperity. They may respond to the gospel message while their real motivation is to be prosperous. However, for most relief organizations, meeting physical needs is merely a part of ministering to the whole person. It is a means by which Christians earn the right to speak to the spiritual needs of hurting people. But in prosperity preaching, Jesus is presented as a ticket to perfect health and financial wealth. The true gospel is stripped of its focus on eternity and reduced to a means by which everyone can experience his or her best life now. It is that message we will address in this article.

In the Old Testament, God speaks a lot about blessing His servants with earthly health, wealth, and honor (e.g., Genesis 12:2; Leviticus 26:3–12; Deuteronomy 7:11–15; 30:8–9; 1 King 3:11–14). Material blessings were part of the Mosaic and Land Covenants for Israel. However, the New Testament focus is on eternal, not earthly, rewards.

Not every preacher who teaches the joy of blessing is a “prosperity preacher.” God does promise blessing to those who serve Him faithfully and follow His statutes (Psalm 107:9; Malachi 3:10–11; Mark 10:29–30). But a preacher who presents God as a means by which we can obtain earthly wealth is a prosperity preacher and a false teacher. This teaching portrays Almighty God as a type of jolly Santa Claus whose primary purpose is to prosper human beings and make their dreams come true. In prosperity preaching, man—not God—is the real star.

Prosperity teachers use terms such as faith, positive confession, or visualization to “release” the abundance God has in store. Often such preachers will entice listeners to “sow seeds into this ministry,” promising abundant returns on this investment. The gospel becomes little more than a repackaged get-rich-quick scheme, with the ministers becoming richer than the listeners. Often, an invitation to accept Christ is given after a service that has been based solely around blessing and positivity. Despite the overwhelming responses to the invitation, one has to wonder: are the responders surrendering to the Jesus of the Bible or a new-and-improved version of themselves?

The shift from truth to error can be subtle, and some well-meaning preachers have been caught up in it. We must be careful not to judge a preacher’s entire message by only one or two sermons. However, when blatant prosperity preaching dominates a speaker’s platform, this is merely an attempt to make greed and materialism sound spiritual. Ephesians 5:5 has strong words for greedy people: “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” While we should ask God to provide for our needs and expect Him to do so (Philippians 4:19), Jesus warned us not to stockpile earthly wealth. Rather, we should store up treasure in heaven (Luke 12:33).

The imbalanced focus of prosperity preachers on an earthy treasure is in direct contrast to the many passages that warn us not to desire riches (Proverbs 28:22; 2 Timothy 3:2; Hebrews 13:5).

First Timothy 6:8–10 speaks directly to this kind of teaching: “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” When earthly wealth is our focus, we are not following the teachings of Scripture.

If the quest for prosperity dominates a preacher’s message, he or she may be someone about whom Scripture warns. The following are some common traits of many prosperity preachers or false teachers:

- The core of his/her messages is always God’s desire to bless everyone.
- There is little, if any, mention of Jesus’ words about self-denial, taking up our crosses, or dying to the flesh (Luke 9:23; Matthew 10:38, 16:24).
- Almost all their teaching focuses on the gratification of fleshly desires rather than spiritual transformation (Romans 8:29).
- Obedience to God’s commands is rarely mentioned as a prerequisite to His blessing (Jeremiah 18:10).
- Positive thinking about oneself and one’s situation is often equated with faith and is presented as to how one can obtain a financial blessing.
- There is a marked absence of any teaching on the necessity of suffering in the life of a believer (2 Timothy 2:12; 3:12; Romans 8:17; Philippians 1:29).
- Very little distinction is made between God’s children and the unsaved in the positive promises of the message (Malachi 3:16–18; Romans 9:15–16).
- The speaker rarely attempts any type of real Bible teaching that does not support the continual message of positivity and blessing (1 Corinthians 3:1–3).
- He or she stays away from passages that contradict the positive spin of the message (2 Timothy 4:3).
- Personal wealth of the minister is often far above the average lifestyle of his congregation (Psalm 49:16–17).
- The only attributes of God ever mentioned are love and generosity. Scant attention is given to His holiness, justice, and righteousness (Ephesians 4:22–23).
- Neither the wrath of God against sin nor the coming judgment is ever mentioned (Romans 2:5; 1 Peter 4:5).
- The only “sins” discussed at length are negativity, poverty, or a person’s failure to believe in themselves (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Philippians 3:3).
- Forgiveness is emphasized but with very little explanation of the repentance that was so important to Jesus and the disciples (Matthew 4:17; Mark 6:12; Acts 2:38).

- The prayer of faith is often referred to as how humans “leave God no choice but to bless me” (Job 40:1–2).

There has been a subtle shift within Christianity toward a version of the gospel that the apostles would not recognize. People are becoming biblically illiterate and are thus easily swayed by preachers who appear to know Scripture but who are perverting it to make it sound more appealing. These preachers are attracting huge crowds, just as Jesus did when He fed the thousands (Matthew 14:21), healed the sick (Mark 1:34), and performed miracles (John 6:2). But when Jesus began to teach the hard truths of the gospel, “many of his disciples turned away and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). Waning popularity did not cause Jesus to water down His message. He continued to teach truth whether people liked it or not (John 8:29). Likewise, the apostle Paul exonerated himself before the Ephesians with these words: “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27). If today’s prosperity teachers would follow the patterns of Jesus and Paul, they could be confident that their works will not be burned up on judgment day (1 Corinthians 3:12–15)