

The Argument against Prosperity

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But critics charge that the broad scope of the biblical witness precludes a prosperity interpretation. At least three sets of biblical arguments are marshaled against the prosperity message. First, Jesus himself advocated and embodied a lifestyle of simplicity, not prosperity. To be sure, Jesus was prosperous but not in the materialistic and consumeristic manner implied if not flaunted by prosperity preachers. Instead, Jesus was dependent on the support of others (e.g., Luke 8:1-3), even to the point that he did not own his own home (Luke 9:58). More important, in his teachings Jesus not only consistently focused on the importance of seeking after spiritual rather than material prosperity (Matt. 5:3-10, Luke 6:20-22) but pronounced woe on the rich, the prosperous, and the greedy (Luke 6:24-25, Matt. 23:25; cp. James 5:1-6).

Second, the apostle Paul, who followed in the footsteps of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), also advocated a lifestyle of simplicity and contentment, even when having little, going hungry, or being in situations of great need and reliant on the generosity of others (Phil. 4:11-16). More pointedly, Paul's devotion to the person and cause of Christ meant that he was wholly committed not to the pursuit of material gain but to suffering the loss of all things and counting them as rubbish, "in order that I may gain Christ [and] know Christ* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:8b, 10b). True prosperity thus consists not in the accumulation of wealth or material things but in the relationship we can have with Christ.

Third, there is Paul's grave warning to Timothy: "But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (1 Tim. 6:9-10). This is consistent with the various admonitions in the book of Proverbs about the dangers of riches (Prov. 10:15, 11:4, 28, 22:1, passim). It is not that prosperity itself is necessarily evil, but that such brings with it seductions that entrap those who are not wary.

Inevitably, the harshest critics of the prosperity gospel are incensed that a few of its most glamorous preachers have been exposed as swindlers of the unsuspecting, or that many of the most recognizable television evangelists openly enjoy their affluence. There is, rightly, the concern of such scandals undermining the Christian witness. There is also, again rightly, unease that the central biblical virtue of giving should motivate the well-to-do to be generous in light of the poverty that afflicts many other Christians (the brothers and sisters of the wealthy!) around the world, not to mention those outside the church. And last if not least, there is also apprehension that too much talk of prosperity leads to the neglect of other important virtues, like emphasis on hard work, or other necessary topics and themes, like a more robust and helpful theological understanding of suffering. All of these anxieties understandably motivate protests against the prosperity message.

Interestingly, however, respondents have in turn noticed that anti-prosperity critics are usually white males located in the middle class in the Anglo-American West and who are therefore not afflicted by poverty, rarely oppressed by racial or ethnic injustices, and not generally touched by gender or class-based inequalities. How then, should these arguments of those who have already experienced a measure of prosperity be assessed or received?