

Prosperity and the Gospel

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] You need money or you won't have any peace. God is trying to put material wealth into your hands and you're stopping him because of your lack of faith. If you're struggling financially, you don't have spiritual victory. These are all quotes from Christian preachers today, preaching what is commonly known as the prosperity gospel. This prosperity gospel is very common today. It's the popular teaching that God wants to bless you in this life with prosperity and health and happiness. And if you don't have these things, there is something wrong with your faith. That's the common teaching that we hear quite often today. And when it comes to the difficulties we face in life, the pastoral advice of the prosperity gospel is to do anything you can in order to get rid of that difficulty, even if it means as one well-known prosperity teacher advised a man whose wife had

Alzheimer's to, I quote, divorce her and start all over again. This is what so-called Bible teachers are teaching people today. And we need to be aware of this kind of teaching in our world because not only is it spreading at an alarming rate, especially in Africa, our own continent, you go and there are masses of people flooding to prosperity gospel teachers. And so we need to be aware of that, not only because of that, but because not all prosperity teachers are as blatant as the quotes that I mentioned. Many are very subtle in their prosperity message. In fact, their teaching sounds okay at first listen. It sounds just like ordinary Bible teaching. Often they don't even know that they are teaching prosperity gospel. Their churches are popular, nice places to go. You've probably been to one. And many of your Christian friends and colleagues might be at a church that is preaching a subtle prosperity message right now, this morning. People you know might be going to churches like these.

And so how do we spot it? How do we spot this prosperity gospel? And how can you tell the difference between the prosperity gospel and the true gospel? Seeing it is so prevalent in our world, seeing it is so evident in Christendom, seeing so many people are drawn to it. How can we spot the difference?

How can we tell that someone is preaching the prosperity gospel? Well, that's what Paul's going to teach us this morning in 2 Corinthians. Because it might surprise you to know that while the prosperity gospel is spreading rapidly today, it's not new. In fact, in some or other form, it's always been around.

In this morning's passage, Paul actually sets out right at the beginning to oppose false teachers in ancient Corinth who were preaching a very similar type of message, if you look into it, to the modern prosperity gospel. And so you'll see, have a look in verse 2. He says, We have renounced secret and shameful ways. We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.

[3 : 17] On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. So he's deliberately comparing himself here and the other apostles with the false teachers in Corinth, who, he says, use deception, secret and shameful methods, and distort the word of God to make it say what's going to fall with their own agenda and probably line their own pockets, very much like the prosperity teachers today. And then he goes on to show how their message, in the rest of this passage, how their message is so fundamentally different to the true gospel message that he brings to the Corinthians. And he says that it's different in at least three ways, which are important for us to see this morning. That's what I want us to focus on, so that we, today, will be able to spot the difference between the true and the false gospel. And so let's do that.

Let's have a look at each of these differences in turn. The first question you've got to ask is, is this teaching focusing on God's glory or our glory? That's the first difference that we've got to be aware of. So as you know, these Corinthians were still pretty skeptical of Paul. If you've been here so far in, in studying this letter, Paul's writing this letter partly to reconcile with the Corinthians, but also partly to prove to them that his ministry is the real deal. And the reason they're skeptical of him, amongst other things, is because of these other impressive teachers coming to visit them while he's been away. And they've been charging for their sermons, and they've been impressing these people, and it's been everything they've wanted to hear. And so the Corinthians are wondering why Paul doesn't seem to be as successful in his ministry as they do. They're, you know, they're saying, Paul, if you say you've got the true gospel and these guys don't, why are they so successful? And you're not. It's the same question that can be asked today, actually. Why is a church that faithfully preaches the gospel every week far less successful on the surface than a church that preaches the prosperity gospel? Have you ever wondered that? I mean, look at us this morning. We've got, what, 60, 70 people here this morning? And we're careful to teach the true meaning of the text.

Each Sunday, you go to a prosperity megachurch, and they're twisting the text, and yet they've got thousands of people. Why? Why isn't the plain teaching of the Bible as attractive as teaching being manipulated by impressive speakers? Well, Paul tells us exactly why. In verse 3, and I'll start at the end of verse 2, he says this, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. Verse 4, the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. So what he says here is that Satan, who he calls the God of this world, the supernatural evil being who is controlling much of what is going on in this world, he is actively working to keep the veil that Paul spoke about last week in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, to keep this veil over people's hearts so that they can't see

God's glory in the gospel. That's what he's saying here. Satan is working to prevent people from seeing God's glory when they're exposed to the gospel. Which means that people who aren't actually interested in the plain teaching of scripture, the plain teaching of the gospel, have not actually seen God's glory in the message of the gospel. They want more. The gospel as it's given in scripture is not enough for them.

They'll only listen to it if it promises more health and wealth and something impressive now. In other words, they are attracted to the glory of the minister and the glory of the life that he promises them that is their own glory, man's glory, rather than the glory of God. Because they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ. They are still in darkness to that.

[7 : 43] That's why they need more. That's why they need to hear these prosperity teachings. Because the gospel itself is not enough. It's not glorious enough. It doesn't show them God's glory. They're in darkness to the glory of God in the gospel. And in that way, actually, I was thinking about this. The prosperity gospel is much like a bug zapper. So, you know those bug zappers if you go camping? Sometimes you get these fancy bug zappers that have an electrified mesh, but inside is this light that attracts the bugs.

And then they fly towards the light and then they are no longer around. And those work really effectively at night. They don't work during the day because you've got the sun shining, right? And the bugs have sunlight. They don't need this light of the bug zapper, so they're not attracted to it.

But when there's no sunlight, they're attracted to the next best thing, to their ultimate doom. Well, that's the prosperity gospel. It attracts people who can't see the glory of God in the gospel, so they follow whatever secondhand man-made glory they can get, and sadly, to their ultimate doom.

But thanks be to God that he does cause the sun to come out for his people, so that we don't have to be attracted to false lights. Look at verse 6 in your Bibles. That's exactly what Paul says here. For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Okay, so Paul is using the language of creation here. When God made creation in the first place to display his glory, that's why we have this world and this universe and the stars and sunsets and waterfalls and vast forests. God is trying to show us just little snatches of his glory in what he makes.

[9 : 50] You know, when we sang Indescribable earlier, we were just meditating on God's creation as the way he displays his glory. And you know how that creation began? What was the first thing God made in the whole of creation? Light. Light. The light of Genesis 1 verse 3. Light was the first thing God did, because if you don't have light, you can't see the rest of the creation, right? And you can't glorify God.

That's how it was. So that bringing light was how he kicked off his creation. And now Paul says he's doing that again. In the light of the gospel, he's kicking off his new creation, so that in that light, we will be able to see his glory again. And he does that by shining light into the darkness that stops people from seeing his glory in the gospel, through the message of Jesus Christ, in the face of Christ. That's what Paul says. In the face of Christ, as we see and believe who Jesus is, and we realize all that he did and what it means for us, we see the glory of God. That is the new light that is shining to kick off the new creation, the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in which we see God's glory. And when we see that glory, it changes us inside. Like it changed Paul. You know, he's saying that light, when it shone into his heart and he could see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ on the Damascus road, when he was converted, when he, up until that point, had been a persecutor of the church. And yet as an Orthodox Jew, he'd been seeking God's glory, never really being able to find it. He had a veil over his heart. He couldn't find God's glory in the old covenant we saw last week. And when he, in the face of Christ, when he was confronted with Jesus, he saw the glory of God that he'd been seeking for his whole life. That light shone in his heart. And from that moment, he was changed to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to share that glory with others. And so that there, God's glory in the face of Christ is the first major difference between the prosperity gospel and the true gospel. The true gospel shows us the glory of God, which transforms us when we see it. The prosperity gospel, on the other hand, is always focused on the glory of man. The glory that you can have in this life. What a glorious life you can have.

Which, of course, while that may be attractive, has no actual transforming power. That does not change you from the inside out. It does not cause you to live a more holy life. It does not cause you to reflect the glory of God if you're focused just on your glory. See, that's the first major difference between these two messages. The second difference is in suffering versus triumph.

So the prosperity gospel does not like the idea of suffering. If your wife's Alzheimer's is causing you suffering, divorce her, says the prosperity gospel, literally. And if you're suffering, it's a bad thing, says the prosperity gospel. It means you are outside of God's plan for your life.

Because the prosperity gospel is all about having victory over your health and your finances and your circumstances. But then as we actually open the Bible and read this passage, we realize Paul's gospel is in fact the opposite of that. He teaches us here the gospel is mediated through weakness and suffering, not through triumph and victory. That's what he means in verse 7 when he says, but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. Now, what are jars of clay besides a pretty decent Christian band? What he means to jars of clay were really fragile, weak vessels. You know, the clay jars that they made were the cheapest things you could carry things in because they were the most fragile. They were the most easily breakable.

[14 : 03] And that's what he's saying here. And it's a bizarre thing in which to carry such an important treasure because it could break at any time. It's not what you normally store treasure. And it's like storing your life savings in a cornflakes box. You know, that's the kind of image that Paul's trying to paint here when he says treasure in jars of clay. But what he's also saying, he's saying that about himself. He's saying he's one of the jars of clay. He's one of the weak vessels in which God is storing and transmitting the treasure of the gospel to the world, which seems strange. And it seems strange to the Corinthians and it might seem strange to us. Why wouldn't God choose strong, powerful, victorious ministers to transmit his message? You know, the kinds that have their own private jets and live in lavish mansions like many prosperity preachers today. Surely they would be the best people fit to transmit God's message to the world because people will respect them and listen to them. Why does God instead choose to transmit his message in weak, easily broken vessels?

Well, I'll tell you why. What Paul says here is because God doesn't want people to think that the transformation power of the gospel lies in the preacher. He doesn't want people to rely on the preacher of the gospel. He wants people to rely on him alone to experience his power, not the preacher's persuasive power. God wants people to experience his power, not man's power. He wants people to seek the true light, not man-made lights, in other words. We have this treasure, Paul says, in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

And so the weakness and the suffering of the apostles actually serves to highlight the power of God and glorify God. But how does it do that? How does the weakness and the suffering of the messengers of the gospel highlight the glory and the power of God? Well, Paul explains from verse 8. Have a look in your Bibles from verse 8. He develops this idea of what it means to be a jar of clay.

He says, we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. So you see, the power of God, the power of the gospel is displayed not in its ability to remove suffering from the lives of his people, but in its ability to give them endurance in the midst of their sufferings. That's the difference.

Paul's saying he does suffer. He's not hiding that fact. He's hard pressed. He's persecuted. He's struck down.

[17 : 09] He's weak. He's saying that he's admitting it. And yet he's also saying in all that, he's not crushed and he doesn't give up and he's not destroyed. He keeps going despite his suffering. Why? Because he says in verse 10, while he shares in the death of Jesus, that suffering that he's sharing because of his ministry, he also at the same time has the life of Jesus flowing through his veins, new life, which keeps him going through it all. And that's the endurance that the power of the gospel gives to God's people.

And another reason he keeps going, he says later in verse 14, just skip down to that. He says, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise with us, sorry, raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. So Paul keeps going through his suffering and the power of the gospel is displayed in his life, both through the spirit's presence in his life, the life of Jesus that he experiences in the present, as well as the gospel hope he has of God rescuing him out of all suffering in the future, even the suffering of death. That's what keeps him going. And this is such an important truth in a Christian's life. If you call yourself a Christian this morning, this is an important truth that must be part of your life, which is that the power of the gospel is not seen in how much you win at life, how triumphant you are.

Rather, the power of the gospel is seen in your ability to keep going when you lose. The power of the gospel is in how it enables you to keep trusting God when things go bad, not when things are going good. To keep living in holiness before God, to keep fighting the good fight, no matter what rubbish this life throws at you, that is the power of the gospel. And that's the second difference between the true gospel and the prosperity gospel. And then the final difference is the focus on the temporary versus the focus on the eternal. So look at what else Paul writes in verse 16 to 18. Therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

Because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. So the main way you can tell that a particular teaching is actually the prosperity gospel or not, is whether its focus is on this life or the life to come. That's the main way you can tell.

Because actually, both the false teaching of the prosperity gospel and the true teaching of the biblical gospel, both of them actually promise health and prosperity. The only difference is that one promises it here in this life, while the other promises it in a new world in eternity.

[20 : 33] The biblical gospel calls us to be patient and wait for an eternal glory. The prosperity gospel tells you you can start having that glory here and now. But you see, only the biblical gospel actually glorifies God. Why? Well, because as we've seen, it's in the waiting and the patient enduring in suffering that God is glorified and his power is shown in our lives. And the gospel is advanced as we wait and patiently endure suffering and are willing to take on suffering to advance the gospel. And you know, you wouldn't be willing to do that if you're seeking health, wealth and prosperity and comfort in this life. And so what, what is it that makes us willing to take on and endure suffering in this life? Well, because as Paul says, verse 18, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal. You see, our ability to live for God now, to wait on God and serve God and deny ourselves for his kingdom, our ability to do that is rooted in our future outlook rather than our present outlook. Where we're fixing our eyes will determine how we live. I mean, more than we like to admit, isn't it true that our present state, how we're feeling right now is always affected by our future outlook. You can't get away from that fact. How your mood now is always affected by what you think is, is, is going to happen in your immediate future or your long-term future. You know, why, why think about this like this, why is a drive home from holiday never as nice as the drive to holiday? Even though it's the same traffic, the same cramped car, the same cheesy music on the radio. And yet you feel so much happier when you're going to holiday, even though you're, you know, it's no different from the drive back. And yet it's, your feeling now is, is dependent on your future outlook. It's the anticipation of what's coming, which affects how you feel now.

Whatever your mood is now, whatever you're feeling right now is determined by what you think is coming this week, this month, this year, for the rest of your life and beyond.

And the difference between a true Christian, as opposed to someone who buys into the prosperity gospel, is that in the prosperity gospel, the moment the ride gets bump, the ride gets bumpy, they want out of the car. They're not willing to carry on going because they're looking for a smooth ride.

And so suffering always pushes them away from the gospel, not towards it, away from God and not towards him. But of course, if they get out of the car, they'll never arrive at the destination.

And the problem is they were setting their hopes on the ride itself, not the destination. For a true believer though, no matter how bad the drive is, they will endure because they're setting their hopes on the destination. They don't even notice the ride because they're too busy reading the brochure of the holiday they're going to. And even if they do notice the bumps in the road, even if it's particularly bad, the worse the drive is, the more they look forward to the holiday.

[24 : 09] And the holiday for us is our resurrection. In fact, that is the true meaning of holy day. The day when we will be holy before God and enjoy his glory without limits.

In the new creation, the life to come that Jesus has secured for us in his death on the cross when he died for the sins of those who trust him. And so if you're one of those people, you can ride along through this bumpy road of life and it will get bumpy, mark my words, but you can stick with it because you know where it's taking you. And we know, we know that for sure because Jesus has guaranteed that for us by his death and his resurrection so that we can set our hope there.

And it's not wishful thinking. It's not blind faith. It's based on the sure death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And because of that guarantee, that surety, that assurance, we can set our hope on the destination which will help us to endure the ride and which will renew us inwardly even as we waste away outwardly. And which is the only thing that will give us endurance to keep following Jesus and serving him in this broken world. Let's pray. Yes, Lord, we know and we've been made aware this morning again that the devil is prowling around, scheming, looking to devour people through false teachings. And Lord, thank you through your apostle of making us aware of false teachings that we can be on our guard against. And so we pray, Lord, help us to have discernment, to recognize the true gospel from the many false gospels that are preached. And help us, Lord, to keep our eyes fixed, not on this life and trying to improve this life, but on the life to come and the glory that you show us in the face of

Jesus Christ. Amen.