

# False Teachers and Money

1 Timothy 6:3b-10

Justin Deeter – July 10, 2016



## Introduction

I recently read a story:

At a church meeting a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. "I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember the turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today." He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said to him: "I dare you to do it again."<sup>1</sup>

That story reflects the confusion we have about money and faith. We think wealth is a sign of God's blessing, and we put faith in our money instead of God. We do not like to talk about it, but money is a huge issue in our spiritual lives. It's a love that grips our hearts and can choke out our spiritual life. As we turn to 1 Timothy 6 today, we will see that Paul gives instructions to Timothy about how to identify the false teachers, recognized in large part by their love of money. He then encourages Timothy and us, to seek "godliness with contentment" for it is a "great gain."

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Munroe, One Voice, Two Hearts, sermon preached First Presbyterian Church, Pueblo, Colo., April 13, 2003.

## False Teachers without Contentment (2b-5)

The false teachers in Ephesus have come up again and again throughout this letter, posing a major threat to Timothy's work as the pastor in the church of Ephesus. Paul describes just what these false teachers are like so that Timothy can identify them within the congregation. Both their teaching and life is out of sync with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's teaching here provides a needed reminder for the Church to practice discernment of those who are teaching them. We must exercise caution whenever we listen to anyone teach the Bible lest we be fooled and deceived. As we walk through Paul's description of these false teachers, I pray that your discernment will be sharpened, that you will bring everything in check with God's word. So let's plunge into this description of the false teachers. Let me give you four ways you can spot them from the text.

First, we see that their "doctrine" "does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ." The teachers were teaching a different doctrine, a different Gospel. Their teaching did not highlight Jesus Christ as the preeminent and valuable treasure, instead they cast him aside as an afterthought. Their false teaching of Gnosticism and asceticism became the focus. It became all about self-purification through man made rules, not the sovereign, extravagant grace of Jesus. Their teaching was fundamentally man-centered not Christ-centered.

In general, false teachers are fairly easy to spot if you know what you are looking for. False teachers make Jesus an afterthought, and ignore his words. Sermons that aren't centered around the exposition and application of the Bible aren't sermons. Using a Bible verse to dive into whatever he wants to talk about, is a good indicator of a false teacher. When I'm listening to a new preacher for the first time, I can usually discern within the first ten minutes if he's worth listening to or not. Is the Bible an afterthought or a diving board, or is the Bible driving the content of the message? Is Christ lifted up as supreme in the message or is he relegated to second fiddle? Does the preacher want me to dwell on how great I am or how great Christ is? Is the preacher holding out Christ as the all-consuming treasure, or something else (money, health, success, laughter, entertainment etc.)? I've listened to enough sermons and the Spirit has helped sharpen my discernment enough to be able to answer those questions relatively quickly. If a preacher doesn't magnify Christ and ground his teaching in the word of Christ, then that's an indicator of a false teacher.

Second, false teachers display an ignorant pride. As Paul put it, "he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing." Not only have they missed the true Gospel of Christ for the other, they pridefully refuse to be corrected. They

feel superior because of their teaching, that they've arrived on a new spiritual playing field. They think they've received new revelation of Christ. Yet in their error, they cannot be corrected, they cannot be reasoned with. You cannot open up your Bible and talk about God's revealed truth. They shut you off. Shut their ears, and remain ignorant and prideful. Paul says in verse five that they are "depraved in mind and deprived of truth." Their minds remain corrupt in their sins, and the truth of the Gospel has yet penetrated their hearts. They are ignorant, yet they think they know.

**Third,** false teachers are divisive. Paul tells us they have "an unhealthy craving for controversy," all of this produces "envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions." They create controversy over words. They major on the minors. They "create friction among people." They pick apart a phrase; they look for fault when there is none. They have a critical and divisive spirit, and seek to destroy the people of God with division over insignificant abstractions.

**Fourth,** false teachers are greedy. Paul states that the false teachers see that "godliness as a means of gain." They use religion to exploit people as hucksters, swindling people out of dollars to line their own pocket books. They devour the flock as wolves in sheep's clothing. Instead of praying for people, they prey upon them. They take advantage of others through religious manipulation, mass hysteria, and smooth talking. A few years ago a Christian rapper named Shai Linne released a song called "False Teachers." If you keep up with me on Facebook, I jokingly said I was going to rap the song for you this morning. God's giving me many gifts but spitting rhymes ain't one of them. But in that song, he created a great deal of controversy as he named specific names of prosperity gospel teachers. This false teaching is everywhere and I have no doubt that many of you have their books on your shelves. I debated quite heavily in my preparation this week whether to bring names to your attention like Shai Linne did, and I decided to do so. I name those names not because I want to hurt you or offend you, but because of my pastoral care for your soul. Like Timothy, one of the most important aspects of my job is to protect you from the teachings of wolves who would prey upon your souls. I do not want you to be swayed by these Prosperity Gospel teachers, who promote a different Gospel than that of Jesus Christ. So if you want to get an idea of what prosperity teaching largely looks like just turn on TBN and you can see it in action. You can see it on display through the work of T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Joseph Prince, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Copeland and more. As 2 Peter 2:3 states, "In their greed they will exploit you with false words." One of those preachers I just mentioned recently asked each of his 200,000 followers (largely the poor) to donate \$300 each so that he could purchase a \$65-million-dollar jet. Many of those prosperity preachers live in opulence and wealth, enjoying

multi-million dollar homes and vacation homes, while their financial supporters scrape by on food stamps. Such teachers exploit the poor, using "godliness as a means of gain."

Their lifestyles condemn them. Yet, if their lifestyle does not give them away as false teachers, surely their doctrine must. The prosperity Gospel has become an especially dangerous American concoction of materialism and individualism painted over with Christian language. Sadly, its empty promises and false message is being exported all across the world particularly to Africa and South America, as many believers there are beginning to buy into the "name-it-and-claim-it" and the promise of "health, wealth, and prosperity" if you only "come to Jesus."

The prosperity gospel is not a gospel. It's a false gospel, one that must be condemned by the church for what it is. This teaching is so dangerous because it sounds so right. In fact, many of its proponents speak truth in some areas, but Satan always comes disguised as an angel of light. I want to spend some time helping you think through the incredible dangers of this teaching, rather than dealing with specific teachers, I want to address the larger principles at play, so that you may be equipped with sound judgement, discerning truth from error.

First, the prosperity gospel is no gospel because it steals glory from Christ and puts it on us. Jesus isn't the one being sought, material blessings are. The prosperity gospel teaches that if you come to Jesus you will receive wealth. "If you come to Jesus your bank account will explode, you'll receive a random check in the mail, you'll have all your problems go away and you will be comfortable and wealthy!" Rather than highlighting Jesus as the all-consuming treasure and joy of the world, the satisfier of our souls, the delight of our hearts, it kicks Jesus to the curb—I don't want Jesus, I just want what he gives me. We don't want Jesus for Jesus, we just want him for what he might give us. The prosperity gospel minimizes sin, eliminates the need for repentance, and instead emphasizes just what Jesus can give us. It cheapens the grace of God and simply reinforces our greed and materialism.

Second, the prosperity gospel has no theology of suffering. The teachers who stand and proclaim wealth and healing if you follow Jesus, cannot explain the suffering inherent to the Christian life. The Bible casts the vision of the Christian life as one of suffering. We are to deny ourselves, die to ourselves, to take up our cross and follow cross. We are to share in the sufferings of Christ. The norm for the Christian life is not one of ease but of suffering. But that's the point, we do not live our lives for this present age, but for the age to come. These afflictions we endure are but light and momentary, compared

to the glory that is to be revealed. Prosperity and health will come to the Christian, but its promised in the next life, not this one.

Third, the prosperity gospel has no theology of mission. The prosperity gospel could only even be possibly true in a country like America, where we are all wealthy. Yet, it's message is being exported from this country wreaking havoc and duping people into believing this false gospel. Think about if for a second, if God wants me to be healthy, wealthy, and happy then why would I feel any need to share the Gospel with my neighbor? If the entire redemptive plan centers on me and my materialistic blessing, why bother making much of the glory of God? Why would I risk my life and my family's life by going into a country to share Christ though I may be killed for being there?

The prosperity gospel is a man-made concoction that makes God subservient to men. It is a bastardized synthesis of individualism and materialism cloaked with Christian language spewed by hucksters and swindlers who imagine "godliness is a means of gain." The whole teaching preys upon the souls of poor people and distracts from our greatest need, which isn't health, wealth, and prosperity but forgiveness, redemption, and deliverance from sin. It gives people false hope in a false god who makes false promises in a false gospel. Sadly, many teachers have fallen into the snare of greed and plunged into ruin and destruction, and they are leading the multitudes with them.

## Godliness with Contentment (6-10)

So how should we respond to these false teachers? Well, Paul gives us the antidote. Godliness is not a means of financial gain, but "godliness with contentment is great gain." The antidote to the false teachers is contentment. Yet, how difficult it is for us to be content! Our entire economy is built on the fact, that we ought not to be content. Advertisers are constantly playing the siren song, luring us into a never ending quest for more. We accumulate and accumulate new gadgets, new cars, new clothing, new furniture, new foods, and on and on. How difficult it is for an American Christian to be content! The puritan Jeremiah Burroughs said, "The world is infinitely deceived in think that contentment lies in having more than we already have." We always think we need something else, something more to make us happy. Our present possessions are never enough. Our current situation is not adequate. We require more!

Yet, Paul says that we must learn to be content with godliness. Wherever God puts us, whatever our situation, we must learn the secret of contentment. No matter our work situation, no matter our family life, no

matter our health, no matter our finances, we must learn to be content with the lot the Lord has given us. When it comes to the span of eternity, placing our trust in riches is foolish! After all, Paul tells us that “we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.” As the old cliché goes, you never see a Uhaul behind a hearse.

One pastor tells this imaginative story that illustrates this principle well:

Suppose someone passes empty-handed through the turnstiles at a big city art museum and begins to take the pictures off the wall and carry them importantly under his arm. You come up to him and say, “What are you doing?” He answers, “I’m becoming an art collector.” “But they’re not really yours,” you say, “and besides they won’t let you out with those. You’ll have to go out just like you came in.” But he answers again, “Sure they’re mine. I’ve got them under my arm. People look at me as an important dealer in the halls. And I don’t bother myself with thoughts about leaving. Don’t be a kill joy.” We would call this man a fool—out of touch with reality. So is the person who spends himself to get rich in this life. We will go out just the way we came in.<sup>2</sup>

Paul tells us that we must be content with what we have: “If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.”

So how then do we develop a spirit of contentment. Well, we must live with eternity in our gaze. The Christian knows that there is more to life than trinket collecting. Our lives are like the dew on the ground, here for a moment then burned up by the morning sun. We have but a few decades, then we are gone. We don’t live our lives for money, because money is a treasure that rots and decays. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-20, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” The wise man and woman recognizes just how temporary material possessions are. The Christian sets his attention on eternity.

Do you remember Jesus’ parable of the rich fool? Turn to Luke 12:13 and let’s read it.

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, Money: The Currency of Christian Hedonism, chap. in Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, 1996).

*"Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." 'But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.'" (Luke 12:13-21, ESV)*

How many of us have spent our entire lives building bigger barns! Do we not realize that when Jesus gives such strong warnings to the rich, he speaks to us? We have so easily bought into the lie of the world building our stock portfolios, being rich towards ourselves, but not to God. When we are blessed with more provision than we need, we so quickly spend it on ourselves. We we receive a raise at work we seek to increase our standard of living instead of our standard of giving. May we all have the courage to carefully probe of our bank statements to identify the wasteful squandering of our resources. Do not invest in treasures where moth and rust destroy, be rich towards God. Give him as much as you can to his mission and the furthering of his name.

May we learn the secret to contentment. We find contentment not by accumulating more but by finding our strength in Jesus. Paul says in v. 8, "But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." Paul fleshes out this idea much more in Philippians 4. Turn there with me, starting in verse 10:

*"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:10-13, ESV)*

So what's the secret to contentment? It's not determined by your salary. Instead, contentment is found in a submissive reliance on the strength of Christ. How can we face hunger and need with joy? We do so through the strength of Christ! "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" is not prayer for earthly prosperity, but for contentment in poverty!

The puritan Jeremiah Burroughs said this: "A gracious heart has contentment by getting strength from Jesus Christ; he is able to bear his burden by getting strength from someone else."

If you struggle with contentment, take your eyes off of your stuff, and put them on Christ. See the riches he's provided for you by his death! See the reward he will give to his saints for their faithfulness. See the man who endured the sufferings of the cross for the joy that was set before him! What's eighty years of suffering in this life if it means an eternity in heaven? Why bother with a mansion on earth when Christ is preparing for us a heavenly home? You see, this is where the prosperity gospel makes a huge mistake. They read the promises in the Scripture and think that God means to fulfill them in this earthly life. God promises us riches, health, and prosperity, but their fulfillment will be in the eternal age, not in this present hour of affliction.

I've ministered to enough people in the hour of affliction, and the prosperity gospel just doesn't match reality! I've never looked at someone on their death bed and prayed, "If this man really believed in you, father, he'd get out of this bed right now and be healed!" When someone calls me on the phone and tells me they've been diagnosed with cancer, I don't respond, "Well, if you'd only given more to the church, God would have spared you this disease!" No! What does a responsible pastor do in those moments? He points their gaze heavenward. You try to help them develop a theology of suffering, that sufferings of this present age are light and momentary compared to the glory that is to be revealed! (2 Cor 4:17). The glory of the Gospel is not that Jesus fills our bank accounts, but that in the midst of our sin Jesus paid the price of our redemption—that Jesus is a treasure worth holding on to, worth sacrificing all for, and worth enduring any suffering to attain. The prosperity Gospel diminishes Jesus to the giver of gifts—Jesus is gives us stuff! While the true Gospel elevates Jesus as the gift. "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and that I may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

Church, "godliness with contentment is great gain." May we so treasure Christ as a people, that nothing else matters as long as we have him! May

the world's riches lose their allure to us. May we reject the materialistic idolatry of our culture, and radically commit ourselves to Christ. With the same urgency and devotion our world tries to keep up with the Joneses, may we devote ourselves to pursuing Christ. May we daily repent of our sin in this neglect. That's why we use the language "Treasure Christ" in our mission statement as a church. Sure you could substitute that word "treasure" for "love," but the prosperity Gospel advocates "love God," they just love him for all the wrong reasons. Faith, love, trust in Christ can all be summed up in that wonderful little word "treasure." Your treasure is your highest love, your greatest affection, your most committed beloved. So may we treasure Christ together church, not as one treasure of many but as THE treasure of our lives.

Paul not only positively gives us the encouragement to seek godliness with contentment, he also must negatively warn us. If we forsake Christ as our treasure, if we refuse to be content in him—our love for riches will bring us only to ruin. A desire for more leads us only into "a snare," a spiritual trap that "plunges" us "into ruin and destruction." Paul's oft' quoted verse is found in v. 10: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils." Again, money itself isn't evil, it's the love of money is. It's not your paycheck that's the problem, it's your heart. Money is ultimately a neutral thing. It's the human heart that determines its use. A Christian who finds Christ as his ultimate treasure will see his money as an opportunity to invest in his true treasure. He will sow his money into the church, into ministry, and into missions so that Christ's kingdom will advance! A worldly person will only use his money to make more, accumulate more, and build bigger barns. Yet, the love of money is a constant danger for us! Paul says if you let money take root in your heart, you commit spiritual suicide. "It is through this craving (love of money) that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."

May the Spirit sound the alarm in your heart now, if you are wandering away from the faith due to an idolatrous love of money. If that's you, please do some serious soul searching. As the Spirit helps you examine your heart for idols, may he lead you to repentance. One of the ways to remove money's enslaving hold on your heart is through incredible generosity. Generosity is a characteristic of a spirit-filled life. When we take our earthly wealth and invest it in Christ's kingdom, an unusual thing begins to happen. Our hearts follow our money. Now nobody gets excited when the pastor starts talking about money and there is a reason for that—we all get convicted. However, I do not want to motivate you to give out of guilt. A motivation of guilt will increase the offering for a week, and then it will return to the usual level. Instead, I want to motivate you with Christ. I'm convinced that if the Spirit

will elevate your love and affection for Christ above your money, then your generosity will follow. But I will say this, your lack of generosity to Christ, to his mission, and to his church might reveal that your love of money is a craving that has caused you to wander you away from the faith. Resolve yourself this day that you will steward every penny you own to maximize your impact for Christ and His kingdom. Resolve to live your life with Christ as your treasure, not money.