

Biblical Prosperity

A Position Paper by Jonathan Wallis

Extreme Views

The Biblical promise of prosperity is a subject that attracts extreme views. At one end of the spectrum there is what is general referred to as the “prosperity gospel” in which prosperity (and in particular financial prosperity) is seen as a sign of God’s blessing and something to be actively sought after by every Christian. This has undoubtedly led to a range of dubious practices which have caused many Christians to brand this doctrine as heresy and a blight on the church.

There are undoubtedly extremes such as those referred to by David Wilkerson in his message “The Reproach of the Solemn Assembly” which we are right to condemn. Prosperity teachers such as Kenneth Copeland are mentioned by DW, but from my reading of some of KC’s material I have not found it particularly extreme and there is much within it that I find myself in agreement with (eg his short paper *How to prosper from the inside out*)

At the other end of the spectrum is the kind of teaching – perhaps typified by Ronald Sider’s book “Rich Christians in an age of hunger” (1978) – which looks at the Biblical teaching on wealth and the poor but then goes much further than the Bible in concluding that we Western Christians should give up much of our wealth and revert to a simple and basic lifestyle, denying ourselves anything that could be deemed to be luxurious in order to channel our wealth to the poor.

The difficulty with this type of teaching is determining where you draw the line between what is necessary and what is not. It is an approach that can all too easily end up in guilt manipulation.

A balanced Biblical approach?

I am not too impressed by either of these extremes, but I do believe there is a middle course which takes into account the full range of scriptures – a balanced Biblical basis which gets to the heart of the real spiritual issues and provides practical answers to the lifestyle issues surrounding this subject.

The purpose of this paper is to set out such an approach. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive exposition of every relevant scripture (that would require a book rather than a paper!) but I will hopefully deal with the key scriptures.

Prosperity in the Old Testament – The Blessing of Obedience v the Curse of Disobedience

There is little doubt that in the OT prosperity is linked with the blessing of God. Of course prosperity involves more than just financial prosperity – something we shall deal with below – but material wealth is clearly an integral part of OT prosperity.

In Deut 8 for example God indicates to his people that the prosperity he is bringing them into in the promised land is a result of his covenant:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land... a land where food is plentiful and nothing is lacking. It is a land where iron is as common as stone, and copper is abundant in the hills... Always remember that it is the LORD your God who gives you power to become rich, and he does it to fulfill the covenant he made with your ancestors. (Deut 8:7-9, 18 NLT)

But mixed in with this promise is a warning of the potential of riches to lead their hearts away from God:

Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the LORD your God and disobey his commands, regulations, and laws. For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, that is the time to be careful. Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God... (Deut 8:11-14 NLT)

And the stark contrast between the blessings that result from obedience to God’s law and the curse that results from disobedience is laid out in Deut 28.

"If you fully obey the LORD your God by keeping all the commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will exalt you above all the nations of the world. You will experience all these blessings if you obey the LORD your God:

You will be blessed in your towns and in the country... with many children and productive fields... with fertile herds and flocks... with baskets overflowing with fruit, and with kneading bowls filled with bread... The LORD will bless everything you do and will fill your storehouses with grain... The LORD will give you an abundance of good things in the land he swore to give your ancestors-- many children, numerous livestock, and abundant crops... You will lend to many nations, but you will never need to borrow from them...

But if you refuse to listen to the LORD your God and do not obey all the commands and laws I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you:

You will be cursed in your towns and in the country... with baskets empty of fruit, and with kneading bowls empty of bread... with few children and barren fields... with infertile herds and flocks... The LORD himself will send against you curses, confusion, and disillusionment in everything you do... You will plant much but harvest little, for locusts will eat your crops... etc etc

These passages lead to a simple deduction – obedience to God's law results in prosperity, disobedience leads to poverty and oppression. David gives much the same principle in Psalm 1:1-3:

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and **on his law he meditates day and night**. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. **Whatever he does prospers.***

A similar promise was given to Joshua in Josh 1:7-8:

*Be strong and very courageous. Obey all the laws Moses gave you. Do not turn away from them, and **you will be successful in everything you do**. Study this Book of the Law continually. Meditate on it day and night so you may be sure to obey all that is written in it. Only then will you succeed.*

There is an eternal principle here. If we live according to God's law (the result of studying it and meditating on it) we will prosper in all we do. The prosperity being referred to here is much broader than merely financial prosperity, but it certainly does not exclude it.

The problem, as pointed out in chapter 8 is that the very prosperity that results from obedience to God's law has a tendency to turn our hearts from God leading to a decline into poverty and oppression. We see this pattern clearly illustrated in the history of Israel which reached its high point of prosperity under the reign of Solomon. But the seeds of destruction were present as Solomon married foreign wives and a process of slippage began which, after much ebb and flow, ended in the exile to Babylon.

It is important to point out, however, that although prosperity resulted from obedience to God's law and could therefore be seen as God's blessing, the reverse could not be assumed. In other words, **just because someone was rich in material terms did not mean that they were blessed of God**. Their riches could have come from oppression or by other means condemned by God.

A person who gets ahead by oppressing the poor or by showering gifts on the rich will end in poverty. (Prov 22:16)

A greedy person tries to get rich quick, but it only leads to poverty. (Prov 28:22)

Like a bird that hatches eggs she has not laid, so are those who get their wealth by unjust means. Sooner or later they will lose their riches and, at the end of their lives, will become poor old fools. (Jer 17:11)

Prosperity in the Old Testament – the Jubilee Principle & God's attitude to the poor

In Deut 15 we also see the Jubilee principle – in which every seven years, within Israel, all debts were cancelled and slaves freed. This principle was set out as the Israelites moved into the promised land, but it is not clear for how long they implemented this, if at all. It certainly does not seem to have been carried out on a permanent basis – one of the first things to go maybe in the process of slippage mentioned above.

When Israel entered the promised land they were essentially all equal. They had all come from slavery in Egypt, lived in the wilderness for 40 years and none of them had any land or great wealth of their own.

There should be no poor among you, for the LORD your God will greatly bless you in the land he is giving you as a special possession...

Once they were settled in the land, each was assigned a portion of land on an equitable basis, but it followed that some – those who were diligent and industrious – would prosper more than others.

Lazy people are soon poor; hard workers get rich. (Proverbs 10:4)

And so just a few verses after saying "there should be no poor among you" the text says "there will always be some among you who are poor". But it does seem clear from the whole tenor of these passages that there is no intrinsic reason why anyone should be poor. God has provided sufficient resources for all.

The jubilee principles were designed to ensure a spirit of generosity among those who gained wealth and possessions, by extending mercy and genuine hope of betterment to those who for whatever reason found themselves poor. The jubilee laws, if implemented, would have ensured that the gap between rich and poor was not allowed to become too wide. The important principle that comes through in Deut 15 is a spirit of generosity from those who have toward those who have not:

But if there are any poor people in your towns when you arrive in the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Instead, be generous and lend them whatever they need. Do not be mean-spirited and refuse someone a loan because the year of release is close at hand. If you refuse to make the loan and the needy person cries out to the LORD, you will be considered guilty of sin. Give freely without begrudging it, and the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some among you who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share your resources freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.

This passage illustrates of the kind of sharing community that God would like to see among his people – and in today's context within the church. It also shows us God's heart for the poor – he is vehemently opposed to the oppression of the poor and longs to provide them with a way out of poverty. In Proverbs we see that Solomon, despite his great wealth, retained God's heart for the poor:

It is sin to despise one's neighbours; blessed are those who help the poor. (14:21)

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who help the poor honor him. (14:31)

It is better to be poor and godly than rich and dishonest. (16:8)

It is better to live humbly with the poor than to share plunder with the proud. (16:19)

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who rejoice at the misfortune of others will be punished. (17:5)

If you help the poor, you are lending to the LORD--and he will repay you! (19:17)

Blessed are those who are generous, because they feed the poor. (22:9)

Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing. But a curse will come upon those who close their eyes to poverty. (28:27)

A king who is fair to the poor will have a long reign. (29:14)

God is passionate about the alleviation of poverty, because **poverty is essentially a result of mankind's sin and failure to live according to God's law**. Of course poverty can be a direct result of our own sin, stupidity or laziness, but the majority of the poor are poor through no fault of their own, but as a result of oppression, war and social injustice.

Proud and wicked people viciously oppress the poor (Ps 10:2)

This has not changed since Biblical times – how much of the poverty in today's world is a direct result of greed, oppression, and war? It's a pretty high percentage. **I can only conclude that if mankind lived according to God's laws there would be sufficient resources in this world for everybody and poverty would be completely eliminated.** Of course this will not fully happen until Christ returns, but I do believe that there is power in the gospel of Christ to make a difference to society and to alleviate poverty in the here and now. We have seen testimony through the "Transformations" video of how Christians have made a real difference to their economy and been blessed by God materially as well as spiritually.

Prosperity in the New Testament – the teaching of Jesus

Jesus started his teaching ministry with the statement "**Blessed are the poor in spirit** for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is (in my view) one of the most important verses in the whole of the Bible. It is not talking primarily about material poverty:

"There are those who tell us that it should read 'Blessed in spirit are the poor.'... So they would regard it as a commendation of poverty. But surely that must be entirely wrong. The Bible nowhere teaches that poverty as such is a good thing. The poor man is no nearer to the kingdom of heaven than the rich man, speaking of them as natural men. There is no merit or advantage in being poor. Poverty does not guarantee spirituality. Clearly, therefore, the passage cannot mean that."

Dr Martin Lloyd Jones – Studies In the Sermon on the Mount

This verse is talking about a poverty of spirit, a recognition of our spiritual need and an acknowledgement of our total dependence on God. Some modern translations render it "How blessed are those who know their need of God."

This verse sets the basis for much of the Christian life. It is all about heart attitude. A rich man can be poor in spirit, but the deceitfulness of wealth and the tendency for him to rely on his riches rather than on God, make it very hard for him to come to this place of dependence.

The Rich Young Ruler

A key passage in understanding Jesus' attitude towards wealth is the story of the rich young ruler – recorded in Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-30 and Luke 18:18-30. When asked "what should I do to get eternal life?" Jesus realised that this young man had one key problem and that was his attitude to his possessions. He possessed great wealth, but his possessions possessed him. He was ruled by the love of money and this power in his life had to be broken.

When Jesus challenged this at the root – telling him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus – he was unable to respond and went away sad. Jesus then said to his disciples

"How hard it is for rich people to get into the Kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23)

The disciples were shocked by this. They had taken on board the generally held Jewish view that financial prosperity was a sign of God's blessing. They rightly understood that prosperity does result from living according to God's law, but they failed to see that riches can easily lead people away from God.

Jesus went on to say that although it was hard for a rich person to get their riches into perspective, it was not impossible for “with God all things are possible”. He then goes on to say:

*"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much **in this present age** (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)*

Once the power of money and possession is broken in our lives, God is able to entrust with these things in abundance **in the here and now**.

The Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus quotes the teaching of the Old Testament and then says “**but I say to you...**” to take it to an altogether deeper and more profound level. He makes it clear that the law has not passed away and its principles stand eternal, but he goes beyond the letter of the law to expose the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

In Matthew 6 he focuses on giving and on our attitude to money and possessions. The chapter begins with a section about giving which essentially says that our giving should not be something we do to be seen by men, but should be done secretly before God. The key is not the fact that you give money (the outward act), but the attitude and the motivation with which you do it (the heart attitude).

In verses 19-34 Jesus focuses on our attitude to money and possessions.

*Don't store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal... **Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be...** No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. **You cannot serve both God and money.** So I tell you, **don't worry** about everyday life--whether you have enough food, drink, and clothes. Doesn't life consist of more than food and clothing? ... Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.*

This is the key passage that summarises the teaching of Jesus on this issue. It asks some deep questions of us.

Who are you serving? Where is your treasure?

What really motivates you? What, deep in your heart, are you really going for? If your real motivation is to get rich and store up wealth on this earth, then you cannot serve God. If, like the rich young ruler, your treasure is in your earthly possessions you will never be effective in God's kingdom. You may, like Judas Iscariot, purport to be a disciple of Christ, but your flawed motivation will sooner or later come to the fore and your life will end in tragedy. Jesus illustrated this very clearly in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21, which he prefaces with the following warning:

*"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; **a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.**"*

It is an illusion that things can provide you with any lasting security or happiness. Sadly much of our Western world is built on this illusion.

Don't worry

If Jesus' call not to lay up treasure on earth hits home at the rich, his command not to worry about whether you will have enough to eat hits equally hard to the poor. The rich are generally concerned about preserving and increasing their wealth, the poor are concerned about where the next meal will come from. Jesus is

saying that neither of these attitudes is right. Seek first God's kingdom, he says, and you can trust God to look after you. It's a matter of faith.

This brings us back to the issue of dependence. Whether we are rich or poor materially, God wants us to be a people who are totally devoted to him and his kingdom and who live day by day in total dependence on him. His promise is that he will supply all your needs.

*And this same God who takes care of me **will supply all your needs** from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:19)*

Whose money is it anyway?

Underlying Jesus' call to serve and trust God, not money, is the fact that it all belongs to God anyway. The poor in spirit are not only those who have learned to depend on God, but those who have learned to **possess nothing**. A W Tozer expresses this very clearly in his classic *The Pursuit of God*:

There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets "things" with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns "my" and "mine" look innocent enough in print, but their constant universal use is significant. They express the real nature of the old Adamic man better than a thousand volumes of theology could do. They are verbal symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. Things have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. God's gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution... The "poor in spirit" ... are no longer slaves to the tyranny of things. They have broken the yoke of the oppressor; and this they have done not by fighting but by surrendering. Though free from all sense of possessing, they yet possess all things. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The Biblical picture that is most helpful here is one of a steward or manager. The issue is not how much do I have in the bank, but who owns it. We are called to stewardship – Gk. *oikonomos* (from which we get 'economics').

The parable of the dishonest steward in Luke 16 illustrates three attitudes to money. When he realised he was going to lose his job he said to himself:

'Now what? I'm through here, and I don't have the strength to go out and dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg.'

Those who are serving money tend to be either *diggers* or *beggars*.

The beggar lives his life in a place of **survival**. He takes on an attitude of need - is always looking for someone else to meet his need. The beggar considers it his right that others - society, the state - will meet his need. The welfare state empowers the beggar spirit (but that's another issue!). The beggar is skilled at creating sympathy and guilt in others. It doesn't matter how much time you spend helping a beggar, he's not interested in anything other than you helping him. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not pander to the beggar spirit, but it brings the prospect of release - "take up your bed and walk".

The digger lives his life chasing the prospect of worldly **success**. All his time is devoted to working, digging, doing the next deal. He's hooked into the world's system - and the digger who falls foul of the system can easily turn into a beggar. The success he is chasing is an illusion - the more successful he becomes, the more isolated he becomes from those around him - successful people are never happy if all they have won for themselves is success.

Those who are serving God, not money are called to be stewards.

The steward lives a life of **significance**. He recognises that all he has does not belong to him, but is entrusted to him by God - not just his money and possessions, but his time, his talents, his friends, his family, and his children. The steward recognises that **'the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof'**.

The Biblical principle of **tithing** (which I have not dealt with specifically in this paper) does not signify that 10% belongs to God and 90% to me. It is a sign that I have recognised that **it's all God's**. The first 10% is what is holy is to the Lord - I have to exercise my stewardship over the other 90%.

Life is an exercise in stewardship. The steward approaches life with the attitude that each day will present him with the opportunity to use his time, his talents and his treasures for the glory and honour of his master. The steward will reflect the **generosity** of his master. Generous with his possessions - "if he asks you for your jacket give him also your shirt". Generous with his time - "if he asks you to go one mile, go two".

The steward is **employed** by his master. There is no such thing as an unemployed steward. If I am a doctor, that is my occupation, not my employment. I'm employed by God to be a steward as a doctor. I don't live to be a doctor, I live for God and his kingdom. I am a doctor because that's what he's called me to do and I do it as a steward of God's grace. The basic requirement of the steward (which is where the dishonest steward went wrong) is **faithfulness**.

Prosperity in the New Testament – the teaching of Paul

Paul's teaching is entirely consistent with and reinforces the teaching of Jesus. He too warns of the folly of seeking after riches.

*So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content. But people **who long to be rich** fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For **the love of money** is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows. (1 Tim 6:8-10)*

Those who are rich in this world's goods should be rich in generosity:

*Tell those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone. But their trust should be in the living God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be **rich in good works** and should **give generously** to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may take hold of real life. (1 Tim 6:17-19)*

In 2 Cor 9 Paul focuses on giving and uses the illustration of **sowing and reaping**:

*Remember this--a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. **For God loves the person who gives cheerfully**. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say,*

*"Godly people give **generously** to the poor. Their good deeds will never be forgotten."*

*For God is the one who gives seed to the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will give you many opportunities to do good, and he will produce **a great harvest of generosity** in you. Yes, **you will be enriched so that you can give even more generously**. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will break out in thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor 9:6-11)*

Generosity

The key principle undergirding Paul's teaching here is generosity. **We are called, not to poverty, not to riches, but to generosity**. The truly prosperous man is measured, not by how much he has, but by how much he gives away. God blesses the generous person with even more to give away.

It is possible to give freely and become more wealthy, but those who are stingy will lose everything. The generous prosper and are satisfied; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. (Prov 11:24-25)

Jesus said much the same in Luke 6:38:

If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in giving--large or small--it will be used to measure what is given back to you."

I saw a TV programme a year or two ago about a young Christian businessman whose motivation in business was to generate wealth that could be used to help the poor and to build God's kingdom. He and his family were deeply involved in various Christian projects in Africa. They lived in Essex in a nice, but normal, family home. They lived comfortably but were not interested in acquiring all the trappings of wealth. Their real motivation was building the kingdom. When asked if the success of his business had made him a millionaire, he replied "I will consider myself a millionaire when I've given away a million pounds to help others."

That is the kind of attitude that delights the heart of God. If we give generously from that which God has entrusted us with (however much or however little that may be), we will be enriched, not so that we can live in luxury, but so that we can have everything we need (2 Cor 9:8) and a surplus that enables us to give even more generously to the needs of others.

Sowing and Reaping

The principle of sowing and reaping is widely used and sometimes misused by those promoting the "prosperity gospel". Some preachers encourage people to sow (ie give to the preacher's ministry) in order to reap (gain a rich financial reward). This results in people giving out of a false motivation (ie a desire to be rich) and invariably leads to disappointment and frustration. As we have seen, Jesus' teaching goes much deeper than the "law" to expose the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Giving and generosity are principles inextricably tied in to **the grace of God**. Paul talks in 2 Cor 8 about the **grace** given to the Macedonians who gave generously out of their deep poverty. There needs to be a flow of God's grace in this whole area of financial giving and this releases blessing to both the giver and the receiver - a flow of generosity that reflects the heart of God. Our giving therefore needs to be prompted by God and directed to God.

Conclusion

I believe God wants his children to be prosperous. He loves to give good gifts to his children, and he wants our lives to reflect his generosity as we give freely from what he has given us, laying up treasure in heaven and not on earth.

Someone has defined true prosperity as **having access to an unlimited supply**. Jesus was not wealthy in worldly terms – he had nowhere of his own to lay his head – but he demonstrated true spiritual prosperity. He knew how to draw on his father's unlimited resources to meet whatever needs crossed his path – whether it was a need for healing or for freedom from demon powers – or whether it was a need to find some more wine for the wedding or a supply of food for 5,000 people. We are called to live the same way and have been given access to the same source of supply.

We are called to be stewards of God's resources and this of necessity means handling money and wealth. It takes money to build the kingdom. God's supply is bountiful, but it is only as we are set free from the love of money, filled with a spirit of generosity and liberated to be cheerful and sacrificial givers, that we are able to handle his bountiful supply without being corrupted by it.