

Does God Bless Us With Prosperity?

Malachi 3:6-12

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⁶ For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷ Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'

⁸ Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ¹¹ I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

It seemed like a good idea. John decided to get his wife an extravagant present for their anniversary. He said, "I have...been patient my whole life for this moment – I'm 45. [Am I] supposed to wait until I'm 70 to live my best life? ...My best life is seeing my wife happy." And so, on their eighth wedding anniversary, John surprised his wife with a \$200,000 Lamborghini, posting the presentation on Instagram.

This was an incredible present...but there was a problem. This was no ordinary gift and this was no ordinary husband. John was not a big time executive or a star athlete. John is a minister – the minister at Relentless Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

Pastor John Gray was quick to say that "not a nickel, not a penny from [his] church...went toward the gift" he gave his wife. But that didn't stop the critics from questioning whether this was too much. Shouldn't he have shown more restraint in

the exhibition of his wealth? Even if this was purchased with money earned outside the church, didn't the optics of this gift take the focus of his ministerial work and put it on his material wealth?ⁱ

However, this wasn't the only thing that John Gray did to draw the attention of the masses. Last month, a reader tipped off *The Greenville News* to the existence of a church-owned residence. After a little investigation, it turns out that the church had purchased a 7,200 sq. ft. house in a gated community for \$1.8 million. The church bought this house, which cost more than 10 times the \$165,000 median home value in Greenville County, because they believed it was needed to entice a pastor of Gray's "caliber" to relocate to Greenville. The church's chief financial officer claimed it was just a parsonage. We aren't doing anything different from almost every other church in the nation.ⁱⁱ

In the ministerial circles I run in, stories about perks like this are usually greeted with two declarations. The first, admittedly, contains a slight bit of jealousy. "I must be doing this all wrong" we lament to our fellow pastors. None of our spouses are getting gifts like that. None of us are living in houses like that. But then we quickly pivot to make a second declaration: "I don't want to do ministry like that."

The fact is, stories like this are nothing new. A generation ago, it was Oral Roberts who raised eyebrows by his largess. He was followed by his personal pilot and chauffeur, Kenneth Copeland, who also became one of the notorious preachers of this brand of thinking. They were joined by the likes of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Benny Hinn, Pat Roberts, and Robert Tilton. All of these preachers were known for teaching a gospel of prosperity. This "health and wealth gospel" or the "gospel of success" suggested that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for people. All it takes to unlock these blessings are faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes to increase one's material wealth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Christian Ethics Professor David W. Jones describes five tenets or characteristics of prosperity gospel teaching:

1. *The covenant God made with Abraham is a means to material entitlement.* As descendants of Abraham, we are rightful heirs to all the blessings God bestowed on Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3).
2. *Jesus' atonement extends to the "sin" of material poverty.* Because of Jesus' death on the cross for our sins, including the "sins" of poverty and illness, these are curses which can be broken by faith and righteous actions.
3. *Christians give in order to gain material compensation from God.* More on that in just a moment...
4. *Faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity.* Prosperity gospel teaching sees the Bible as a faith contract between God and believers. Because God is faithful and just, when believers fulfill their end of the contract, they will receive God's promises.
5. *Prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity.* This tenet suggests that one can speak into reality what they believe in. What you say determines everything that happens to you. And this includes the favors you demand of God.^{iv}

Holding these tenets to be true, it's no wonder than the televangelists of the 1980s were famous for saying "God wants you to have this..." or "God wants you to have that..." They believed that God indeed would bless their congregants and listeners if they just did the right things...which included a healthy donation to their ministries. And even with the high-profile scandals of those televangelists, the prosperity gospel didn't go away. In fact, in 2006, three of the four largest congregations in the United

States were teaching prosperity theology. And while better refined, that teaching continues today through ministers like Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and T.D. Jakes.^v

Wouldn't we all like to secure health and wealth? Wouldn't it be great if a few actions on our part could make all the difference in our physical fitness and bank accounts? A little obedience here and a donation there and our next doctor appointment will be no big deal; our needs will just go away. But is that really how it works? Does God bless us with prosperity?

The fact of the matter is, our scripture reading from Malachi 3 is one of the principal texts that suggests this is possible. At least it's one of the primary texts prosperity gospel teachers use to claim it's possible.

The little book of Malachi is the last book in the Christian Old Testament. Scholars think it was given its position at the end because it serves well as a set-up for the gospels of the New Testament. After all, this unknown prophet proclaims in the verses right before our scripture lesson this morning that "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come into his temple." There's little doubt that the shapers of the biblical canon had Jesus in mind when they placed this book right before the Gospel of Matthew – where Jesus did show up and come to the temple several times.^{vi}

Written around 450 BC, Malachi had some matters to address with God's people. These included the details of animal sacrifice, bored priests, unfaithful husbands, and a complaining laity. Yet, one of the chief issues Malachi articulates is God's concern about the lack of piety in the temple – the lack of serious worship. Good and devout Israelites were few and far between. For years, they had presumed God would be faithful and patient. That's what we find in our scripture reading in verses 6-12 of Chapter 3.

Our text opens with the declaration that the Lord does not change. This is the truth we sang a few minutes ago: "[We] wither and perish, but naught changeth

thee.”^{vii} And it’s the truth we will sing in just a moment: “Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not.”^{viii} This was a critical reminder. For the people of Malachi’s day, the God who does not change was the God who loved Jacob and his descendants. God’s compassion for them was the reason they continued to exist in spite of their shortcomings.

One of these shortcomings was the fact that the people had not kept the Lord’s statutes. They had not followed the law. Their parents had not followed the law. Their grandparents had not followed the law. This had put them out of the Lord’s favor. But what Malachi records in verse 7 is a way to fix that. It's simple... if they return to the Lord, the Lord will return to them.

The word for "return" in Hebrew is the same word used for repentance in the New Testament. It meant to turn around; to go in the opposite direction; to do a 180 degree turn. But in their religious culture, repentance and righteousness were not as simple as asking for forgiveness. So, naturally, the people asked, how can we do this? In other words, God’s chosen people were saying, is there something we can say or something we can do that will change things? That will make things better? That will make things right? The answer came in a very specific charge and a very specific action: tithe. Pay your full tithe.

In the book of Nehemiah, written around the same time, the failure to pay the tithe was also raised as a concern. But Malachi makes the issue personal. Your failure to pay the tithe was robbing God. And when one robbed God, there were consequences. Certainly, there were individual consequences. That was what caused the people to fall out of favor.

Equally as concerning was that the failure to pay the tithe had consequences for the community. The tithe - the 10% of agriculture and livestock - was given to the priests to support their efforts. That's how they made a living. When the tithe wasn't being

paid, the priests were having to go work in the fields to sustain themselves. And when the priests weren't attending to the duties they were called to fulfill, right worship wasn't taking place. This meant everyone was missing out when the Temple was being neglected.^{ix}

So after telling them to bring the full tithe, the Lord ups the ante. He basically says...try me! Test me. See what I can do. If you do what I ask, then I will open the windows of heaven and pour down overflowing blessings. All those things that have been bothering you previously - drought, locusts, disease - none of that will be an issue anymore. Do your part and I'll make it worth your while. And no one will be able to suggest that I delight in the wicked (2:17), for it will be clear that you, the righteous, will be in the land of delight.

You can see why these verses are one of the primary texts used in support of the prosperity gospel. It's not too hard to read this text and make it a legal formula... we do this, God you do that. After all, that seems to be the equation found in this text. If $a = \text{God's promise}$ and $b = \text{our righteous action}$, then $a + b = c = \text{God's blessings}$. If you do what God says, then put God to the test, and see if overflowing blessings don't result. It's simple math...

Even churches that aren't proponents of the prosperity gospel have used this text in a formulaic way. NewSpring Church, another South Carolina congregation, created a tithing challenge with a 90 day money-back guarantee. If church participants committed to give 10% of their income or more, and if "God doesn't hold true to his promises of blessings" after three months, they can request their money back - no questions asked. Other churches around the nation have done similar challenges.

The point of the money-back guarantee was to foster a healthy giving habit, and to reassure first-time tithers. It was to help them get past the fear factor of "will there be enough at the end of the month." And while these churches weren't offering this

challenge in support of prosperity, this incentive could create a problem. The nothing-to-lose mentality is not exactly consistent with a biblical perspective of giving joyfully out of gratitude. And is trust in God sincere and faithful if participants know they can count on the church's refund?^x

I would love to tell you that if you make a tithe to First Christian Church, your life would be fabulous. I would love to be like Oral Roberts and talk about sevenfold giving – you give your tithe (10% of your income) and you will get 70% back. But it doesn't work that way, does it?

So when faced with gimmicks like this and difficult scriptures like this morning's from Malachi, how do we know what to believe and what to do? Craig Greenfield, the founder and director of Alongsiders International, an organization that works with children and orphans in poor countries, says in his experience, there are five things to consider – five signs to watch for.

First, if there is an absence or failure to realize that people suffer, that's a big problem. As the Apostle Paul pointed out, there is a heavy cost in following Jesus. And as we noted a few weeks ago, bad things happen to good people. Good and godly people get sick, hurt, and die – even though they have faith. The only guarantee we have is that God loves us and will never leave us. Or as Malachi put it...God never changes.

The second sign that should raise our suspicions is when someone suggests poverty is just a lack of faith. The poor just need to believe harder and everything will change. But as you and I know, overcoming poverty is a little more complex than that. As Rick Warren notes, "This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy...[is] baloney. It's creating a false idol. You don't measure your self-worth by your net worth. I can show you millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty. Why isn't everyone in the church a millionaire?"^{xi}

The third sign of problematic thinking is when personal prosperity matters more than shalom. The word translated throughout the Old Testament as “prosperity” is actually the Hebrew word “Shalom.” Shalom is much deeper than wealth or health. It is not just peace and prosperity. As we recognized last week in talking about creation, shalom is a big, beautiful vision that embodies all that God desires for God’s creation. It is the restoration of all things...not just the restoration of your health or your financial losses.

Greenfield’s fourth sign that something is amiss is when the gospel isn’t viewed as good news for the poor. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he proclaimed in the Nazareth synagogue that the “Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (Luke 4:18). Oh sure, there are the spiritually poor and Jesus was talking about them, too. But it’s hard to read the gospels and not come away thinking that Jesus was concerned with the materially poor, as well. After all, he was one of them. He was born into a poor family, and lived a meager human life, as did most of his disciples. In fact, the only disciple concerned with wealth was Judas. Most of the time when Jesus spoke about material wealth, it was part of a cautionary tale.

The final sign that can help us guard our beliefs and practices is to recognize that the prophets of the Old Testament weren’t about predicting the future. They were railing against injustices in the present. Their descriptions of what would happen someday were a warning about what needed to be done that day. Such was the case for Malachi...and Isaiah...and Ezekiel...and Habakkuk...and all the other Old Testament prophets.^{xiii}

To these five concerns, John Piper would add a sixth sign – an absence of seriously dealing with tensions in scripture.^{xiii} After all, just as our scripture this morning suggests that God wants to open the windows of blessing for God’s people, in another

scripture, Jesus points out that “it is easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25). Likewise, in the New Testament, when the false prophets of the greed sects began to infiltrate the early church, Paul warned that these men of “corrupt mind” supposed godliness was a means of gain. But as he told Timothy, the love of money leads to all kinds of evil. That’s why a serious study of the Biblical text is important. Because, if we did that with our scripture from Malachi this morning, we would have to consider that every other time the phrase about “opening the windows of heaven” is used in the Old Testament, it is about rain. It’s used in Genesis to refer to Noah’s flood (Genesis 7:11). It’s used in 2 Kings to describe a needed rain (2 Kings 7:2). And it is not out of the realm of possibility that this is what was being promised to the people reading Malachi’s prophecy.^{xiv} After all, the people of that day had been dealing with a drought.

The point of Malachi 3, in the prosperity that is promised, is that divine justice will be visible and the good will be recognized as good. In other words, God can do amazing things. And that’s true for us as well.

Does God bless us with prosperity? I believe the answer to that is yes. But is that prosperity a guarantee? Can we make God make us prosperous? I believe the answer to that is no. God is not a cosmic slot machine in which we can do the right things and hit the jackpot. There is no magic formula for prosperity.

However, I do believe there is a formula to remember. If $c = \text{God's blessings}$, then $c = g+r+a+c+e$. It’s the grace of God that makes us prosperous. After all, if it was all about us, about what we can do for ourselves, about what we can do to God...the unchanging God would be changing all the time...based on what I think, then what you think, then what she thinks...

Paul told Timothy not to set his hope upon the uncertainty of riches. Instead, set it on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. It's about optics. To focus not on material wealth but on the gift of God's grace we've been given. That's just the kind of prosperity God is all about. And our response is to be rich in good works, be generous, and be ready to share. That's how one takes hold of the life that really is life. That's how we really prosper.

ⁱ Singletary, Michelle. "Should a Megachurch Pastor Be Lambasted for Buying His Wife a \$200,000 Lamborghini?" *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/12/20/should-megachurch-pastor-be-lambasted-buying-his-wife-lamborghini/?utm_term=.dd2daedcc8ce

ⁱⁱ Gross, Daniel J. "Relentless Church bought John Gray a \$1.8M house in Simpsonville. Here's why." *Greenville News*, January 19, 2019. <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2019/01/19/john-gray-house-relentless-church-pastor/2360826002/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Prosperity Theology" (accessed February 18, 2019). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology.

^{iv} Carter, Joe. "What You Should Know About the Prosperity Gospel." *The Gospel Coalition*, May 3, 2017. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-prosperity-gospel/>

^v *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Prosperity Theology."

^{vi} Holbert, John. "The Lord is Coming: Look Busy! Reflections on Malachi 3:1-4." *Patheos*, December 9, 2012. <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/lord-is-coming-john-holbert-12-03-2012>

^{vii} "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." Words: Walter Chalmers Smith, 1867. *Chalice Hymnal*, 66.

^{viii} "Great is Thy Faithfulness." Words: Thomas O. Chisholm, 1923. *Chalice Hymnal*, 86.

^{ix} Schuller, Eileen M. O.S.U., "The Book of Malachi" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. VII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

^x Shellnutt, Kate. "When Tithing Comes With a Money-Back Guarantee." *Christianity Today*, June 28, 2016.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/faithful-tithing-now-comes-with-money-back-guarantee.html>

^{xi} Van Biema, David and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" *Time*, September 6, 2006.

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-2,00.html>

^{xii} Greenfield, Craig. "Five Sure Signs You've Been Hoodwinked By the 'Prosperity Gospel.'" July 8, 2017.

<http://www.craiggreenfield.com/blog/prosperitygospel>

^{xiii} Carter.

^{xiv} Whedon, Daniel. "Malachi" in *Whedon's Commentary on the Bible*. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/whe/malachi-3.html>