

**The Rightly Ordered Church:
Godliness with Contentment (1 Timothy 6:3-10)**
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 10, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ *“If the Lord Jesus Christ was physically on earth today, he wouldn’t be riding on a donkey. He’d be in an airplane flying all over the world.”*¹ Those are the words, recently spoken, by a prosperity gospel preacher from Louisiana. He was making an appeal to his followers to help him raise \$54 million dollars to purchase a private jet. The thing is he already has three jets. But he says he needs this new one because it has better fuel economy.

- ❖ Sadly this man is just one of many prosperity preachers who are peddling a false gospel that offers false promises. **Prosperity theology essentially boils down to the idea that God promises to reward faithfulness with material prosperity.** The more you trust him, the more you should expect to receive health, wealth, and happiness in life. And giving financially to the ministry of these prosperity teachers is portrayed as a form of investment.
 - ▶ They often exhort people to “plant a seed” – by which they mean a donation to their ministry – and then watch that seed money grow and come back to you in the form of abundance. If you want to be debt-free, if you want that promotion, if you want to fix that broken marriage, if you want to be healthy again – then you’ve got to have faith. And you show that faith by giving generously to this or that ministry.
 - **That kind of prosperity theology, trying to pass for Christianity, is just in the air we breathe, especially here in Houston.** Sadly I think it’s one of our biggest global exports. Prosperity theology, much of it originating from our city, has encircled the globe. There are millions of people around the world drinking up this kind of teaching through weekly television broadcasts.

- ❖ It’s such a popular message for a society consumed by consumerism. It plays well into the dreams and aspirations of modern people. **But as we see from this morning’s passage, prosperity theology is not a modern invention.** It’s apparently an ancient teaching found in the ancient church. It looks like godliness has been treated as a means of gain for centuries.
 - ▶ In 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to the church of Ephesus, specifically to Timothy whom he put in charge. If you’ve read the book of Acts, you’ll remember that it was in Ephesus, in chapter 19, that Paul faced great opposition from the silversmiths and artisans who made a good living selling silver shrines of Artemis. **Ephesus was the home of the great Temple of Artemis, and an entire economy was built around the cult worship of the goddess.** It was a sure means of gain.
 - So in this same city, in a similar religious atmosphere, there were individuals in the church of Ephesus with the same idea, thinking godliness is a means of gain, of material gain, of worldly prosperity.

- ❖ Church, I realize that none of you would take me seriously if I asked you to buy me a jet. None of you would be fooled into thinking that you’ll be blessed materially if you gave a donation. I know you’re not susceptible to shameless, overt prosperity teaching.

¹ See online: https://wapo.st/2JgMXsO?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.73f06c7c2115

- ❖ **So I think it's easy for a church like us to stand at a distance and condemn these teachers and their followers as flagrant examples of greed.** We can throw stones from a distance and pat ourselves on the back, comforted in knowing at least we're not like them.
 - ▶ But here is where we need to take a hard look at Scripture. Be honest, can you see a reflection of yourself in a passage like this? **The truth is, we can detest prosperity theology as a teaching while indulging the same love of money behind that kind of teaching.** There are softer, subtler forms of prosperity theology that we might be susceptible to, so as we look at this passage, let it take a hard look at you.
- ❖ When we entered into chapter 5, Paul shifted focus to different groups in the church. First to widows, then elders, then slaves, and now, in chapter 6, to false teachers in the church. Paul describes them as those who have deviated from sound doctrine, divided the church, and are being driven by the love of money.
 - ▶ Let's break this down into three sections. First, we'll consider the characteristics of the purveyors of prosperity theology. Second, we'll look at the damage that can be done by prosperity theology. Third, we'll see the antidote to prosperity theology.

The Purveyors of Prosperity Theology

- ❖ We start with a look at the characteristics of these purveyors of prosperity theology described for us in vv3-5, and hopefully it'll help us identify any contemporary teachers cut from the same cloth. Look with me starting at v3, *"³If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing."*
 - ▶ Paul is urging Timothy to keep a close watch on the teaching that takes place in the church and to look out for anyone teaching a different doctrine. That's the Greek word *heterodidaskaleō*. **Hetero-teaching. Different teaching.**
- ❖ **Different compared to what?** What does the text say? Different compared to *"the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness."* Now that could be referring to words actually spoken by Jesus, perhaps found in a collection of sayings that had been preserved. But more likely that phrase *"the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ"* refers to sound words or instruction about the Lord Jesus Christ. So we're not just talking about the red letters of the Bible. We're talking generally about the gospel.
- ❖ **We're talking about the good news of Christianity that pronounces a gracious offer of a divine pardon to sinners like us, who have spurned God's kindness, who have turned away and gone their own way.** The God to whom we owe everything – who owes us nothing but the demands of justice, which call for our destruction – this God sent and sacrificed his own Son that whosoever turns from his own way and returns to the Father in faith will be reconciled to him and to one another in one body called the Church.

- ▶ These are the sound words of the gospel about our Lord Jesus Christ. If you disagree with them, if you teach contrary to them, then you're dealing with different doctrine, with a different religion. **Christianity is not something we can define for ourselves.** Christianity is a religion centered and defined by a proclamation, by a pronouncement about our Lord Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished to secure our salvation.

- ❖ Now in the same verse, Paul also says these false teachers are teaching doctrine that is different compared to “*the teaching that accords with godliness.*” It seems, by this time, there was **a standard body of apostolic teaching** that was being passed down from the Lord Jesus, to his apostles, who were now entrusting it to faithful men who are able to teach it to others (cf. 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2). And this body of teaching accords with godliness. That means they correlate. **You should be able to draw a straight line between godly, sound doctrine and sound, godly lives.** So you look at the soundness of a teacher’s life to determine the soundness of his or her doctrine. Behavior is a good barometer of one's beliefs.
 - ▶ That’s why Paul, in vv4-5, describes the lives of these false teachers and their followers to reinforce the falseness of their doctrine. Look at v4, “*he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.*”

- ❖ We don’t know the identity of the false teacher(s) that Paul has in mind. It could be the Hymenaeus and Alexander that he called out in chapter 1:20. **Regardless, here he says the false teacher is conceited and a know-nothing.** I think that's an apt description. False teachers must be puffed up with conceit to think they can improve on the wisdom of Scripture, on the teaching of the apostles. So they retool and redefine doctrine. But what they dish out is unhealthy. It doesn't build up the church. It just feeds their “*unhealthy craving for controversy.*”

- ❖ **Did you notice Paul keeps using a metaphor of bodily health?** When he mentions *sound* words or *sound* doctrine (1:10), he literally means healthy words/doctrine. The word *hygiene* is derived from this Greek word (*hygiaino*). Think about it: If you keep taking in unhealthy foods, that leads to an unhealthy life. **A steady diet of airy, fluffy, cotton candy will taste great. It’ll go down easy.** It melts in your mouth. But cotton candy has no nutritional value. If that’s all you’re ingesting, it’ll lead to health complications and eventually kill you.

- ❖ In the same way, all the false teaching that’s floating around is like cotton candy. It lacks substance. It's not filled with the glory of God, the weightiness of God. **That’s the reason false teaching tastes sweet to us. Because God’s glory is not in it. It’s filled with human glory, self-glory.** It goes down easy for people when you tell them that God is not that mad and you’re not that bad. No one will choke on teaching that says you do your part and try your best and God will understand and accept you. People will flock together under teaching that promotes and promises material blessings of health, wealth, and happiness.

- ▶ But if you redefine God’s holiness; you redefine sin; you redefine judgment; you redefine the cross; you redefine conversion; you redefine obedience and godliness – now you have concocted a different set of doctrines, a different religion. One that tastes sweet and goes down easy but will kill you in the end.
- ❖ I know our church is growing a reputation for being very theological. For wanting our theology to be clear and accurate. **But I hope you understand that we're against false teaching not just because it's inaccurate, but because it's sickly.** We’re not just concerned with theological correctness. We’re concerned with the spiritual harm unsound doctrine causes to the body – to the body of Christ. False teaching – especially the kind that imagines godliness as a means of gain – is unhealthy. It’s sickly. It may even kill you.

The Damage of Prosperity Theology

- ❖ Let’s dig further into that in our second point. Here we’re going to consider the damage of prosperity theology. Just think about it with me. **If you teach that godliness is a means of gain – of some form of material, earthly gain – you will inevitably create division and distrust between the haves and the have-nots within the church.** Between those enjoying God’s blessing of prosperity and those still waiting. Why did you *not* receive the healing? Why are you still in debt? Why didn’t you get that job or into that school? Did you trust God enough? Did you believe in his promises enough?
- ❖ Do you see the burden it places on people? Now initially it’s attractive to tell people the onus is on you – to suggest that you control your own fate. **In all the various forms of prosperity theology, there’s a “*name it-claim it*” aspect, where power is assigned to positive thinking, to your attitude, to the very words you use.**
 - ▶ Listen to the most popular prosperity teacher today. *“Friend, there is a miracle in your mouth. If you want to change your world, start by changing your words. . . . If you’ll learn how to speak the right words and keep the right attitude, God will turn that situation around.”*² In another book, he writes this, *“Words have creative power. . . . When you say of the Lord you are healthy, you are whole, you are free, you are blessed, you are prosperous – when you say it, God has promised He will do it.”*³
- ❖ **Do you see how this places a heavy burden on the individual?** Because it hinges on you and your attitude or words, if you do experience prosperity, it puffs up your conceit. But if you face disappointment, if it’s apparently *not* your time and you’re *not* living your best life now, then your faith is utterly shaken. **By convincing you that your words determine your destiny, prosperity teachers do you great harm – whether the results of their teaching fill you with pride or fill you with despair.**

² Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 125.

³ Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 123.

- ❖ By feeding people's desire for riches, by tapping into their craving for money, these teachers are leading individuals off a cliff, into temptation, into the devil's snare, into ruin and destruction. I've read stories and I've met people who share testimonies of family or friends who have wandered away from the faith when the healing never came, when the finances didn't improve, when the marriage stayed broken. **If you've convinced someone to trust God – not for who he is and what he has done in the gospel – but for what he can do to improve or enhance your life, then don't be surprised if they stop trusting when prosperity runs dry or never comes at all.**
- ❖ Paul saw this coming. He knew the damage of prosperity theology and wrote about in vv9-10. Look with me at v9, *“⁹But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”*
- ❖ This is the kind of damage prosperity theology can inflict on individuals, on families, and on churches. And, friends, we're all susceptible. Don't fool yourself into thinking you're immune to this kind of teaching. **One of the problems in preaching this kind of message is that it might sound like I'm preaching to the choir.** Most of you have no interest in reading the books of prosperity teachers or to watch their television broadcasts or podcast their sermons. So you might think this has little to do with you.
 - ▶ But I would argue that – because we live in a highly consumeristic culture and the vast majority of us are well off – there are strands of soft prosperity theology that may have infiltrated our faith and practice, without us even realizing.
- ❖ Look back at v9. We need to be nuanced here and speak carefully. **So notice that Paul doesn't say it's wrong to be rich. It's not bad to have money. But he does say it's wrong to desire to be rich. It's wrong to love money.**
 - ▶ I think v10 is often misquoted. We hear people say, “Money is the root of all evil” but that's not what Paul wrote. Money itself is not the problem. It's the love of it. Maybe you're rich because of your family. Maybe you have lots of money because you study hard, work hard, and excel in a profession that commands a high salary.
 - **So being in the possession of money, even lots of it, is in itself morally neutral.** Morality only kicks in when you're thinking about what to do with that money or when we consider your attitude towards that money – whether you're trying to get rich or to stay rich.
- ❖ So I'll say it again: It's not a sin to be rich. I know many of you have done well in your career, and you shouldn't feel guilty for the simple fact of having a lot of money. But before you assuage any feelings of guilt, let me reinforce Paul's whole point: **According to vv9-10, it is a sin to desire your riches and to love your money, especially to the point that you're unwilling to give it away or invest it for the glory of God and the good of others.**

- ▶ I want you to take a good, hard look at vv9-10. I don't think any of us can stare at these verses and not see some reflection of ourselves. Maybe we don't desire money for the sake of pure pleasure. We don't care for private jets. **But we do desire money for the status it gives us or for safety and security it provides.** With those desires we can fall into temptation and sin. Even if it's just the **sin of discontentment** – that sense of not having enough, of not getting what we think we deserve.

- ❖ **But accumulating more money and more stuff will never cure a discontented heart.** You just have to look at the riches people in society and how unhappy they still are. King Solomon was one of the richest men of the ancient near east. He once wrote in the book of **Ecclesiastes 5:10**, *“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.”* It's vanity, he says, to chase after riches thinking it will satisfy. Take it from someone who had it all.

- ❖ I realize there are also those of you who are still in school or at the start of your career, so you're not rich and you don't have a lot of money. **But the question is: Do you desire it? Do you want to be rich?** Is it a goal of yours to get a high-paying job and make lots of money?
 - ▶ This is where I think many of us have fallen victim to a soft, subtle form of prosperity theology. **Why is it that we consider a desire to be rich, to make a lot of money, as fairly harmless?** We tell ourselves that's just how we were raised to think. You study hard. Get a good job. Make a lot of money. Eventually you exceed the wealth and success of your parents and pass on the same opportunity for your children.
 - **But having read Paul's warning, why would you desire to be rich?** Unless we don't believe him. Maybe we don't take him seriously, at least in this particular verse. Look at v9 again and let me read it slowly: *“⁹But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”*

- ❖ Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to turn poverty into a virtue. **We're not suggesting that godliness comes easier to the poor.** Poverty has its own set of snares. So Paul's not advocating for poverty instead of wealth but for contentment instead of covetousness.
 - ▶ Listen to **Proverbs 30:7-9**, a prayer to God, *“⁷Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”*

- ❖ This is what we should pray. Lord, please give what is needful for me. **I don't desire to be poor lest I be tempted to sinfully take matters into my own hands.** I might steal. I might cut corners. I might hurt others. I'll profane God's name.
 - ▶ **But neither do I desire to be rich lest I be tempted to sinfully take matters into my own hands and no longer trust God.** I'll feel self-sufficient. Like I have the means to handle my own problems. Eventually I'll say or just think to myself, “Who is the LORD? Who needs him? I can handle it.”

- ❖ That's why none of us should *want* to be rich. **If financial gain is what you so desire, it won't lead to godliness. It'll lead towards a godless self-sufficiency.** Now for any of us that actually are rich, it doesn't mean you have to give it all away (though it's not beyond Jesus to ask). **But what “not desiring to be rich” means for you is that you must not fall in love with the money you have or with the comfort and security it provides.**
 - ▶ Use money, steward money, give money – but never fall in love with it. **It's not wrong to have money in your hands, even lots of it. It's only wrong to grip it tight so that you refuse to use it for the glory of God and the good of others.**

The Antidote to Prosperity Theology

- ❖ Friends, beware the love of money. It is a root of all kinds of evil. Think of all the various societal evils in our day – fraud, embezzlement, theft, robbery, murder, drug trafficking, human trafficking, pornography and exploitation, etc. You can tie it all to the love of money. And don't forget the evils in our own hearts – selfishness, jealousy, envy, hatred, betrayal, etc. You can trace back all these evils to the love of money.
 - ▶ We need a cure. We need an antidote. This is our third and final point. **But to find the cure, we have to understand that the love of money is not merely a spending problem. It's a contentment problem.**
- ❖ That's how Paul explains it in vv6-8. If you recall in v5 he says these false teachers imagine that godliness is a means of gain. Paul turns that around and argues, “Yes, godliness is gain, great gain, provided you're talking about spiritual riches.” **If you're content with the material goods that God has given you, then any desire for gain is good and godly.**
 - ▶ Look at his argument in v6, “*6But godliness with contentment is great gain, 7for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.*”
- ❖ **In v7, Paul is saying contentment comes from first realizing that nothing that's yours is actually yours.** Whether it's the money in your bank account, the home you live in, the car you drive, the smartphone you use all the time, whatever material possession you cherish – just remember you're only borrowing it. **You get the privilege to use and it enjoy for a limited period of time. And then you die.** And you can't take it with you.
 - ▶ When the Lord allowed Satan to strip Job of all his riches and all that he cherished on earth, **Job 1:21** records him as saying, “*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*” **Contentment comes from realizing that everything belongs to the Lord. Whether he gives or takes away, the prerogative belongs to him as Owner.** We, as stewards, can only say, “Thank you” and “Blessed be your name”.
- ❖ Now if you look in v8, Paul says if God graciously give us food and clothing, with these we will be content. Now commentators have noted that clothing could be translated as “covering”, which could actually apply to a shelter or a house. **So basically Paul is saying: With food, clothing, and shelter, you can experience contentment.**

- ❖ Now John Stott helpfully points out that Paul is not trying to define, “*the maximum that is permitted to the believer, but the minimum that is compatible with contentment.*”⁴ So it’s not wrong to have and enjoy more than those three things. **But Paul is suggesting that what we typically assume is necessary to live a fulfilling, contented life is probably extraneous.** You clearly don’t need as much as you want.
- ❖ But I know it’s not that easy. Discontentment is so common that we might not even feel comfortable calling it a sin. **We think being discontent just means wishing you had more than you do.** But I want to point out something Paul does here that demonstrates the spiritual significance and seriousness of the sin of discontentment.
 - ▶ Look back at v4 and notice how when Paul describes this false teacher – who lacks contentment – the first thing he mentions is his hubris. His pride. His conceit. **What that tells me is that the discontented man doesn’t just lack happiness. He lacks humility.** He thinks he deserves better than what God has given him. He feels entitled to more. He's puffed up with conceit. That’s why he's discontent.
- ❖ Friends, the antidote to the love of money, to prosperity theology, is a contented heart. **But if you want a contented heart, you need a humbled heart.** You need to go back to the gospel, and remind yourself that you deserve nothing good from God. Nothing but his condemnation. You're entitled to nothing but his wrath. But out of sheer mercy and pure grace, he gave you his Son Jesus, who died for your sins, was raised for your justification, and richly blesses you in the Spirit with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.
 - ▶ So humble yourself at the foot of the cross. Realize the spiritual riches you have in Christ. And thank the Lord for every good gift you enjoy. Godliness with this kind of contentment is truly great gain.

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, 150.