

THINK magazine – December 2006

Faith and Finance - Jim Palmer

Poverty Theology

“Does God want me to be... poor?”

Is it wrong for one to have wealth? Is it more spiritual, more morally excellent – more righteous to voluntarily forego the material? Should one feel guilty if he or she finds a level of enjoyment in having “this world’s goods?” Would God have us “sell all that we have and distribute to the poor?” And what exactly is *asceticism* anyway?

Last month we looked into a false doctrine known by many as “the Prosperity Gospel.” We considered its tempting appeal, we noticed its many shortcomings and misapplication of Scripture, and we acknowledged that it is not gospel – in fact, it’s just the opposite – *it’s bad news!*

So then, should we swing to the opposite side? If, in fact, the Prosperity Gospel were wrong would it be better for us to subscribe to a “Poverty Theology” instead? Let’s consider the doctrine, its logical conclusions, and its consequences to see what we may determine.

Asceticism is the belief that wealth is wrong. Poverty is held up as the way one will set himself apart from the world (worldliness). While purveyors of “Prosperity” teach that faithfulness to God is evidenced by financial abundance (and vice versa) and ultimately find themselves like Belshazzar and company praising the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone (Daniel 5:1-4), those espousing “Poverty” swerve to the other side of the issue by abhorring anything (and anyone) who they perceive to be rich with this world’s goods. In a culture of materialism and worldliness, “taking the other side” may seem like the thing to do. Maybe asceticism is the cure for American consumerism!

Many Christians struggle between the two extremes of poverty and prosperity. On the one hand they point to latter part of 1 Timothy 6:17 and believe that God blesses materially and that all good things come from Him according to James 1:17. On the other hand they feel guilty about having material wealth and its attendant blessings because they “think of all the people who have little or nothing,” they hear Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler telling them to “sell all and give to the poor,” and they read in 1 Timothy 6:10 that money is the root of all evil.

What’s a Christian to do? Is there a way to understand and get to the truth of the matter? In the balance of this month’s article, let’s consider God’s Word together and address these questions:

1. Are having possessions wrong?
2. Is money the root of all evil?
3. What are the consequences of all Christians giving up “this world’s goods?”

Are Having Possessions Wrong?

Renouncing material possessions is one of the major tenets of “poverty theology.” But is it a biblical practice?

With only a little time spent in either the Old or the New Testaments, one will shatter the notion that having possessions is wrong. From the patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job, to Israel’s and Judah’s kings like David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Jehoshaphat to first century examples like Zaccheus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Lydia the Bible is replete with examples of faithful men and women who were also materially blessed. Throughout Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes the principles of faithful sowing and plentiful reaping are found. The Lord Himself expressed His favor on people by increasing their material wealth.

So what’s the problem? The problem arises with the improper use of possessions. The problem comes from the heart. The problem is found in one’s attitude, approach, and motivation for attaining material wealth. Our lusts for things, covetousness for more, envy of others, and entanglement with worldly pursuits is the sin. It is the attitude of heart that dictates whether having possessions is good or bad. So, rather than focus on the externals by removing things (possessions) from one’s lives God would have us cleanse our hearts of the iniquity of idolatry (Colossians 3:5; 2 Peter 2:14; 1 John 2:15-17) and properly manage the blessings He provides.

Is Money the root of all evil?

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

Answer to the question posed: No, money is not the root of all evil.

But, the *love* of money *is* a root of all kinds of evil. It’s not the money but the love of the money that is the problem. One may be rich and love money. But, one may be poor and love money too. The rich person may see what good can come from having material blessings and desire more “good.” They may trust in riches rather than God. They may hoard money in a vain attempt at security, stray from the faith as a result and pierce themselves through with many sorrows stemming from greediness (vs. 10). Or, one may lack material wealth, see the pleasures others enjoy and commit soul and self to the pursuit of this world’s goods. In their lust and desire to be rich they may willingly forfeit the treasures of eternity for a piece of today’s good life. The love of money may consume their thoughts and actions and cause them to pursue it in unethical and sinful ways (vs. 9).

Rather than eschew all things material - especially money – as poverty theology dictates, we would do better to “remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the power to get wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18). It is all His (Psalm 24:1; Job 41:11, et al). We are keepers of that which is His (1 Corinthians 4:2; Romans 14:10,12). And, we are to glorify Him in all that we do – including the way we make use of money (2 Corinthians 8:7; 9:10-13).

What are the consequences of all Christians giving up “this world’s goods?”

Consider the admonitions found in Luke 6:38, 2 Corinthians 9:7-8, and Proverbs 3:9-10.

If, as Christians, we attempt to live a full ascetic lifestyle, we must first get rid of everything material that we have; then, we must not have anything to do with a mechanism that would potentially increase our wealth (i.e., a job); thus we would out of necessity likely need to reside somewhere communal while depending on the goodwill of others (heathens by the very definition of poverty theology) and forced redistribution of wealth (by the government?) to provide for our physical needs.

Question: if we have nothing how are we to fulfill the commands of giving?

The fact is that as a part of His divine providence God has entrusted each accountable person with the ability to prosper to some degree. As Christians we may not be the wealthiest people and we likely will not be the poorest people. It is our duty to work, to earn a wage, and to provide for our needs and the needs of those *unable* to provide for themselves. We are to do this - we can only do this - without going to the extremes of poverty theology.

Conclusion

The danger in espousing extremes is that in doing so we wind up adding to or taking from God’s direction for our lives. When we do this we inadvertently substitute our will and wisdom for God’s will and wisdom. At least three times in the book of Deuteronomy, the people are admonished to **turn aside to neither the right hand or the left** but to **walk in**

all the ways the Lord God has commanded (Deuteronomy 5:32; 17:20; 28:14). The rationale behind the warning was that in doing so it would be well with the people, their days would be prolonged in the land which they possessed, and so they would not go after other gods.

In order for us to walk in all the ways the Lord God has commanded we must train our hearts and minds with thorough application of God's Word. We must prepare our hearts to willingly accept God's provision and use it to His glory. That way we will not be enamored with and deluded by extremes that would endanger our souls and the souls of others. Rather, we will then begin to have the attitude of the writer of Proverbs 30:8-9 which reads, "Remove falsehood and lies far from me; **give me neither poverty nor riches** – feed me with the food allotted to me; lest 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."

****Thus far, we've considered two inaccurate interpretations of God's will with regard to monetary blessings. Next month, to kick off 2007 on the right track, we will consider an attitude and approach to life that is based solidly in Biblical truth – it's called **Stewardship Theology.***

****Also, beginning in 2007, we want to hear from you! Send us an email or drop us a note with specific questions about everyday living. With what are you struggling in the realm of Faith and Finances?*

ADD SEMINAR INFORMATION / THE BOX (same as November)