

Today we continue week four in “Sticks and Stones” the things we say sermon series. Today we tackle the prosperity gospel. Kate Bowler, the author of “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved” first wrote a book about the prosperity gospel. It was called: “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel.” First Kate journeyed into this topic through a dissertation she was defending, but once she started studying this movement, she became so entrenched in understanding it and knew that she wanted to encapsulate its history from the beginning.

In her study she confessed: “I would love to report that what I found in the prosperity gospel was something so foreign and terrible to me that I was warned away. But what I discovered was both familiar and painfully sweet: the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes. And no matter how many times I rolled my eyes at the creed’s outrageous certainties, I craved them just the same.”<sup>i</sup>

So, what is the prosperity Gospel? The prosperity gospel is the belief that your faith can promise you riches, blessing, and prosperity. Bowler explains that people who believe in the prosperity gospel “claim that God will give you your heart’s desires: money in the bank, a healthy body, a thriving family, and boundless happiness.”<sup>ii</sup>

So, what is the origin of this belief? As Bowler went through the history in her book, she showed that this religion took root in the “New Thought” movement in the 1880’s where individuals believed that they could make things happen by the power of their minds. This idea transferred over into faith and preachers in this movement which taught that “people shaped their own worlds by their thinking just as God had created the world using thought.”<sup>iii</sup>

This was new for Americans who before this time had felt God was far away and that God controlled their future. This new movement taught them that they could have a hand in achieving the desires of their heart if only they were faithful.

With promises like this the movement spread like wildfire and prosperity gospel preachers found themselves in front of the largest crowds that churches had ever seen.

Like Kate, I can see why the prosperity gospel is so alluring. The sermons of these pastors are upbeat and hopeful. They promise success and stability, but as we have asked every week...is the prosperity gospel biblical?

We recognize that there are places in the Bible where Jesus Christ links faith to healing. We remember the scripture about the hemorrhaging woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ robe and was immediately healed. Jesus said to her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Matthew 5:34).

On the sermon on the Mount in Matthew and on the Plain in Luke we hear Jesus share the beatitudes, how Jesus bestows blessings upon God’s people. In Matthew 25:29 we hear the parable where the servants who invested the talents entrusted to their care multiplied their wealth, and we see their master bless this action when he says, “<sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given...”

Scripture echos some of the promises of the prosperity gospel, but there is one major difference. Instead of the claim that we as the individual are the primary actors in our lives, Scripture reminds us that it is indeed God who offers healing, blessing, and joy.

**The good news for our lives today is that we will experience the richness of the kingdom of God, we will be blessed by our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we will always get to look forward to living in a heavenly mansion through our faith in Jesus Christ.**

The prosperity gospel is “fake news” but the promise of eternal life that Jesus Christ offers to us is the truest news we will ever hear.

In our lectionary scripture today from Luke 12 we see a man caught up in the lure of the prosperity gospel. Jesus tells the parable of farmer who had an amazing crop season. He had so many crops he didn’t have room for them. Instead of thinking of giving away the extra to help others, he had the idea of tearing down his barns and building larger ones to house all his riches. Then he decided to not work for a couple of years, knowing he would have all the food he needed. That is where this familiar phrase comes in: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 12:19).

“Eat, drink, and be merry” sums up the theology of the prosperity gospel because it is focused on materialism. It is focused on gaining all the success we can while we are here and that is what will bring us happiness. At the end of this parable we see that Jesus speaks against these ideas of the prosperity gospel.

Jesus cautions us against our love for material possessions and says, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God” (Luke 12:21). The commentary summarizes the parable this way: “Those who confess Jesus look to God for their security, not to their own ability to accumulate possessions and lay up their wealth for the future.”<sup>iv</sup>

Through this conclusion of the parable Jesus shares with us that our love of material possessions gets in the way of our relationship with God. In our hearts we know this to be true. I think this is why when we hear stories about a mega church pastor who bought his wife a \$200,000 lamborghini<sup>v</sup> we raise our eyebrows and think wait a minute...that is because actions like these are the same thing that Jesus warned about. Actions like these by mega church pastors are the embodiment of building up more store houses for our things, instead of being thankful for what we have and sharing our blessings with others.

I have always looked up to Billy Graham. Upon his death he was worth \$25 million dollars, and yet he lived in a simple house in North Carolina and gave most of the money he made away.<sup>vi</sup> Billy did not build storehouses for himself while he lived on this earth, instead he invested his money in organizations, properties, and people that will continue to aid in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

In the book *The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House*, long-time *TIME* contributors Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, co-authors say “Graham regularly insisted that his crusades be audited and made public to avoid any hint of scandal, and that Graham could have easily made far more money if he wanted. ‘He was turning down million-dollar television and Hollywood offers half a century ago,’ Gibbs and Duffy wrote in *TIME* in 2007. ‘He never built the Church of Billy Graham, and while he lived comfortably, his house is a modest place. If he had wanted to get rich, he could have been many, many times over.’”

What a beautiful example of a servant of God. I have always thought it was beautiful how Jesus did not spend a lot of time in a home. He made no storehouse for himself, he spent time out and among the people, sharing with them the love of God.

This past week at My Brother’s Table, we had a wonderful time sharing the blessing of God’s gift to us, through a meal and fellowship with those in our community who do not have a place to call home.

Time and time again Jesus reminds us that the goal of our faith is not to accrue material possessions, that goal of our faith is to make disciples. The goal of our faith is not about us, it is about other people.

So, where does this leave us today? Jesus Christ is calling us to invest our lives in building up the kingdom of God. Instead of being lured by the promises of wealth and success of the prosperity gospel, Christ is calling us to surrender our lives to God’s calling where we empty ourselves of our own desires so that others may come to know the love and grace of God.

John Wesley wrote a beautiful prayer about embodying our faith called “The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.” Let’s read it together:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low by thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

The good news for our lives today is that God has made a beautiful storehouse for us in heaven, and no matter what we have been through in this life,

- Whether we have gained success or not.
- Whether we feel like we have been blessed or not.
- Whether we feel like we have experienced healing or not...

we will be welcomed home through our faith in Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Kate Bowler. “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lives I’ve Loved.” Random House: New York, New York. 2018. P. xiii-xiv.

<sup>ii</sup> Kate Bowler. “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel.” Oxford University Press: New York, New York. 2013. P. 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Bowler. “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel.” Oxford University Press: New York, New York. 2013. P. 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 255.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/us/megachurch-pastor-criticized-for-buying-wife-200g-lamborghini>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://money.com/money/5168865/billy-graham-net-worth-quotes-money-greed/>