

## Resurrecting an Old Heresy

When I saw the cover story in Time Magazine I was mentally transported back to the late 1980's. The lead article posed the question, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" I thought that question had been answered already as we watched Jim Baker hustled off to jail and Robert Tilton trying to rebuild his fallen empire. I do know this; if God wants you to be rich it will be a very scary thing. Jesus said, *"How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (Luke 18:24-25).



I think it is interesting that when a major news source wanted to know about God's attitude toward rich people, they asked the wealthy folks. Why didn't they talk to the poor? A more interesting question would be, "Does God Want You to Be Poor?" Honestly, I think God wants me to be middle-class. At least, that is where He has placed me at the moment. If He wants me to be rich, one of us is not doing a very good job.

The problem with the "Prosperity Gospel" is that it is based on two (at least) misunderstandings. The first is a problem defining success. If you were to ask people for the names of those who are financially successful, you would hear names like Gates, Buffett, and Dell. We immediately think of wealth when we define financial success. Since we all want to be successful, and we are confident that God wants us to be successful; the goal is to become wealthy.

However, a simple review of Scripture will help us redefine our concept of success. The only person Jesus ever commended for giving an offering was the poor widow who had very little to give and nothing left over after giving. The Apostle Paul might have been wealthy at one time, but most of his life was spent in and out of prison. He had very little money. Even Jesus died without as much as a change of clothes.

Some of God's finest were also extremely rich. Abraham, David, Solomon, Barnabas, and many others prove that God is not opposed to wealth. The point is that God does not define success in monetary terms. It is possible to be rich and be a failure, or to be poor and be a failure. It is just as possible to be rich and be a success, or to be poor and be a success. The amount of money in our hands has no bearing on our standing with God.

A second flaw in the doctrine of the "Prosperity Gospel" is ignoring the close kinship between desiring money and loving money. Perhaps the most familiar verse of Scripture concerning money is 1 Timothy 6:10 - *For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.*

In order to understand this verse completely, perhaps it would be wise to comprehend the words of the preceding verse - *But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction* (1 Timothy 6:9). It seems incomprehensible to me that God's desire for me is that I desire those things that will plunge me into ruin and destruction and cause me to wander away from the faith.

It is a warning to be careful around those who promise wealth and prosperity. They are not doing me any favors by tempting me to strive after things that bring such despair. Many very promising followers of Jesus have fallen because of a desire for money. The problems caused by loving money did not end when Jim Baker went to prison. A well-known pastor in our city recently lost his ministry because of financial tomfoolery caused by the desire to be rich. It appears that his longing for prosperity was not from God after all.

Does God want you to be rich? Probably not! However, it is safe to say that He wants you to be a good steward of whatever comes your way.