



The *Prosperity* Gospel

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD *on* FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
Bishop Robert Barron.

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Some time ago I read an article in *The Atlantic* that bore the rather-startling title “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” I know a lot of people in the secular media want to blame Christianity for almost everything, but I thought this was a little bit much. It soon became clear, though, that the culprit in the mind of the author was the so-called “prosperity gospel,” the view propagated by a lot of people today that holds that if you follow God’s will, great things will happen to you in the material sense. The argument in the article was that a lot of Christians who believe this gospel were making bad and risky investments, and this led to the collapse of the housing market, the economy, and so on and so forth.

I don’t know how seriously I take that particular argument, but I must say my interest was piqued in this phenomenon of the prosperity gospel. The roots of it, at least in America, probably go back to Oral Roberts, the famous evangelist. Oral Roberts told his many listeners, “Expect a miracle. Trust in God and great things will happen at the material level of your life.” Probably the most prominent prosperity gospeler today is Joel Osteen, who is the pastor of the biggest church in America and has millions of readers and listeners with books and a radio broadcast. He also was a former student at Oral Roberts University, where he

probably picked up this theology. Joel Osteen pretty much announces the same gospel as Oral Roberts. Don't settle for a mediocre life. Trust in God's promises, follow God's will, and you can expect more money, a better house, a family you can be proud of, and all kinds of material benefits.

Now to give the prosperity gospels their due, there is a biblical warrant for this point of view. Look in the Book of Deuteronomy. You will find this promise over and over again: If you follow God's commands, you will prosper. If you do not follow God's commands, you will suffer. And you find that reiterated often in the Book of Deuteronomy. In the Psalms, you will find similar things about trusting in the Lord and then expecting great benefits. Jesus himself says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and the rest," meaning presumably wealth and clothing and food and the things you need, "will be given unto you" (Matt. 6:33). He even speaks of the birds of the air that neither reap nor sow and yet God cares for them (Matt. 6:26). And certainly throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, we hear the command to trust in God's great providence.

We have to be careful at this point, though, because the Bible itself nuances and specifies this claim of the Book of Deuteronomy. The great counterweight to the Book of Deuteronomy is the Book of Job. In

the Book of Job, we hear about a man who is perfectly righteous, follows the commands of the Lord, heeds the Book of Deuteronomy, and does what God wants. And yet, Job massively suffers. In one fell swoop, Job loses everyone and everything he holds dear: his family, his livelihood, all his wealth, and even his health. His friends come and they commiserate with him and they sit in silence for seven days. Then they open their mouths, and what comes out is a typical standard Deuteronomy reading of things. “Job, you must have done something wrong. To be suffering in this way, you must have offended God in some way.” But Job knows he is righteous. And we know he is righteous. And so Job protests against this.

God’s great speech occurs in chapters 38–40 of the Book of Job. We do not hear a standard Deuteronomy reading like “Yes, Job. You did offend me in some ways.” Rather, Job’s suffering is placed in the context of God’s unfathomable permissive will. There is no strict correspondence between Job’s suffering and Job’s virtue or lack thereof. There is actually a cautioning of the Deuteronomistic point of view.

How do we solve this problem, this dilemma that occurs maybe within the Bible itself? We solve it by looking at prosperity, not from our perspective, but from God’s. It is true, I would say, that following God’s will leads to prosperity, but not necessarily in a

worldly sense. Following God's will rightly orders the soul. It rightly orders me toward my proper end and makes my life, in the spiritual sense, joyful. That is the prosperity I can infallibly expect from following God's commands, not necessarily prosperity in this world. In many ways, the Book of Job is meant to caution us, lest we move in that direction.

St. Thomas More, one of my heroes, is a good example. Thomas More was a very prominent figure and an important political player in the court of Henry VIII. He was very wealthy and socially prominent. At a key moment, he followed his conscience and obeyed God's command. As a result, he lost everything. He lost his family, his home, his status, his political position, his wealth, and in the end, his life. Yet, Thomas More was, in the only relevant sense, a prosperous man, meaning he had the great joy and that ordered soul that comes from following God's commands. He had treasure in heaven.

Here is another perspective on it from St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas wrestles with that same problem that we all do. How come wicked people seem to prosper in the world and good people seem to suffer? What gives? It seems as though God is not just. Aquinas tells us to be careful. Look at it not from our narrow perspective, but from God's. That wicked person who receives all kinds of material benefits

might be punished. How come? Because those material things that he gets are taking him away, perhaps, from the spiritual good that really matters. How about the good person who receives no great material advantage? He perhaps is being rewarded because it is the very absence of material distractions that allows him to be spiritually upright. In other words, be careful how you read prosperity and what prosperity means.

And so, is the prosperity gospel right? Yeah, I would say so, but in the sense that if you follow God's commands and do his will, you will prosper. But don't expect primarily treasure on earth. Expect treasure in heaven.

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