

“The Eyes of Tammy Faye”

God at the Movies 2022: Pt.2

[Trailer 2:20]

Our film this morning is a female tour de force. Just last month, Jessica Chastain was awarded the Oscar for Best Actress for her portrayal of notorious televangelist, Tammy Faye Bakker. I can't think of a more deserving performance to ever win an acting prize. This film doesn't *exist* without Chastain, she was an executive producer as well. She had a passion to bring humanity and dignity to a much maligned and misunderstood woman. I think she accomplished her goal. By the way, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* won an additional Academy Award this year, Best Hair and Makeup – because *of course* it did!

So this is a movie that starts at the ending then jumps back and tells a chronological story. So I don't feel bad with using the final scene of the film as our opening clip. By 1994, Tammy Faye has been out of the spotlight for years and has been invited to Oral Roberts University – a name that we will revisit shortly - to give a concert for the first time in a long time. So she is nervous backstage and that brings out her own insecurities and why it is that she wears all that makeup – she's hiding from something.

But the movie closes with her on stage singing before a skeptical audience who she slowly wins over with her

enthusiastic performance of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. I should mention before showing you the clip that she is alone on stage with only an accompanying pianist. The choir and balloons and flag that you see are all in her imagination. It's very stylized. But let's pay special attention to the final words of the film.

[America :30]

Final words of the film. “God bless America. Hallelujah. Oh yeah.” Fitting words to end on. A mix of fantasy and reality. God and country. Patriotism and piety. In a mild way, this touches on the Christian Nationalism that we talked about last week – a comforting fire that with the right accelerators can quickly burn down a nation. So problematic for sure, but I stand by my evaluation that it's a *fitting* ending. Because this movie tells a religious story – for good and bad – but it is a religious story that could *only* happen in America – for good and for bad.

The Jim and Tammy Bakker story is a uniquely American tale of rags to riches to rags that could be told in the world of commerce as much as in the church. I read a fascinating book just before the pandemic called *Fantasyland*. It's a 500-year history that seeks to explain why this current fake-news, alternative facts, conspiracy theory moment is not some new phenomenon, but just an expression of the attitudes that's have made America exceptional for it's entire history – and really from it's pre-history.

His argument is that ours is the only nation in the history of the world built on advertising. Ever since Columbus discovered the New World, people were lured west with promises of new trade routes to China and loads of gold and silver. Neither of which ever materialized. And yet many people did get rich in the New World, albeit on slaves and tobacco – Americans will always find *something* to sell. But the call of “There’s gold in them there hills” started long before the push to California in the 1800’s.

In 1614, yet another Plymouth Company expedition sailed to New England exclusively in pursuit of gold. Previous ventures had failed but this one had an inside man aboard, a native who’d been captured and enslaved by an earlier company ship off Cape Cod. He spent his captivity in London learning English and the nature of his captures shiny-metal fixation, so he concocted a story just for them: “There’s a gold mine on my own island,” he lied, “and I’ll gladly take you back there to claim it.” When the English anchored off Martha’s Vineyard, he jumped ship, his tribal brothers covered his escape with bow-and-arrow fire from waiting canoes. The Englishmen realized they’d been played and sailed home. They were not imaginative enough to become Americans!

But plenty of others were. And always have been. Think of the kind of immigrants who have always come to these shores. Not lazy and shiftless, are you kidding? These are hardworking dreamers. My Italian-American grandfather went from roller-skating stock boy at the Dallas Sears catalog warehouse to a three-piece-suit corporate executive in the retail giant’s Chicago headquarters. Because he believed the dream that in America you can be anything you want to be.

In fact, if I used statistical rational facts to point out that’s not true – that the vast majority of people can *not* in fact be anything they want to be - some of you will want to fight me! Because that’s unAmerican! So you had to believe the sales pitch to even come to this country. And therefore it’s like we are a people genetically preselected to take risk. Hope beyond hope is encoded into our national DNA.

The author says: “America was created by true believers and passionate dreamers, by hucksters and their suckers – which over the course of four centuries has made us susceptible to fantasy as epitomized by everything from Salem hunting witches to Joseph Smith creating Mormonism, from PT Barnum to Henry David Thoreau to speaking in tongues, from Hollywood to Scientology to conspiracy theories, from Walt Disney to Billy Graham to Ronald Reagan to Oprah Winfrey to Donald Trump.”

“In other words: Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that steep and simmer for a few centuries; run it through the anything-goes 1960s and the Internet age; the result is the America we inhabit today, where reality and fantasy are weirdly and dangerously blurred and commingled.”
(*Fantasyland*, Anderson, 11)

Is it any wonder that both the Multi-Level Marketing concept and the modern notion of advertising began in America? Specifically in New York City – if you’ve seen *Madmen*. MLM is not just a home sales business. There are plenty of legitimate sales businesses in the internet age. An MLM is a business in which you make your money – not actually by selling a product to customers – but by having more and more people *under* you buying *from* you to sell to others – but really working to get people under *them*. It’s called a Pyramid Scheme, because the only way to make money at the top is to have lots of people slaving away at the bottom.

The Federal Trade Commission published a paper on their website entitled, “The Case (for and) Against Multi-level Marketing.” Among it’s findings were: “Failure and loss rates for MLMs are not comparable with legitimate small businesses, which have been found to be profitable for 39% over the lifetime of the business; whereas less than 1% of MLM participants profit. MLM makes even gambling look like a safe bet in comparison.”

But don’t worry, I’m sure your sister-in-law has cracked the code! And even if you do go bust, again because we’re dreamers, we just get up and look for the next get-rich-quick scheme. And because even a blind squirrel finds an acorn every now and again,

some do make it. And we celebrate those stories. And the vast majority that don’t...well we just pretend they don’t exist! Because that’s the way of American exceptionalism!

And it’s present in our commerce, in our politics, in the way we teach our history, in the way we structure our health care system, even in how we do religion. My earlier quote referenced speaking in tongues. Now, Americans didn’t invent this – it appears numerous times in the New Testament – but it was in America at the turn of the 20th century that the Pentecostal revival brought the restoration of the gifts of the Spirit – including tongues - to the church all around the world.

But that was a very *individual* thing. Now you could hear a supernatural word from God yourself. You didn’t need need a stuffy clergyman to prophesy God’s word to you, the Spirit would speak directly through *you*, or your neighbor. And so the early Pentecostals left their denominations in droves – were kicked out really – and vowed to form loose associations of fellowship without too much overhead control. One of the earliest – and currently the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world – is the Assemblies of God, started in 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Now, the Pentecostal revival has spread around the globe – it has been the fastest growing branch of Christianity for the last 70 years. But it’s origins are uniquely American. And many of the early adherents were poor. These weren’t the nation’s elite, these were people looking for a better life. And the Holy Spirit provided it to them – certainly mentally and spiritually, but often times physically as well. I am a Pentecostal *and* an ordained Assemblies of God minister. And quite frankly, that *shocks* me.

When I was in a teenager in the 1980’s – and you know, you’re always kind of embarrassed by your parents stuff at that age – but the two most well known ministers in the Assemblies of God were television preachers; Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker. They both were equally popular – at their height each of them had an audience reach of 30 million people. And they represented the opposite poles of my Assemblies of God denomination.

Jimmy Swaggart was from the old holiness fire-and-brimstone tradition. If it was fun, it was sin! His was a very serious message from a very serious Bible. Mostly centered on the Christians duty to separate from “worldliness”. Women couldn’t dress too flashy or wear makeup. The music was old fashioned gospel. Couldn’t watch movies or listen to that devil rock and roll. Jimmy even came out with a book

against *Christian* rock music – and if you come back in three weeks for the “Jesus Music” documentary, I’ll explain why I considered having him *assassinated* over that!

And at the other end of the spectrum was the PTL Club with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker – Praise the Lord! They embraced the world with a positive message of God’s love for everyone. They created Christian celebrity. Dressing flashy was actually a sign of God’s blessing, not your sin. They played up-beat music and even hosted Christian rock concerts at Heritage USA – the South Carolina Christian theme park that by the mid-80’s had become America’s third most visited tourist attraction – after Disney World and Disneyland!

So two ministries as different as cheese and chalk. But both led by ordained Assemblies of God preachers. Both massively popular television personalities. To be AG in the 80’s was to be in Camp Swaggart or Camp PTL...and I couldn’t stand either one of them! Swaggart took the Bible seriously...but he was so *mean*. The Bakkers were very sweet and kind...and so *stupid*. I’m sorry, that’s not kind, let’s say they were shallow. I’ve never much cared for shallow. Even then I knew their theology was fluff.

And then over the course of 1987 and 1988, *both* Swaggart and Bakker were caught up in very public scandals over sex and money. They were on all the magazine covers. I didn't watch their programs but I *did* watch *Saturday Night Live* and David Letterman and both men were the punchlines of a *lot* of jokes. Both ministers were disciplined out of the denomination. In fact there was one moment in particular that floored me in this film – we'll leave the lights up, but look at this brief clip **[Carlson :08]** – that is my brother-in-law's grandfather. G. Raymond Carlson was the head of the Assemblies of God at the time of the disciplinary actions. I've been in his house. I was at his funeral.

So this is a movie I *lived* through. I had family members and church friends with timeshares at the theme park. I was terribly embarrassed by all this. It affected my ability to share my faith at school because I didn't want people to know what *kind* of Christian I was. I remember wanting to go to the Methodist church down the road instead. Because I didn't know of any scandalous Methodists...and the girl I had a crush on went there.

So when I went to college my act of rebellion - as a fourth-generation Pentecostal - was I wouldn't go to an Assemblies of God church. And now of course, I pastor one. And if you didn't recognize that this is an Assemblies of God church, don't worry about it, very few of my denominational elders recognize this as an Assemblies of God church either!

But along the way, I discovered a more serious faith. A more robust theology. And more genuine spirituality. And the deep historic roots of Christianity. I also discovered that my tribe was not alone in falling victim to over-hyped, poorly-grounded Prosperity Gospel teachings. The truth is millions of Americans of all religious stripes have come to measure spiritual progress in terms of their financial status and physical well-being.

The Prosperity Gospel movement goes by many names; Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It (or as some derisively snark, Blab It and Grab It). It began in earnest in the 1920's, boomed in the post-war 1950's and hit it's peak on the cable-televisions of the 1980's. But you can switch to channels right now - at any time of the day or night – and find examples of this doctrine.

In mainline Protestant churches – the “respectable” Christians - the principles would be dubbed “positive thinking”. Norman Vincent Peale was it's most prominent voice. Positive thinking, often mistaken for simple optimism, stressed the power of mind over matter. It was a synthetic mixing of the categories of religion, psychology, medicine and self help. I would say Oprah is the modern embodiment of this movement.

In Pentecostal and charismatic circles, the preferred term was “positive confession”. Kenneth Hagin – who also started as a Texas Assemblies of God preacher – is considered the father of the prosperity gospel movement. In the 1930’s he began teaching that Christianity is a legal contract, established by Jesus’ death and resurrection. And since God is bound by that contract, every follower of Jesus is entitled to a life of blessing. All you have to do is claim – or confess – your right to the blessing. So you don’t actually pray and ask God for blessing or healing. You *tell* Him what He *owes* you.

I want to play you a clip from the film in which a young Jim Bakker is shown presenting some of this theology in his Bible College. By the way, when you see “North Central Bible College” on the screen, just know that is where our own associate pastor, Connor Davis, went to school. In fact our last *two* staff members are North Central alum. They walked over the “Bakker Bridge” on their way to class! But don’t worry, they graduated with *much* better theology. **[NCU 1:46]**

Now, that professor’s correction is an important reminder that even in Pentecostal circles, the prosperity gospel teachings were never the fully orthodox position although they were hugely influential. After all, who are you going to listen to; the poor but well trained theology professor? Or the flashy TV preacher with big bucks to give to the Bible School building fund?

By the way, the verse Jim quoted from 3 John 2 is a very important one in the positive confession movement. We will actually take a look at it in a bit. But it was the verse that inspired a young preacher named Oral Roberts to become a disciple of Kenneth Hagin. And Roberts would take the movement to greater heights than probably anyone else. He founded the university in Tulsa that bears his name and had the first large word of faith television network. In 1977 he claimed he was visited by a 900-foot Jesus who told him to build a faith based hospital. He did.

Also in 1987 – what a year for Pentecostal televangelists – he informed his television audience that God told him that if he didn’t raise \$8 million dollars by the end of the year that God would “call him home.” I remember this too made the late night talk show comedy rounds. And Roberts raised \$9.1 million so I guess he got the last laugh. “Blessed are the extortionists, for they shall get rich.”

Now, you may remember that I said that the boom years for faith movement teaching were in the 20’s, the 50’s and the 80’s? Do you know what *else* those years had in common? They were all decades of incredible prosperity in America *in general*. The Roaring 20’s, the Booming 50’s, the Material Girl 80’s. Pentecostals in the 1980’s wore \$500 suits to sing the old hymns of longing to escape the hardships of life.

Listen to what one religious historian had to say about the 50's in particular:

All revivalists, were **preaching upward mobility to people already on the way up.** These were the boom years in which many families considered the possibility of home ownership for the first time or were able to enjoy hitherto unobtainable luxuries such as indoor plumbing, a private telephone, and electrical appliances such as stoves and refrigerators.

Farm fields were bulldozed to build new subdivisions, and contractors erected instant ranch-style, split-level, and Dutch colonial homes. A new social space, unknown to the pre-war world appeared, variously called the rec room, rumpus room, or family room. There the ever-growing family could watch Oral Roberts, AA Allen or Rex Humbard on increasingly large television sets. A new car was now within the reach of most Americans (*Blessed*, Bowler, 51)

Culture always informs the way we read the Bible – always – I think that's important to remember. I'm a church planter from the early 2000's when social media was first being invented. That meant you could create your own marketing platform for your church. We're just beginning to understand how important – and damaging – that was for our theology of church.

But it's always been this way. You can't say the American prosperity gospel would have been possible without...well, without American prosperity. Speaking of new cars, let's watch this clip from the film as Jim brings home a surprise for his new wife. And when I say "home", they've been living in poverty at her parents home. [**Car 1:32**]

God has placed the powers of the bank at Jim and Tammy's disposal. Of course, it's not clear if God informed *the bank* about that arrangement because just a few months later the car is repossessed. This will be a glimpse into a cycle in the Bakker's life and ministry. Overspend in faith...and then cry when the inevitable collapse happens.

You know, the same bible that says "walk by faith" says, (**Luke 14:28-30**) "*Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. **Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'***" But Jim Bakker didn't do that either. He *specifically* didn't do that.

He would amass cost overruns in the ministry – by faith – and then appear vulnerable on TV and ask for more money. Wash, rinse and repeat. And this pattern led to corruption. The local newspaper began to get wind of financial misdoings at the ministry. I don't just mean lavish spending, but fraudulent building and loan practices. Let me play you a clip of how the Bakkers responded. **[Persecution 1:29]**

Virtually every fallen minister story I've ever heard of involves the minister accusing those who would hold him accountable as persecuting agents of the devil. But hey, it makes the phones ring and that's all that really matters once the money becomes the true master of ministry. In fact, the movie depicts another pattern in the lives of the Bakkers; the exploitation of their own stories – whether it's expecting a child or confessions of Tammy's addictions and adulteries – into pleas for money. There's a cynical saying, "Authenticity is the key to ministry. Once you can fake that you've got it made." True authenticity is not manipulative.

Well, the *Charlotte Observer* did begin to publish a series of articles about the improprieties. In 1998 they won a Pulitzer Prize for their role in covering the PTL scandal. Editor Richard A. Oppel turned the publicity into a nice opportunity to land a new gig...running the *Austin American Statesman*. He was the featured speaker at a luncheon at my seminary a few years ago and I met him. I told him I was an AG minister and I

thanked him for his role in bringing the darkness into the light. That in the end we're always best served by the truth, no matter how painful. I think he was shocked.

The sex got everyone's attention, but it was the money fraud that sent Jim Bakker to prison. In 1989 He was found guilty of all charges - eight counts of mail fraud, 15 counts of wire fraud and one count of conspiracy. He was diverting money that people sent for one project to others. That's against the law. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison. Got that reduced to 8 on appeal and served almost 5 years before being paroled in 1994.

Now, it's very easy in situations like this to simply cast aspirations on the people involved. Shallow things like their goofy appearance and simpleton thinking. The hypocrisy and transparent manipulation. The tacky ostentatious lifestyle. That's what all the talk shows did. And quite honestly, a lot more of the attention got thrown towards Tammy Faye because of her looks and her voice. One need look no further than Monica Lewinsky to realize that paternalistic society is often way crueler to the women of failure than it is the men who were the true perpetrators of the evil. Movies like this show we're trying to correct that.

What I want to do is offer a critique of the root *theology* that lies underneath the prosperity gospel teachings. Because this hasn't gone away. If anything television preachers have gotten more slick and adapted to current trends...but the underlying message is the same. And it's just as damaging for people who fall into the trap.

But I want to offer a balanced critique. Because, as with most everything, there are two opposing errors that you can gravitate toward with prosperity teachings. On the one side, we want to avoid **cessationism**. What's that mean? It's a theological term that means after the time of the apostles that is recorded in the Bible, God *ceased* to work in the supernatural ways that you witness in scripture.

As I was researching critiques of the word of faith movement, most of what I found came from sources that said, "See, we told you miracles don't exist. All claims of healing are fake. All words of prophecy are illusions. God doesn't operate outside the norms of natural means and methods." I don't believe that. I don't believe it because of personal experience. But I also don't believe it because of a *proper* understanding of Scripture.

See, the most devastating lies don't negate scripture, they *twist* it. Remember the snake in the garden, "Did God *really* say..." and then a gentle misquote. This is why the most popular cult movements today don't abandon the Bible. The *add to* the Bible. "Oh yes we like the Bible, but this book or this teacher is *also* equally inspired of God." But the abuse of scripture does not negate scripture. I *do* believe in miracles...I just remain very humble about them. I *do* believe God wants to bless you...if you've ever gotten an email from me, my salutation is always "blessings". And faith is *incredibly* important. "Without faith it is impossible to please God". That's from the book of Hebrews and we're going to spend all summer long on a series that looks at what faith is and how we grow in it. Even George Michaels knew that "You gotta have faith."

So I don't want to err on the cessationism side, but we don't want to go to the other extreme of **triumphalism**. This is the viewpoint that the Kingdom of Heaven with all it's benefits has been won by Christ on the cross and it is *totally and completely* available to the Christian *today*. The Kingdom is now. But that is an out of balance perspective as well. My favorite Pentecostal Theologian is Gordon Fee and he talks about the "radical middle". He says, "Here we will regularly expect, and see, both the working of miracles and the fellowship of his sufferings, without sensing frustration in either direction." (*God's Empowering Presence*, 8)

So with that balance in mind, let me end with a three fold critique of the prosperity gospel movement. This will be a brief overview, it's much more nuanced than I have time for. But here are three mistakes they make. They misunderstand the Bible, they misunderstand anthropology, and they misunderstand God.

First, Prosperity gospel teachings misunderstand the Bible. One of the frustrating things when reading their literature is the overwhelming desire to help those people understand the basic laws of Biblical interpretation. I want to say, "Don't drop out of Bible school to get married before you take hermeneutics!" They don't understand basic principles like the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, the didactic, teaching passages interpret the historical and allegorical passages, clear passages interpret obscure passages.

These are the basics. Without them it's very easy to misinterpret the Bible. We know this from the example of Jesus himself. The devil came to tempt Jesus for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness and what did he do? He *quoted scriptures* to Jesus. And how did Jesus deal with it? He had a principle for interpreting scripture so that scripture answered scripture. And he knew that one verse taken out of context does *not* trump the overall meaning of scripture.

Now, I could pick dozens and dozens of passages to illustrate this, but let's just use one that has been prominent in the word of faith movement. We heard it read already in the movie, and Oral Roberts claimed it as the foundational passage for his whole ministry. I'll read it to you in the King James Version they would have read (our NIV didn't come out until the late 70's). **3 John 1:2 KJV**, "*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.*"

Now, 3rd John is the second shortest book of the Bible – one verse shorter than 2nd John. And it is a letter that Paul wrote to a friend in ministry. This verse is simply the greeting – a way of saying "I hope you are well." And we know from secular literature of the time – around the first century Mediterranean world – that this was a very common formula in even non-Christian letters. Same thing with "Grace and peace be unto you."

How would you feel if you sent someone an email and started with "I hope everything is going well with you and yours." And they took that statement and elevated it to a universal principle that all *must* go well for *everyone* at *all* times in *all* periods? That's absurd. A text like that contains a certain amount of truth, but when you try make a verse like that support the weight of an entire movement, it's simply not strong enough. Especially when that view is contradicted by other places in the scripture.

It's natural, normal and even Godly to say to people, "I hope everything is going well in your life." But you don't build a religion off of it. But that's exactly what Oral Roberts and many others did. If you *start* with a poor foundation the rest of the structure will crumble. Which is what *literally* happened with ORU's hospital and PTL's theme park. But it's true of their teachings as well. They misunderstand the Bible.

Secondly, prosperity teachings misunderstand anthropology. This is of course the study of human beings. And see if you can observe how their abuse of a principle of *prosperity* can lead to an abuse of their view of *people*. Let me play you one last clip. This is Tammy visiting Jim in prison – they are now divorced – and he's been doing some thinking there in time out. Let's watch. **[Jail :48]**. By the way, when he got out of prison he wrote a very contrite book called "I Was Wrong". I read it and was impressed. Poverty was good for him. But before long, he made his way back to TV and he is now a bigger huckster than ever. He was recently sued by the State of Missouri for pushing a sliver tonic that he claimed – for the low, low price of \$80 a bottle – would cure COVID-19. Spoiler alert: it won't.

But again our critique is not as focused on the faulty people as on their faulty theology. Kenneth Copeland was a disciple of Oral Roberts who is still on TV today out of Fort Worth - why are there so many Texans in this???? But he says, "The gospel to the poor is that Jesus has come and they don't have to be poor anymore." Well let's process that. If God's will is always for financial prosperity then therefore you have to say that to be poor is to be out of God's will. Right? So if you are poor...who's fault is that? Oh, this is a very American ethos.

This is the same philosophy again as the Multi Level Marketing schemes. You go to the seminars and get pumped up – look at all the success stories! People that sell this product get rich. So if *you're* not getting rich...it's clearly not the products fault...*you* must not be working hard enough, believing in the product enough. It's a scam that keeps the people at the bottom of the pyramid pushing resources up to the people at top of the pyramid to prove they're not lazy or dumb. And for the 99% that don't make a profit there are only two eventual alternatives: you either reject the product and the sales pitch, or you reject yourself. "I just don't have what it takes."

It's the same thing with prosperity gospel. "If you're not healed, if you're not wealthy, if your career isn't advancing...that's not God's fault. How dare you question God?! It's just that you don't have enough faith." And so when people are in this long enough for the fantasy to be blurred by the reality, they either develop terrible self-esteem (which is a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure ironically) or they turn their back on "the product" which is this case God or at least the church.

But that's *not* what God teaches. If the poor are outside of God's will, or still under a curse – which is a big positive confession teaching – what do you do with the Jerusalem saints who are undergoing a famine in Acts chapter 12? Are they under a curse because they are poor? What do you do with the saints in Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8 who "out of their extreme poverty" gave an offering of rich generosity? Are they under a curse because they are poor?

And what do you do, of all people, with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was poor. We know she was poor because when she went to dedicate Jesus in the temple she brought an offering of two doves and not a lamb which is specified in the book of Leviticus as the gift of a poor person.

Yet when the angel, Gabriel, greets her in **Luke 1:28** it says, "*The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are **highly favored!** The Lord is with you."* And right after that, her relative, Elizabeth greets her with "*Blessed are you among women!*"

Maybe the most egregious abuse is how they twist the story of the rich young ruler. This is the story where the young man asks Jesus "what can I do to be saved?" And because Jesus could see in his heart that his wealth was the source of his identity, he says to him, (**Luke 18:22**), "*You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*"

And it says the man went away sad *because* he was very wealthy. In fact, right after this is when Jesus said how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven – the camel through the eye of a needle bit. Do you know how the prosperity gospel people spin this? They say this was the greatest *financial* mistake in this man's life. Because God *always* returns a hundred fold blessing when we give – that's another misinterpretation of scripture by the way. But according to them, Jesus was giving this man an investment opportunity of a lifetime, that when he gave his thousands to the poor, God would return millions! So this guy's sin was he didn't buy *enough* crypto!

After all, right after this Jesus wraps it up by saying, **(Luke 18:29-30)** “‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus said to them, ‘no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to **receive many times as much** in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’” See, the prosperity teachers say, if he had given up the money he would have many times more money in *this age*, as well as the age to come.

What’s wrong with that view? Several things. The disciples of Jesus who are with him, have left all to follow him. And they admit it, **(Luke 18:28)** “Peter said to him, ‘We have left all we had to follow you!’” So did Peter get rich? Did he get the same get-rich-now scheme the young man did? Is there a verse where Peter says, “Master we have left everything to follow you and now we have two villas on the Mediterranean, thanks a lot!” No, but in Acts chapter 3 just a few months after the Resurrection, Peter says to the crippled begged, “Silver and gold have I *none*...but what I do have I give you.”

The rewards of following Jesus were not purely material. You say, well surely by the end of his life things turned around. I mean this is Peter, the rock of the church. Let’s look. Jesus says to him in **John 21:18-19**, “...when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead

you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”” It was a call to the cross. Because Jesus pre-saw Peter’s own crucifixion. Which was a death for slaves. Important citizens like Paul got their heads cut off. Slaves were nailed to a tree.

And this of course is a pointed reminder of the death of the greatest man who ever lived. Jesus was born into poverty – two doves at his dedication – and at his death his only possession was the cloak on his back. The soldiers gambled over who would get it while he died naked above him. Jesus was poor...was he therefore out of God’s will? Blasphemy!

And of course, Jesus wasn’t *just* a human being. So in addition to misunderstanding the Bible and the nature of humanity, finally and most importantly, the prosperity teachings misunderstand God. I think this is what upsets me the most about these word of faith abuses. They not only abuse people who are desperate for help, but they abuse the very name of God. These people use the name of God like a magic formula that will create wealth. Magic is witchcraft. The same people who tell you not to read Harry Potter will turn around and tell you your words have the power to bind God to your wishes. That’s *actually* witchcraft.

Another Texan, A.A. Allen was a big shot Assemblies of God prosperity revivalist in the 1950's. My dad was good friends with his son! Allen is quoted in his television program as saying, "I believe I can command God to perform a miracle for you financially. When you do, God can turn dollar bills into twenties." You're going to *command* God? Have you no sense of decency, sir?

And he didn't. A friend of mine told me that his pastor in California, when he was a young bible college student volunteered to work at one of his crusades and Allen pulled him aside ahead of time and asked him to fake a hearing loss for him to heal. Said it would "build faith" among the crowd. He was eventually dismissed from the Assemblies of God for his exaggerations. Divorced his wife and died an alcoholic. But he had a television audience to them very end.

I was in the room when a prominent San Antonio based word of faith preacher testified that in response to his prayer to protect his son from a set of bad influence friends, God *killed* the three young men in horrific ways. And the crowd cheered. These things make a mockery of God. That slanders the very character of God. The cross is scandalous in it's own right. We don't need charlatan preachers to make an additional scandal.

I think it would be fitting to provide us with a warning – not just for television preachers – but for all of us who get too mixed up in the consumer, get-rich-quick, materialistic spirit of our age. Here is Paul in **1 Timothy 6:7-10**, "*For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*"

P.T. Barnum is credited with the phrase "There's a sucker born every minute." Don't be one of them. And don't turn Christ's church into a circus. We don't need any more clowns. Learn to properly handle the word of truth. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you discernment. And yes, work hard, be a good steward, there *is* a healthy work ethic in the Bible. But don't fall for the hucksters. There's a lot of great traditions about being an American, but Christians don't need to make that foolishness one of them.

I wanted to end with a little teaching on what the Bible *does* say about how to be good stewards of your finances. I don't have time, but I've taught about it before. You can find older series on the website.

Do tithe – that is a very biblical way of putting God first in your finances. Build a budget, avoid debt in your operating costs, buy smart, save and invest, be generous to the needy, get wise financial council, and hold everything lightly. Because nothing is ever certain in this life *except* the love of God. Those are all sound principles. Not very sexy. Not very exciting. Not very quick.

But these are the old ways. This is why I love church history. There have always been charlatans in our midst, but the cream eventually rises to the top. And none of them – none of the great voices of church history – present anything close to a prosperity gospel message. Just the opposite actually. Let me close with a quote I stumbled across just yesterday by, John Chrysostom, second only to Origin and Augustine among the great Church Fathers. He wrote this in the 300's.

“To speak the truth, he is not rich who is surrounded by many possessions, but he who does not need many possessions; and he is not poor who possesses nothing, but he who requires many things. We ought to consider this to be the distinction between poverty and wealth. When, therefore, you see anyone longing for many things, esteem him of all men the poorest, even though he possess all manner of wealth; again, when you see one who does not wish for many things, judge him to be of all men most affluent, even if he possess nothing. **For by the condition of our mind, not by the quantity of our material wealth, should it be our custom to distinguish between poverty and affluence.**”(*Discourse II, 1*)

That sounds about right.

Let's pray...