

CURRENT CULTURE

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONSE

REGULAR BAPTIST PRESS

Several authors contributed content for lessons in this course. They are as follows:

- Lesson 1 Aaron Lavender, pastor, author of *Are You a Full Gospel Christian?*
- Lesson 2 Adapted from *No Free Lunch: Economics for a Fallen World* by Jeff Haymond
- Lesson 3 Alex Bauman, director of Regular Baptist Press
- Lesson 4 Larry Vardiman, retired professor of paleoclimatology, Institute for Creation Research
- Lesson 5 Rex Rogers, president of SAT-7 USA, author of *Gambling: Don't Bet On It*
- Lesson 6 Pamela Russell, director of Almond Tree, author of *More Than Sobriety*
- Lesson 7 Gary Gromacki, professor of Bible and homiletics, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pa.
- Lesson 8 Mark McGinniss, associate professor of Old Testament literature, languages, and exegesis, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pa.
- Lesson 9 Kezia McNeal Curry, education consultant, adjunct faculty, University of Hawaii at Manoa
- Lesson 10 Mike Stallard, systematic theology professor and dean of Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pa.
- Lesson 11 Nigel Black, pastor
- Lesson 12 David Gunn, editorial director of publications, Regular Baptist Press
- Lesson 13 Ken Gardoski, associate professor, assistant director of the Ph.D. program, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pa.

Director of Regular Baptist Press: Alex Bauman

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How to Use *Truth for Living*

Truth for Living:

A comprehensive, trustworthy curriculum that presents the truth of God's Word without compromise. The curriculum plan includes through-the-Bible courses as well as topical courses. Perfect for adults who want a guide in using all of God's Word as God intended.

As you prepare to teach these lessons, keep these two factors in mind:

- The FOCUS of productive adult Bible learning is the learner. The intent of teaching is not teaching, but learning—the learner's learning.
- The GOAL of productive adult Bible learning is an appropriate life-response to Biblical truth. You do not teach simply to impart information; you teach so that the Holy Spirit of God can use the truths of the Word of God to change the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

The Lesson Plan

Each *Truth for Living* lesson has three distinct parts. GETTING STARTED is the attention-getter. The questions and activities “set the table,” as it were, for the study. SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES is the heart of the lesson. A series of study questions leads the teacher and learners through the Biblical text. RESPONDING TO CULTURE applies the truth to life.

As is true of any teaching experience, you can adapt the parts of the lesson to fit your particular class. You may choose to alter the beginning activities or change the focus of the application. You will find more material in the study than you can probably cover in one class session.

The Study Book

This leader's guide is designed to accompany the Bible study book. We encourage you to distribute Bible study books to your learners. Urge them to complete the study before class. The more your learners have studied on their own, the better the class discussions will be. Most of the questions in the leader's guide are picked up from the Bible study book. You will notice the question numbers in parentheses after the questions. The answers to the questions are in italics following the questions.

Other Resources

The resource CD has PowerPoint presentations for every lesson. They incorporate the resource visuals and provide a good way for teachers and learners to track the lesson. The resource CD also has Prezi presentations for some of the lessons. Instructions for using the Prezi presentations are on the CD. Other resources include lesson outlines, case studies, and verse cards.

Preface

Should I be scared of global warming? What is Islam? Is there hope for substance abusers? Should our nation go to war? Does God approve of a free market economy? What is a good strategy for personal purity? Does God promise me health and wealth? Does God care if I gamble? Does God hate homosexuals? How should I respond to immigration problems?

Questions like these need answers. They arise as we are confronted with culture every day in both our private and public lives. We can't escape culture, and we should not try to ignore it. We are wise to consider cultural issues through the lens of the Word of God. That is what this course will help you do.

The topics are widely varied, but all of them affect us all in some way. As you lead your learners through the lessons, help them understand above all else that the Bible has all the answers for our questions about culture. We must be very careful not to let culture tell us how to answer our questions.

The Bible is timeless. It addresses today's culture as if God had recently inspired it. Teach with that truth in mind. Teach your learners to seek to know God's Word when they are confronted with *Current Culture*.



Behind the Veil of Prosperity Theology



Topic

Prosperity theology

Theme

God considers prosperity theology as destructive and as veiled hedonism and materialism.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will evaluate his faith for selfishness, replacing any selfish desires with a desire to do God's will above all else.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 2

Scripture Focus

Deut. 8:10–14; Job 1:1; Ps. 119:71, 75; Luke 12:13–21; John 9; Rom. 8:22, 23; 1 Cor. 11:17–34; Gal. 1:6–8; Phil. 2:25–30; 1 Tim. 5:23; 6:6–10

Summary

This lesson presents prosperity theology and then evaluates it from a Biblical perspective. The learner should see the fallacies of prosperity theology and desire to use his time and money to serve God faithfully.

Outline

I. Prosperity Theology

- A. Health gospel
 1. Healing and Christ's atonement
 2. Healing and positive confession
- B. Wealth gospel
 1. Wealth initiated by faith
 2. Wealth demonstrated by Christ's example
 3. Wealth activated by seed planting

II. Biblical Evaluation of Prosperity Theology

- A. Biblical truth regarding physical health
 1. Sickness is a result of Adam's sin
 2. Some sickness is related to sin
 3. Godly people get sick
 4. God uses affliction and illness for His glory
- B. Biblical truth regarding wealth
 1. Pursuing money leads to loss of focus
 2. Pursuing money breeds covetousness
 3. Pursuing money creates temptations

Memory Verses

"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:20, 21).

GETTING STARTED

Promises, Promises

That God rewards faithfulness with good health and material wealth has quickly become one of the most captivating messages in churches across North America. The impact of this movement transcends racial and denominational lines. Advocates such as Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas; T. D. Jakes of the Potter's House in Dallas, Texas; Frederick K. C. Price of Crenshaw Christian Center in Inglewood, California; and Creflo Dollar of World Changers Ministries near Atlanta, Georgia, all expound messages that promise much but deliver little.

VIDEO: If possible, play a clip from the Internet of a prosperity-gospel preacher making his case for believing God wants all believers to be healthy and wealthy.

ASK: Have you heard a prosperity-gospel preacher speak? What did you think of his message?

ASK: Why do you think prosperity-gospel preachers are so popular? (Q1)

This lesson will help us understand both what the prosperity preachers believe and what the Bible actually says about health and wealth.

An Encouraging Word?

ASK: Based on your current situation, how encouraging is the message that God gives people health and wealth according to their level of faithfulness to Him?

ASK: Why is that message so dangerous? (Q2) *It distracts people from God's true gospel and creates strong disillusionment when illness or financial troubles pervade our lives.*

This lesson will help us understand both what the health and wealth preachers believe and what the Bible actually says about our health and wealth.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Prosperity preachers claim to give the *full gospel* by adding health and wealth to it. In reality their message is what God condemns as being *a different gospel*. Their ideology is a disease that maligns the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ and distorts the true message of His gospel. The apostle Paul rebuked the Galatian believers for quickly deserting the true message of the gospel.

READ: Galatians 1:6–8. **ASK:** How serious is the matter of keeping the gospel unadulterated? (Q3) *Paul said anyone, including himself or even an angel, should*

be accused for preaching another gospel.

Paul makes it known that *another gospel* is in reality *another gospel of a different kind*, and therefore not the true gospel. Twisting the gospel to our own liking is a serious offense.

I. Prosperity Theology

A. Health gospel

The prosperity-gospel's philosophy on the subject of health was greatly influenced by the metaphysical Mind Science groups such as Christian Science, Unity School of Christianity, and Church of Religious Science. Benny Hinn, one of the movement's most outspoken preachers, believes God's healing power is already in us and that God's highest desire is for His church to be perfectly healthy.

1. Healing and Christ's atonement

Supporters of this teaching believe that any acknowledgment of sickness opens the door to satanic control and that medicine is a crutch for the spiritually immature. They also claim that physical healing is in the atoning work of Jesus Christ and that all diseases are healed by Christ's spiritual atonement in Hell, not His physical death on the cross.

READ: Isaiah 53:5; Matthew 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24. **ASK:** Why might a person conclude that these passages teach Christ died so we might be healthy? (Q4) *The passages seem to state clearly that Christ's death is related to our health.*

This movement teaches that when sickness does occur in one's life, it is a matter of one's lack of faith.

ASK: What might a terminally ill person conclude about his faith in God according to the prosperity-gospel movement? (Q5) *That his faith is very small and weak.*

2. Healing and positive confession

Closely connected to healing is what this movement calls *positive confession*. *Positive confession* is based on the idea that words have creative power and that what people say determines, to some extent, everything that happens to them.

In positive confession, success is generated by right thinking, right believing, and right confession. It is supposed that people are not getting healed because they are thinking wrong. Three reasons are given to support this conclusion: (1) sickness and disease are spiritual, not physical; (2) a true believer should never be sick; and (3) negative confession produces sickness.

Positive confession advocates use the phrase *and he is the saviour of the body* from Ephesians 5:23 as justification for their claim. They teach that our bodies ought to be made whole since Jesus Christ is the savior of the body. Christians receive healing by positively confessing that Christ is the savior of their body. So worrying or complaining about an illness forfeits a believer's right healing through Christ.

See Benny Hinn's *Rise and Be Healed* for more on his support of the prosperity gospel.

Both Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 2:24 are in contexts replete with word pictures and figures of speech which indicate that the best interpretation is to take the reference to physical healing in the passages to mean spiritual healing.

ASK: What might a sick believer conclude about Jesus when the believer's positive confession doesn't work? (Q6) *That Jesus is either weak or uncaring.*

B. Wealth gospel

Economic wealth is the second major focus of the prosperity-gospel proponents. They apply God's promises to Abraham to the church today. They essentially believe that God has promised to make all believers rich. This wealth is initiated by faith, demonstrated by Christ's incarnational example, and activated by seed planting.

1. Wealth initiated by faith

Prosperity-theology supporters argue that wealth is the divine right of all Christians but that the wealth is accessible only in proportion to their level of faith in God. A believer's faith connection to Abraham puts all the spiritual and physical blessings promised to Abraham at that believer's immediate disposal. T. D. Jakes, a prosperity-gospel leader, exclaims that faith is what motivates God to transfer His wealth to believers.

Not only is faith essential to prosperity proponents, but their hermeneutic (method of interpreting Scripture) is essential as well. Several verses of Scripture are used as proof texts for their belief system. One of the more prominent verses used is 3 John 2. Prosperity-gospel advocates believe the primary purpose of 3 John 2 is to teach that God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy. But they have missed the writer's intent.

READ: 3 John 2. **ASK:** Determining a writer's intent is important in interpreting and applying Scripture correctly. What would you say is the writer's intent in this verse? (Q7) *Primarily, to encourage his readers by praying for them; secondarily, to model genuine love and concern for fellow believers.*

2. Wealth demonstrated by Christ's example

Nowhere is this movement's heresy more apparent than when it comes to the incarnation of Christ. Many of the movement's followers present a Jesus Who looks remarkably like themselves. John Avanzini, for example, said on his Trinity Broadcasting Network program that he presents a Jesus that wears designer clothes, resides in a big house, and is so flush with money that He needs a treasurer.

ASK: Does needing a treasurer necessarily mean a person is rich? Explain. (Q8) *Not at all. The presence of a treasurer simply means there is some money to manage.*

Frederick K. C. Price, another supporter of this teaching, embraces the hypothesis that since Jesus was financially wealthy, believers should be wealthy as well. In defending his assumption on his TBN show, he said that believers should stop thinking Jesus and His disciples were poor. Jesus was wealthy, and believers are to follow in His footsteps by being wealthy too. Price drives a Rolls-Royce as a way of following Christ's example.

The idea that Jesus was rich is fabricated. The Bible never presents Jesus as wealthy. He was born into a modest household and lived in a modest city. He even

See T. D. Jakes's book called *Life Overflowing: 6 Pillars for Abundant Living* for more information on his prosperity-gospel point of view.

warned a man that was eager to follow Him that He had no permanent place to lay His head at night (Matt. 8:19, 20).

3. Wealth activated by seed planting

Prosperity theology thrives on the idea that wealth is gained, not only in proportion to one's faith, but also in accordance to one's giving to like-minded ministries. This is referred to as seed planting, a concept which is essentially ego-centric. The general idea is that a person reaps what he sows. The more *seed faith* money a person gives, the greater the return. Promoters of this teaching believe that when a person sows his seed money by faith, God creates an atmosphere of perpetual blessings for that person. If people will give their money to the church, the televangelist, or to certain preachers, God will give them back thirty, sixty, or one hundred times more than they gave. This teaching feeds upon an already prevailing covetous mentality.

ASK: Describe your level of trust in televangelists who ask for viewers' cash donations while promising that God will pay them back more than they gave. (Q9)

II. Biblical Evaluation of Prosperity Theology

The prosperity movement has swept across our nation like a hurricane, leaving in its path broken hearts, broken dreams, and distrust in God. It appears the only ones profiting from this movement are the prosperity preachers. Their fabulous homes, designer clothes, fancy automobiles, and enormous bank accounts prove that being a prosperity preacher has its earthly rewards.

TESTIMONY: If you have someone in your church who has been hurt by the prosperity gospel, ask him to share a brief testimony with your class. Otherwise, consider showing a video testimony from the Internet.

Many African American pulpits suffer because pastors have adopted the baseless rhetoric of prosperity theologians. Is there a Biblical answer to those who preach such rhetoric? Absolutely! God's Word, when examined with a careful, accurate hermeneutic, clearly refutes prosperity theology.

A. Biblical truth regarding physical health

Prosperity-gospel proponents believe Christ offers complete healing to humanity in this life based on His death. But the belief that physical health is guaranteed by Christ's atoning work lacks Biblical merit. Believers should understand what the Bible teaches on sickness and let that truth inform their response it.

1. Sickness is a result of Adam's sin

Most Christians agree with the prosperity movement's teaching regarding the origin of sickness and death. Due to Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, mankind has been inflicted with a curse.

READ: Romans 8:22, 23. **ASK:** How widespread is the curse? (Q10) *It affects all of creation, including our bodies.*

Sickness, suffering, and death came upon the human race due to Adam's willful disobedience, and both the righteous and the unrighteous share its reality.

2. Some sickness is related to sin

Some sickness is directly related to personal or corporate sin. The apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth that their misplaced values, pride, and unconfessed sins were the reasons for their present condition. Some of the Corinthians had a flippant, self-centered attitude regarding the Lord's Supper.

READ: 1 Corinthians 11:29, 30. **ASK:** To what degree did the Corinthians' sins affect their bodies? (Q11) *Some were sick and some even died.*

Attending the Lord's Supper fellowship with unconfessed sin brought severe judgment upon the guilty parties. God's solution to the demoralizing condition of the people was that they should examine themselves for sin before partaking (11:28). The alternative would be God's discipline in the form of sickness and perhaps even physical death.

3. Godly people get sick

The Bible contains several references to godly men who suffered with sickness or diseases. This should be a wake-up call to all who claim it is God's will that no Christian ever be sick. Job, who is affirmed by Scripture as a great man of faith (Job 1:1), was covered with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head (2:7). The apostle Paul reminded the Galatian believers of a bodily illness he had (Gal. 4:13). Timothy, Paul's son in the faith, suffered from frequent stomach problems. Instead of telling Timothy to *positively confess* his healing, Paul gave him some practical advice.

READ: 1 Timothy 5:23. **ASK:** What did Paul tell Timothy to do? (Q12) *To drink a little wine for medicinal purposes.*

Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20), while Epaphroditus fell ill and nearly died (Phil. 2:25-30).

READ: Philippians 2:25-27. **ASK:** Why did God allow Epaphroditus to get better? (Q13) *To mercifully keep Paul from having sorrow upon sorrow.*

There is no mention of positive confession in Paul's letter to Philippi. Epaphroditus, however, is praised for his willingness to put his life in danger for the cause of Christ (2:30).

4. God uses affliction and illness for His glory

God has also used affliction for His glory. This truth should perplex full-gospel proponents. There is no room in their subjective theological system to resolve the fact that God's Word records at least two occurrences of when this transpired.

The first occurrence is in Psalm 119. The writer, presumably King David, declares that experiencing affliction was not for his benefit alone.

READ: Psalm 119:71, 75. **ASK:** What did the writer of Psalm 119 exclaim about his affliction? (Q14) *That it was good for him to have been afflicted so he might learn God's statutes and so that God might be shown faithful.*

The second occurrence is the healing of the man born blind (John 9). Jesus states emphatically that the man's blindness was not due to inherited or personal sins. Rather, his blindness and subsequent healing were for the glory of God. When asked by His disciples whether sin was the cause of the man's blindness, Jesus said, *Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him* (9:3). God used the healing of the blind man to put His glory on display.

Obviously the health of humanity is not God's primary goal in this age. Accomplishing His will for His glory is a higher priority. This priority sometimes demands that believers experience illness.

B. Biblical truth regarding wealth

The idea that God desires all His children to be rich is not supported by observation of the world today. The obvious impoverishment of faithful believers in developing countries is a strike against such a belief.

Many Christians in Ghana, West Africa, for instance, are genuine in their faith, exuberant in their worship, and hungry for God's Word. Yet the overwhelming majority of them live in abject poverty. Observing their lives, one must conclude that their poverty has absolutely nothing to do with their lack of faith.

ASK: What might be some reasons poverty-stricken believers are not usually considered as evidence against the prosperity gospel? (Q15) *Most poverty-stricken believers are not in the United States, so they are out of sight and out of mind. They could be explained as simply ignorant of the prosperity God offers them.*

While there is nothing inherently wrong with wealth, it can become sinful when we pursue it as an object of our affection. Prosperity theology proponents make pursuing money their goal. The Bible reveals at least three dangers of pursuing money.

1. Pursuing money leads to loss of focus

The first danger of pursuing money is taking one's focus off God. All material blessings are the result of God's mercy and grace. People forget God when they emphasize the blessings of wealth over the Giver of wealth.

READ: Deuteronomy 8:10–14. **ASK:** What did God warn His people not to do once they were in the Promised Land enjoying the richness of the land? (Q16) *Become so focused on enjoying the land that they forget that God provided them with the land and all its abundance.*

We cannot pursue money without also serving it and loving it. And loving money makes it impossible to also love God (Matt. 6:24).

2. Pursuing money breeds covetousness

The second danger of pursuing money is that it breeds covetousness. In direct response to an extremely covetous man, Jesus educated His audience by giving them a stern warning (Luke 12:13–15).

READ: Luke 12:15. **ASK:** Why are we tempted to act as if life consists of the

Dr. Aaron Lavender, the contributor to this lesson, visited Ghana on five occasions and can personally testify of both the faithfulness and the poverty of the believers there.

See Dr. Aaron Lavender's book, *Are You a Full Gospel Christian?* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press), for more on the topic of pursuing money, including a section on the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21).

things we possess? (Q17) *That is the philosophy the world promotes; we can find acceptance and status in the world through our possessions; we are proud and want attention based on what we own.*

To illustrate the truth that life doesn't consist of things, Jesus told the story of a farmer who worked hard and realized a plentiful harvest (12:16). This material prosperity generated within the farmer a self-absorbed, insensitive spirit (12:17–19). The rich man died having no regard for God or others. God called the man a fool for pursuing goods and pointed out to him that he had left of all his possessions on earth for someone else to own (12:20). The man was spiritually bankrupt (12:21). Pursuing money breeds covetousness that results in a pointless, worthless life with no eternal value.

3. Pursuing money creates temptations

The third danger associated with pursuing money is that loving money produces snares and temptations.

READ: 1 Timothy 6:9, 10. **ASK:** *Why is the love of money at the root of all evil? (Q18)* *The love of money is driven by a love of self, which makes us highly susceptible to all kinds of temptation.*

As shoots grow out of a root, all things that are bad or evil may in fact grow out of a love for money. This desire for more money is so strong that those captured by it are tempted to sin in other ways (e.g., lying, stealing, cheating) to get more things. And there is no satisfaction to be found in things. So the temptations to sin to get more money grow even stronger.

READ: 1 Timothy 6:6–8. **ASK:** *Why is contentment a key ingredient in realizing true gain in life? (Q19)* *Contentment comes from trusting God to provide for one's needs. That trust in God becomes a pattern for other decisions in life.*

Pursuing a relationship with God is far more valuable than pursuing money. The value of a life lived for God lasts forever (Matt. 6:19–21).

RESPONDING TO CULTURE

Know the Word

ASK: *Why does a good understanding of God's Word help to keep us from falling prey to false teachings such as the prosperity gospel? (Q20)* *We will be able to recognize when Scripture is being misused and yanked out of context.*

ASK: *How will you strengthen your understanding of God's Word? (Q21)*

Contented Trust

God wants us to have faith in Him that He will accomplish His will in His time through us. Our faith becomes wrong when we expect God to align Himself with our selfish desires.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. **ASK:** How might we know if our faith is selfish? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q22) *There is little or no concern for others in our prayers; we are discontent most of the time; we don't seek to know God's will in His Word.*

Encourage your learners to talk to God about any selfishness evident in their faith. Motivate them to seek to know God and to do *His* will. (Q23)

Summary and Memory Verses

RESOURCE: Display resource 1. Add a response for lesson 1 or use the following: Find true value in loving and serving God, not money.

Encourage learners to memorize Matthew 6:20 and 21. Give them an opportunity to say the verses in class next week.

