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**A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing:**  
Joel Osteen's (Mis)use of Scripture in *Your Best Life Now*

The recent prodigy of popular Christianity, Joel Osteen, and his bestselling books *Your Best Life Now* and *Become a Better You*, are taking America and the world by storm. *Your Best Life Now* has reportedly sold five million copies while *Become a Better You* was the largest first printing in Free Press's history, three million copies.<sup>1</sup> Osteen often referred to by fans and critics alike as "The Smiling Preacher" because of his positively buoyant persona and charismatic demeanor, has risen in the ranks of popular Christian ministers to become a leader in Evangelical American Christianity. He has been called the "most influential Christian" in America<sup>2</sup> and, in 2006, was one of Barbara Walter's most interesting people of the year.

Osteen is senior pastor of the largest church in America,<sup>3</sup> Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, which boasts an average 40,000 attendants at weekly services.<sup>4</sup> Osteen's sermons and services are broadcast on numerous television networks around the world and seen in one hundred countries.<sup>5</sup> What is it about this man that makes his message so incredibly popular with millions of people? A common answer is his positive message that claims that Christians have the right to expect Divine favor and that they can obtain

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Osteen, interviewed by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, October 16, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> As ranked by ChurchReport.com and cited in the *60 Minutes* interview by Byron Pitts, October 14, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Osteen, *Larry King Live*.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Osteen, interviewed by Lillian Kwon, *The Christian Post*, February 15, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Osteen, interviewed by Robin Roberts, *Good Morning America*, ABC, October 15, 2007.

this favor by following Osteen's seven steps, which he outlines in his first book, *Your Best Life Now*.

"Favor," in Osteen's loose definition, ranges from physical health and material wealth to job promotion and even prime parking spaces and discounts at stores. If Christians will only pray the formulaic prayers, prayers that declare their desires to already be fulfilled, repeat positive affirmations and well-chosen scriptures, which Osteen provides his readers, and give in order to receive, also known as planting seeds of faith, they can receive almost anything that their heart desires.

Critical biblical scholarship provides a devastating critique of Osteen's use of the New Testament and its ethic on wealth and material possessions. Also, while the Hebrew Bible, especially the Deuteronomistic theology stemming from the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites, does contain passages<sup>6</sup> (specifically in Proverbs and Deuteronomy 28-30) equating God's favor with material and physical well-being, the scholar finds little of its formulaic logic in the New Testament, especially in the teaching of Jesus.

These facts throw the incongruities of Osteen's message into high relief, as this study will show. Osteen's teaching is in conflict with those of the Jesus of the Gospels, whom Osteen claims to serve and follow. Furthermore, Osteen's method is, in effect, a perversion of the New Testament Scriptures. The Biblical passages, especially from the New Testament, that are used in *Your Best Life Now*, are, at best, taken grossly out of context and misused and, at worst, are blatant misinterpretations of the teachings of Christ, the Apostle Paul and the writers of the general epistles. The endeavor of this paper

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<sup>6</sup> See Paul Gifford's article "Prosperity" in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford UP: 2000), 570-571.

is to demonstrate how Osteen has exploited the New Testament for the promotion of his own version of the gospel, the gospel of health and wealth. It is necessary for our study of Osteen's theological use of New Testament scripture to come to a full understanding of what that Testament does say about wealth, riches, possessions, and the pursuit of all these before we discuss what the New Testament does not say about these things, but what Osteen infers from Scripture and superimposes upon the teachings set forth in the New Testament.

### **The New Testament Ethic of Wealth**

Of the synoptic Gospels, Luke has more to say about wealth and the pursuit of riches than Matthew and Mark. Only Luke contains the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21) and the narrative of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). However, the Synoptics do share parables and narratives such as the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-25; Luke 8:4-18) and the narrative of the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). These passages require a careful exegesis as well as sociological and historical attention to locate their significant role in the Gospels. The synoptic Gospels, it is imperative to mention, do deal with the issues surrounding wealth more than any other group of texts within the New Testament. The Gospel of John does not deal directly with these issues. The letters of Paul rarely mention wealth. Paul's main focus and the theme in his letters seem to be discipleship and defining the best behavior for Christians who wish to live in a manner that reflects their belief in Christ as their Savior. However, the deutero-Pauline letters of James and I Timothy do have scathing remarks towards excessive wealth and the pursuit of worldly things. These passages offer

perhaps the most direct criticisms of wealth and the dangers of the pursuit of riches. However, the primacy of the Gospel teachings and the teachings of Jesus regarding wealth and possessions cannot be denied. To understand this fully, we must examine several key New Testament passages.

The synoptic Gospels are peppered with references to wealth, the sacrifice of possessions for the kingdom of God and the furthering of the gospel, as well as the danger of serving two masters, God and mammon. This latter idea comes from a passage in Luke 16:13 and Matthew 6:24: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”<sup>7</sup> The term *mammon*, it is crucial to note, is an Aramaic word for possessions and is used in the negative sense in this passage. However, the presence of an Aramaic word in a gospel written in Greek may suggest that the early gospel writers left the term untranslated because it was seen as a name for an idol.<sup>8</sup> This coincides with the idea present in all of the gospels that Jesus and his ministry were bringing about a new world order, the kingdom of God. Furthermore, “the imminence of the kingdom of God demands freedom over possessions, the renunciation of all care, complete trust in the goodness and providence of the heavenly Father.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, possessions come to represent something evil and “demonic in nature” for scholars such as Martin Hengel, in *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, because they are symbolic of the rejection of the kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> All biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Hengel, *Prosperity and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

A brief summary of the Gospels' understanding of wealth in connection with the kingdom and discipleship can be gleaned by a survey of several statements concerning the wealth of Jesus, the disciples, and the way that they lived during Jesus' three-year ministry. Jesus had few possessions of his own, if we are to take passages such as Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58, which state that Jesus had "nowhere to lay his head," as indicative of chosen way of life. He told the disciples to leave their families and businesses when he called them<sup>11</sup> and sent the disciples on journeys with virtually nothing in their pockets.<sup>12</sup> Many scholars assert that Jesus and his disciples lived an itinerant lifestyle during their journeys throughout Judea. This lifestyle also was a strong factor in the teachings of Jesus and those of the Gospel writers. If one was to follow Christ, s/he must replicate his actions, even to death. Therefore, the pressing issues of money and possessions were very real in the first generation church.

One scholar, James Crossley, makes the claim that the real audience of Jesus' message was the wealthy. This may sound strange, especially given the passages in the Gospels, which seem to say the exact opposite.<sup>13</sup> However, Crossley makes a very strong argument, saying bluntly that it was the rich who most needed the grace and mercy offered in Jesus' message, "these sorts of people *must* repent before it is too late, as summarized in the ominous conclusion to the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:20-21)."<sup>14</sup> The people who serve mammon, who seek the company of the rich in order to be repaid (Luke 14:12-14) and those who store up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19-21; Luke

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<sup>11</sup> See Luke 9:59; 14:26; Mark 1:16; 10:17, 28.

<sup>12</sup> See Luke 9:3; 10:4; Mark 6:8.

<sup>13</sup> See Luke 4:16; 7:22; Matthew 11:5.

<sup>14</sup> James G. Crossley, "The Damned Rich (Mark 10:17-31)," *The Expository Times* 116.12 (Spring 2005), 400.

12:33-34) are the ones who are farthest from God's favor. Regardless of the reward-based theology that is present in the Hebrew Bible, the poor have always found favor with God because of the reasons for their poverty, namely oppression and social injustice.

Therefore, the prominence given to reforming the wealthy in the synoptic Gospels allows the scholar to infer that wealth is not something to be seen as a reward from God but, most certainly, can be seen as an obstacle to entering into the kingdom of God and into eternal life. Few passages in the synoptic Gospels tackle this issue more concisely than that of the rich man who comes to Jesus, asking what he must do to gain eternal life. Luke, however, contains other passages that deal with the perils of wealth.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:16-31) and the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:16-31) both deal with men who serve mammon instead God. In the former passage, both the rich man and Lazarus die. The rich man goes to Hades where he is tormented, while Lazarus is in paradise with Abraham. The rich man calls out for aid, asking Lazarus for cool water. It is Abraham who pronounces judgment, saying "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here and you are in agony" (16:25). The latter passage, however, does not offer a scathing pronouncement of wealth but tries to persuade the audience to trust God in all things. The rich fool has torn down his barns in order to build larger ones to hold his abundant harvest of grain. But God comes to the man and calls for his life. The man had stored treasures for himself and was not rich toward God (12:21). Instead, he greedily worried about his own wealth. Jesus calls the man a fool. In *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, Miguel A. De La Torre comments on the harshness of Jesus' reply, saying "This is the same Jesus who in Matthew 5:22 tells us

not to call anyone a fool lest we be answerable by hell's fire! By the use of such strong language, Jesus castigates the person whom our present society elevates.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, De La Torre comments on the Christian's desire to “spiritualize” such passages, “interpreting it so that the sin is not hoarding resources that could be shared with those who had none but rather relying on the individual to succeed instead of God.”<sup>16</sup>

However, the passage within the synoptic Gospels known as the narrative of the Rich Man (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30) takes this idea of wealth and greed further. For our examination here, we will limit our exegesis to the passage as it appears in Mark 10:17-31. The passage can be split into two sections, the dialogue between the nameless man and Jesus and the lesson to and dialogue with the disciples, namely, Peter. What is standard in this form of narrative is the connection between the two sections and the utilization of the latter section to interpret the former.

When reading the passage, it is crucial to note one of Mark's typical rhetorical tools. He uses the Greek word εἷς, meaning “one,” to denote the universality of the man around whom the narrative revolves. The man, then, is seen as a “neutral figure, a figure of ‘everyman’ who shares his lot as an owner of many possessions.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus refers the man who seeks eternal life to the Decalogue. The portion of the Decalogue, from which Jesus quotes, is commandments dealing with human interaction and social justice. Murder, adultery, honoring one's parents, not bearing false witness and not defrauding others all focus on relations with others. However, there is one notable change to the

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<sup>15</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 111.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 111-12.

<sup>17</sup> Sondra Ely Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 44.

Decalogue as presented in Mark. The command to “not defraud” (10:19) is not in the Exodus version of the Decalogue.

As James Crossley notes, the commandment against coveting has been replaced by fraud in the passage and we can assume the writer had a very specific reason for doing so. The verb used is *apostereo*. This verb is also present in the LXX translation for Malachi 3:5, “in the context of not depriving workers of their wages”<sup>18</sup> and is echoed in again in Mark 10:19. Crossley posits that the reason this command was added was to show the uprightness of the man’s actions in his business. He had “not even done what many rich people were deemed all too able to do: oppress and/or take advantage of and/or deny wages.”<sup>19</sup> The man, who claims to have kept all of these commandments, is shocked and saddened when Jesus tells him there is still one more thing he must do.

This “one thing” is to listen to the call of discipleship. In order for this man to follow the first part of the Decalogue, his discipleship must take the form of the sacrifice of all worldly goods.<sup>20</sup> The man, unable to give up his wealth, goes away grieving, because “he is unable to leave them even to have the life he knows enough to seek. The man also knows enough to sorrow for the life he is forgoing” by his rejection of the call to discipleship.<sup>21</sup> As Wheeler notes, his sadness is, in part, due to the theology that surrounds him in the Jewish traditions in which he and the disciples were raised.<sup>22</sup> His surprise, as well as that of Peter, is a natural reaction to this theological view that his

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<sup>18</sup> Crossley, 397.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wheeler, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

wealth is “a reward for obedience and not something to be surrendered.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, according to Sondra Wheeler in *Wealth as Peril and Obligation*, the disciples were actually “struck outside themselves” by Jesus’ pronouncement, which is an idiomatic phrase denoting an abrupt sense of shock and disbelief.<sup>24</sup>

Some scholars, however, argue over the exact meaning in Jesus’ sayings, such as “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 23); “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (v.25). Additionally, it is precisely this latter statement of Jesus that has caused scholars and preachers alike to downplay the importance and harshness of this passage. Some view this passage as merely a warning against greed while others (mostly in the Middle Ages, but also among prosperity preachers) opt for a more tangible excuse, such as a gate in Jerusalem called “Needle’s eye”<sup>25</sup> where a camel would have to crawl through the gate, meaning that it was not impossible for the rich to enter into the kingdom, just very difficult for this to be done. Another view of this passage is that it is simply a story about one man and not a “programmatic statement of Jesus about the ethics of property ownership.”<sup>26</sup> Because this man, to some readers, is not an everyman, the lesson that follows the passage does not apply to all Christians.

If, however, the reader does identify him/herself as being similar to this rich man, and also hears and accepts the call of discipleship being offered in Jesus’ message, what will s/he receive as a reward? Like Peter, s/he can expect to have to leave their homes,

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<sup>23</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downer’s Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 139.

<sup>24</sup> Wheeler, 46-47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 399.

<sup>26</sup> Wheeler, 45-46.

families and fields in order to follow him. These sacrifices will be remembered and the faithful will “receive a hundredfold now in this age” the things which s/he have sacrificed for the kingdom. It is this portion of the passage that appeals to prosperity theology. The promise of material gain for spiritual sacrifice is an attractive reward. However, this is not the correct reading of the text. What is promised to be increased a hundredfold is “the community of those who follow.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the family that is gained is the “spiritual kin they acquire as they become part of the large family of God’s people.”<sup>28</sup> Craig Blomberg continues his examination of the passage by noting that “a new family means a new community of those who share with one another” and without anyone thinking of their possessions as their own.<sup>29</sup> However, Wheeler is quick to remind her readers that “whatever the real richness of life in the community, it is experienced, against the background of persecutions, as permanently insecure.”<sup>30</sup>

This, while attracting followers in the first and second century, is a less popular and desirable image of Christianity for today’s Christians. How, then, is this passage to be read in a modern church community? Wheeler offers an option, but it is dependent on the modern Christians’ acceptance of the kingdom of God. She sees the passage in Mark as dealing with discipleship first, with the understanding that wealth is “a potential obstacle to discipleship.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, at issue is whether or not the Christian is “unable to abandon wealth to follow Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> However, this model for discipleship means nothing unless the modern church has “some idea that a commitment to Christ might take

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Blomberg, 140.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Wheeler, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the form of being called upon to *do* something concrete and distinctive, rather than simply to believe something, or to live a conventionally decent life.”<sup>33</sup> If, on the other hand, this understanding is not present, then the passage in Mark means nothing to the modern church. If the term “Christian” does not command some kind of allegiance to the kingdom of God, then the sacrifices associated with discipleship, like giving up possessions, families, and jobs, is not necessary and may be seen as superfluous piety.

It is because of this that other New Testament passages must be examined along with the teachings of Jesus as presented in the Gospels. The terms of wealth that are given in this passage and other Gospel pericopes are, at best, contextual and dependent on the social context of wealth within that specific time period and historical situation. At its worst, these passages can and will be viewed only as separate incidences that do not function within a broader understanding of Jesus’ ministry and a universal idea of the Christian lifestyle and are interpreted only through a metaphorical and spiritual lens, not a lens which takes into account the entire gospel message of Jesus Christ. In his critique of biblically justified classism, De La Torre has this question for “well-off” Christians: “How do they reconcile . . . claims of seeking self-interest, the foundation of a capitalist economy, with the biblical admonition to put the needs of others before one’s own needs?”<sup>34</sup>

As previously noted, the epistle of James contains some of the harshest criticism of wealth, the rich and the pursuit of material gain. The opening chapter of James contains an admonition to those Christians who are suffering, saying, “Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>34</sup> De La Torre, 81.

will disappear like a flower in the field” (1:10-11). This passage, called the “reversal of fortunes” by scholars, is the first of many within James.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the point of this harsh treatment of the rich so early in James’ letter is most likely an attempt by the author to “help those who, by reason of their religious affirmation and affiliation as ‘The Lord’s poor,’ feel themselves socially disadvantaged and slighted.”<sup>36</sup> James furthers his invective toward the rich in 2:5-7 when he writes, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you?” Ralph Martin, in his analysis of this passage, reminds his readers that “the evaluation that the poor are dear to God was firmly rooted in both Jewish and Christian thinking.”<sup>37</sup> Martin interprets this passage as a sharp warning from James to this church community. They are discriminating against the poor, which causes them to be “at risk of excluding themselves from the promise to those who inherit the kingdom.”<sup>38</sup> While De La Torre widens this critique to the modern church, saying that they who “refuse to interpret biblical texts from the perspective of those who first heard the Gospels, the poor, end up fabricating interpretations that tend to spiritualize the gospel message and then refuse to deal literally with how those original hearers understood Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

James carries this assault against the rich further in chapter 5. James’ audience was attempting to follow the example of these wealthy non-Christians and was also trying to justify their desires and actions when James is writing to them. James claims

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<sup>35</sup> Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary V.48: James* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1988), 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> De La Torre, 111.

that riches and worldly possessions are nothing, saying, “Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and will eat your flesh like fire” (5:2-3). James is speaking here to rich farmers and using a rhetorical style that was common among the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>40</sup> Like the prophets, James is rendering a description of the Day of Judgment.

The verb “to rust” used to describe the effects on gold and silver is “paradoxical,” according to Martin, because gold does not corrode. The point James is making, therefore, is that “even the most permanent earthly treasure has no lasting value” and that “it is a senseless practice to invest one’s hope in objects that are mundane and transient.”<sup>41</sup> The rusting of the gold also shows the greed of the rich, who have not given to the needy and poor but have kept their riches and not put them to any honorable use only to see them utterly destroyed. Martin concludes his analysis with the observation that “the wealth of the ungodly rich stands as a witness to accuse them.”<sup>42</sup> This passage provides a stirring and somewhat frightening closing to James’ remarks on the wealthy and their disregard of the poor. Its reminiscence of the judgments of the prophets and to the description of the final judgment as described by Jesus shows the danger that comes with wealth and the ungodly character of the pursuit of such wealth.

I Timothy, one of the Pastoral Letters, which probably was not written by Paul but by an associate or follower of Paul, deals with wealth and the rich in its last chapter. First, the author addresses those who want to be rich and then those who have wealth. After a

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<sup>40</sup> Martin, 172. (Martin suggests reading Isaiah chaps. 5, 13, 15, 34, which are the oracles against foreign nations)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 177.

common set of exhortations on correct and incorrect behavior for a Christian, the author continues by saying:

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (6:9-10)

Outside the Gospels, this is one of the few passages that address the desire for riches and the pursuit of wealth, as opposed to addressing those who are already wealthy. The author is warning the readers of false teachings and, apparently, the teaching that the pursuit of wealth is a godly and noble enterprise was being taught in this community. The author wishes to rectify this false teaching by dispelling the lie that “the profit of godliness is measured in terms of wealth.”<sup>43</sup> For Blomberg in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, “Godliness must not be seen as a means to financial gain. Rather, godliness with contentment in whatever circumstances one finds oneself is viewed as great spiritual gain.”<sup>44</sup> Obviously, some members of the congregation were under the assumption that obedience led to material gain, as we have seen before in Mark. This reward theology corresponds with traditional Jewish thinking. The writer therefore goes through great pains to illustrate the futility of such a mindset and also hopes to show his readers the correct way of viewing spiritual gain and mature relationship with God.

The rationale that is present in this section is similar to that found in Job 1:21.<sup>45</sup> Because we, as humans, bring nothing into the world, we can take anything out of it. How then can we assume the right and responsibility to obtain wealth as a means of

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<sup>43</sup> William D Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 344.

<sup>44</sup> Blomberg, 210.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

spiritual growth? Later, in that same chapter, the author addresses those who are rich, saying, “Command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (6:17). This passage is strongly reminiscent in thought and theme with James 5. Riches and all physical and material things are ephemeral. Compared to the greatness of God, eternal life, and the Kingdom of God, worldly riches are nothing. They will decay and rot, leaving the bearer empty-handed and possibly lacking something much more, inheritance into God’s kingdom. Therefore, the importance shifts from earthly wealth to spiritual wealth. The author is “telling those who have this world’s goods not to count on being able to buy the favors of others in return” and yet he does command the wealthy to be generous to those in need.<sup>46</sup> The desire that is presented in this chapter is that the wealthy recognize the greatness of God and the ephemeral nature of worldly goods and that they “do good,” “be rich in good deeds,” “be generous,” and be willing to share what they have with others who are in need (6:18).

Through this brief examination of some of the more important New Testament passages on wealth, we can see a strong theology dismissing the pursuit of material or earthly goods in lieu of spiritual gain. A central theme within the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament is discipleship. One common stumbling block to this seems to be wealth or, at the very least, the pursuit of wealth. And while the New Testament never goes so far as to condemn wealth in totality (it is important to note that wealth did help spread the gospel throughout Greece and Asia Minor), it is seen as a dangerous pursuit. Wealth is also viewed as something impermanent and fleeting. The New Testament’s

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 211.

major theme of the impending eschaton places all worldly concerns in the background of the overarching goal of eternal life, when the kingdom of God comes to complete fruition. The question that arises now is: when did these passages on riches and the wealthy become of little importance to leaders in the prosperity movement and how did this slow separation between the call to discipleship and the dangers of wealth occur? At what point did some American ministers begin to preach a gospel, not of sacrifice, but of material wealth and physical health as a reward for right relationship with God?

Now that an ethic of wealth has been established within New Testament scripture, we turn our focus to the reaction of modern American ministers, like Russell Conwell and Norman Vincent Peale, who have become overwhelmingly popular with certain Christian groups and how these ministers adhere to this ethic or reject this ethic, choosing instead to reinterpret scripture to suit their own theological goals. Joel Osteen is the most prominent and recent example of the popular minister. However, large churches and enormous followings are nothing new to American Christianity. Neither is the movement of prosperity, also known as the Gospel of Health and Wealth.

### **Prosperity Theology's Origins**

Russell Conwell was, by most accounts, the creator of modern prosperity thought within Christianity. His idea of the Christians' right and duty to obtain wealth has been used and built upon by numerous ministers, such as Kenneth and Gloria Copeland,<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Proponents of the Word of Faith Movement and authors of such books as: *Prosperity: The Choice is Yours*, *The Laws of Prosperity*, *One Word from God* series, *Protection Promises*, and *Prayer: Your Foundation for Success*.

Kenneth Hagin<sup>48</sup> and Oral Roberts.<sup>49</sup> Another preacher who pioneered prosperity thinking was Norman Vincent Peale, the public speaker and writer who was the progenitor of the “positive thinking” movement in the mid-twentieth century. His message of harnessing the power of positive thought in order to succeed in business and heal oneself has also been weaved into modern prosperity theology. Joel Osteen’s message in *Your Best Life Now* draws upon the theories and theologies of these two men. In order to clearly see this connection, it will be helpful to summarize and reflect upon the foundational works of both Conwell in *Acres of Diamonds* and Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

In 1862, a young man of nineteen gave a lecture, which would be later called “Acres of Diamonds.” This man, Russell H. Conwell, would later become a Baptist minister and travel the United States and the world giving his lecture on how to realize the wealth around you and fulfill the Christian’s duty of being prosperous. At his death in 1925, Conwell had given his groundbreaking lecture 6,000 times<sup>50</sup> and the publication of his famous speech would go on to be published and sell tens of thousands of copies. It was Conwell’s ministry to dispel the negative image Christians had toward wealth and the pursuit of it. Conwell countered the more ascetic views of Christian discipleship by arguing that Christians “ought to get rich, and it is [their] duty to get rich.”<sup>51</sup>

However, before Conwell’s ideology could be accepted, it was necessary to justify the actions of the wealthy and tear down the common myths and misconceptions

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<sup>48</sup> Creator of the Word of Faith Movement and author of several books dealing with healing and prosperity through prayer, such as: *Art of Prayer*, *Praying to Get Results*, *Executing the Basics of Healing: A Game Plan for Walking in Divine Healing*.

<sup>49</sup> Founder of Oral Robert University and creator of the “seed faith” theology noted in Paul Gifford’s article, “Prosperity” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*.

<sup>50</sup> Agnes Rush Burr, *Russell H. Conwell and His Work, One Man’s Interpretation of Life* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1926) 307.

<sup>51</sup> Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Jove Books, 1978), 20.

about wealth as a corruptive agent to Christian piety and the acquisition of wealth as an ungodly pursuit. Conwell scoffs at this idea saying, “And yet there are some people who think in order to be pious you must be awfully poor and awfully dirty.”<sup>52</sup> Conwell claimed that “ninety-eight out of one hundred of the rich men in America are honest. That is why they are rich.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, for Conwell’s movement to flourish, which it did, it was necessary for the minister to change the perceptions Christians had concerning their duties and responsibilities to their God. Conwell expounds on this concept by stating that “the foundation of godliness and the foundation principle of success in business are both the same.”<sup>54</sup> Conwell assumes that his audience will make the connection between honesty and righteousness. If wealthy men are honest, than honest men have a greater potential for accruing wealth.

Additionally, Conwell repeatedly claimed that wealth is a necessary component to the fulfillment of God’s will in a Christian’s life. If you are wealthy, you are in fulfillment of God’s divine will. If you are not wealthy, then you are not fulfilling your Christian duty and are failing God. Furthermore, those who are not wealthy or prosperous, may in fact be so by their own doing, or worse, by the will of God.

Conwell makes many claims about the poor early in his lecture. “The number of poor,” he says, “to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins, thus to help him when God would still continue a just punishment is wrong.”<sup>55</sup> The crux of this message, which was preached in every state and in several nations worldwide, is that God wants Christians to be wealthy. It is a reward.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 23.

Poverty, on the other hand, is either a punishment or the just desserts of someone who deserves no better. Conwell states this subtly, “A man can judge very well what he is worth by what he receives.”<sup>56</sup>

Sadly, Conwell does not expound on this burgeoning prosperity theology. He gives no references to scripture, nor does he formulate a hypothesis for this reward based divine-human relationship. He simply states it as being at work in his life and the lives of the hundreds of people he has helped by this inspiring message. And truly, his message does have an inspiring note. He urges his audience not to simply dream about rising above their circumstances, but to realize their potential and the potential of the things around them, in their towns and cities.

As motivating and inspiring as Conwell’s message is, it also brings with it, on a subtle understated level, a sense of condemnation and guilt for those Christians who are poor, who will never be prosperous or wealthy, and who believe to be failing both themselves and their Christian duty to their God. The realization that they have sinned, are being punished for living an ungodly life and have failed the “duty” set before them can be – will be – detrimental to their system of belief.

Likewise, the loosely scriptural foundation of Norman Vincent Peale’s 1956 publication, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, changed the way Christians thought about prosperity, health, and the means to attaining them. Where Conwell gave an order to Christians, Peale gave them a method. He created a revolutionary way of thinking and praying in order to obtain blessings from God. The method was to recite affirmations of faith and scripture and to think positively in order to maintain physical health and gain

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 27.

material and financial success. Peale also relied heavily on scripture whereas Conwell did not. Therefore, Peale placed his theology of positive affirmation in a spiritual realm by connecting success with Biblical passages. The rhetoric of his book also builds upon this premise. All of his claims are backed by well-known scripture verses. His affirmations and sample prayers are also drawn from New Testament passages. This, in union with positive thinking and the repression of negative thoughts, should almost guarantee success in any realm. Peale shows this success by constructing his book as a series of anecdotes where most of the assertions Peale makes are placed within conversations he has had with others who claim the method, his method, has worked for them.

Additionally, there are some foundational principles in Peale's work, similar to those that we will examine in Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*. Peale first warns his readers against negative thoughts, saying that a negative attitude "repels success"<sup>57</sup> and that it is "our attitude" in difficult situations that either fosters or hinders victory.<sup>58</sup> Peale goes on to say that "the trouble with most prayers is that they aren't big enough."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the blame for one's lack of victory, wealth, or health is placed on the person who has not prayed fervently enough, sincerely enough, or big enough. Peale's remedy for this dangerous problem is the recitation of specific scriptures, such as "I can do anything through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) and "According to your faith be it done to you" (Matthew 9:29). However, what is not discussed in conjunction with these passages is the context in which they are presented to the reader.

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<sup>57</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1956), 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

The former passage comes from Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He is comforting his readers by thanking them for their concern for his physical and spiritual wellbeing while he was in prison (Phil 4:10-14). He tells the Philippians not to worry over his physical and spiritual state because he has Christ to strengthen him through this challenging time in his ministry. The latter passage comes from a miracle story in Matthew where Jesus heals two blind men and asks them whether they believe he is able to heal them (Matt 9:27-31). This is one of many healing stories within the chapter; all are presented in an attempt to show the reader the power of Jesus as the messiah and Son of God.

The idea that these, and other passages, can be repeated a specific number of times per day in order for the speaker to gain victory over obstacles has no scriptural basis within the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Peale has simply placed the theory of positive affirmation onto scripture. While some motivational speakers were giving their audiences affirmations that had no biblical basis but were still positive, Peale gave his audience supposedly Christian affirmations that were claimed to work like magic in the lives of those who said them regularly (typically ten times per day) and with sincerity.

Along with the idea of thinking positively and daily affirmations is Peale's theology of prayer. Prayer, he said, "restores the harmonious functioning of the body and the soul" and "is a vital part of the power-releasing process."<sup>60</sup> Peale even goes so far as to make the claim that "prayer power seems able to even normalize the aging process, obviating or limiting infirmity and deterioration."<sup>61</sup> Given the seriousness of this claim it is necessary for Peale to provide his readers with "fresh prayer formulas" that will change

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 38 and 39.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 39.

their lives. These passages can be found in Matthew 9:29; 18:19-20; and Mark 11:24. All of the passages have been taken out of their textual context and their social-historical context and Peale uses them to suggest to his reader that by the mere recitation of “positive” biblical scripture one’s prayer will be answered, regardless of their placement within the Biblical text. They are then used as a mantra, in the sense that the more they are recited, the more power that is released in the life of the speaker.

However, it is necessary for Peale to offer an apologetic when the method fails to work. He then, in the latter chapters of his book, assaults the reader with accusations of weakness. Peale claims that “people are defeated in life because of a lack of wholeheartedness” and that “they themselves are not fully given” to the system of positive affirmation and the power of prayer.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Peale asserts that, “life cannot deny itself to the person who gives life his all.”<sup>63</sup> What Peale is presenting his reader is very similar to the argument that Russell Conwell also made. If you are not successful and healthy, the problem lies within you. You are at fault for your material and physical wellbeing. And while this may be true to some extent, it continues the cycle of guilt and self-blame that has become characteristic of prosperity theology. If the system works, it is credited to the power of prayer and the power of God. However, if the method fails, then the fault lies with the person who did not try hard enough. The power then shifts from God to humans. It is this reversal that makes the gospel of health and wealth so dangerous for those who exposed to it. Failure is internalized and the relationship with God suffers because the Christian is not good enough for God’s blessing and reward.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## **The Gospel of Health and Wealth during the 1980s**

The works by Conwell and Peale have served as a foundation to the prosperity movement within American Christianity. Also, the principles offered in both *Acres of Diamonds* and *The Power of Positive Thinking* have been modified throughout the phases of the gospel of prosperity. Other defining characteristics of prosperity theology came about in later decades, during the height of the prosperity gospel movement. This movement began in the 1980s, specifically during the Reagan administration, when capitalism and the pursuit of wealth was at an all time high. In turn, American Christians felt the need to justify their greed and strong adherence to the capitalist economic system, which functions solely on the oppression of others and the advantage gained by oppressive social structures. Therefore, the gospel of prosperity was born out of the affluent Christians' desire to rationalize their blatant rejection of the selfless and anti-materialistic principles of the New Testament, specifically in the teaching of Jesus.

What, then, are the staples of this doctrine and how does it seek to reconcile itself with Biblical scripture? Two notable articles published in the 1980s seek to answer these questions, especially in relation to the most prominent prosperity preachers of the day, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Robert Tilton, Kenneth Hagin and Jimmy Swaggart. Ken L. Sarles article "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel" and David T. Williams' "The Heresy of Prosperity Teaching" will be used to illustrate the core elements of this theology and then will be compared to Joel Osteen's first publication, *Your Best Life Now*. We will attempt to understand further what theology Osteen is preaching his thousands of followers, where these teachings originated, and how they are

linked with scripture. First, however, it is necessary to define prosperity theology as it appeared in the 1980s to 1990s.

Williams describes his understanding of prosperity teaching as “a Christian, by exercise, of faith, can claim material benefits; he has a right to be rich because he is a child of God who owns all things, and because Christ died on the cross to redeem him from all the ‘curse of the law,’ which includes poverty.”<sup>64</sup> There are many facets to the illegitimacy of the claim that is being made by the proponents of this way of thinking. To begin, there is a misunderstanding of the will of God, an assumption on the part of the Christian that they can and should expect and demand things from God, which raises the status of humans and decreases the sovereignty of God. There are also the slippery loopholes that these preachers use when healing is not achieved; wealth is not gained, which places blame and guilt upon believing Christians. Furthermore, the idea of faith that is being taught within this type of theology is not biblically sound and is dangerous for any Christian seeking to be like Christ.

However, this prosperity movement is not without a moral facet. The overarching reason for attaining wealth is to help others who are less fortunate. Both Conwell and Peale gave generously to charities and to individuals. Richard Conwell even admitted to a biographer that he did not keep any of his profits even though he made substantial amounts. Therefore, it is possible for the prosperity movement to take on a philanthropic edge. Williams also recognizes this theme within prosperity preaching by noting that, wealth is “necessary to provide relief of poverty . . . to provide funds for spiritual

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<sup>64</sup> David T. Williams, “The Heresy of Prosperity Teaching,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 61.1 (Dec. 1987), 33.

work.”<sup>65</sup> The rationale at work is that money is an integral part of fulfilling the Great Commission given to Christians in Matthew 28. And yet, there is also a darker side to this giving, which is the law of compensation. Sarles defines this as “a divine, spiritual law . . . . When one gives to others, whether money something else, more will be given by God in return.”<sup>66</sup> The basis for this belief is Mark 10:30, which describes a hundred fold blessing upon those who decide to follow Christ. However, as we have seen in our earlier discussion of this passage, what is promised is not material, but communal and spiritual.

We also must understand the roots of this movement and outline a few defining characteristics of churches that promote this gospel. First, modern prosperity preachers are typically of the Pentecostal or charismatic tradition, which, more often than not, is marked by “strong authoritarian leadership,” “conservative political views” and charismatic worship services.<sup>67</sup> What goes along with these things is also the very fundamentalist view of scripture and the inerrant and fully inspired word of God. As Williams notes, “each verse is treated as immediately applicable to the reader” making the interpretation of a verse such as Matthew 21:21, where Jesus tells the disciples that they can move mountains with only a command, become a life application for removing illness and debt.<sup>68</sup> Scripture, then, may be divorced from its social and historical context and applied to a situation, functioning as a kind of absolute truth. This kind of interpretation is “highly subjective and arbitrary” and, as Sarles claims rather boldly, a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 143.0572 (Oct-Dec 1986), 333.

<sup>67</sup> Williams, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 36.

“distortion of textual meaning.”<sup>69</sup> There is also a strong element of continuing revelation among churches of this sort, which is almost contradictory to their strict views of reading scripture. There is “inspiration *beyond* the text” with “verbal revelation” continuing in the vision and dreams of the preacher or pastor.<sup>70</sup> These revelatory experiences of the charismatic prosperity preacher tend to raise “the question of their authenticity as the genuine revelation of God rather than simply subjective feelings”<sup>71</sup> in the minds of scholars and yet goes unquestioned and undoubted by the churches’ masses of attendants. This element of heightened spirituality heightens the authority of these preachers, making a critical analysis of their teachings more difficult.

The theological and scriptural base for this movement stems mostly from the Abrahamic covenant. Additionally, the scripture in the New Testament is also used to bolster the claims that if a Christian performs certain duties and tasks, they too can reap the benefits that Abraham and his descendants were promised. As Sarles notes, Kenneth Hagin turned Genesis 13 into a source for a three-fold promise, one of spiritual, physical and financial blessing.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant becomes conditional and based on the participant’s actions and obedience instead of the grace of God. Furthermore, passages such as Galatians 3:14, which states that, “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” are used to further the Christian’s right to wealth. The context of the passage has been stripped from its interpretation. Prosperity preachers use this passage, and others, to show their followers the claim that Christians have to material

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<sup>69</sup> Sarles, 337.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Sarles, 334.

blessings. The fact that the passage is dealing more with the spiritual blessings that one may now attain through salvation by Christ is disregarded in favor of a more material interpretation.<sup>73</sup> By defending “the conditional nature of the covenant and the extension of the personal blessings,” the interpreter had taken the scripture out of context.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, passages like those in Deuteronomy 28, which discuss the blessing and curses that will be placed upon the Hebrew people for certain actions are “historically conditioned” and cannot “be extended to New Testament saints.”<sup>75</sup> What occurs because of this is a reduction of the importance of grace within Christian belief. If one is to labor constantly under the threat of divine punishment or reprisal the grace that is provided to Christians through the acts of Christ are stripped of their importance. Furthermore, the result is an apathetic attitude toward those in need, as we have seen in Russell Conwell.

However, this is not the only theological issue that is raised by the propagation of the prosperity gospel. As mentioned earlier, the sovereignty of God is challenged by this theology and that of humans is raised to such a height that humans are able to make claims upon God and bind God in God’s own “divine laws,” such as the “law of compensation,” a phrase coined by Robert Tilton. There is also the idea of positive confession, something we have already encountered in Peale’s work. The driving force within both of these tactics is the use of human faith. It “becomes a power exerted by individuals” and loses its original meaning as being a type of “resting or repose.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, through positive confession, “God is forced to act by human technique. This denies the idea of the sovereignty or the freedom of God, rendering human whims

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 347.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

absolute.”<sup>77</sup> This is done through claiming one’s healing or financial gains. One begins to speak as though s/he is already healed or wealthy. Therefore, the responsibility for wealth and health is on the person, which “places a tremendous onus on the individual to act in God’s stead by ‘getting the ball rolling.’”<sup>78</sup> For this reason, it is typically called the name-it-claim-it gospel, which was the favored teaching of Kenneth Hagin. This theology, then, begins to work like an algebra equation. If you are fervent in prayer, think positively, and claim your healing, wishes, needs and desires to already be met, God is bound by the laws set in motion to do what has been ordered by humans. And yet, this is not a foolproof plan. Many times the healing, job offer, or loan does not come through. Simply commanding their cancer to flee from their bodies does not miraculously heal people. What excuse or reason do prosperity preachers give when their methods work for their own lives but not in the lives of their parishioners?

This failure can only be the result of one of three problems: a lack of faith, the infiltration of negative thoughts, or the need for patience. The problem is not within the doctrine that is being preached, but instead it is “due to a lack of faith.”<sup>79</sup> James 1:7 is used to establish this claim because “the receipt of blessing is dependent upon a continued exercise of faith until that which is claimed is actually received.”<sup>80</sup> This idea goes hand in hand with the need for continued patience. As Sarles notes, “The seriously ill are exhorted to persist in their confession and build up their faith to the level necessary to obtain the promised healing.”<sup>81</sup> If faith and patience are not the problem, negative

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, 35.

<sup>78</sup> Sarles, 342.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Sarles, 332.

thinking may be the barrier between wholeness and illness/poverty. However, as previously noted, this “places an enormous burden on the believer to control his thoughts in order to achieve prosperity” and serves as a “ready escape hatch for the prosperity preacher and faith healer when their ‘miracles’ do not come to pass.”<sup>82</sup>

### **Prosperity Theology – Renovated and Repackaged**

Such is the brand of prosperity theology that was popular a decade ago. With the rising popularity of Joel Osteen, prosperity preaching and teaching has changed, becoming much more subtle and potentially subversive. Gone are Kenneth Hagin’s railings against demons that cause disease or the boisterous commanding of Tilton and Kenneth Copeland. Osteen, instead, has opted for a calmer and more sedate approach to gaining prosperity, good health, and success. First, in *Your Best Life Now*, he never directly discusses money. He offers advice and help with finances and employment issues but is not as overt as his predecessors. Second, because his message is so incredibly positive, he is often described as a motivational speaker, similar to Peale, who tackles issues of negative thinking and failure by positive affirmations and confessions. It would also be fair to note that some of Osteen’s teaching and use of scripture is correct. There are a few steps in his “7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential,” such as developing a healthy self-image and letting go of the past, that endeavor to help the reader acknowledge the positive aspects of her/his personality and character, acknowledging God’s love and the talents and skills that every person has. However, the main body of Osteen’s book focuses on increasing one’s “favor” and gaining “success.” These are two

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 343-344.

key words that stand in place of the typical accoutrements of prosperity theology: health and wealth.

Of the 7 steps, “enlarge your vision,” “discover the power of your thoughts and words” and “live to give!” are the three sections that contain many of the numerous misuses of scripture, as well as the most dangerous theological elements. “Enlarge your vision” discusses the laws of compensation and the positive confession or faith confession. “Discover the power of your positive thoughts,” as one would imagine, provides the same kind of teaching as Peale and Copeland, only in a revised and anecdotal manner. Lastly, “live to give!” contains the method of “seed faith” and does much to distort the Christian motive of philanthropy.

Several critics have spoken out about Osteen’s theology, forcing the preacher to defend his teaching and theology in numerous interviews. The criticism is pointed and harsh, coming from both secular and Christian sources. Some critics take issue with the vast amounts of money being handled in the Lakewood Community Church, while others question his teachings directly. The evidence is strongly against Osteen and his ministry on both counts. Osteen’s ministry spends thirty million dollars per year on television programming,<sup>83</sup> which is a substantial part of the church’s monetary intake. Forty-three million dollars are collected during church services and another thirty million dollars are collected through phone and mail donations every year.<sup>84</sup> However, Osteen strongly maintains that money is never the focus of his preaching or teaching, even though the statistics and evidence say otherwise.

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<sup>83</sup> Osteen, *Christian Post*.

<sup>84</sup> Joel Osteen, interviewed by Byron Pitts, *60 Minutes*, CBS, October 14, 2007.

In a recent interview with Byron Pitts on *60 Minutes*, Osteen's connection to prosperity theology was brought into question. Pitts summarizes the message in Osteen's latest publication, *Become a Better You* by saying, "To become a better you, you must be positive towards yourself, develop better relationships, and embrace the place where you are. Not one mention of God in that. Not one mention of Jesus Christ in that."<sup>85</sup> Osteen's rebuttal is that he does have scripture to back up those claims, but that there are "better qualified people to say, 'Here's a book that going [*sic*] to explain the scriptures to you.'"<sup>86</sup> As a preacher to hundreds of thousands of people, Osteen feels that he is not best suited for scriptural exegesis and accurate interpretation of biblical passages. Pitts also interviewed Rev. Michael Horton, a professor at Westminster Seminary, who calls Osteen's teaching "heresy." Horton claims that Osteen's "core message is God is nice, your nice, be nice . . . He uses the Bible like a fortune cookie. 'This is what's gonna happen to you. There's gonna be a windfall in your life tomorrow.' The Bible's not meant to be read that way."<sup>87</sup> However, Pitts and Horton are not Osteen's only critics and challengers.

In a recent interview with Larry King, Osteen was, once again, called upon to defend his teaching. "We deal with the real issues of life," Osteen told King.<sup>88</sup> However, when King asked Osteen about prosperity theology, Osteen said that, "there needs to be a balance. I think there has been and there can be. But I think the whole prosperity thing is, you know, if somebody asks do I believe God wants you to be well and happy and whole

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Osteen, *Larry King Live*.

and have good relationships and have beautiful children, my answer would be yes.”<sup>89</sup>

Osteen continued by saying, “I do believe God wants you to be blessed and he wants you to increase. He wants you to be successful in your career. God never wants us to drag through life.”<sup>90</sup> Osteen was further tested when King made reference to the story of the Rich Young Ruler, asking Osteen his thoughts on the idea of it being hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Osteen claimed that the passage had to be understood within its contexts, saying,

I believe that man’s focus was all about the money. But it depends on where your heart is. I mean the scripture says it’s the love of money that’s the root of all evil . . . Abraham – way back where Christianity was started, it said he was the wealthiest man in all the East. And I think David left the equivalent of a billion dollars to his son since – Solomon – to build the temple.<sup>91</sup>

As we have already seen, the position that Osteen has taken in regard to the story of the Rich Young Ruler is that of the traditionally metaphorical and spiritual reading, which refuses to acknowledge the extreme level of surrender and sacrifice being called for by Jesus of his followers. Furthermore, his use of Abraham and David are also typical of prosperity preachers who choose to emphasize the rich men in the Bible as well as the Abrahamic covenant. By justifying his wealth and his teachings by calling upon Abraham, Osteen shows his strong connection to the traditional form of prosperity theology. This theology and these kinds of examples from Osteen are commonplace in *Your Best Life Now*. In fact, Osteen devotes more space to Abraham than to Jesus in *Your*

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

*Best Life Now*, using the example of Jesus only once,<sup>92</sup> while calling on the forebears of Judaism and their wealth to justify his claims to the Christian right to wealth and health.

What then is the message that Osteen claims to be teaching, if it is not a form of the prosperity gospel, as alleged by his critics? According to Osteen in several interviews with major news organizations, his message is one of hope. “God never wants us to be in a rut,” Osteen told Larry King in October 2007.<sup>93</sup> In an interview with Hannah Storm of the CBS *Early Show*, Osteen said that, “Our whole message is that Jesus came to help us live a great life.”<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, Osteen consistently claims that his teaching attempts to “lift people up.”<sup>95</sup> And yet, there is also another side to Osteen’s message, a side that condemns “mediocrity” and being average. Most issues, Osteen told King, stem from people living below their potential. “God didn’t create us to be average,” Osteen told King, continuing his thought by saying that “the environment you put yourself in is what you’re going to become like,” which is why Osteen tells his followers to only surround themselves with successful people.<sup>96</sup>

Can this ideology be reconciled with scripture? Osteen seems to think so. And it is this attempt to force scripture to take on a specific interpretation, one that is stripped of its contextual and canonical meaning, that works only within this flawed form of prosperity theology. Osteen’s message may not be so incredibly damaged and flawed if it were completely divorced from scripture but because he chooses to align his teachings

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<sup>92</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, (New York: Faith Words, 2004): 242. Osteen gives an example of Jesus’ giving nature saying, “He always took time for people. He was never too busy with his own agenda.”

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Osteen, *The Early Show*.

<sup>95</sup> Osteen, *The Christian Post*.

<sup>96</sup> Osteen, *Larry King Live*.

with the Bible, his use of scripture must be analyzed in order to gain the scope necessary to pronounce his teachings as false and heretical, which this author believes them to be. Furthermore, if Osteen's message was simply one of positive thinking and affirmation, it may not be as dangerous. But because Osteen chooses to condemn a modest lifestyle as being average and mediocre, and by implication also condemns it as not living to God's standard for all Christians, he opens himself and his teaching up to harsh scrutiny and examination.

### **Osteen's Misuse and Misinterpretation of Scripture**

Out of the one hundred and thirty-eight biblical passages specifically cited in Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*, sixty are passages from the Hebrew Bible, while the remaining seventy-eight are found in the New Testament. For our purposes, we will be examining Osteen's use of New Testament scripture and how that coincides with the passages on wealth and poverty that have been discussed earlier in this paper. Osteen draws from the New Testament often, but it is rare that the passages are read or interpreted correctly, meaning that they are read in context of the chapter and book in which they appear and that the themes or motifs present within those passages can be reconciled with what is found in the teachings of Jesus as represented in the Gospels and in the apostles, such as Paul. Often Osteen uses only a portion of one verse to endorse his claim. In every case, if the verse is read in context, Osteen's claim is shown to be false. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Osteen's discussion of favor. Favor, for Osteen, is necessary in gaining abundance and victory, which are the key elements in Osteen's version of the prosperity gospel.

Osteen uses the blanket term “success” to define what can be gained by attaining God’s favor in your life. “If you develop a healthy image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you.”<sup>97</sup> Osteen claims that God wants to bestow “His far and beyond favor” upon all Christians, citing Ephesians 2:7.<sup>98</sup> However, Ephesians 2:7 is not talking about favor, regardless of how Osteen chooses to define the term. The verse is dealing with salvation through the “riches of God’s grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.” Osteen also uses 1 Peter 1:13, a passage also discussing grace, to identify favor with earthly gain, saying, “Friend, that’s the favor of God. Never give up on God. The Bible says, ‘If you will hope to the end, divine favor will come.’”<sup>99</sup> However, the actual passage states that Christians should “prepare [their] minds for action; discipline [themselves]; set all [their] hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring [them] when he is revealed.” Osteen interprets grace as favor, changing both the meaning and the purpose of the verse from dependence upon Christ to the expectation of divine blessing in one’s life.

The only way to gain this favor is to follow the simple rules that Osteen outlines in his book. Similar to Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Tilton, it is necessary to verbally affirm God’s blessings and favor upon one’s life. In order to do this, the law of compensation must take effect when specific passages are repeated. These passages are typical among prosperity preachers. In Mark 11:23, Jesus tells the disciples that they can move mountains if they believe and declare it to be so. Another popular verse used by Osteen and others is Romans 10:10: “For one believes with the heart and so is justified,

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<sup>97</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 52.

and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” The passage, which is describing a confession of faith, is thus turned into a way to force God to bless or show favor upon Christians wise enough to use the passage “correctly.” Osteen claims that this saving principle can be “true in other areas.”<sup>100</sup> Osteen goes on to explain how the verse works in everyday life: “When you believe God’s Word and begin to speak to it, mixing it with your faith, you are actually confirming that truth and making it valid in your own life.”<sup>101</sup> This principle can also apply to issues of illness and financial troubles. God has made promises to God’s followers and is bound by them.

Favor is at the crux of Osteen’s message. However, we now turn to the way that favor is made manifest in the Christian’s life, according to Osteen. Favor comes into someone’s life in the form of abundance of material goods, victory over obstacles and problems, and reward. This comes only if the Christian enlarges his/her vision and declares the reward to be his/hers. S/he has to learn to want more and expect more from God because God does not want mediocrity. Osteen uses the well-known passage in Matthew 9 when Jesus turns water into wine and relates a parable to his followers about new wine in old wineskins. Osteen’s interpretation of the passage is that, “Jesus was saying that you cannot have a larger life with restricted attitudes.”<sup>102</sup> God is just waiting for Christians to realize their potential and start “thinking bigger.” But in order to do this, Christians must shed their old wineskins or “old negative mind-sets that hold you back.”<sup>103</sup> However, if the verse is read within the wider context of Matthew, which is dealing with the coming of the Kingdom of God through Jesus’ ministry, the verse

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 6.

becomes an allusion to the new way of life that Jesus is teaching his disciples and others who follow him. New wine needs fresh wineskins so “both are preserved” (Matthew 9:17).

Osteen’s manipulation of scripture also extends to his more oblique references. In a chapter called “Living Favor-Minded,” Osteen tells his readers that if they “keep expecting it and declaring it, God’s favor will show up.”<sup>104</sup> He then launches into an anecdote about how Lakewood Community Church obtained a prime network slot for their TV program. Their contact at the network said there was no possible way they could obtain that slot and that they should settle for another time. Osteen’s rebuttal was, “The Bible says we have not because we ask not. So, let’s give it a try.”<sup>105</sup> The church fervently prayed that they would get the time slot they needed to reach millions of viewers. However, it is not the anecdote that raises questions of Osteen’s skill as a preacher but the scripture passage he has used. The passage he quoted goes uncited in his book but comes from James 4:2. As we have already noted, James does deal heavily with issues of wealth and money.

However, the opinion of the letter writer is in direct conflict with Osteen. The passage deals specifically with covetousness and greed, saying, “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask.” The next verse follows by saying that “you do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on pleasures” (James 4:3). There could not be a greater irony in the presence of this passage in Osteen’s teaching. The very thing Osteen is telling his readers

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

to ask for and expect from God is partially what is causing problems for the Christians James is writing to. This passage, in conjunction with those previously examined in this paper, provides a strong opinion against the pursuit of earthly goods, whatever they may be. And yet, it is only through a skewed reading of the text and premeditated manipulation of the biblical passage that this verse and others like it could ever be seen to bolster the claims of any kind of prosperity teaching.

The other component for attaining God's "favor" is to think positively and reject all negative attitudes or thoughts. This ideology is the driving force behind Osteen's label as a motivational speaker. Like Peale and John Osteen (Joel Osteen's father), the younger Osteen also claims that favor and good things cannot and will not come to those who surround themselves with "losers" and unsuccessful people. Favor will also elude those who pity themselves and choose to live in mediocrity. However, the scriptures that Osteen uses in his discussion on the power of positive thinking are not addressing negative thoughts or positive thoughts, per se. In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul is telling his Philippian readers about the long race they (and he) must endure in the name of Christ in order attain the eternal reward of "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul is encouraging his readers, as he often does, to press on through persecution and obstacles in their spiritual lives. However, Osteen sees the passages quite differently. He uses the passage as a model to defeat disappointments, saying that "Paul was saying, 'I'm not going to dwell on yesterday's disappointments or my past failures . . . I'm looking ahead for the *good things* God has in store for me"<sup>106</sup> (italics mine). On the surface, the "good things" Osteen repeatedly speaks of may be the reward of eternal life, as Paul was

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid,183.

describing. But they could also be, and in fact are, allusions to things of this world, job promotions, financial gains, healthy children, etc. Osteen's sample rewards are always material or physical and never deal with the Christian's spiritual state or understanding of God.

Another passage Osteen often uses is found in Matthew 6:33. Osteen claims that the Bible says, "Make the most of each day."<sup>107</sup> However, when we read the passage directly, we see the error in Osteen's translation. The passage actually comes after a short block of teaching by Jesus about having faith in God to provide for one's needs. After telling his disciples and followers not to worry about what they will eat, drink or wear, Jesus tells them to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these things will be given to you as well." Osteen has replaced Jesus' command to seek the kingdom of God and righteousness. Instead, he tells readers to think positively and let go of the past. Osteen uses this same interpretation with several other verses, changing the point of emphasis from the kingdom of God, holiness, righteousness or purity to material things of higher value.<sup>108</sup> Granted, concerning oneself with things "not of this earth" would be positive thinking. However, Osteen tacitly claims that the things they should think about are ways to increase in material wealth and physical health, which brings us to the reward Christians can hope to claim if they follow Osteen's seven steps to living a better life.

In Osteen's section on giving, he includes a chapter on seed faith, which is a common teaching and practice among prosperity preachers. They use biblical passages

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>108</sup> Other examples can be found on pages 13 and 105 using Colossians 3:2, 104 using Ephesians 4:22-24, 108 using Romans 12:1-2, 109 using 2 Corinthians 10:5 and 119 using Hebrews 12:3.

referencing sowing and reaping, such as Luke 6:38, 2 Corinthians 9:6 and Galatians 6:7. These passages are the basis for a theology that emphasizes giving in order to receive. Whatever you give to God, church, or others in need will be given back to you, with interest. In the introduction to the chapter, Osteen assures his readers that “If you want to reap financial blessings, you must sow financial blessings in the lives of others.”<sup>109</sup> He even goes so far as to offer readers specific examples of how to “bless” others financially, saying, “If you need a financial miracle, go buy somebody a cup of coffee tomorrow morning, or give a little extra in the offering at church.”<sup>110</sup> This is a principle that Osteen claims to practice in his own life and it bears a striking resemblance to Robert Tilton’s Law of Compensation. Osteen tells his readers that, when he is advising people facing financial crisis, “I want to tell them, ‘Just hold on to that money. You need that money.’ But I know that God’s principles are true. And I know it is imperative that the people with the greatest need continue to sow.”<sup>111</sup> This is a perfect example of the other side of this so-called positive theology. There is a strong undercurrent of fear running through these passages. Osteen makes it very clear that to give is to receive and if you do not give, God will not reward you or help you in your time of need. Osteen even goes so far as to say that if Christians give as they should, “He’ll [God] keep the enemy off your money, off your crop, off your children, and away from your home.”<sup>112</sup> All of this is connected to the “laws” God has put in place in order that God’s people be duly rewarded on earth for their faith and their knowledge of these laws.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 256.

However, like Conwell before him, Osteen uses fear as the backbone of his message. The implication in his message of seed faith is that if you do not give, God will not protect your home, your job, or even your children. Osteen's vision of God looks more like a Mafia godfather than a giving, nurturing parent. In order to be protected from the enemy, which for Osteen is Satan, you must give (financially) to your church. "The size of your harvest depends on the amount of your seed."<sup>113</sup> But what is kind of harvest is Osteen describing? On this issue, he is very vague. Osteen uses terms like "abundance" and "victory" to describe the reward that can be gained through the law of compensation. And the scriptures he uses to back this statement are used in a faulty manner at best. Typically, the verses that Osteen chooses to cite as foundational to his anti-average mindset describe salvation and eternal reward, not earthly reward or material gain. Like most prosperity preachers, Osteen makes John 10:10 the focal point of his prosperity argument. The verse states that, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I [Jesus] came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." However, the verse comes in the midst of a teaching section where Jesus is describing himself as a shepherd, saying, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved" (John 10:9). It is clear that Jesus is not talking about prosperity or even health. Jesus' message, to the Gospel writers, was one of spiritual gain and everlasting life rather than earthly wealth and health. Osteen uses the same misinterpretation of Hebrews 10:35, Matthew 25:40, Colossians 3:24 and 2 Timothy 1:6. All of these verses deal in some way with eternal reward or salvation. Yet, Osteen changes the meaning of these passages to suit his own purpose. Reward, for

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 255.

Osteen, is something that can, should and will be attained now, in this life. God wants Christians to be rich now, be healthy now, and be victorious now.

### **Resolving the Conflict**

However, in our study of key passages in the New Testament dealing with wealth and reward, we find that the only assured promises to followers of Christ in this life, on this earth, is persecution and suffering. Furthermore, wealth is treated as a danger and impediment to human salvation and fidelity to God. The rich young man was ordered to give away all he owned. Even though Osteen would like to read this passage as a warning against greed and self-absorption, this author would posit that Osteen's message is a loosely veiled apology for Christian greed and consumption. The message that Osteen preaches is that suffering only occurs when Christians have not fulfilled their duty to God by giving, praying or believing as they should. This is in direct conflict with many New Testament passages, in the Gospels and in the letters of Paul, that warn believers that pain, suffering, and sacrifice lie ahead. Discipleship requires the utmost in faith and surrender. Self-preservation and pride must be relinquished, for Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33). However, this is not necessarily a call to martyrdom. It is a call to complete obedience to the will of God, no matter how challenging that may be.

Furthermore, Jesus signaled a change in some Jewish thinking about reward and punishment. With the narrative of the Rich Young Ruler, Jesus did away with the traditional rationale that the Abrahamic covenant equated wealth with righteousness. His radical statements about the material world and its ephemeral nature shocked and

dismayed his disciples as well as the rich man who went away grieving. Therefore, we can only conclude that the teaching of Osteen and the prosperity preachers before him are in error. The only way they can use scripture to bolster their faulty claim is by taking it out of context and misusing it. Why preachers like Osteen misuse scripture to present Christians with a twisted gospel that prizes wealth and health over eternal life and the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the other letter writers of the New Testament can only be left to conjecture. It is not the place of this writer to delve into the motives of these preachers, whether they are honorable and pure, or stemming purely from a deep-seated corruption and greed. This writer has attempted only to show the New Testament ethic on prosperity and compare that ethic to the teachings of one minister, who has gleaned from his predecessors a gospel that is fundamentally flawed and only acts as a proverbial Band-aid covering a festering wound. It is empty of spiritual value and will, in the end, fail to sustain those masses that follow it blindly and never reap the benefits that have been promised to them. They have been cheated.

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