

# Is the Prosperity Gospel Biblical?

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*Matthew*

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**Bible Text:** Matthew 6:1-3  
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Tonight, I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Matthew 6, and if you're not normally with us on Sunday evening, allow me to share with you kind of our study, our direction on Sunday evenings. We are very slowly but yet systematically walking through what we know as the gospel of Matthew, and there's a variety of reasons for doing such, one of which is I believe that the gospel Matthew is the key to understanding the total message of scripture. Basically by walking through Matthew, we're getting a course in the entirety of biblical theology in one book of the Bible because it is that book in the Bible that bridges us not just from the Old Testament to the New Testament, but from the synagogue to the Church, from the the covenant of bulls and goats to the covenant of the blood of Jesus Christ. And in particular, we find ourselves tonight in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. It began in chapter 5, it will conclude in chapter 7, and Jesus has gathered a very large multitude around him, of which every single one of the participants and the hearers, and this is critical for our understanding, every one of those in attendance that day believed that their offering of sacrifices and their bringing of those items, made them righteous with God. And as we read the Sermon on the Mount, one of the things that Jesus does so compassionately and so lovingly is very systematically show them and show us that no matter how many sacrifices we bring, no matter how faithful we are to that Old Testament covenant and system, we all at some point fall woefully short.

It is at the conclusion in chapter 7 that Jesus will make this illustration or analogy, he says that every one of us is building a house of our life. There are two foundations that we can build it on: either a rock or shifting sand. And he was addressing himself as that solid foundation and everything else as the shifting sand. Tonight, as we come to chapter 6, we kind of did an overview last week, chapter 5 of the gospel Matthew shares with how we fall short oftentimes when it comes to our horizontal relationships, humanity to humanity, chapter 6 is more vertical, our relationships to the Lord. Tonight, the first four verses of Matthew 6 I'm going to ask a question that, at least in this environment, is thankfully rhetorical. You already know the answer to this question but we're going to open up God's word tonight and discover why the answer to this question is the answer to the question, and the question is: is what we know as the prosperity gospel biblical? This concept, this idea that if I give to God, he will give back to me more than I gave unto him, that I can receive physical and spiritual blessings by sacrificing of the material or the

financial items in and of my life? If you're not aware, this is not only a theology that is prominent here in what we know as the western hemisphere, but if you go over to the eastern hemisphere, it's even more so prominent because oftentimes those who have very little financially or materially, are taken advantage of by people who want their money and say that, "If you give it to me and my ministry and my church, God will bless you more abundantly." Tonight, we're going to address this issue that I know in advance you already know the answer to but we're going to peel the layers away and discover why, for you and I, what we know as the prosperity gospel is not a valid biblical doctrine.

Now we're going to read Matthew 6:1-4, but we're going to do something tonight that's not very Baptist, but we're going to do it anyway. We're going to spend a lot of our time in the book of Numbers and Deuteronomy, all the way back in the Old Testament, because there are these passages that lay an understanding for what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6. So beginning in verse 1, he says,

1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Now these four verses of Matthew 6 are dealing with our giving of our financial resources and our means to the Lord and to the work of the Lord, what we often, in our context, might call the "first 10%." When we get later to verse 25, we're going to talk about how do we handle the other 90%, again, understanding finances kind of from a different perspective. So tonight, I just want to answer some very basic questions about this passage, address what it's actually saying, and understand for us not only what is Jesus trying to, as I said this morning, course correct in their lives, but how it can impact our lives as well.

What is it that these individuals are giving? When it says that they gave their alms, this is not what we would call a tithe or "10%." This isn't even what we often would call an offering in our context today. That concept, that word "alms" means they were giving charitably. They were giving for those who had less than they. These are those benevolence offerings of the ancient biblical Old Testament days. Let me draw you a parallel in the book of Acts 10. We have a man by the name of Cornelius. He's a Roman centurion. He's a very powerful man in his context and in his culture, and chapter 10 of the book of Acts is known because he cried out to God. He said, "God, I want to know you," and it was there that Simon, Peter, remember he was on top of the house and he had a vision and it was that famous sheet that was tied at four ends and it had all these animals on it, and the Lord told him, "Do not call unclean what I've called clean." Not just the Levitical dietary laws, but do not look at this Roman Gentile by the name of Cornelius and automatically assume that he cannot receive the grace that I have poured

out on you. But that chapter begins by saying that Cornelius was not just a man who prayed but he gave his alms. He was a generous man. He was a very benefactor, if you allow me to say that. In our context today, he would have never passed the red kettle without putting something in it. He would have never gone to an event that was for a charitable organization and not somehow participated in it. So when we talk about alms, understand that all four of these verses are addressing the giving or the donating or being generous to people who are less fortunate financially, physically and materially. There is nothing in these four verses about what they would bring to the temple. There is nothing in these four verses about how they would give in their regular manner. And so we're going to unpack what all that means.

Who is it that is giving? I've already mentioned it somewhat in the introduction. Every single person who he's addressing would have been Jewish by belief and most likely by blood, that would have gathered on a regular occasion, it mentions it in this passage, in the synagogue. And notice it says that they're in the synagogue, they came and they gave so that they could be seen by men. And so basically what Jesus is addressing, he's saying there are those times in life, we'll talk about this more specific in a moment, when you are not only called to but are led to give to those less fortunate than you. Make sure that when you do it, you do not do it in a manner to be seen by man, but in a manner to be honoring to the Lord and to the Lord only.

Which leads to this third question: what are the "tithes," plural with an "s"? Alright, Baptists, y'all ready for an Old Testament journey? Let's go back to the book of Deuteronomy 12. Deuteronomy 12:11 is one of those strategic verses much like we find in the book of Exodus 31. While you're finding the book of Deuteronomy, in Exodus 31 it talks about the Jewish people, the Lord has said, "Obey my Sabbaths," plural. When you go to the Old Testament, you'll discover that a Sabbath day, a day of reverence that was set aside from sundown one day till the next day, a 24-hour period, was not just from Friday to Saturday. The feast of Unleavened Bread had a Sabbath day celebration the first and the last day of that feast. There were certain days within the festivals and feasts that had a respected Sabbaths. That is why in John 19:31, as you're walking through the crucifixion events of Jesus Christ and you struggle with chronology, it says that that Sabbath day that they had to get his body down for was a high day. It was not a regular calendar chronological day. It was a part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which the book of Exodus 12 calls what we know as the Passover. Why is that important? Because God told them to obey the Sabbaths, plural.

Let's go to Deuteronomy 12:11. It says, "Then there shall," by the way, just as a preface, both Numbers and Deuteronomy, which we'll spend a lot of time in tonight, are preparing the Jewish people for their life in the Promised Land. They've been wandering for all these years and this isn't just the story of the wandering, it's the preparation for when they get to the other side. It says in verse 11, "Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices," listen to this, "your tithes," plural. The concept of a tithe, which by definition simply means 10%, that's defined actually in Isaiah 6, the Lord says that there are more than one of them. And we

addressed this very briefly last week, I want to address it very specifically this week, because it is what we know as the prosperity gospel that bases its whole doctrine on how much we give, and that they believe the more you give, the more you will get, and I don't believe that many people who advocate this theology realize how much was asked to be given. And so tonight, I want to walk through in the Old Testament what the three "tithes" were. By the way, just so I can get the cart before the horse here, when Jesus talked about alms, he was talking about the third tithe, okay?

So let's begin with the first one. What was the first tithe? This was a tenth, this was a gift to specifically the Levites and then later what we know as temple worship, of which the Levites serviced it. A few pages to the left, the book of Numbers 18, I want us to read what that first tenth was to be for, Now, before we read this, let me remind you that when they go into the land, the Jewish people, the Israelites, they are going to take this land and they're going to divide it among the tribes, and every tribe will have their own place, every tribe will have their own means, but the Levites, the Levites were not landowners. The Levites did not have ownership of anything. They were the priests of the day. They were the ones who were handling all the sacrifices and all the means of worship. And so when you read this passage, don't think the Levites got more than everybody else, much contrary to that, what we're talking about here is just the substance for their living is what it is, how they had their means of life.

In the book of Numbers 18:21 it says, "And, behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, even the service of the tabernacle of the congregation." And so when we talked about that famous tithe of the Old Testament, you go into Malachi 3, that famous story about "bring all your tithes into the storehouse," that first tenth, those "firstfruits" were a part of pretty much an agricultural-based sacrifice that was brought of which after the sacrifice was made, for lack of better terms, the leftovers were given to the Levites. So they lived on land that was borrowed and they ate food that was left over in exchange for their service to the Lord in the tabernacle in the book of Numbers, but later in what we know as the temple. Later in the New Testament in Hebrews 7, it will confirm for us that this Old Testament tithe was given to the Levites. Even after the temple had been constructed and built, they still were not landowners, they still did not have what we might call secular means of occupation and acquiring financial gain. They were subjected to what we know as the gifts or the tithe of the other tribes.

That, my friends, is the tithe that we are the most familiar with. As I mentioned, in Malachi 3 when it says to bring the tithe into the storehouse, to bring that 10% of what the land had given them, or 10% of what they had gained, it was to provide for the Levites which in exchange reciprocated because these were the men who would facilitate the sacrifices during the feasts and the festivals. However, there is a second tithe and this to me is probably the most interesting and fascinating of them all. This is found in Deuteronomy 14. So again, we're going to stay here in those first five books of the Old Testament. The second tithe, or the second 10%, was for the celebration of the Jewish feasts. There are seven of these feasts that are contained within your Old Testament. Three of them, if you were male in gender, you had no option but to attend. Now you do

realize most of them took place in Jerusalem. Not everybody lived in Jerusalem. That's why when you get to Acts 2, that famous Pentecost event, it says there that there were Jews from all nations that were present because what we know as Pentecost was one of those Jewish feasts where every male had to attend. You do realize if you're going to cross the country and if you're going to be away for weeks, it takes financial resources. And so not only did they give a tenth unto the Levites or to the temple worship, they were to set aside a separate tenth so that they, their family members, and particularly the men and their sons, could attend these respective feasts.

Deuteronomy 14, beginning in verse 22, it says, "Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year. And thou shalt eat before the LORD thy God, in the place which he shall choose to place his name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the LORD thy God always. And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from thee, which the LORD thy God shall choose to set his name there, when the LORD thy God hath blessed thee: Then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose: And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household." Now, initially it's talking about going to offer those initial sacrifices, that Levitical, that temple worship. What's fascinating about this passage is that when it says if it's too far to go turn it into money so that when you get there, you'll have a place to stay, you'll have food to eat and you can participate in everything that it was designed to be. It's referred to oftentimes as the second tithe so that you could not go to the Lord, so to speak, and say, "Well God, I know I'm supposed to go to Pentecost but I just don't have the resources. I'm sorry, I can't make it." All right? This was the allowance for them to make sure that they set aside the resources to attend the feasts.

So tithe 1 is the 10% into the Levitical and/or temple worship system, tithe 2 was the means by which to go and to enjoy the feasts, the festivals. Tithe 3 are the alms. This is what Jesus was referring to. Why is this important? Because he was "presuming" that they'd already done the first two. He was presuming they had already participated in the Levitical tithe they'd already set aside because they gathered at the feasts and the festivals. The third one wasn't just for the Levite, but for the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Hopefully you still have Deuteronomy 14 open. Allow me to pick up the story in verse 28, "At the end of three years thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay it up within thy gates: And the Levite, (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee,) and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest." Here's what's interesting: the blessing that God promises is on the alms. In other words, that first tithe was just simply expected, that second tithe was very pragmatic to get to the feasts and the festivals, but he says this third one that's taken every three years to give to the widow, to the orphan, to the homeless, to those that are struggling, it says "you will be blessed." Now do you

understand in Malachi 3 when it says to bring all of the tithe into the storehouse? It wasn't just speaking of the Levitical, it was speaking of all of these encompassed.

Back to Matthew 6. Jesus says when you bring your alms. Understand this would not have been at the end of necessarily the harvest season, that would have been your regular tithe. This wouldn't have been when you gathered at the Passover or at the Pentecost or at the Feast of Tabernacles, because your presence alone demonstrated you had done so. But every three years, they passed the plate, every three years they had a special time to give to those who were less fortunate than themselves. It was not only an opportunity to be seen by men, as Jesus said, but according to verse 29 of Deuteronomy 14, it was a time to be blessed.

Now do you understand why Jesus is coming down so hard in verses 1 through 4? He says, "You come and you give alms claiming to be ministerial, claiming to be generous, claiming to be a benefactor, and at the end of the day, really all you want is to be seen by men and get more in return." That's the condemnation that Jesus is making toward them. So how are they giving? Obviously, he said to be seen by men. If you have Matthew 6 marked, you might want to turn a few pages to the right. In Matthew 23, I believe we have one of the most scathing discourses that Jesus ever gave. He gave this unto the Pharisees. He gave this unto the religious leaders. He spoke these words to the very men who not only benefited from these tithes but were very overt not only in the collection, the distribution, but in the naming of them. In verse 23 of Matthew 23 it says, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." Jesus does not say the tithes were unimportant, he says but in addition to them there should be mercy, there should be grace. What is he saying to these Pharisees? Basically, what he's communicating is really 2.0 of Matthew 6. We know you do the firstfruits, we know you show up at every festival, you've got the second one but, boy, when it comes to that third one, you are not only in abundance but you're very specific and everybody knows what you're doing.

Allow me to put this in today's terminology. I'm not here to upset. I'm not here to offend. I'm not here to ruffle your feathers. But very few people are willing to give generously today unless there's a kickback or their name is on the side of the building. That's a modern-day adaptation of this passage. Jesus is saying, are you willing to give? Can I make it hurt just a little bit? Without the deduction? Are you willing to give without the receipt? Are you willing to give without the notoriety? Are you willing to give without people applauding you and recognizing what you've done? Now do you understand that when Jesus spoke these words, how weighty they would have been on his audience because oftentimes we non-Jews, non-synagogue, non-Levites, are we not guilty of the same thing? And the prosperity gospel teaches that if we give, then, somehow, someday, God will even give more back to us than we've originally given to him.

So how should they give? Back in Matthew 6, Jesus makes an interesting statement, "Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." Now let's look at this from a practical perspective. That's just near impossible, okay? Have you ever tried it, by the

way, if you ever try this, please do it with nobody else around because you will look really foolish, okay? Try to do something in your home with your right hand to where your left hand does not have the perspective of seeing your right hand when it does it. It is nearly impossible and what Jesus was illustrating for them is that when they came to give, when they gave their alms, when they were benefactors to the widows and to the orphans, that if at all possible, do it in such a manner that the only person who knows is God himself. Don't parade. Don't ask for your name to be put on the side of the building. Don't walk through with a large entourage and notice how they give so much. Again, this attitude of under a cloakness of anonymity, for lack of better terms.

So in conclusion, what's the difference for today? How do we go to this passage that was about a bunch of Jewish people who gave three different ways to the synagogue that really isn't a parallel much of our lives today? Jesus in verse 4, "The Father which sees in secret shall reward thee openly," that our giving to the Lord is really nobody's business but God's, and that when we give, we should not do so in such a manner that we necessarily expect something in return. Now I'm going to share with you something that I've had the unfortunate privilege of being a part of, never facilitating but being in the presence of. I have been in worship services, I've been in evangelistic crusades, I have been in gatherings where, unfortunately, unfortunately, there have been those in leadership that before the offering have asked people to take their wallets and to put them in the air and pray that whatever is given that night, that the Lord will return it to them tenfold. I've seen it. I've seen this passage manipulated, twisted and torn, and I understand the heart that Jesus has for this.

You know, every one of us, at least I hope every one of us, has that one person in their life who is just so incredibly intelligent that they blow our mind. I have one of those individuals. Every now and then I tell a story to my boys about this young man that I grew up with. He may be watching tonight for all I know. He's a resident of the great state of North Carolina now. The Lord has taking us both out of the state of Texas. This young man is the smartest individual that I knew growing up, just brilliant, intelligent, just figured it out before the teacher got it off her or his tongue. When we were college students, what's ironic is he grew up a Baylor fan and went to Texas. I grew up a Texas fan and went to Baylor. The Lord has a sense of humor. But nonetheless, while we were college students, one of these prosperity preachers was advocating on television this idea that if you gave to his ministry, the Lord would return to you tenfold what you gave. Well, this guy's sharp. He's smart and he actually did something that I thought was incredibly intelligent. He wrote this man a letter and said it was obvious that he needed financial gain, so he needed to take the same medicine and my friend asked him for \$1,000 so that he could get \$10,000. That was brilliant. Here's the only problem: the return address he put on the letter was my PO Box so I got all the paraphernalia and I got all of the solicitation.

He was smart in multiple ways but what did he do? He called it out. Think about that for a moment. If we truly believe that "giving" will receive a multiplier back, what are we doing? We're putting ourselves in the place of God because God is the one who says, "Just bring me what you've got. Let me take care of it. I can do more with it than you

could ever dream of." Right now there are people, and I can tell stories, time will not allow, I can tell you stories of individuals in the months before their final breath on earth who listened to some of these prosperity guys and gave all of their financial gain to them, thinking somehow that would bring their children a tenfold blessing. You know what it brought them? Nothing. I can tell you there are individuals who will cross the sea to those who, in our vernacular, make less than \$5 to \$6 a day with heavy labor and say if you give it all to their ministry. God will give them that house they could never afford on their own.

What did Jesus say? He said, "If you do this, then you're not in a position of righteousness but much the opposite. Give to your Father in secret," and notice he says, "and he will reward you openly." Can I make a very stark statement tonight? One day, according to scriptures, it says that we will all stand before God. I would hate to be in a position thinking that I was going to get a tenfold blessing and get much the opposite because I "strutted my stuff," financially speaking, in front of men and others, not realizing that it pretty much voided out the reward. What is the lesson for you and I today? It's real simple: God can do more with your little than you can ever do with your lot, but don't ever think by giving your little God's going to give you a lot. Let me repeat that: God can do more with your little than you can do with your lot, but don't ever fall for the idea that by giving your little God is going to give you your lot. He says, "Don't worry about it, just be faithful, mind your own business, do it in privacy, and let me take care of all the rest." It was a lesson that those that the Sermon on the Mount struggled with, and unfortunately it's a lesson that we struggle with today as well.

Let's pray.

As we close tonight with our heads bowed, our eyes closed, you may be that individual that even though we've talked about this Old Testament law of giving, really at the end of the night it's about whose righteousness are we trusting in, our righteousness with giving, or Jesus Christ's righteousness upon the cross. Maybe you're that person who's never believed in Jesus, you never received Jesus, you never confessed your sins and repented. Tonight would be a great night to do that. Or maybe tonight you say, "I'm already a believer. I got that covered." But you've struggled with this prosperity gospel, maybe you've struggled with this mentality that says, "God, but I give you so much and I see so little in return." What the Lord was doing in the Sermon on the Mount is what he's doing in our lives tonight, he's giving us one of those heart checks. Where's our heart on this matter? Do we give just so we can get? Or do we give with no strings attached? No recognition sought for the honor and the sake of the Lord himself?

*Lord Jesus, as we come to this time decision, God, it's weighty because not only are we talking about tonight such a tangible item but, Lord, your word says you know the intents of our hearts. It doesn't matter what we give lip service to, it doesn't matter what we verbally promote, at the end of the day you know where our heart is. You know where our intent is. You know what our desires are. So, God, tonight I pray as we come to this time of response, as we come to this time of invitation, that we would not say and/or do anything thinking that somehow you will multiply our blessings on the backside, but may*



*we do as the original tithes were designed, to give sacrificially expecting nothing in return but simply just to honor you with what you've given to us. Lord, tonight, whatever decision you weighed upon our heart, may we do in like manner. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*