

Introduction – Would Jesus Hate this Book?

Sean here. I'm a pastor in Alabama, and I'm a survivor of the prosperity gospel. Here's the brief version of my story: I didn't grow up in the church. As a kid, while most of my Christian friends were hustling memory verses for jewels in their Awana crowns, I was watching Eddie Murphy's *Delirious* for the 900th time. When the Lord saved me from my sins at the age of eighteen, I had a lot of catching up to do. Moses, Abraham, Samson, Elihu...I'd never heard of 'em. And maybe it wouldn't have been that hard to catch up had I been warmly received into a good, gospel-preaching, Bible-believing church. But I didn't seem to really fit in at any of those churches, and I didn't stick around long enough to learn the things I needed to know.

You see, just a few months before being saved, I was walking around with a gun in my pants. Or under the seat of my car. Or under my pillow at night. As a drug dealer, I needed a weapon close at hand at all times.

As you might imagine, drug dealers have a certain image they need to maintain. They have to look the part, and I

most certainly did. I wore an A-frame tank top (also known as a 'wife-beater' by those in my neck of the woods), sagging shorts, a cut in my eyebrow, a bandana in my back pocket, and about as much physical aggression as I could exude at any moment in time.

When I got saved out of that lifestyle, my heart may have changed, but my wardrobe largely remained the same. I was still extremely aggressive, but now I was aggressive for Jesus. I was a poor man's Nicky Cruz (*The Cross and the Switchblade* guy). Youth pastors from all over the great expanse of North Alabama invited me to come and share my testimony with their students—and the more war stories, the better. Many of these churches were happy to have me put on a 'scared straight' clinic for their teenagers, but they didn't seem too keen on keeping me around after the lights came on in the youth room. And who could blame them? I still had a gold grill with vampire teeth at the bottom. Scary stuff.

What this meant for my discipleship, however, was that there wasn't any. Which is tragic, because I desperately needed help. Do you remember how Paul talks about zeal without knowledge (Rom. 10:1-3)? Well, that was me. I was evangelizing anyone who would listen, and even some who wouldn't. One of my major plans for evangelism involved me climbing onto the roof of a fast food establishment and preaching the gospel to the drive-thru customers. But I really had no idea what I was doing. The only thing I knew was that Jesus had saved me, and I wanted other people to be saved, too. I wanted to be Christ's ambassador, as if the Lord

Jesus were making His appeal through me, ‘Be reconciled to God!’ (2 Cor. 5:20)

Just a few months into stumbling along the path of righteousness with no real guide, a man in my neighborhood saw me walking around with a Bible in my hand. This man invited me into his home, bought me lunch, and then finally got around to asking me if I understood what was really going on in that book I was carrying. I assured him that I understood most of it...maybe. Truthfully, however, the Bible was like a German refrigerator manual to me.

I don’t speak German. Nor do I know anything about refrigerators.

Over the next twelve to fifteen months, this man disciplined me in God’s Word. Or so I thought. As a new Christian, my doctrinal discernment was at what physicists and theologians alike describe as ‘absolute zero.’ Let me give you an example. I still remember calling someone an idiot during Bible study for saying that Jesus was a Jew. ‘How can this guy not know that Jesus was a CHRISTIAN?!’ I muttered under my breath. If you don’t know, that’s OK, but let me tell you that Jesus was totally a Jew.

So when someone told me that sickness is the result of either sin or lack of faith, I didn’t know any better. When I was told that going to the doctor was a sin—because illness is a spiritual condition, not a physical one—I almost died of mercury poisoning. When someone used the Bible to convince me that we were supposed to rebuke poverty with the power of our speech, I started calling out my (sometimes negative) ATM balance.

Health, Wealth, and the (Real) Gospel

It wasn't until later that I could see that these teachings were a combination of silly, dangerous, and spiritually toxic. What this man taught me wasn't the gospel at all, but a distortion of it. At the time, I couldn't see that this 'prosperity gospel' wasn't good news. I had no idea it was an untrue message that couldn't save anyone. Now I realize that what we believe about things like faith, the cross, physical healing, and spiritual victory really matters. When we misunderstand and distort the gospel, people get hurt—in this life and even eternally.

Mike here. I'm a pastor in Virginia. I never sold drugs or rebuked my (sometimes negative) ATM balance. And once my family started going to church, we went to a solid church that preached the Bible clearly. But I've still had my fair share of run-ins with the prosperity gospel. As a pastor, I've seen people's suffering made worse by a sense that they were somehow responsible, that their circumstances were a result of a failure of their faith or holiness. I've seen others seduced away from the faith by promises of material blessings and long life.

The danger of the prosperity gospel hit home for me when my lovely wife, Karen, was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 2006. As you can imagine, it was an upsetting, confusing, and even frightening experience for us. We couldn't help but wonder why this was happening, what it meant for our future, and how we would manage if Karen became really ill. It was the kind of situation that drives you to your church family for support and strength. And sure

enough, lots of Christians said very helpful things to her about God's love and power and His good plans for her life. We were strengthened and encouraged by these brothers and sisters.

At the same time, some Christians said silly things about the dangers of drinking out of plastic bottles and the curative power of certain herbs. We rolled our eyes a bit and tried to take these comments with good humor. But a few Christians we knew said some really unhelpful things to her about faith and healing—that it couldn't possibly be God's will for her to be sick and that she would rebuke her illness if she had enough faith. This was the prosperity gospel, and it was maddening to me. Karen was one of the most faithful and sacrificial followers of Jesus that I know. That last thing she needed in her suffering was to have false guilt and unnecessary blame heaped on her.

My interest in this book comes from seeing all of the people who are hurt and misled by false teaching. I've been in India and Africa, where prosperity gospel preachers attract many thousands of people with their promises of riches, health, and blessings—never mind the fact that their promises never come to pass! I've seen the pain and frustration on the faces of faithful pastors in those places when false teachers come along and lead their sheep astray. I want to help you to understand what the prosperity gospel is, why it is so dangerous, and why the real good news is so much better.

We're writing this book for two audiences. First, we're writing it for you if you belong to a faithful gospel-preaching church, but you have friends or family members in a prosperity church. Or you wonder if they're in such a church. You've heard them talk about their preacher's sermons. You can tell something is wrong. But you can't quite put your finger on it. Plus, they have plenty of Bible verses to back up their claims. You love them and are worried about them. Our goal is to help you put your finger on exactly what's wrong.

Second, we're writing it for you if you yourself belong or suspect you belong to a prosperity gospel church. We want to help you to ask good questions about what your church teaches. No, we're not trying to cultivate a crowd of critics, but we do want to make sure you understand what is and what is not the gospel. It's the most important piece of news you'll ever know, both for your sake and for the sake of those you love. So you want to make sure you get it right!

Even the apostle Paul said to the members of the Galatian churches, he didn't care if someone showed up their churches and flashed the apostle card or if an angel flew down from heaven on wings: if that person taught a false gospel, it was up to the members of those churches to kick that false teacher out (see Gal. 1:6-9). By that token, both of us will tell the members of our church to fire us (!) if we ever teach a false gospel.

Still, maybe you wonder, why would we attack ministers who seem to be turning millions of people to Jesus? Even if we have some concerns about the content of their teachings, shouldn't we applaud the fact that the Bible is being preached

and Jesus is being lifted up? Sure, they may get some things wrong, but isn't it worse to be a negative and critical person? After all, didn't Jesus tell us not to judge (Matt. 7:1)? And didn't He say that whoever is not against us is for us (Mark 9:40)? In short, would Jesus hate this book?

We don't think so. Yes, of course He taught us not to be judgmental people (which is the point of Matthew 7:1). But everyone exercises judgment when they decide which doctor to see or which restaurant to frequent. If you saw that a surgeon had his license suspended repeatedly, you would (wisely) judge that he is not someone you should trust with your health. If you saw that a restaurant was shut down for health code violations, you would (correctly) judge that you should find another place to eat.

Prosperity gospel teachers are more dangerous than an inept surgeon or a roach-infested restaurant. Those things might make you ill; they might even shorten your life. But if you believe false things about Jesus, if you don't understand what it means to be saved by Him or to be His disciple, the consequences are disastrous for eternity.

In many cases, it's wise to give people the benefit of the doubt. The love that the Holy Spirit produces in us leads us to believe the best about others. It's quite possible that many prosperity gospel preachers sincerely believe what they are teaching; they think they're helping people. So if you're uncomfortable by a book devoted to criticizing and challenging these preachers, we get it.

But consider: Jesus repeatedly warned us about the prosperity gospel. He didn't think it was something to be

embraced or even tolerated. He attacked it in the sharpest terms because He loves us and wants to vaccinate us against this deadly spiritual disease.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Jesus' words near the end of the Sermon on the Mount. So let's look at two matters that Jesus addressed in Matthew 7, not too long after He warned us not to be judgmental. First, Jesus says:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matt. 7:13-14)

Jesus' point is clear: the way that leads to life is difficult. In context, it seems that this difficult way is the one He'd been laying out earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. It's the way of forgiving your enemies (Matt. 5:44), mourning your sin (Matt. 5:4), and thirsting for righteousness (Matt. 5:6). It's the way of marital faithfulness and sexual purity (Matt. 5:27-30), of meekness and humility (Matt. 5:5), of truth-telling (Matt. 5:37). It's the way of turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and going the extra mile (Matt. 5:41). None of those matters are easy and pleasant. As a result, this path isn't crowded with travelers.

In contrast, it's very easy to wander down the road that leads to spiritual destruction. This is the path for the disinterested, the hypocritical, and the deceived. It's the path for people who want to live any way they want to live, to avoid difficulty and sacrifice and self-denial. If you want

to do whatever seems right to you, if you need to have ease and pleasure now, then the easy path is the one for you.

Much of what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount boils down to the value of delayed gratification. If you want your best life now, then take the easy path. It won't be so great for you in the end, but it'll 'feel good' for a little while. The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11), on the other hand, teach us that if you want someday to be comforted, if you want to see God, if you want to inherit the earth, if you want to be satisfied in the end, if you want a great reward in heaven, then it's going to be difficult now.

Maybe you can begin to see how this applies to the prosperity gospel. But we're not finished yet. Look at what Jesus says next: 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves' (Matt. 7:15).

It's hard to overstate what Jesus says here. After warning us about the destruction that results from taking the easy path, He immediately alerts us to the danger posed by false prophets. A false prophet is someone who leads people onto the wrong path. A false prophet calls his victims to walk the easy road that leads to destruction; he assures them that they can have it all—in both this life and the next.

Picture those two gates and paths in your mind. Now imagine that outside the gates are two tour guides. Both have maps of their respective paths, both claim that theirs is the way that leads to life, and both tell you that listening to the other guy is going to cost you dearly. According to Jesus, it matters quite a bit which tour guide you choose. If

you allow yourself to be convinced to head down the wrong path, the consequences will be terrible.

And so Jesus instructs us to ‘beware.’ He wants us to be attentive, to be picky, and to pay attention to what we hear and whom we follow. Because false teachers don’t normally come to us with their claws out, drooling and baring their fangs. Instead, they look just like another sheep. That’s how they gain entrance into the flock, lull the sheep into a false sense of security, and finally prey on their victims.

False teachers don’t come to us saying, ‘Just to be clear, I am a false prophet. If you listen to me, your soul will be endangered. I will now propose that you participate in rank evil.’ If they did, no one would be deceived! Instead, false teachers come with a mixture of truth, speculation, and innovation. What they say *makes sense*, but only if you ignore other biblical truths. They might teach something you *wish* Jesus had taught, even if you’re pretty sure He didn’t. We have to watch out for teachers who seem like one of the sheep, but who actually are tour guides on a path that leads to hell.

If prosperity gospel teachers aren’t teaching what Jesus taught, then we absolutely cannot afford to coddle them or tolerate their message. In the end, you should judge everything you hear and read (including this book!) by the truths of Scripture. We intend to make the case that the prosperity gospel is a dangerous lie that must be exposed and resisted. So let’s get to it.