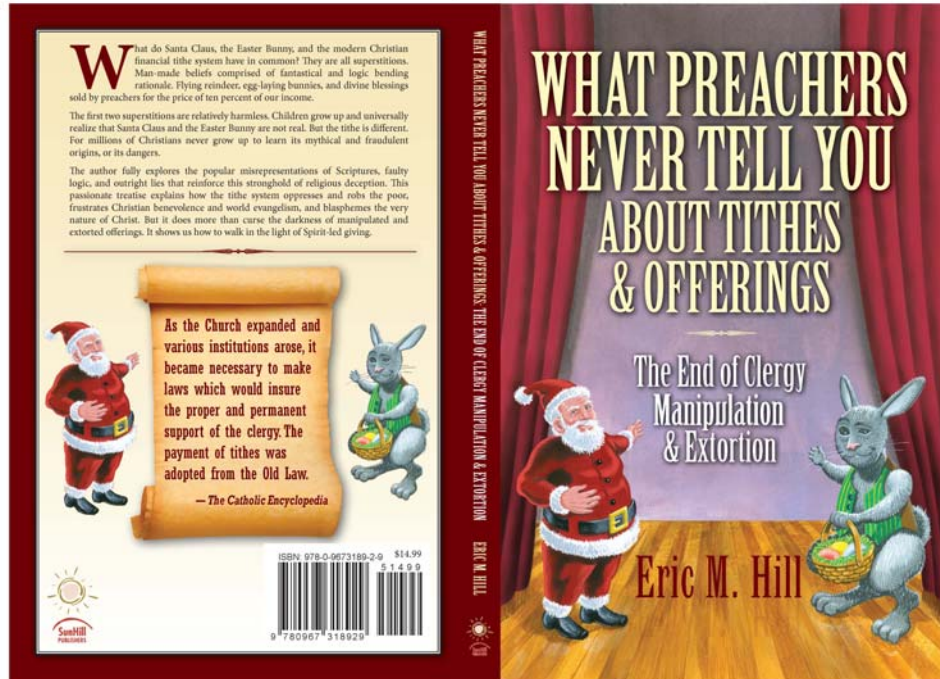


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Thank you!



The Gospel of Covetousness #1

By Eric M. Hill

Gehazi's Shadow

American Christianity is big business! More people have become rich in the name of Jesus Christ than any other religious figure, alive or dead. Jesus—the One who chased religious thieves out of the temple—is now the step ladder of spiritual

midgets with tall financial dreams. Men and women who could have never achieved comparable material success in secular business have grown rich from the offerings of good, but naïve people.

Is it any wonder that the world scornfully laughs at the American Church? How can they not laugh? We say we believe in a literal heaven and hell, but live as though there is neither. If we truly believe that **“...the world is passing away, and the lust of it...”** (NKJV 1John 2:17), why are we so attached to things that are doomed to pass away? It is because the American Church lives in the darkness of Gehazi’s shadow.

2 Kings 5 tells of the destruction of Gehazi. He was a greedy apprentice prophet who studied under the prophet Elisha. His woes began when God used Elisha to heal Naaman, a Syrian captain, of leprosy. Naaman was so impressed with Jehovah and His prophet, Elisha, that he forsook his false gods and offered Elisha a large reward for healing him. Verse 16 shows the character of the prophet. **“But he said, As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing. And he urged him to take it, but he refused.”**

I wish this were the end of the story, but it’s not. Gehazi wasn’t made out of the same stuff as Elisha. He watched in silent horror as Elisha rejected the fortune. As the healed Syrian rode off with his sacks of money, Gehazi thought, *“What’s wrong with Elisha? Doesn’t he know that the wealth of the wicked is laid up for the just? Doesn’t he know that it is God who gives us power to get wealth? Doesn’t he know that men shall give unto our bosom? Doesn’t he know that God wishes above all things that we prosper?”*

Like so many prosperity preachers, carnal Christians, and false converts Gehazi knew every Scripture that remotely seemed to justify his greed. To him Elisha was living beneath his privileges; he didn’t know who he was in Christ, so to speak. So Gehazi waited until the “ignorant” prophet went home. Then he said, **“But as the Lord lives, I will run after him and take something from him,”** (vs. 20).

There is a troubling similarity in the words of Elisha and Gehazi. To the temptation of covetousness, Elisha said, **“As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing,”** (vs. 16). Yet when Gehazi faced the same temptation, he answered, **“As the Lord lives, I will run after him, and take something from him,”** (vs. 20). Elisha resisted temptation in the name of the Lord. Gehazi yielded to temptation in the name of the Lord. What does this tell you? It tells you there are people who sin in the name of the Lord.

However, they don't actually call it sin. A professing Christian wouldn't do that. Today covetousness isn't called *sin*. This unholy desire for money and possessions is called *Claiming the promises of God*, or *Possessing the land*, or *Taking back what the devil has stolen*, or *The wealth of the wicked is laid up for the just*, or a hundred other code phrases for covetousness disguised as Christianity. This is not new. The apostle Paul explicitly warned us of this financial trickery:

⁵...men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself...⁹But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

1 Timothy 6:5, 9, 10

Gehazi was an ancient prosperity preacher; he was skilled in the art of converting religion into cash. The decision to sneak back to Naaman to accept the reward that Elisha rejected did not require the burning of a single mental calorie. In less than the time it took to inhale and exhale one breath, Gehazi planned his trip to Naaman, determined where to hide the stuff, and what lie he would offer Elisha for his absence. *Life was about to become oh so good.*

No more off-brand sandals from *Payless* for this prophet. From now on there were going to be some *Kenneth Cole's* and *Johnson Murphy's* on his sanctified feet. Besides it was foolish to turn down so much money. What about the good that could be done with these funds? Plus, Naaman was a Syrian captain—a Syrian captain! Why wouldn't God want him to accept a reward from this enemy of Israel, this murderer of women and children? This Gentile dog owed Israel a thousand times more than he offered. Elisha was a miracle worker—no one could take that from him—but he was also a fool. Gehazi told himself that a hundred times as he ran towards his blessing—and his destruction.

Once Gehazi received and hid the money, he returned to Elisha. Here is how God felt about the greedy prophet's new blessings:

Elisha said to him, "Where did you go, Gehazi?" And he said, "Your servant did not go anywhere." Then he said to him, "Did not my heart go with you when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever." And he went out from his presence leprous, as white as snow.¹

2 Kings 5:25-27

How does God feel about your so-called blessings? That depends on how much you have in common with Gehazi. For your sake, I hope it's not much.

¹ Leprosy is now treatable, but was incurable in the days of Gehazi. See its effects at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/ihm/images/A/12/594.jpg>.

It Works...So It Must Be God!

Uninformed Christians make the dangerous mistake of giving God credit for the success of their sinful activities. Multitudes naively believe their material success is proof of God's blessing. After all, if I confess my faith, lay hold on the promise, and go after it in the name of Jesus and get it, it must be God—right? Not necessarily. Neither material success nor material poverty proves God's blessing or curse. *They don't necessarily tell you anything about a person's walk with God.*

When Gehazi yielded to the demon of greed, and chased money and possessions in the name of God, guess what—he received them! But God had nothing to do with his so-called faith “victory.” He didn't receive his financial prosperity from God, but from lies and fleshly manipulations. Any time we violate the fruit of the spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, or temperance—to get any kind of blessing, we deceive ourselves if we think God is pleased with us.

Shallow Testimonies

Many testimonies of financial *blessings* are nothing more than results of Gehazi-like behavior. Of course, we shouldn't hastily suspect everyone with such a testimony of compromise. They may have been actually blessed by God. Yet, it is foolish and biblically unsound to accept every testimony of financial blessing as God's prosperity. Some apparent blessings are actually results of sin.

The city and tower of Babel are perfect examples of people doing something that was *apparently* good, but was *actually* wrong. A group of people had decided to build a city and tower. Yet God fought against the project, frustrated the people, and scattered them to different lands. The significant thing about this story (Genesis 11:1-9) is that nothing was *apparently* wrong with their intentions. The closest we come to seeing anything negative is when they said, ***Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower***

whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth,” (vs. 4).

Were these boastful declarations of prideful people? Perhaps, but we can't dogmatically say so. For similar words are used by pastors—some good, some bad—around the world to support their building programs. Yet whatever the motivation was for this ancient building program, we know by God's actions that He didn't approve.

Notice, however, that although God didn't approve of the project, it would have succeeded had He not stopped it. In God's own words: ***“...And this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do,”*** (KJV; vs. 6). Here the Lord plainly tells us we can gain material prosperity and success without His blessing. Anyone who believes there is a Mafia can't believe otherwise.

“But God did stop Babel,” you say. You believe this is proof that if something is not of God, He will stop it. Therefore, you conclude that whatever God doesn't stop, He endorses. So if He doesn't stop your efforts to “get your material blessing,” He must agree with your attainment of the so-called blessing. I ask you to consider two things: the logical conclusion of your argument and the Scriptures.

God hasn't abolished crime, disease, accidents, or violence. Is this proof that He endorses these social maladies? Can the successful bank robber credit God for his success? Can the prostitute legitimately thank God for her record profits? I think you see the foolishness of this.

The Bible provides no reason to believe the mere existence of evil legitimizes it, or worse, that it is blessed of God. It instead teaches that God allows evil to exist until He removes it. There may be a great time span between the offense and the judgment. Nonetheless, ***“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but***

that all should come to repentance...But the day of the Lord will come,” (2 Peter 3:9-10).

God destroyed Babel, but allowed Egypt to survive until this day. He destroyed Sodom, but spared Zoar (Genesis 19:12-22). As Creator, God has absolute authority to do with His creation whatever He desires whenever He desires. If in His infinite wisdom He decides to judge one sinner today, but wait several years to judge another, that is His right. Finite creatures who received their limited knowledge from the infinite God can't challenge His wisdom. It is enough to know that all of His actions are dictated by His eternal love and holiness.

What does this have to do with *Shallow Testimonies*? Everything. Prosperity preachers often use testimonies of financial gain to prove God is blessing those who practice their doctrine. We have shown, however, that it is possible to prosper financially or materially without God's blessing. We have also shown that God does not always immediately judge sin. As Paul told Timothy, who was probably wondering why God didn't judge false prophets quicker, ***“Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later,”*** (1 Timothy 5:24).

Unfortunately, many false prophets and prosperity preachers will not be exposed until Judgment Day. Then they and their followers will pay the eternal penalty of their grievous errors.

Prosperity That Stinks

Prosperity that stinks? What in the world does this man have against prosperity? you ask. Nothing. Prosperity is good. I would rather be full than hungry, healthy than sick, and rich than poor. Poverty doesn't glorify God; it doesn't reflect His original plan. Poverty is a curse, as is disease and starvation.

The prosperity that stinks is not, “***The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and he adds no sorrow with it,***” (Proverbs 10:22), but “***the prosperity of fools shall destroy them,***” (KJV; Proverbs 1:32). There is heavenly and demonic prosperity, just as there is heavenly and demonic wisdom (James 3:15, 17). Heavenly prosperity comes from the Spirit; demonic prosperity comes from the flesh.

Exodus 16 gives a great example of demonic prosperity. The Israelites in the wilderness murmured against God and demanded meat and bread. “***Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not,***” (vs. 4).

First, notice that the people prayed for a blessing and received it—but not because they were spiritual. They were actually exceedingly fleshly, sinful, and yet their prayers were answered. *What a great prosperity seminar! I believe I receive, and ooops, there it is!* What they didn’t know was that like a later generation that would pray for a king, and receive him in God’s wrath (Hosea 13:11), they, too, would receive their request ***mixed with judgment.***

Second, God commanded the people to gather only one day’s provision (vs. 19). But covetousness is a spiritual cancer. It can’t be contained; only removed. “***Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto Moses; but some of them left of it until the morning*** [took more than they were allowed and saved it until the morning], ***and it bred worms, and stank: and Moses was wroth*** [furious] ***with them,***” (vs. 20). This is prosperity that stinks. It’s prosperity gained through fear, covetousness, and disobedience.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “***Give us this day our daily bread,***” (Matthew 6:11). The Jews in the wilderness violated this timeless principle by hoarding

God's provision. Fearful provision for the future insults God. It indirectly calls Him a liar. For God has commanded to ***“take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things,”*** (Matthew 6:31-32).

Did Jesus literally mean it's wrong to think about food, clothing, and other necessities? Did Jesus eat food? Did He wear clothing? How do you eat food and wear clothes without thinking about either? You don't. The issue is not whether you think about necessities, but whether you *seek* these things (v. 32). Here we must judge between godly provision; and fearful, covetous provision.

Godly provision isn't laziness, lack of ambition, or looking for angels to mysteriously supply your needs. It isn't living life in such a way that you're one paycheck away from homelessness. Nor is it living without air conditioning in your car or owning only two changes of clothing. Godly provision is simply trusting that God is your ultimate Source. Sure, you work, save, and invest, just as others do. But the difference is you serve God and ultimately trust Him to care for you. Your attitude and actions concerning money and things prove you believe life is short, death claims all possessions, and Judgment Day is inevitable.

When Jesus said to “take no thought,” the immediate context shows He was speaking of fear and covetousness. He was telling us to not fear that our Father will not provide for us, and to not be guided by greed. When we “seek” provisions as do the Gentiles—unbelievers—we direct our lives not by the abundance of God's promises, but by the scarcity of our faith in those promises.

Ungodly seeking of provisions is that which is motivated by unbelief, fear, and covetousness. We don't believe God will provide for us, so we default to our own devices. In such an atmosphere, all kinds of sinful attitudes prevail. But by far the most

delusional is when we, like Gehazi, greedily seek after things in the name of Jesus. Oh, how easy it is to hide our covetousness under a robe of religion.

“We’re not fearful of the future; we’re just being wise stewards.”

“We believe God; we just don’t want to be foolish.”

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse—my storehouse, that is.”

“God wants you to prosper.” Or another way of saying this is, “How can I get your money if you don’t have any?”

“Nothing but the best for God.”

Or we could mimic King Solomon. “I hope the bigness and brilliance of my ministry covers the shallowness of my spirituality.” The list of religious excuses to seek things as do the Gentiles is endless.

Religious covetousness is subtle. Discernible for a moment, but untouchable—present, yet unseen. A poisonous snake that conceals itself by blending with its surroundings. Hidden in thick bushes of religion until God’s fire scorches its hiding place and forces it into open confrontation.

Legalism Versus Covetousness

How do you free yourself from this curse of covetousness, this lethal germ of greed? Do you cancel your pension fund? Do you sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor? Do you quit your job and live as a beggar? Precious child of God, after saying so much about the curse of covetousness, my next words may surprise you. Were we to do all these things, we would be no better for it. We can’t exterminate sin by outward actions. Self-induced poverty can’t destroy covetousness, and throwing away dirty magazines can’t kill lust. These actions will produce nothing but a poor, covetous man; and a lustful man with no dirty magazines. As Jesus said,

There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him that can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man...For from within, out of

the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness...All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

Mark 7:15, 21-23

Legalism is no match for greed. You can legislate rules for behavior, but you can't stop sinful desires. You can pass laws against pornography, but you can't make lustful people stop x-raying the objects of their fantasies. You can forbid covetousness, but you can't prevent greedy people from craving more. We must remove the roots of covetousness and not become distracted by its branches. Love removes roots; legalism clips branches.

Love Fulfills the Law

We impose laws to change behavior, not desires. A person who fears consequences may obey a law and still be a criminal. God isn't interested in simply scaring people into obedience. Nor does He want obedience borne of convenience. God wants more than lip service. He wants **"sincere love,"** (2 Corinthians. 6:6). Love has no hidden agendas; no ulterior motives. It gives without expecting a return. This is the love that says, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive,"** (Acts 20:35).

Love and covetousness are natural enemies. There can be no peaceful coexistence between them nor any compromise. The conflict is eternal. For while love sacrifices itself to help others, covetousness sacrifices others to help itself. This is why Jesus said, **"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money],"** (Matthew 6:24).

Love and covetousness are both masters. To get rid of one, we simply yield to the other. To destroy covetousness, we don't pass another law—Thou shalt not be selfish—we instead obey Romans 13:8 and Galatians 5:14: **"For he who loves another has fulfilled the law,"** and **"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in**

this; You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Therefore we conclude that the answer to covetousness (and all sin) is not more laws, but more love. But from where does this love come?

The Love of God is Shed Abroad in Our Hearts by the Holy Ghost

The problem of covetousness is not that a person possesses too much of this world, but possesses too little of the other world—heaven. The answer to covetousness is not to become poor in the things of the world, but to become rich in the things of the Spirit. A heart that is full of God has no room for covetousness. A heart that is convinced of God’s love is free to love. A heart that sees heavenly riches is not impressed with earthly riches. A heart that is grateful for salvation is generous. A heart with these qualities isn’t afraid to love without manipulating a material return. God is the return.

God promised the true Christian that ***“the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us,”*** (Romans 5:5). This love enables us to free ourselves of the death grip of covetousness and selfishness. It allows us to look beyond the temporary pleasures of this world to see the eternal pleasures of God. It empowers us to deny the sinful tendencies of our flesh.

The love of God makes us sensitive to others’ needs. It compels us to help the helpless. It makes us rearrange our priorities. It makes us go here and there, seeking and saving the lost. It casts out all fear, so that we may obey the Great Commission to ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,”*** (Mark 16:15). It gives us sight, so we can see as God sees. It makes our hearts tender, so that we might feel as He feels. It makes our ears sensitive so that we might hear His Word.

This love shed abroad in our hearts is not the result of rules and holy policy letters. It’s not the result of speaking in tongues or getting a Bible degree. It doesn’t

come from praying an hour a day or fasting a day a week. It doesn't come from a special Holy Ghost anointing meeting. Nor does it come from memorizing Scriptures.

The love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost is the work of the Spirit and not the work of the flesh. Yet although it is a work of the Spirit, it is not without the cooperation of the human heart. No one can legitimately say, "I would be more loving if only the Holy Ghost would shed His love in my heart." The truth is you would be more loving if you allowed the Holy Ghost to pour His love in your heart.

How is the Love of God Shed Abroad?

The love of God is not something you received in the past, but rather something you receive daily from the Holy Spirit. His ministry of shedding abroad supernatural love in your heart begins the moment you repent of your sins. He sheds His love abroad in your heart by revealing Jesus Christ to you in powerful, understandable ways.

The intensity of God's love in your heart is in direct proportion to your vision and appreciation of Jesus Christ. The love of God can only be as real to you as Jesus Christ is real to you. As your eyes open to the goodness and greatness of Jesus Christ, everything earthly diminishes to its proper place. Worldly weights drop off of you, and you are then able to elevate to the heights of the eternal heavens. It is this great and mysterious work that He accomplishes in us that delivers us from the double bondage of selfishness (Mine! Mine! Mine!) and covetousness (More! More! More!).

Expose yourself to as much of God as possible: Bible study, prayer, verbal worship, Christian fellowship and accountability. These things provide an ideal climate for the Spirit to reveal Christ to you. Your bondage to covetousness will weaken in direct proportion to your growing relationship with God.

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Power Evangelism Ministries, P.O. Box 4921,
Atlanta, GA 30302
www.PowerEvangelism.org
EHILL111@comcast.net