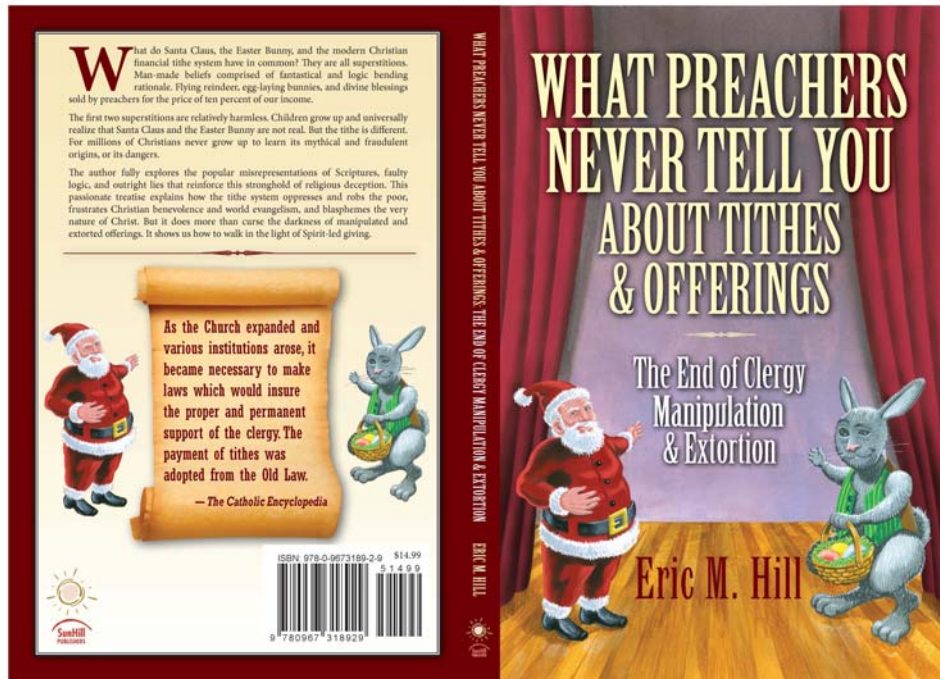


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Thank you!



## The Gospel of Covetousness #2

By Eric M. Hill

### Thieves in the Pulpit

There is a common perception that all preachers are thieves; that they are in ministry primarily for money. I'd love to defend the ministry and categorically deny this charge. But it would take great dishonesty, naïveté, or imagination to justify the greed of many American preachers. Therefore, I shamefully confess that materialism and

covetousness comprise the unhealthy diet of many ministers. Like incontinent gluttons, they greedily stuff themselves until the stench of their sin's overflow can no longer be ignored or explained away.

Open sin requires open confrontation. When King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the Lord told him that he would be judged openly because he had sinned grievously, and given the heathen an occasion to blaspheme His name (2 Samuel 12:1-15). Impartial judgment against sin is necessary if God and the Church are to maintain any kind of integrity.

What would have happened had God forgiven David without correcting him, as is the practice of the American Church? Israel would have suffered what we suffer today: a lowering of God's standard of righteousness, a light-hearted attitude towards God's judgment, and a general contempt of God in the Church. The Lord dealt openly with King David for the good of the nation. We must deal openly with covetousness for the good of the Church and world. For a covetous, corrupt Church disqualifies itself as God's representative.

### **Theft and Fraud in Ministry**

The world has discovered our financial hypocrisy and has rightly accused the ministry of theft and fraud. Multitudes of preachers are accomplished thieves, manipulators, and con men. Yet before I further address this issue, I must emphatically note that not all ministers are of this sort.

American Christianity has its share of ministerial thieves, but it also has a holy remnant of outstanding preachers and workers ***“who have not defiled their garments,”*** (Revelation 3:4). These faithful Christians aren't as well known as the thieves: (1) Because the conduct of the faithful does not attract attention; and (2) Because it is not in the best interest of wicked sinners to highlight the purity and holiness of true Christians. For instance, when have you ever heard the media discuss the financial accountability of honest preachers with modest lifestyles? I never have and you probably never have either. They're out there, but their stories don't interest as

many radio listeners and television viewers as do the relatively few ministers with mansions, Rolex watches, and private jets. So the media skips over five hundred preachers who drive a \$30,000 dollar Ford to report on one who drives a \$150,000 dollar Maserati.

## **Wanted!—Ministers With Integrity**

Nonetheless, much of the scorn American society heaps on its preachers is well deserved. For the worship of money and things has invaded the Church and has become the rule rather than the exception. A tolerated atmosphere of selfishness [Mine!] and covetousness [More!] has eroded the American Church's integrity and has made us the joke of our society. This is certainly the case with prosperity preachers. They personify greed. But to a lesser degree and less noticeable, there are *apparently* even sound ministers who despise the gospel of covetousness by name, yet endorse it in practice. They have a Ford in their garage, but a Maserati in their heart.

The Apostle Paul was a man of integrity. If he were alive today in America, many in the Church would despise or even hate him (look at the Corinthians). The prosperity cult would criticize him for not knowing his rights in Christ. They would deride him for teaching sacrifice instead of greed. Yet the world would fear and respect him for his message, integrity, and godly results.

One day when Paul was in prison—not for theft or fraud, but for preaching the gospel—he was called by Felix, ruler of Judea, to defend himself. Acts 24:25 says, **“And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled...”** (KJV). Why would a ruler with the power of life and death in his hands tremble at the words of his prisoner? What was it about Paul's message that terrified Felix? There were three things that gave Paul *moral authority* over Felix.

### **The Minister's Moral Authority**

First, Paul preached a message that the Holy Spirit had obligated Himself to confirm. Jesus said in John 16:8, **“And when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will**

***convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.***” The Holy Spirit took Paul’s words of reproof and struck Felix’ mind like a hammer striking a shelled egg. Felix was crushed by the irresistible impact of Paul’s message of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Thus, *he trembled*.

Second, Paul was willing to give his life for the gospel. This is obvious in his presentation to Felix. Had he been fearful of the consequences of offending this wicked ruler, he would not have preached what many now consider a negative message—that is, a sin message. Paul’s bravery astonished and impressed wicked Felix. He must have thought, *This man actually believes this Jesus who was crucified is alive. He believes Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That’s ridiculous. He must be insane. Yet he doesn’t speak like a crazy man. He’s intelligent and persuasive and...What if this Jesus did rise from the dead? And what is this he is saying about eternal punishment? What if this talk about a day of judgment is true?*

Third, Paul gained moral authority over Felix by his honesty. When Paul answered the choreographed accusations of the Jews and their smooth talking lawyer, Tertullus, it amounted to nothing but a rebuttal. Neither side had any hard proof of guilt or innocence. Yet Felix believed Paul. That is obvious by his subsequent treatment of the apostle. Such is the power of honesty that even wicked men are impressed with it. They are either too self-serving or fearful to be consistently honest themselves, but they recognize those who are and admire them from a distance.

The lack of the above three qualities in American ministers, and Christians in general, is the reason our wicked society laughs at us. The world doesn’t respect our message, our sacrifice, or our honesty. Our message is weak, our sacrifice is minimal, and our honesty is adjustable. The sad result is a presentation of Christ that lacks integrity. And yet there is still another shameful condition in the American Church. This is our disfiguring disease of lust for things and money.

**“I Have Coveted No Man’s Silver...”**

I am constantly amazed at how prosperity preachers can pervert any Scripture to justify chasing money. Paul was the exact opposite of today's crop of shallow preachers. (Maybe that's why they claim to understand more of the Bible than he. Don't laugh. They actually believe this.)

Before Paul left Ephesus, he told the elders:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves...I have coveted no one's silver, or gold, or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Acts 20:28-30, 33-35

Paul's declaration to the Ephesian elders that they knew he had coveted no man's silver, or gold, or clothing is a rebuke to the American Church. Rarely in our country can we find a preacher who can boldly claim that he has not coveted our money? Oh, sure I know—it's for the work of God. Well, is it the work of God for preachers to use manipulation, lies, extortion, and bribery to get into our pockets—sounds like tithes, doesn't it? Is it God's work to pay themselves fat salaries at our expense? Are their luxury cars and huge homes God's work? Are their private planes and expensive suits God's work? Oh, I know the plane is necessary. The big airlines are so inconvenient and undependable. And the expensive suits...well, God wants His preachers to look like royalty—right?

And surely God wants His preachers to use the most self-serving fundraising schemes available. That's why prosperity preachers cry into the radio or television for more money while they sit on huge bank accounts. This is nothing more than a religious

scam. And at the appropriate time God shall reward this evil by casting their wretched souls into the bowels of hell to be tormented throughout eternity.

I will be criticized for standing against such wickedness. But I can't keep quiet in the face of such blatant sin among Church leaders. Who can number the multitudes who have been deceived by these religious thieves? How many souls have gone to hell thinking Jesus died on the cross to make them financially rich? Precious child of God, purchased with the very blood of Christ Himself, free yourself from the covetous influence of greedy ministers. Their doctrine is a poison that pollutes and kills. You can't serve God and money!

## Doctrine According to Godliness

Paul told Timothy that ***"...if any man consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing...."*** (1 Timothy 6:3,4; KJV). It is interesting and significant that Paul spoke of the doctrine which is *according to godliness* in respect to money and things. This means you must judge money doctrines by their fruit. If the doctrine does not produce godliness, it is not of God. It's that simple. Even if the doctrine is apparently supported by a hundred Scriptures, if it does not cause a person to believe and act like the biblical Jesus, it is not of God.

How can a doctrine be supported by a hundred Scriptures and not be of God? That also is simple. A cunning, crafty minister can twist the Bible into any shape his lust desires if he takes Scriptures out of context. How is this done? By rearranging, adding, deleting, overemphasizing, underemphasizing, and otherwise manipulating the Word of God. Yet no matter how crafty false teachers may be, the most unsophisticated child of God can discern between the true Word of God and a masterful lie if she remembers one thing: godly doctrine produces godly fruit (Matthew 7:15-20).

Does the doctrine feed your ego, make you greedy, or make you selfish? If so, how can this doctrine be of God? Does it inspire you to want more, bigger, better? If you are honest, you will admit that prosperity doctrines do all of the above. This is directly contrary to Paul's instructions: ***"Now godliness with contentment is great***

**gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content,”** (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

## **Strifes of Words**

Paul warned us that greedy, manipulative preachers would use the strategy of “**...strifes of words**” which would result in the doctrine of “**...gain is godliness,**” (1 Timothy 6:4, 5; KJV). What is this strategy? It is deliberate overemphasis or underemphasis of key words. Prosperity preachers are skilled at overlooking the obvious for the mysterious. They pick a key word in a Scripture that serves their greed and overemphasize, underemphasize, or totally ignore it. This reinterprets entire passages of the Bible, and effectively rewrites any part that contradicts greed.

A secondary effect of this manipulation of Scripture is that major themes are ignored or perverted. Themes are concepts and doctrines that are consistently interwoven throughout the entire Bible. For example, God is holy; God is love; God is just; God is sovereign; or God is eternal. These are foundational truths that are so clearly established in the Scriptures and critical to our understanding of God that they can't be modified without polluting the entire revelation of God. Yet this is exactly what false teachers do with their “strifes of words” strategy. Don't let Satan's ministers deceive you by their manipulations of key words. Covetousness is wrong before, during, and after the manipulations of men.

## **Combating Heresy in the Church**

Heresies are structures of doctrines built with dangerous mixtures of bad material and good. They are like leaking pipes of lies behind wooden walls of truth. If the pipes are ignored, the water will rot the walls. We must remedy this situation even though the job is messy. Yet it is here that Satan's ministers enjoy a propaganda advantage. For every effort to fix the pipes is misrepresented as an attack on the walls. So when we denounce greed, they slanderously report that we are against prosperity. Nonetheless, the true minister of Christ must disregard this defamation and “**earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints,**” (Jude 3; KJV).

My part in this great fight is limited here to briefly refuting only a few of the more popular false prosperity heresies. Let's begin with....

## The “Who We Are In Christ” Heresy

The basic premise of this lie is that children of the King ought to live like kings—earthly kings, with all the extravagance and privilege this provides. Of course, Scriptures are manipulated to this end. Often when I hear a prosperity preacher simulate biblical instruction and teach this lie, it resembles a parrot repeating physics formulas to admiring crowds. The parrot speaks authoritatively of issues that are as far beyond its understanding as infinity is beyond a lunch break. Yet we admire these talking birds without ascribing to them intelligence they don't have. This is how we must view prosperity preachers. They, too, speak authoritatively of issues they don't understand. “...***Understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm,***” (1 Timothy 1:7).

A perfect example is the “Who We Are In Christ” heresy. This doctrine starts out beautifully. *We are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus* (2 Corinthians. 5:21). *We have the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians. 2:16). *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (Philippians. 4:13). *If you shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it* (John 14:14). *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might be rich* (2 Corinthians 8:9). *And [He] has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father....* (Revelation 1:6).

One could point to a hundred similar Scriptures of God's glorious provision, goodness, and kindness. Yet ten million promises of God or declarations of His goodness would not justify the conclusions of false prophets that covetousness is good, and that God's primary goal for Christians is financial wealth. The mistake of false and carnal Christians is they don't understand God, righteousness, or holiness. This is why they equate earthly riches with the favor of God.

A wrong understanding of money, things, and comfort corrupts the knowledge of God. When a person believes that God's ultimate calling in life is to be wealthy and comfortable, he will find it impossible to satisfy God's requirements for discipleship. For whenever he hears the Holy Spirit say, ***"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me,"*** (Matthew 16:24) he will instinctively reject the thought. He will instead follow greedy manipulators and become increasingly hardened to any command of God that threatens his lust for money, things, and comfort. This is why Jesus said, ***"...when they have heard [God's word], [they] go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life,"*** (Luke 8:14).

False teachers create and sustain the "Who We Are In Christ" heresy by manipulating Scriptures that mention or discuss our identification in Christ. Our blessed relationship with Christ is explained within the context of making money, getting stuff, and enjoying a life of leisure. Spiritual blessings are converted into cash, cars, and clothes. And our great pursuit of life changes from attaining the riches of Christ to attaining riches through the use of Christ. How contradictory that the doctrine of who we are in Christ, which is given to free us from the world, should instead be used to enslave us to the world.

I will tell you who we are in Christ. We are the creation and property of Almighty God; we are subject to His sovereign will. He doesn't have to ask our permission to do anything. Nor must He be careful to act only within our understanding of Him. This doesn't mean that He acts contrary to Scripture. But it does mean He is free to act contrary to our *misunderstanding* of Scripture.

We are kings and priests, but our authority is only valid within the boundaries of God's character and wisdom. A police officer has genuine authority, but it is limited by the laws of the land in which he serves. The preeminent laws of the land in which we serve are love and humility. If we violate either of these laws our authority is corrupted, curtailed, or cut off altogether. The Lord simply has not given us unregulated authority

to supernaturally fulfill the whims of our unpredictable lusts. Our authority is instead that of a *servant*—the authority to do as we are told.

The “Who We Are In Christ” doctrine, however,—as it is taught by greedy, manipulative teachers—turns Christians from servants of Christ to masters of Christ. Scriptures are taken out of context and used as a bulldozer to tear down God’s sovereign authority over our lives. The result is that a doctrine of God is used to challenge and dethrone God. Specifically, Christians are subtly taught that Christ’s accomplishment on the cross gives them authority to violate the character of God.

Of course, the greed merchants will argue that it is the character of God to give good gifts unto those that love Him. And to this I say, Amen. Yet I must also add that no matter how much a Christian loves or believes God, he never gains leverage over God. Some people think that if they only confess and do the right things that God is obligated to give them what they want. This is nothing less than Christian witchcraft. It is an abomination and an insult to Almighty God that anyone, friend or enemy, should think that a finite, imperfect, sinful human can manipulate an infinite, perfect, and absolutely holy God. This is ignorance and arrogance at its very worst.

### **The “Wealth of the Wicked Laid Up for the Just” Heresy**

Christians often say, “The wealth of the wicked is laid up for the just.” This true statement becomes a false doctrine, a heresy, when the timing of the prophecy’s fulfillment is wrong. Of course, I believe God has appointed a day of judgment when sinful humanity will be stripped of its power and authority. On that day a great transference will take place. The lowly saint will be exalted to great honor, and the sinner shall be cursed with everlasting shame and contempt. **“For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth,”** (Psalm 37:9).

Daniel also spoke of that great day when the saints would inherit all things:

I beheld, and the same horn [antichrist] made war with the saints, and prevailed against them; Until the Ancient of days [God the Father] came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom.

(Daniel 7:21, 22; KJV).

We have corrupted the hope of our inheritance of the earth by striving to attain *now* what we shall be freely given *then*. There is a difference between *now* promises and *then* promises. A “now” promise is one that pertains to this present world. A “then” promise pertains to the new world. For example, Acts 1:8 is a “now” promise. ***“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”*** We know from the context, from history, from scriptural validation, and present experience that this is a “now” promise.

Revelation 21:4 is an example of a “then” Scripture: ***“And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”*** This obviously is a future promise.

There is, however, a third category of promises. This is the now-then promise. It is fulfilled in a limited, temporary way “now,” but is fulfilled in an unlimited, eternal way “then.” The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead gives a good example of a now-then promise. ***“Jesus said unto her [Martha], ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to Him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection....’”*** (John 11:23-25).

Martha’s theology was correct: There is a general day of resurrection appointed for saints and sinners. However, she didn’t understand that when Jesus said, “Your brother shall rise again,” He was not giving her a “then” promise, but a “now-then”

promise. It was true that Lazarus would rise again at the future general resurrection. Yet Jesus' promise included a present limited resurrection—solely for Lazarus.

I mentioned the categories of promises to help you examine the “Wealth of the Wicked Laid Up for the Just” heresy. This doctrine is built almost entirely on Proverbs 13:22: **“A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.”**

This heresy encourages covetousness if the victims of our covetousness are not Christians. Basically, if Christians believe God and use their faith, they can get the rich person’s wealth. My question is, Is this **“...the doctrine which is according to godliness?” (1 Timothy 6:3; KJV)**. Is the end of this doctrine Christ-like behavior? What kind of fruit does this tree produce?

### ***The Fruit of Covetousness***

The tenth commandment says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shalt not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that is your neighbor’s,” (Exodus 20:17). And only the most uninformed would seek to hide behind the already tried-and-failed retort of “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), so don’t even think about it.

How does God feel about your desire and effort to get someone else’s wealth? If this is not covetousness, what is? And how exactly do you reconcile God’s command to love your brother with your lust for his property? Do you seize the property of someone you love? I know, I know, you’re not actually seizing it; you’re using your faith to get it. Tell me, how does that look? Do you just come right out and say, “God, give me Harold’s house”? No, that’s probably too honest a request. What about this: Harold’s house is going into foreclosure. You can loan or give enough money to Harold to save his home. But you don’t do it because you want Harold’s house, and if he loses it, you can get it on the cheap—for the kingdom of God, of course. Now that’s one we can put God’s name on, right? Wrong.

I think part of the reason we find it easy to desire the property of the “wicked” is we see them as objects rather than people. Have you ever considered that sinners are actually people? Do you understand that God loves sinners just as He loves you? If this is true (and it is), how do you justify lusting after their property? Do you think that a single Scripture, “the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous,” is to be interpreted in a way that conflicts with the character of Christ and the commands of God to love one another? If this is what you believe, you may want to dig up your receipt and return your salvation to Wal-Mart for a full refund; it’s not genuine.

### ***The Fruit of Hypocrisy***

The official reason for desiring/coveting the wealth of the wicked is to establish the kingdom of God. But can it be that while these covetous people quote Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 8:18: ***“And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant....”*** that they are ignorant of Romans 3:7: ***“For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?”***

Romans 3:7 records that it is possible to make God look good through dishonesty. Preachers do it all the time with inflated reports, false healings, exaggerated miracles, manipulated moves of God, etc. The minister’s lie causes people to worship God. Yet the minister is judged by God as a liar. God doesn’t need or desire lies to make Him look good.

With this in mind, how can a so-called Christian covet another person’s property for the kingdom of God? Is this not flexible morality--bent to fit the shape of our wickedness? Though we rationalize our greed with select Scriptures, and though we pretend to have a great desire for the kingdom of God, will the Lord who ***“searches all hearts and understands all the intents of the thoughts....”*** (1 Chronicles. 28:9) not judge us as hypocrites? If we adopt such hypocritical behavior are we not in danger of hearing these dreadful words on Judgment Day?: ***“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness,”*** (Matthew 7:23).

The proper understanding of Proverbs 13:22 begins with acknowledging that it is a now-then promise. Within the boundaries of God's will for a specific individual, it can certainly be applied today. God may sovereignly transfer wealth from one person to another. But this is God's business, not ours. Fleshly, covetous manipulations to get someone's wealth, property, or position will identify the manipulator as a hypocrite. A careful examination of biblical personalities who did receive the wealth of the wicked will reveal that they were not greedy; they did not seek wealth. Nor were they manipulators. Abraham, Joseph, and Daniel all received the wealth of the wicked. Yet they didn't pursue wealth. It was thrust upon them.

Nonetheless, there is such a thing as prospering for the kingdom of God. Do you really believe you are called to this dangerous ministry? Don't be so quick to answer yes. Very few people or societies in the Bible or secular history have passed God's test of prosperity. Prosperity has a way of exposing and fertilizing our sinful tendencies. What secret seeds of worldliness will burst through the soil of your life once you get enough money to satisfy your lusts?

Now let me ask another question. What portion of your life is dedicated to sacrificing for others? Are you presently known as a kind, generous person who gives his or her life for the kingdom of God? Statistically speaking, you probably aren't. Few of us are described by others in such terms. Do you have the character of Abraham, Joseph, or Daniel? Don't answer yes too quickly. It takes decades of suffering intense abuse at the hands of God and Satan to achieve such character. Does that statement offend you? It doesn't fit your prosperity template, your formula for a life of leisure and luxury? If so, you're spiritually immature and not ready for the ministry of abundance. It would destroy you. Another question. Is money and things important to you? They are? Now we know you're not ready for abundance.

You're not called to abundance. You're just attracted to it. *More in Part 3.*

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