

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Remember on the 8th, when we had Rally Day, how excited we all were about the activities and life of Dunn’s Corners? If I had thought about it, I would have made Rally Day and the launch of Stewardship Sunday happen on the same day, because a good stewardship sermon about how it takes a variety of talents to function as an active church

community and to keep the church running. It takes all of us, pooling our resources together to fund the church's budget. It takes faith in each other, trust in the financial management of our resources, a collective vision, and generous givers to make Dunn's Corners what it is. I simply want to repeat all the same things, but you just heard that a few weeks ago.

Plus, you already know that. Not just because I alluded to it on the 8th. Maybe you were pleasantly surprised on Rally Day to see the size and hear the sound of all of us worshipping together, but you've always known that a church needs its members to give their time and their offerings in order to thrive, and I hope you're all excited about what's to come and ready to fill out your pledge cards, if you haven't already. I've heard some of you have!

So, I don't need to repeat the Rally Day sermon. Nor do I need to talk to you about faith in each other or how tight the budget is. We do so much as a church than what our budget would suggest, because we have the Tuesday Guys working instead of hired contractors. We have parents donating supplies and food to the children and youth programs outside of the church budget. We have deacons providing labor and food to those in need, and generous people sign up for Fellowship time responsibilities instead of having the church pay for Dunkin Donut munchkins or a Stop and Shop sheet cake every week.

We don't yet know this church's full potential, but I can feel the energy and momentum building. That's a good reason to give to the church and to consider what you might anticipate giving in 2025 so that we can responsibly create a church budget.

But what I want to talk about today is a wrong reason for giving. There are very few things in life that I hate. When I was young, I heard Yoda say, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering," and I believe him. Master Yoda is wise. So when I feel fear, anger, or hate, I try to channel my inner jedi and release those feelings, but I have hatred toward the prosperity gospel and those who preach it.

The prosperity gospel is a Christian belief system that proclaims that God will reward faith with health and wealth and good fortune. It sounds really wonderful at first. They proclaim, “God loves you!” “God wants the best for you.” They quote scripture like John 10:10 “Jesus came that you may have life and have it abundantly.” And 2 Corinthians 8:9 “Though [Jesus] was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

And they even use Mark 10:30, one of our verses for today. Gloria Copeland writes in her book *God's Will Is Prosperity* about this verse, “Give \$10 and receive \$1,000; give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000 . . . in short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.”

Of course, that's just part of Mark 30. These folks pick scriptures and sometimes just pieces of scriptures and ignore the rest. They ignore Mark 10:30 part b which says that with the prosperity there will also be persecutions, and verse thirty-one which says the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

So that's what they promise for giving to the church, but it's the flip side of this belief system that can be spiritually devastating, because if God rewards faith with prosperity, then those who lack prosperity lack faith. When tragedies and struggles and health problems and unemployment and inflation and relationships problems and mental illness and the aging process come about, which they tend to do in every family at some point, the judgment is that you're out of favor with God. It's your fault. You're spiritually deficient. The angel accountants up in heaven have calculated your church offerings and the time you've spent in prayer and the number of verses you've read and how many Sundays you've attended church, and the bottom line is, you've fallen short of the quota, so God's blessings are being held back until you get yourself together and catch up.

If you've ever, ever, thought that God's blessings work like this, then I'd like to apologize on behalf of the church. We who know better have not railed hard enough against this emotionally manipulative, financially exploitative, theologically twisted belief system. If it sounds like I'm angry, I am.

I mean, if it were true, then why do bad things happen to good people? Why do matriarchs of the church get cancer or dementia? Why do our prayer warriors live paycheck to paycheck? Why do the children of faithful people struggle with addictions? Don't tell me it's because they don't have enough faith.

And I've seen first-hand how painful it can be. For about 4 years of my hospice career, I was on a team that specialized in Lou Gerhig's diseases, or ALS. The team was given specialized training about this cruel and horrible and very random disease that stole your independence and motor control and voice.

I cared deeply about these patients and would do almost anything they asked of me to bring them peace. One woman's request was that I read to her, since she could not hold a book herself. So each week, I would ask what she'd like me to read. Every week, it was the same. She wanted to read from Joel Osteen's books.

Joel Osteen is the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. You may have seen him on tv before. He is a high school graduate whose father started a church and his church currently has a \$90 million dollar church budget. His net worth is currently estimated at over \$50 million dollars, but to be fair, Osteen at this point does not receive a salary from the church. His income these days comes through the sales of his books and speaking fees. Trustees, I'll start working on that 10 year plan right away.

I attended a service at Lakewood once. I was in Houston and wanted to see what it was like. The church had bought the NBA arena that the Houston Rockets used to use. A praise band opened the service with a thirty-minute concert. Then Mrs. Osteen stood to ask for the offering. She encouraged the congregation to give generously. She said, "I have a pomegranate orchard at my home. Each tree began as a single seed. Each tree produces a hundred pomegranates. Each pomegranate has about a thousand seeds. From a single seed comes hundreds of thousands of seeds. Each dollar you give is like a pomegranate seed. Give to the church and it will return to you one hundred-fold or more." She was speaking about her orchard, but she was referencing Mark 10:30. I grimaced as I watched the offering buckets being passed.

But I digress. I was reading Osteen's books to my patient, week after week. The theology was a mile wide and an inch deep. I wanted so badly to interrupt his words with my own commentary. To correct his misguided theology. I wanted to assure her that she had done nothing wrong and that this was not a punishment doled out or a lack of healing due to a lack of faith. I wanted read to hear instead from Henri Nouwen and Anne Lamott, two of my favorite authors who know that suffering and faithfulness are not oxymorons. I wanted to remind her of actual scripture about faithful people who suffered, from Abel to Rachel, and Ezekiel and Paul, and Jesus himself. That the scriptures are more about the suffering faithful than the prosperous faithful. That God's promise is not about wealth and health but to not leave or forsake no matter how hard life is.

But a chaplain's job is not to impose their faith on a patient and family but to be a spiritual resource for their needs. So each week I asked her what she wanted me to read and each week she asked for Osteen's words as she declined steadily. In the midst of book three or four she became unresponsive. Her young adult daughter, who had always been at work during my previous visits, could not wrap her head around the contradiction between medical science and the family's faith and when the nurse told her that there was not heartbeat, the daughter refused to accept it. The whole team spent a couple of hours with the daughter, assuring her that there was nothing medical or spiritual that could have changed her mother's diagnosis or death, before she allowed the funeral home to come to the house. It wasn't that she accepted the reality. She was just physically and spiritually exhausted at that point.

And I don't blame her. If you believe that God will bless the faithful, and your mom is faithful, and then your mom suffers, how do you process that? Do you blame yourself for her suffering? Do you doubt God's goodness? Do you give up on the church because you can't stomach what religious authorities have been espousing? I think a lot of young people have.

So, I have a personal beef against the prosperity gospel. And that makes asking you all for your pledge cards a touchy subject because I don't want you to give for the wrong

reasons. Don't give out of a sense of guilt or empty promises. I will never, ever promise you that if you tithe, God will reward you and multiply it a hundredfold or give you a pomegranate orchard or good health.

I want you to give for the right reasons. Give because you recognize your own abundance. Give to the church as an act of love and excitement. I hope you believe in the church and the budget and the vision. I hope you have confidence that money given will be managed with wisdom and faith, and I hope you know that the staff is committed to the work of the church. The stewardship theme for this year is a good one – Serving Christ, Serving Others is what we're about. Those are good reasons to give.

But all these years later, people still don't understand what Jesus meant when he said it is difficult for the wealthy to get into the kingdom of heaven and that those who give in this life will receive a hundred-fold.

So until we get to ask him ourselves, my best response is to quote Jesus back to them. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

That is our answer about inheriting eternal life. It is not possible for a wealthy person to buy their way in. There is nothing we can do to earn it. Prosperity in America in 2024 is ours through a combination of privilege and opportunity and global capitalism and generational wealth and insurance and education and hard work, not a heavenly algorithm. Jesus loves the rich man and the disciples, and you and me, and life can still be hard for any or all of us. Give to Dunn's Corners Community Church because it makes you glad, because you believe in the mission and vision of the church, not because of any false promise of return. The true reward is already yours, regardless of what you put on the pledge card. Amen