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MA Biblical Studies New Testament

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MINI-DISSERTATION

DISSERTATION

Dissertation

THESIS

PROPOSED TITLE

Selected Jesus sayings on materialism according to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) in judging the so-called prosperity theology

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## A. INTRODUCTION

(Overview of research problem and literature)

### **The Major problem/Question for the Author:-**

Prosperity theology in some circles today can do more harm than good to the believers.

The following pattern is typical according to particular media propaganda: “An anointed man of God rebukes the spirit of poverty, bind the works of the devil and release the financial blessings of God on the congregation every Sunday”. According to this anointed preacher, the will of God for every man, is that all should prosper financially. If that is not the case, then “there is something wrong and it must be rectified”. Alcorn (2003:75) defines prosperity theology as follows: “This man represents a large and visible segment of American evangelicalism that subscribes to what is called “prosperity theology” or the “health and wealth gospel.” Many of these prosperity preachers which we constantly hear on TBN Television, radio and from the pulpits preach that God wants to bless every believer with “material things”, especially “money.” MacArthur (2000:137) says: “The “PROSPERITY GOSPEL” is still alive and well in some sectors of contemporary Christianity. That is the teaching that says God wants His followers to be rich and have all the best from life – large, elaborate homes, expensive luxury cars, the most ostentatious wardrobes, and so on.” Yet Jesus warned us against the lay up of treasures on earth (Matt 6:19). Where is this fine line between God’s blessing and a materialistic attitude? In the prosperity messages one normally finds a clear pattern which the researcher calls a spiritual recipe to become rich. Expressions like “giving and receiving”, “sowing and reaping” and “name it and claim it” are only a few to mention. The researcher is to investigate whether the prosperity message does more harm to the believers than good by testing it against the background of Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount. This research is not about materialism “out there” in the world, but rather “in here”, among the believers.

Materialism is not a new issue in the church. The Pharisees may be accused of breathing “prosperity theology”. Everyone who was not on the same social level as they were, were seen as sinners. (Luke 15:1-2) Schrage (1988:99) remarks: “The rabbis usually consider poverty a disaster, reckoning the poor with the dead but extolling the rich.” Simon Magus (Acts 8:18-21) was probably a materialist. When Simon saw the power of the Holy Spirit he saw money. Alcorn (2003:60) says that: “In the early sixteenth century, Pope Leo X raised funds by selling the forgiveness of sins on the form of indulgences.” Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation in 1517 was a direct response against Johann Tetzel’s act in selling “forgiveness” on his arrival in Wittenberg. MacArthur (2000:8) says the following on materialism: “I believe materialism is an even more serious issue facing contemporary churches today. So many church members are like the rich fool who wanted to build bigger and bigger barns (Luke 12:16-18).” In today’s world materialism is a power that drives the Christian and the non-Christian.

The researcher decided to agree with Alcorn (2000:39) who says that:” ...seeking fulfilment in money, land, houses, cars, clothes, boats, campers, hot tubs, world travel, and cruises has left us bound and gagged by materialism – and like drug addicts, we pathetically think that our only hope lies in getting more of the same.” The researcher is convinced that the prosperity message in essence is not helping the believers to live a balanced life concerning material things, but rather motivate them to become materialist at heart. The striving to have more material things and especially money is evident in the

prosperity message. More than enough money becomes a sign of God's blessing according to this message. However there is also a danger side to money.

"Money is used as a weapon to bully people and to keep them in line. Money is used to enlist the allegiance of others. Money is used to corrupt people. Money is used for many things; it is one of the greatest powers in human society." Foster (1985:54)

To the researcher, the central issue of the Prosperity message is that God becomes the servant to man. The whole message is man-centered and not God-centered. The prosperity message treats God as a tool which can be used to reach certain financial goals.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT(S)**

**(Central problem statements, why it is a research problem, when will the problem be regarded as solved.)**

The Prayer of Jabez, a book by Bruce Wilkinson has sold well over 100 million copies since its first edition in 2001. In this book according to Wilkinson one will find: ... "a daring prayer that God always answers." (2000:7) By praying this daring prayer which is broken into smaller segments, one will break through to the "Blessed Life." The researchers' problem is that in Prosperity theology one will find a pattern or a recipe which can be followed in getting to the "blessed life". According to the prosperity theologians certain recipes will guarantee the arrival of God on the "dancing floor". Prayer is one of the keys in getting into the blessed life, sowing and reaping another and confessing of the Word another. In the prosperity message one will hear hundreds of sayings like, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your bank account", and "God desires to give you more than you could ever dare to dream or imagine". The "name it and claim it" saying is also well known. Prosperity teachers also frequently love to quote certain scriptures to confirm their message of financial abundance. "The thief comes to kill, steal and destroy. I have come that they might have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prosper" (3 John 2).

Although financial prosperity is God's will for everyone, according to the prosperity theology, the believer has certain roles to play in breaking into this "blessed life". One of the keys most used in this theology is the concept of sowing faith seeds into a preacher ministry. By doing this one is assured of financial abundance. Murdock (1997:61) puts it as follows: "A Seed is a tiny beginning with a huge future. It is anything that can become more. It is the Beginning. It is anything you can do, know or possess that can improve the life of another." He is also convinced that: "God Promised You A Harvest To Motivate You To Sow A Seed" (1997:117) This is what Howard-Browne say about a "giver": Show me a person who is a giver and I will show you someone who is blessed" (1995:17). Copeland's (1997:74) view on prosperity is as follows: "Your prosperity depends on how much thought and study and attention you give God's Word in that area." Siddiki asks: "Is it God's will for you and me to prosper while on this earth? Absolutely yes!" (1998:5) Thompson (1999:12) says: "I'm not preaching something I don't know about. I'm preaching "Money cometh" because it's working for me. Almost every four days, somebody gives me a check! My church is out of debt – way out of debt! And the same spirit that is upon our church should be on you." Botha (2001:2) indicates that: "We need to understand that by giving we create an opportunity for God to bless us." Osteen

(2004:5) puts it this way: "The Scripture says that God wants to pour out "His far and beyond favor." God wants this to be the best time of your life. But if you are going to receive this favor, you must enlarge your vision. You can't go around thinking negative, defeated, limiting thoughts." However MacArthur says the following on material blessings:

" Instead of adhering to the biblical prescription that says fiscal responsibility gives believers the opportunity to be blessed with spiritual ministry, false teachers have taught that material blessings result from superiority. "If we are rich in this world's goods, it must mean God is pleased with us and doesn't mind if we concentrate all our energies on accumulating more wealth." This is really just an extended definition of today's prosperity gospel, and could not be more wrong or unscriptural." (2000:55)

The primary research question is whether the "prosperity theologians" exegesis on the issue of prosperity in the Bible is legitimate. That has to be determined by thorough exegesis of the applicable "proofs" of materialism in the Bible. It is true that some Old Testament Scriptures link material prosperity with God's blessing. Abraham received material wealth (Gen 13:1-7), his son Isaac was a very rich man (Gen 26:12-14) and his son Jacob was a wealthy man as well (Gen 30:43). God also promised the Israelites that he would bless them materially for faithful financial giving (Deut 15:10). However this is only one element of the whole truth in the Scriptures. There are also many warnings against the dangers of wealth in the Old Testament (Deut 8:7-18).

This brings the researcher to the secondary questions of the research:

- Are material blessings a reliable indication of God's reward or approval?
- When God does bless us financially, what does He expect from us?
- What is the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount concerning materialism?

Luz (1989:215) has the following to say about the Sermon on the Mount: "The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' sermon: in it Jesus the Son of God speaks, through whom God guarantees the truth of his claim." The researcher has decided to focus on the Sermon on the Mount in answering his questions, concerning prosperity theology. Again Luz (1995:49) remarks: "The entire Sermon on the Mount is a proclamation of the will of God to men and women who are children, and who are permitted to pray to their Father because he is near to them and hears them." Schnackenburg (2002:11) says: "The Gospel of Matthew retains its abiding value as the "church" work that gives Christians direction and guidance in the world. Indeed, its ethos today is more current today than ever before." One finds good ethics and the command to love in the Sermon. Luz (1989:215) also adds that the Sermon on the Mount defines the conditions of entering into God's kingdom: "Rather, the Sermon on the Mount is the pure uncorrupted expression of the will of God as it agrees with law and prophets, i.e., as it always was. In this sense, it defines the conditions of entry into the kingdom of God." It is possible to enter into the kingdom of God when one looks at the definition of Patte. The following statement by Patte is relevant:

"The kingdom of heaven is a place where people are in true Father-children relationship with God: (a) because they are in God's presence, and (b) because they acknowledge his authority and pay homage to him by conforming their righteousness to his righteousness, implementing their vocation as he implements his will." (1987:94)

Another challenge to believers is to consider the opposite of prosperity theology. This is the weakness of asceticism – a self denying life. Alcorn (2003:16) defines it as follows: “Asceticism is a way of thinking that sees money and things as evil. To the ascetic, the less you own, the more spiritual you are. If something isn’t essential, you should not have it.” The renouncing of possessions is a way for many Christians to say “no” to the world but “yes” to God. To the ascetic money and material things are evil and will avoid all material comfort and be satisfied with only the bare economic necessities. The ascetics love to support their view on money with a statement that Jesus was poor and homeless. This view of money is just as wrong as the view of materialism. MacArthur (2000:55) remarks: “Throughout redemption history, false religious teachers – such as the scribes and Pharisees – have twisted the relationship between money and spirituality.” The core of the problem to the researcher can then be summarised with the question: What is the theological message of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount concerning either of these view points?

### **AIM AND JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO RELEVANT AND RECENT LITERATURE**

(Contextualise in terms of the broader field and literature, preliminary research conducted)

Over the last few years numerous popular books have been published by Christian authors on how to become financially prosperous. The following are only a few examples:

- Leonard (2003) Keys to financial freedom.
- Osteen (2004) Your best life now.
- Avanzini (1996) What Jesus taught about manifesting abundance.
- Botha (2001) The opportunity to give.
- Thompson (1999) Money cometh.
- Strite (2000) God’s principles for financial success.
- Siddiki (1998) Kingdom principles of financial increase.
- Copeland (1997) Managing God’s mutual yours and His funds. Understanding true prosperity.
- Murdock (1997) 31 Reasons people do not receive their financial harvest.
- Howard-Browne (1995) Thoughts on stewardship. Volume two.
- Murdock (1998) Secrets of the richest man who ever lived.

Most of these books if not all contain what the researcher calls, a “spiritual quick fix” on how to become rich. Thousands of Christians buy these books with the expectation to find the true way to prosperity. However what are found is so called “keys” and a “spiritual recipe” to financial abundance.

The aim of this dissertation is to do exegesis on the applicable and relevant Biblical passages on the issue of materialism. By doing this we determine whether the “prosperity theologians” and “ascetic” views are legitimate.

### **METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION & RESEARCH METHOD**

(Methodological and theoretical point of departure, explain the theoretical framework to be employed)

The exegetical survey will focus on a text orientation discourse analysis of Matt 5-7 combined with socio-scientific analysis of the Matthean church during the first century AD. Furthermore, the methodological orientation will centre upon a Biblical theological

study of the prosperity message and material blessings within the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

## **PROPOSED STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY**

(Proposed chapters)

In CHAPTER ONE the introduction, problem statement, purpose of the study, paradigm and research methodology will be discussed.

### CHAPTER ONE

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Why this Title?
- 1.3 Material blessings versus Prosperity theology –Problem
- 1.4 Why is it a Research Problem?
- 1.5 Aim and justification of Study
- 1.6 Methodological orientation and Research Method
- 1.7 Structure of Study

CHAPTER TWO will contain a survey of the Biblical context concerning materialism, including the history of the economic system during New Testament times. The New Testament politics and active Jewish religious groups will be discussed as background.

### CHAPTER TWO

2. A New Testament context concerning materialism
  - 2.1 Definitions
    - 2.1.1 Materialism
    - 2.1.2 Money
    - 2.1.3 Wealth
    - 2.1.4 Prosperity theology
  - 2.2 Economy in the New Testament
    - 2.2.1 Building industry
    - 2.2.2 Commerce
    - 2.2.3 The rich
    - 2.2.4 The middle class
    - 2.2.5 The poor
    - 2.2.6 Slavery
    - 2.2.7 Cost of living
    - 2.2.8 Banking
    - 2.2.9 Summary
  - 2.3 Social setting in the New Testament
    - 2.3.1 Politics and Political economy
    - 2.3.2 Roman Republic
    - 2.3.4 Roman Empire
    - 2.3.5 Palestine and the Romans
  - 2.4 Prominent Jewish religious and political movements
    - 2.4.1 The Scribes
    - 2.4.2 The Pharisees
    - 2.4.3 The Herodians
    - 2.4.4 The Sadducees

- 2.4.5 The Zealots
- 2.5 Socio-scientific analysis of Matthean church
- 2.6 Summary

CHAPTER THREE will deal with the exegetical analyses of Matthew 5-7 self concerning the materialism sayings of Jesus. The researcher will look at the background and the structure of the Sermon on the Mount. Exegesis will be done on the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' sayings will be evaluated against the so called Prosperity message.

#### CHAPTER THREE

- 3. Exegetical analysis of Matthew 5-7 concerning materialism sayings
  - 3.1 Introductory Remarks
  - 3.2 Background and message of Matthew 5-7
  - 3.3 Matthew 5-7's functional position in the Gospel
  - 3.4 Structure selected verses in Matthew 5-7
  - 3.5 Selected Jesus' sayings
  - 3.6 Exegesis on selected verses in the Sermon on the Mount
  - 3.7 Application of exegetical results
  - 3.8 Summary

CHAPTER FOUR will contain the evaluation of the so called Prosperity message and the conclusion

#### CHAPTER FOUR

- 4. Judging the so-called Prosperity theology

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