Deconstructing Prosperity Theology Through 1 Timothy 6:3–11: An Exegetical Engagement Toward Restoring Ethical Church Leadership in Africa

Rev. Adetola Ipadeola, Ph.D

Abstract

Prosperity theology has redefined the goal of Christianity, Christian ministry and Church leadership globally. This redefinition, subtly entrenched in the teaching that godliness is a means of financial gain, is understandably more appealing across many African churches due to the average struggle of Africans with poverty. Accordingly, this paper re-engages 1 Timothy 6:3-11 through a historical-grammatical exegetical method to uncover the passage context and the underlying flaws of some prosperity-driven ministry through examination of the Greek expressions: *aperterēmenōn tēs alētheias* (deprived of the truth), *porismon* (means of gain), *philarguria* (love of money), *eusebeia meta autarkeias* (godliness with contentment). By deconstructing Prosperity theology through the text, this paper argues that prosperity teaching, which stirs Christians' appetite for material accumulation at the expense of contentment, is heretical and inimical to Christian faith. Thus, it finds that reclaiming Pauline pastoral ethics is essential to restoring dignity and sanity to African church leadership. The study concludes that 1 Timothy 6:3-11 is more than a critique; it is a prophetic warning and reorientation for Gospel ministers, guiding them away from superficial religiosity toward authentic godliness.

Keywords: Prosperity Theology, African Church Leadership, godliness, financial gain, ethics of contentment, 1 Timothy 6:3-11

Introduction

Prosperity theology has had a profoundly pervasive influence on the global concept and goal of Christianity, as well as Christian ministry and Church leadership. Rooted in Pentecostal theology of a holistic gospel, it has evolved into an emphasis on the absolute will of God to grant health and wealth to all believers who have faith and are committed to biblical principles of positive confessions and seed-faith.[456] The salvation of a man's soul encompasses deliverance from the curse of poverty, ill health, and all forms of demonic oppression, the prosperity gospel avows.

Subtly, even, among orthodox denominations that openly critique or seem reserved about the excesses or omissions of the contemporary prosperity drive, conscious or unconscious rating of fellow believers by their state of health and wealth, their success or attainment, increasingly abounds. Rich Christians (even pastors) are honored, revered, recommended, given public appraisals, while their poor counterparts are ignored, sidetracked or despised. Tacitly, now, the yardstick for a true Christian is growth in health, wealth and life accomplishments; while a suffering Christian is deemed a misnomer. Thus, the idea of suffering is generally detested and uncritically mocked. Since no one wants to be ostracized or ridiculed as immature, weak in faith or sinful, the chase for material wealth increases at the expense of commitment to God's will.

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[456] Dodeye U. Williams "'Prosperity theology": Poverty and implications for socio-economic development in Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7818 (2022):2-3, https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/ view/7818/23676

Sadly, the foregoing redefinition of salvation's goal, both in prosperity theology and the productivity gospel (the new stream of the prosperity gospel), subtly yet pervasively implies that godliness is a means of financial gain. Observably, thus, Christianity is becoming a mile wide and an inch deep; apparently, because many seek salvation or identification with the church for the socio-economic empowerment it promises.[457] It is more despicable that church leaders and organizations deliberately float programs with the aim of financial gain. There are Christian ministries with the sole objective of raising billionaires.[458] Financial empowerment seminars now incorporate how a believer can utilise their spiritual gifts and resources (especially online) to generate income. So, observably, gospel podcasts and Christian drama are on the increase online. Everyone is an exceptional teacher, preacher, or prophet of the word of God, vying for an online following. And doing this is being entrenched as the contemporary gospel truth.

Literature Review

David T. Adamo explains that prosperity theology is not only rooted in Africa's religious and socio-cultural heritage but also contextually relevant to Africans. He avows that the prosperity gospel serves a unique purpose of proving that Christianity is African, and not a foreign religion in Africa, as anti-colonialists

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[457] "Many economically challenged Africans have found that "being a member of a church offers life-saving access to social networks of mutual aid and support, which teach essential survival skills [while] peer pressure helps believers avoid the snares of substance abuse." cited in Joshua Robert Barron, "Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity," *Conspectus,* Volume 33 (April 2022): 98.

[458] Ebenezer Obadare, "'Raising righteous billionaires": The prosperity gospel reconsidered', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies,* 72(4), a3571 (2016): 1-2, https://scielo.org.za/pdf/hts/v72n4/70.pdf (accessed December 12 2025)

have argued.[459] Adamo highlights three ways in which the background of prosperity gospel can be traced to Africa, thus: (1) African Traditional religious heritage; (2) African social–cultural heritage; and (3) historical heritage.[460] The prosperity gospel's focus on divine prosperity in all dimensions, including good health, wealth, power, and overall well-being, is not unfamiliar in the African traditional religious heritage. In fact, the majority of the divinities, particularly among the Yoruba people, such as Obatala, Orunmila, and Osun, are sought after and worshipped for health and wealth.[461]

Positive confessions also have roots in African socio-cultural heritage, which believes that words are spiritual and have potent power to bring about the supernatural. In African historical heritage, struggles against diseases, death and poverty are real phenomena. These phenomena are caused and overcome in the spiritual realm. The prosperity gospel's assurance of victory over diseases, death and poverty, therefore, resonates deeply with typical Africans. Consequently, Adamo rightly observes, citing Fatokun, that "in Nigeria, there is hardly any church, mainline or African Indigenous churches without Pentecostal or prosperity gospel traits."[462]

He contends for the vital significance of the prosperity gospel in Africa, noting that "Africa needs the message of hope, which the accomplished work of Christ on the cross of Calvary can bring amidst the harsh socio-economic realities."[463] Whatever way prosperity gospel, seeking holistic healing and well-being as typically the practice of Africans from time

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[459] David T. Adamo, "The African background of the prosperity gospel", *Theologia Viatorum* 45(1), a71 (2021): 8, https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v45i1.71 (accessed November 25, 2025)

[460] Ibid., 1.

[461] Adamo, 5.

[462] S. Fatokun, "The founder of Global Pentecostalism, Parham or Seymour? A historical evaluation" *Orita* 39(2), in Adamo, 8.

[463] Adamo, 8.

immemorial, may have been critiqued, Adamo avows that "It has encouraged African Christians to remain steadfast with faith in Christ, which is powerful enough to deliver instead of seeking healing, wealth and success from the African traditional divinities because the power of God and Christ is capable of delivering them from sickness, poverty and situations where there is no hope."[464]

However, Marius Nel insists that neo-pentecostal prosperity teachings have impaired the faith life of adherents.[465] The narrative language of prosperity in Africa is that poverty is a curse on humanity due to the disobedience of sin. Jesus Christ came to redeem us from that curse. Therefore, no believer should be poor. Prosperity gospel implies that poverty is due to a lack of faith; anyone poor (especially Christians), thus, should be blamed for their lack of faith. Concisely, since God is interested in the financial status of Christians, "Poverty, far from being a blessing, is a sign of God's disfavor; thus, Christians have a duty to deal only with the apparent lack of faith among the poor and not their poverty itself."[466] In a continent that struggles with mass unemployment and underemployment, the absolutized assertion[467] that poverty is a curse, a mark of God's disfavor, is not only psychologically traumatic but also results in some unguarded extremes of some adherents to pursue wealth at all costs. Indeed, "when religion

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[464] Ibid.

[465] Marius Nel, "Changing the Narrative Language of Prosperity in Africa: A Pentecostal Hermeneutical Challenge," Journal for the Study of Religion 34, 2 (2021): 1.

[466] Bradley A. Koch, "The prosperity gospel and economic prosperity: Race, class, giving,
and voting", *Unpublished dissertaton,* Indiana University, Indianapolis (2009), 1.

[467] Nel observes the absolutized assertions that salvation confers healing and wealth on all believers who engage faith, without exception, as flawed with error.

is limited to wealth accumulation, it leads to an obsession with acquiring wealth."[468]

Furthermore, Nel notes that the absolutized assertions are traceable to the hermeneutical error in the prosperity gospel, namely, reading and interpreting the Bible literally without minding its historical and social context. Consequently, especially since readings and interpretations were experiential, solely subjective, revelation-based, and focused on meeting existential needs, unqualified assertions are inadvertently or deliberately generalized. The problem is that some of the assertions contradict the socio-cultural and historical intention of the Scriptures. Yet they are justified on the basis of continued charismatic revelations, implying a more open view of canonicity.[469] Nel calls for a reconsideration of this hermeneutical trend. He suggests revising the narrative language of prosperity with another hermeneutical paradigm that does not interpret the Bible in a literalist manner.[470]

While prosperity theology truly contextualizes traditional religion practices for Africans in pursuit of well-being of the holistic person, venerating the man of God to his adherents as a prophet closer to God, more spiritually mighty and thus unchallengeable, the impact of this veneration in redirecting adherents' focus on the man of God, rather than God, just as it is the case in African traditional religion, is perplexing.[471] Moreover, if prosperity preachers are becoming "the modern witchdoctors, offering deliverance from situations that cause distress, such as a failure to attract a suitor for marriage, childlessness – a significant challenge in many African marriages – mental and bodily sickness, and

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[468] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Did Jesus wear designer robes?" *Christianity Today* (November 2009): 38-41, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/november/main.html, in Nel, 14.

[469] Nel, 4.

[470] Ibid., 18.

[471] Ibid., 6.

unemployment,"[472] and they cannot be challenged if or when they abuse their adherents while they seek divine intervention, is the faith-life of the adherents not being impaired?

In addition to the African traditional religious imagination of fertility, abundance, and wholeness, African Neo-pentecostalism also synthesises American materialism that defines a standard of living, characterised by profligate consumption that makes self-worth dependent on status symbols of wealth, a value compatible with the aspirations of the new African elite of wealthy entrepreneurs.[473] Unequivocally yet subtly, this exacerbates the pervasive pursuit of materialism in contemporary African Christianity. Also, prosperity teachings emphasize (like formulas of) positive confessions to draw God's hand to perform supernatural acts, which poses questions about the place of God's sovereignty. Nel queries whether these are not attempts to change the biblical God into a deistic and manipulable god and, in continuation of an element of Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, deify believers.[474]

Joshua Robert Barron revealed a third (new) stream of the prosperity gospel movement, which encompasses economic justice, solidarity with the poor and sharing of resources with the poor or people in need. He calls it "the productivity gospel or the gospel of empowerment."[475] This gospel accentuates hard work, entrepreneurship, generous giving and Socio-Political reforms. Thus, it silences critics of the prosperity gospel as an individualistic gospel that enriches its teachers at the expense of its adherents. Barron notes, for instance, that productivity gospel pastors preach thus: "If you are rewarded, use your

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[472] Ibid., 7.

[473] Ibid., 6.

[474] Nel, 7.

[475] Joshua Robert Barron, "Is the Prosperity Gospel the Gospel? The Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity," *Evangelical Review of Theology,* Vol. 47, No.4 (November 2023):333.

reward to make opportunities for others. Are you a businessperson? Grow your business not just for self-enrichment but so that you can hire more employees, for we are blessed to be a blessing."[476] Indeed, many have become great entrepreneurs, making significant contributions to nation-building.

Nonetheless, the prosperity gospel or theology has distorted Christians' concept of suffering, leaving no room for a theology of suffering or of the cross. Its repudiation of every form of suffering based on the complete redemptive package delivered through the once-and-for-all suffering of Jesus Christ has created an unquenchable appetite for material wealth in average Christians. Since every believer is covenanted to succeed, be healthy, be victorious and be prosperous at all times,

> Prosperity Gospel frequently insists that Christ's resurrection means that for believers, all aspects of death that affect life on earth—poverty, sickness, barrenness, broken relationships—have already been undone, resulting in victim-blaming and victim-shaming of any believer who is not experiencing all the marks of 'a victorious life' such as 'success, prosperity, health, and strong social ties.[477]

Thus, "In Africa, the Pentecostal message (i.e., prosperity preaching and theology) is deemed a tool of hope equipping adherents to aspire for health, reversal of economic desolation,

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[476] Barron, "Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel?" *Conspectus,* Volume 33 (April 2022):99-100

[477] Barron, "Is the Prosperity Gospel the Gospel?" *Evangelical Review of Theology,* Vol. 47, No.4 (November 2023):326.

expansion of wealth, and prosperity in all human endeavor."[478] This wave of aspirations inspired by bold faith confessions and professions is not limited to Pentecostals. More materials are available in Barron's comprehensive bibliography on the prosperity gospel in African Christianity.[479]

Methodology

This paper engages 1 Timothy 6:3-11 to re-examine the fundamental claim of prosperity theology that godliness is a means of financial gain through the historical-grammatical method of exegesis.

The paper aligns with the traditional view of authorship of I Timothy as Pauline[480], based on identification of Paul as an apostle of Jesus Christ (1:1), Paul's description of himself as a former blasphemer and a persecutor (1:12-13), similar structure to other Pauline epistles and the indicated father-child relationship between Paul and Timothy (1:2). Significant external evidences from the early church and church fathers also establish this.[481] It is significant to establish Paul's authorship of 1 Timothy, even if communication through a trusted amanuensis is acknowledged, because it helps situate the message of the book within the historical lens of the

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[478] Sampson Nwaomah, "Overview of Prosperity Gospel." *Prosperity-Gospel: A Biblical-Theological Evaluation,* edited by Daniel Kwame Bediako (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: Advent Press, 2020), 9.

[479] Joshua Robert Barrron, "The Prosperity Gospel in African Christianity: A Bibliography*," African Christian Theology* 2, no. 1 (March 2025): 67–102; accessible on https://www.researchgate.net/publication/ 390509595_ The_Prosperity_Gospel_in_African_Christianity_A_Bibliography

[480] Constable also cites renown scholars who asserts Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles as most plausible; scholars such as Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, William Hendriksen, Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown in Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 Timothy 2025 Edition*, https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/pdf/1timothy.pdf (accessed December 12, 2025), 3.

[481] Olusayo Oladejo, *International Council for Higher Education: Studies in Pauline Writings* (Ibadan: Baptist Press (Nig,) Limited, 2018), 159-160.

relationship between Paul and Timothy; thus, clarifying the nature of the false doctrines and teachings Timothy was to refute and Paul's passion for issuing the imperative to flee from the false doctrines.

I Timothy is one of the Pastoral Epistles, written to Timothy, with essentially a double-fold purpose: to defend sound doctrines and maintain sound discipline.[482] Although Timothy also needed to ensure the orderliness of worship and the organization of the church leadership, many scholars agree that the main occasion for the letter was to address false teachings emerging within the house churches of Ephesus.[483] Timothy was saddled with this responsibility, young as he was, not only because he was the leader of the church in Ephesus and a son in the faith but also because he had proven loyal and genuinely concerned for the welfare of churches as a faithful companion, travelling with Paul for over 15 years throughout most of his second and third missionary journeys.[484]

It is, however, challenging to situate Paul's journey to Macedonia in light of the double-fold purpose highlighted above in the historical narrative of Acts, given that Paul asked Timothy to stay in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3).[485] Therefore, this

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[482] Samuel Olugbenga Akintola, *Understanding Vital Issues in the New Testament* (Ibadan: Baptist Press (Nig.) Limited, 2021), 250.

[483] Bob Utley, *Paul's Fourth Missionary Journey: 1 Timothy, Titus & 2 Timothy*, https://www.ibiblio.org/freebiblecommentary/pdf/EN/VOL09.pdf (2013): 12.

[484] John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy: Guard the Gospel* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 18-19

[485] "According to 1 Timothy 1:3, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to while he himself travelled to Macedonia. These two areas are mentioned at three points in Acts: 1) Acts 16:9-10 – Paul travelled to Macedonia on his second missionary journey. The church in Ephesus was still too young to match the description in 1 Timothy; 2) Acts 18:19- Paul was in Ephesus, but when he left he did not go to Macedonia but to Caesarea and then Antioch; 3) Acts 19:8-20:31- Paul spent roughly three years in Ephesus, but there is no mention of his making trip to Macedonia during those years, especially a long trip as to warrant a letter like the one written to Timothy; 4) Acts 20:1- Following Paul's departure from Ephesus, he went to Macedonia. But he did not leave Timothy behind in

paper concurs with the traditional belief that "Paul's imprisonment in Acts 28 ended in his release and that his ministry extended at least four years after this imprisonment. He probably wrote 1 Timothy and Titus sometime between AD 63 and 67. Then he was re-arrested, and during this final imprisonment, he wrote 2 Timothy, which was his last testament before his execution in AD 67 or 68."[486] This places 1 Timothy among Paul's latest writings.

The foregoing clarification is essential to accentuate that the burden for Paul's later letter to Timothy was earlier laid in Acts 20 and committed to the elders of the church in Ephesus (v.17). Specifically, Paul charged the Ephesian elders, saying, "even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."[487] A later similar charge to Timothy to stay in Ephesus and command certain people (who, of course, were men from within the church, according to Acts 20), not to teach false doctrines any longer, would imply that the false doctrines and teachers persisted until Timothy was specially saddled with the responsibility again. Paul described the false teachers in 1 Timothy 1:7 as those who want to be teachers of the law but do not know what they are talking about

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Ephesus; he sent him on ahead (Acts 19:22; 20:5). They were setting out for Jerusalem, and there is no indication that he was planning to travel to Ephesus soon, as implied in 1 Timohty 3:14 and 4:13" cited in Samuel Ngewa, *Africa Bible Commentary Series: 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Zondervan: Hippobooks, 2009), 2&417

[486] Ngewa, 3; Utley agrees with Ngewa, "Therefore, I think that Paul was released from prison (early to mid 60's, which is documented in I Clement 5, written about a.d. 95) and took a fourth missionary journey, was then rearrested and ki led before a.d. 68 (Nero's suicide)." (Utley, 12); see also Gary H. Everett, *Study Notes on the Holy Scriptures using a Theme-Based Approach to Identify Literary Structures: The Epistle of 1 Timothy* (October 2025 Edition), *https://www.academia.edu/17893834/The_Epistle_of_1_Timothy_2025_edition_* (accessed December 5, 2025): 14-15.

[487] Acts 20:30-31

or what they so confidently affirm. That implies the false teachers were either ignorant or assertive and proud.

1 Timothy 6:3-11 addressed false teachings involving reliance on wealth, greed, deception, and the general betrayal of the truth, the faith, and sound teaching.[488] Incisively, 1 Timothy 6:3 begins with an unambiguous description of a false teacher. A false teacher, according to Paul, is *tis eterodidaskalei*, which translates to anyone teaching another of a different kind. This is what the compound word *eterodidaskalei,* which prefixes *eteros* (another of a different kind) with *didaskalei* (teaching), indicates. I Timothy 6:3 thus underscores that a false teacher is not just different in style, manner or emphasis from what is congruent with the sound teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and in accordance with godliness in teaching; otherwise, the Greek word *allos*, meaning another of the same kind, would have been prefixed with *didaskalei.* A false teacher is fundamentally different. His teachings are of a different kind.

Furthermore, in verse 4, Paul asserts that such a false teacher is proud. Actually, the Greek word used to describe a false teacher as proud, *tetuphōtai*, is more profound. *Tetuphōtai* is a Greek perfective passive indicative verb[489] which literally translates to "he has been puffed-up or conceited", meaning a false teaching arises only as a symptom of an already ingrained character flaw; that is, puffing up or self-conceitedness. No one becomes a false teacher before he is self-conceited. Unfortunately, with the two subsequent Greek participial phrases, *mēden epistamenos*, *alla nosōn,* the inflated ego of a false teacher is empty and baseless. Indeed, the Greek participial phrases (both in the present tense) translate to "understanding nothing, but having an unhealthy desire," serving to modify the perfected state of conceit in the false

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[488] David W. Pao, *Brill Exegetical Commentary Series, vol 1: 1–2 Timothy, Titus* (Boston: Brill, 2024), 43-44.

[489] Perfect passive indicative verbs express a completed action in the past with present (continuous) effect.

teacher. The latter Greek words are further adjectival modifications that clarify the focus and effects of the unhealthy desire. A false teacher's unhealthy desire, in his ignorance, is in controversial discourses (*zētēseis*) and quarrelling over the meaning or use of words (*logomachias*). The results of that desire are *phthonos*, "Ill-will, envy, jealousy,"[490] which makes people want what others have, *eris* (strife), *blasphēmiai* (blasphemy), and *huponoiai ponērai* (evil suspicions).

Paul continued in verse 5 to describe the attitude of the false teachers as *diaparatribai* (engaging in constant and repeated arguing[491]). This is also followed by two perfective passive participial phrases modifying *diaparatribai*; they are: *diephtharmenōn anthrōpōn ton noun* and *aperterēmenōn tēs alētheias*, which roughly translate to "the mind of men having been corrupted and having been defrauded of the truth" Again, these participial phrases significantly imply that the ones who engaged in constant and repeated arguing over words, controversies leading to envy, strife, blasphemy and evil suspicions had not only been proud but had also been corrupted in their mind and defrauded of the truth. Their constant and repeated arguing is also symptomatic of a corrupt mind that has been defrauded of the truth at some point in the past. Before they were deceived, their minds were correct. The passive voice of the Greek participles, however, shields the subject who corrupted the mind of the false teachers and defrauded them of the truth. Loud-Nida Lexicon captures *diaparatribai diephtharmenōn anthrōpōn ton noun* in a very weighty tone: "constant arguing of those whose minds do not function."[492]

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490 Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *Greek Lexicon (Abridged).* Electronic ed. quoted in Bible Works 8. (Woodstock Georgia: American Book Company, 1901), 44971.

491 J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon to the Greek New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains.* Electronic ed. quoted in Bible Works 8. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 33.452

492 Louw-Nida, 33.452

Verse 5 ends with the phrase that is the principal focus of this research: the underlying (sometimes subtle yet obvious) supposition of many prosperity theology movements that godliness is a means of financial gain. Specifically, verse 5b reads: *nomizontōn porismon einai tēn eusebeian*, meaning "supposing godliness to be a means of gain." The Greek word used, *porismon*, specifies the kind of gain supposed. It is, according to the Analytical Greek lexicon, "a way to make money."[493] Some manuscripts include *Aphistaso apo tōn toioutōn*, which translates to 'withdraw from people of this kind.'[494]

In contrast to the supposition in verse 5b, by using the Greek word "*de",* Paul similarly avows in verse 6 that godliness with contentment (*eusebeia meta autarkeias*) is great financial gain (*porismos megas*). It is incredible that Paul used the same Greek word, *porismos*, and even amplified it with *megas* to refer to a great means of making money. So, while the supposition that godliness is a means of making money was refuted, when godliness is accompanied by contentment, it is a great means of making money. Paul clarified the concept of the word for contentment (*autarkeias*[495]*).* Beyond ambiguity, Paul specified in verses 7 and 8 that food and clothing are the basic scope of satisfaction in the world.

He cautioned in verses 9 and 10 that those wishing or determining to be rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge into ruin and destruction. Meanwhile, the Greek word employed, *ploutein*,

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[493] Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg & Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament.* Electronic ed. quoted in Bible Works 8. (Baker Pub Group, 2000), 22662

[494] Manuscripts such as Codex D^2 (Codex Bezae corrected)، Codex Ψ (Codex Lorsch) and others which include the phrase, , are listed in Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984), 547.

[495] "The state of being content with one's circumstances or lot in life," in Louw and Nida, 25.83.

translated as 'rich,' does not imply that every desire to be rich is a sign of a lack of contentment. Instead, *ploutein* means having considerably more than what would be regarded as the norm in a society,[496] leading one to become greedy, stretching unduly for financial gain because of an inordinate, insatiable appetite to accumulate wealth without purpose. This category of people, according to Paul in verse 10, becomes a victim of depression, sorrow and backsliding from the Christian faith.

In verse 11, Paul turns the clarification and caution into a twin present imperative for Timothy: *pheuge* (keep fleeing) and *diōke* (keep pursuing). Timothy was commanded to keep fleeing from the love of money, which creates an insatiable appetite for wealth at the cost of spiritual, mental, and physical flourishing, and to continue to pursue godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. The imperative to keep fleeing suggests that love of money and the tendency to seek God for financial gain will always be a besetting influence. In the same vein, the imperative to keep pursuing suggests that godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness are not natural proclivities; manifesting them requires continuous pursuit. Moreover, what to flee from and what to pursue are mutually exclusive.

Findings and discussions

The study finds that in verse 3, Paul implies, from the immediate context of the imperatives to Timothy (*tauta didaske kai parakalei*, meaning "keep teaching and exhorting these things"), that false teachers teach something fundamentally different from the faithful allegiance of Christian slaves to their believing masters. It is significant to note that Paul did not teach or imply that it was wrong for any of the believers to be slaves, as contemporary prosperity gospel covertly or overtly implies. Rather than emphasizing self-empowerment, freedom from servitude or deliverance from the bondage of slavery as predominant in contemporary African Christianity, what was

[496] Louw-Nida, 57.25

paramount was that the faithful allegiance and subservient service of Christian slaves made God's name and teaching above reproach. Sadly, while the latter teaching fades and the empowerment gospel gains ascendancy, accessing faithful Christian services, especially at the grassroots of life (in society, public and private organizations, professional spheres, and even in the church, among church leaders), becomes increasingly difficult, especially where the remuneration is meagre. Every Christian, young and old, mature and immature, literate and illiterate, wants to be the head and not the tail. Accordingly, many Christian bosses or leaders now prefer to employ non-Christians to work for them because their fellow Christians have betrayed their trust.

Verse 4 reveals that puffing oneself up or engaging in self-conceit precedes false teachings. In other words, proud Christians are predisposed to false teaching. It can thus be plausibly concluded that the people who arose among the Ephesian Christians to distort the truth to draw away disciples after them, as warned by Paul in Acts 20:30, had been self-conceited. They are, however, ignorant brutes whose unhealthy desire for controversies and argument over the meaning or use of words results in envy, strife, blasphemy and evil suspicions. This writer queries if all too often the latter consequences of false teachings have not ensued among contemporary African adherents of prosperity theology.

Furthermore, verse 5 reveals that the false teacher's ignorant but audacious supposition is that godliness is a means of financial gain (a way to make money). Paul asserts that this supposition is characteristic of people whose minds do not function correctly, having been corrupted and deceived by falsehood. Consequently, any prosperity theology which underscores financial gain solely and absolutely as a means to propel people to salvation is to be considered false. Of course, in verse 6, Paul affirms that godliness with contentment is a great gain. Therefore, this study clearly infers that prosperity theology is false when it absolutizes godliness as a means of

making money apart from contentment. By implication, prosperity theology is not lethal to the Christian faith until it creates discontentment.

Prosperity theology creates discontentment, according to verses 7 to 10, when it stirs an insatiable appetite to pursue wealth at the detriment of one's spiritual, mental and physical soundness. While, of course, godliness with contentment is a means of financial gain, in which case prosperity theology cannot be altogether refuted by this passage, ignorant and extreme pursuits of its tenets by people already defrauded of the truth and whose minds are corrupt have led (and still lead to) sorrow, grief and backsliding from the Christian faith. Finally, verse 11 clearly cautions that church leadership should avoid the extremes of prosperity theology, which create discontentment in them and in those they lead, by continually fleeing from such extremes. It is gratifying that Kenneth E. Hagin, one of the leading proponents of prosperity theology, acknowledged an alarming increase in confusion, error, and extremism regarding the prosperity message. He notes that the preaching that getting rich is the main focus of faith, that God's main concern is your material well-being, and that money is the accurate measure of spirituality, is not biblical truth.[497]

Recommendations

To restore ethical church leadership in Africa, in view of the pervading and inexorable influence of prosperity theology, church leaders should teach and insist that while God truly prospers his children materially,

1. Prosperity is much more than having billions in one's account and accumulating worldly possessions. It is having all one's needs (Spirit, soul and body) abundantly

[497] Kenneth E. Hagin, *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (Tulsa, Ok: Faith Library, 2002), xiv.

met by God according to His will and purpose for one's life.

2. Money is not the accurate measure of spirituality; therefore, Christians should not seek God as a means to acquire wealth. Instead, they should, in all contentment of love for God and faith in Him, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.
3. A believer seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and suffering for that is not a sinner because (or when) all things have not been added for him. Therefore, fellow believers should desist from reproaching or condemning another on a journey of faith to abundance while lacking wealth or health.
4. Accordingly, the absolutized measure of genuineness of salvation and faith-walk, in relation to a believer's current level of financial prosperity, should be reviewed and revised to accommodate the process that leads to God-given wealth; for godliness with contentment is *a means of great gain* (not that it is great gain).
5. Prosperous Christians are contented and faithful people. The Christian virtue of loyalty from Christian slaves (or servants) to their masters is a reflection of contentment. Where it is lacking, and a person claims to be a Christian desiring prosperity, the individual is self-conceited and defrauded of the truth.
6. True prosperity is not attained by inordinate pursuit and accumulation of wealth. Even if one becomes rich that way, what the individual gains will be sorrow, grief, and faithlessness.
7. Christians should flee from the besetting influence of greed for financial gain.
8. Seed-faith should not be mechanically engaged to manipulate God for self or greedy intent. Instead, Christians should be encouraged to give out of love and obedience to God.
9. Love for money is a besetting influence on Christians. The continuous pursuit of godliness, faith, love,

endurance, and gentleness delivers us from that influence.

10. Christians must not put their hope in wealth. Instead, they are to put their hope in God, do good, be rich in good deeds, be generous and be willing to share.

Conclusion

Prosperity theology is not unbiblical. In fact, it is truly contextually appropriate for Africans. However, much of its absolutized and subjective assertions, which measure salvation by material possessions and leave no room for a theology of suffering, persecution, or the cross, are false. Unfortunately, these have redefined the goal of Christianity, Christian ministry, and Church leadership globally as wealth accumulation. This redefinition is subtly entrenched in the teaching that godliness is a means of financial gain. Consequently, church leadership has increasingly come under severe financial and ethical scrutiny. To reclaim ethical church leadership in Africa, this paper re-engages 1 Timothy 6:3-11 through the historical-grammatical method of exegetical analysis. The study finds that any prosperity theology that absolutizes godliness as a means of making money, apart from Christian contentment, is false. It thus recommends a revision of prosperity theology to emphasize that prosperity is much more than having billions in one's account and accumulating worldly possessions. It is having all one's needs (Spirit, soul, and body) abundantly met by God and, accordingly, empowering one to be a channel of God's blessings to others.

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The Expression of the Golden Rule in World Religions and the Christian Position

Bamidele Moses Olayemi
John Olu Adetoyese

INTRODUCTION

The Golden Rule stands as one of the most enduring and universally recognized ethical principles in human history. Its simplicity gives it power, yet beneath that simplicity lies a profound moral demand: the call to step beyond self-interest and enter into the experience of others. In the Christian tradition, this principle is explicitly affirmed by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12, NIV). Similarly, Jesus restates it in a reciprocal form in Luke 6:31: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." At its core, the Golden Rule compels individuals toward empathy, selflessness, and respect for human dignity, virtues that reflect the very character of God as revealed in Scripture.

From a biblical worldview, this principle is not merely ethical advice but a reflection of divine law fulfilled in love. The command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18) establishes an Old Testament foundation that is carried into New Testament teaching, where love becomes the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10). James refers to this as the "Royal Law": "Love your neighbor as yourself" (James 2:8), highlighting its central place in Christian

ethics. Likewise, believers are exhorted to humility and concern for others in Philippians 2:3–4, which calls Christians to "value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

What makes this principle particularly significant is its remarkable presence across diverse cultural, geographical, and religious contexts. From ancient civilizations to modern societies, variations of the Golden Rule appear in moral teachings that were developed independently of one another. From a theological standpoint, this raises an important question: does this widespread appearance reflect a shared human moral intuition rooted in being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), or does it point to a deeper divine moral law written on the human heart, as suggested in Romans 2:15?

Although commonly associated with religious teachings, the Golden Rule is not merely a cultural ideal but, within Christianity, an expression of God's revealed will. It appears in both positive forms ("do unto others…") and negative forms ("do not do to others…"), each carrying ethical weight. The positive form reflects the active nature of Christian love (agape) which seeks the good of others proactively (1 Corinthians 13:4–7), while the negative form emphasizes moral restraint from harm. Together, they reveal that biblical ethics are not only about avoiding wrongdoing but also about actively pursuing righteousness and love. The universality of the Golden Rule therefore, suggests more than coincidence; it may point toward a shared moral awareness implanted by the Creator. However, this assumption also invites careful theological reflection. While many traditions express

similar ethical sentiments, Scripture presents the Golden Rule as ultimately grounded in the character of God revealed fully in Christ, who not only taught love but embodied it through self-sacrifice (John 13:34–35).

This article therefore, examines how the Golden Rule is articulated across major world religions, analyzing both its common themes and its distinctive expressions. By comparing these perspectives, the study aims not only to highlight the unifying moral thread within global religious ethics but also to critically assess the depth, meaning, and limits of that unity in light of biblical revelation.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is a central ethical principle in both philosophical, cultural and religious traditions, broadly understood as a standard that promotes reciprocity in human relationships. It calls individuals to evaluate their actions by considering how those actions would affect them if they were in the position of others. Rather than functioning as a rigid command, it serves as a reflective moral guideline that appeals to empathy, fairness, and consistency in ethical reasoning.

This principle is commonly expressed in two major forms: the positive and the negative. The positive form, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” emphasizes proactive moral responsibility, urging individuals to actively pursue the good of others. This formulation is clearly articulated in the Christian tradition: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Holy Bible, Matt. 7.12). In contrast, the negative form “Do not do unto others what you would not want

done to you" focuses on moral restraint. This version appears in Confucian teaching: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire"[498] While both forms advocate reciprocity, the positive form demands a higher level of moral engagement by requiring intentional acts of kindness rather than mere avoidance of harm.

From a philosophical perspective, the Golden Rule can be understood as a test of moral consistency. Harry J. Gensler explains that the rule requires individuals to imagine themselves in the position of others and to ask whether they would accept the same treatment, thereby promoting impartiality in ethical judgment.[499] This reflective process helps expose contradictions between one's actions and one's moral expectations, making the Golden Rule a tool for ethical reasoning rather than a simple behavioral instruction.

A similar line of thought can be found in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose principle of universalizability closely parallels the logic of the Golden Rule. Kant writes, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law".[500] Although Kant does not explicitly frame this as the Golden Rule, the emphasis on consistency and universality reflects a similar concern for fairness and rational moral judgment.

Despite its strengths, the Golden Rule is not without limitations. One major criticism is that it assumes an individual's personal preferences can serve as a reliable

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[498] (Confucius 15.23).

[499] (Gensler 45–47).

[500] (Kant 30).

guide for others. However, in diverse societies, people's values and expectations often differ significantly. As James Rachels observes, ethical reasoning must take into account relevant differences between individuals, rather than relying solely on personal standards.[501] This suggests that the Golden Rule must be applied with sensitivity to context in order to avoid oversimplification.

Nevertheless, the enduring significance of the Golden Rule lies in its universality and adaptability. It provides a shared ethical framework across cultures and religions, encouraging empathy, fairness, and moral reflection. Its continued relevance in both religious and philosophical discourse highlights its role as a foundational principle for responsible human conduct.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is not a product of any single religious tradition; rather, it is an ethical principle with deep historical roots that extend into some of the earliest known human civilizations. Its presence in ancient cultures across the world suggests that the idea of reciprocal moral responsibility is deeply embedded in human moral consciousness. From a biblical standpoint, this universality is significant because Scripture affirms that humanity is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27 then, God has also placed a moral awareness within the human heart (Romans 2:14–15). This provides a theological explanation for why similar ethical insights appear across civilizations.

[501] (Rachels and Rachels 122).

One of the earliest known expressions of reciprocal ethics appears in ancient Egypt, particularly in the Instruction of Ptahhotep (c. 2400 BCE). This wisdom literature emphasizes humility, justice, and consideration for others, reflecting an early form of ethical reciprocity. Although not expressed in the wording later found in Scripture, the underlying principle aligns with biblical wisdom literature, which repeatedly calls for justice and humility. Proverbs 11:17 states, "Those who are kind benefit themselves, but the cruel bring ruin on themselves," while Micah 6:8 summarizes God's ethical expectation: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." These texts show that the biblical tradition similarly connects morality with social responsibility and righteous conduct.

Similarly, ancient Mesopotamian traditions reveal comparable ethical concerns. Legal and wisdom texts from Babylon emphasize justice, fairness, and accountability in human relationships. While often framed as civil law rather than moral teaching, they reflect an understanding that societies must be governed by principles of equitable treatment. This corresponds with the biblical emphasis on justice as a reflection of God's character. Deuteronomy 16:20 commands, "Follow justice and justice alone," reinforcing the idea that ethical fairness is not merely social necessity but divine expectation.

In ancient China, the ethical teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE) provide one of the clearest early articulations of the Golden Rule in its negative form: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire".[502] This principle closely resembles the biblical moral restraint expressed in

[502] (Analects 15.23).

Leviticus 19:18, which commands love for one's neighbor, and is later intensified in the teaching of Jesus: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). From a Christian perspective, this shows that while human cultures may articulate moral truth differently, the fullness of ethical revelation is ultimately found in Christ, who internalizes and elevates this principle into active love (John 13:34–35). The recurrence of similar ethical teachings across ancient civilizations suggests that the Golden Rule is not merely a borrowed or transmitted idea but one that reflects a shared human moral awareness. Scripture provides theological grounding for this convergence by affirming that God's law is written on the human heart (Romans 2:15), even among those outside explicit revelation. As a result, many cultures arrive at similar moral conclusions because they are responding to the same created moral order established by God.

However, it is important not to assume complete uniformity in these early expressions. While the principle of reciprocity is present across cultures, the motivations behind it differ significantly, ranging from social harmony, legal order, and philosophical reasoning to theological obedience. In contrast, the biblical worldview roots the Golden Rule not merely in social utility but in the character of God Himself. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:12 is not only ethical instruction but a reflection of divine love fulfilled in action. Therefore, the Golden Rule in Scripture is not simply a human moral insight but a revelation of God's kingdom ethic, centered on love, justice, and righteousness.

THE GOLDEN RULE IN MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS

The Golden Rule occupies a central place in the ethical teachings of the world's major religions. Although expressed in different forms and shaped by distinct theological and philosophical frameworks, the principle consistently emphasizes reciprocity, empathy, and moral responsibility. A comparative examination reveals both a shared ethical foundation and important differences in interpretation, motivation, and application.

THE GOLDEN RULE IN CHRISTIANITY

In Christianity, the Golden Rule is explicitly articulated by Jesus Christ in the New Testament: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12, NIV). This teaching forms a cornerstone of Christian moral instruction and is closely linked to the broader commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). Jesus further summarizes the moral law by uniting love for God and love for neighbor as the foundation of all ethical living (Matthew 22:37–40). Together, these teachings establish love (agapē) not merely as an emotion, but as the governing principle of Christian conduct.

Unlike traditions that emphasize restraint alone, Christianity presents the Golden Rule in a strongly positive and active form. It calls believers not only to avoid harm but to intentionally pursue the good of others. This is reflected in Paul's instruction: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Philippians 2:3–4). Likewise, believers are commanded to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians

6:10). The ethical vision of Christianity therefore moves beyond minimal morality into active benevolence, generosity, and sacrificial love.

However, a central theological question arises: Is such a demanding moral standard realistically attainable? From a purely human standpoint, consistent selfless love is difficult because of the fallen nature of humanity. Scripture affirms this tension, stating that "the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit" (Galatians 5:17). Yet Christianity does not leave believers powerless in this struggle. The Golden Rule is made possible through the indwelling presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit plays a decisive role in enabling believers to live out this ethic. According to Romans 5:5, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." This means that love for others is not merely self-generated but Spirit-enabled. Furthermore, Ezekiel prophesied this transformation: "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees" (Ezekiel 36:27). The New Covenant therefore does not only command moral action—it provides divine empowerment to fulfill it.

This is why the Golden Rule in Christianity is not intended to be burdensome law but Spirit-empowered life. Paul explains this transformation clearly in Galatians 5:22–23, where the fruit of the Spirit includes love, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. These virtues directly correspond to the practical outworking of the Golden Rule. In other words, when the Holy Spirit governs a believer's life, treating others rightly becomes not only possible but increasingly natural.

Jesus Himself promised this enabling presence when He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), but also assured believers that the Holy Spirit would guide them into truth and empower their witness (John 14:26; Acts 1:8). This means that Christian ethics is not grounded in human effort alone but in divine assistance.

Therefore, the Golden Rule in Christianity is not merely an ethical ideal but a lived reality made possible through spiritual transformation. Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee rightly describe Christian ethics as “transformative,” calling believers beyond minimal obligation into self-giving love and justice. However, from a biblical standpoint, this transformation is fundamentally the work of the Holy Spirit, who reshapes human desires, renews the mind (Romans 12:2), and enables believers to reflect the character of Christ in their relationships.[503]

The Golden Rule in Christianity is both a command and a capability: a command given by Christ, and a capability made possible through the indwelling Holy Spirit. What would be impossible through human effort alone becomes attainable through divine empowerment, making love for others not only a moral duty but a spiritual expression of a transformed life.

THE GOLDEN RULE IN ISLAM

In Islam, the Golden Rule is prominently expressed in the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Sahih al-

[503] Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee