

Six Keys to Detecting the ‘Prosperity Gospel’

The following is a transcript of the audio.

Pastor John, you are an outspoken opponent of the prosperity gospel, and you have been for many years. Episode #231 of this podcast series it’s aptly titled: “Why I Abominate the Prosperity Gospel.” That sums up your position pretty well, and your words there are very strong. Podcast listener Derek recently wrote in to ask a follow-up: “Pastor John, how do you recognize prosperity theology when it’s not blatantly obvious? What are some key indicators to discern a ‘soft’ prosperity theology?”

I really appreciate this question. I am eager to give some things to look for and I don’t think it is all that difficult. Anybody could probably sit down and come up with these. So I thought of at least six that I jotted down, six things to look for and if you see them, the likelihood is that you may be dealing with insipient prosperity theology or soft or beginning prosperity theology.

Number one, the absence of a serious doctrine of the biblical necessity and normalcy of suffering, the absence of a doctrine of suffering. [Acts 14:21](#) said that basic discipleship as Paul went through the churches was to teach them through many tribulations you must enter the kingdom. Is this basic doctrinal teaching in the Church? Tribulations are necessary and there are many and you must walk through them. Is [Romans 8:23](#) essential in dealing with sickness and calamity? We, we who have the Holy Spirit groan waiting for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. Is there a strong note that Christians full of the Holy Spirit get cancer and groan under the calamities and the miseries of the fall? [John 15:20](#). If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. Is there a strong note that a faithful Christian will be persecuted? Hebrews 12 and 2 Corinthians one. God is sovereign over all of our pain and ordains it for our holiness. So that is the first one. Is there a serious doctrine of the necessity and normalcy of suffering?

Number two, the absence of a clear and prominent doctrine of self denial is a tip off that something is amiss, an absence of a clear and prominent doctrine of self denial. Jesus said: If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Paul said, [Romans 8:13](#), if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [Philippians 3:8](#). I count everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. In other words, normal progress in the Christian life comes by saying no to lesser values and yes to Christ and many of those lesser values are the kinds of pleasures that prosperity preachers don’t like to say no to. So is there a good doctrine of self denial?

Number three. Look out for the absence of serious exposition of Scripture. Does the preaching take the Bible seriously by explaining what is really there in texts? Does it work through passages of Scripture, explaining the flow of the thought? Or does it feel like the pastor has his favorite topics, he circles around to them over and over making a few texts serve his purpose? So watch for careful and continuous handling of the Scriptures in an expository way and be suspicious if all you ever get is topical preaching with a few pastors’ favorite topics that lean towards prosperity, the mark.

Number four. Watch out for the absence of dealing with tensions in Scripture. That is, does the preacher bring up passages that seem like problems with the ones he is dealing with and then give careful explanations to show how they really fit together? Or is he content just to say what seems to be in one text and never even raise the question. There may be 10 other texts that seem to say something else. I think that is a bad sign if week after week you get the impression: Doesn't he realize what he just said from this text is contradicted in a few other places in the Bible? And he doesn't seem to know that or care about that. That is a serious problem.

Number five. Do the church leaders have exorbitant lifestyles? Do they drive cars, live in houses, wear clothes, travel to places that only the very wealthy can go or only the very wealthy can possess? Is the pastor living above the average person in his parish? Now why might that be? And I know that there might be cultural and traditional reasons for it, but are there biblical reasons for it? Try to sniff out. What makes this pastor tick. Why is he so concerned with the clothes he wears and the car he drives and the neighborhood he lives in and the way he travels and the accommodations he gets on his traveling. This doesn't smell like the Jesus who had no place to lay his heads.

Number six. Last one. Is there a prominent of self and a marginalization of the greatness of God? Does the preacher seem to parade himself? Does he figure into the talk too much? Is the greatness and majesty and glory of God the centerpiece of all he says and does? Is the preacher in love with the glory of God in the gospel? Is he broken hearted for his sin? Is he contrite and humble? Is he publicly self effacing? Does he repent of the sins and model how to appropriate daily the sweetness of what Jesus did for us on the cross? Or is the majesty of grace marginalized while he exalts himself?

So those would be some of the things I would watch out for in trying to discern where a church may be going off in relationship to the prosperity gospel.

Excellent. Thank you Pastor John for those six gauges. For more on the prosperity gospel, see that episode #231: "Why I Abominate the Prosperity Gospel." You can find that episode in the Ask Pastor John archive. And if you have a question on the brain that you would like to ask Pastor John, please email it to us at AskPastorJohn@desiringGod.org. Next time we return to talk about food, specifically, what does the Bible say to us about food? Pastor John I think is up for offering us a little bite-sized theology of food. That's tomorrow. Until then, I'm your host Tony Reinke, thanks for listening.

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