



by John MacArthur

It is a severe and perverse corruption of biblical ministry to be in it for money. Contrary to the model we often see today, pastoral work and church leadership are not meant to be avenues to wealth and fame. In fact, men who carry the love of money into ministry are on the fast track to becoming false teachers (cf. **1 Peter 5:2**; **2 Peter 2:1–3, 14**).

In his list of qualifications for church leaders, Paul includes the vital reminder that godly shepherds must be “free from the love of money” (**1 Timothy 3:3**). A similar prohibition is found in Titus, where Paul writes that a qualified elder is “not fond of sordid gain” (**Titus 1:7**). That phrase is translated from a compound of *aischros* (“filthy, shameful, base”) and *kerdos* (“gain, profit, greed”), and it refers to a person who, without honesty or integrity, seeks wealth and financial prosperity at any cost. Paul says such a man is not fit for ministry.

That doesn’t mean godly shepherds shouldn’t be paid. All Christians, including pastors, have a right to make a living for themselves and for their families. Jesus said “the laborer is worthy of his wages” (**Luke 10:7**). Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you? . . . So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel” (**1 Corinthians 9:11, 14**). A pastor not only has a right to earn a living but has a right to be paid by those to whom he ministers.

However, from the infancy of the church, false teachers have entered the pastorate simply to make an easy living. They were “men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose[d] that godliness is a means of gain” (**1 Timothy 6:5**). They were in the pastorate for the money, not to serve the Lord or His people. “Godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment.” Paul went on to say:

For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. (vv. 6–11)

Paul used the term “man of God” as a technical term for pastors and elders (see also **2 Timothy 3:17**) in much the same way that it was often used in the Old Testament of prophets (cf. **2 Kings 1:9, 11**). Just like those in the early church, false prophets and teachers in Old Testament times were “shepherds who [had] no understanding; they . . . all turned to their own way, each one to his unjust gain, to the last one” (**Isaiah 56:11**). Peter admonished pastors: “Shepherd the flock of God among you,” he said, “exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness” (**1 Peter 5:2**)

In the light of such clear biblical warnings and prohibitions, it’s incredible that so many false teachers and prosperity preachers not only survive, but flourish—some for decades. The church is overrun with brazen thieves who use the façade of ministry to cloak their pyramid schemes and snake oil sales. They’re wolves who prey on the gullibility of people looking for a shortcut to spiritual blessing and wealth. For men and women like that, ministry is nothing more than a confidence game.

Contrast that with Paul’s financial perspective on ministry: He told the Philippians “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (**Philippians 4:11**), and he assured the Ephesian elders that during his three years of ministry in their city, he had “coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes” (**Acts 20:33**). Paul was faithful to the work the Lord had called him, regardless of the reward. And on at least one occasion, he sacrificed his own financial reward for the sake of the ministry (**2 Corinthians 11:7-15**).

A godly shepherd is not greedy, stingy, or financially ambitious. His focus is not on his bank account, but on the building up of the church to greater spiritual growth and godliness—*that* is his true reward. A man whose priority is anything else is unqualified for ministry.