

Evaluating the Teachings of Joel Osteen

by Chuck May

- *What does Joel Osteen teach about Christians and wealth?*
- *What does the Bible say about Christians and wealth?*
- *What is the significant issue in Osteen's teaching?*

Joel Osteen pastors the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. Lakewood is the largest church in America, with over 35,000 attendees each Sunday ("Charisma Magazine," June 2004). His recent book, "Your Best Life Now," has been on the New York Times "Best seller List" for 50 consecutive weeks and has sold over 3 million copies. The book has even inspired a board game – "Your Best Life Now – the Game."

Osteen's Doctrine

The doctrinal statement of the Lakewood Church affirms: the Bible is inspired and inerrant, the triune nature of God, the deity of Christ, the sacrificial death of Christ, and other orthodox beliefs. However, it includes one affirmation that I have never seen before in any doctrinal statement. Namely, "we believe ... as children of God, we are overcomers and more than conquerors, and God intends for each of us to experience the abundant life He has in store for us" (http://joelosteen.lakewood.cc/site/PageServer?pagename=JOM_WhatWeBelieve).

This idea of "succeeding in life" is the main focus of Osteen's teaching. Osteen teaches that God wants His people to be successful in all areas of their life, especially financially and materially. In the introduction to his book, Osteen encourages the reader to dream, "Someday I'll earn more money and won't have to worry about how to pay my bills." He writes, "God wants to increase you financially" (p. 5). "Even if you come from an extremely successful family, God still wants you to go further" (p. 9). "Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase" (p. 11).

On page 5, Osteen states that this desire for material abundance is pleasing to God. He says, "God wants to pour out His *far and beyond* favor. God wants this to be the best time of your life." According to Osteen, God wants you to experience His goodness in physical, material and social ways—here and now—and, therefore, this pursuit should be the goal of godly people.

A Biblical Evaluation

One of the problems with Osteen's teaching is that it promotes a feeling of discontentment. He teaches that to be what God wants, we should be healthy and wealthy (like Osteen). But what if we aren't? The person who just has average means will soon feel discontent with their financial position. This discontentment will be the motivation for seeking more wealth. But the Bible is categorically opposed to this idea. *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* (1 Timothy 6:8-10). Scripture also teaches that our life does not consist in the amount of material wealth we possess (Luke 12:15). Furthermore, *Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have* (Hebrews 13:5).

A second problem with Osteen's teaching is a focus on the temporal. We should be successful now, rich now, and healthy now. With this focus on the temporal, he quotes predominantly from the Old Testament, where God did promise physical temporal blessings to an obedient Israel.

But the New Testament consistently teaches that we are not to look for temporal blessings. Our hope is for eternal rewards. Matthew 6:19-21 says, *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Jesus said to rejoice when you are persecuted now because then blessing will be waiting in heaven (Matthew 5:11, 12). Paul said he rejoices in tribulations because they bring about perseverance, proven character, and hope (Romans 5:1-3) and that we are to set our minds on the things above (spiritual growth) not on the things that are on the earth (material growth) [Colossians 3:2].

Of course, God can make anyone wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, but that does not mean we should desire wealth for ourselves. And according to the New Testament, wealth is never seen as a “blessing” but as a responsibility. It isn’t your money just because God puts it in your hands. It is still His money; you are just in charge of using it properly. And rest assured—you will give an account for how it was spent (Luke 12:48).

Osteen’s message of health and wealth for Christians is not new. Neither is it hard to defeat if one has even a basic understanding of the Bible. The New Testament is clear that our hope should be for eternal blessings, and to achieve these eternal rewards, we should seek after eternal goals not material goals. In Philippians 3:18-20, Paul contrasts the Christian’s mindset with that of the worldly person. He says, *for many [the enemies of Christ] ... whose end is destruction, whose God is their appetite ... who set their minds on earthly things. For our [the Christian’s] citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Old Testament, also, is quite clear about what pleases God. *Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD* (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

The Bigger Issue

Osteen says that we must teach our mind to think proper/successful thoughts because what we think and say controls our destiny. Osteen states, “Next, you need to imagine the life you want to live and keep it before your eyes. Imagine success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness. If you keep this before you, nothing on earth will be able to hold these things from you” (p. 5).

Besides thinking the right way, we need to speak/declare the things we want. Declaring our desires in audible form will bring them to pass. Osteen says, “I believe one of the main ways that we grow in favor is by declaring. It’s not enough to just read it. It’s not enough to just believe it. You’ve got to speak it out. Your words have creative power. One of the primary ways we release our faith is through our words. There is a divine connection between you declaring God’s favor and seeing God’s favor manifested in your life. And some of you are doing your best to please the Lord. You are living a holy consecrated life, but you’re not really experiencing God’s supernatural favor. And it’s simply because you’re not declaring it. You’ve got to give life to your faith by speaking it out” (Joel Osteen, audio clip as broadcast on the Bible Answer-Man, April 26, 2004).

Osteen further says, “Your words have creative power. When you go around saying, ‘I have favor, people want to be good to me, and supernatural doors are opening’—when you make those declarations of faith—you are charging the atmosphere. And your own words can help to bring it to pass. That is why we should get into the habit of every day consistently speaking God’s favor over our lives” (Joel Osteen, “Experiencing More Of God’s Favor,” Tape # 212, Daystar, July 10, 2004).

Much of Osteen’s theology borrows heavily from the Word-Faith (also known as “name it and claim it”) movement. Teachers in the Word-Faith movement include Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland, Robert Tilton and Benny Hinn. John MacArthur says about the Word-Faith movement, “Word-Faith teachers owe their ancestry to groups like Christian Science ... not to classical Pentecostalism. It reveals that at their very core, Word-Faith teachings are corrupt. Their undeniable derivation is cultish, not Christian. ... The gospel proclaimed by the Word-Faith movement is not the gospel of the New Testament. Word-Faith doctrine is a mongrel system, a blend of mysticism, dualism, and gnosticism that borrows generously from the teachings of the metaphysical cults. The Word-Faith movement may be the most dangerous false system that has grown out of the charismatic movement so far” (“Charismatic Chaos,” p. 290).

The basic logic of ‘positive confession’ as taught in the Word-Faith movement is:

- God created things by speaking them into existence.
- We are created in God’s image.
- Therefore we, too, can create things (or situations) by speaking them into existence.

Osteen, and the Word-Faith movement, both teach that God wants you healthy and wealthy and that once you claim it aloud in faith, God is obligated to deliver these things to you. Joel Osteen’s theology dethrones God, portraying Him not as the One who *works all things according to the counsel of His will* (Ephesians 1:11, emphasis mine) but rather as One who is obliged to perform in response to **our** will and **our** words.

In his book “The Knowledge of the Holy,” A. W. Tozer said something like this—What you think, when you think “God” is the most important thing about you. Your concept of God will do more to shape your thoughts and actions than any other single concept in your life. It’s no wonder God spent so much of the Bible emphasizing His attributes. He wants us to know what He is like so that we may live a proper life. If our view of God is flawed, it will necessarily lead to a life that is also flawed. If your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness (Matthew 6:22-23).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What does Joel Osteen teach about Christians and wealth?*

A: Osteen teaches that God wants us to be materially wealthy now. The Christian should name it and claim it when it comes to financial success, and this will make it a reality.

Q: *What does the Bible say about Christians and wealth?*

A: The New Testament states *the love of money is a root of evil*. Nowhere does the New Testament say that wealth is a blessing or that it should be pursued. On the contrary, the New Testament calls for us to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth.

Q: *What is the real problem with Osteen’s teaching?*

A: The real problem with Osteen’s teaching is his Word-Faith theology. This theology makes God the servant of man by saying that God is obligated to grant man’s wishes if they are declared aloud and in faith. A wrong view of God will have disastrous results in a Christian’s life.