

Review: JAO171

OSTEEN'S "GOSPEL-LIGHT" MESSAGE

a book review of
Become a Better You: Seven Keys to Improving Your Life Everyday
by Joel Osteen
(Free Press, 2007)

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Named as one of Barbara Walters' "10 Most Fascinating People of 2006" and selected as the "Most Influential Christian in 2006" by the readers of *Church Report Magazine*, Joel Osteen's star continues to rise. His charmed life as the guru of the "gospel-light" message is now all the more assured with skyrocketing sales of a new blockbuster book on self-improvement. Not without its merits, *Become a Better You* offers good advice throughout, such as accepting God's forgiveness, reaching out to others, and never giving up. As in his other number-one bestseller *Your Best Life Now*, which remained on the *New York Times* "Best Sellers" list for more than two years and has sold more than four million copies, however, there are serious concerns about its teachings.

To Whom It May Concern. The first question I had when reading this book was the matter of the intended audience. Osteen's church in Houston attracts non-Christians as well as Christians, and when he makes statements such as "You are a child of the Most High God" (p. 4), or "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law" (41), he gives the false impression that these statements apply to anyone reading the book, Christian or otherwise. Biblically, however, nonbelievers are still under the curse of the law, since they have not been redeemed.

The key question Osteen addresses throughout the book is "What must I do to become a better me?" His main goal seems to be to help readers "look inside" themselves "and discover the priceless seeds of greatness that God has placed within" them (xiii).

Readers will note that the emphasis here, and throughout the book, is on what readers must do rather than on Jesus Christ. The onus is on the readers to change themselves by tapping into the "greatness" within them rather than on God to change them by using His true greatness. In contrast, Paul says "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Rom. 7:18).¹

The One with the Most Toys. Osteen says that God wants you to do greater things. "That means if you're a teacher, you haven't taught your best lesson yet. If you're a builder, you haven't built your best home yet. If you're a business person, you haven't negotiated your best deal yet" (4). He says that the wealthiest places on earth are graveyards because they are filled with peoples' unfulfilled dreams, "books that will never be written, businesses that will never be started," (71) and so forth.

It is true that you should strive to do your best at all times, but when you get to heaven, you won't be boasting about your successes in this life. You will be boasting instead in the Lord and what He did in purchasing your salvation. As Paul wrote, "For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor. 10:18). Success in this life isn't wrong, but this appears to be one of Osteen's chief goals for his readers.

Missed Opportunities to Share the Gospel. Osteen tells the story of the woman at the well in John 4 (10). Osteen's point is, "I wonder how many times God tells us that He wants to do something great in our lives, that we are going to be healthy and well; we are going to get out of debt. We feel it strongly, but like the woman at the well, we start thinking about what we don't have, and all the obstacles in our path, and before long, we've talked ourselves out of God's best." Osteen completely misses the point of this story in which Jesus points to Himself as the living water that leads to eternal life.

Success Equals God's Blessing. Osteen says "We need to understand that just as God supernaturally opens doors, sometimes God supernaturally closes doors" (15). He then uses his father as an example. The church that Word-Faith teacher John Osteen pastored rejected his new teachings on healing (Osteen called it persecution) so he left and started a new church that became much more successful (15–16). Osteen assumes in this illustration that if a church has become successful it is because God has blessed it. To the contrary, the success can mean that the church has strayed from the central teachings of the gospel and has started preaching a feel-good gospel that appeals to the flesh.

Redeemed from Sickness. Osteen writes, "You may have had many negative things in your family line for generations. They just keep being passed down from one generation to the next: sicknesses, bad attitudes, addictions, financial stress, low self-esteem, and other chronic conditions. Please understand those are some of the things from which you have been redeemed. Those things are under the curse, and that curse has been broken" (44). The danger, however, lies in the idea that if the reader is not cured of his sicknesses, it is because God is unable to cure him; if so, perhaps God is also unable to save him from his sins!

Footloose and Sin-free. Joel Osteen denies that we are sinners. He writes that "we used to be poor old sinners, but when we came to Christ, He washed away our sins. He made us new creatures. Now, we are no longer poor old sinners, we are sons and daughters of the Most High God" (102). The Apostle Paul, however, said, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15). Paul didn't say that he *was* the worst sinner but that he *is* the worst. Christians are both sinners and saints.

Misquoting Scripture. One of the more frequent mistakes Osteen makes is in misquoting Scripture. With his misquotation often comes misinterpretation.

A case in point would be his use of Hebrews 12. "Stop dwelling on everything that's wrong with you and taking an inventory of what you're not. The Scripture says in Hebrews, 'To [sic] look away from everything that distracts'" (104). Hebrews 12:1–2a does not say that we should look away from what is wrong with us. It states, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...." Hebrews tells us to do something about our sins. It then tells us something Osteen never tells his readers here—to get our eyes off of ourselves and to fix them on Jesus Christ.

Osteen then says, "The Scripture tells us that we are to 'call the things that are not as if they already were'" (112). Romans 4:17, however, says that it is "God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were," not we mere mortals.

Believing Is Becoming. Osteen repeats the error he made in *Your Best Life Now* when he says that Abraham and Sarah could not have a child until they believed they could. According to Osteen God achieved this goal by changing their names. "God had to change the image Abraham and Sarah had of themselves before they could ever have that child....He changed Abram to Abraham, which means 'father of many nations.'...He heard that so often, it began to sink down inside him" (113). This, however, effectively gives more power to us than it does to God.

Osteen advises, "Believe God is working behind the scenes in your life. The Scripture says, 'God is effectually at work in those who believe.' Notice, His power is activated only when we believe. God can work in your behalf your whole lifetime and you never really get the full benefit of it because you didn't

believe" (290). What 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says is, "...when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe." God's word was working in all those who believed the Gospel message, not just in those who believed that He was working in their lives.

Preaching the Whole Word of God. Joel Osteen has said that digging deep into the Scriptures and preaching about sin is "not my main calling." He has a congregation of more than forty thousand people, in addition to millions who watch him weekly on television rather than attending a regular church. He is, in effect, their pastor. If he isn't going to faithfully preach the gospel to them, then *who will?* The same applies to his readers. Except for two brief paragraphs at the end of the book, there is no presentation of the gospel to those who are lost. This is undoubtedly the saddest part of his "gospel-light" message.

— reviewed by Bob Hunter

NOTES

1. Melanie Eversley, "Osteen Shines a Positive Light," *USA Today*, Oct. 21, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-10-21-joel-osteen_n.htm.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
3. Joel Osteen, interview by Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*, FNC, Dec. 23, 2007.
4. Robin Roberts, "Joel Osteen's Megachurch," *Good Morning America*, ABC, Oct. 17, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3740379>.