

Thou Shalt Not Be Negative

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Overly positive thinking and prosperity teaching undermine Joel Osteen's bestseller [Excerpts]

On the cover of *Your Best Life Now*, Joel Osteen flashes the sort of smile that suggests a man who not only succeeds in everything but also quietly befriends the world's outcasts. Osteen has much to smile about: His first book showed up on The New York Times bestseller list for hardcover advice books in November, and by mid-January it had reached No. 1 – outranking even Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

Osteen's teaching avoids some of the harder edges of prosperity theology, such as Kenneth Copeland's bizarre emphasis on Jesus' "dying spiritually" in hell or his scowling mockery of Christians who haven't grasped the core prosperity doctrines. Still, Osteen promotes some of prosperity theology's favorite notions, such as reprogramming your mind with positive thoughts or changing your life with the power of your spoken words. He writes of his mother's battle with cancer:

She gets up every morning and reviews those same Scriptures on the subject of healing. She still speaks those words of faith, victory, and health over her life. She won't leave the house until she does it. Beyond that, she loves to remind "Mr. Death" that he has no hold on her life. Every time my mother passes a graveyard, she literally shouts out loud, "With long life He satisfies me and shows me His salvation!"

Osteen takes his emphasis on being positive so far as to shoehorn the concept into biblical passages. Thus Moses' charge to the Israelites becomes, "I have set before you life and death, blessings, and curses, positive and negative; therefore God says choose life" (a subtle spin on Deut. 30:15-19). Similarly, he writes that the Israelites' "lack of faith and their lack of self-esteem robbed them of the fruitful future God had in store for them."

Osteen also stresses generosity, but he tinges this with a formula he calls "In the time of need, sow a seed." Even acts of mercy are not string-free expressions of God's grace, but faith-building down payments in a "You can't outgive God" account.

Osteen rightly notes that people do not enjoy being around chronic complainers. But he lives at the other end of the spectrum, where Christians must maintain their happiness (Osteen uses the word interchangeably with joy and peace) regardless of woes. Most people live between these two

points, neither yielding to despair nor finding the silver lining behind every crisis.

Osteen issues stirring calls for people to forgive readily, to keep bitterness from taking root, and to watch their tongues. Your Best Life Now may well help heavily driven North Americans to remember there's more to life than what kind of car they drive. For readers who know the spiritual limits of health, prosperity, and even a positive attitude, the Book of Ecclesiastes would be better reading (Douglas LeBlanc, Christianity Today, April 2005, Page 103).

[TBC: Much like Rick Warren, Joel Osteen promotes the unbiblical idea of self-esteem, which while appealing to the flesh, is not compatible with biblical teaching. Even the secular world recognizes that high self-esteem is key to undesirable behavior as the following extract from a Surgeon General report shows: "In general, there is little evidence that low self-esteem causes violence or that violent offenders have low self-esteem. On the contrary, the evidence is more consistent with the position that high self-esteem and threats to high esteem lead to violence (Baumeister et al., 1996)."