

JOEL OSTEEN 2005 TV AIRTIME REPORT

Joel Osteen was not included in my 2004 study of 26 televangelists for a simple reason—at that time he was not considered a significant player among television ministries. However, shortly after the study was completed secular media coverage of the Houston pastor exploded due to his best-selling book “Your Best Life Now.” Even though his personal ministry was relatively new after taking over his later father’s Lakewood Church, the secular press propelled Osteen to the top of the list of modern televangelists. He now claims to have the highest-rated religious broadcast in America.

Osteen (pronounced with a long O) has become the face of the positive thinking approach to Christianity. As Norman Vincent Peale had done in the 50s and Robert Schuller in the 70s and 80s, Osteen emphasizes the power of positive thinking and rarely mentions Christ, doesn’t dwell on the suffering that the Bible promises to those who are believers and only promotes a “happy Christianity,” where God will bless followers with a content life. His sermons are cotton candy fluff, happy talk that lack substance. The title of one Sunday’s sermon was “Being Determined to Enjoy Our Lives.”

Though he doesn’t promise riches, Osteen does preach that Christians who “have faith” will “lead long healthy lives, prosperous lives” that are filled with “happiness.” To support his narrow theology he must skip entire sections of the New Testament, including the sermon on the mount which makes such downer statements as “blessed are those who mourn.” Osteen would claim those who mourn are involved in negative thinking.

Joel spends entire sermons condemning Christians who focus on the negative, saying, “Something happens when we verbalize a (negative) thought...you’re opening up the door to trouble.” Yet his sermons are filled with negative stories. One Sunday alone he used a sermon on “believing all things are possible” to introduce the possibilities of a wife dying, a teenager rebelling, a man freezing to death, a marriage failing, an elderly man losing his vision, a family worrying about a soldier returning home safely, a spinster never getting married, infertility, bankruptcy and four times talked about a family member getting cancer. While Osteen claims to focus on the positive, his sermons are filled with detailed negative illustrations that can actually stir up more fear than faith.

Despite the fact that he admonishes viewers “to meditate on God’s word,” the pastor rarely mentions the Bible in his sermons. And when he does, Osteen can distort scripture to support his positive-thinking approach. On one 2005 telecast he took Col. 3:2—“set your mind on the things above and not on things of the earth”—and restated it as a promise of God that Christians will prosper on earth. Osteen said from the pulpit about the passage, “I believe the higher things are the positive things...set your mind for success, set your mind for victory, set your mind that you’re going to enjoy this day.” So a verse that is meant to be a command for Christians to get their eyes off earthly rewards was twisted by Osteen into a pep talk that believers should experience earthly happiness.

Similarly, he changed the story of Job in the Old Testament, which many consider an example of God allowing a man’s faith to be tested and strengthened by hardships. Osteen saw the story as an example of how Job’s fear caused bad things to happen to him. In Osteen’s world, if believers have enough faith then they will always “prosper and succeed.”

On the Sunday the congregation returned after Hurricane Rita caused the church to cancel services for only the second time in 46 years, Osteen turned the tragedy into another positive

thinking message: “If you’re affected by one of the hurricanes...I just encourage you to open up your heart and find some reason to give God thanks....If we go around negative and discouraged, talking about our problems, complaining about how life’s treating us...that keeps God from working in your life.” Though the rest of the country was raising money for the victims, no mention was made on the program of doing anything for those in need other than offering them prayers and admonishing them to keep a positive faith.

There are two versions of his broadcast—a few stations air the hour-long version of the church service, which includes prayers and singing, while most stations air the half-hour program that contains 27 minutes of preaching. Though the hour-long shows contain praise and worship segments, the typical half-hour version that most Americans see contains little solid spiritual material. The televised versions of his sermons barely, if ever, mention Jesus. Until the last one-sentence altar call it would be difficult for a viewer of the half-hour show to know that this man was even a Christian preacher.

Instead Osteen comes across as a meek version of the Tony Robbins positive-thinking infomercials. The sermons are filled with corny jokes and stories about insignificant people who find great success and happiness just by being positive. Part of his success is due to his simple storytelling ability and he tells a new story every two minutes on the telecast.

When wife Victoria Osteen participates from the stage in the hour-long version of the program, her bleached-blond hair and wide smile make her look more like a beauty pageant contestant than a traditional ministry leader. Often Victoria will lead prayer and another blond beauty leads worship. These women seem to reflect the happy and healthy lifestyle that Joel preaches about.

Osteen devotes only 4% of his half-hour telecasts to fundraising, leaving just a little over a minute at the end of each show for announcements that sell his book or encourage people to go to Ticketmaster to buy seats for Osteen’s upcoming stadium services around the country. Only 1% of the show is verbalized promotion, so 95% of the program is devoted to the sermon. For the hour-long broadcast almost 98% of the airtime is made up of ministry segments. However, Osteen overuses the bottom of the screen to promote his materials. About every 90 seconds the sermon is visually interrupted by an Osteen promotion at the bottom of the screen, almost turning the entire broadcast into an infomercial. Thirteen times in 21 minutes a visual promotion appears that detracts from the spoken message and encourages people to buy something.

Osteen’s preaching style doesn’t help. His southern drawl and Cheshire cat grin have the telegenic appeal of Gomer Pyle. He is an exaggerated version of the down-home preaching style of his late father, who pastored the same church. Joel’s sermons ramble on, with him repeating the same words over and over again: “nice,” “positive,” “success.” His stage humility gives him an underdog, everyman status that is appealing and never intimidating. And his stories of his fear of speaking or his spontaneous tears (“I don’t know why I’m such a cry baby,” he says as he weeps in the middle of the sermon) elicit a sympathy factor from the tens of thousands in his new cavernous arena church.

In addition to the bland pronouncements, such as “We gotta learn to keep a smile on our face” and “God is a positive God—there’s nothing negative about Him...He wants you to succeed,” he can shock with his half-joking inept theology. “It’s okay to lie,” he announced one Sunday when he told people to stop criticizing others and instead compliment people even when it wasn’t the truth!

What viewers end up with is a down-to-earth guy who would be fun to go fishing with but who doesn't preach much of a foundation in Christian doctrine. It may be different for those attending his Houston church—after all, viewers of the half-hour show just see an edited version of the message that is meant to attract potential believers. His TV approach is “Christianity light,” emphasizing pop psychology the way Schuller did thirty years earlier.

But back then Schuller was criticized for his watering down of the Gospel; today Osteen is praised for his “inclusiveness” and lack of dogmatism. He may be a success because he represents the direction Christianity has headed in the past decade— a mega-church ministry that makes followers feel good without calling Christians to any of the suffering promised by Christ to those who truly believe in Him. It's a commentary on American Christianity that Osteen's bland style of preaching now attracts the largest audience of any televised church service.