Why Joel Osteen is the Perfect Pastor for Our Times

For years, I've sort of known who Joel Osteen is. If you walk into a bookstore, his giant, smiling face seems everywhere. But until a couple of weeks ago, I had never heard Osteen preach.

Meet the Press had just concluded this last Sunday, and I was slow to turn the TV off. As I scrambled eggs for my kids, I watched with genuine curiosity as the ever-smiling 54-year-old pastor began to preach to a huge congregation of people.

Osteen is of course famous for promoting what many refer to as "prosperity gospel," a doctrine that holds that financial success and good health are the result of God, and that steadfast faith will increase one's material wealth and well-being.

I only watched Osteen's sermon for five or ten minutes, but it sounded about the same as a couple others I later watched on YouTube. (I have a feeling if you've seen one Joel Osteen sermon, you've kind of seen them all.)

What were my impressions? Osteen is a skilled orator. He is a wonderful storyteller and uses a style that is highly-engaging, almost mesmerizing. He oozes positivity. His body language is serene; he moves like water. Words flow off his tongue, hymn-like. His folksy puns are trite, but endearing.

Osteen is a skilled preacher. And he totally creeped me out.

I'm not sure precisely why. At first I thought it was mostly the theological message, which seems not just hollow and icky, but false.

Any Christian who believes good things cannot happen to evil

people, or vice-versa, needs to consult their Scriptures. (Or, if you don't have time, just watch the South Park episode on the Book of Job, in which Kyle gets a hemorrhoid while Cartman gets his own amusement park. Viewer discretion advised, of course.)

That's part of it, but I quickly realized there is something else. His sermons are all about one person: You. Everything is about you, you, you, you.

"Nobody can beat you at being you."

"…you have the power to set a new standard."

"It's your year to see favor in a new way."

"If you didn't get it then you didn't need it."

"You have potential."

It goes on. And on. And on.

Now, I believe in self-help and self-empowerment. But as a theology, I find it empty and gross. Let's be honest: Osteen doesn't know a damn thing going on in the lives of the vast majority of people sitting in those pews.

He doesn't know if 2017 is really going to be "your year" or if your child is going is going to get leukemia. Or if your wife is going to get laid off. If you'll suffer profoundly. But people loved what they were hearing. Because it was about them, and it sounded good.

Osteen strikes me as a smart man, and I believe he knows what he is doing. He is preaching a message that taps into our culture's narcissism and sates the guilt we feel over our love of material things. And he's quite good at it.

In 2012, it was estimated that Osteen's net worth was $68 million. Lakewood, Osteen's church, has a weekly attendance of

52,000. His weekly television program is watched by more than 10 million viewers. He has his own radio show on Sirius XM.

I don't begrudge Osteen this success. But I can't applaud a man whose sermons feed on (and feed) man's self-love and love of things.

Osteen's success reveals nothing about God. It only reveals the shallow character of our culture, one that has become infatuated with itself.

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