

An Appeal to Joel and Victoria Osteen

Dear Joel and Victoria, I hope and pray that you will read this letter and that you take to heart the things I'm sharing. I write as a friend wanting to help, not an enemy wanting to hurt, and everything I write, I write out of love for God, love for you, and love for the church and the world.

I have said many times that I'm glad to see your smiling faces on TV as you speak about Jesus rather than some stern-faced, joyless, angry Christian leader. And I believe you genuinely do care about people and want them to find wholeness in the Lord.

Joel, I appreciate the fact that you end every service by asking people to get right with God, having them pray a prayer where they say to Jesus, "I repent of my sins, come into my heart, I make you Lord and Savior."

The big problem is that you haven't told them what their sins are, and you haven't told them what real repentance is. And since you are speaking to people around the world, you can't possibly assume that all of them understand the meaning of sin and redemption and repentance. (Most American Christians don't even understand these things today.)

In short, you have not shared with them the whole counsel of God, and by telling them only part of the story, you have done what the false prophets of ancient Israel did: "You superficially treat the fracture of My people saying to them, 'All is well, all is well,' when nothing is well" (Jer. 6:14, my translation).

A true physician tells his patients what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. As one preacher of old, Jean Daille, once said, "Ministers are not cooks, but physicians

and therefore should not study to delight the palate, but to recover the patient.”

Have you been more of a junk-food cook than a physician? Have you been afraid to tell people their true condition? Have you been so concerned with making them feel good about themselves and giving them a sense of hope that you failed to diagnose their terminal sin disease?

Paul said to the elders of Ephesus, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27).

Do you really believe in your heart of hearts that you have declared the whole counsel of God to your listening audience?

God has given you one of the largest platforms for the gospel in human history. Can you say before Him that you are “innocent of the blood of all”?

Have you ever taught extensively on the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount? Have you ever worked your way through one of the letters of Paul? If not, why not?

Proverbs tells us that, “Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue” (28:23). Do you believe God’s Word, or do you feel you have found a better way to do His work?

I appreciate the fact that you hold up your Bible before you preach, as your father did, and you have people make a confession about God’s Word, as you also learned to do from your father. But do you really preach that holy Word?

Shortly before Paul was martyred for his faith, he reminded Timothy that, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

He also gave him this solemn commission: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Is this your pattern of preaching and ministry? Do you rebuke in love (Prov. 27:5) as well as exhort and encourage?

Perhaps it's time to ask yourself honestly where you fit in this warning from Paul: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

Wouldn't it be utterly heartbreaking if, on the day you stand before God, you discovered that you were one of these teachers? Wouldn't it be tragic if your efforts were found to be wood, hay and stubble on that great and glorious Day (1 Cor. 3:11-15)? And may I ask you candidly if you even talk about that holy day of accounting?

Some Christians have referred to you and Victoria as outright heretics, others have said that you are fighting against the Holy Spirit (since the Spirit convicts the world of sin but your preaching does not), others have said that you are a pagan religionist, while others have said that your superficial message of material prosperity cannot bear the weight of the gospel.

These are very serious charges, but rather than just saying, "Hey, I'm just going to love everybody and stay in my lane," perhaps you should ask if these leaders might be saying something you need to hear. Is there any truth at all in their words? Could it be that God's lane for you is different than the lane you're in?

It would be far better for you to see your TV ratings fall and your crowds dwindle than to displease the Lord. (Perhaps if you preached the whole counsel of God, your audience would end up even bigger.)

By all means, you should be an ambassador of hope and joy—that's all part of the gospel—but if you don't speak about sin plainly and without compromise and if you don't tell people that there will be suffering and hardship in this world as we follow Jesus, then the hope that you offer will only go skin deep.

Have you ever wondered about how your message plays out among Christians who are going through hell on Earth because of their faith in Jesus? Have you ever thought about what your message sounds like to persecuted believers today who just had to leave their homes and possessions behind to flee for their lives?

And Victoria, if I may speak with you for just a moment, your recent comments that have gone viral have drawn a stream of well-deserved criticism, even if some of it came in an ugly and wrong spirit.

The reality is that our lives are supposed to revolve around God; He doesn't revolve around us. And even though worship and praise are good for us too, since they focus our attention on who God is and bring us into His presence, we do not worship or serve Him for ourselves but for Him. As Paul wrote, Jesus died for all so "that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15).

This is Gospel 101, as basic as it gets, yet you turned things upside down during that one regrettable moment on TV, a moment that reflected a wrong, off-base theology that starts with us and that says God is here to please us rather than starting with God and recognizing that we are here to please Him.

Joel and Victoria, I know these words have been strong, but they are written with love and concern. And since I have no connection to anyone on your team and I don't know of any way to reach you directly, after prayer and reflection, I felt that this was the best way to go, addressing public statements publicly, jealous for the Name of Jesus, jealous for your massive listening audience, and jealous for both of you.

Without a doubt, there are many people you have helped; you have also hurt far more than you realize. I pray you will take this to heart.

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