

Phil Munsey Speaks Out on the Joel Osteen Most People Don't Know

While praying alone in the auditorium of Lakewood Church in Houston recently, I sensed God speak in my spirit. As I pondered just how and why God has used Joel Osteen to fill this massive auditorium with the masses week after week, I felt God respond to my query with a simple impression: "Joel Osteen is a friend to sinners."

As the day progressed, the impact of that statement began to overwhelm me. I couldn't think of another minister with significant public influence who could bear that title—not even a close second.

Of all the accusations Christ received, none were more controversial—especially from the religious crowd.

I began to reflect on the phenomenal ministry Joel and Victoria Osteen have had in our nation, beginning with their work as pastors. Since 1999, Joel has pastored Lakewood Church, the country's largest church—in fact, the largest in our nation's history. It's a church where some 45,000 people attend weekly at one location. Lakewood Church buzzes nightly with discipleship classes facilitating its members and the nearly 50,000 people who receive a new believers book at the altar calls each year in the Lakewood services. Training and engaging the over 6,000 volunteers in Christ-centered ministries makes the 53-year-old Lakewood Church one of the healthiest churches in the country. The 90-minute weekend service includes 60 minutes of nonstop worship mixed with exhortation, prayer for the sick, a 90-second offering (with no announcements) and then Joel's 27-minute message. Joel's messages are skillfully and prayerfully laced with an average

of a dozen or so Scripture references. (Joel has observed that multiple references to verses and books in the Bible to the high percentage of unbelievers in the television audience can be intimidating).

Joel addresses addictions, bad habits, dysfunction relationship issues, shame, ungodly self images and other “sins” people face. His solution is always the same: Trust in God’s free goodness. Expect His love and grace in every area of your life.

Sure, Joel touches 40 million people monthly through television and other media. His books have impacted over 30 million people and counting, including 5 *New York Times* best-sellers.

Yet his greatest attribute is his heart for the unbeliever. Joel is a friend to sinners.

Joel is not a televangelist. His dedication as a pastor is reflected in this interesting fact. In the past 14 years, Joel has missed an average of just two weekend services a year. Even though Joel speaks at 38 of those weekends services annually, you’ll still find him sitting on the front row (including Wednesday nights) when not speaking, faithfully serving his flock and being a humble example (including shaking hands with the guests and new converts for one hour between services).

Joel and Victoria and Lakewood Church are ambassadors of the gospel—the hope of Christ. Since 2004, Joel and Victoria have held over 130 live “Night of Hope” events around the country and overseas. These monthly events have brought over 1 million people to a public confession of their sins and Christ as Lord!

Each month, Joel’s family and the Lakewood team hit city after city with the message of hope. Joel’s 16-hour nonstop Friday begins with meetings with local pastors, media interviews,

then time preparing for the event. Joel and Victoria exhort and preach the majority 3-hour event, which ends with 30 to 50 percent of the mostly unbelieving and unchurched attendees standing and confessing their sins and Christ as Savior. As the thousands leave the auditorium, Joel can be found shaking hands with those who've sponsored children for World Vision. On most occasions, Joel is one of the last to leave the building, rising early the next morning and heading back home to preach three services at Lakewood Church.

Joel has his critics. They post his "gotcha" clips from his hundreds of secular media interviews.

But what some call weakness is really Joel's strength. Joel refuses with uncompromising conviction to use secular guest appearances to judge people. His kindness has kept the hearts and minds of millions receptive. Joel is a friend to sinners.

I'm not defending Joel; his fruit does that. I'm writing to those who are sincerely concerned that yet another popular "celebrity televangelist" would embarrass the Christian faith. Consider this, from someone who has been in full-time ministry for 40 years, who's seen the ego-gone-wild, naive novices and those with tainted intentions: Joel is a sincere and now-seasoned voice to the generations and nations!

My wife, Jeannie, and I have traveled the world with Joel and his family for over 10 years, volunteering with this life-changing, God-fearing, soul-winning and graced-with-humility ministry. We've witnessed not one inappropriate word or deed. Joel's behavior is consistently above reproach.

Though rarely mentioned, Joel and Victoria do not take a salary from the church or ministry. Expenses like air transportation, hotels, even food, are paid by them personally. In fact, Joel and Victoria are Lakewood Church's largest contributors. Joel is a faithful husband, loving father and loyal friend to many—and has been for many years.

No one is perfect, but for 14 years Joel has proven to be an honorable man giving honor to Christ.

Even sincere people have struggles understanding what it means to be a friend to sinners.

When Jesus was in the homes of the gluttonous and wine-bibbers, Jesus appeared comfortable, and so did the sinners. I'm sure the disciples felt betrayed, confused, angry and maybe a bit envious. Why was Jesus spending time with those people?

Like the disciples, we as Christians may feel betrayed—left out. And with a culture that has seemingly rejected our faith and oftentimes mocked and misrepresented it through the media, it's easy to be disillusioned. Why would Joel and that grin of his be with “those” people? Why? Because Joel is a friend to sinners too.

Joel is an invited guest to our neighbor's home, to the person we do business with, to our families and friends—all of whom watch and are positively influenced by his ministry. My goodness, even our president watches!

I believe history will record the past 14 years of Joel's ministry and influence as one of the most effective pastor/evangelist of our time. And his compassionate passion for people indicates to me that his best efforts are yet to come!

Can I encourage us to begin to believe the best in and for each other? To especially pray and protect the gifts of Joel and Victoria? God has given them to represent and reach an increasingly number of unchurched, de-churched and unbelieving in our world. To be a friend of sinners should be a claim no one should be ashamed of!

Phil Munsey is the former senior pastor of Life Church in Irvine, Calif. He stepped down from that position to head the

Champion's Network, a national network of churches and leaders founded by Joel Osteen.