

View

“God Wants Me to Be Rich”

By Karl Taro Greenfield, *Portfolio Magazine*



[Editor's Note: This article appeared in the August 2008 issue of *Portfolio Magazine*, a magazine that, by the look of the advertising, seems to cater mostly to wealthy investors. I can't reprint it all here for copyright reasons (and length), but I suggest you read the whole article — you can find it at <http://www.portfolio.com/executives/features/2008/07/16/Megachurch-Preacher-Joel-Osteen>.

The average attendance of the Lakewood church in Houston, where Osteen preaches, is 45,000 and they have an annual budget of \$72.6 million. No wonder — not only does Osteen preach a gospel of wealth and secular optimism, but he also refuses to say that only believers in Christ will be saved (has he read John 14:6, “No one comes to the Father, except by Me”? Apparently not, or he doesn't care). He also refuses to take a position on evolution vs. Creation and would never preach a sermon on hell or judgment. But the main point of this article is that believers get good stuff because they're believers. After all, Joel and his family have gotten good stuff. Really good stuff.

But I ask, what does that say about our brethren in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and the Philippines, many of whom struggle just to find daily bread? Perhaps more to the point, what does it say about Christians in the New Testament who suffered terrible persecution? Read Paul's experience in II Cor. 4 and 11; or the litany of difficulties outlined by the Hebrew writer at the end of chapter 11 regarding Old Testament heroes. Who, in the book of Acts, “got rich”? My

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word, how can anyone who knows his Bible preach such a thing? Even the Lord “had no place to lay his head” (Mt. 8:20). Apparently Jesus could have used a bit more faith! Is this the gospel? Well, in a way, it’s “good news,” all right —if you want to feel good about yourself and never be challenged with the high calling of Christ’s work. 45,000 people per week think that’s the way to go.

Here’s the first page of the article. Read it and weep. dp].

Who will save us? Who will lift us up from crushing credit-card debt and resetting mortgage payments and impending foreclosure, from increasing gas prices and decreasing health-insurance coverage? We are a nation stumbling through our worst financial crisis in a generation and our worst housing market in a lifetime. And so we come, seeking gentle salvation, inspiring prayers, steadying words, soothing notions, and calming thoughts that will allow us to become, in Joel Osteen’s words, “victors, not victims.”

We are in Greensboro, North Carolina, making our way into the downtown arena through the hot, buggy air, to worship with the pastor who will save us, the man anointed, by one of his congregants, as “Reverend Feelgood.” Sixteen thousand will file in this evening, as have millions more to coliseums, concert venues, and baseball stadiums around the country—all, in a way, his churches. (View a slideshow that tallies the budgets of some of the biggest churches.)

We are a diverse, representative swath of troubled America: families struggling under debt, husbands and wives seeking reconciliation, young couples on first dates, children dragged by pious grandparents who promise them popcorn and BibleMan action figures. It is religion as escapism, criticized throughout the Bible Belt as “Christianity lite” or “prosperity gospel.” But this murmuring crowd, slouching toward a kinder, gentler salvation, is a more telling indicator of the state of our union than consumer durables purchased or capital goods ordered. Unemployment they know; they don’t need to wait for the Bureau of Labor Statistics to publish a monthly number. O, but come to Joel, lift your

hands to Jesus, banish your negative thoughts, and you can find in these dark times a beacon.

If, in this country, there is great hurting, then Osteen is here to soothe that suffering. He does not wish that pain on any of us, and the sight or thought of it will bring forth from him great torrents of tears—his eyes clamped shut, his fingers pressed into narrow eye sockets, his lips pulled back over pink gums as he grimaces. The crying has become a visual touchstone of an Osteen sermon, the born-again equivalent of James Brown’s pre-encore collapse from “exhaustion.” Joel feels our pain and has made himself wealthy (reportedly earning \$13 million for his last book advance alone) and his church prosperous (\$75 million and counting in annual revenue) by urging us to let go of it, to turn it over to God, to accept God’s favor so that we may be as prosperous as Joel.

There was always a strain of American Puritanism that pointed to Scripture as justification for asserting that wealth is somehow godly. But ever since evangelical Christianity separated from the mainline faiths in the early 20th -century, some preachers have gone further and linked their focus on personal piety to financial success. The big-tent revivals of the 1930s promised the dust-bowl destitute the possibility of finding Jesus and their next meal just by listening to a fire-and-brimstone message. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, televangelists like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart made prosperity gospel big business, capitalizing on that era’s economic uncertainties to win over a new generation of acolytes, before those ministries were brought down by scandal.

Osteen is one of a new breed of televangelists—Joyce Meyer, T.D. Jakes, and Creflo Dollar are also rising stars—who are preaching a less sanctimonious, more inclusive message. His church is in that part of the economy that thrives in troubled times, that can count on full pews when wallets are empty and an ever more receptive audience if we do go into a full-on recession.

Osteen hasn’t necessarily tailored his message for the downturn. Instead, he has continued his feel-good preaching, his exhortations to focus on the positive and banish negative thoughts, his reminders that God wants you to have a good job, a beautiful home, and decent cash flow. [More at Porfolio.com]

“ HOW CAN ANYONE WHO KNOWS HIS BIBLE PREACH SUCH A THING? EVEN THE LORD ‘HAD NO PLACE TO LAY HIS HEAD’ (MT. 8:20). APPARENTLY JESUS COULD HAVE USED A BIT MORE FAITH!”

Thoughts on Parenting

He Leaks!

Even though we were on a shoestring grad-student budget, my wife insisted we pay off the hospital bill when our son was born. Now we had to figure out how to meet our other financial obligations. We were discussing this one night when the baby began crying for a diaper change. As my wife picked him up, she sighed, "He's the only thing in this house that's paid for... and he leaks."

Patience?

A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her shopping cart. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her "no." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, "Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long."

He passed the mom again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out."

The man again happened to be behind the pair at the check-out, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The mother patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this check out stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap."

The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen..."

The mother broke in, "My little girl's name is Tammy... /m Ellen."

Observations of a Father

I am going to share with you all my wisdom of four years of parenting. When I had my first child I lost half of my memory; when I had my second child I lost the other half; when I had my third I lost another half I didn't know I had.

I am unashamed to go into public with dirty clothes because a parent with three under four has either snot, spit up, or crumbs on his clothes at all times.

I no longer hum songs that I enjoy, I hum children's music. If you see me driving down the road shaking my hands like this I am humming the Wiggles song.

Home decor has gone from sage, ivory, and burnt umber to red, yellow, blue, and pink and other Crayon colors.

Sleep is overrated.

It takes you longer to get where you are going than the time you actually spend there.

SOURCE: BIBLICAL PARENTING

Good Boundaries

Children have a great need to know where behavioral boundaries are and who has the courage to enforce them. Years ago, during the early days of the progressive-education movement, an enthusiastic theorist decided to take down the chain-link fence that surrounded the nursery-school yard. He thought the children would feel more freedom of movement without that visible barrier surrounding them. When the fence was removed, however, the boys and girls huddled near the center of the play yard. Not only did they not wander away, they didn't even venture to the edge of the grounds. Clearly, there is a security for all of us in defined boundaries.

SOURCE: FOCUS ON THE FAMILY