

WORTHY OF REPENTANCE

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Joel Osteen is one of the most influential Christians in the world. Every week more than ten million people watch his services. His net worth is estimated to be over fifty million dollars. A journalist once said to him, “You've been criticized for 'Church lite,' for 'a cotton candy message. Do you feel like you're cheating people by not telling them about the Hell part? Or repentance part?" (CBS News online, “The Positivity of Joel Osteen,” March 27, 2016) He replied:

No, I really don't, because it's a different approach. You know, it's not hellfire and brimstone. But I say most people are beaten down enough by life. They already feel guilty enough. They're not doing what they should, raising their kids -- you know, we can all find reasons. So I want them to come to Lakewood or our meetings and be lifted up, to say, “You know what? I may not be perfect, but I'm moving forward. I'm doing better.” And I think that motivates you to do better.

Osteen is one of many so-called ‘prosperity preachers.’ The popularity of the ‘prosperity gospel’ is not limited to affluent nations. Conrad Zmbewe, pastor of a church in Zambia, has said that in Africa prosperity theology “has replaced the true gospel of salvation with a kind of ‘gospel’ that is no gospel at all.” (“Prosperity Teaching Has Replaced True Gospel in Africa,” The Gospel Coalition online, June 25, 2015) One may compare Osteen with Wang Yi, pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church in China. Last Sunday, government officials in China arrested more one-hundred Christians associated with the that church. Pastor Yi had instructed members that, in case he ever went missing for more than forty-eight hours, they should publish a letter he had prepared. In that letter, Pastor Yi states:

As a pastor, my firm belief in the gospel, my teaching, and my rebuking of all evil proceeds from Christ’s command in the gospel and from the unfathomable love of that glorious King. Every man’s life is extremely short, and God fervently commands the church to lead and call any man to repentance who is willing to repent. Christ is eager and willing to forgive all who turn from their sins. This is the goal of all the efforts of the church in China—to testify to the world about our Christ, to testify to the Middle Kingdom about the Kingdom of Heaven, to testify to earthly, momentary lives about heavenly, eternal life. This is also the pastoral calling that I have received.

The greatest failure of the modern Church may be her not calling people to repent, because without repentance there is no forgiveness.

God called Abraham, and made a covenant with him, and He sealed that covenant with the sign of circumcision. After that, every male among his people had to receive that sign. It was to be to them a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. At Mount Sinai, God gave to Abraham’s descendents the Ten Commandments, and the law of Moses, which is the application of those commandments. The entire law can be

reduced to two commandments: “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5) The law included the system of animal sacrifices for all those people who failed to keep the law. The law told the people what was right and good to do. Because the people regularly broke the law, they needed regularly to offer animal sacrifices to cover their sins.

That sinful men would distort God’s good gifts was a matter of course. Circumcision was a sign, a seal of the righteousness of faith. However, it became to the people of God a badge of their pride. The children of Israel came to believe that circumcision identified them as the descendants of Abraham, and so as the righteous people of God. Moreover, although they offered the animal sacrifices as God commanded, their hearts were not right when they did.

Not long after God delivered the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, they repaid His kindness by worshipping a golden calf. When later they were prepared to cross the river Jordan into the promised land, Moses reminded them of their lapse at Sinai, and he said to them, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.” (Deuteronomy 10:16) They were to be in their hearts what their circumcision signified: righteous. A right heart would lead to right actions. They were to love God, and to love their neighbors. Moses said to:

And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?... For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:12, 13, 17-19)

King Saul was one who performed religious rituals, but did not obey God, because his heart was not right. God commanded Saul to annihilate the Amalekites, but Saul spared their king, and kept the best of their livestock for a sacrifice to God. Samuel the prophet told him that God desires, not sacrifice, but a faithful heart. He said to him, “Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” (1 Samuel 15:1-23) David, who succeeded Saul, understood this. When Nathaniel the prophet exposed David’s sin with Bathsheba, David repented and wrote in the Fifty-first Psalm, “O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:15-17)

The children of Israel continued in their rebellious ways. They practiced the rite of circumcision, and they offered the sacrifices, but their hearts were not right before God. In the time of the divided kingdom, God’s patience with His people finally came to its end, and He denounced them for their empty rituals. Through the prophet Isaiah He said:

Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new

moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:13-18)

Through the prophet Jeremiah, He said:

Hear, O earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it. To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country? your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me. (Jeremiah 6:19-20)

God warned the people that He would punish them for their sins by sending heathen nations to conquer them. However, He had promised king David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever, and the prophets proclaimed that God would be true to His word. (2 Samuel 7:12, 13; Psalm, 132:12; Isaiah 9:6, 7; Jeremiah 23:5, 6) One day the Christ would come, and He would rule the world in righteousness. The Assyrians did conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and the Babylonians did conquer the southern kingdom of Judah. Some years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and Cyrus, ruler of the Persians, allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland. They did return, and were conquered by the Greeks, and then the Romans. The people continued to wander away from the Lord. The religious leaders were the farthest away, and Jesus called them blind leaders of the blind.” (Matthew 15:14) He felt compassion for the people, however, “because they were as sheep not having a shepherd.” (Mark 6:34)

There were some righteous Jews who looked for the coming of Christ, Jews like Zacharias and Elizabeth. On one occasion, when Zacharias, who was a priest, was ministering in temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear him a son, and that he should call him ‘John.’ He also told him that John would be a prophet who would turn many of the wayward Jews back to God and prepare them for the Lord. (Luke 1:16, 17) When John began his ministry, he went to the region around the Jordan river, “preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (Luke 3:3) This was in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah who said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Isaiah 40:3-5) According to Saint Matthew, John proclaimed, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:23) The people recognized John as a prophet, and many came to him to be baptized. (Luke 9:29, 30) The people pondered whether John might be the Christ, but he told them most assuredly that he was not. He told them that he was merely the one God had appointed to prepare the way for the Christ. (John 3:15, 17) He proclaimed that the Christ had finally come to ascend the throne of His father David, but the people were not fit to enter His kingdom, because they were still in their sins. So, John preached to them that, if they would enter into Christ’s kingdom, then they must do what so many of their forefathers failed to do: they

must repent of their sins. They must be sorry for their sins, and turn away from them. When John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees in the crowd, he said to them:

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. (Matthew 3:7-9)

John perceived that, although they were expert in religion, their hearts were not right before God. They reckoned themselves righteous before God because they were Abraham's descendants. Without a right heart, however, their being Abraham's descendents meant nothing, and their circumcision meant nothing. With a right heart, however, circumcision meant everything; it was a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision." (Romans 2:25) A righteous man repents. He is sorry for his sins, and because he is sorry for them he turns from them to do good works. The experts in religion were proud, and believed they had nothing to repent of. They refused to repent, and they refused to be baptized by John. (Luke 18:9-13) Jesus said that in their refusal they rejected the counsel of God, and that to their own hurt. (John 7:29, 30) The people, however, did repent, and they wished to do what was right, so they asked John what they ought to do. His answer was simple: stop doing wrong, and do right instead. He told the people, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise." That is to say, he told them to love their neighbors as themselves, to look after the needs of their fellow man. He told the tax collectors not to steal from people. He told the soldiers the same, and added that they should not bear false witness, and not covet. Unlike the religious leaders, the common people, even the tax collectors and the soldiers, did repent and did receive John's baptism, and his baptism was a sign that, because they had repented of their sins, those sins were washed away.

Good deeds in themselves do not commend a person to God. After all, there are atheists who do some good. Acts of religious devotion in themselves do not commend a person to God, for there are idolaters who do some good. Even doing the works that God commands in itself does not ingratiate a person to God. Over and over again the prophets told the children of Israel that their performing the rituals of the law of Moses, even their offering of sacrifices, did not satisfy God, because their hearts were not right. A man is righteous before God by faith, by believing God. The Scriptures say that when God made a promise to Abraham to give him innumerable descendants, "He believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." (Genesis 15:6) The prophet, Habakkuk, said, "The just shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4) A man is righteous before God by faith, and the man of faith repents of his sins. The faithful man is sorry when he is unfaithful to God. He is sorry for his sins, and he turns away from them to do good. He desires to do good, and he is sorry when he fails. Works without faith do not commend a man to God, and faith without works does not save. As with circumcision, so with baptism. For them that do not repent, and do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance, baptism is for them worse than meaningless; it means that they have betrayed God's trust. For those who repent of their sins, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance, baptism is a sign, a seal of the righteousness of faith, and by it the Christian may assure himself of his salvation.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.