

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In a recent video, Victoria Osteen proclaimed to the people at the church she “pastors” with her husband, Joel,

I just wanna encourage every one of us to realize, when we obey God, we’re not doin’ it for God (I mean that’s one way to look at it), we’re doin’ it for ourself, because God takes pleasure when we’re happy. That’s the thing that gives Him the greatest joy this morning. So, I want you to know this morning, just do good for your own self—do good, ‘cause God wants you to be happy. When you come to church, when you worship Him, you’re not doin’ it for God, really, you’re doin’ it for yourself, ‘cause that’s what makes God happy.

Joel and Victoria Osteen are “co-pastors” of Lakewood Church, a church which makes every other mega-church look minuscule by comparison. As evidenced by Victoria’s little speech, the Osteens preach what is known as Prosperity Gospel. Prosperity Gospel has at its core the belief that God’s greatest purpose is your happiness, “[D]o good, ‘cause God wants you to be happy.”

Does God want you to be happy? I can’t say that He takes no delight in your pleasure. On the contrary, if God wants to give you what you desire, as the Psalmist states (cf. Psalm 37:4), then He will see you happy, but your happiness is not His chief aim or desire, and at times He will send suffering and unhappiness your way to teach you again to trust in Him for what you need.

I bring up the video, not because it’s a current event, but because of it’s timeliness. What Victoria proclaimed—what the Osteens preach—coincides very well with what we heard in today’s Gospel reading.

There, Jesus had healed a man who was deaf and could not speak (as the Greek of the text would indicate). With a word, “Ephphatha,” the man’s ears were opened and his tongue untied. From then, he spoke plainly—his speech and proclamation were straight, the text literally states. When his tongue was loosed, he spoke plainly about who Jesus was and what Jesus was doing.

But Jesus had immediately turned to the crowd and told them not to tell anyone. The more he told them this, though, the more they proclaimed it, saying, “He does all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Now, they aren’t spreading lies; at least, not by those words. So, why would Jesus tell them to shut up? It’s simply because of this: There’s a lot in what they don’t say. The Jesus they are proclaiming is merely one who does things well enough for them and to them—one who does things to make them happy. In English, the same could be said of the formerly deaf-mute, that there’s a lot in what he doesn’t say, but there are nuances in the words that St. Mark used that would indicate that what the man was speaking was the whole truth about Jesus, whereas the crowd was not.

This Prosperity Gospel is as old as time itself. The crowds in today’s reading were proclaiming it. Some in the crowds miraculously fed with a few loaves and fish thought the same things. It’s the age-old question: “What can Jesus do for me?”

The Prosperity Gospel is alive and well in Christian circles. Ironically, it crops up among the skeptics and atheists as well. For them, it normally sounds like, “I can’t believe in a God who would allow something bad to happen,” or, “I won’t believe in a God who would forbid such a thing as I would endorse or enjoy.” For them, they have a problem believing in a God that doesn’t always or ever make them happy.

It is difficult to believe in a God that doesn't always do all things well, as we would define doing things well. It is for that reason that the Prosperity Gospel, or some version of it, finds its way into Lutheran circles, too—even into your thinking, I would presume. You see, when things are going well for you, when the cards stack favorably for you, when you're happy, it's easy to ascribe to God the thanks for that which He has given you. But when He sends hard times, when He allows you to suffer, it is more difficult or even impossible to thank God for anything. In those times, the temptation is to blame God for your troubles, and if it gets bad enough, to turn away completely from God and His Christ, curse Him and die.

This is precisely what Jesus was guarding against in today's Gospel when He commanded the crowds to tell no one. Yes, Jesus did come and make the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, the blind to see, the lame to dance, and raised the dead, but He did none of this in order to make the people happy, but to point them and everyone to Himself and where He will ultimately do one thing really well—the one thing He came to earth to do: take their and your sins into His assumed flesh and die on the cross for their and your salvation. Jesus is the One who makes all things new as His death brings to those who believe in Him newness of life, maybe not for this life, but certainly in the life to come.

So, while you're tempted to blame God for your troubles, even tempted to curse God because of them, and at times succumb to those temptations, Jesus met the same temptations (and worse) and overcame them. While your Old Adam is always at work in you to turn from a God who doesn't make you happy, Jesus was resolute in His desire to save you despite the fact that you deserve to die for your sins. So, He died in your place, suffering the full wrath of God for your sins, trouble unlike anything you have ever experienced, sparing you from death—Jesus has done this well for you. And the third day after He died, He rose to life again, a seal and sign of the eternal life that you have been given by His Word and Sacraments, despite the good and the bad that you would enjoy and suffer in this life.

Jesus has done this thing well for you: He has brought through death to life. Prosperity on this fallen world is fleeting, but so is suffering and pain. Happiness lasts but only a short time, but so does sadness and want and need. Through it all, there is only one thing that is sure and certain and eternal, and that is Jesus Christ and His life, death, and resurrection for you for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It is by His death and resurrection that Jesus unblocked the man's ears and loosed his tongue. It is by His death and resurrection that Jesus gave sight to the blind, caused the lame to walk, cured the diseased of their leprosy, and raised the dead to life. Deaf, mute, blind, lame, disease, death...these are all the symptoms and wages of sin; that Jesus removed these from people all point to Him as Redeemer and Savior, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All of the Scriptures point to this one thing that Jesus did well: His death and resurrection for the salvation of the world.

It is also, then, by His death and resurrection that Jesus has unblocked your ears and loosed your tongue. By His work on your behalf, given to you in Word and Sacrament, you are set free to hear with unblocked ears of the forgiveness of your sins, and proclaim straightly Jesus Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins, because you have been given faith that saves you.

Jesus has taken your sins to the cross, making atonement for them, unblocking ears to hear the proclamation of His Word, loosing tongues to proclaim His Word, and giving you newness of life from the grave. It is this Word of God which declares into your unblocked ears from this loosed tongue: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.