

Dumb . . . or Dangerous?

The latest video to go viral, at least in the Christian sphere, is a clip of Victoria Osteen at the massive Lakewood Church in Houston, followed immediately by a completely out-of-context (but hilarious) snippet from *The (Bill) Cosby Show*.

Here is the transcript of her 33-second message:

“I just want to encourage every one of us to realize when we obey God, we’re not doing it for God—I mean, that’s one way to look at it—we’re doing it for ourselves, 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 doing it for God really. You’re doing it for yourself, because that’s what makes God happy. Amen?”

Then we see an incredulous Bill Cosby: “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard in my life!”

I found myself unable to stop thinking about this video, it was so disturbing to me.

Is it true? Does our happiness give God the greatest joy? Should we obey Him and do good so we can be happy? When we go to church and worship God, is it really for and about us?

:::shudder:::

As the apostle Paul was fond of saying, “May it never be!” Or, as Rick Warren said in his opening sentence of the mega-hit *The Purpose Driven Life*, “It’s not about you.”

The Osteens preach a “gospel of self.” Jesus, on the other hand, said, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Denying ourselves means taking ourselves off the throne of our lives and making Jesus Lord, following Him in obedience and submission. The crazy (as in, crazy-beautiful) thing is that when we follow Him by abiding—staying connected and dependent on Him, He flows HIS joy into us: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:24). Denying ourselves and abiding in Jesus leads to a supernatural degree of happiness and joy—but it’s not the kind of “God wants you to be happy” we see in Mrs. Osteen’s teaching.

There is a massive disconnect between a false god who is all about making ME happy and the true God of the Bible. One of the greatest minds in Christianity, A.W. Tozer, wrote about our concept of God:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . [T]he gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.” (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York: HarperCollins, 1961, p.1)

It is dangerous teaching that promotes a god who is all about our happiness. This sets people up for all kinds of disastrous beliefs about the way life really is. And when they expect God to make and keep them happy, they are frustrated and turn away in disbelief because their expectations were not met—expectations that the true God never promised. A few days ago, Probe Ministries received an email asking for advice from a woman whose life had skidded off the rails, and she was confused because she just *knew* God wanted her to be “happy above all.”

Ultimately, that is true in a way: God delights in His children being full of joy and the kind of biblical happiness that is found in every reference to being blessed. (See the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, for starters.) But we find that kind of happiness NOT in ourselves but in intimate connection with the true God. Again, it’s not about us.

Think about what happens when parents indulge their children’s every whim because they want them to be happy. Do you get stable, productive people who are others-aware and open to serving them? No! You get spoiled brats! Can you imagine our heavenly Father indulging His children’s immature, self-centered ideas of what would make us happy to create a world of spoiled brats? “May it never be!”

God does want us to be happy. By His definition, in His way, in His timing. And it’s so much more than the “spoiled brat” concept of happiness, it’s about finding our happiness in relationship with Him.

Because it’s not about us.

It’s about Him.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/dumb_or_dangerous on Sept. 1, 2014