Dumb . . . or Dangerous?

Sue Bohlin blogs about the viral video of Victoria Osteen teaching that we should worship God and do good for ourselves.

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

“I Need Help Figuring Out the Meaning of MY Life”

Jerry Solomon,

I read your essay entitled, “What’s the Meaning of Life?” and was encouraged. I see that you wrote the piece over five years ago; but of course the content is ageless.

If you have a few minutes, I’d like to share my story with you and perhaps solicit some advice from you.

I’m 43. I became a believer when I was 8. I’ve walked closely with Jesus for most of those years. I have a wife of 22 years and three fantastic teenage children. Vocationally, I’ve been [details edited out]. In addition to many other blessings, God has blessed us financially—so much so that the financial need to work has diminished, leaving me time (and emptiness) to consider “meaning” questions.

I ask God, “What’s next?” but I don’t seem to be getting throughor at least I don’t understand His answer(s). Most men (including my believing dad) are very uncomfortable talking to me about “meaning” questions. I sense that it’s scary for them to face such crucial issues head on. I’ve read *Purpose Driven Life* and am re-reading Piper’s *Desiring God*. *Purpose Driven Life* was good; but it didn’t offer me any new perspectives. Piper’s book is challenging; but I’m not sure how to “activate” the whole idea of “enjoying God.”

I’m taking a month off work to try to figure out what happens next. I would be honored if you would take time to comment or share spiritual insights you (or your staff) might have.

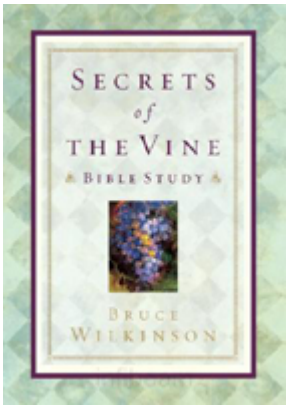
Dear _____,

Thank you for your comments and expression of gratitude upon

reading Jerry's article. In a following paragraph to his article we explain that Jerry is no longer with Probe and that within 2 years of leaving Probe for an associate pastor's role in a local church, the Lord took him home after a 6 month battle with pancreatic cancer. I will respond to your query as best I can.

You are correct in your observation that many men are uncomfortable considering questions of meaning. Basically they are afraid of what they might discover and that their life has been focused on the wrong things. Who wants to discover that?! This is especially so for someone like your dad who is late in life with little time to correct his perspective.

You are also correct in your intuition that discovering life's meaning for you has to go beyond reading a book. *Purpose Driven Life* is great for those who have never even considered these things. But for those who have followed Him with some perseverance over many years will find the book a little stale and repetitive. It really is for baby Christians.



I would like to suggest a different book you can read in an hour or so but the application at the end could last several years. The book is Bruce Wilkinson's *Secrets of the Vine*. It's an exposition of John 15 that outlines four stages to a believers life: (1) little fruit, (2) no fruit due to discipline brought on by sin, (3) pruning to produce more fruit, and (4) full abiding. My suspicion is that you are desiring a fully abiding relationship with your Lord, and Wilkinson's description of his own crisis and his solution will be enlightening and empowering to you.

Unfortunately, in my experience, few Christians get to the place where full abiding is where they want to be. It scares them. It is a full relinquishing of ourselves to Him and Him alone. Abiding truly is just being with Him and not

necessarily looking for more ways to serve, more things to accomplish. Abiding is getting to the point where we realize that if we simply pursue Jesus, all He wants from us will flow with almost no effort because we are yielded to Him.

This requires a sharpened sense of knowing His will. To do that one needs to spend time with Him, truly know Him. Wilkinson embarked on a journey of journaling his thoughts with the Lord. I am working on developing that skill. It's not easy for me, having grown up with a loving but non-communicative father. I'm still learning how to talk to my heavenly Father as a person and not some kind of heavenly czar.

I have led several groups of men through this book, and some get it and get it big. Most, however, are intrigued, enlightened, but non-committal.

Quite simply, yet frustratingly, the meaning of life is Jesus. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Ultimately, knowing Him and pursuing Him is the only thing that can bring true meaning, fulfillment, and joy in this life, no matter what we actually do, day in and day out.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin, PhD

Thank you very much for your very thoughtful response. I was very encouraged by your comments and felt like you really understand the struggle. Wow, what a breath of fresh air, that another brother understands. I look forward to getting and reading Bruce Wilkinson's *Secrets of the Vine*. Thank you for taking the time to respond.

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