

**A Greater Question**  
**Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-25**  
**Faith Community Church – October 28, 2008**

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**Joel Osteen**

Walk into any bookstore and it would be hard to miss the smiling face of Houston pastor Joel Osteen. After all, his publisher printed three million copies of his latest book, released just a few weeks ago. The book, *Become A Better You*, is ranked 13<sup>th</sup> on Amazon.com's website, and 12<sup>th</sup> on Barnes and Noble's website. A lot of people will read it.

Osteen's forte is a positive-thinking, self-help message, peppered with occasional Bible verses. People read his books or watch his TV program because he makes them feel good about themselves.

Let's acknowledge that being a better person is a commendable pursuit. Certainly there is nothing inherently un-Christian or unbiblical about wanting to be a better person. Yet a lot of pastors and Bible teachers are not big fans of Joel Osteen. What's the problem?

If time permitted I would point out a couple of things that I see as problematic with his ministry. But one place where he misses the mark particularly is that he doesn't deal with an issue far more basic and important than how you and I can become better people.

You see, it is a good thing to take a look at our lives, to be honest and see our weaknesses, our failures, our sins. But to teach that the answer to those flaws is to try harder and do better is to ignore the reality of the "bad news" of the Bible, which is that we are all sinners and stand in peril of God's judgment. He is not "for us," but is "against us." See, for example, Ephesians 2:1-3. And without the "bad news," there is no way to understand the "good news."

**Martin Luther**

If there was ever a person who understood the reality of the "bad news" of our lost condition before God it was Martin Luther.

Luther was born in November, 1483. When he was 23 he set aside his plans to study law and entered a monastery in Erfurt, Germany. In Luther's day, becoming a monk was the "height of spirituality."<sup>1</sup>

Because Luther had a sharp mind and was a good scholar, he had been assigned the responsibility to teach the Bible. As Luther studied and taught the Bible, he was not led to believe that he needed to work on becoming a better person. Instead he was faced with the reality of his sin, of God's incredible holiness, and of his lost-ness before this holy God. Luther had tried to find God's acceptance through the rituals and good works of

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<sup>1</sup> Sunshine, *The Reformation for Armchair Theologians*, 20

Catholicism, but could never find it. But as he continued his studies, he came to a life-changing realization that God would remove both the penalty and guilt of his sins – not by Luther’s own efforts to be better, but through faith in what Jesus Christ had done on the cross.

Finding himself at odds with a Roman Catholic practice of selling documents that promised forgiveness of some sin and time off from purgatory, Luther posted an invitation to debate. His act was quite innocent, but God used it to begin a movement that changed the face of the world. That event took place on October 31, 1517 – 490 years ago this Wednesday.

It is important to see that Luther was not introducing new ideas, helping Christianity to evolve to a new level of understanding. Instead Luther and many men and women of that time were used by God to recover an understanding of what the Bible said about salvation and life. As I look at what I am supposed to be doing as your pastor, perhaps the most important responsibility that I have is to help you understand what justification by faith is all about. So we’ll talk about that today.

### **Justification by Faith**

Let me define the idea of justification by faith this way:

To be justified by faith is to be made right with God. To be regarded by God as no longer guilty, and righteous in his eyes because of our faith in what Christ did in his life and death. It is described in Romans 3:21-25.

Sadly, the term “justification by faith” is infrequently used and even less frequently understood in most of our churches. Even the little ditty that justification means “just as if I’d never sinned” is like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and saying, “Wow – some hole in the ground.” It doesn’t do it justice.

#### 1. Justification by faith is the Gospel.

Is the idea of justification by faith a more technical expression of the Gospel? The answer is no. It is the Gospel. It is not the Gospel put into the language of scholars. It is the Gospel that is expressed throughout the Scripture.

We need to be careful that we don’t reduce the message of the Gospel so far that we lose it. While we may use such terms as “You need to accept Christ,” or “Christ will change your life if you invite him in,” those expressions do little to explain our need and God’s solution. In our good desire to make the Gospel plain, we can betray a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit who caused words like justified to be a part of the Word of God.

That does not mean that we want to rush out and print a tract that says, “Have you been justified by faith?” or put it on bumper stickers or use it as a pickup line when trying to find a Christian girl to date. “Hey baby – have you been justified by faith?”

But it does mean that we need to be careful to explain where we stand before God because of our sin – our breaking of his law, as well as what Christ has done in his death and resurrection, and how God will make us right with him when we place our faith in what he did in that death and resurrection. And we shouldn't feel that it is too involved to explain that God exchanges our unrighteousness for Christ's righteousness and as a result he no longer sees us as guilty, but pardoned, so that the Bible is absolutely truthful and honest in what it tells us, as we read David's words in Psalm 103:10-13, as we see what Hezekiah says in Isaiah 38:17, as God himself speaks in Isaiah 43:25, and as we read in Micah 7:19.

## 2. Justification by faith is the basis of our assurance.

Have you ever questioned whether you were truly a believer in Christ, truly saved? Actually that is not necessarily a bad thing – we are encouraged to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). But question their relationship with God on the basis of their uncertainty over whether they used the right words when they prayed or whether they really meant their confession to God.

When that happens, we show that our assurance is based on us, and not on God. And we are not saved because of prayers we pray, words we use, something we do, but because of what Christ did, and our faith in that.

I am far more interested in what you understand than in what you understood when you were six, and far more concerned about what are trusting in now than what you professed to trust in then. The answer to the question of doubt is not “did you pray a prayer?” but “do you have faith in what Jesus did as the only hope of being forgiven?” It is because of faith that we are made right with God, not our praying, not particular words we used, and not an experience we had. So when I doubt or question, I don't run to what I did, but to what God has promised if I have met the condition of belief, of faith.

## 3. Justification by faith needs to be part of our daily thinking.

Let me encourage you to right down the following reasons why justification by faith needs to be a part of our daily thinking:

Because thinking about the truth of justification by faith in Christ will help us understand what God has done for us:

- a. It provides comfort when we sin.
- b. It mutes the accusations of Satan and delivers us from guilt.
- c. It assures us that God is for us, not against us.
- d. It gives us confidence that God will hear our prayers.

- e. It assures us that we will go to heaven.
- f. It assures us that God is in full control of our lives – Psalm 1:6
- g. It provokes us to be partners with God in the Gospel.
- h. It encourages humility.
- i. It corrects us when we think we need to perform for God to accept us.
- j. It reminds us of our obligation to please God.

I can assure you that these things are more life-changing than any positive-thinking, feel-good advice you will ever encounter.

### **The Greater Question**

Some people describe the Gospel – the good news of what Jesus has done – as an invitation. It is that, but it probably is more accurately a command. We are to obey it and believe in Christ. Have you done that? If you have, then what we have talked about today is yours. Get to know it and live in light of the blessings of those who have been forgiven.

If you have not trusted in Christ, I urge you to do so, because our guilt is real and so is God's right to judge us. God has provided a way of escape, and I hope you will take advantage of that today.