

**Children's Moment**

Good morning, girls and boys. I'm so glad you made time to be with us today. Esperanza and I pray for you and miss you.

**Can you help me?** I need some advice. While waiting to make this video, Esperanza and I started playing a game. See, the board is right here. But there's a problem. We were playing and I kept interrupting her. I wanted to win so badly. I got excited and did a bad thing. I skipped her turn and went ahead. She got upset and quit playing. I hurt her feelings. I was selfish.

**What can I do?**

We're being selfish when we think more about beating the other person than we do about enjoying our time playing together. We're selfish when we think more about ourselves than the other person. Sometimes, we compete because we're afraid there won't be enough and we'll get left out. If we're worried there won't be enough cookies, we may take more than our share. If we're worried that recess will end soon, we'll hog the swing because we don't think we'll get another turn.

A selfish person once asked Jesus what the most important thing was. Jesus said, "*Love God and love everyone else the same way you love yourself.*" Jesus wants us to be generous with ourselves, our time and everything we have, not selfish or afraid there won't be enough.

When we share with others, they'll remember and share with us. Someone may save us a cookie or invite us to take a turn on the swing or thank us for helping out. We learn to say "I'm sorry" and really mean it when we're generous.

We'll find other kids like being with us when we're generous with everyone. We'll have friends. We won't be alone. Other people will watch out for us the same way we watch out for them.

Speaking of saying sorry, I need to go find Esperanza. I hope she'll forgive me for being selfish and we can play another game.

*Will you pray with me?*

**Message: “A Legacy of Generosity”**

**A frugal pastor walked into the house panting and almost completely exhausted.** “What happened, honey?” asked his wife. “It’s a great new idea I have to be a better steward of our resources,” he gasped. “I ran all the way home from the stewardship committee meeting behind the bus and saved \$1.50.” “That wasn’t very bright,” replied his flustered wife. “Why didn’t you run behind a taxi and save \$10?”

Obviously, that joke has a few years on it, but it’s still timeless.

**I share the joke with you for a few reasons.** First, as an homage to our stewardship campaign. I affirm what Rufus said last week. We don’t give to a budget. We give according to our faith and desire to advance the mission of Jesus Christ, to transform the world by making disciples.

**Second, whenever we hear a pastor preach about generosity we think we’re being asked to get our checkbook out.** I’m not here to ask for money, yet one of the legacies we can leave is money or assets. We’ve been blessed by the foresight of many of those who went before us. Through their endowments and gifts, we have the wonderful sanctuary I’m sitting in now as I film this message. It is a vehicle for you to use to offer people in our community a spiritual home.

**Finally, I told the joke because a legacy of generosity goes far beyond money and assets.** I believe a legacy of generosity comes from the way we live our lives. Last week, I shared the illustration of bucket-filling. We can choose to fill others with positive emotional and spiritual energy, making their lives better and improving ours as well. This lies at the heart, and legacy, of generous living. We believe Jesus makes our lives together better and we choose to live that way.

**The opposite is true as well.** We can choose to drain emotional and spiritual energy from others. This is the negative. We can be a drag on other’s lives and our life suffers as well. This is the basis for a legacy of scarcity, fear and anxiety. Our self-interest governs what we do. It’s all about finishing ahead of others, gathering more prizes, recognition and control.

**These positive and negative aspects of life are reflected in many different philosophical and ethical views.** Yin and yang, good and evil, right and wrong, we’re in an era where we want to see things through simple lenses: you’re either with me or against me.

**This is true for us as individuals and for the groups we affiliate with.** More and more, we look for organizations to be clear about their values and intent. For example, look at the number of groups that published their policies around safety and care for customers during COVID-19. We got regular email from Starbucks, Best Buy and a couple of restaurants. We even got email from J. Jill and several clothing stores. (Aside: this is not a promotion or advertisement for any of these establishments).

**Influencers have this down to an art form.** Sadly, there’s a lot of negative messages, too. It’s well known that negative messaging is disliked, yet effective. Groups in our society have learned the tactics of psychological warfare and deploy it fiercely. We are battling each other with the weapons of fear! The result is something that has been called “extreme hopelessness.”<sup>1</sup>

**How does this happen?** The answer is found in the mental tactics used. The objective is to “deny each person the emotional support that comes from interpersonal relationships. There are four primary tactics:

- **Informing** – reward people when they ‘snitch’ on one another. No one, offender or informer, gets punished. The goal is to break relationships and get people to turn against each other.
- **Self-criticism** – gather people in groups to share. Each person is to stand up in front of the group and confess *all the bad things they’ve done AND all the good things they could have done but failed to do.* This corruption of group psychology erodes the caring, respect, trust and social acceptance commonly found in healthy groups.
- **Break loyalty** – slowly and relentlessly you undermine each person’s allegiance to leaders and organizations. This led to terrible situations. In one case, a military officer told one of his men not to drink water because he knew the organisms in the water might kill him. The

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<sup>1</sup> Material drawn from Rath and Clifton, *How Full is Your Bucket?*, Gallup Press, 2004, pp. 19-23

soldier told the officer off publicly, drank the water and died of dysentery three days later.

- ***Withhold all positive emotional support*** – this is probably the most harmful of all the methods. The goal is to withhold all positive emotional support while inundating people with negative emotions. For example, a supportive letter would be withheld. But all negative letters – such as those telling of a relative passing away, would be delivered immediately.

**Overall, the effects have been devastating.** In one wartime POW camp, 38% of the men died, while the rest lost their basic belief in themselves, their comrades and their loved ones, not to mention God and country.”<sup>2</sup>

**The terrible effects of negativity can take several forms:** anxiety, depression and even suicide. COVID-19 has affected the mental health of millions of people in the United States and around the world.

“Younger adults, racial and ethnic minorities, essential workers and unpaid adult caregivers are experiencing more mental health issues, increased substance use, and elevated levels of suicidal thoughts.”<sup>3</sup>

**People in our households, neighborhoods and community are hurting and in pain.** Most of the people in our congregation are anxious and may be battling with some level of depression and grief. Lord, hear our cries!

**What can we do and where do we start?** I believe the first step is to name the elephant in the room. We have to admit we have a problem and we need help. The antidote for fear and hurt feelings is truth. Truth with ourselves. Truth with God. And truth with the people in our lives. Jesus said, “*You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:31-32). When help comes, you have to accept it.

**For instance, I’ve been battling moderate depression for a couple of months.** I’ve written about it and openly shared it. I am receiving care and support, including prayer, therapy and coaching. I didn’t become

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 19-23 summarized

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

depressed through a single event, act or situation. What I have come to realize is I've been taking in the negative and not really dealing with it in a healthy way. Empathy - feeling the pain of others, can overwhelm us. Being compassionate – recognizing someone's pain, being present and helping them to become well through prayer, presence and serving, is much healthier.

**I share my experience with you today, because that's how I see God's Spirit working in my life and in our community of faith.**

I don't have all the answers. You don't, either. We probably wouldn't trust someone who says they do. What we DO have is a shared experience. Everyone participating in this service has been touched by Jesus and prompted by the Holy Spirit. That's God's grace in action.

**There's a reason why telling people about Jesus is good news.**

God hears our cries when we suffer. That's why God sent Jesus to be with us. It shows us God's love is more powerful than darkness, sin and the power of the negative. God's love conquered death when Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus replaces the negative with a more powerful, positive image and narrative of faith and love. That's what gives us hope. There's no place where the light of God's love, the light of life, can't enter and dispel the negative, the evil, there.

**Paul's very first missionary letter was to a group who was grieving.**

We read it together earlier. Paul reminds us of the positive legacy we can build, what we can pass on. We can overcome by remembering:

- Our work comes from faith,
- Our effort comes from love,
- Our perseverance comes from hope in Jesus, who is present with God.

**God calls and chooses you, not just with words pastors speak, but with power and the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.** That's what you can always rely on. That kind of belief goes deeper than your ability to express. There is no firmer foundation for the trust we have in God.

**That's how we know we can share the message of Jesus with full confidence.** God won't let us be overcome. Prayer builds us up from

the inside. Caring for others with healthy compassion lifts our spirits and make our lives better, one moment, hour and day at a time.

**That’s how we turn away from the negative to the positive.** It’s the legacy we pass on. One sentence Paul wrote speaks volumes, “*People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God*” (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

**“It’s remarkably easy for us to grow accustomed to false things.** We can develop a bizarre security in trying to please a god-who-will-not-be-pleased. We persist in the belief that if we keep trying, and keep working and keep attempting to control ourselves, we may finally be acceptable. But the trying and working and attempting to control never seem to work. Instead, we find ourselves re-enacting old family dramas. We find ourselves ever more deeply entrenched in shame, blame, rejection and self-loathing.

**A remarkable thing can happen when we turn from false things to serve the living and true God.** It doesn't happen all at once. But gradually we unclench our tight fists. We open our closed hearts. We take in light. We take in love. It’s like coming outside after being in a small, dark room. We walk outside and feel overwhelmed by the richness of the sky and land around us. We thought God was small and dreary. And we discover instead vastness and warmth.”<sup>4</sup>

**The call to turn to the living and true God is a daily call to live.** The old narrative and patterns of life will draw us back. We need to leave them over and over again, embracing the positive, one step at a time. That’s how we will pass on a legacy of life, faith and hope.

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<sup>4</sup> Dale & Juanita Ryan, NACR devotion, October 8 & 10, 2020 (adapted)

**Psalm 100 (CEB)**

Shout triumphantly to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with celebration! Come before him with shouts of joy!

Know that the Lord is God - he made us; we belong to him.

We are his people, the sheep of his own pasture.

Enter his gates with thanks; enter his courtyards with praise!

Thank him! Bless his name!

Because the Lord is good, his loyal love lasts forever;

his faithfulness lasts generation after generation.

**1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 (CEB)**

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the Thessalonians’ church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to all of you.

We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. We know this because our good news didn’t come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don’t even need to mention it. People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.