

Message: Positive Impact, Moment by Moment

In God's Time (a joke)

A woman was talking to God. She asked God, “How long is a million years to you?” God said, “It's a second.”

Then she asked God, “How much is a million dollars to you?”
God said, “It's a penny.”

So the woman asked, "God, can I have a penny?"
And God replied, "Just a second."

We need a little humor in each day. That’s because we hear so much bad news. The media is full with information about Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain this week. Their suicides leave their families in pain. A lot of people are asking “why?” With all they had going for them, why did it happen? Their deaths are tragic for their families and friends. We aren’t celebrities, but we face the same challenges in our lives, times when we ask “why?”

Last week we heard about the terrible effects of negativity. It can lead to extreme hopelessness. That can take several forms: depression, anxiety, give up-itis and even suicide. The mirasmus, or lack of resistance, caused by mental isolation removes our motivation to live. In the absence of motivation, we can die, mentally and physically. That’s the power of negativity.

Fortunately, we have the Jesus to turn to and through him, the good work of Dr. Don Clifton. He studied the question:

Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?

Consider this: there’s a reason why telling people about Jesus is good news. It’s good because God hears our cries when we suffer. God sent Jesus to be with us. That shows us God’s love is more powerful than darkness, sin, even death. God’s love conquered death when Jesus rose from the dead. That’s what gives us hope. There’s no place so dark that the light of God’s love, the light of life, can’t enter and dispel the evil there.

So the answer to the question is a resounding YES! The result of Clifton’s study is the theory of the bucket and the dipper. Thanks to Steve and Kelly, we saw that illustrated for us earlier.

Saying “yes” prompts a question: What impact does positivity have? Dr. Clifton and his team set out to find an answer. They started with employees in organizations, since that was their area of expertise. They surveyed more than 4 million people, across 30 industries and 100 organizations worldwide. What they found was amazing.

People who received positive emotional support showed a number of common characteristics:

- People felt better about their group. They had a better mood.
- People felt more engaged with their colleagues.
- People were more productive and groups performed better.
- People were more satisfied and likely to stay with a group.
- People had better safety records and fewer accidents. Clifton reports a 33% less chance of stroke.¹
- Other people felt the positive energy of the group and reported a higher degree of satisfaction and loyalty to the group that was positive.

One leader, who was part of the survey, called bucket filling a “secret weapon.”² The most enjoyable part of bucket filling was “watching the positive energy move through the group.”³ It’s possible to light up an entire room with a few brief, but energizing, conversations. Sadly, the reverse is also true. People who are actively disengaged from a group can be very counterproductive, stirring up trouble and anxiety by complaining.

The greatest bucket filling tools are authentic recognition and praise. Sadly, praise is rare in most places. One poll found that 65% of Americans received no recognition for good work in the last year!⁴ On the flip side, no one has ever reported being over-recognized. When

¹ Material drawn from Rath and Clifton, *How Full is Your Bucket?*, Gallup Press, 2004, pp. 31-32

² *Ibid*, p.29

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 39

I’m talking about recognition, I’m not talking about the Employee of the Month or formal programs. Those can become formulas. I’m talking about sincere, deserved and individualized recognition.

That leads us to the topic for today: moments.

We don’t usually stop to consider the impact of our brief interactions with others. But we literally experience hundreds of potential turning points in a given day. Most of us want more positive emotions in our lives. 99 of 100 people say they want to be around positive people. 9 of 10 people say they’re more productive around positive people.⁵ So being positive is a good thing.

Unfortunately, wanting a more positive environment isn’t enough.

Paul knew the challenge. He wrote, “*The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can’t do it. I don’t do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don’t want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don’t want to do, then I’m not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it*” (Romans 7:18a-20). We’re at war inside ourselves. Good intentions and bad behaviors end up in gridlock. Paul tells us the Holy Spirit is the only one with the power to break the tie. We’ve grown up in a culture where it’s easier to tell people what they did wrong, rather than praising them when they succeed. This negativity-based approach permeates our society at all levels.

For example, the experience of children in school stands out.

Negativity has a tendency to stomp out individuality and encourage conformity, despite parents’ good intentions for a more positive learning environment. Seventy years ago, a study showed this.

Dr. Elizabeth Hurlock explored what would happen if fourth and sixth grade students in a math class received different kinds of feedback on their work. Dr. Hurlock wanted to find out if it was more effective to praise, criticize or ignore students. The outcome was determined by how many math problems were solved each day during a weeklong study. Each day’s results were compared to the first day’s results.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 47

The results were dramatic and clear. “The overall results were as follows: 71% of those praised improved (19 questions solved), 19% of those criticized improved slightly (14 questions solved), 5% of those ignored showed slight improvement (12 questions). The group that received praise improved significantly more than others; four times better in fact. This study, along with others, has led to the Positive Psychology movement.

This work has shown two things:

- Negative emotions can be harmful to your health and might even shorten your life.
- Positive emotions are an essential daily requirement for survival.”⁶

Perhaps we all need FDA stickers informing others about our need for a recommended daily allowance of positivity! Not only do positive emotions improve our physical and mental health, they can also provide a buffer against depression, anxiety and illness.

Dr. Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winner, says we experience “about 20,000 individual moments in a waking day.”⁷ Take a second and think about a strong memory. The image in your mind is tied to a precise moment in time. Rarely do we remember neutral encounters – the memorable moments are almost always positive or negative. In some cases, a single incident can change your life forever. Can you remember a teacher who had a great impact on your life? Perhaps a mentor who said something that showed great recognition and carried great meaning in your life?

Do you remember a time when you “just knew” Jesus was your Savior? When we encounter Jesus in a real, meaningful way, it changes our life forever. Our perspective shifts. When we realize there’s a God and God wants to save us from ourselves and show us the way to eternal life in heaven, our view of the world changes. It doesn’t mean that our circumstance or situation will change, but we can see the positive where before we could only see the negative.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 51-53

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 53

One of the benefits of believing is that we begin to see God’s presence in the every day things around us. We see opportunities to experience God’s love. We begin to see ways to share God’s love with others. We want to make a positive impact, particularly on those who are closest to us.

How do we make a positive impact? Let’s talk about ratios.

Research suggests there is a “magic ratio” of positive to negative interactions. For example, John Gottman studied marriages. He found that marriages are significantly more likely to succeed when the couples’ interactions are near 5 to 1, five positive interactions for every negative interaction. When the ratio approaches 1 to 1, marriages are more likely to cascade to divorce. To further support this research, Gottman’s team did a study with 700 couples. They interviewed the couples for 15 minutes and counted the number of positive and negative interactions. Then they made a prediction on whether the marriage would last or not. Ten years later they followed up with the couples. Amazingly, the predictions made after a 15-minute interview were 94% accurate. They also learned that small, positive emotional interactions offset even large, negative emotional interactions.

It’s important to love others and to build each other up positively.

Paul said, *“let’s strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up”* (Romans 14:19) and *“everything is permitted, but everything isn’t beneficial. Everything is permitted, but everything doesn’t build others up”* (1 Corinthians 10:23) and *“continue encouraging each other and building each other up, just like you are doing already”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11). When you show love to others, it’s a good thing. God is present. Let’s open our hearts, minds and doors to others in what we do as well as what we think and say. God will bless us when we do.

There’s an important side note: while we’re talking about ways to increase positive emotion, it’s important not to ignore negativity and weakness. Positivity must be grounded in reality. False optimism is annoying, counterproductive and not authentic. There are times when we need to correct mistakes or manage weaknesses. Most of the time

false optimism isn't the problem, though. Our ratios are skewed more to the negative, so we have room to improve.

I pray you will take the words of this message to heart as you leave today. Jesus said, “*Good people bring out good things from their good treasure*” (Matthew 12:35a). Let's go and love others, making friends and sharing God's love and our lives in a positive, encouraging way, moment by moment.

Let's make a positive impact in Jesus' name.

Let us pray ...

O God, you showed your passionate love for us through your Son, Jesus Christ. We come today with hearts in need of your love, seeking a positive relationship with you and with others. Give us the courage to be people who love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We desire to be followers who are so focused on you that our agenda and our lives meld into yours. Teach us how to live with such passion and abandon that nothing short of miraculous transformation takes place, reshaping us and growing us in the image of Christ Amen.

Proverbs 10:31-32 (CEB)

The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom,
but the twisted tongue will be cut off.

The lips of the wise know what is acceptable,
but the mouth of the wicked knows only what is perverse.

Acts 11:11-14 (CEB)

At that moment three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. The Spirit told me to go with them even though they were Gentiles. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered that man's house. He reported to us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and summon Simon, who is known as Peter. He will tell you how you and your entire household can be saved.”