

Message: Make Life Better¹

Price of a Sermon

A man and his ten-year-old son were on a trip miles from home. At the boy's insistence, they decided to attend the Sunday worship service at a small church. The father forgot to bring any cash, so he reached in his pocket and gave his son four quarters to drop in the offering plate as it was passed.

As they walked back to their car after the service, the father complained. “The service was too long, the sermon was boring, and the singing was off key.”

The boy said, “Dad, I thought it was pretty good for a dollar.”

Negativity kills. That's no surprise.

Positivity gives life and makes us better. This may be surprising, but only because we're usually focused on the negative, rather than the positive. I began the message with humor today because it's a positive emotion. Luke tells us Jesus found favor with people (Luke 2:52). I believe he laughed, cried and was a good person to be with.

There's a lot of research and study on the question “what's wrong with people?” This sermon series and the resource we're using, the book “How Full is Your Bucket?” by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton are focused on the opposite question: **What is *right with* people?**

The late Dr. Clifton cited one, key case study that led him to ask the question. The results have as much of an impact today as they did 60 years ago, when the incident occurred. With your permission, I'll summarize the findings. This will set up our sermon series and the Sunday school lessons that are paralleling it. That's right, not only are we reflecting on it during the sermon, the children and youth will have lessons on it as well. This should give you some good material for the car ride home or dinner time later.

¹ Material drawn from Rath and Clifton, *How Full is Your Bucket?*, Gallup Press, 2004

“Major William Mayer, an MD who would later become the U.S. Army’s chief psychiatrist, studied 1,000 American prisoners of war (POWs) who had been detained in a camp. What made this case unusual was that it’s the most extreme and perversely effective case of psychological warfare on record. The overall POW death rate in that camp was 38% - the highest in military history.

What’s amazing is that the camp was not considered to be especially cruel or unusual. The soldiers had adequate food, water and shelter. They weren’t subjected to the common physical torture of the time. There was less physical abuse in that camp than in any other. There was no barbed wire. There were no armed guards surrounding the camp. Yet no soldier ever tried to escape. The men regularly broke rank, turned against each other and some formed close relationships with their captors. When finally released to a Red Cross group, the men were given the opportunity to make a phone call to their loved ones to let them know they were alive. Almost no one made a call. When they returned home, the soldiers maintained no relationships with each other.

Dr. Mayer described each man as being in a mental ‘solitary confinement cell ... without any steel or concrete.’ All of the men were suffering from the same thing: a disease of *extreme hopelessness*. 4 of 10 soldiers suffered from it. They would wander into their hut, look around, and decide there was no use in participating in their own survival. They would go into a corner alone, sit down and pull a blanket over their head. And they would be dead in two days.

The soldiers called it ‘give up-itis.’ There was no medical reason for their deaths. They simply died in the absence of motivation. Half of those who died did so because they gave up, mentally and physically.

How could this have happened? The answer is found in the mental tactics their captors used. The captors’ objective was to ‘deny each person the emotional support that comes from interpersonal relationships.’

They used four primary tactics:

- **Informing** – the prisoners were rewarded when they ‘snitched’ on one another. No one, offender or informer, was punished. The goal was to break relationships and get them to turn against each other.
- **Self-criticism** – the prisoners were gathered in groups of 10-12. In these sessions, each person was required to stand up in front of the group and confess *all the bad things they had done – as well as all the good things they could have done but failed to do*. This corruption of group psychology eroded the caring, respect, trust and social acceptance that is commonly found in healthy groups.
- **Breaking loyalty** – the captors did this by slowly and relentlessly undermining each person’s allegiance to the leaders and organization. This led to terrible situations. In one case, an officer told one of his men not to drink water from a field because he knew the organisms in the water might kill him. The soldier told the officer off publically, drank the water and died of dysentery three days later.
- **Withholding all positive emotional support** – this was probably the most harmful of all the methods. All positive emotional support was withheld from the men, while they were inundated with negative emotions. For example, if a supportive letter came from home, it was withheld. All negative letters – such as those telling of a relative passing away, or a wife writing to say that she had given up on her husband’s return and was going to remarry – these were delivered immediately. The captors would even deliver overdue bills from collection agencies in the U.S., some within two weeks of the postmark.

The overall effects were devastating. The men lost their basic belief in themselves, their comrades and their loved ones, not to mention God and country.”²

We aren’t living in POW camps today, but there are a number of parallels of this case study. From negative tweeting to being unfriended on Facebook, our lives are exposed to a barrage of negative

² *Ibid, pp. 19-23 summarized*

comments from those we know, those we don't know and even from those who troll online, looking for targets. That's informing. How many of you have been in a meeting where everyone went around and confessed their failures – what they did poorly and what they failed to do? That's certainly self-criticism.

There are problems with many organizations and institutions today, without a doubt. But when we're led to believe we can't trust any organizations and we should challenge leaders on every point, we're breaking loyalty. Finally, there's no shortage of bad news on TV, radio, internet or at home. We're connected 24x7 today, so it's hard to get away from the negative. This adds to our stress. The polarizing nature of conversation makes it difficult to have an open, positive conversation. Few people want to talk about faith or anything positive. We seem to favor division on political, social, economic or ideological grounds, rather than being united for a common, higher purpose – loving God and one another. Our society has become more nihilist (or fatalist). The mental weapons used in the military are now commonly used in society.

Is it any wonder we're suffering from unprecedented levels of depression, stress and hopelessness today? Do I need to say more? “As a result, Dr. Clifton and his colleagues decided to study the flip side of this horrible equation. They asked:

Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?

The answer is YES! The result of their study is the theory of the bucket and the dipper. It goes like this:

- ***Everyone has an invisible bucket.***
We're at our best when our buckets are overflowing and at our worst when they're empty.
- ***Everyone also has an invisible dipper.***
Each time with interact with another people, we can use our dipper either to fill or dip from others' buckets.
- When we choose to fill others' buckets, ***we fill our own.***
- When we choose to dip from others' buckets, ***we dip from our own.***³

³ *Ibid, p. 25*

That’s the theory, simply stated.

Filling a bucket is a positive emotional action. Dipping from a bucket is a negative emotional action. Both have consequences. We’ve already considered the negative consequences. The positive consequences are just as powerful and far-reaching.

Positive emotional experiences support our relationships everywhere. We can find them at home, school, church, work or in other groups. For example, Don, a man I met this week, told me the story about how the Kiwanas discovered that people don’t join the group because of the service work. They join because of the good, positive fellowship. It’s about people! Sound familiar? Church isn’t about buildings, budgets or an organization. It’s about people who love God and believe in Jesus.

We’re gathered here, this morning, because Jesus changes our lives and makes us better. Faith is about relationships: first with God and second with people. That doesn’t happen alone or in isolation. It happens most often and most powerfully when we gather with other people who believe the way we do. John Wesley believed we were made holy when we gathered together to love God. He called this social holiness. When we gather in the presence of God, who is holy, we’re made holy together. God is present. There’s a second part....

We shape and form each others’ lives when we gather with other people with the purpose of being in positive, loving relationships with one another. This includes those who we know well. It includes those who we are getting to know, like our neighbors, family and friends. It includes those who we’ve just met. It certainly includes people who aren’t like us at all. Loving one another means our differences don’t matter. We have a Savior whose love unite and connects us. When we love and care for each other, we’re sharing God’s love in a positive, reinforcing way.

This gives us life. It gives us hope. It gives us faith in a God who is love. I hope you will come and join us as we continue to explore the power of positivity on our lives, the lives of others and the world. And yes, I will tell more jokes.

Please invite your family, friends and neighbors. Let’s start living with positivity and hope. Our lives will change for the better.

Proverbs 18:20-21 (CEB)

The stomach is satisfied
by the fruit of the mouth;
one’s lips can earn a satisfying income.
Death and life are in the power of the tongue;
those who love it will eat its fruit.

2 Timothy 1:3-7 (CEB)

I’m grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. When I remember your tears, I long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. I’m reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I’m sure that this faith is also inside you. Because of this, I’m reminding you to revive God’s gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.