

Message: Pay It Forward¹

God’s Left Hand (a joke)

Little Susie was spending the weekend with her grandmother. Her grandmother decided to have lunch in the park on Saturday. It was a nice summer day and everything was beautiful.

Her grandmother remarked ... “doesn't it look like an artist painted this scenery? Did you know God painted this just for you?”

Susie said, “Yes, God did it and God did it left-handed.”

This confused her grandmother a bit, and she asked, “What makes you say God did this left-handed?”

“Well,” said Susie, “we learned in Sunday School that Jesus sits on God's right hand!”

I’m glad to have the opportunity to share a little humor with you during our series “How Full is Your Bucket?” I was reflecting a bit this week. Esperanza and I have been blessed to be with you for two years. My first sermon at Corona UMC was about our call to be a blessing. God called Abraham and promised he, his family and his spiritual descendents would be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-4).

Receiving a blessing comes with a relationship string attached.

God wants us to pay it forward. Pass on the blessings you have received from God to others and you’ll be blessed even more. One of the best ways to do so is to fill buckets; to increase our positive emotional support for others. That’s why it pays to be positive.

Sounds good. How?

Don Clifton and Tom Rath offer five strategies for increasing positive emotions (for filling buckets): “prevent bucket dipping, shine a light on what’s right, make best friends, give unexpectedly and reverse the Golden Rule.”² Let’s look at each of these strategies briefly.

¹ Material drawn from Rath and Clifton, *How Full is Your Bucket?*, Gallup Press, 2004, pp. 62-105

² *Ibid*, p. 92

Prevent bucket dipping. If you find yourself in the middle of a situation, ask yourself whether you’re “adding to” or “dipping from” someone else’s bucket. A good practice is to hit “pause” mentally. You have to step back and look at how you’re interacting with the other person. Sure, you can blast them or speak without any filter, but that usually isn’t a positive or helpful thing to do. You might win the moment, but lose the relationship. It’s not easy, but taking a second to think about their bucket can make all the difference in the world.

One helpful tip Tom Rath offers is to poke fun at ourselves in stressful situations. We usually speak out when we’re feeling insecure. That’s the stress getting to us. So name it. Call it out. Make it a joke. Being able to release the pressure in a positive way is a good habit to develop.

One note: we have to be particularly careful about “group dipping.” There are times when we can gang up on another person, even without meaning to. We don’t even have to say anything. In some cases, not speaking up is a negative action. That’s bucket dipping. Bullying is a good example of this. Most bullies will stop if others speak up. Sadly, most of the time, that doesn’t happen. We can stop bullying and group bucket dipping. Pray for the courage to speak up.

Shine a light on what’s right. Draw attention to things others do well, particularly those things we like. Maybe you aren’t a fan of a particularly kind of art, music, a particular hobby or style, but if you know someone who’s good at it, encouraging them is very positive.

For example, my nephew Sammy is awesome with Rubik’s cube. He can solve the regular 4x4 cube in 16.61 seconds (I asked!). He’s gotten so good he enters competitions. Truth be told, I’ve never solved a Rubik’s cube puzzle even once. And I’m not all that interested. But as our family has encouraged Sammy at home, church and school, we’ve been amazed to see his self-confidence grow by leaps and bounds. He wrote an analysis of puzzles as part of a pitch to tell us he wanted more for his birthday. We thought a professional wrote it. By the way, Sammy’s 13 years old.

When we shine a light on what’s right, this kind of bucket filling sets something good in motion. What we recognize and encourage in others helps them shape their identity and future. That’s especially important when it comes to our spiritual identity and growth.

Make best friends. Develop great relationships, beginning with your first interaction. Start filling the buckets of the people who are around you today, beginning with those closest to you and then keep on going. Bucket filling leads to great benefits: more people will want to be around you! 99 out of 100 people prefer to be around positive people. You’ll be filled, too.

The characteristics of a best friend: they listen to you. They’re unconditionally supportive. They care about what happens to you. When you need help, they’ll be there. I have a truth that’s obvious yet perhaps painful: if you want to *have* best friends, you have to *be* a best friend. It’s never too late. Start today.

Give unexpectedly. All kinds of gifts fill our bucket. We like gifts. Gary Chapman says that gift giving is one of the five languages of love. Here’s the thing: unexpected gift giving fills our bucket even more! We remember unexpected gifts for a long time, maybe even for our lifetime. There’s one thing to keep in mind: gifts don’t have to be tangible. You can give intangible gifts. You can trust someone when there’s no reason to do so. You can love someone who can’t or doesn’t understand what unconditional love means. These can be the greatest gifts.

Reverse the Golden Rule. Admit, this is the one you’re most curious about, isn’t it?

First of all, what’s the Golden Rule? Do to others as they do to you. That’s based on the law set forth by Moses in Exodus 21. The portion of that chapter that’s most often cited refers to the repercussions for people fighting who injure a pregnant woman. The case law says this: *“If there is further injury, then you will give a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a bruise for a bruise, a wound for a wound”* (Exodus 21:23-25). That’s what most of us think of when we hear the Golden Rule, though

we tend to include good as well as bad actions. The Romans called it *lex talionis* – give as you receive.

Jesus reverses the Golden Rule. He said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.*

You have heard that it was said, ‘You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your God who is in heaven. God makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:37-45).

Jesus ends with a question and lesson: “*If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? ... just as [God] is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete” (vv 46, 48).*

Don Clifton says the Reverse Golden Rule this way: “Do to others as they would have you do to them.”³ These are radical restatements of the old case law. These reverse the law, changing it from a punitive, negative, bucket-dipping rule to an encouraging, positive, bucket-filling rule. It’s a radical reversal. It changes our worldview. It changes our stance. Rather than reacting, we’re proactive. It changes our thought process from “getting my fair share” to “investing freely, willingly and unconditionally in the future through others.”

The Reverse Golden Rule shifts our perspective. Rather than doing good *to* another person, we do good *with* them. That means we have to get to know them. Otherwise, we have no way to know what they want or need. That’s what a good relationship does. It’s a give-and-take relationship where no one counts; we talk freely. That’s God’s love in action. It isn’t distant or aloof or even sanitary at times. It’s messy, up

³ *Ibid*, p. 105

close and hip-to-hip. Rolling up our sleeves and helping out is a good metaphor.

Jesus certainly set the example, over and over again. He gave us a commandment that sets the bar, *“love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends”* (John 15:12-13). That means we don’t put our desire to “go full speed and damn the torpedoes” first. We put the desires of others first, even when it makes us uncomfortable and we don’t get to fully express ourselves.

That’s what happens when we see the other person as God’s child, worthy and valued. They’re worthy of God’s love, just as we are. Shouldn’t they be worthy of our love? Or are you putting yourself in God’s place – again? Relax, let your worry go. Seek joy and contentment in God’s presence, for God is present in everything and everyone. Then you’ll be more able to embrace and see the positive.

Pay the positive things you get from God forward. Be a blessing. Filling buckets every day is a great way to start.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for the abundant blessings you shower on us, each and every day. Forgive us when we become complacent, set in our ways and when we grumble and complain. Give us a heart for others. Help us to make new friends, best friends and even to love those who are enemies. Give us the courage to speak up for others. Show us how we can be a blessing to others by filling buckets, no matter what our daily circumstance may be. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Proverbs 18:4 (CEB)

The words of a person’s mouth are deep waters,
a bubbling stream, a fountain of wisdom.

Matthew 7:7-12 (CEB)

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.