

Being Negative Positively

Living with Grace:

Ephesians 4:17-32

November 13, 2005

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One day a four-year old heard a bishop speak. Following the speech the preschooler walked up to the bishop and exclaimed, “Bishop, you’re a good... bishop!” Although I vaguely remember doing that, my family never let me forget it. As a child I enjoyed giving compliments. They were inexpensive, and I liked the way people responded and reciprocated. In a way, I became addicted to the positive. I gave out compliments even when they amounted to flattery. Conversely, I found it difficult to express anything negative. We all get hurt, but I’d suppress the it. Most often, I would laugh it off or ignore it. I feared expressing the negative. I wanted to be liked. I feared hurting someone, or losing a friendship. However, negative feelings don’t leave when we ignore them. Unattended, they quietly simmer until something else causes the pot of resentment to boil over. The feelings spill out in emotional outbursts and scald unsuspecting souls. Occasionally, I control those feelings better, but find they seep out in a fog of gloom.

Have you experienced any of that? Do you have trouble expressing the negative? Do you on occasion explode or live in a gloom? In my struggle with negative feelings, I looked for techniques. Maybe I could express the negative in a way that lessened the risk of losing what I found precious. Maybe, I could sugar coat the pill of truth so it would go down better. I did learn some techniques we call communication skills that fit well with some biblical principles. For example, Solomon wrote:

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1, NIV)

He also wrote:

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone. (Proverbs 25:15, NIV)

There is value in the way we say things. We need to craft what we say, and not hurriedly express ourselves. However, I discovered that communication skills are a tiny piece of applying what Jesus and his apostles taught. Jesus goes deeper than the way we express things. Although Jesus said very negative things, he didn't needlessly hurt people. He didn't suffer tantrums. He wasn't sarcastic. He didn't seek retribution and he didn't stuff his feelings. His focus was completely different because he understood himself differently than we do. He declared:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son... (John 3:16, NIV)

Jesus saw his life as a gift to the world. He didn't see the world as a gift to him. Consequently, his vision was about grace. It was about giving rather than receiving. He didn't focus on what would benefit him, but what would help others. Jesus said:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:17, NIV)

Jesus focused on grace. He focused on redeeming people, not hurting them. He came not to judge or umpire. He came to save. Jesus talked negatively only when it served the purpose of redemption. The subject was never "me." The objective was never "me." The objective, even with anger, was helping others.

If Jesus lives in us, won't we embrace the same identity as a gift to the world and the same posture of redemption? Listen to what Paul wrote:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29, NIV)

As disciples of Jesus, the purpose of our communication is not to vent some feeling, chastise some person or administer some judgment. It is to build up the people we talk to. Thus, if we are angry about something, how is that anger helpful for others to know? Is there something that would help them, or help their relationship with us? Our focus is essential because we are not judges. We are not called to “give people a piece of our mind.” Jesus warned:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
(Matthew 7:1-2, NIV)

If we know people by their sins, they will know us by our sins. If we are focused on what is right and wrong, we’ll find ourselves living in a courtroom rather than a temple. The issue is not what is right. The issue is not what is wrong. The issue is “what is God’s redemptive will?”

It is difficult to focus on God’s will, if there is a cauldron of resentment simmering. Our words and actions come from a reservoir of beliefs, feelings and memories. If that is poisoned, what streams from our lives will be poisoned as well. We will end up hurting the people we love regardless of our motives. That is why Jesus said:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:3-5, NIV)

If we are bitter, our words and actions will carry that bitterness; and even in diluted form bitterness is toxic. We might rightly see other people’s problems, but it is doubtful. Even if we see the problem correctly, our help will be clumsy because the stream of words and actions flow from a reservoir polluted with selfishness and simmering with anger.

The Apostle Paul wrote:

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26-27, NIV)

When we don't deal with anger, we allow it to root in our hearts. It quickly becomes a place of temptation, a foothold; and it soon can become a fortress of deception, a stronghold of God's enemy.

How do we deal with anger? Well, you may already have great grace in this arena. You may already see growth rather than destruction as a result of your anger. However, if you don't, then it is critical that you sew a new habit. Thus, when you feel anger, bring it to God before you bring it to people. If you have trouble getting God's mind and heart about your response, bring it to God's priests. Bring it to someone who represents God's heart and mind to you. It may be a close friend, a Bible study leader, or a pastor. Those discussions with God's people often help you become free of resentment and redemptive in your response. Paul counseled:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32, NIV)

Sometimes, we speak to those who offend us, and other times we do better praying for their forgiveness, even if they offend us 70 times 7. Jesus practiced and taught this. He said:

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.
(Matthew 7:6, NIV)

Not everyone welcomes the truth. Jesus did not openly talk about his identity because he would have been trampled. He spoke in parables constantly around the self-righteous. Only the spiritually hungry sought the meaning of what he spoke. They pondered and pursued what Jesus said. All the others were looking for Jesus either to reinforce what they already thought or to discredit himself. Sometimes, you have to pray and wait for people to be ready. Only then will your speech be redemptive.

On other occasions, God has us speak negative things even when people won't receive it. In these rare cases, we respond to a command of God and simply give witness. Sometimes, because we are a parents, counselors, chaperones or leaders, we have to give witness whether our listeners are ready or not. Although I am not to judge people, I must judge behavior. To not do so is to neglect my responsibility. Is that true for you in some relationships?

In those circumstances it is important that we take responsibility and ownership for what we feel and say. Instead, of "you make me angry," which blames our hearers in judgment, we own what we feel, "I want you to know that I'm upset and angry when I hear you say or see you do such and such," which is witness. The anger is ours. It doesn't belong to the one with whom we are upset. Anger is not an occasion for judgment. Anger is an occasion for self-revealing communication. It is a time to give witness rather than judge because God is the judge.

In the church many of us function as judges rather than witnesses. We say, "Adultery is sin," which is judgment; rather than, "I read in the Bible that adultery is sin," or "I believe that adultery is sin." That is witness. The saying, "You are wrong," is judgment. The phrase, "I believe you are wrong," is witness. The difference in these statements is not politics or polish. It is understanding and responding to who you are and what is your call. It is the difference between asking someone to submit to your judgment or listen to your witness. Which is God calling them to do? Submit to your judgment or listen to your witness?

Through the Holy Spirit we become witnesses not judges. The world needs more witnesses of God rather than judges of earth. *Being negative positively* blesses rather than blasts. It is not communication technique. It is knowing and growing in who Christ has made us. Consequently, as you and I grow, many will be healed by the grace that forms us and sends us.