

Focusing on Negatives

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

Good Advice Gone Wrong

Paul's directive to the Philippians sounds so right, so appealing, so uplifting, and so unlike the way we live.

Paul says to dwell on the pure and lovely and excellent, the positive things. He's talking to us, we who live in a world that offers numerous opportunities to do exactly the opposite. Negatives not only pervade our lives but quickly jump to the center of our attention. Watch your reaction when a friend interferes with your agenda – you're so focused on their offense you totally forget about the nice qualities they've demonstrated for years.

We've all met people who can tell us everything that's gone wrong but are hard-pressed to think of what's gone well. We've encountered others who have trouble putting together a sentence that doesn't include the words "no," "not" or "never." (Some people have a great deal of trouble leaving a positive observation unchallenged.) Undoubtedly you've felt the frustration of interacting with folks who routinely follow any compliment with their own comment about where they fall short or why it doesn't apply. Focusing on negatives is quite common. (Perhaps you do it yourself.) Circumstances. Frustrations. Difficult people. All share the brunt of our disappointment with life.

We're pretty adept focusing on our own problems as well. Our personal faults tap us on the shoulder, then shout at us from center stage. Tap. Tap. *How could you have said such a dumb thing?* Tap. Tap. *You just screwed that up big time.* Tap. Tap. Some of us brush those jibes off; others take them to heart. Then there's our circumstances – the lost job, the pains of aging, the difficult relationships – the list goes on and on. If we're inclined to dwell on negatives, there's no shortage of material.

Dwell on the pure and lovely and excellent? In *this* falling-apart world? How unrealistic. It sounds like Paul is selling rose-colored glasses. He's not.

Paul isn't suggesting we abandon reality and ignore the negatives around (or within) us. He's just warning us to be selective about the how much time we spend focusing on what's going wrong in our lives. He wants us to take care lest our brain cells are preoccupied with negative rather than positive information. Of course we *notice* negatives – we're just not to dwell on them. We're to steer away from such a prolonged, repeated, and damaging focus. Paul doesn't want us be unaware of negatives; he just wants us to avoid *concentrating* on them. He tells us instead to focus on positive, good things. (It's called being thankful.)

Do we need to recognize and deal with faults and failures? Of course. But we must take great care not to allow them to edge their way into the center of our attention. We must not let what's

missing crowd out our awareness of the good God consistently provides. That's Paul's (and God's) point.

Resisting God's Advice

God says to dwell on what is worthy of praise. We dwell instead on what we can criticize. What's behind our resistance to God's advice? Several motivations come to mind, some quite well-intentioned. One person's focus on negatives might be no more than an effort to be accurate and give a balanced point of view. Another person hopes their negative comments will motivate a friend (or their own self) to make wiser choices. You've done it yourself. Think of the times you've concentrated on negatives in an attempt to understand and escape them. And haven't you found that describing your problems gives you at least a temporary connection with others? Of course you have. Sympathy (even reluctantly offered) makes any sufferer feel less alone. These are well-intentioned journeys into negativity. Unfortunately they tend to backfire.

Other motives veer more blatantly off-course. Fear, insecurity, and guilt often play a part in negativity. So does a desire for control or a tendency towards coveting.

Let's start with fear. Some of us fear that if we stop monitoring our faults, our fleshly tendencies will rise up and take over. Our focus on those negatives is an attempt to control what we fear. Who knows what will happen if we take our eyes off our baser impulses! [That, by the way, doesn't happen, at least not to Christians. Romans 6:14 reassures us that sin will no longer control a believer's life.]

Taking our eyes off another's sin seems equally risky. We get frightened that if we're kind to someone and stop telling them their faults they'll never change. [That also turns out to be false. See Romans 2:4 where God comments that kindness leads to repentance.]

People who feel insecure or inferior may tell us what an awful person they are. They put themselves down ... and hope we will contradict them. On other occasions, they may put others down, hoping that unveiling another's shortcomings will cause us to see them more favorably. But, whether self- or other-directed, such negativity has a high cost: focusing on negatives leaves us unaware either of another's worth or of our own.

Sometimes guilt lies behind a tendency to focus on what's wrong with us. It not only feels irresponsible *not* to focus on our flaws, but aren't we *supposed* to keep our flaws under control? And how are we going to do that if we don't keep an eye on them? God's view differs from ours. He tells us to focus not on our flaws but on the Holy Spirit. (See Romans 8:6) That shift in focus produces the life and peace that negativity can never achieve.

Guilt also can motivate us to focus on negatives on others' lives. Some of us feel responsible to keep another person's faults in check. (It's called [codependence](#).) God's view again differs from ours: we have no ability, and so no responsibility, to change another's heart or control their choices. Deep change only comes from God,, not from us.

A desire to control also play a part in negativity. Some of us remind others of their shortcomings in order to try and make them do what we want. We want them to stop doing what irks us. We want them to start doing what pleases us. It's quite self-serving. (It also fails to take into consideration that what we consider a negative may be something of which the other person is rather fond.)

And then there's coveting, an attitude that fuels our disappointment with life. Think of negativity as a focus on what's missing. We get frustrated. We get mad. Sometimes we direct our anger at other people, but often we direct it at God (whom we assume is holding out on us). Coveting re-enacts the scene in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had a major case of focusing on negatives.

The longer someone practices focusing on what's wrong with life) the more automatic it becomes. It starts to feel normal, so normal that the person doing it generally doesn't even recognize what they're doing. They become blind to their behavior. Don't think of negativity as a consciously chosen goal. Think of it as a trap into which they (or we) have gradually and unwittingly walked.

Leaving Negativity

Before any change will occur, at least three things need to happen: a recognition of the negativity, a discovery of what motivates it; and a willingness to turn from the illusion of deprivation to an appreciation of the gifts currently available.

What starts the process? Any number of events may trigger someone's awareness of their negative focus: an undeserved gift, a struggle with depression, a scene from a movie, a friend's comment, words that leap off a page of the Bible, a whisper from the Holy Spirit. Maybe even something *we* say to them.

People cling to negativity for different reasons – a friend's motivation may be quite different than our own. For some, demoralizing as it is, negativity also feels familiar and safe. For others, their allegiance to negativity is fueled by a deep fear that there will be nothing there to replace it. (They haven't yet learned that looking at positives carries richer rewards.)

And then there's the crucial need for truth. Truth about ourselves. Truth about circumstances. Truth about pain. Truth about God and truth about His consistent and generous provision. I am talking about the truth in Scripture, but I'm also talking about truth made visible inter-personally. Meeting thankfulness "in person" pierces many a negative heart. We all need such encounters.

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