

A Positive Attitude

Philippians 2:12-30

Written by Brian Croyle



Getting Started

Let's be honest – our day to day lives can sometimes offer ample reason to grumble. We can feel justified in complaining when our work environment is steeped in negativity, or when our relationships are strained, or our finances tapped. We are inundated with negative and critical messages in our media, from news commentary to Facebook posts to "reality TV". And it would be untrue to say that there isn't valid reason to be negative about some of the problems that surround us – they're real, frequently undeserved and unfair. The problem is that, if we fall prey to the same negative mindset we find in the world around us, we no longer stand out. If we become negative, we look like everyone else. When that happens, we send a message that Christianity has nothing of value to offer to a broken and hurting world.

In Philippians 2:15, Paul describes that our goal as Christians is to be like stars – that, as children of God, we should exude the character of Christ in such a way as to shine in the midst of the darkness of the world. Our attitudes should bring light to those around us in the form of compassion, gentleness, wisdom, and encouragement. But, like stars, we can only put forth our light when we are directing our energy outwards. We don't shine from self-absorption or self-glorification, but rather from directing the love of Christ outward to those around us. A star that begins to drop in energy – to put out less heat and light – can ultimately collapse and implode under its own weight. When this occurs, a black hole forms. Its entire makeup changes. Rather than giving out, it sucks in. In place of light, we find the deepest of darkness.

Negativity and self-absorption so often go hand in hand. We become negative when we are focused on the difficulties of our own situation. We are caught in a sort of darkness, and we can suck others into that darkness without realizing it. Alternatively, true positivity is most often accompanied by thoughts of God and of others. Despite the message we might hear from countless self-help resources and a farcical SNL skit, a positive attitude is so much more than a self-focused, vague feeling that "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and – doggone it – people like me." Instead, a positive attitude that cannot be shaken can only come from recognizing the truth that God is always at work in our world – in our own lives, in those of our loved ones, in every circumstance. Even in the midst of struggle and turmoil, God is tirelessly "working all things together for good" because he is relentless in His desire to bless us and mold us into the image of His Son. And this awareness can disarm the situations we feel are attacking us, robbing them of their power over us, so that we no longer need to ruminant over them. As that happens, we can more easily look beyond ourselves to recognize the ways in which we can encourage others. We once again have something of great value to offer to lost people in desperate need of grace.

Content/context:

- 1) Read Phil. 2:12-18. Notice that Paul begins this section by saying, “Therefore...”. Many years ago I was taught an important Bible study tool – that, whenever you see the word “therefore”, you need to determine what it’s “there for”. In other words, the use of the word “therefore” in the text means that what follows is related to what comes before it, often in a cause/effect or statement/response manner. The previous verses (5-11) offer one of the most powerful declarations in all of Scripture of the character and glory of Christ. Why might Paul have linked the discussion in verses 12-13 about obedience and working out one’s faith to the description of Jesus in the prior verses?
- 2) Paul makes use of an interesting paradox in these verses when he says “work out your salvation... for it is God who works in you.” In the first instance, he tells the Philippians to get to work; in the second, he tells them that God is working in them. What might these seemingly contradictory statements indicate about how we partner with God in our own spiritual development?
- 3) Now read Phil. 2:19-30. Paul writes about two different men – Timothy and Epaphroditus – who had served with him in his ministry. What common traits do you see in these two men that made them so valuable to Paul?
- 4) Paul was clearly very grateful that the Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to him as a support and encouragement. Yet he states that he feels it is necessary for him to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippians; in fact, he says he is eager to do so. Why would Paul be so willing to release someone who had become so dear to him? What does that indicate about Paul’s perspective and priorities?

Application:

- 1) Do you find grumbling and arguing prevalent in your experience today? In what ways do we as Christians differentiate ourselves when we choose not to grumble or argue?
- 2) In what areas of your own life are you susceptible to grumbling and arguing? Are non-believers around to see you when you do become negative? What needs to change so that you’ll be less likely to be that way the next time your non-Christian friends are watching?
- 3) Paul praises the Philippians in this letter, and in this section he praises two fellow workers who have walked boldly into those areas where God has called them. Who in your own life is worthy of similar praise – a friend, family member, someone at Grace? Who has stepped out in faith and integrity in a visible way that honors God and blesses others?

- 4) Timothy and Epaphroditus helped Paul, and Paul praised them in return. How do you think genuine encouragement and positive reinforcement like this influence the culture within the church? How might this kind of positive encouragement become infectious? Have you seen that happen before?
- 5) How do you think God might be calling you to look beyond yourself into unique avenues of ministry into which He has called you? In what ways have you responded, like Timothy and Epaphroditus? In what ways are you still holding back?
- 6) Paul says that God “works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose.” If this is true (and we can trust that it is!), how can the knowledge of God’s active work in our hearts reshape and revitalize how we look at our lives and relationships?