

Message: “Are You a Bucket-Filler?”

This person was out on a bike ride when their chain came off.

As they were trying to fix it, a blue Mustang pulled up alongside them. The driver suggested they tie the bike to the car and tow it back into town. “Just ring your bell if I’m going too fast,” the driver said.

No sooner did they get the bike hitched up when a yellow Corvette pulled up alongside the Mustang and challenged the driver to a drag.

As the two cars raced down the freeway, a police officer saw them and radioed back to base. “Pick up this blue Mustang and yellow Corvette. They’re going 100 miles an hour.” Then they paused. “Just a minute. You won’t believe this, but there’s someone on a bike right behind them. They’re ringing their bell like a madman. I think they’re trying to pass!”

I’m sure it’s no surprise; negativity kills. There’s a lot of research and study on the question “what’s wrong with people?” The corollaries are, “What’s wrong with families?” and “What’s wrong with the church?” are more.

Positivity gives life and makes us better. This may be surprising, but only because we’re usually focused on the negative. I began with humor today because it’s a positive emotion. Luke tells us Jesus found favor with people (Luke 2:52). I believe Jesus laughed, cried and was a good person to be with. And I think it’s a good illustration of what Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-12.

In 2004, Tom Rath and Donald Clifton published the book “How Full is Your Bucket?” focused on the question “What’s *right with people?*” Dr. Clifton cited a key case study that led him to ask this question. The results have as much of an impact today as they did 70 years ago, when the incident occurred. I’ll summarize the findings.

“**Major William Mayer**, an MD who would later become the U.S. Army’s chief psychiatrist, **studied 1,000 America prisoners of war (POWs) who had been detained in a POW 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 the camp was 38% - the highest in military history.

What's amazing is the camp wasn't considered to be especially cruel or unusual. The soldiers had adequate food, water and shelter. They weren't subjected to the common physical torture. There was less physical abuse in the 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 soldiers regularly broke rank, turned against each other and some formed close relationships with their captors. When finally released to a Red Cross group, they 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 relationship with each other.

Dr. Mayer described each man as being in a mental 'solitary confinement cell ... without any steel or concrete.' All of them 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. Then 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 coming 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** – 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 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 a soldier not to drink water from a field because he knew the organisms in the water might hurt him. The soldier told the officer off publicly, 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 soldiers, while they were inundated with negative emotions. For example, if a supportive letter came from home, it was withheld. All negative letters – like those telling of a relative passing away, or a wife writing to say she had given up on her husband’s return and was going to remarry – 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 captives lost their basic belief in themselves, their comrades and their loved ones, not to mention God and country.”¹

We aren’t living in POW camps today, but there are several parallels of this case study. From negative tweeting to being unfriended to viral videos, our lives are exposed to a barrage of negative comments from those we know, those we don’t know and even from those who troll online, looking for targets. That’s informing.

And 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.

Without a doubt, there are problems with organizations and institutions. 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.

And there’s no shortage of bad news on TV, radio, at work, home and even church. We’re connected 24x7, so it’s hard to get away from negative emotions. Even good news is framed in a negative tone.

¹ *Ibid*, pp. 19-23 summarized

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 anything positive, much less faith. 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 a formerly military context are now commonly used in society against groups and one another.

Is it any wonder we're suffering from unprecedented levels of depression, stress and hopelessness? This is why Dr. Clifton and his colleagues studied the flip side of this horrible equation. They asked:

Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?

And 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 we 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.***²

That's a simple proposition. Filling a bucket is a positive emotional and spiritual act. Dipping from a bucket is a negative emotional and spiritual act. Both have consequences. We've heard the negative consequences. The positive consequences are more powerful and far-reaching.

Positive emotional experiences support our relationships at home, school, church, work or in groups. For example, I met a man named Don, who told me about the Kiwanas. What they discovered is people don't join the group because of the service work. They join because of the good, positive fellowship.

² *Ibid*, p. 25

It's about people! Sound familiar? It's no surprise church isn't about buildings, budgets or an organizational structure. It's about people who love God and believe in Jesus.

We're gathered here because Jesus changes our lives and makes us better. Faith is about relationships: first with God and then with people. This doesn't happen alone or in isolation. It happens most often and most powerfully when we gather with people who believe the way we do. John Wesley believed we were made holy when we gathered 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 other's lives when we gather with people to be in positive, loving relationships. Those who we know well are included. So are those who we are getting to know, like our neighbors, family and friends. This also includes those who we've just met. And 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 unites 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 be with us regularly so we can build this kind of community, a community based on hope, trust, love and joy.

Please invite your family, friends and neighbors. We can live in a positive lifegiving way. After all, this is the way Jesus shows us. When we do, we're sowing seeds of faith and lives will be drawn to God.

Let us pray ...

Matthew 23:1-12 (CEB)

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and his disciples, “The legal experts and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat. Therefore, you must take care to do everything they say. But don’t do what they do. For they tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry. They put them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others. They make extra-wide prayer bands for their arms and long tassels for their clothes. They love to sit in places of honor at banquets and in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with honor in the markets and to be addressed as ‘Rabbi.’”

“But you shouldn’t be called *Rabbi*, because you have one teacher, and all of you are brothers and sisters. Don’t call anybody on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is heavenly. Don’t be called *teacher*, because Christ is your one teacher. But the one who is greatest among you will be your servant. All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.”