

Being positive / negative: is it a good thing?

Introduction

There are people that enjoy being negative and miserable; they usually enjoy their own company. There are people that insist that one must be positive at all times. They are usually upbeat people but often get confused when they hit a setback.

I have seen people complain to others that they are not being positive and be extremely negative in their attacks. The hypocrisy of this seems to elude them.

What then do we say about this matter. Should believers always be positive?

Overview

Let me state at the outset that insisting on always being positive or negative is wrong. The key matter in all affairs of this life is truth and the foundational response is always faith, 'The just shall live by faith' (Rm 1:17). 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (Jn 8:32).

People that focus on always being positive in every situation face being founded in untruth; there are situations facing us that are simply very negative. Being faithful in that situation is not necessarily the same as being positive; it is doing God's will. What is critical is being realistic. You cannot assess a situation unless you have a realistic view of it. The reality of any matter is what counts.

Take soldiers in the trenches in WWI. They were in a dire situation. Those with a positive attitude trusted the officers and commanders and thought that everything would work out fine in the end. They were slaughtered; their lives wasted in stupid military decisions.

Realists understood that the whole affair was a pointless mess and that no good would come of it. They were neither positive nor negative; they were realists that properly analysed the situation. Such folk conscientiously objected and perhaps went to prison for a time; but they came out alive. Being positive in a dire situation will do you no good at all and will cloud your judgment.

Being focused upon the truth will mean that you are a realist. You analyse every aspect of a situation and come to a sound conclusion about what action to take under God.

Being automatically positive is dangerous. It leads to conclusions about matters without any analysis or judgment. In their mind it is always the right action for such folk to be positive.

When God pronounced judgment upon Judah for her many sins, he announced it through certain prophets. The same happened with Israel earlier on. There were false prophets that declared that the nation should be positive because they were God's people. Victory would be theirs, they said. God denounced these false prophets for spreading a false message of hope when judgment was declared. This was a time to repent and grieve for sins, not to be positive.

And the LORD said to me, 'The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart. Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in My name, whom I did not send, and who say, "Sword and famine shall not be in this land" -- By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed! And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; they will have no one to bury them -- them nor their wives, their sons nor their daughters -- for I will pour their wickedness on them. Therefore you shall say this word to them: "Let my eyes flow with tears night and day, and let them not cease; for the virgin daughter of my people has been broken with a mighty stroke, with a very severe blow".' Jer 14:13-17

Therefore do not listen to the words of the prophets who speak to you, saying, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon,' for they prophesy a lie to you. Jer 27:14

Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,' when the LORD had not spoken. The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. Ezek 22:28-29

In the matter of sin there is no cause to be positive. Upon sinning a believer should grieve for that sin. He should confess it and seek cleansing. There are no grounds to be positive.

When a person is grieving the loss of someone, no one should demand that they be positive; even if their loved one went to be with the Lord. Demanding positivity would be cruel and heartless. The bereaved person is in grief and needs time to find their way naturally.

When we see horrific cruelty and brutality, such as dead children bombed in a pointless war, there is no place for positivity. We should be outraged.

There are many situations when being positive is simply the wrong course of action. What counts is being realistic.

Was Jesus always positive?

Absolutely not! We can point to many situations when Jesus was: negative, condemning, upbraiding, rebuking, denouncing, protesting, warning and so forth.

Rebuking Peter

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'. Matt 16:22-23

Denouncing the Pharisees

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Matt 23:27-28

Upbraiding the disciples in the boat

Then His disciples came to *Him* and awoke Him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' But He said to them, 'Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?' Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. Matt 8:25-26

Prophesying Peter's denial

Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' Matt 26:34

Condemning a bad ruler

'Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You.' And He said to them, 'Go, tell that fox'. Lk 13:31-32

Accepting a negative event

Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Matt 26:45

God's prophets were not always positive

In fact it is rare to find them just positive. Any signs of positivity are really faithfulness and Biblical hope, not mere positivity.

Prophets were sent from God to bring correction when things were going wrong. A people walking right before God need no prophets. Since they faced bad situations, their words and actions are filled with warnings, condemnation, denunciation, rebukes, exhortations to do good, and so on. Rarely do they merely say, 'everything is going to be fine'. A few instances out of many thousands will suffice.

Therefore the anger of the LORD is aroused against His people; He has stretched out His hand against them and stricken them, and the hills trembled. Their carcasses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. Isa 5:25

The Syrians before and the Philistines behind; and they shall devour Israel with an open mouth. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. Isa 9:12

This is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the LORD. Isa 30:9

This people has a defiant and rebellious heart; they have revolted and departed. Jer 5:23

Hear, O earth! Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people. Jer 6:19

How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool In the day of His anger. Lam 2:1

I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse. Zeph 1:17

God's apostles were not always positive

But Peter said to him, 'Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity'. Acts 8:20-23

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 1 Cor 5:4-6

For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. ... For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you. 1 Cor 11:18-22

Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words. At my first defence no one stood with me, but all forsook me. 2 Tim 4:14-16

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. ... These dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. ... these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know

naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Jude 1:4, 8, 10-13

Stephen (the first martyr) was not always positive

You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do* you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*. Acts 7:51-53

Hope not positivity

Positivity in the world is rarely grounded in anything because it is an automatic response mechanism. Such people believe that they should always be positive. But positivity without any foundation in fact is dangerous; it will lead to bad decisions and despondency.

Hope is a different matter and believers must always have hope. This is because hope is founded upon something; it is founded upon Jesus who has prepared the way into eternal life for us. Thus hope enters into the heavenlies.

We might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Heb 6:18-20

Biblical hope anchors the soul in the truth and promises of God; in the work of Christ. True hope is based upon a strong foundation. This is nothing like mere positivity. Hope rests upon grace.

Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Pt 1:13

Thus Christians must exercise hope unto the end

We hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end. Heb 3:6

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. Heb 10:23

Assessing the truth

In any given situation that we face it is vital to make a correct assessment, a rational analysis, so that we can decide upon what is the best option to take. This is realism. We are neither positive nor negative, we simply evaluate the facts correctly and take the best action.

If we face a bad situation and simply act in a positive way, then we hinder faith. True faith assesses the facts, cries to God for help,¹ rolls the burden of it to the Lord² and believes that he will make a way forward.³ If we are unduly positive we just act as if everything is going to be OK and don't act in faith; don't seek God's help. Why cry to God if everything is fine?

In every situation that we face the most important action is to understand the truth of the matter. What are the facts? What is the reality? What does God want us to do about it? Simply being positive fails to ask these questions and just blindly trusts that all is well when it may not be.

Positive thinking is soulish and fleshly

Positivity is trust that something good will come out of something bad – but without any evidence or substance. This is akin to paganism. It is false hope, blind faith, or wishful thinking. This is based upon the occult psychology of certain writers, such as Norman Vincent Peale's, 'The Power of Positive Thinking' (1952).

Where does this positivity come from? It is generated by the soul. It is worked up from within by certain disciplines, much like mysticism. It does not come from God and is not based on divine promises. It is not spiritual; it is soulish.

Soulish actions are easily dominated by the enemy because they are fleshly and always lead to deception and sin.

These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual [*pneumatikos*] things with spiritual. But the natural man [soulish man, *pseukikos*] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually [*pneumatikos*] discerned. But he who is spiritual [*pneumatikos*] judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For 'who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?' But we have the mind of Christ. And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual [*pneumatikos*] people but as to carnal, [flesh, *sarkinois*] as to babes in Christ. ... for you are still carnal [*sarkiko*]. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal [*sarkiko*] and behaving like mere men? 1 Cor 2:13-3:1, 3

¹ Exod 22:27, 'when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious'.

² Ps 37:5, 'Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring *it* to pass'. 'Commit' is the word 'roll'.

³ Ps 7:1, 'O LORD my God, in You I put my trust; save me'.

When the soul acts without the spirit it acts as if it were unregenerate; it is according to the flesh. When the spirit, acted upon by the Holy Spirit, dominates the soul then the person walks spiritually. Many churchgoers walk in the flesh.

This fact that the church comprises spiritual people and fleshly people is clearly spelled out here. The soulish man is also a fleshly man; his lower nature (the soul) dominates his life instead of a renewed mind in the spirit.

There are levels of being fleshly. Some people just act according to the flesh (*sarkikoi*) but some go further and are fully flesh (*sarkinoi*).

Now positive thinking is fleshly, it is soulish. It does not emanate from the spirit under God.

I have seen a man teach the truth about certain things, exposing Biblical facts under the power of the Spirit, only for disgruntled church individuals to get angry (a bad sign) and condemn the person outright for not being positive enough. This proves the fleshly source of such positive thinkers.

The soul is a vessel for human action; it is the executive of the life. It is meant to be ruled by the human spirit, which itself is meant to be empowered and advised by the Holy Spirit (i.e. walking in the new nature). When this occurs, there is a divine testimony.

If the soul is sunk in the flesh (equates to unregenerate life, Adamic life) the spirit and the Holy Spirit are ignored and the person acts upon feelings, will or intellect; i.e. human ability. Then there is no testimony. Positive thinking arises from this process.

The pagan and occult tendencies to positive thinking

There are many occult doctrines and practices that focus upon being positive.

Visualisation

For example there is the visualisation or imagineering techniques that are based in magic.

Magic is the supposed power to manipulate nature by various means, such as spells, incantations. Visualisation is a religious word identifying occult techniques to gain material things that you desire without working for them. Thus being positive is raised to a level whereby being super-positive leads to gaining material things supernaturally. The visualisation in Word Faith churches arises from occult practices and the teachings of Soka Gakkai Buddhism.⁴

Today there is a resurgence of this thread of magic being couched in supposed scientific terms and quantum theory; but it is still occultism pure and simple.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism is another branch of the occult centred in communication with dead spirits. This is also couched in positive terms being fellowship with a dead loved one and speaking to them again or receiving direction and advice from them. How positive.

⁴ Soka Gakkai a political and lay religious organisation founded in Japan in 1930, based on the teachings of the Nichiren Buddhist sect. The origin is Japanese, from *sō* 'create' + *ka* 'value' + *gakkai* '(learned) society'.

In fact this is a deception. Spiritualism is not talking to the spirits of the dead; that is impossible. They are trapped in Hades with no ability to communicate with this world (see Lk 16). People using mediums, clairvoyants, Ouija boards and suchlike are not talking to humans in the other world but to demons masquerading as people. This is not positive but negative and highly dangerous. The purpose is to deceive and cause harm.

The legacy of PP Quimby

Quimby formed a religious group that was based upon the syncretism of Christianity with the occult and eastern religious philosophy. The products of this were groups such as Christian Science, Religious Science, Unity, New Thought and others.

One central feature of these was the idea of being super-positive. For example, there is no sickness, there is no death; these are all in the mind and can be overcome.

These soon fell out of favour when the reality of pain, sickness and death overturned adherents. Mary Baker Eddy, who had preached for years that sickness and death do not exist, herself died after a long period of painful sickness.

For all the bluster of positive thinking, there was no foundation at all.

The philosophy of Norman Vincent Peale

His self-help book, 'The power of positive thinking' a best seller, was designed to develop a permanent optimistic attitude in his followers. Though he claimed a Biblical basis and was a pastor, this teaching is unbiblical and is more based upon occultism.

Like other similar philosophies it was based upon affirmations (cf. 'positive confession' of Word Faith) and visualisation (again cf. Word Faith). Visualisation is an occult technique based in magic (as I have explained).

It involved picturing oneself being successful; thinking positively; repeating mantras multiple times (like Hinduistic philosophy); and suchlike. The body was to have negative energy removed and gaining positive energy (what is this; how do you measure it?). There was a big focus upon success; believing in it and gaining it. But what is the measure of success? The cross was God's victory over sin, death, Satan and the world but the world saw that as a massive failure. God chose the weak things in the world, not the successful.⁵ He encouraged people to reach out to 'a higher power', something that mystics and occultists have taught for centuries. No Christian uses such non-personal terms for God. Worst of all, many of Peale's techniques equate to self-hypnotism and mind conditioning.

Like many such self-help books the foundation was personal anecdotes and not verified facts. This was not a Biblical exposition or something that centred upon Jesus, but stories about unverified people.

Multiple specialists denounced his work claiming that the self-hypnotism always leads to damage in the end, ruins critical thinking and is based upon superficial ideas about mental health. Teaching people to destroy all negativity actually leads to fostering negativity and aggression.

⁵ 1 Cor 1:25-28, 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are'.

A classic positive attitude taught by Peale involved saying ‘*Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better*’, in the absence of any positive evidence, or facing contrary evidence. Such behaviour, based on irrational non-realism, can only cause harm.

Hypnosis

Hypnotism is an occult technique that goes back millennia. It was re-purposed in the West by Anton Mesmer [1734–1815], i.e. Mesmerism, in the 1700s. He called this technique ‘*animal magnetism*’. Mesmer took ancient techniques of mysticism and occultism and dressed them up in scientific terms claiming to have developed a new therapy. In fact a critical report of a royal commission in 1784 put paid to his claims. Nevertheless, hypnotism continued, especially in the various psycho-heresy movements.

Many modern psychologists, psychiatrists and other practitioners seek to teach patients how to have a positive attitude through hypnotism claiming that this will fix all sorts of problems from depression to smoking. This is merely warmed over occultism.

Being negative

Is there any advantage in being negative? No; not ever.

Being realistic about a bad situation is not being negative; it is correctly assessing facts. Though others may call this being negative that is irrelevant; if the situation is bad then a correct assessment, a realistic evaluation, is that the state of affairs is bad. Decisions must be made on the basis of correct assumptions.

Being negative implies that one has a negative impression of any situation, whether good, bad or indifferent. Negative people see bad things in every situation and fail to correctly assess the state of play. They tend to be miserable, down at heart, complainers.

The key factor is truth; what is the real situation before me. Being negative negates faith when facing a difficult time. Being negative negates joy when facing a blessing.

Conclusion

Christians focus upon the truth in whatever context that may arise. In the context of situations before us we must seek the truth of what we face. We must analyse the situation and take action accordingly. Being either negative or positive is utterly irrelevant and pointless; what is important is the reality.

The truth of a situation does not determine our actions. A situation before us may be extremely bad, but that does not mean that our response is despair or giving up; we are to live by faith. We assess the truth of the matter and then seek God’s will.

In the OT when David sought God’s will about battles. Sometimes God said to go up and fight against overwhelming odds, but other times he said don’t make a frontal assault against a much smaller force.

When David fought Goliath he certainly faced a bad situation. Yet David was convinced that God had given Goliath into his hand for the glory of God. The correct, faithful action was not to run away but to gather five pebbles.

The key is to know the will of God. Sometimes God calls us to yield to a bad situation. Jesus did this in Gethsemane. Early Christian martyrs did this in the amphitheatres. Sometimes

God delivered people from within a bad situation; like Peter being freed from jail. Sometimes God delivered a person from certain death, such as Elijah facing persecution or Paul facing shipwreck followed by snakebite.

No situation will be improved by being either negative or positive based upon soulish feelings or will power. That is just presumption. We must analyse the reality of the situation and then seek to know what God wants us to do about it.

Christians are not automatically positive or negative; they are faithful, walking in the light of truth.

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