

Text: Numbers 13: 25-14:4

Title: The Pessimist vs. the Optimist

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

Preacher: Rev. Dr. William Lewis, Senior Pastor

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Today I want to talk about our natural inclinations. What causes us to make the choices we do? A child brought home F's on his report card, so his dad sat him and said son we need to get to the cause of these grades, to which the boy replied yes Dad what do you think it is—environment or genetics? Certainly these factors make up our personalities, our strengths & weaknesses, gifts and quirks and determine who we become.

Everything we do is based upon our particular personality attributes. Our peculiar character traits are inherited or in some way influenced by our parents and other important people and events in our lives. It seems life is a struggle to see which side of our personality is going to dominate and shape us.

My observation is most people can generally be categorized into two camps: The pessimist and the optimist.

What's the difference? The Pessimist sees the glass as half empty, while the optimist see it as half full. A pessimist when he smells the flowers looks around for a funeral, while an optimist is a fisherman who takes along a camera. A pessimist actually thinks the chief purpose of sunshine is to cast shadows, while an optimist is like a woman who puts her shoes on when the preacher says in conclusion.

P& O's see the same situation from completely different points of view. The pessimist focuses on the difficulties & potential problems. They are cautious, skeptical, inclined to doubt and hold back. While the optimist focuses on the possibilities, the potential, the dream. The difficulties that stand in the way do not dictate their endeavors. They see the best case scenario.

In terms of our faith, our inward disposition--the way we approach life will affect our experience of God. & as our text reveals can severely impact those around us.

Numbers 13 is a pivotal event determining the destinies of the Israelites. God commands Moses to send out a survey party. God wanted the leaders from each tribe to see the great fertility and blessing He has in store for them. But along with seeing the goodness, God also wants to prepare them for what they are about to encounter. This was to keep the Israelites from being alarmed at the first sight of their foes & get them mentally prepared for battle.

Most importantly, God wants to show the Israelites that the task of removing the inhabitants from the land is beyond their own ability & strength. They have to exercise faith in Him to remove the people just as He did with the many miracles in delivering them from Egypt. After all, God told them it is the land that **I am** giving you.

Throughout the Bible God promises to handle our formidable foes, our obstacles, fears, problems, habitual mistakes, addictions...it requires turning to Him. Which is difficult for us independent, individualist, self reliant types—to let God call the shots and trust Him rather than try to handle our situations on our own.

When you are a Christ follower it is not our giftedness or resources that solve our problems—but the movement of God. Zechariah 8:23 Not by might and not by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord.

Throughout the Bible we see overwhelming situations arise only to watch God handle the problem. The challenge for you and me is in our times of trouble will we trust Him or cross our arms skeptically?

When the 12 spies came back we find there are two very different viewpoints. Everyone admitted the land was most definitely flowing with milk and honey—they brought back fruit to prove it.

But 10 of the spies were pessimists. They focused on the difficulties and obstacles. These are not to be minimized. A recent archeological discovery in the land of Canaan found people with large bones even by today's NBA standards. Their fears led them to exaggerate the size of the inhabitants stating they saw the legendary race of semi divine beings from Genesis 6 the Nephilim living there. Notice they also magnified their own limitations, we are not strong enough--we felt like grasshoppers.

Their failure was not in recognizing that there were difficulties and obstacles ahead. No it was their inability to see the difficulties in their proper perspective. Rather than exercising faith in God who had performed numerous miracles for them (like parting the sea and washing away their enemies) and was constantly visible to them as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day, they focused on themselves and their own limitations.

Notice the crippling affect of the pessimistic attitude. Their doubts and lack of faith caused them to miss out on God's blessings. Worse, it caused others to suffer—inspiring despondency...ultimately their families were robbed of God's intended blessings. Their sentence: 40 years of wandering the desert. Saved from slavery, only to miss out on a new life of blessings. The result of not trusting God.

I wonder how many of us have been saved from sin only to live without the benefit of Christ's promised new life. Christians who spent all their lives in the church, but choosing to stand on the sidelines, never giving their lives over to His control, never investigating to overcome their doubts, never experiencing the promised land of mature Christianity or a deep relationship with God, but their faith was more like a life of wandering the wilderness. Oh God is around...but not in a way that impacts your life. When I was fretting about selling the house in Nebraska I started whining to my wife what if it doesn't sell...how can I carry two mortgages...ohhhh. She said: You are like the ten spies, God has shown you the land that He is sending you to, but you don't trust Him.

Even more devastating was the negative effect their pessimism had on the faith the people placed in God. They incited blame and mistrust toward God. It brought into question God's goodness and implied He was too weak to care for and protect them. So instead of going forward with God, everyone else went backwards away from God's blessings.

When I was a Ch. Ed. Director at a church in California, the Associate Pastor taught the confirmation class all the difficult passages of the Bible filling their minds with doubts and skepticism. Psalm 137 (Blessed is he who bashes Babylonian babies heads upon the rocks) So when I began to lead the Youth Group through Bible Study they were predisposed to reject, dismiss and be hostile toward the gospel.

Few things can be as harmful to your own faith and the ministry of the church as a pessimistic attitude. If we spend our energy focusing on the negative, doubting God will answer our prayers, skeptical that God will lead us in accomplishing our big ministry goals we will curb the future of the church. Because the nature of God is to lead us to places and projects that lie beyond our comfort zone.

When we walk around sneering statements like; we already tried that, we've never done it that way, we can't afford it, those people are unreachable, something might get broken, not in this neighborhood... then not only will you excuse yourself from seeing the power of God, but you will infect others—keeping them from participating with God building His kingdom (for a Christian the promised land is experiencing God moving through us)!

God has a calling and ministry for each of our lives. His promised land. You can find reasons to excuse yourself from this calling with pessimism...why did God allow that bad thing to happen to me? Or buy into the intellectual criticism of the Bible that dismisses the miraculous and special moments of the scriptures and faith journey.

Or you can focus on a God who challenges us to believe in His power. That is the initial invitation—to believe! Romans 8:31 If God is for us who can be against us. When you decide to believe with an active pursuit--that is when the reality of Jesus Christ comes alive.

I don't mean to minimize the difficulties that get tossed at us in life. I had personal stories thrown at me this week that swirled in my mind for days as I tried to figure out where was God and how did these people maintain their faith through those challenges.

Not to mention that the Christian voice has been discounted by today's culture...scientific naturalism, relativism (morally neutrality) tolerance of every point of view except the Christians...it is easy to become pessimistic and keep us from speaking out for the faith.

I remember at the U of Colorado an advanced Psychology professor would make a Biblical reference and laugh hysterically. He did this week after week—it started to annoy me. At first I figured it was better not to jeopardize my grade by confronting him on his blatant Christian harassment. But finally I decided to address it with him. So I went to his office and mentioned this pattern of ridiculing the faith and he broke down in tears. He was struggling in the faith because of a recent divorce. I laid hands on him and we prayed. I got an A in the class. Two years later I had my faith shaken by an advanced philosophy course European Intellectual Thought. The relentless attacks on the faith had led me to a crises moment. One day when I was shaken to the core, who do I run into on the campus path? The psychology professor. He asked how I was doing and I shared I was struggling with the Philosophical perspectives and he laughed that crazy disdainful way and compared the limited intellect of these professors to the apostle Paul who had the Holy Spirit's wisdom or Jesus the son of God! With his confidence I went forth and worked through those atheistic arguments. When his pessimism crept in my optimistic faith lifted him up. When my pessimism seeped in his optimistic faith encouraged me!

If we shy away from the opportunities that lie before us because of potential difficulties, we will end up like the Israelites forfeiting God's intended blessings and worse we will deprive others of God's power as well. The unwillingness to take a spiritual risk: forgiving someone, sharing your faith, getting involved in kingdom work ... stepping out for Christ's cause can cause us miss His abundant life.

So how can we change our nature so our personality quirks don't dominate and ruin our life or the lives of our families? Those hurt by our controlling or angry or critical attitudes?

I hear people rationalize their weakness's that's just who I am or I have always been that way. While it is wise to acknowledge your limitations, God offers transforming power to help you become the best you possible! Psychologists tell us that our personalities are set at an early age, but God says I'll create a new heart & mind within you. Yes he accepts you as you are, but loves you too much to leave you that way!

In contrast to the 10 pessimist we find Caleb and Joshua, standing firm in their faith that God could and would deliver them.

This is the difference between the Christian pessimist and the Christians optimist. Caleb focused on God's power source which impacted the way he perceived the challenge before them...in Numbers 14:9 they were as prey without protection.

Why this positive attitude? In Numbers 14:24 it states that Caleb had a different Spirit. When we place confidence in God and step forward on Christ's behalf God puts His Spirit within us...2 Timothy 1:7 informs us what His Spirit is like: you do not have a spirit of timidity, but of power, love & discipline. Do you have Christ's Spirit?

If not invite Christ to guide you through His Holy Spirit and then follow His lead as you go through the day...whatever challenges and decisions you encounter.

So what's it going to be the spirit of the world or the Spirit of God Mr. and Mrs. Pessimist as long as you sit shaking your head at every Spiritual opportunity you are aiming at nothing and you'll be sure to hit it. For nothing is the fruit of the Pessimist.

Jesus said in Matthew 13:58 He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief & James 1:9 reiterates the same truth...for those who doubt let that person expect to receive nothing.

Christians it is time for an attitude check, to set aside our fears and step forward optimistically believing God can handle all personal and society's problems. I was with one of our Missionaries Roger Randall this past week and I asked him about the Muslim problem in Europe and he reframed it do you mean the Muslim opportunity! That's the difference between the pessimist and the optimist!

If you are tired of living in a spiritual wilderness instead of experiencing a vibrant, alive faith decide to trust God and step forward...with your financial fears work struggles relationship breakdowns, your inner demons...

The New Year and next decade is upon us—it's time to get to the next level of a deeper faith.

The wilderness or the promise land--you decide