

West Valley Church
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ISMS: A Christ-like Response Pessimism/Optimism

Today is a first of two sermons this summer dedicated to “attitudisms”: pessimism and optimism. Both of these words come from Latin words; pessimism meaning the worst and optimum meaning the best. Being optimistic, in the typical sense of the word, is defined as expecting the best possible outcome from any given situation; or seeing the glass half full. Expecting the worst case scenario – pessimism, or seeing the glass half empty. Today’s attitudisms relate to how we view things, how we view ourselves, and how we view other people.

Let’s look at a few examples of pessimism and optimism in the Bible in order to help us have a Christ-like response to these attitudisms we deal with today.

Let’s start with pessimism: a tendency to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen; it’s also defined as a lack of hope or confidence in the future.

Examples in the Bible of pessimism: Sarah being told that at 90 years old, she would have a baby, she laughed and showed her lack of confidence in the future. Moses being asked by God to deliver His people:

“Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt. But Moses protested to God, ‘Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?’ God answered, ‘I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain.’ But Moses protested, ‘If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them? God replied to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’” (Exodus 3:10-14)

Moses is talking to God as a burning bush, but still questions Him. He was pessimistic (at least in this scenario) about the future and the lack of confidence he showed in himself. Even the Israelites were pessimistic when it came to attacking their enemies despite having been rescued by God, seeing God take care of them, and even seeing God fight and win some of their battles for them. After Moses and Aaron, and

the Israelite community received a report of the land of their enemies, Caleb responds first with optimism:

“Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, ‘We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.’ But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, ‘The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size.’” (Numbers 13:31-32, niv)

These are just a few examples of people who showed signs of pessimism in their lives. They had a lack of hope or confidence in themselves or someone else, but through it, they learned to trust God in even greater ways. So I don't want you to think that if you show signs of pessimism in your life, or you lack faith in yourself or others, that it means you also lack faith in God. It might, but maybe not. God still loves us if we lack faith in Him or a particular situation we are in. At times, even the disciples lacked faith, and Jesus called them out on it. In Matthew 14:28, after seeing Jesus walking on water towards the boat...Peter replies:

“Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come,” Jesus said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:28-31)

Jesus still loved them, and still continued to invest in their lives. Despite the disciples “little faith” they went on (with the help of the Holy Spirit) to help make what the Church is today. I don't blame Peter for showing pessimism while walking on water. It would be easy to think about the worst case scenario coming true.

I have a tough time getting the worst case scenarios out of my mind, especially now that I have kids. I am always worrying about them. The first two weeks Judah was alive, we didn't sleep when he was sleeping. At least not both of us. Someone was always awake while he was sleeping just in case he made a weird noise or something else. What if he stops breathing? What if he doesn't wake up? I once thought that when my kids got a little older I would stop worrying about them, young Casey was so optimistic.

Whether you have kids or not, we have plenty of reason for pessimism today: the pain and suffering in our world, shootings and violence, death, disease, cancer, lots of things; but the greatest reason for pessimism is our actual enemy in this world.

“Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a **roaring lion**, looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 4:8)

Our enemy is trying to keep us from listening to God, from having faith and hope, from remembering the amazing things God has done in our lives. On top of that, we have reason for pessimism because we have sin in our lives, and to make things worse, there is a penalty for our sin. Any possible worst scenario we can think of, is nothing compared to the death and eternal separation we deserve because of our sin.

The first part of Romans 6:23:

“For the wages of sin is death...” (Romans 6:23, nlt)

For all things we just mentioned, we have plenty of reason for pessimism. We could all agree this was a real downer of a morning if I ended the sermon on that note right? Let's steer towards optimism but beginning with reading the last half of Romans 6:23...

“But the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 6:23, nlt)

This verse sums up pessimism and optimism perfectly. Our glass is half empty (Pess) – we deserve death (the worst case scenario). But our glass is half full, (Optim) – God gives us a gift of eternal life (best case scenario).

God is too good and loves you too much, and has conquered too much for us to be negative in life. We have plenty of reasons for pessimism today, but there are plenty of reasons (many more) for optimism.

Optimism is: hopefulness and confidence about the future or the successful outcome of something. There are plenty of examples of optimism in the Bible.

Examples in the Bible of optimism: Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac – “We have the fire and the wood,” the boy said, “but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” “God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” Abraham answered. And they both walked on together.

Someone might argue that Abraham isn’t showing optimism, but instead, he’s showing faith. Well yes he is. Hebrews 11:1...

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1, niv)

Remember our definition for optimism is: hopefulness and confidence about the future or the successful outcome of something.

So while they are not identical, they are similar.

Another example of optimism in the Bible is this one guy named Jesus. His entire life is one big lesson in optimism. Jesus was willing to be born a human, live among us, be beaten and put through pain and death, because He had confidence in the future, confidence that the outcome of the master plan would be successful. He knew our best case scenario was to be forgiven of our sins so we can be reconciled with God for eternity. And we couldn’t do it without Him.

So what is a Christ-like response to pessimism? If you struggle with thinking the worst case scenario in an area of your life, start by asking God for help. Our confidence in life is not in ourselves, but in God. If you lack faith in God or yourself, ask God for help and remember that He loves you anyway. We serve a God who is bigger and stronger than any worst case scenario we could possibly think of. And our worst case scenario isn’t nearly as bad as what we deserve because of the sin in our lives. Remember Romans 6:23...

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

Reasons for pessimism and optimism all in one verse.

Being optimistic doesn’t mean walking around with a smile on our face even if you are sad or dealing with tough times. We will have trouble, but our optimism is not found in our circumstances, it’s found in the hope we have for what God has already done for us, and promised to continue doing. We should be optimistic, because we have faith. Faith in a God who is bigger and greater than anything we face (best or worst case scenario).

Our worship team is going to close with a song. It's one many of you know or have heard, and many of you know the background of what the writer of the song went through before he wrote it. In November of that year, due to unexpected last-minute business developments, he had to remain in Chicago, but sent his wife and four daughters on ahead as scheduled on the S.S. Ville du Havre. He expected to follow in a few days. "On November 22, 1873 the ship was struck by the Lochearn, an English vessel, and sank in twelve minutes. Several days later the survivors were finally landed at Cardiff, Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, 'Saved alone.'" Spafford left immediately to join his wife. This hymn is said to have been penned as he approached the area of the ocean thought to be where the ship carrying his daughters had sunk.

Despite losing his four daughters in one day, he showed optimism, he showed confidence in the future, and faith in God to the point he could say, "It is well with my soul".

That didn't mean he was happy or smiling about the circumstance he was in. We all know what it's like to hurt. You might be here today and you think you have more reasons for pessimism than optimism. It might feel like you do. But I want to encourage you, that even if you don't feel happy, you have a God who loves you. A God who cares about you and He wants to help you with whatever you might be going through today, even if you lack faith in Him to do so.

Whether you tend to see things as half full or half empty, remember, God's love for you cannot be classified in either one. God's love for you is not half empty or half full but overflowing. Regardless of how you view the world around you, you can have confidence in the future, and faith in God, so that you can say, "It is well with my soul."