

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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What you focus on grows!

“Milk curds and honey shall he eat until he knows to refuse the evil and choose the good.”

Isaiah 7:15.

A candidate is at a job interview.

“What are your strengths?” say the employer representative.

“I’m an optimist and a positive thinker.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Yes! When do I start?”

In the Old Testament the Messiah is very much a human being. He has to learn how to distinguish between the evil and the good, just like the rest of us. That is part of his quest.

The Jesus of history saw himself as the Messiah. Thus, according to this prophesy, he would understand that his thought process would develop as ours does. When an infant is fed on milk curds and honey, which was the infant food of the land, he is still a child. But when the child grows up there is this amazing ability that develops that speaks of maturity- **to know how to refuse evil and to choose the good!** Is there a simple way of figuring out what is evil and what is good?

The book of Proverbs has a delightful little teaching. It says, “As a man thinks so is he.” So, if he thinks evil thoughts, then he becomes evil.

The converse is also true Think good thoughts and we become good people.

That is why St Paul in the New Testament teaches us “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, **think** on these things.”

Why do this? Because to think in this way is transformative.

But in order to do this, we must have a matured ability to know **how** to refuse the evil and choose the good!

We know quite a lot today about how the mind works. Good solid research tells us that what we focus on tends to preoccupy us and thus to grow in our minds.

If we fill our minds with negative news reports all the time, it is so easy to become negative ourselves. We can begin to take a slanted view of the world. We become selective in our thinking. The result of this is that we can become negative thinkers, negative talkers, negative speculators until our whole world view is affected. We become pessimistic about the future of the world. We become pessimistic about our own future possibilities. And the negative grows and grows!

But the Messiah had to learn how to refuse the evil and choose the good. So, do we!

I have come to believe that whether we realize it, or not negative thinking is evil because it takes us down the wrong path. Why? Because the very opposite of negative thinking is faith filled thinking. It is possibility thinking. It is positive thinking. For as scripture says, “With God all things are possible!”

Do we believe that? Well...most of us stop somewhere along a line of possibility. Yes, we think some things are possible that may be difficult but ALL things? No, for many of us that’s a bit of

a stretch! We say ‘That’s not realistic. So, don’t go there. Believe in limited possibilities and go on from there. That is reality.’

But as soon as we do that, we have shut miracles out of our consciousness.

Actually, true faith in God is not like that at all! I often say

“There are three answers to prayer taught by the Bible: Yes, No and slow!”

For instance, if you believe that “With God all things are possible” then it is possible to believe in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Normally people coming back from the dead does *not* happen, but with God it could, and Christians believe it did. In order to even preserve the idea that “All things are possible with God” then God can say Yes to anything. But this is not automatic or based on our saying some magic words in prayer! Yes and No are God’s decision because God is God and stands always in the field of all possibilities. We do not.

If “All things are possible for God” then death becomes **a variable** not an inevitability. It can be suspended, postponed or denied, for God can also say NO even to death. Only One who is all powerful, all knowing, and all compassionate knows **when** to say “YES”, **when** to say “NO” and **when** to say, “not just yet.” Sometimes that seems hard for us to trust, but we do not know better than God and accepting that, **leads us to peace!**

We offer up our prayers to God respectfully. We just don’t know enough. We cannot see the whole picture. We are foot soldiers in a great battle and we do not know fully what is going on. Only the Field Commander does. And whether we like it or not we need to trust The Great One who knows the end from the beginning.

Remember Jesus, when contemplating the suffering that lay ahead of his crucifixion wanted the cup of suffering to pass him by? But then he said

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

Learning to refuse the evil means to let go and let God be God.

We are in the midst of an incredible refugee crisis in the world. Europe just across the Mediterranean, has been hit hard by people scrambling into makeshift boats, many drowning on the way. It is also spilling over into Canada. Mexicans are still pouring into the USA.

But one country has been, under Angela Merkel’s leadership, absolutely outstanding in this whole mess of disruption, suffering and death-...Germany. But as I speak to you, there are movements afoot in Germany that are anti refugee as well as pro refugee. Germany is really being pushed to close its borders.

At the beginning of the crisis Germany welcomed refugees from war torn Syria. The train stations were full of welcoming Germans. When asked “why they are so welcoming?” one woman said, “Because we are human beings!”

Let’s remember that this is the Germany of the children’s children of Hitler’s Holocaust who systematically killed the Jews under the Nazis. But up to today they have in a most remarkable way **refused the evil and have chosen the good...**

I hope and pray that they will continue to provide a compassionate haven for these dear displaced people, for as we all know, the Germans who have worked so hard to choose the good, still have their critic whose voices get louder...

At the same time as Germany was accepting immigrants, Hungary was putting up a razor wire fence to keep refugees out.

Hungary is now all about the law, regulations, staying in camps. They are not refugees they are *illegal migrants* and they must be stopped in their tracks before the Hungarian culture is lost and overwhelmed. So, says the PM of Hungary Victor Oban.

South of the Canadian border Donald Trump is using the same ideology to justify a wall to keep illegal migrants out. The children of Mexican border crossers have been separated from their parents and kept in holding centers with world consternation at the lack of compassion...

Do we see the difference in approach? This is what the Messiah had to learn. Which approach is the better? Where is the good choice going to take us? This is our learning curve too!

We need to know to how to refuse the evil and how to choose the good!

In our church life we discover that whatever we focus on grows.

Thus, if we think positively about everything that New St. James is doing as a church community, the positives will grow in NSJ. The converse is also true. If we are negative about NSJ, that will grow.

So, if we are to be a faithful church we have to turn off the negative talk, the negative ideas and the gloom and doom. Because if we don't we will get more of them.

New St. James, although challenged in some areas, is actually doing very well. Thinking positively, we could balance the budget this year for the first time in several years. Thinking positively and faithfully, we may call a new minister, hopefully the one who God want us to call, because we have been diligent in prayer and the search process and we have a wonderful search team!

Our focus needs to be to see New St. James **thrive**. Why? Because a thriving church is so wonderful to be a part of! Everything begins to rock! Things get done. People step up. People develop ownership. They grow spiritually. The needs of people in the community and refugees are met with kindness and the Kingdom of God comes to earth, right here in London on Oxford street, as it did in little Palestine so long ago.

In our personal lives it is just the same.

If we choose the good and focus on that, we will get more of it.

What is the temptation?

The temptation when something bad happens is to dwell on it, ruminate on it, preoccupy on it. We pray about it negatively in a kind of moaning and that unfortunately brings more of the same for the universe responds to what we attract. The negative attracts the negative. The positive attracts the positive. It is part of the created order.

But there is a way forward. It's called faith.

Faith is positive, faith liberates us and if we use faith visioning we empower ourselves.

Jesus said: "Whatsoever things you ask for in prayer, believe that you have them already and they shall be yours." Why? Because the positive attracts the positive.

If we want to be successful in life we must **refuse** to think negatively, talk negatively or act negatively. We must **refuse** gloom and doom scenarios and look on the bright side of life.

Hope is our friend here, for as Jean Paul Sartre said: "Hope begins on the other side of despair" and as St Paul says we are **saved in Hope**.

Alaina Smith was leaving her workplace carrying a shopping bag of personal items- a framed photo of her husband and other personal things. She stumbled her way to her car, threw in her stuff and drove home sobbing. She had just been fired.

For weeks afterwards, she struggled with anxiety and shame. Would she ever get another job? "Firing doesn't happen to someone like me" she thought over and over. Her whole world had become negative. Her husband tried his best to comfort her. At night she fought insomnia and nightmares.

About a month afterwards she saw a challenge to write a story about overcoming obstacles for the series Chicken Soup for the Soul.

The writing prompt arrested her: “What changes did you make to help you cope with these issues and turn negative into positive?”

There it was! The **Messianic** quest: In the middle of the negative to find and follow the positive. Could she do it?

She knew there were people who were trying to help her on this journey and so she decided to write thank-you cards to whoever helped her. She wrote a card to a friend, who said in her thanks back to her, “In addition to feeling appreciated I got to see the good stuff you liked IN FRONT OF ME with this card. It reminded me of the ways I can be a good friend to you! This means so much to me.”

Soon afterwards another friend who was battling her own unemployment, after receiving one of Alaina’s cards wrote back gratefully to her. So, the gratitude began to ripple into waves as she sent card after card!

Alaina said **that writing thank-you cards was the best thing she could have done to dissolve her negativity and move forward.**

Whatever we focus on grows and with that positive focus positive things began to happen for her.

Shortly after her little program to acknowledge people as a way to help herself and others move forward, Alaina got a job that fitted her skills and interests.

She says: “My happy ending wasn’t only being employed, it was putting on a swimsuit and jumping into my gratitude wave pool.”

We, under God, can do the same, here, now, in New St. James. We are so blessed here. We have so much to be grateful for, starting with New St. James itself and this wonderful congregation, which is so warm and welcoming!

Will we continue here to follow **the Messiah’s quest**? Will we refuse the evil and choose the good? If we will, then... What we focus on, will grow! 😊