

PERCEPTION IS REALITY

(Acts 16:16-26)

I recently read a fascinating research study done by Vicki Medvec, a professor at Northwestern University. She studied Olympic medalists and she discovered that Bronze medalists (3rd place) were happier than Silver medalists (2nd place) and here is why. She found that Silver medalists (those who finished 2nd) tended to focus on how close they came to winning gold so they weren't satisfied with their 2nd place finish. Bronze medalists (The 3rd place finishers) tended to focus on how close they came to not winning a medal at all so they were just happy to receive one.

I think that study reveals a fascinating side of human nature: your focus determines your reality. How we feel isn't so much determined by our objective circumstances, for if that was the case, Silver Medalists would be happier than Bronze medalists because they had objectively achieved a better result.

Here's another way of saying it: your internal attitudes are more important than your external circumstances. All of us know people who can find something good to focus on even in the worst of circumstances. And all of us know someone who can find something bad to focus on even in the best of circumstances.

All this leads me to today's second reading and let me summarize what you are going to hear. After being bothered by a young girl with a fortune-telling talent, Paul casts out her demon, her handler is upset by the loss of the revenue generated by the girl, has Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and then thrown into jail where the jailer locks them in the most secure cell and clamps their feet in stocks.

Now that you have a summary of what I am going to read, let me read you the actual scripture as the Word of God comes to us from the 16th Chapter of Acts, verses 16 – 26.

It is difficult to imagine a situation much worse than that but the 25th verse says "Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening." That is what I call a positive perspective!

A statement I once read somewhere said: "You can't plan Pentecost. But if you pray for ten days, Pentecost might just happen." I don't think Paul could have planned the earthquake that created the opportunity for a jailbreak. The prisoners were set free, but they don't leave!

We can't script that kind of thing. We can't plan miracles. But, when we worship God in the worst of circumstances, we never know what is going to happen for worship sets the stage for miracles! Worship causes spiritual earthquakes that can change the topography of our life. Worship is a shifting of the tectonic plates in our life. It may not change our circumstances. But it will change our life.

One of my favorite books is Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, who wrote about his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. Everything was taken away from the prisoners. They were stripped of their clothing, their pictures, and their personal belongings, their names taken away and they were given numbers. Frankl was number 119,104. Everything was taken away from them except for one thing. Frankl said, "Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

I'm absolutely convinced that the most important choice we make every day is our attitude. The outcome of our life will be determined by our outlook on life and Paul and Silas are great examples of us. They were in prison. Their bodies were chained but their spirits were not and that is what Victor Frankl discovered in the concentration camp.

Let me share something I've learned from personal experience. When I get into a spiritual or emotional slump, it's usually because I've focused on the negative aspect of the situation. And, nine times out of ten, the solution is getting a perspective on the situation. That happened to me several weeks ago at the office. We had been involved in a series of conference calls with the Banks and the Investors, and all their lawyers, who were considering investing in 2 upcoming affordable housing projects. As we got closer to their final decisions, the calls seemed to focus more on problems that could potentially add considerable costs to the projects, costs that could keep the projects from even getting started. As the calls wore on, I had almost forgotten why we were doing what we were doing and I had to refocus on our dream of building 2 housing projects here in Topeka that would provide clean, safe, modern, and affordable housing for 100 families. We had been working on these projects for 2 years and you can imagine the stress as more time went by and I had to wonder if we were ever going to be able to fully answer all their questions. But as I continually prayed for strength and peace, my faith finally took over and I was able to relax knowing that God is in charge and that my responsibility was to do the best I could and leave the rest to God. As has often the case, I needed to change my focus. But how do we do that?

I think what we need to do is to refocus on the fundamentals of our faith, and, as a result, it will restore the joy of our salvation. We regain our spiritual equilibrium and peace. But nothing is more difficult than praising God when everything seems to be going wrong. Praising God even when we don't feel like it is one of the purest form of worship because it shows God that our worship isn't based on circumstances but is based on the character of God.

Napoleon Hill said, "Every negative event contains within it the seed of an equal or greater benefit." I believe that. Worship is the way we stay positive in negative circumstances. And it's not a placebo! It's reality. No matter how bad things get, as a follower of Christ, we have eternity in heaven to look forward to! My pain is real. But so is heaven. The good news is that the reality of this earth is temporary but the reality of heaven lasts forever!

The key is focusing on the right reality! I read a fascinating statistic this week. Research indicates that the average person talks to himself or herself about 50,000 times a day. Any guess on what percentage of self-talk is negative? That same research indicates that 80% of self-talk is negative. We say negative things to ourselves. "I'm not good enough." "I'm not smart enough" "And, to make it worse, people just don't like me." Once we go down that line, we let what's wrong with us keep us from worshipping what's right about God.

In her book, Mindfulness, Ellen Langer says that all of us have "premeditated cognitive commitments." Translation: we tend to see what we're looking for. A pessimist will always see something bad in a good situation and an optimist will always see something good in a bad situation. Paul gives some priceless advice in Philippians 4:8 and it's a list of eight premeditated cognitive commitments. He says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Here's a closing thought: the circumstances we complain about become chains that imprison us. It was worship that set Paul and Silas free physically. And it's worship that will set us free emotionally and spiritually for worship sets off a chain reaction. And as we focus on what is right with God, the prison doors that restrain us will fly open and the chains that bind us will break free.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN