

The Problem With Positive Thinking

On Sunday, we resumed our “Mastering Your Mind” sermon series by re-evaluating the merits of positive thinking.

1. Warm up question: As you look back over this past week, when did negative thinking have its greatest hold on you? When were you at your best in terms of positive thinking?

2. Dr. Gabriele Oettingen is a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg in Germany, and author of a book called “Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation.” She argues that positive thinking, standing alone, actually hinders us. In one study, women enrolled in a weight loss program were interviewed. They were asked questions like, “Imagine yourself being tempted to cheat on your diet. How do you think you’ll do?” Women who were more positive in their interviews actually ended up losing less weight than the negative women. In another study, students were asked to envision the week ahead. One group was asked to imagine a great week, and the other group was left free to picture their week however they chose. Oddly enough, the second group ended up feeling more energized and accomplished more!
 - a. Do these study results surprise you? Why or why not? Why do you suppose the positive thinkers performed less well?
 - b. Oettingen and other social scientists have concluded that fantasizing about happy outcomes often causes us to lower our guard, lose energy, and lose a sense of urgency to take action. Can you think of a time in your life when you bought into an unduly optimistic view of what might happen – and that ended up hurting you? Tell us what happened.

3. The solution, Oettingen says, is not to become a pessimist. People who get stuck dwelling on the negative fare no better than people who focus only on the positive. The answer, Oettingen says, is to consciously blend the two types of thought. Those who accomplish most, studies show, move through a three-step process:

Step 1 – Think of a wish and imagine it coming true – let yourself dream.

Step 2 – Then shift gears and imagine obstacles that stand in the way of your dream.

Step 3 – Develop a plan to overcome those obstacles. (Or if the obstacles are too great, step back, re-calibrate your dream, then move through the steps again.)

To illustrate this process, have a few people in your group respond to the following:

Step 1 – Describe a dream of yours.

Step 2 – Describe the realistic obstacles that could prevent realization of your dream.

Step 3 – Describe some steps you might be able to take to overcome those obstacles.

4. What do you think of Oettingen's three-step process? Does it ring true to you? Is it consistent with your life experience?
5. Jesus himself is an excellent example of Oettingen's process at work, while the Apostle Peter is an excellent example of the dangers of unchecked positive thinking. For a graphic example, read Matthew 16:13-26.
 - a. In this passage, Jesus makes several statements that represent bold positive thinking. Hint: You'll find at least one bold positive statement in each of the following verses: vs. 16-17, vs. 18, vs. 19, and vs. 21. See if you can identify each of these bold ideas.
 - b. When we roll these bold ideas together, how would you summarize Jesus' dream for what he would accomplish?
 - c. What obstacles did Jesus anticipate might disrupt his dream?
 - d. What was Jesus' plan for overcoming these obstacles?
 - e. Most people in Jesus' culture expected the Messiah to become political ruler of Israel, overthrow all their enemies, then establish a world-wide kingdom that would usher in a golden age of peace, justice, and prosperity. Peter apparently embraced that same "happy thought" view. So when Jesus tells Peter that he will face great suffering and be killed, how do you think that affected Peter? In that moment, what do you suppose Peter was thinking and feeling?
 - f. How would you paraphrase Peter's words in verse 21?
 - g. How would you paraphrase Jesus' words in verse 22?
 - h. How would you paraphrase Jesus' words in verses 23-26? What is he trying to teach you and me in these verses – especially in light of all we've been talking about tonight?
6. Jeff wrapped up Sunday's sermon by telling the stories of two people who seem to have intuitively understood and applied the "Jesus/Oettingen Model" of powerful thinking. In your own life, have you had the opportunity to observe someone live that model? Tell us about him or her.
7. As we close, let's go around the circle and each name a dream (large or small) that we want to apply the "Jesus/Oettingen Model" to. (For now, for the sake of time, just name the dream. But at home, in the next few days, write down your dream, the obstacles, and your plan for overcoming.)

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!" Philipians 4:13.