

Introduction

Let me tell you about two women, the first 30 pounds and the second 25 pounds overweight, who went on diets. The first lost seven pounds in the first two weeks and one pound in each of the next two. Encouraged by that result, she stayed on the diet and lost her excess weight in about six months. The second woman lost eight pounds in the first two weeks and one pound in each of the next two. Discouraged by that result, she went off the diet and stayed overweight.

The different responses of those two women raise an instructive question. Why did almost identical results encourage the one and discourage the other? Answer: It's the expectation effect. And that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Expectations in Human Life

In 587 B.C., the Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed its capital, Jerusalem and God's temple in it, and exiled the Jews into Babylon. Then in 537 B.C., after the Persians conquered the Babylonians, their king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

According to verses 8-9, they began rebuilding it a year after they returned by laying the foundation. When the foundation was completed, they then held a public celebration that elicited the mixed response of verses 10-12. The larger part of the Jewish people rejoiced and praised God for what had been done and what would be done. In verse 12 though, a small but significant part wept and expressed sorrow instead. The result was the strange scene in verse 13. The sound of rejoicing couldn't be distinguished from the sound of weeping.

Haggai 2:3 explains this mixed response. Those who were weeping were the older Jews who had seen the original temple of Solomon that the Babylonians destroyed. They expected that the new temple would be as glorious as that one was, but recognized when they saw its foundation that it wouldn't be. Far from it, the new temple seemed to them like

“nothing in comparison” to quote Haggai 2:3. But those who were rejoicing hadn’t seen Solomon’s temple, and thus, didn’t have that expectation. They had never had a temple, in fact, and were now overjoyed at the prospect of getting one.

It’s clear then why the same circumstance compelled some to weep and some to rejoice. It was the expectation they had. An expectation is the anticipation that something will be so. So, the older Jews who wept anticipated that the new temple would be as glorious as the first one was. Or the woman who quit the diet anticipated that her weight loss would be easy and quick. That’s expectation. It’s the anticipation that we’ll experience, achieve, or do something.

Expectations of course are a routine and pervasive part of ordinary human existence. Consider a sampling of the activities, experiences, and events of our day-to-day lives. We get married, buy a used car, give birth to a child, co-sign a loan, order a delivered pizza, go to college, enter our profession, go on a date, use an ATM, get a tooth filled, stop for a red light, and on it goes without end. The fact is that all of us have expectations of one kind or another in each of those activities, experiences, and events.

The Expectation Effect

And they profoundly affect us for good or ill. Take something as simple as waiting at a red light. If we anticipate that the light will turn green in 60 seconds and it turns green in 40, the 40 gladdens us. But if we anticipate that it will turn green in 20 seconds and it turns green in 40, the 40 annoys us. The very same experience elicits opposite responses, depending on our expectations – just as it did in the lives of the Jews in our text and in the lives of the two dieting women.

There is a physiological component to this. Dr. David Rock is an author and the Director of the NeuroLeadership Institute. In his book *Your Brain at Work*, he claims that expectation is **“central to our lives.”** He goes on to explain in physiological terms how it is. It involves a

chemical, the neurotransmitter called dopamine, that is released in the brain. When our expectations are met, there is a pleasant releasing of dopamine in the brain that makes us feel good. When they're unmet, there is a blocking of dopamine that makes us feel bad.

Whether Rock's explanation is true or not, it's consistent with what we know. Our expectations being met or exceeded affects how we feel and act for good. We feel encouraged, confident, calm, caring, or secure and act constructively as a result. In contrast, our expectations being unmet affects how we feel and act for ill. We feel discouraged, fearful, anxious, angry, or insecure and act destructively as a result.

Some years ago, the Youngstown Vindicator published an article about expectation in marriage. It cited a study that showed the crucial role it plays. Those who entered marriage with higher expectations became more easily disillusioned and divorced more frequently than those who entered it with lower expectations.

There's no doubt about it. Our expectations being met or exceeded affects how we feel and act for good. But our expectations being unmet affects how we feel and act for ill. That is the expectation effect.

Unrealistic Expectations

All of us of course want our expectations to be met and our text reveals one of the two defining factors that determine if they will be.

Let me ask you a question. Was the expectation of the older Jewish people who wept rooted in reality? In the 10th century B.C., Israel's great economic and military power enabled King Solomon to build a temple that was truly magnificent in quality and size. But now, in 536 B.C., Israel had no economic and military power. It was feasible for Israel to build a magnificent temple in the 10th century B.C. It wasn't feasible in the 6th century B.C. The expectation of the older Jewish people, therefore, wasn't rooted in reality. It was unrealistic.

And sometimes, so is ours. We sometimes have what are called "**expectation illusions.**" All of our expectations are based upon

assumptions we have about reality. Sometimes the assumptions upon which they're based are false ones. When they are, what we have are unrealistic expectations, ones that aren't rooted in reality.

Expectations can be unrealistic in one of two ways.

First, what we anticipate is less than reality allows. Our expectations are too low, which is detrimental. It cultivates injustice, mediocrity, or immorality. So, parents dismiss their 10 year-old son's constant misbehavior as **"boys will be boys."** They have low expectations of him, don't discipline him, and his bad behavior continues. Unrealistically low expectations are detrimental.

Expectations can be unrealistic in a second way. What we anticipate is more than reality allows. Our expectations are too high, which is detrimental. It defeats us not motivates us. Investment advisor Nate Tobik contends just that: **"Nothing can demotivate as quickly as unreasonable expectations. This is just as true in finance as it is in marriage, or in a career. Twenty-two year olds who expect to be sitting behind the mahogany desk on the top floor in three years are in for a rude awakening. Individuals who expect marriage to be bliss will be disappointed."** Tobik is right.

Realistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations, as you can see, are detrimental. So, let's be realistic about ours. Let's root them in reality.

We root them in reality by doing three things. First, gather all the facts we can about the object of our expectation. Study our experiences, the experiences of others, and what people in the know write and say about it, beginning with the Bible. Second, use good logic to draw valid conclusions (assumptions) from the facts. And third, base our expectations on those valid conclusions.

A wife I know, not of our church, is seeing a therapist who gave her a list titled **"My 25 Rights in Marriage."** She is exercising those rights including number 4, **"I have the right to be angry."** Thanks to her

therapist, she now has an expectation. She anticipates that anger will motivate her husband to be and do what she wants him to be and do.

But we know better don't we? We gather the facts. We study our anger, the anger of others, and what people in the know say and write about it. We learn these facts when we do. Anger lets loose more than we can predict, control, or retrieve. Anger elicits anger. Anger feeds on anger. Anything that can be done with anger can be better done without it. And anger that's laced with malice or pride (99.9%) is sinful. Having gathered the facts, we then use good logic to draw a valid conclusion from them. It's that anger always makes people and things worse not better. We then base our expectation on that conclusion. We anticipate that anger will alienate her husband not motivate him.

The moral of the story is this. For our benefit and the benefit of others, we must make our expectations realistic ones. We make them that by basing them on informed and logical conclusions (assumptions).

Expectation and Righteousness

Now that we know about expectation, let's consider it in relation to righteousness. To be righteous means to routinely think, feel, will and act rightly, as Jesus would if He were us. Now, each of us, as His disciples, has one of three expectations in that regard.

One is that we're "**just forgiven.**" Assuming we're "**only human,**" we anticipate that we'll routinely think, feel, will, and act wrongly (sinfully). So, we received criticism with defensiveness and anger before we became disciples and will continue to do so. Or we envied those who eclipsed us before we became disciples and will continue to do so. The only real difference discipleship makes is this. Before we became disciples, we didn't repent and get God's forgiveness when we sinned, but now, we do. We're just forgiven.

Another expectation we can have is that we're perfect. Assuming that the Holy Spirit eradicates our sinful nature by sanctifying us, we anticipate that we'll always think, feel, will, and act rightly and never

wrongly. I was taught just that growing up and assumed it to be true. So, I went to the altar at church, asked the Holy Spirit to sanctify me, and anticipated, for instance, I'd never get angry again. We're perfect.

Many disciples of Jesus have one of those expectations, but neither is rooted in reality. The first is unrealistically low. It anticipates less than reality allows. The second is unrealistically high. It anticipates more than reality allows. Both, therefore, are detrimental. Anticipating we can't routinely think, feel, will, and act rightly, we don't intend to and, consequently, don't. Or anticipating we will always think, feel, will, and act rightly, we get discouraged each time we don't and eventually quit. Anticipating perfection or nothing, we end up with nothing.

But there's a third expectation we can have. It's based on two assumptions. First, we aren't "**only human.**" We are human plus indwelt by the empowering and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. Second, our sinful nature isn't eradicated. It can and will direct us if we turn to it. Based on those assumptions, we anticipate that we will *increasingly* think, feel, will, and act rightly – that we will grow in righteousness until the day we die. We anticipate that thinking, feeling, willing, and acting rightly will eventually be normal for us and thinking, feeling, willing, and acting wrongly exceptional.

That expectation is rooted in reality. It anticipates what reality allows and so is beneficial. We have a realistic vision of how righteous we can become in the power of the Holy Spirit. Motivated by that vision, we then do what is necessary to achieve it. We devotedly engage Jesus and His kingdom at hand in the specific ways I've preached and taught before. That in turn makes us increasingly righteous.

Conclusion

That then is the message of our text. Expectations are central to our lives. Unrealistic ones affect how we feel and act for ill. Realistic ones affect how we feel and act for good. That is the expectation effect and its demand is clear. Make your expectations realistic ones.