

Introduction

I'd like to begin by reading Ogden Nash's poem *The Outcome of Mr. McCloud's Gratitude*: **"When Thanksgiving comes twice, who walks proud, as that grateful optimist Mr. McCloud. * Things you and I would greatly deplore, McCloud found ways to be grateful for. * This was his conscientious attitude, double thanksgiving, double gratitude. * Whatever happened no matter how hateful, McCloud found excuses for being grateful. * To be grateful, he really strained his wits. * Had he hiccups, he was grateful it wasn't the fits. * Had he hives, he was grateful it wasn't the measles. * Had he mice, he was grateful it wasn't weasels. * Had he roaches, he was grateful it wasn't tarantulas. * Did his wife go to San Francisco, he was glad it wasn't Los Angeles. * Mrs. McCloud, on the other hand, was always complaining to beat the band. * If she had the mumps, she found it no tonic, to be told to be grateful it wasn't Bubonic. * If the cooked walked out, she would scream like a mink, instead of being grateful she still had a sink. * So, she tired of her husband's cheery note, and stuffed a silver tea tray down his throat. * And he remarked from the floor where they found him reclining. * I'm just a McCloud with a silver lining."**

Let me ask you a question. Are you like Mr. McCloud or Mrs. McCloud? Is your life a continual feast or a continual famine. Turn to Proverbs 15:13,15 and we'll see.

Sad Hearts and Broken Spirits

Let's start with verse 13 and the words "the spirit is broken." I once talked with a mother whose son lost his job three days after his wife left him. She called me and asked me to speak with him because he was, and I quote her, **"disheartened."** That's what it means to have a broken spirit. It means to be disheartened.

But what is it exactly that breaks people's spirits? Look at verse 15

and the words **“the afflicted.”** Let me ask you. Who are the afflicted? The answer is, **“all of us are.”** It isn't a matter of “if” bad things are going to happen to us but “how often” and “to what degree.” The fact is that bad things constantly happen to us all and will continue to do so until the day we die. That's just the way life is. In one *Ziggy cartoon*, Ziggy is driving on a highway and passes a sign that says: **“HARSH REALITIES THE REST OF THE TRIP.”** That's right. It's a fallen world filled with fallen people and bad things, as a result, constantly happen to us all. And that, most say, is what breaks people's spirits.

But the wise man, in verse 13, disagrees. This verse has two lines. One says, **“When the heart is sad, the spirit is broken.”** Notice what it is that makes people disheartened. It's a sad heart. The other line says, **“A joyful heart makes a cheerful face.”** Notice what it is that makes people cheerful or glad. It's a joyful heart. Summarizing the verse then, people are disheartened because they have a sad heart. They're cheerful or glad because they have a joyful heart.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that the key word is “heart.” The Hebrew word translated “heart” has different meanings depending on the context. In this context, it refers to people's thoughts and attitudes, which makes the message of verse 13 clear. Sadness and gladness, depression and joy, are matters of thoughts and attitudes not circumstances. Derek Kidner says it well in his commentary on this verse, **“Thoughts and attitudes, not circumstances, are decisive.”** It's sad thoughts and attitudes that make people disheartened. It's joyful thoughts and attitudes that make them cheerful or glad.

Verse 15 drives that point home with a happy metaphor. Using the word “heart” again, it says that **“a cheerful heart”** has a continual feast. The message of the metaphor is a vital one. Your life and mine will be a continual feast (cheerful) or a continual famine (disheartened), depending on what our thoughts and attitudes are.

The Law of the Mind

Inherent in verses 13 and 15 is one of the fundamental truths of human personality.

I'm feeling cheerful now because I'm in church doing something I love – preaching. But I can make myself agitated and annoyed in a matter of seconds. How? It's by choosing to think about bad things like the 2004 Boston Red Sox, Congress's billions of dollars of pork barrel projects, materialistic televangelists, or any number of other things.

That illustrates a fundamental truth of human personality that's inherent in verses 13 and 15. Thoughts and attitudes create feelings. Psychologists consider thinking and feeling as functions of the mind - because thinking and feeling always go together. Feelings don't just happen. They're caused. They're fostered and sustained by the thoughts and attitudes we have in our minds. Those thoughts and attitudes always give rise to and nurture either constructive or destructive feelings.

There is no escaping this. Poet Gerald Manley Hopkins said, "**the mind has cliffs.**" He meant that the mind has its laws that are just as rigorous as the law of gravity. One of those laws is what I just shared. Thoughts and attitudes create feelings. We can't step off a roof and not fall to the ground. In the same way, we can't have bad thoughts and attitudes and not have destructive feelings. And we can't have good thoughts and feelings and not have constructive feelings. That's the gist of the wise man's message in verses 13 and 15.

That makes our calling clear. Have a joyful or cheerful mind. Our mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We can place it on whatever we choose. So, we choose not to place it on things that create destructive feelings. We choose to place it on things that create constructive feelings instead. We do that in two ways.

Accentuate the Positive Things

My brother Danny attended Cleveland Bible College (now Malone University) years ago. His favorite professor there was John Grafton Sr. John was a wonderful man who loved his students and often encouraged

them with these words: **“Get the barbs out of your mind. Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.”** That’s the first way we create constructive feelings. Accentuate the positive things.

People talk and joke all the time about being optimists and pessimists. It’s said, for instance, that a pessimist is someone who complains about the noise when opportunity knocks. An optimist is someone who invites it in. I don’t know about you but I’m an optimist and here’s why. Life is a mixed bag: problems – possibilities; costs – benefits; what is lost – what is gained; what can’t be done – what can be done; the bad in people – the good in people; and much more. It’s true. Life is a mixed bag comprised of both positive and negative things. But guess what I’ve found. With rare exceptions here and there, the positives outweigh the negatives.

My philosophy, therefore, is this. Address the negative but accentuate the positive. I examine the negative to determine if I can do anything constructive about it and try to if I can. But otherwise, I forget about it and *dwell on* and *take advantage of* the positive instead.

I once counseled a Christian who was still bitter about her husband leaving her three years before. I shared with her in the course of doing so a basic principle of human life. Every ending is a new beginning. **“So,”** I told her, **“Stop dwelling on the ending, your divorce, and start dwelling on the new beginning instead.”** I then explained to her, from 1 Corinthians 7, what that new beginning was. It upset her though that I did. **“You’re trivializing what I lost,”** she objected. But I didn’t. The problem wasn’t that I trivialized what she lost. It was that she trivialized what she gained. She didn’t accentuate the positive – the freedom of single life, which she could devote to knowing and serving Jesus. She accentuated the negative, the loss of her marriage, which she couldn’t do anything about. That in turn made her bitter and sad. The moral of her story is clear. Accentuate the positive things.

To do that of course, we must first discover what they are. And to discover what they are, we must give deeper thought to the reality

around us. Optimism is rooted in reality. We discover the positive, therefore, by examining and analyzing that reality. Ann Landers, for instance, claimed that one out of four people has a mental illness of some kind and to some degree. But *considering* how delicate and finely tuned the brain and glandular systems are, you'd think the percentage would be much higher than that, maybe even four out of four. The more I know about the brain and glandular system, the more I appreciate the wonder it is that three out of four people aren't mentally ill. You get my point. Give deeper thought to the reality around you. You'll discover and can then accentuate the positive if you do.

Accentuate the Things Above

The second way we create constructive feelings is found in the other text I read, Colossians 3:1-4. Accentuate "**the things above.**"

Look at the first line in verse 1 and verse 3. When we decide to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit does something supernatural. He regenerates us. The result is that we "**have died**", verse 3, and have been "**raised up with Christ**", verse 1. The first means He empowers us to disengage from Satan, sin, and the world. The second means He empowers us to engage what Paul calls "**the things above.**" "**The things above**" refers to invisible spiritual realities, specifically God and His kingdom. Jesus is pleading my case to Father God, right now as I speak. God causes all things to work together for my good because I love Him. The humble are the greatest to God and the proud the least. Those are just a few of the countless "**things above,**" all of which the Holy Spirit empowers us to engage.

Notice what Paul commands us to do in verse 2 because He does. Set our minds on (meaning, "accentuate") those things above. The fact that he commands that implies that it isn't something that the Holy Spirit does for us. On the contrary, it's something that we ourselves must intend to do and here's why.

People apart from Jesus are burdened by the habit of dwelling on

things less than God and His kingdom – what I call “**the things below.**” “**The things below**” are the clutter, interests, and concerns of the secular world around us. Most men, for instance, think far more often and deeply about sports than God. And most women think far more often and deeply about the smartness of their children than the smartness of Jesus. It’s a fact. People apart from Jesus are burdened by the habit of dwelling on the things below, the things less than God and His kingdom.

Now, the Holy Spirit doesn’t automatically break that habit of our minds when we decide to follow Jesus. According to verse 2, he expects us to break it instead. He expects us to purposely open our consciousness to the things above, to direct and redirect our thoughts to them. He in turn works in us as we do. The result is that the habit of dwelling on the things above eventually replaces the habit of dwelling on the things below. It eventually becomes something we naturally do.

While I was eating a salad last week, for instance, I began thinking about the long and complicated process that enabled me to do so, beginning with the farmer planting the lettuce. That in turn made me think about the fact that I depend on so many people for my existence. Which in turn made me think about the fact that God doesn’t. He’s self-existent, has the power of being within Himself. He depends on literally no one or no thing, therefore, for His existence. That’s an awesome thing for which I began to praise Him.

That illustrates how we accentuate the things above. We perceive and interpret the activities and experiences of everyday life, big and small, in terms of God and His kingdom. We purposely ponder *what they tell us about* or *how they relate to* Him and it.

Conclusion

I end with the question with which I began. Are you like Mr. McCloud or Mrs. McCloud? Is your life a continual feast or a continual famine? Decide to follow Jesus. Then accentuate the positive things and the things above. It will be a continual feast if you do.