

The Power of Negative Thinking

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



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P.O. Box 7100
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Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes; fear the LORD, and depart from evil. (Proverbs 3:5–7)

“Accentuate the Positive” was not only a popular song many years ago, but it has been the popular philosophy for America for many years. A prominent preacher in the East has incorporated it into religion with the catchy phrase, “the power of positive thinking.” It has become a fad today and a form of fanaticism with multitudes of people. There are dedicated disciples to this cult that make it a sin to say no to anything. You have to be positive. You are not to use the word *no*. In fact the word *not* has all but disappeared from the English language in the thinking of many people today. *Negative* is a bad word, and you don’t use it in polite society. The chamber of commerce has adopted the positive approach and developed it. Politicians and automobile dealers are always in a positive frame of mind. Radio and television announcers are splendid examples of the positive cult that is in our midst. In fact our nation has had difficulty saying no to any nation that wanted to borrow money. Today many parents just don’t say no to a child. They think they must not say no to any of their whims or any of their wishes. Someone asked a modern father the other day, “Do you strike your children?” He said, “Only in self-defense.” America today has become the land of the positive and the home of yes-men.

Men Like Moses

We need today men and women who can do some old-fashioned negative thinking like Moses, who turned his back on the pleasures of sin, said no to the throne of Egypt, and walked out to take a stand for God. We need young people today who can say no to temptation, as Joseph said no to Potiphar’s wife. We need to put an emphasis on the negative as well as on the positive.

The Bible is filled, it is true, with positive thinking. It is likewise true that the Bible is filled with negative thinking. We need to be well-balanced; we shouldn’t go overboard on either side.

You see, God actually began with a negative in the Garden of Eden with man. God wrote in neon lights over that garden the word *no*.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. (Genesis 2:16–17)

God put a *not* over the Garden of Eden, and He asked man to do a little negative thinking.

It was Satan who came along and suggested that man emphasize the positive. He said to him, “I don’t think you ought to put the emphasis on the negative. I think it would be very nice if you did eat of the tree because you would then have the knowledge of good and evil. Then you would become as gods.”

It is interesting to see as you move through the Bible that the Ten Commandments major on the negative. Eight out of the Ten Commandments contain the negative (Exodus 20:1–17):

***Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt not make unto thee any carved image.
Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.***

Thou shalt not murder.
Thou shalt not commit adultery.
Thou shalt not steal.
Thou shalt not bear false witness.
Thou shalt not covet.

It looks as if God puts the emphasis on the negative in the Ten Commandments.

Then when you come to the first beatitude given in the Bible, which is in the first psalm, you find that it really majors in the negative. There are three negatives in one verse:

Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. (Psalm 1:1)

Other Negative Examples

Then when you come to the Sermon on the Mount, to which the liberals like to run, you will find many dead-end streets that are blocked with the negative. You will find our Lord saying, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law” (Matthew 5:17). *Think not* is negative thinking. Then He says, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth” (6:19). Also He said, “Judge not” (7:1). Our Lord put the emphasis on the negative. Then as you come to the epistles you find there also an emphasis on the negative. Paul has a little expression that occurs in many of his epistles, and it is “Know ye not?” (e.g., Romans 6:3, 16; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 5:6; 6:19). Paul suggests to believers that they try the negative approach. Also Paul says, “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth” (Romans 14:22). Then when we come to the marvelous love chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13, we find that, although love is the subject of the chapter, there is an emphasis on the negative. It tells us that love “rejoiceth *not* in iniquity” (v. 6) and that “love *never* faileth” (v. 8). That is a good, hearty negative.

Then when you come to the final message which our Lord Jesus Christ gives to the church, the Laodicean church, the lukewarm church that was torn between yes and no, you will see He did not mind giving a negative message. He said, “Thou ... knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). You will find all through the Word of God an emphasis on the negative.

Now this does not always mean negation; nor does it mean that you are being contrary. It does not mean that you are being disagreeable if you emphasize the negative. You see, the negative sometimes is the most positive approach you can make. For instance, I see signs which read Do Not Touch in many places of industry, especially around certain materials. That is one of the most positive statements you can find, and the emphasis is upon the negative.

The church has come to the place where it is attempting to take a position that reveals it has no conviction whatsoever. As a result, compromise is the motto of the present-day church.

We do need people who will say *no* at the proper time, who will say *no* in a lovely way, who will say *no* without being controversial, who will say *no* to that which is wrong, and say *yes* to that which is right.

The book of Proverbs reveals the power of negative thinking; in fact, that is the approach made in this book. The book contains short sentences. Cervantes defined proverbs as “short sentences drawn from long experience.” Evidently proverbs originated in the East, but many countries have proverbs. Let me cite just a few that have interested me a great deal. One comes

out of the Far East. Laotse, the co-founder of Taoism, said, “Doing nothing is better than being busy doing nothing.” There is a Danish proverb that says, “Give to a pig when it grunts, and to a child when it cries. You will have a fine pig and a bad child.” Then there is a good old American proverb that goes like this: “Nobody don’t never get somethin’ for nothin’ nowhere, no time, nohow.” That is probably the best American proverb that we have. There are interesting proverbs that come from a variety of backgrounds.

What Proverbs Says

But the book of Proverbs is comprised of gems of wisdom that God has given to us. They are written in a form of poetry. Hebrew poetry is not achieved by rhyming or using dactylic hexameter. It is attained by what is known as parallelism in the form of couplets of two related clauses. There are different kinds of parallelism. There is synonymous parallelism, which states a truth, then restates it. There is antithetic parallelism, which states a truth, then states the negative. This is what we have before us: antithetic or contrast in parallelism. The positive is given, then the negative is given, and we need both.

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart” (Proverbs 3:5). This is the positive side. The word *trust* is one that occurs over one hundred times in the Old Testament. Actually it is the Old Testament word for the New Testament word *believe*. Bringing it up into New Testament terminology makes it the same as what Paul said to the Philippian jailor, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). It is the Old Testament way of saying the same thing.

To trust means to lean upon. A wonderful picture of this is given in the book of Genesis where it says that Abraham “believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). He trusted God. The picture is of a man who had exhausted all of his resources. Abraham had gone down every avenue and had found them dead-end streets. He reached the place in life when he was a century old—one hundred years old. Yet he considered not his own deadness nor the deadness of Sarah’s womb, and he believed God when He said He would give them a son. He had nothing else to hold onto or look to in this world. He just believed God. It simply means that he leaned on God. He could do nothing else but lock his arms around God and hold on.

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart” means your total personality. When you come to Jesus Christ, you do not bring just your emotions, although I do not think you ought to leave out your emotions. It is too bad today when emotion is revealed in the church that the critics say, “That is too emotional”; yet these same people will go to a movie and dampen two or three handkerchiefs. After all, a block of ice is weepy! They are not really moved. But we need to bring our emotions when we come to Christ. We also need to bring our intellects when we come to Christ. We need to bring our wills when we come to Christ. And we need to bring our bodies when we come to Christ. Trust in the LORD with all thine heart—your total personality and every fiber of your being. That is what He is saying.

Now we have the negative side of Proverbs 3:5: “And lean not unto thine own understanding.” The positive is stated, then the parallelism is negative. It comes at it from the other side. “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart”; then the negative is “lean not unto thine own understanding.”

Apparently God has made man the most helpless creature in His universe. There is no angel as helpless as man; no creature beneath in the animal world is as helpless as he is. Even the

dumbest of animals have an instinct that guides them. Man is helpless from the moment he is born, and even for the first few years he is perfectly helpless. There are some creatures that from the moment of their birth can take care of themselves.

Man is also born ignorant. Most animals know at the time they are born all they need to know on the physical side. Man, a human being, higher than the animals, is ignorant. I don't know about you, but I didn't know *a* from *b* when I was born. I had to go to school. Man has to be educated and trained to cope with his environment.

Then when man learns and begins to use the front lobe of his brain, there is a danger of his thinking he is smart. He learns to depend on his intellect. There are a great many who think they are smart enough to get along without God, and they are living without God today. With biting irony, Isaiah in his day reminded his people how foolish it was to try to live without God. He said: "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass, his master's crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider" (Isaiah 1:3).

Look at the animals he uses for an illustration. The ox is noted for being dumb; we still have the expression "dumb as an ox." But the ox has sense enough to know his owner. And the ass, the little long-eared animal, doesn't have a reputation for brains. Those little animals do not have Ph.D. degrees. And the ass is not known for his brilliance. Yet when his master comes and puts hay in the crib, he has sense enough to know who is feeding him. But man doesn't know. Man thinks he is smart and leans on his own understanding.

The writer of the Proverbs, Solomon, wanted to enforce this. Solomon was a man who was wiser than any man on this earth, and he still holds that reputation. He said, "Lean not on your own understanding." He went on to say, "Be not wise in thine own eyes" (3:7). Then following through Proverbs to chapter 28, he added, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool" (v. 26). What strong language! He who trusts in his own heart is a *fool*.

I believe that there is a proverb to fit every person on this earth. They characterize many men in the Word of God. You can go back into the Old Testament and find those who were trusting in the Lord with all their hearts. You can find those who were wise in their own eyes and were going their own way.

For an illustration let's take the servant of Abraham. This man was sent to the land of Haran to get a bride for Abraham's son. You would think that this man, a man of the world, so experienced and capable that he had charge of all Abraham had, would be smart enough to make a choice and select a bride for Isaac. But he wasn't. And he knew he wasn't. When he reached the land of Haran, he paused. Listen to him:

And he said, O LORD God of my master, Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and show kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water.
(Genesis 24:12-13)

He did not know which one to choose. So he asked the Lord to give him an indication and show him which girl he was to select. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart." That means in all the relationships of life. This man depended upon God. What a wonderful thing it is to watch him as God leads him!

Turn over a few pages and you will come to another man whose name is Jacob. He comes to that same land, and he comes on the same kind of a mission, a bride for himself. At the same time he is running away from his brother who certainly is planning to kill him. As he comes to

the same place, you would think that he would depend upon God. He is in a foreign country and doesn't know where to turn, but look at him: "And he said, Lo, it is yet high day, neither is it time that the cattle should be gathered together: water ye the sheep, and go and feed them" (Genesis 29:7). He hasn't been in that land fifteen minutes, standing there at that well with the other shepherds, but Jacob is telling them how to raise their sheep; he's telling them how to feed them and where to take them.

What a smart one he was! He was not depending upon God at all. He was not looking to God. In fact he was in the position of giving advice to anybody that wanted it, and in this instance he was giving it unasked. All the way through this account here is a clever boy depending on his own ability. Before long it brings tragedy into his life. He is the example of the one who was "leaning on his own understanding." He is the example of the one who was "wise in his own conceit." He was the one who thought he could handle his own life.

Two other men in the Scriptures illustrate this proverb. First, there is David, the shepherd boy. Even when he went out against the giant, he could say: "The LORD who delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37). David is a man who throughout his life depended upon God and could say at the conclusion of his life, "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). He had depended upon Him to lead him through life.

Another man with whom David was associated was King Saul, a big man in his own estimation. On more than one occasion he took matters in his own hands; and when Samuel, God's prophet, challenged him, he said in substance, "Well, after thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that God's commandment was a very foolish one, and I have acted on my own decision in the matter."

And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king. (1 Samuel 15:22–23)

"Be not wise in thine own eyes." Trust not in your own heart or your own understanding.

There are other men who fit this proverb whose stories are recorded in the Old Testament. There was a man whose name was Jeremiah, a prophet of God who wanted to quit because the message he was relaying to his people was breaking his own heart. In fact he went to the Lord and said he wanted to quit.

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not refrain. (Jeremiah 20:9)

He found that he couldn't quit because God's Word was like fire in his bones. Then he sent God's message to the king whose name was Jehoiakim. Now Jehoiakim was a young man who was wise in his own eyes, trusting in his own strength and ability. When the written message from Jeremiah was read to him, he got a penknife, cut it to shreds, and pitched it into the fire. That's what he thought of God's Word. The history of these two men reveals the foolishness of Jehoiakim and the wisdom of Jeremiah.

Examples From the New Testament

Also I think of men in the New Testament who fit this proverb. I think of Simon Peter and Judas, both disciples of our Lord and both denied Him. One sold Him and the other denied Him. But Simon Peter was never wise in his own conceits; he was not a man who trusted his own ability. When he fell down, he always got up and came back to the Lord. After Peter failed so miserably, our Lord appeared to him privately. We are not given any of the details because it was a private matter. But I have a notion that Simon Peter wept out his soul and said, “Lord, I’ve failed You again! Why don’t You turn me out? Why don’t You get somebody else?” Our Lord didn’t turn him out because here was a man who was trusting in the Lord with all his heart. But Judas—what went on in that crooked mind I do not know. There is a mystery about that man, as there is always a mystery about crookedness and iniquity. But deep down within this man was confidence in his own wisdom and ability. Even at the last moment when he admitted he had betrayed innocent blood and could have gone to Christ in repentance, he was still leaning on his own understanding.

Paul was no different when he was Saul of Tarsus. Giving his own testimony, Paul said, “I verily thought within myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, which thing I also did” (Acts 26:9–10). He was following his own wisdom. He was a smart boy, the most brilliant of the Pharisees. He was going his own way until that day on the Damascus road when Jesus Christ appeared to him. Then he said, “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision” (26:19). That day he yielded himself to Christ and learned to trust Him with all his heart. No more did he lean on his own understanding. In all his ways he acknowledged Him, and God did direct his paths.

In conclusion let me turn to a statement that our Lord gave which I think is the greatest negative statement that has ever been given. It has three negatives in it:

He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
(John 3:18)

There are three *nots* in that verse; you could hardly get more than that in one sentence. We think that a double negative is bad, but in the Greek language the double negative is for emphasis, and the triple negative increases the emphasis. Here it is triple. “He that believeth on him,” that is, on the Lord Jesus Christ, that He is the Son of God who was lifted up on a cross, the one whom God gave that men might not perish but have everlasting life. “He that believeth on him is not condemned.” But if you do not believe, you are condemned already. You and I are born lost sinners. We are born in a world of sinners. We have a sinful nature. “He that believeth not is condemned already.” Why? “Because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

Our Lord put up three great signs at dead-end streets. He says if you believe in Him you are not condemned. On the other hand, He says if you do not believe, you are condemned. And you are condemned because you believe not. You see, that *not* takes us down the road of leaning on our own understanding.

John Locke was the English philosopher who introduced empiricism into philosophy. He is the man who is responsible, some think today, for dialectical materialism, which is the basis of Communism. It is thought that Karl Marx got his philosophy from John Locke. He was a

materialist until the last fourteen years of his life. Up to that point John Locke had trusted in his own wisdom. He was a brilliant fellow. Until then this man had gone in his own strength, and he was clever. Then one day he was brought face to face with Jesus Christ, and he made his decision. He made it for Him. Before he died he said, “The Scriptures have God for their author; eternity for their object; truth without any mixture of error; and doctrine of fact for their subject matter.” He came to the place of trusting the Lord with all his heart.

Michael Faraday’s biography was one of the most thrilling biographies I read while in college. He is the man who introduced what is known as theoretical science, and today millions of dollars are being expended on experimentation. He is known as the greatest scientific experimenter the world has ever seen. This man came to the Lord Jesus Christ. He no longer trusted in his own understanding but learned to trust the Lord with all his heart. Then he wrote, “But why will people go astray when they have this blessed Book of God to guide them?”

Earlier I said there was a proverb for every person. There is a proverb for you. Which is it? Can it be said of you that you are trusting the Lord with all your heart? Or are you given to the positive way of thinking and leaning on your own understanding? Which proverb fits you?