



David Hines © 1 October 2017

## Introduction

Its quite difficult trying to pick a sermon topic a month ahead, so Clay can put it onto the church noticeboard.

So a month ago I took a big gamble, and I thought, On October the first we will have had the election, but we still won't know who is going to be the government.

It'll be a nail-biting time, when some of us will be feeling cynical, and some will be feeling relentlessly positive. But which will prove right?

So that is my topic: relentless positivity – the pros and cons.

- I first want to say It's not a new idea; it goes back several thousand years.
- And second, I'd like to look at a classical statement about the many sides of relentless positivity, in the Bible, in St Paul's letter to the Philippians.
- And lastly I'd like to say there are problems with relentless positivity. It **can** fix some of our problems, but certainly not all of them

## The history of relentless positivity

So firstly, what is the history of this idea

I did a Google search, and found it has been used by:

- business training gurus. If you want your business to grow, you need to get your executives together and teach them some relentless positivity. One example was Pam Warren in Britain who was in a train crash and spent 18 months getting her face repaired; and began a career in helping people “turn huge negative experiences into positives, and battling on”
- It's been used by church team builders. I found a book for pastors about relentless positivity in 2015
- I found a Baptist minister in Auckland two weeks ago. He preached a sermon saying Jesus was relentlessly positive, because he could walk. Hmm???
- Another example was a concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl. He became a psychotherapist, after World war two... And for him the turning point was when he was in a crowd of prisoners being herded along by the guards, whipping people till some could not stand up. And another inmate alongside said to him ... if only our wives could see us now. I hope they are better off. And Frankl noticed this other prisoner had the same source of hope... He looked back on that moment and said when you cannot do anything positive; you can still love your wife and draw energy from that. So positivity in times of trouble is definitely part of psychology.
- It's also part of marriage counselling. A book on happier marriage recommended, when you are in conflict with your spouse, do something positive for them.

- Relentless positivity appears horoscopes. An article in 1998. It says people born under sign of Aquarius are full of positivity. So that may be encouraging if you are born between the 20th of January and the 18th of February (but not so good for the rest of us. )
- When I was training to be a minister in 1959, we were trained to use client-centred therapy; And that too was aimed at building people's self-esteem and happiness.
- But there have been critics eg Another psychologist Kirk Schneider says high positivity correlates with illusion.
- A Jewish writer wrote a book on 3000 years of Jewish thought, and he said called it positive psychology.
- And a Buddhist writer, Majjhima Nikaya said the "The way to wisdom: is to ask what can I do that will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?"
- So there were lots of psychologists in the 20th century using the idea of positive psychology. But I think the first person to use those actual words was Martin Seligman, the new president of American Psychological Association, late 1990. He said that in the previous half century of psychology had been concerned with mental illness. But he urged his colleagues to go back to an earlier kind of psychology of nurturing people's talents, and improving their everyday life.
- Some of the sayings of Jesus could be interpreted as relentless positivity: Such as
- Faith can move mountains.
- Love your enemies,
- Don't worry about tomorrow.
- But he got criticised for those very ideas. The prophet Mahomet .... was asked by one of his followers whether he could match Jesus in saying faith can move mountains: Mahomet sarcastically tried it out by commanding a mountain to come to him. Not surprisingly, it didn't, so he said: Well, if the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet will have to go to the mountain
- And the Christian leader St Paul also poured cold water on the idea, I may have enough faith to move mountains, but if I have no love, my faith is worthless.
- So this really is an issue that has been discussed for thousands of years. And it is still valued by some, and criticised by others.

## St Paul on positivity

But it was Paul himself, who gave one of the longest connected statements of positivity I could find. It's in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, verses 4-9. Where he says:

Rejoice<sup>4</sup> in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.<sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved,<sup>5</sup> whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about<sup>t</sup> these things. <sup>9</sup> Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Now that really is positivity, and it really is relentless. And it answers some of the criticisms people of made about positivity, and still do. St Paul had thought through the criticisms, and came out with that positive statement.

## St Paul's context

Paul also puts that discussion into the context of his own life. The whole letter of Paul to the Philippians leads up to this passage, and it tells you his circumstances, and the circumstances of the people he was writing to.

It says he was in house arrest in Rome, but he rejoiced about that because he was free to preach the gospel.

He was even happy about people who preached the gospel from bad motives, because they were still keeping the message alive.

He was especially encouraged by the generosity of the people of the church in Phillippi. They helped him feel positive and that is part of the reason he wrote it! To say thank you for your support.

He didn't gloss over their negative points. He was concerned about some of them who were living materialistic lives. But that was not so great it got him down.

He was also concerned about two loyal women Euodia and Syntyche who respected him, but they couldn't agree with each other So he encourages them to make it up, and he encourages the person who delivered the letter, to talk about it with them. That is Paul at his most positive. He's far away, can't help these two women in person, so he writes a letter to encourage them. **Letters can be very positive, far beyond their original readers..**

And from this example of these two women, Paul's applies his ideas on positivity.

He says

- 1) May you be known for gentleness .... being positive about people who are weak, or people you think are in the wrong .
- 2) Example two: do not be anxious. A good idea but **how do you stop worrying?** And Paul says by praying. in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to god. And you don't have to believe in God to deal with anxiety. As we do here when we light a candle of joy or a candle of concern, depending on the mood we are in. And when we do it together, we generate positivity for each other.
- 3) As Paul sees it, when you pray like this and light a candle for one another, peace will guard your hearts and minds.
- 4) His fourth example is a list of positive ideas: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, **think** about<sup>t</sup> these things. And it will be helpful
- 5) . I found a remarkable tribute to these words in a book by Christopher Hitchens, who is the most negative atheist I've every come across. He would have rubbished all the rest of this passage But he picked those words to use in a funeral service for his father. So even an atheist and a Christian evangelists can find common ground in these words. :Positive feelings can be shared across different belief and different criticisms. Nobody has a monopoly on them

- 6) And Paul ends this list by reminding his readers to think of good role models and good advice. Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the god of peace will be with you.
- 7) So he is not just **talking** about relentless positivity: he is helping people to find it and switch it on in their minds.

## What are some of dangers in positive thinking?

What are some of the dangers in positive thinking?

- 1) One of them when you try to impose them on someone else, who is depressed, and say cheer up. This just shows a lack of empathy ... it takes empathy and compassion. People who are down need the power to take their own steps out of depression.... There's a passage in the book of proverbs that says if somebody gets up early in the morning and starts singing .... they will be counted as cursing.
- 2) Another fishhook, is that most problems also require critical thinking, and awareness of the consequences of what we do. But even critical thinking has its positive side. I went to a university course on critical thinking a couple of years ago, and the lesson I found most helpful of all was "the principal of charity". That means that when you are having an argument with someone, you should remember that your goal is not to put them down but to persuade them, and to do that you need to address them at their strongest, not their weakest. So in an argument, if someone says something that seems obviously wrong ... instead of saying "that's stupid"; it would be more helpful to get on their side and: do you really mean that? And the value of that approach is that you open yourself to their good ideas as well as your own. If you win an argument by negative thinking; and that is quite easy to do. But then you will get a solution that the other person won't like, and they will keep on fighting for it. So you could call this ;positive arguing. It doesn't always work, but it's worth trying first.

## Balancing in the Bible

So there are examples of positive thinking everywhere, but I think Paul does better than most in presenting an overview, giving half a dozen kinds of positive thinking and how they come together. He makes it more relentless.

## Bringing it back to today, and my own conclusions

I had a very sudden dose of relentless positivity about six months ago. I had trouble sleeping, and lots of problems were getting on top of me, and my doctor gave me a questionnaire about major depression.. And even as I answered it, I could see I was depressed. And she prescribed citalopram, which is a tranquiliser. But I would call it a relentless positivity pill, because it takes the hormone serotonin, which makes you alert and happy, and makes it last longer.

And suddenly I was feeling positive more than negative.

And the most surprising thing was the way it kept shining a light on different parts of my life.

- 1) For instance, I started facing up to problems I had avoided; I had a habit of making a list of all the things I had to do, each day. But the hardest ones always kept getting put off. So I started tackling them, and saying: It's time to do this.
- 2) Another thing, was I started talking more confidently to other people,

- 3) And a third change was that bad things happened, I got over my bad mood within minutes, or within a few hours.
- 4) All from one little pill every day

## Summing up the risks.

But to be honest, I should also sum up the negatives.

One is that positivity can make you gloss over real difficulties.. It can make you focus on your own happiness, and ignore the feelings of others. It can make you overrate yourself, and can make you blindly follow a leader, just because they are positive and give you a lift.

I studied psychology informally for about 10 years, while I was writing a book on it. And one of the lessons was that different people's troubles are different, even though they act and look the same.

For instance, one person may have a lack of empathy for other people because they are arrogant; another person may have a lack of empathy with others because they are suspicious. Another may have a lack of empathy because they are dependent, and they are looking for someone else to help with their problems.

Similarly with **positive** feelings .... one person may feel happy when they are putting other people down. Some people feel positive when they see other people in pain. Some people feel happy when they are in the centre of things, but not when someone else takes the lead. And some people may feel happy because they have broken through their anxiety, through medication. But they may still have some way to go, in fixing up the neglected parts of their life..

And some people who are unhappy may benefit from conversation; but others may need to process things on their own.

Some people can boost their serotonin by singing together. Others may feel this is pushing them into steps they are not ready to take.

I'm taking that risk here today, because I've written a hymn about relentless positivity.... and some of you may be in a different space altogether.

It's based on a Christian chorus, which uses Paul's first words "rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice."

Then I thought, why just use the first verse, so I wrote the other three verses, a few years ago.

Then I tweaked two words yesterday to bring us to New Zealand-post-election-blues 2017.

Let's sing it:

1. Rejoice in the spirit always, and again I say rejoice  
 Rejoice in the spirit always, and again I say rejoice.  
 Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice (2 times)

2. May you be known for gentleness, leave bitterness behind

and relentless positivity will guard your heart and mind.  
Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice (2 times)

3. Whatever is kind, whatever is just, whatever is open and true,  
whatever leads on to excellence, keep all these things in view.  
Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice (2 times)

4. Remember the beauty you have seen, and every happy choice.  
And trust in the wisdom you have won, and again I say rejoice.  
Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice (2 times)