

## “Sub-Optimal”

Luke 6:39-42 and Matthew 15:10-11 (Jesus talks about our habits.)

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[Walking around] Gee, it is the middle of July and hasn't reached the 100 degree mark. When is summertime in Redlands ever going to get here? Look at this ... mention green marks on the cement floor.... Oh, dear, I've slipped back into my habit of complaining!

Seeing Lance Armstrong in the *Tour de France* the past week has reminded me of his yellow “Livestrong” bracelets, which reminded me of a purple bracelet I wore for a month or so. Someone told me about a campaign to help people live more healthfully by reducing our habitual complaining, so I checked it out. The project is called “A Complaint Free World” and their web site—and Facebook site—goes by that name. I checked “A complaint free world.org” this past week and discovered that by now more than 3 million people have participated in the project. The project was started by a pastor, but it was given impetus by Oprah at some point.

What this project suggests is that we wear the purple bracelet on one wrist, and try not to complain. If we do complain, and notice that we complain, we move the bracelet to the other wrist. If someone else notices that you complain, *and tells you so*, then both of you have to move your bracelets. The goal is to notice our own complaints, to get out of the rut of complaining. It is similar to the goal of schools which have “No whining zones.”

Did you know that there are places in the U.S. where unpaved roads outnumber paved ones? Is anyone here from Iowa? I understand that in one place in Iowa there is a sign which reads, “Choose your rut well—you will be in it for the next 20 miles!” Once our vehicle is driving in a particular rut, it is very hard to get the wheels up and over the edges of the rut. Once we're in any rut, it's hard to get out.

We all know that habits can and do change. Our awareness and intent to change our behavior can work. I can testify to this, and I bet most of us can. For almost a year I had to have a fountain coke every afternoon. I worked to discern why I felt I needed that, then made a decision and got out of that rut. When I was in college, I had the habit of making a pun out of what people said, and I knew it was annoying. I finally stopped. The need to change habits is very Biblical. Jesus told several parables with the purpose of getting people to change their behaviors. Parables are a marvelous way to challenge people's habits, because to kick a habit often requires something odd, something peculiar.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus used bizarre imagery to discuss faults. He noticed that people—even back then—tended to point out a tiny flaw in another person's behavior, when they themselves had huge faults. This is the weird image Jesus came up with: He said we should remove the log from our own eyes before we fret about the speck in the eyes of others. For example, before we complain about someone forgetting to say “thank you” occasionally, we should notice that we hardly ever make a request of them with a “please.”

*A major purpose of any type of behavioral change is to be attentive to what really matters in life, to choose habits that help us to live out our faith healthfully.*

Jesus was an optimist. He *believed* we could change our thinking as well as our behaviors. He was also a good psychologist. Scientists have shown that we humans are able to change our habits, especially if we change our behavior for several weeks straight. Drink a glass of water 5 times a day for three weeks, and we're very likely to keep drinking that much water after that. (Unless, of course we stop drinking the water for three weeks.)

Here is another example of Jesus persuading people to change a habit. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells people to worry about what comes out of their mouths more than what goes into their mouths. The people were accustomed to all sorts of laws about what they were allowed to eat or forbidden from eating. (We discussed this in worship last week, actually.) Jesus did not say the dietary laws that people were accustomed to were bad. It's okay to pay attention to what goes into our mouths. However, Jesus thought that it was *more* important to pay attention to what we say, to what words come out of our mouths, especially what we say about others. Jesus' main point was that words are a matter of the heart. Matters of the heart, relationships, are most important.

Complaints are words that come out of our mouth.

Don't we have to complain about things that are wrong, in order to change them? If we complain because something actually needs to change, we are advised instead to speak *directly to the person, and only the person, who can change the situation*. For example, if you notice my mic is not on, that is something that needs to change. I *want* you to raise your hand and tell me my mic is not on! I would appreciate you for doing that; in fact, that honest helpfulness would deepen our relationship. That is not a complaint; it is stating a fact that can easily be changed. However, if you were wearing a purple bracelet, you would move it to the other wrist, that is, count it as a complaint, if you say nothing to me, and then tell *other* people that I should get better at using our sound system.

What is the problem with complaining? Besides being a drag for the people around us, by creating a negative mood, frequent complaining eats away at *us*. Negativity is draining. Groups of people who have taken on this challenge to give up complaining report that they *thought* it would be a gift to others, yet to their surprise they discovered it was also a gift for themselves. Just as giving money to church or birthday presents to friends is joyful for us, refraining from complaining benefits us. The people who have tried reducing their complaints report more contentment with their lives.

My sister Marilyn invited me to visit her on a day that she was taking care of her two grandsons, to see their routine. I went to my sister's home in the San Fernando Valley the night before, woke up early, and drove with her to her daughter's home. Her daughter greeted us cheerily. My sister and her daughter spent almost an hour having breakfast, feeding the boys, talking with each other, and discussing the plans for the day, until my niece left for work. My niece, Debbie, is an Intellectual Property Attorney. I need to tell you, too, that in high school and even in *college*, at U. C. Irvine, Debbie was a Cheerleader. She is an optimistic person with an almost unmatchable "upbeat" attitude.

At the end of the day, Debbie came home from work. We overlapped in our visiting, until my sister and I left—waving and blowing kisses . . .

I noticed that at least four times during those intervals with Debbie she commented that something was “**sub-optimal.**” I cannot recall any of the exact events, but let me give you a likely scenario. Let us say Debbie just finished dressing the younger boy, and then he pooped in his diaper. She had to change his diaper again and said, “This is *sub-optimal.*”

That approach to an unwelcome event was new for me. I had *never* heard the phrase, “**Sub-optimal.**” *Optimal* would be when everything works smoothly. **Sub-optimal** is just under optimal, not so perfect. It is not optimal for a toddler to dirty a diaper just after getting dressed when his mom needs to leave for work. However, quite truthfully, neither is it the end of the world. It is exactly “**sub-optimal.**”

We all make mistakes. We all notice other people’s mistakes. That means we are all on a level playing field. I noticed that I complained shortly after I put on this bracelet. I was inclined to feel badly about myself. You might complain later this afternoon about Pastor Carolyn’s encouragement this morning to reduce your complaining. However much we don’t succeed at a goal to improve, it’s still worth the effort.

I read an interesting article about mistakes in the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> I want to share a little of the research on mistakes with you. On the one hand, we tend to tell children, “Everyone makes mistakes,” and we explain that Thomas Edison said, “I have not failed. I have just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.” On the other hand, adults seldom praise errors, though we do praise good grades and doing things right. So, clearly, adults give mixed messages. We *say* mistakes are okay, citing Edison, but we virtually never praise a child for making one.

This is fascinating. Several studies have shown that when one group of children is praised for being “really smart” and another group is praised for their “effort, for trying,” the two groups behave differently when asked to choose between two tasks. Those children who were praised for their *effort, for trying*, chose a harder task. Those praised for *being smart* chose an easier task, a task they knew they could do.

This phenomenon is true for adults, too. One researcher advises those in business to consider making deliberate mistakes. He points out that we learn from our mistakes (or should) and if we—or our businesses—are no longer making mistakes, then we may be playing it too safe. We are not being edgy enough, not exploring the boundaries of what we can do or be. We at church stuck our necks out, agreeing to provide showers for persons without homes; we agreed to Youth Hope meeting in our Courtyard to gather young adults and street kids twice a week. We’re exploring a different kind of worship in the style of *Taize*, starting August 1<sup>st</sup>. All these, in which Karen Gardner has been pivotal, are edgy ministries which explore our boundaries. These ministries just might be opening to the presence of God in wonderful ways.

Obviously one key is to not make the same mistake over and over. In addition, we need to choose the domain of our risks. We do not want airplane pilots to push the limit of their abilities, but we can applaud musicians like the Tustin Transfer for doing so.

Habits *are* changeable. This is as true for challenging ourselves when we fall into our rut of prejudice or stereotyping as it is to deciding to be more patient with the foibles of others.

If we take Jesus seriously and accept his challenge to notice the log of complaining in our own eye instead of the speck of errors in others, then it is *equally important that we not complain about ourselves.*

We need to accept grace about our own mistakes.

I don't think that Jesus is suggesting that we never see errors and things we don't like. If that were the case, Jesus sure wouldn't have wanted us to watch the refereeing of the World Cup! (Oops, I guess I just complained.) Our goal is to change our *habit*, from compulsively having to name the mistake, to the habits of *wonder and compassion*. Whenever we start to complain, we can shift to *wonder* about the situation and *compassion* for the people. For example, we can wonder silently, "I wonder if from that angle, the referee just couldn't see that the ball actually went into the net." If we must say something, we can say, "It's **sub-optimal**." (I'm ruling that saying "It's sub-optimal" does not count as a complaint.)

This is what we have the opportunity to do in response to Jesus' unusual admonitions about logs and specks and things coming out of our mouth being certainly worthy of our worry as much as things going in.

[Wander again.] For me it's "**sub-optimal**" to have warm, not yet sizzling temperatures in Redlands this summer. I wonder, though, probably many people are enjoying this warm weather! You know, I just learned that these green marks are here to line up the pews. Isn't that something?

Jesus was some mentor! The world *looks* different through the eyes of *wonder and compassion instead of constant criticism*! We sure can **see** better without all that lumber clouding our vision! It **is** a spiritual gift; it is *enlivening* and *joyous* to pay attention to what comes out of our mouths—that's a great rut to get into.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Many Errors in Thinking About Mistakes" *N Y Times* Sat Nov 24, 2007 by Alina Tugend