ACCENTUATING THE NEGATIVE by Andy Diestelkamp

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and it was very good (Gen. 1:1,31). The first man and woman were placed in a beautiful paradise, told to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over God’s creation, and were given “every tree whose fruit yields seed” for food as well as “every green herb” (1:28-30). It was likely an exquisite environment beyond our present ability to comprehend.

 However, if you are familiar with “the beginning” as revealed in Scripture, your mind has already gone on to accentuate the negative. This is exactly what Satan (aka “the serpent of old” - Rev. 12:9) did in his initial effort to deceive when he asked, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?” (3:1). In truth, if you compare Satan’s quotation of God with what God actually said (as quoted above and in 2:16), you will see that, in the context of paradise, God accentuated the positive while any negative remained an exception. It is the Devil who deceptively contorted reality by accentuating the negative to breed discontentment. It is then that we are most vulnerable to exchange truth and reality for a lie.

 However, with sin came a complete reversal of the human condition. The world moved from being “very good” to being cursed with pain and suffering and death as the consequences of sin. By subjecting us to such apparent futility, God is constantly reminding us of the wages of sin (cf. Rom. 6:23).

 So, now that the present reality is reversed from the original creation, Satan delights to deceptively accentuate the *positive* (rather than focus on the negative consequences of sin). For example, consider how some complain that preaching often focuses on the negative and “religion” guilts and shames people. This is because the masses do not want to deal with reality; they want to have their ears tickled with lies (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3,4).

 Indeed, Scripture itself accentuates the negative from the moment sin entered the world. Thereafter, the curses are the first things pronounced by God (Gen.3:14-19). Yes, thankfully, even in those there are hints of grace and hope; but the reality is that because sin dominates the world, God’s revelation accentuates the negative to identify the true problem and thereby create a longing for God’s salvation.
 Eight of the Ten Commandments are expressed negatively. The Law of Moses is dominated by prohibitions. When it comes to the blessings and curses that were given to Israel, the warnings concerning the curses far outnumber the blessings. Indeed, the history of the nation of Israel is rife with apostasy, and the message of the prophets sent to her was predominantly negative.

 The preaching of John the Baptist was a call to Israel for repentance. He referred to Israel’s leaders as a “brood of vipers.” The preaching of Jesus was more of the same. Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) begins with blessings but is dominated by stern warnings against hypocrisy and carnal priorities. It is true that Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (Jn. 12:47); but it is quite revealing that He did so by accentuating the negative reality of sin and its cost.

 The first sermon preached by the apostles after Jesus’ ascension was full of condemnation for those who killed the Messiah (Ac. 2:23,36). This so characterized the preaching of the apostles of Jesus that the Jewish leaders complained about their negativity saying, “You have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring [Jesus’] blood on us!” (Ac. 5:28).

 From Paul’s epistles to Jesus’ “letters to the churches” (Rev. 2,3), negativity dominates precisely because this present world is dominated by and in peril of sin and death. This accentuation of the negative is necessary because the truth is that sin is a real problem, and it kills. To anesthetize ourselves to that reality does nothing to solve the problem. To cry “Peace!” when there is no peace is spiritual malpractice (cf. Jer. 6:14; 8:11), the equivalent of applying a Band-Aid to a mortal wound.
 Of course, the ultimate purpose of God’s Word is *not* to be a message of doom but is to reveal a solution to the problem of sin and death. After all, the word *gospel* means good news. However, the good news is only good to those who are being saved by it. To those who are perishing, the gospel is foolish nonsense and the negativity of the cross of Christ is a grotesque stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

 The positive word *salvation* implies the reality of an extremely negative peril. The good news of Jesus Christ begins with the bad news of the reality of sin and death. So, if we fail to accentuate the negative reality of sin, which required the horror of the cross to remedy the problem, we simultaneously deemphasize the positive salvation and hope of God’s grace which offers to reverse the curse and restore the human condition to glory as “far as the curse is found.” Only therein can we once again truthfully and realistically accentuate the positive.

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