

# “Attitude!”

Philippians 1:9-11; 2:5-11 <sup>1</sup>

Race week in Bristol has many dimensions. One of those dimensions that may or may not be particularly helpful is the “bad boy” attitude that seems to characterize some of the drivers. I suppose NASCAR drivers do need a certain level of aggressiveness in order to become winners, but for my part, I prefer the drivers who tend toward being gentlemen.

Attitude has everything to do with life off the track, too, of course. There’s a story on the Internet about a restaurant manager named Jerry.<sup>2</sup> Jerry was always in a good mood and always had something positive to say. When someone asked him how he was doing, he always replied, “If I were any better, I’d be twins!”

Jerry was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, Jerry talked to the employee about how to look on the positive side of things. Watching Jerry made Francie Schwartz curious, so one day she asked him, “I don’t get it! You can’t be a positive person all of the time. How do you do it?”

Jerry replied, “Every morning I wake up and I say to myself, ‘Jerry, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood.’ So I choose to be in a good mood. Every time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. So I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me with a complaint, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of things. So I choose the positive side.”

“Yeah, right. It’s not that easy,” Francie protested.

“Oh, yes it is,” Jerry said. “Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation involves a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or a bad mood. The bottom line is that it’s your own choice how you get through life.”

Soon thereafter, Francie left the restaurant industry to start her own business. She lost touch with Jerry, but she often thought about him when she made choices about life instead of just reacting to it.

Several years later, Francie heard that Jerry did something one is never supposed to do in the restaurant business: he left the back door open one morning and was held up at gunpoint by three thieves. Jerry’s hand slipped while he was trying to open the safe, and the robbers panicked and shot him. Luckily, Jerry was found relatively quickly and was rushed to the local trauma center. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Jerry was released from the hospital with fragments of the bullets still in his body.

Francie saw Jerry about six months after the shooting. When she asked him how he was, he replied, “If I were any better, I’d be twins. Wanna see my scars?”

Francie declined to see his wounds, but she did ask him what had gone through his mind as the robbery took place. “The first thing that went through my mind was that I should have locked the back door,” Jerry replied. “Then, as I lay on the floor, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live, or I could choose to die. So I chose to live.”

“Weren’t you scared?” she asked.

Jerry continued, “Well, the paramedics kept telling me I was going to be fine, but when they wheeled me into the emergency room and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on August 15, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Francie Baltazar-Schwartz, “Attitude is Everything,” found in many places on the Internet, but unverified.

and nurses, I got really scared. I could read their eyes, and their eyes said, 'He's a dead man.' I knew I needed to take action."

"What did you do?" Francie asked.

"Well, there was a big, burly nurse shouting questions at me," said Jerry. "She asked if I was allergic to anything, so I said, 'Yes.' The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, 'BULLETS!' Over their laughter, I told them, 'I am choosing to live. Work on me as if I'm alive, not dead.'"

Francie later wrote, "Jerry survived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude. I learned from him once again that every single day you and I have the choice to live well or to live poorly. Attitude, after all, is everything."

Chuck Swindoll agreed with Jerry when he wrote that "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. It's more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do.

"Attitude is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day of our lives regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day.

"We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes."<sup>3</sup>

You'll not be surprised to learn that the Bible talks about attitude in several places, the most well-known of which is our second text this morning, where Paul wrote that <sup>5</sup> *You must have the same **attitude** that Christ Jesus had.* <sup>6</sup> *Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.* <sup>7</sup> *Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he emptied himself, took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,* <sup>8</sup> *he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross* (Philippians 2:5-8).

Now while our second text focuses on attitude, our first text puts attitude in a larger frame. There Paul wrote, <sup>9</sup> *I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding.* <sup>10</sup> *For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.* <sup>11</sup> *May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous **character** produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God* (Philippians 1:9-11).

You've heard me say many times that only two things cross over with us from this life into eternity—our character and other people whom we've led to or influenced to believe in Jesus. That's it; nothing else goes. Last week, we looked at character through the lenses of the fruit of the Spirit. This week, we're looking at character through the lens of attitude.

As we come nearer and nearer to our renewal services on September 12-14, I continue to wonder and pray about how I might best help us to prepare our hearts for God to do a powerful work in and among us during those days. This morning's message focuses on how our attitudes can affect those outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Swindoll, quoted in *The Bristol Tennessee Electric System Newsletter*.

Jim Wilson is a Naval Academy graduate who became a teacher and a minister after his Navy days. Now more than 80 years old, Jim has served in Moscow, Idaho, near the University of Idaho, for more than thirty-five years. I've recently become aware of some of his writings about our attitudes, and have found them helpful.<sup>4</sup> He is best known for his work on bitterness.

Jim wrote, "It's easy to recognize when somebody is bitter. You can see it in their eyes and in the lines of their face — even if the person is young. You can see it in their mouth; you can see it when they're smiling or laughing. . . . You can hear it in the tone of their voices. You can hear it when they protest that they are not bitter. Yet, while it's relatively easy to see when other people are bitter, it's not so easy to see it in ourselves."

Jim pointed out that while we experience guilt when we sin, we feel bitterness when others sin against us. According to Jim, bitterness is always based upon someone else's sin . . . whether real or imagined.

"Bitterness," Jim wrote, "is based on sin that somehow relates to you. It is not concerned with how big the sin is; it is based upon how close it is. For instance, if some great and gross immorality occurs in Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, or Columbia, what do we do? We read about it, but we don't feel guilty. We read about it, but we don't feel bitter. We may be appalled or amazed, but we don't feel guilty, and we don't feel bitter. Bitterness doesn't depend on how great the evil is, *it depends on how close the other person is to me*.

"We don't get bitter towards evil outside of our own immediate context," Jim wrote. "Bitterness is based on somebody else's sin who is close to us and who we believe did something to us. The offense might be minor. It doesn't have to be great; *it just has to be close*. And if this has happened to you, you may think you have a right to be bitter. But the Bible doesn't grant anyone the right to be bitter. The Bible says to **get rid of all bitterness** (Ephesians 4:31).

Jim noted that "When I was a young midshipman at the Naval Academy, I thought that the pettiness and jealousy I observed there would give way to maturity. I thought the higher you got in rank, the more mature you became, and the less this sort of thing occurred. But as I grew older I saw that the jealousy just became more intense. *Bitterness accumulates*, and unless there's a solution to it, people don't get less bitter with maturity. Their bitterness grows worse and worse.

"So how do we get rid of bitterness? Well, before we can get rid of bitterness, we have to realize that we are bitter. And how can we tell if we are bitter? One good rule of thumb is this: *bitterness remembers details*. You've had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you've forgotten. But here's one that took place five years ago, and you remember every single word and the inflection of every word. You know exactly what happened — and that means you are bitter.

"Someone might object and say that it is also possible to have precise memory of a wonderful conversation. Yes, that's possible, but it's not likely. People don't usually mull over wonderful things nearly so much as they go over and over and over the bad things. Memory is helped by repetition.

Jim noted that "I've done quite a bit of counseling with people who are in the process of getting divorced. I've known some since the time they were married, and they've had many happy times together. But at the time of the divorce they can't remember a single happy time. All they can remember is the pain that they've gone over and over in their minds. They're bitter.

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<sup>4</sup> James I. Wilson of Moscow, Idaho, *How to Be Free from Bitterness, and Other Essays on Christian Relationships* (Canon Press, rev. and enlarged ed., 2007).

“Their failure to remember the happy times doesn’t mean there weren’t any. It just means that they’ve concentrated on how right they were and how wrong the other person was.” You can take this to the bank: if you have a sharp, detailed memory of something that happened a long time ago, and if that memory is at all accusative of anyone else, then it’s an indication of bitterness. And the solution for bitterness is to get rid of it. Spiritually, bitterness is the sin of the bitter person alone, unrelated to anybody else.

Amy Carmichael has a helpful note on this point in her little book *If*, where she pointed out that “a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted.”<sup>5</sup>

“Can you see her point? If a cup is full of sweet water and it’s jolted, what will spill out of the cup? Sweet water. And if you give it a harder jolt, what’s going to happen? More sweet water. If someone is filled with sweet water and someone else gives him or her a jolt, what will come out? Sweet water.

Jolts don’t turn sweet water into bitter water. Jolts only bring out of the container what’s already in it. If you’re filled with sweetness and light, and you get jolted, you’re going to spill sweetness and light. If you’re filled with honey, then honey will come out.

But if vinegar or acid comes out, what does that show? It shows what was already in the container. Bitterness is not really based on what the other person did at all. Bitterness is the result of what we do and who we are. It’s the result of our own spiritual condition.

Jim Wilson’s thoughts about bitterness are very similar to what you’ve heard me call “the Spirituality Test.” This test has to do with what we say, feel, and think when something unexpected and unpleasant happens, such as closing a door on our finger or someone else doing something that displeases us. That’s another way of speaking about what’s already “in the cup.” Or, as James, our Lord’s brother, put it, “*Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water?*” (James 3:11). And the obvious answer is, “No, a spring either has fresh water or it has bitter water.”

As you and I move forward together toward special services of renewal and blessing, many of us are praying that God will fill us, individually and together, with amazing grace and divine power. As the Gospel song puts it, “Fill my cup, Lord! I lift it up, Lord! Come and quench this thirsting of my soul! Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more; fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!”<sup>6</sup>

Our problem is that not even God can “fill our cups” with grace and power when they’re already full of something else. Our text in Philippians 2 reminds us that in order to bring grace and forgiveness to us, Jesus “*emptied himself*” (2:7). And in order to receive what Jesus came to bring, we must empty ourselves as well.

We sometimes say of folk—and it’s not usually a compliment—that he is “full of himself” or she is “full of herself.” The way we empty ourselves is to do what Jesus did: “*he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on the cross*” (Philippians 2:8).

Or as Paul said several weeks ago, “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20). If you and I are “dead men walking” in this sense, we have no self to be offended; and if we are offended, it is proof positive that we do not know the reality of this verse.

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Carmichael, *If* (CLC Ministries, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> “Fill My Cup, Lord,” words and music by Richard Blanchard, 1964.

Joann Feazell taught us many things, many wonderful, eternal things, and chief among those in my experience of her was the evidence of God's presence in her life, revealed through her attitude. Joann was a single adult all her life, and she could have been bitter about that. When the time came for her to retire after forty-five years as our Minister of Music, she could have been bitter about that. When the time came for her to move from her home to The Grand Court, she could have been bitter about that. When a stroke left her paralyzed for the last year or so of her life, she could have been bitter about that. But Joann didn't ever become bitter about any of those things.

Instead of being bitter about being single, Joann gave her life joyfully to music and to this congregation. Instead of being bitter about retirement, Joann chose to bless and to encourage Eric as her successor, and she later chose to bless and to encourage me as her pastor. Instead of being bitter about moving to The Grand Court, Joann made up her mind ahead of time that she was going to enjoy living there, and she did. When the stroke paralyzed her, bringing perhaps the greatest challenge of her life, Joann's persistent request of me and of many of you was that we pray that her faith not fail—which was a prayer about attitude—and she prevailed in that final challenge as well.

There's a story about an old fellow going into a church business meeting where something fairly emotional was going to be discussed. Someone asked him, "Bill, which way do you think it will go?" And Bill answered, "I don't know, but I do know this: whatever happens, I'm going to be mighty bitter."

As you sit here this morning, are you more like Joann, or are you more like Bill? When life jostles and jolts you and your days don't go as you'd prefer, what spills out? How would those who know you best and are around you the most answer those questions? And what do you need to do about that as you do business with God right now?