

Happy opposite day everyone! Opposite day, you know, that little kid trick where all you do is declare a day opposite day and if I say “I hate you” it really means “I like you” or if I say “you’re dumb” it really means “you’re smart.”

Happy opposite day.

Allow me to explain...

I just finished watching Medal of Honor on Netflix (anyone else binge watching that?). If you don’t know what it is, the title is pretty self-explanatory. It’s a Netflix special that tells the story and dramatically reenacts the heroism that earned eight soldiers our nation’s highest honor – the Medal of Honor. Of the more than 40 million men and women who have served in our armed forces fewer than 3600 have earned this prestigious medal.

I think even a non-history lover would agree that it is an inspiring show. It’s the kind of series that any red-white-and-blue-blooded American can find pride in watching. They are pinnacles of human achievement. They are men that we look up to. They are real life super heroes.

Do you know what I haven’t seen on Netflix?

A series about the worst, weakest, and most cowardly soldiers in American history... I’ve yet to see a show called “Dishonorable Discharge – America’s Lest Honorable Soldiers” or “AWOL – America’s Best Deserters”.

Because in the real world we celebrate strength not weakness. We praise praise-worthy people. We rejoice when hardships are over-come by human resilience and bravery not when people give up or fail. We name MVP’s not LVP’s (Least Valuable Players). We celebrate Comeback Players of the Year not Faded into Irrelevance Players of the Year.

We may make shows about the weakest and rejected and failures of society, but it is more out of a morbid fascination, certainly not a desire to be like them.

This is how our world operates.

We delight in strength, in honor, in victory, in popularity, in resilient conquest.

And then Paul comes along...

“I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.”

And we wait on baited breath for the “happy opposite day” because if Paul is right, then we have it all wrong.

If I asked you, “Would you rather be the weakest in the room or the strongest? Would you rather be praised or insulted? How about a life full of victory or a life full of failure? Do you want people to like you or hate you?” – we are all voting the same way on every single one of those... and if Paul is right, we are wrong.

Today is a vitally important “ah-ha” moment this Epiphany. There is a truth in the lessons today about how Jesus wants us to operate in the world that we really need to pay attention to – because it is the exact opposite of how this world operates. It is the exact opposite of how we tend to operate.

We celebrate and chase after honor, strength, victory, and popularity. Paul says, “I celebrate the exact opposite.”

And Paul isn’t alone. You heard Jesus just a minute ago...

“Blessed are the *poor*... Blessed are the *hungry*... Blessed are you who *weep*...” You are receiving *blessing* from your God when people hate you, exclude you, insult you, and reject you.

Then he says: If you are rich, if you are well fed, if you are laughing, if people speak well of you – woe to you!

And we wait on baited breath for the “Happy opposite day!” because if Jesus is right, then we have it all wrong.

If I asked you, “Would you rather be poor, hungry, crying, and hated? Or rich, well fed, laughing, and loved?” – we are all voting the same way on that... and if Jesus is right, we are wrong.

This is a hugely important truth of the Bible that we need to chew on (what should we delight in, what should we consider a blessing from God) – and I’m betting that the more you chew on it, the more it will feel like a big hunk of gristle in your mouth.

Just walk through some of the implications of what Paul and Jesus are suggesting today:

For your family...

Would you rather have a healthy family **or** a family with special needs kids and cancers and Alzheimer’s? Would you rather have the spouse, the kids, the white picket fence – no body’s perfect, but we all get along family, **or** the split holidays, bickering, broken-hearted, complicated, divorced family? Would you rather have your perfectly timed 2.5 kids **or** wrestle with infertility for years? Would you rather be married for 60 years and then both peacefully die in your sleep, **or** be widowed before you hit 10 years of marriage?

We all are voting the same way on all of those questions. I get that if you are already in one of those not so savory family situations, you are finding the blessings in the hardships, but in an ideal world, the one you dreamed of before you had a family, those weren’t in there... but if Paul and Jesus are right, our daydreams are wrong.

Or how about for your career...

Would you rather go to a good 4-year college, earn your degree, and get recruited before you graduate, **or** have to drop out of college because you don’t have the money or you can’t keep your grades up? Would you rather slide right into the career of your dreams with lots of opportunity for upward mobility **or** get stuck working a dead-end job where going to work is torture but you have

to pay the bills? Would you rather have everyone like you at work, you all get along, there's lots of laughs and good team work, **or** have everyone hate you at work, the office is full of sniping and backstabbing?

We all are voting the same way on all those questions... but if Paul and Jesus are right, we are wrong.

Take the same thing and apply it to what you think it means to be successful as a church, or successful at school, or successful at friendship, or successful at personal health, and I guarantee you that the way you naturally define success and blessing in all of life is the opposite of what Paul and Jesus talk about today.

How's that gristle tasting?

Now to be clear – when Jesus lists his “blessings” and Paul delights in his weakness the Bible is not encouraging us to go chasing after those things. God is not saying that if you like your job you need to quit and find a job you hate. Paul is not saying that if you are happily married that you should get divorced.

This isn't God encouraging a sadistic worldview – where we *only* like and chase after weakness, insults, hardships, persecution, and difficulty. This is God challenging us to redefine what it means to be successful in the first place.

This is an important topic. This is a big topic. In theological jargon it is the Theology of the Cross vs. The Theology of Glory – how we define success. It is the Biblical and philosophical truth that all humans beings are seeking a successful life. When we die and the obituary is written, what would make my life a life worth living? It doesn't matter if they are a Christian or not, every human being is living with a working definition about what a successful life looks like.

The Bible makes clear that all people answer that question in one of two ways: you either have a theology or worldview of glory, or you have theology or worldview of the cross.

The Bible also points out that most people are going to answer that question in essentially the same way (in fact, *all of us* are naturally hard-wired to answer it this way). We all are naturally theologians of glory – our lives are successful if in our own small way we have done something glorious. Not many can point to a Medal of Honor, but we point to our kids, to our careers, to our philanthropy, to our work ethic, to our accomplishments – to show that in our own way we have lived a successful life. So a Theology of Glory is a life lived chasing after and delighting the obviously good things and avoiding and hating the weakness, suffering, painful things.

Paul and Jesus come to us today and challenge us to completely change how we define a successful life.

Paul wants us to reorient our lives so that instead of chasing glory, we chase the cross. My life is a success not because of glorious thing that I have accomplished, but if my life is a success if it has focused my attention on Jesus and his cross. My life is successful if Jesus and his cross become the main character and achievement in my life's story – as opposed to me and my obituary as the main character and achievement in my life's story.

What does the Theology of Glory vs. the Theology of the Cross look like in practical terms? Take my family:

A theologian of glory thinks the family exists to enhance my own glory – I rejoice in my strengths and accomplishments as a husband and father: At my funeral I and my obviously good things are the main character: “He was such a good dad, such a good husband, he raised such good kids. Look at everything he did.”

A theologian of the cross sees his family as one more reason why Jesus and his cross matter. I rejoice in my weaknesses as a father and husband, and my failures, and the things I suffered. At my funeral Jesus and his cross are the main characters: “His family was a hot mess of suffering – some of it because of his own selfishness that made him a far from perfect father and husband, some of it because of sin in general that brought all sorts of suffering to his life and his family. And that is why Jesus and his cross meant everything to him and his family. Look at everything Jesus did for him and his family.”

The theologian of glory delights in strength, in honor, in victory, in popularity, in resilient conquest because then I am a good, glorious main character in my story.

The theologian of the cross delights in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties because then Jesus is a good main character in my story – I needed him every step of the way.

This is a huge worldview shift (there is no way I can even begin to unpack even a fraction of the implications in a sermon like this). And this kind of worldview, this theology doesn't come naturally. We are all naturally theologians of glory – it is our default setting. And that is why sometimes God punches us in the face.

Did you catch that in 2 Corinthians 12?

Paul had a heart just like ours that naturally wanted to make life all about him. And if you want to talk about an obituary worth glorying in, Paul certainly had one. Right before this Paul talked about how God had given him an insider's view into heaven – had revealed to him some secrets that no one else on the planet knew.

But then Paul says, “**To keep him from becoming conceited** (making life all about his personal glory), **I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.**” The Greek word translated “torment me” literally means *to strike with a fist*. So, a slightly looser translation is: to keep me from making my life all about me, God sent a messenger of Satan to punch me in the face.

“**Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’**”

We don't know what this thorn was, we do know that it was some ongoing suffering or weakness in Paul's life that God refused to take away.

Why? Because Paul needed to remember that Jesus and his cross were the main characters in his life's story. It was a worldview that didn't come naturally to Paul, so God punched him in the face to remind him that he needed God's grace. He needed Jesus. He needed the cross.

And so Paul learned the Theology of the Cross in the devil's classroom. With God's permission Satan put Paul through the ringer so that Paul would never forget Jesus.

“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It turns out it is opposite day – but not in the way we initially expect.

When you are weak – like you are just not good enough, smart enough, strong enough, to do what needs to be done – that may look like a colossal failure, but happy opposite day. You are not the main character in your life's story. Jesus is. You may be weak. But Jesus not.

When you are insulted and persecuted – when you are not the most popular kid in class or the workplace, when people don't look up to you, and they don't respect you, and they make fun of you, and talk about you behind your back, or to your face (whether you've done something to earn that bad treatment or not), even if no one were to show up to your funeral because no one cared about you while you were alive – you may feel like a colossal failure, but happy opposite day. You are not the main character in your life's story. Jesus is. You may not matter to anyone else in the world, but you matter to him – how much? He died for you – that's how much you matter to him. You may be hated by the world, but you are loved by your Jesus.

When you go through hardships and difficulties – when your kid is sick, when you bury a loved one, when your family falls apart, when you wrestle with depression and anxiety, when you get stuck working that dead-end job, whether you brought those hardships and difficulties on yourself, or they happened in spite of your best efforts – you may feel like you are failing at life, or life is failing on you, but happy opposite day. You are not the main character in your life's story. Jesus is. Your life may be filled with hardships and difficulties that you are incapable of handling, but that is exactly why Jesus came and died on the cross – so that he could look you in the tear-drenched eye and say, **“In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.”** You may have hardship and difficulties in this life but because of Jesus and his cross you will one day be in heaven where God will wipe every tear from your eyes.

Friends, happy opposite day. We get to redefine what it means to be successful. In a world full of the failures of sin, because of Jesus and his cross your life is an overwhelming success even if it looks and feels the exact opposite.

This is huge, and it doesn't come naturally, but we have a God who will do whatever it takes to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and his cross. Praise God that when we are weak, he is strong. Praise God that in his grace, all we need are Jesus and his cross to make our lives successful.

Amen.