

Positive Negatives #1 – Hebrews 10:1-18

Young Frank Epperson left his glass of pop with a straw inside out on his back porch overnight. Now normally this wouldn't have been a big deal. Frank's climate in San Francisco usually wasn't that extreme. And having a glass of pop lose its fizz isn't the end of the world. But Frank's oversight did cause him some grief – grief magnified for an 11 year old. You see, the night that Frank left his pop out on the back porch just happened to be one of the coldest winter nights in San Francisco's history. The pop that Frank left out froze solid, breaking the glass. Frank's parents weren't happy with their son and they scolded him for his forgetfulness. Now their negative reaction to their son's miscue could have caused Frank to lose heart. But the young man didn't respond that way. Rather, as he began to think about this situation that had caused him some grief, he began to get some ideas. He soon asked his mother if he could use the family ice box. Frank would take containers that wouldn't break, fill them with pop, put a stick in them, and then pack ice around them. Frank began to sell his new invention to his friends. He called them Eppsicles – a combination of his last name and icicle. Frank's invention was so popular that he continued to make them. 18 years later, Frank Epperson applied for a patent for *frozen ice on a stick*. In the patent he renamed his invention *Popsicle*. By 1928, as a relatively young 33 year old man, Epperson was very wealthy, having earned royalties on more than 60 million Popsicles. He went on to create Fudgsicles and Creamsicles as well. Frank eventually would try more than 100 different flavors even though cherry, orange and grape would become the most popular. Last year, millions of Americans were happy that young Frank Epperson made that mistake as an 11 year old boy as they consumed more than 1.2 billion Popsicles.

The older we get, the more we realize that negatives can sometimes become very positive in our lives. Quite often, positive advances come from circumstances that might have appeared to be negative at the time. So we eventually come to the place where we thank God for situations that had appeared to be negative.

In Hebrews 10, we find 5 negatives that all work to very positive ends. Today and next Sunday morning, the Lord willing, I would like to look at these positive negatives with you.

The first positive negative is the fact that the law could never make people perfect. Notice this with me in verses 1-3. READ Hebrews 10:1-3:

HEB 10:1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming--not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.

Now at first it appears to be very negative indeed that the law did not have the ability to make people perfect. The word that is translated perfect in verse 1 means complete or mature. The idea is that the O.T. law could never make God's people spiritually complete or mature. Now this statement must have been very discouraging at first to the readers who first looked at these words. They were those who had tried to follow the law with all of their hearts. They had great respect for the law. The law was legendary, bigger than life in their minds. They had read the story of how God gave the law to Moses in the first place. Moses had ascended that mountain called Sinai into a smokey cloud of fire with lightning flashing all around and cracks of thunder deafening the ears. God had inscribed His commandments to His people on tablets of stone. The miraculous circumstances surrounding the law gave it an almost mystical quality. And that law had been immediately valued by the people of God. Oh yes, they had transgressed the law even while it was being written by forming a golden calf in violation of the 2nd commandment so those first tablets of stone had been crashed upon the rocks by Moses showing the seriousness of their actions. But those 2nd tablets that God had inscribed with His finger had been valued as the priceless commodity that they were. They were carefully secured away in the Ark of the Covenant where nobody would even be able to see them. Housed in the Holy of Holies, only the High Priest on the day of Atonement could ever be in the same room with them. And he dare never look into the Ark of the Covenant for his very life depended upon the care that he executed in performing the Day of Atonement sacrificial rites. So, the secretive and mysterious qualities of the law even gave them a more special place in the hearts and minds of the people.

The religious teachers and leaders had spent lifetimes studying the law. They knew every jot and title that had been written down. For the writer to admit that the law could not bring spiritual maturity or completeness to even those who carefully tried to obey all of its commands must have been very discouraging indeed to those who first read these words.

Why couldn't the law bring perfection? The writer gives the reason clearly in the very first sentence of the chapter. The law was just a shadow. It was not the reality. The KJV uses the term image to describe the inadequacies of the law. The law was not the image – it was merely a shadow.

There is a great deal of difference between an image and its shadow. The image is produced by refraction of light while the shadow is produced by absence of light. When we get up in the morning and look into a mirror, we see an image of ourselves. Now that image shows the true reality doesn't it? And usually it is not a pretty picture the first thing in the morning. We are able to see an image of ourselves because of light waves that are reflected from our person back to our eyes by means of the mirror. But then when we finish getting ready and eating breakfast and go outside to our car, we very well might see our shadow if it is a sunny day. The shadow is caused by our body blocking the light of the sun. We certainly would never use our shadows to comb our hair or wash our faces because the shadow doesn't give any details of our reality at all.

The shadow just gives a bare outline. While the image is dependent upon light – we can't even see ourselves in a mirror in a pitch black room without first turning on the light – the shadow is dependent upon the absence of light – we can't see a shadow if there is light fully shining all around us. So the weakness of the law is found in the fact that it was only a shadow, it was not the reality. The law was not the image of God Himself, it was only a shadow of his character and attributes.

Now having said all of this, we must quickly add that the inherent inability of the law to make its followers spiritually mature did not make the law a bad or evil thing. No, the law was good because it was an expression of God Himself. The Apostle Paul made this very clear in His epistle to the Galatians. In this book Paul was writing to churches that he had planted on previous missionary journeys that had been infiltrated by Judaizers. Judaizers were religious teachers who were advocating the position that the law was sufficient to bring spiritual maturity into the lives of its followers. They were teaching new followers of the Lord Jesus Christ that their faith alone was not sufficient – they needed to follow the law of Moses as well to reach spiritual maturity. Paul very clearly teaches them the inadequacies of the law. READ Gal. 3:10-13:

GAL 3:10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Now Paul realized that some would take these words and jump to a logical conclusion that the law of God was a bad thing, that it was evil. So anticipating these thoughts, he quickly added in verse 21:

GAL 3:21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!

There was nothing wrong with the law. The law itself was good. It was righteous. It was an expression of the character and attributes of God. But the law could not perform what some people were expecting out of it. You see, because of the miraculous circumstances of the law's inception and because of the mystique that surrounded the law and because of all of the traditions that had built up around the law, some people were expecting the law to bring complete spiritual maturity into their lives. Some people were looking to the law for their salvation. And the law simply could not do that. God never gave the law to the human race in order to make them spiritually mature. The Apostle Paul states that clearly in giving one of the most succinct statements of the law's purpose in that very passage in Galatians 3. READ Gal 3:19:

GAL 3:19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

If the law was just a shadow and not the full reality, who then was the complete image of God? The image was the one whom the law predicted. The image was the one whom the law pictured. The image was the one whom the law looked forward to. Paul states this very clearly in Colossians 1:15-20 as he speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ:

COL 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

There is a metaphor that many exegetes use in their commentaries on this verse speaking of the law being a shadow or foreshadowing of things to come that I feel is very helpful. When an artist begins to paint a work of art, he first makes a light, preliminary sketch on the canvas. The sketch helps him to set the perspective for what he wants to paint. After he has sketched out the rough outline of the work of art that he has planned, he then takes out his palette and mixes all of the beautiful colors and paints the complete painting that he desired to produce. When you go to any art museum, you never see the rough sketches on display, you only see the beautiful paintings that have been completed by the world class artists. The sketches served an important purpose, but they were not the finished product.

The O.T. law was like God's rough sketch of his redemptive plan. The law pictured God's program like a shadow. But the law was never designed to bring God's people to spiritual maturity. And we can be thankful for that positive negative. For if the law were it, if the law were God's final program, we would all be doomed. None of us has completely fulfilled the law. Who of us has not failed the law at some point? Who of us has never told a lie or taken something that wasn't ours or coveted someone else's possession? If the law had been God's final program, we would all be doomed to an eternity apart from God. But the law was not God's final program. The law was just a shadow, not the reality. The law could never bring a person to spiritual maturity or completeness.

And this brings us to our 2nd positive negative. Animal sacrifices cannot take away sin. Notice this truth with me in verses 1b-4:

For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴ because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Now this truth was so critical to the author's point that he repeated it in verses 11,12:

HEB 10:11 Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Now the point that is being made here is very clear, isn't it? If animal sacrifices could provide the complete payment for sins in the eyes of God, then why were they continually made? One sacrifice should have been sufficient to pay the penalty for sin. The fact that these sacrifices were made day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, for more than a thousand years was a demonstration that they were inadequate to pay the penalty for sin in the eyes of God.

Now again, this reminder while logically impeccable, must have been somewhat discouraging to the readers at first. For one thing, just think of all the animals that had died on altars down through the years of Jewish history. Literally millions of animals had given their lives to atone for sins. And now the writer was saying that these were all inadequate. What an apparent waste. And the readers would have also been somewhat chagrined because this argument would have been a deterrent to the religious path that they were considering. That, of course, was the exact reason why the writer penned these words in the first place.

You see, these Jewish believers had begun to suffer the strong hand of persecution. The Roman empire had sensed a threat from Christianity. Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ were multiplying all over the Roman Empire at such an alarming rate that the Caesar had felt threatened. So, in an attempt to limit the growth of Christianity, he had put Christianity on the list of illegal religions. The Romans had 2 classes of religions – legal and illegal. Legal religions were tolerated. Illegal religions were squashed. Judaism was a legal religion. Christianity had now been placed on the illegal list. Now there was a natural tendency for those new believers in their Christian faith to reason – why suffer the persecution of the Romans for being a Christian when I can worship in complete freedom as a Jew? After all, I didn't change Gods when I became a Christian. I worshipped the same God as a Jew that I now worship as a Christian. Why not just go back to the synagogue and worship in peace rather than suffering the indignities of persecution as a Christian? This epistle to the Hebrews was written as an apologetic against such thinking.

The point that the author is making here is simply this. Once the shadow was all that we had. But now the perfect image has come. Once animal sacrifices were all that we had. But they couldn't take away sin. That's why we had to keep making them over and over and over again. But now the final and complete sacrifice for sin has come. God sent His one and only Son to us as His Messiah. The Lord Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross of Calvary as the final and complete sacrifice for sin. To go back now to animal sacrifices after

Christ has given His life as the final and complete sacrifice would be to reject God's gift of redemption. And this would be foolish because animal sacrifices can never take away sin. It doesn't matter how many are made, it doesn't matter how often they are made, it doesn't matter how sincerely they are made – animal sacrifices just don't have the capacity to pay for sin. They can only picture the Lamb of God who did have the ability to pay for the sin of the human race.

In proving his point, the author makes an interesting observation about the temple that is sometimes overlooked. It is an argument from silence or omission which is not usually the strongest argument to make, but in this case it is very powerful. Within the temple proper, there was one piece of furniture that was very conspicuous by its absence. As most of you know, the temple building itself was divided into 2 major sections. There was the holy place and the holy of holies. Within the holy place were 3 pieces of furniture – a table upon which were 12 loaves of bread, an altar of incense, and a golden lamp stand. In the Holy of Holies there was one article of furniture – the ark of the covenant. Conspicuously absent from the temple was any type of furniture upon which the priest could rest. There was no sofa or bed, there were no chairs, there was nothing that the priest could sit or lay upon. And this was most interesting, for priests spent a good deal of time in the holy place of the temple trimming the wicks of the lamp stand or offering incense at the golden altar or replacing loaves of bread on the table of showbread. The author of Hebrews here picks up on this absence of any type of resting furniture and implies symbolic significance to it. Day after day the priest stands and performs his religious duties, he writes. This symbolized the fact that the priest's work was never done. The blood of animal sacrifices could never fully atone for sins. In contrast, the Lord Jesus Christ ascended to heaven and the first thing he did was to sit down at the right hand of God after His final and complete sacrifice had been accomplished. This symbolized the fact that His work was done. His sacrifice had been final and complete.

So again, that which at first appears to be a negative is in reality a positive. While it is true that the blood of animal sacrifices could never fully atone for sin but rather they simply pictured the Son of God who would make for all time one sacrifice for sin, their failure to satisfy God's holy and righteous demands gave the Lord Jesus Christ the opportunity to make one complete and final sacrifice for the sin of the human race. His sacrifice did satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God.

2 negatives that are very positive. The law of God could not bring complete spiritual maturity to anyone and animal sacrifices could never take away sins. Now there are 3 more positive negatives in this passage that we will look at next week, the Lord willing. These also bring great comfort and hope to our hearts.