

Spiritual Disciplines Series - Spring 2006 - King's Centre Church

New Years Day 2006 People of Change Nick Allan

Firstly - Happy New Year to everyone!

Its quite unusual for NY day actually to fall on a Sunday, but it's an opportunity to set the tone for the coming year. It feels kind of right that we are able to start 2006 in church, giving of ourselves, worshipping and giving the Lord a place of honour in our first day of the year. So I congratulate all of you who have dragged yourselves out of bed this morning (even with a later start!) to come into God's house instead. It's a sign that you mean business in your walk with God – and He'll never ignore a sign like that!

Today, just for a short while, I'm going to look at the issue of our Christian walk, as we see the blank canvass of 2006 looming large in front of us all.

SO – I have to ask the obvious question today..... Who has/who hasn't made any New Year's resolutions?

3 most common NY resolutions (50% of people make them)

1. I'll lose weight
2. I'll kick a habit (like smoking)
3. I'll change the way I spend my time (realised it over Christmas). Eg. More time on this, less time at work.....

The reality of the situation is that by end Jan – 50% broken, by end of year 90% broken.

The reality is that we are creatures of habit. Change is hard. Making a resolution means resolving to change. Its hard to break the patterns we have established. But Christians are called to be always changing - pressing on to the goal.

Philippians 3:13-15 – Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

Let's look at those powerful words of Paul:

- **'One thing I do'** – this is his goal, his raison d'être. The **one thing** he concentrates on in life. (bearing in mind, he was also in prison in Rome when he wrote this).
- **Moving forward** – greek = strain yourself, stretch yourself physically forward
- **'Press on'** Greek = dioko – 'press forward' and 'persecution' – suggestion it would be worth everything. To go for it with enormous passion.

Why would you do all that?

The is no point in being Goal-less – fasting for the sake of it. Loosing weight – we need a motivator. Paul tells us – bc we are going for a goal, a prize. The prize is God, in Christ Jesus. If we're going to do the pressing and the stressing, we've got to see the wonders of the prize! "All of us who are mature should take such a view" (and we have the power to do so – Holy Spirit).

That's what resolution is all about

If we are to be always changing, so does our environment need to be. We need to put things in place to be able to be always changing.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) the great American revivalist preacher who lived in the 18th century, set himself some rather demanding resolutions which are recorded in his writings:

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humble entreat Him, by His grace, to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake. [I will] remember to read over these Resolutions once a week:

3. Resolved, Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.

4. Resolved, To live with all my might, while I do live.

5. Resolved, Never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.

8. Resolved, To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

10. Resolved, To ask myself, at the end of every day, week, month, and year, wherein I could possibly, in any respect, have done better.

11. Resolved, Never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.

12. Resolved, After afflictions, to inquire, what I am the better for them; what good I have got by them, and what I might have got by them.

13. Resolved, Always to do that which I shall wish I had done when I see others do it.

You might balk a little at those. (actually there are 14 points on the list!). Perhaps he was setting the bar a little optimistically high given that even he was a mere human like the rest of us...But there is something to admire too in those – because what he was doing was setting a goal, making the effort to set a direction, and then holding himself accountable by promising to read over that list.

- Setting a goal and holding himself accountable. This is the Learning Circle of Lifeshapes.

Actually, we make resolutions all the time in life. Some of them we keep, others we review and change a little (too optimistic perhaps, or a bit off-the-mark), or drop. But lets think today about the year ahead – 2006...

- 365 days of discipleship.
- 365 days closer to finally meeting the Lord face to face...
- 365 days of surprises,
- 365 days of challenges – some of them not to our liking,
- 365 days to seize, to grab by the scruff of the neck and make into something good in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

As we enter 2006, I think we should be entering it with optimism. I am 100% confident that if you follow Jesus in 2006, you will see personal breakthroughs – times when the Lord moves you on – in your life. That's what the Holy Spirit does. He is moulding us, changing us to be more like Christ. Teaching us, training us, improving our characters, raising our game. We are empowered by the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead!

We're on the winning side too. We are part of the largest move that humanity has ever seen. Over 1 third of the world's population are Christians today – and you are part of it! God is redeeming humankind, and we're counted amongst that number. **Optimism should be the default position for us as Christians. That's why the gospel is called good news!** And we live the truth of the gospel, of this Good News

I've said this in my Lifelines article this month. Last Autumn just gone, we discovered again together some of the glories and challenges of being citizens in the Kingdom of God. I hope that we were encouraged and empowered by what we learnt and started to put into action more than before, but I also hope that there were times when we were challenged, prodded by the Spirit, left feeling that actually I'm not quite there yet, not quite where God wants me to be, and I really should do something about getting there! If you weren't challenged like that, you probably weren't listening hard enough!

As a church in the season ahead, I think it's right for us to look a bit deeper into the issue of making and keeping resolutions in the Christian life. In other words, now we are followers of Jesus, falling in love with Him, wanting to be radical disciples of our King, how can we best be *resolved* to live that kind of life?

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How does one keep the resolutions of being a radical disciple?

I'd like to suggest that one tried and tested approach is by embracing the Spiritual Disciplines. These are lessons in the school of discipleship – tried and tested, passed down to us

Richard Foster:

Inward

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Study

Outward

- Simplicity
- Solitude
- Submission
- Service

Corporate

- Confession
- Worship
- Guidance – hearing the leading of God
- celebration

There are others too. I think *giving* is possibly a spiritual discipline for example. Other people categorise very similar disciplines as 'disciplines of engagement' and 'disciplines of abstinence'.

- Taking up things (engagement – confession, celebration),
- and giving up things (abstain – fasting) – a bit like New Year's resolutions!

The Christian life which Marjorie and I want to encourage in the King's Centre - of discipleship and mission – is one which will bring great rewards to us in life, and also quite likely great challenges and hurdles. So the idea of looking into the Disciplines in more depth is so that we will be mature Christians – able to run with perseverance the race marked out before us.

Philippians passage says exactly this. Its about training our natural responses, so that they are in tune with Christ. Natural responses are the things we do without thinking about it, say, in a crisis situation. Like driving a car – something in road – natural response = break & swerve.

Our goal in terms of natural responses, what our *nature is like*, should be that of Christ-likeness. Ephesians 5:1 - ¹Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ²and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.)

Its about implementing change in our lives in a way that will bring about lasting transformation – not 1-month wonders! The main problem with New Year's resolutions is that we tend to make too many at once. As in, "This year, starting now,

- I'm going to quit smoking,
- get up every morning at five and exercise,
- stop eating dessert,
- call my mother every other day,
- have a quiet time every morning,
- have only one glass of wine before dinner (for my heart),

The engine that powers our character often needs a tune-up. Sometimes it requires a complete overhaul. That's what the disciplines are about. So that we naturally become people that can sustain change, and become Christ-like. The bible sets the bar high, when we are thinking about resolutions. Think of Moses as he passes on God's words to his new people of Israel, after giving them the 10 Commandments:

Deuteronomy 6:4-12 ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

¹⁰ When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, ¹² be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

An Old Testament resolution God was asking his people to make – don't forget me. That's setting the bar high isn't it?

Here's a NT one...

Hebrews 12:1-2 - ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...

The bar is quite high there as well isn't it?

But what's the key ingredient here – which we need to take away with us today? When we think about resolutions, even biblical resolutions. Its GRACE! Danger for us is that we operate in law not grace. I'm not going to stand here and tell you all to work harder and be more determined not to sin this year, and to do acts of service every day etc etc. Because by the time we get to Christmas 2006, we'll all just feel like failures. But – bible & church tradition also gives us pointers to how to live the life with grace and discipline.

Grace – there is no point in trying to 'better' ourselves by striving. Its not about striving really hard to be 'good Christians'. God isn't standing over us with a big stick, waiting to pounce every time we mess up and fall short of the Glory of God. Otherwise, we would never get very far. This is one of the key differences between Christianity and the other big world religions – grace. I haven't got to try to live up to God, because I haven't got the ability to do so. That's why Jesus died in my place, and in your place.

God's grace means that he will keep forgiving us as we slip up, but the covenant agreement between Him and us means that we should always be moving along that road. I don't suggest you rely on grace if you are slipping up while heading down the wrong roads! God wants us on the straight and narrow!

But I can be active in allowing my character to change, to be moulded into Christ-likeness,
Training ourselves, our nature, our character into Christ-likeness, by the power of the Holy Spirit. –
2 Cor. 3:18 - ¹⁸And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect^[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.).

God's spirit will do the changing, but we can play a major part in it. That's where having a kingdom vision, and being active radical disciples comes into play. If you have no goals, you aren't going to want to put in the effort. Same as joining the gym. It starts with small manageable steps – which I hope we will learn together. Relies on a grander vision, goals to head for, a vision of the kingdom life. Its been called - 'A Curriculum for Christ-likeness' (Willard)

Summary

- Kingdom life is there for the taking
- HS is our power available to change
- Disciplines are about being able to keep our resolutions
- God's grace will honour our efforts, not punish our failures
- The Goal is SO worth it! The Prize. Life to the full.