

## Resolve to Remember (Make a Gospel Resolution) by Dan Jacobson

When I get an opportunity to preach, it's always helpful to have a topic or an occasion to help guide the process. In fact, sometimes when there is no topic or occasion given, I have to make one up. So what is the occasion of January 6<sup>th</sup>? It turns out, as I learned from one recent study in the news, is the day that falls exactly in between the day we make our new years resolutions, and the day we break them. That's right. The average New Year's resolution according to the study, lasts until the 12<sup>th</sup>. Another study was less specific, but agreed that 80% are long gone by February. Now I don't want to discourage those of you who are proudly still on the path to success in your goals for the New Year. I'm sure you'll be the exception. Its only science and pretty much all of our human experience and observation that are against you.

Its an interesting thing, isn't it, this optimism we have as a new year begins? As if the things we weren't able to will ourselves into doing on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December will be easy commitments on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January. We seem to think that growth comes by declaring ourselves to be something new, and by willpower alone achieving the goals we desire. And its funny because we know enough to be cynical about our friend's resolutions. We know the chances are slim for real change, and yet we believe somehow for us this is going to work. I know in my case, if I was to declare to my wife today that in 2019 I will refrain from leaving my clothes on the floor, she would probably smile and say "that's great Dan, maybe you could start by picking up the 2018 laundry that is still on the floor now in 2019." While I might have truly believed my declaration, my wife knows me enough to be skeptical.

I think there is no better time than the 6<sup>th</sup> of January to be reminded, as we watch the resolutions topple one by one around us, that human beings are not all that good at changing themselves through effort and declarations alone.

So how do we change? How do we grow? Having goals for spiritual growth is certainly a great thing. So what would spiritual growth look like and how do we achieve it? In other words, what kind of a resolution could we make that might be effective?

How do we grow? One of the age old mysteries of spiritual growth is the question of whose job it is to create it. Am I supposed to be working for it, or is God doing the work in me? There was a whole desiring God conference a few years back on this question alone.

Peter gives us a great new years resolution list in 2 Peter 1.

<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue,<sup>[e]</sup> and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities<sup>[f]</sup> are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So Peter says we should make every effort to attain these goals. A great resolution for the new year.

But in Galatians, Paul gives us a very similar list. Its not identical but there is a lot of overlap. He calls these things the "fruit of the Spirit"

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

So this is another great list of goals we should have for our lives and Paul says they come from living in the spirit.

So are we doing the work, or is God doing the work? At first it seems that Paul and Peter disagree. They are known to have had a disagreement here and there. Or Perhaps this is a contradiction in God's word. A mistake... But then Paul, in Philippians, goes and says this:

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [YOU WORK]

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. [GOD WORKS]

Paul is way too smart to have done that by mistake. There they are right next to each other. Like all the challenging questions in scripture, once you dig deeper you realize that this is a mystery, yes but not a mistake.

Today I don't plan to unpack the deep mysteries of sanctification actually. An elder only has to raise good questions. The pastors can answer them. So if you want to understand God's role and our role and how that mystery works, go ahead and grab Tim or Brian or George after the service and they will explain it all. I'm sure it would only take 30 seconds or so.

I do want to bridge the gap a little bit though, and ask this question: What's wrong with me if I am not consistently seeing these things? Peter says these qualities should be mine, and they should be increasing. What if they aren't? At least not as much as I want them to be? And what if I'm not seeing the fruit of the spirit like I wish I was.

A couple of years back we did a study called the Gospel Centered Life and they used this passage from 2 Peter to show us how we can think wrong about this sometimes. They had us read that passage:

<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue,<sup>[e]</sup> and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities<sup>[f]</sup> are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And then the group was to answer this question: Hows that going? Are you increasing consistently the way you want in these areas? Most of us had to confess that we weren't.

Then it asked us to give our thoughts on why. The answers were the same ones you would give if we asked this today. Well, I lack discipline. I need to get my priorities straight. I need to get up earlier and study more. (and yes we do need to do those things) but Peter says something else in the next verse so they had us read it:

Verse 9: "For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins."

So Peter says our lack of growth is tied into what we are remembering. Specifically, the gospel. The fact that I was in sin and Christ's death cleansed me from those sins and changed my identity. Reverse engineer that passage then, and it would go something like this: Remembering/believing that Christ has cleansed you and rescued you from sin will help you see clearly so you can gain these qualities and remain effective and fruitful.

So the problem in our growth may be more about what we are believing than how much we are trying to change ourselves.

And here is the cool thing. Back to the other passage in Galatians, the one that seems to indicate that growth comes through the spirit. How do we grow in the Spirit? Earlier in Galatians, Paul says this:

Gal 3:1-3, 5 NIV

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the spirit by observing the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?...Does God give you his spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law or because you believe what you heard?

How does the Spirit come? By believing what we have heard. What have we heard? The gospel. Christ crucified.

So there is mystery in sanctification. We are working. God is working. BUT both passages say that believing/remembering the gospel is how this happens. Peter says if you aren't growing you aren't seeing it. You are forgetting the gospel. Paul says believe what you have heard because that is how the spirit came in the first place and that is how you grow.

So all that to say this. If I want to make a resolution to grow in 2019 my resolution is going to be this: I want to believe the gospel in 2019. And you say "well, great. Things are looking up. One of our elders just became a Christian." But you know what I mean. I assent to the gospel of course but day to day in my life I drift away from the things I know to be true. REMEMBERING the gospel may be a better word.

So I have four remembering resolutions. There could be a hundred but here are the ones I need in 2019 if I am going to grow in these ways.

### **1. I resolve to remember God's infinity.**

According to Dr. Richard Swenson, there are 10 to the 20<sup>th</sup> power stars in the entire universe. That's 1 followed by 20 zeros. That makes me feel small. But my body contains 10 to the 28<sup>th</sup> power atoms. That makes my body (according to Swenson) a million times more complex than the universe. According to Isotope studies, 90% of these atoms are changed out each year so you are almost completely new for 2019. There are over 7 billion of these collections of atoms walking around the earth, and our infinite God is monitoring those atoms all the time. And counting the hairs on our heads, and listening to our prayers.

DO WE REALLY BELIEVE THAT?

How can we wrap our minds around the infinity of God? It would seem impossible that such a being exists except the existence of such a being is also the only real explanation for how the universe holds together and WE can exist. If the Bible didn't tell us about him we would need to make him up to explain the reality around us.

And yet we can mumble through worship songs about the power of God and not even stop to realize how ridiculous it is to sing and speak about such things in such uninspired tones.

Annie Dillard says this about God observing our worship: "Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle His own laughter.... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?... Its madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to

church... We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

If I can remember the nature and power of my God, and the fact that he stoops to monitor the concerns of our lives, the awe and wonder that flood into my life will help to melt away a lot of anxieties. So I resolve to keep this in front of me in 2019.

## **2. I resolve to remember how significant my sin is.**

1 Jn 1:8 If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

I have just described the kind of God we believe in. To look at that infinite, all powerful, indescribable personality and proclaim my way to be better is a remarkable act of stupidity by a very small man. And I do it in some form every day.

There will be sin in 2019. No resolution of self-betterment will change that. I am either going to hide it, deny it, blame it on someone, make an excuse for it, or I'm going to confess and repent. If I am believing the gospel, then I am believing its better to be the tax collector in Jesus parable, crying out for forgiveness for many acknowledged shortcomings, than it would be to play the part of the self-righteous tax collector, who believes he has achieved holiness through effort.

I would love to resolve that sin won't be present in my life during the new year. I think it is the resolution we all want to make, but the rabbit hole goes pretty deep. The older I get, the more I come to learn the depth of my weakness.

So I can't make a resolution to eliminate all the sin from my life in 2019, but I do want to become a good repenter. A world class repenter. How is that for a resolution?

## **3. I resolve to remember how complete my salvation is.**

1Jn 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

There are many promises that come with our salvation. Too many to cover here, but the primary good news of the gospel is that the work is done. Its finished. Christ did the work of salvation for us.

I can live in confidence that in Christ I am accepted, adopted and given identity in Christ. I am not working for my salvation, nor could I ever achieve it if I was. Christ has done what I could never do. He met the standard I cannot meet and his righteousness is imparted to me.

I will be tempted to measure my own righteousness. I will be tempted to see only my sin, in constant need of confession, but who am I to question the promises of God?

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself... (2Cor 5:17-18).

We will never stop being tempted to try to seek our own righteousness. Admitting our weakness, but trusting that Christ has completed the work will change everything about how we think and live.

#### **4. I resolve to remember that joy is found on the other side of obedience.**

Sometimes obeying the commands of scripture brings instantaneous joy. I find a lot of joy in the day to day obedience regarding the formation of my family in a biblical way and the raising of kids and teaching them God's word. That's enjoyable so often to me.

Other times obedience is hard. It feels like nothing but sacrifice in the moment. I don't want to do it and it doesn't make me happy. The only thing that motivates me toward hard obedience is the belief that ultimately in this world and eternity my joy will be greater if I obey.

Why did Jesus endure the cross? He didn't want to do it. He asked his father for another way. Hebrews says he endured the cross "for the joy set before him." I can endure the difficult obedience if I truly believe in the joy set before me.

So if you're encouraging me this year, don't tell me "God says so. You better do it." Remind me that God's commands are for His glory, AND my joy. I can serve that kind of God.

The apostles Peter and Paul seem to agree that believing the right things is a prerequisite for doing the right things. So instead of making a resolution about doing, which would probably fail, I am suggesting we make a resolutions about believing. So here is my resolution for 2019. It's not a resolution of human effort. It's a resolution of remembering.

- 1. I want to remember God's infinity.**
- 2. I want to remember the significance of my sin.**
- 3. I want to remember how complete my salvation is.**
- 4. I want to remember that joy follows obedience.**

I think if we remember these things we will grow. I can't remember them without consistent reminders. I need help from my brothers and sisters at FBC in 2019 and I am glad to help you remember these things as well so we can grow together.