

A New Year's Resolution

Conrad Harkrider

The beginning of a New Year causes us to think about our goals, direction, and expectations for the upcoming months. Many people around the country are determined to lose weight, spend more time studying, get organized, or perhaps they're looking to start up a new project or finish an old one. But so often these plans and resolutions last anything but a year. We start out really strong the first few weeks (or maybe just the first few days...), and then we slowly begin to slip back into our previous routine and our old ways.

It doesn't take a doctor or a psychologist to tell you that developing a new habit takes considerable time and effort. So how can we create and establish goals that will last longer than just a few weeks? Each one of us could come up with a list of different areas we need to improve on in our lives. But nothing is more important than our relationship with God. As we think about our goals for this year, let us consider the necessity of reading and studying the word of God. There is no replacement or substitute for daily, consistent reading of God's revelation to man.

In Colossians 3:16, Paul encourages all believers to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom..." When an actor takes on a new role for a movie or a play, many times they will engulf themselves in the character by continuously reading over the script, practicing the accent and mannerisms, and rehearsing the body language. They begin to talk, act, and think like the character they are trying to imitate. If we are striving to imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1) and desire His words and thoughts to "dwell" within us, we must immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. The ability to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) does not come by simply hearing a few sermons each week (although that is an important part). Rather we must give ourselves over to constant, regular study so that we "may learn to fear the Lord (our) God and be careful to observe all the words of (the) law..." (Deuteronomy 17:19).

Perhaps the reason we fail to read our Bibles on a daily basis is because we lack the motivation. Sometimes it is difficult for us to see the benefits that come from spending time with God's word. We may not immediately see or feel any observable difference in our character or actions, but let us not forget that the "word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12) and is able to purify and save our souls (1 Timothy 4:16). It is the greatest weapon we can use against Satan and will allow us to avoid sin and fight temptation (Psalms 119:9-11). Instead of viewing the Bible as a book of good stories and timely quotes, it should become a lamp that guides our path as we walk in this life (Psalms 119:105).

Here are a few suggestions to help us develop a consistent, daily reading schedule for this next year:

- 1) *Make Time* -- Set aside some time each day when you can sit down in a quiet place to read. If you're not a morning person, read after lunch. If you're busy during the day, take time after dinner. Whenever it is, make spending time with your Bible a priority.

We make time for movies, TV shows, Facebook, and friends. Let's make time for God's word!

- 2) *Be Realistic* -- Don't set an unobtainable goal for yourself. It might not be practical to read one book (i.e. Matthew or Mark) every night. Try starting with an amount you know you can handle until you begin to develop the habit of sitting down to read everyday. Sometimes less is more. Reading one Psalm every night and truly understanding its content is better than skimming over five or six chapters. Regardless of how much you read, the important thing is that you start somewhere!
- 3) *Become Accountable* -- Ask a friend or someone at your church to start a reading plan with you. It helps if you can ask questions or just talk to another person about what you have read the previous week. Having someone to be accountable to will help during the times when you are really busy or just don't feel like keeping up with your reading.
- 4) *Be Consistent* -- The only way to develop a habit is by continuously practicing or performing the given task; just stick with it. If you miss a few days, pick it back up when your schedule settles down. Try to make reading a part of your daily routine.

Let us make reading and studying our Bibles a priority for 2009 and every year the Lord gives us to live on this earth. *"Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; For I am called by Your name, O Lord, God of hosts"* (Jeremiah 15:16).

The Tongue

Jeremy Ferguson

Socrates once said, "Nature has given us two ears, two eyes, and one tongue to the end that we should hear and see more than we speak." The inspired writer James wrote, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19). Both of these statements are summed up simply in Proverbs 10:19, "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise." Why is that? Why are there so many warnings about the tongue? This two can be answered with a quote, "With great power, comes great responsibility."

James the third chapter is a discussion of the power inherent within the tongue. Admittedly, James says, "we all stumble in many things If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). Across the world, everyone agrees that there is power in the tongue. What is the tongue comparable to?

James gives us several examples to illustrate the power the tongue has: "Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" (James 3:3-5). Here in Texas, we have the benefit of seeing the first

example very easily. Here in a place renown for its horses and rodeos, the example of the bits in the horse's mouth makes a large impact on us. The horse is a grand beast of great power! Just by watching a horse, you are struck by its muscles. Even when standing still, a horse's muscles will twitch and show its great power. A bit is such a small thing. This small object, when placed in a horse's mouth controls it entirely. Even the greatest ships have small rudders to control their movement through the water. Every fire begins with a single, small spark.

What makes this power so great and so dangerous is that everyone wields it. The oldest and the youngest, the biggest and the smallest, the smartest and the most ignorant all have the same great responsibility to use their tongues wisely. The tongue can be used in a positive or a negative way.

The negative is obvious. The wisdom literature reiterates time and time again the negative power of the tongue: "May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, And the tongue that speaks proud things" and "the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness" (Psalms 12:3; Proverbs 15:2). These are but two examples. James describes the tongue as "a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:6-8).

The tongue is capable of good things. Paul writes in the book of Romans, "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:13-14). The only way that people can be saved, is if they are told what they must do. Talking or preaching is the most common way to exchange information and in this case, the steps of salvation. The writer of Proverbs stated, "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; The heart of the wicked is worth little . . . There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise promotes health" (10:20; 12:18).

Truly, "life and death are in the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). The choice comes down to us. Speech is nothing more than the expression of the heart. Christ stated, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). We cannot say anything without thinking it first. When we use our words in an evil way, it reveals our hidden, evil thoughts. When we use our words in spreading the Gospel or any other work of God, it exposes our hearts of gold.

Transformed in the Image of Christ

Shane Millard

In my time growing up I have learned many valuable lessons, but some of the lessons I value most come from learning more about something I already knew. For example, someone understands baptism to be for the remission of sins, but later they realize that it is an anti-type of the salvation Noah had in the flood. It's lessons like this that mean a lot to me as I continue to grow. Today, I hope to share one with you.

I know personally I was raised with the mindset of being a good person, treating others respectfully, and learning God's word. All of these were great attributes that my parents worked to instill in me, as I'm sure it was with many of you. But today I want to go deeper into why we act "good" as Christians and also look at the level of "good" we are trying to reach.

Our first idea we need to understand is that God is good. When I mean that God is good, I mean that God defines what is good. He is the One who, by His word, furnishes us "unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). Without God's determination of what is right and good, there would be no right or good. Perhaps your parents would try to give you an idea of what they view as good but without God it is only their opinion.

Now what does God view as "good"? Our passage we will begin with is 2 Cor. 3:18: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." The point the author is making can be illustrated in a very simple way. Did you know that our Statue of Liberty in New York is actually a copy? The first one was made in Paris on a smaller scale and there is another one near Brazil. We received ours last! Below is a picture of the one in Paris (on the right) as well as the one in New York (on the left).



As you can see, they are the same image and this is the same idea Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians 3. Just as the sculptor has a particular image in front of him then takes a block and copies it, we take ourselves and transform ourselves into the image of Christ.

Now one other side point I want to make before we make some application is that our lives are moldable or impressionable. No one is made sinful or righteous, we weren't fashioned into a particular mold before the world was formed. Also, we can change the molds we decide to be in. If we were sinners we can change and form ourselves after the life of Christ. These concepts are spoken of in 2 Tim. 2:20-21 and Paul shows clearly that if someone wants to change bad enough they can.

Now back to our idea here in 2 Cor. 3. The application we have now is that we are doing more than just casually becoming "good." What needs to be happening in your life and mine is taking the lifestyle of Christ and mimicking it. Just like the childhood game of copying what someone else says to get on their nerves, we are doing that same thing in regard to all that Christ did -- minus the getting on the nerves.

But isn't that too much to ask of someone? Isn't that too much work for the everyday person who has "sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)? I will completely agree that it is difficult, but didn't Jesus say that some people would be unwilling to take on the demands of being His disciple? But there are other considerations as well we must think about. First, God will not ask something of us that we cannot perform. If God asks us to live like Christ then we can. Second, the process of transforming ourselves into the image of Christ isn't something that happens overnight and God knows and understands that. Just as the sculptor doesn't conform the piece of stone into a beautiful statue overnight, likewise the person who is in the image of the world will have to work hard and take time to become like Christ. Here is one of those concepts again that didn't ever click with me. In God's word there are directional commands and absolute commands. The absolute commands are usually one time commands such as being baptized for remission of sins. But there are also directional commands that demand we work toward a certain direction such as loving our neighbor as ourselves. Now as we connect this to our concept, God is wanting us to head in the direction of being like Christ and understands it will take time.

Finally let's bring this concept home for our lives. How can I be like Christ today? First, pray for the strength and dedication to live the "good" life. Second, learn about who Christ is in His word. There is no reason we shouldn't understand the nature of Christ considering the New Testament discusses Christ's life and nature extensively. Third, surround yourself with people, entertainment, and influences that will help you learn and develop into being more like Christ.

This is the lesson I learned and that I hope you can see as well. That when people tell you to act right it isn't just because "it's the right thing to do." It's because it's what Christ would do and as a Christian you have chosen to become what the name describes -- One who is like Him. Let's take this concept into our study and lives and glorify Christ in our bodies.

Starting Over

Brady Cook

I've always been impressed with the strength that our fathers had in the Old Testament to push on and move past people and events. Civilizations around them rose and fell, never to be heard from again, but the nation of Israel (at least in race) still exists today as it existed back then, even though they may not be God's specific chosen people anymore. Their history has seen leaders that surpassed the nation itself, such as Moses and David, and witnessed events that surpassed mortal eyes, like the crossing of the Red Sea. Every generation continued to see greater and greater things, with the victory of Elijah at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18) and redemption of Israel with the help of Esther and Mordecai. Sadly came the time, however, for these great men to depart, Moses on Mt. Nebo (Deuteronomy 34) and Elijah in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). With their great leaders gone, how could they ever expect to carry on to the next chapter of their service?

This most certainly would have been the heavy thought on Joshua's mind as he prepared to lead the Israelites into the promised land in Joshua 1. For so long, Moses had been the one at the helm, guiding God's people under His leadership, and his death signaled an end to that era. Now it was his turn to lead the Jews into Canaan, but how would he do it? Would he try to copy Moses' method of speaking, or try to develop his own? Would he try to be as Moses had been, or become Joshua the leader, standing on his own two feet? It was vitally important for him to mimic the servant characteristics that Moses had towards God, but how would he follow up possibly the greatest leader the Jews would ever have? He realized however, that just because one great era has come to an end does not necessarily mean a bad one has to follow. Just because Moses had been greatly successful at his job, did not mean Joshua could not be at his, in his own way. When God came to Joshua in Joshua 1:2, saying, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, and go over this Jordan, you and all this people," Joshua realized it was his turn to act. The only question was, how would he approach it?

This philosophy of only looking ahead works especially when negative events have occurred in our past. David's encounter with Bathsheba illustrates this point perfectly. Because of his adultery with Bathsheba and eventual murder of Uriah, David was told his son would die. In other words, the blame for his son's death would rest purely on his shoulders (2 Samuel 12:14). What a load to carry! The rest of 2 Samuel talks about the mourning and fasting that David did on behalf of his child, only to have it die, true to the Word of the Lord. But instead of murdering himself over and over again in anguish of what he had done, after the child dies, he gets up, cleans himself off, and sits down to eat. To this his servants are astonished, but David utters the most simple reply, saying, "What can I do about it now?" (2 Samuel 12:21-23). This example of a complete turn-around in his actions must have been painful, but David understood the value of the future. Wailing for his son would not bring him back, but learning from his mistakes and using them to make himself a better person would make the situation have some profit. How many times have we squandered our future because we have spent time wailing about the past? The attitude of a Christian is not "Look what I have done, it's all over," but "I know my past has been less than stellar, but I'm going to make my future be the best it can be." Take the lessons that you have

learned from your mistakes, and your successes, and use them to shape a more God-centered future.

In our own lives today, there will be many events that happen in our past that will force us to examine how we will handle our future. “I can’t be a good christian, too many people know what I have done,” some may say. “Look at how I handled it last time, there’s no way I could do any better next time it shows up,” still another will claim. If this argument was true, than nothing on this earth would be accomplished, as “all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The difference between those who succeed and those who don’t, is how you let the difficulties of the past affect how you approach the future. If Joshua had let the majesty of Moses’ reign blind him from his own abilities, and tried to “live up” to that reputation, Joshua would have failed as a leader; there could not be another “Moses.” Joshua was left to evaluate his own abilities, and rest on the promise that God would be with him, and that he would be successful in his own endeavors (Joshua 1:8).

The ending of one aspect of our lives signals the beginning of another, each one more exciting and hopeful than the last, but living in the past and reflecting on past mistakes all the time does no one any good. In a book that deals heavily with the supremacy of Christ’s true law over material worship, Paul states something very logical that can apply to our lives today, but especially in our service to Him: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek those things which are above” (Colossians 3:1). Why, if we have been raised with Christ, would we still seek the things on earth? In the same vein, if we have been raised in Christ, why would we still walk in our past lives? 2008 may or may not have been a good year for you, but I’m sure we all have things that we wish we could go back and redo. Instead of squandering opportunities in 2009 by thinking about events in 2008, whether good or bad, live in the present, always growing and abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). Remember, the one thing that never goes away and stays with you through all the transitions in your life, is our Lord. “Be strong, and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

The Voice of Experience

A Good Disciple

Kyle Campbell

Elisha was a disciple of the great prophet Elijah. He was designated as Elijah’s successor but first worked as Elijah’s servant (1 Kings 19:15-21). When God was ready to take Elijah to heaven by a whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:1-14, Elisha showed the qualities of a good disciple. If we will live by these qualities, we will be good disciples for our Lord’s cause. What makes a good disciple?

First, a good disciple follows (2 Kings 2:1-2, 4, 6). Wherever Elijah went Elisha insisted on going too. We should follow our Lord Jesus this diligently (Luke 9:23; John 12:26). Truth deserves to be followed and preserved. "Buy the truth and sell it not ..." (Proverbs 23:23). But just as Elisha surely learned the difficult life of a prophet of God, so the Christian learns the difficulty of following the Lord. It is difficult to follow the Lord when your friends or family ridicule your position on doctrines such as instrumental music and church-supported institutions (although I certainly hope this is never the case). False doctrines always assault the people of God, and it will be difficult to follow the Lord when your brethren oppose you. Ridicule and opposition will not end, so we must endure and follow the Lord.

Second, a good disciple is faithful (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 8). Even though Elijah and the sons of the prophets both seemed to try to dissuade Elisha from following, he was faithful. He was not going to be dissuaded (Luke 14:26-27; 1 Corinthians 4:2). A faithful Christian will not be pulled away from serving the Lord by a whim or by some unimportant, irrelevant, and trivial reason. They will put God and His kingdom first. Far too many Christians now do not love the Lord more than they love their job or their recreation. Sadly, this fact is often demonstrated when Christians are not even willing to attend worship services regularly or gospel meeting assemblies that are arranged by a local congregation (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Third, a good disciple has foresight (2 Kings 2:9-12). When Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted, he asked for a double portion of his spirit. The enormity of the loss of Elijah so gripped the humble Elisha that he asked to be granted spiritual power far beyond his own capabilities to meet the responsibilities of the great task that lay before him. He wished that Elijah's mighty prowess might continue to live through him. In short, he asked for a spiritual blessing. If we could choose anything to be given us, would we waste that choice on a material possession or would we desire something greater and more heavenly? Solomon chose wisdom and an understanding heart above material riches (1 Kings 3:9-13). Are we willing to seek for knowledge and understanding of the Lord's word rather than financial advantage in this life? The assaults of the devil in the forms of immorality and false doctrine never stop. Congregations need strong, wise servants of the Lord who can see the end of a matter and know the Bible and how to defeat ungodliness and error.

Fourth, a good disciple has faith (2 Kings 2:13-14). Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and performed the same miracle that Elijah had done earlier. He had the faith to believe that God would give to him the power to work miracles like his great predecessor. It is our faith which gives us the ability to overcome the world (1 John 5:4). This victory does not take the form of miraculous actions, but of a victory over sin and Satan. When we cast off the dominion of sin, we must do so by faith. Christ's disciples live by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:6).

Are you a good disciple? If you were to take stock in how you have lived your life to this moment, would you hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:21, 23)? If not, then maybe you need to repent!