



## From the Pulpit

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**"Your Spiritual Resolutions"**

A man said to his friend: "There's nothing like getting up at six in the morning, going for a run around the park, and taking a brisk shower before breakfast. Then I like to sit down and read the Bible for about fifteen minutes, then spend another fifteen in prayer." The friend answered, "How long have you been doing this, anyway?" He answered, "I start tomorrow."

January is the month when people are starting resolutions. New Year's resolutions give people an opportunity to feel as if life can be made better. Everyone has made a resolution at one point or another. "This year I am going to read more. This year I resolve to make amends. This year I resolve to eat right. This year I resolve to exercise." It is difficult to keep resolutions. Most fall by the wayside within the first month. There is an internet site called resolution reminders that will email you monthly motivational reminders to keep your resolutions on track!

We wonder why we fail so quickly. It could be that the reason why our resolutions fail is because there is something else beyond what we are resolving to do- maybe something spiritual. If we fail to address the spiritual side of our lives, we may not be able to make progress in other parts of our lives. For example, if we are not at peace with God we may not be able to keep a resolution to be less angry. Or if we feel an emptiness in our lives we may not be able to stop overeating until we address that void. If we have a poor self image we may not feel motivated to exercise and feel healthy. Or we may turn to alcohol or stimulants to address disappointments in life instead of turning to God's comfort and strength. There may be a deeper problem behind the behaviors we want to correct.

I once heard that the mind and body may get on the treadmill, but they won't last long if the spirit is still on the couch. Yet knowing what we know about resolutions, if we get our spirits involved and create a list of spiritual resolutions, aren't they just as likely to fail quickly, too? Keeping regular resolutions has

proven difficult. Keeping spiritual resolutions seems impossible! How do we make spiritual resolutions that are long lasting and life changing?

Some exert a lot of effort looking for the right tool toward spirituality. Do we need to subscribe to a new internet spiritual resolutions reminder program? I heard that there is also an IPOD and MP3 Bible devotional. Maybe what we are looking for is found within ourselves.

Today's Scripture lesson from Corinthians 12 provides hope in this matter. The Scripture is a portion of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Reading Paul's letters is a bit like listening to a one sided telephone conversation. Paul responded to questions and issues the Corinthians had. He begins this portion of the letter with, "Now concerning the spirituals..." The Corinthians had asked Paul about the people who were spiritual. They were former pagans who were very misguided as to what spirituality was. Spirituality had become adversarial-they were putting each other down by doing things such as cursing people in the name of Jesus.

A curse tablet found in the temple of Demeter in Corinth read, 'Hermes of the underworld [grant] heavy curses'. *Jesus be cursed* can be translated 'Jesus [is] a curse' or 'Jesus [grant] a curse' for the two words are literally 'anathema Jesus' or 'let him be anathema' where the verb is in the present tense.

This was not genuine spirituality to be cursing one another. Paul stated that God gave spiritual gifts that may be manifest in different ways, but in the end the gifts do not compete with each other; they complement each other since all of the spiritual gifts come from God.

Spirituality is first connecting to God and then connecting to one another. The Corinthians were very spiritual but they were lacking in love. Love is the power behind the spiritual life. Love unites people in the spirit. That is why the next chapter, Corinthians 13, is the chapter about love.

Paul wrote that they are all valued in God's eyes because God created them to be a spiritual family of faith. They do not have to do anything to prove that they are more spiritual than another. All are gifted in the spirit, and spirituality brings people together.

This is very good news. Instead of trying to manufacture the spirit in our lives, we can be assured that God has already given us the gift of the spirit. We do not have to go out and buy a new computer program to teach us how to be spiritual, or subscribe to a reminder program. It may help us if we begin a new devotional practice, but we can begin our spiritual lives with one on one contact with the presence of God.

Paul is saying that spirituality blooms from love, which logically makes sense if God is love and connecting with God's spirit is what makes us spiritual.

Maybe we do not have to make a list of spiritual resolutions. We only need to realize that God has already reached out to us and has initiated the spiritual life through love. Instead of trying to stop doing something, we need to gain control over our desires. Instead of trying to repress urges, we need to master ourselves and desire what is healthy and right. If we desire what is right, we do not need to fight ourselves all of the time.

A simple way to look at this might be if we were to take a blank sheet of paper and sign our names to the bottom and then hand it over to God, saying, "Here God, you take this and fill in what I need to do. You know my weaknesses, my rough edges that need to be smoothed out, my desires, my lack of discipline." Instead of starting from the outside by ourselves, we are asking God to change us from the inside out. That is where lasting change happens. That is where the spiritual resolution will endure!

Helen Roseveare discovered that. She was a medical missionary in Africa. She considered herself a very spiritual person and had a very big job- she was the only doctor in a large hospital. Her patience began to run out. She was too busy and constantly being interrupted. One of the African pastors noticed that she had become irritable. He didn't want her to burn out, so he invited her to a two day retreat at his house. Two full days of prayer would help her find peace. She lasted one day and told him that her prayers were bouncing off the ceiling. She was frustrated. With his bare toe, the pastor drew a long straight line on the dusty ground. "That is the problem, Helen: there is too much 'I' in your service. I have noticed that quite often, you take a coffee break and hold the hot coffee in your hands waiting for it to cool." Then he drew another line across the first one. "Helen, from now on, as the coffee cools, ask God, 'Lord, cross out the "I" and make me more like you.'"

Soon after this simple spiritual practice, Helen Roseveare realized that the spiritual solution was within. Her whole life was energized again and her work became fulfilling again. She was too full of herself to realize God's peace in her life. This was the master principle of Jesus: freedom comes through service, and service comes by releasing our ego. In the midst of the busyness, she had lost sight of God's love in others, just like the Corinthians, in the midst of their misguided spirituality, had lost sight of true spirituality- God's love flowing through the lives of disciples to others.

I believe there is an opportunity in each of our lives for a spiritual awakening when we locate and unlock our spiritual awareness of God. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Paris, Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk, discovered a powerful inner spirituality that he did not realize he had. He felt connected to God through his daily chores in the monastery. Instead of going through the frustration of trying to find mountaintop experiences that would suddenly illuminate his being, or waiting on the proverbial Damascus road to be blinded and renewed by a vision of Christ, he discovered a spirituality in his day to day living. In 1692 his ideas were put together in a book posthumously, but here are a few very powerful points that might be called his spiritual resolutions:

*Renounce anything that doesn't lead  
to God*

*Trust in God.*

*Recall God's presence in your past  
that you may have forgotten.*

*Work at being aware of God,  
carrying on a silent, habitual,  
conversation from your soul.*

*Pray for a sense of the love of God.*

*Pray for an ability to endure  
suffering with courage.*

Let us hope for moments in our lives when we find ourselves becoming less materialistic, less self-absorbed. How ironic that an inner spirituality would lead to looking outside of ourselves!

So many people live only for themselves- their whole world centers around themselves. Jesus calls us to lives of giving not getting. Jesus tells us to serve rather than be served- that is how we serve God. Jesus calls us to realize the irony of an outward focus creating an inward peace.

Making spiritual resolutions with this in mind is like changing your whole framework of thinking of resolutions in the first place. Instead of fitting a resolution into your life like a piece of pie in a pie chart with yourself in the center, let us move God to the center- let us put God at the center of the spokes of the wheel.

What would our lives look like if we gave God the blank sheet of paper? Every day we can start with a blank sheet and commit to God's strength. How would our lives change if we put God at the center of the wheel of our lives? We would have all of the answers and we would always be going the right way! We would connect God's love through our lives outward to the world.

Paul wrote that when we allow God to build up our spiritual lives, the whole body of Christ is built up. When we become aware of God's presence in our daily lives, our spirituality blossoms with love...when we decide to let God use our lives in service, the whole world profits, and we gain the whole world- things of the world that truly matter- love, hope, peace, relationships. That is what Jesus was talking about when he told the disciples about the kingdom of God:

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) May your new year begin right- with spiritual resolve to connect with God as never before!