

PRIORITIES AND RESOLUTIONS—Philippians 3:7-4:1, Jan. 14/24.

Well, it's that time again. The Christmas tree's come down & sadly the decorations have been put away. There's the issue of having had inadequate arm strength to push yourself away from the dinner table, with lingering results, where you would prefer not to have them show up.

It's the time of new beginnings. It's time to reflect on the past year, high & low points, great memories & very forgettable ones. But there's this beautiful thing about a new year—it provides, at least in theory, an opportunity for a new start & the possibility of making new choices. So, people with varying degrees of enthusiasm, pledge to mend their ways & set new directions. You'll have little difficulty predicting many of the resolutions topping the list of desired changes:

1. lose weight
2. stop smoking
3. stick to a budget
4. save or earn more money
5. find a better job
6. become more organized
7. exercise more
8. be more patient at work with others
9. eat better
10. become a better person

It's not a bad list. People want to correct their life-direction & improve their lives. That's commendable. But the issue is what happens 1 month, OK 2 weeks, OK 1 day after the big commitment is made that it's broken. “Do people ever really change?” Lucy asks Linus—he replies, “Sure. I've changed a lot in the past year.” Lucy in her usual empathetic way, shoots back, “No, I mean for the better.” That too often is the way it is. But it's not how it needs to be.

You may remember Bruce Jenner, an American decathlete who, in finishing 10th at the 1972 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, returned home carrying the burden of disappointment—his own & that of an entire nation. He'd been favoured to win the

event that is said to determine the world's greatest athlete. Tenth in the world is not bad when you think about it! Still, after years of training & anguish, it was a bitter result & for a time Bruce tossed in the towel. But in time, he realized if he were ever to achieve his goal, it wouldn't be by quitting. He poured himself into his work, getting better, not bitter—a small change in a letter, an enormous change over time in out-come. For the next 4 years he committed himself to all the punishment that his body, mind & spirit could bear, pressing on relentlessly toward the goal. And in 1976, in Montreal, Bruce Jenner stood on the central podium as the gold medalist in his event.

We all have priorities. How can we know what our priorities are? You'd be correct in saying look where you spend time, energy & money. Look at your activities & your chequebook. Do these line up with what you say is important? Another truth about priorities is that if you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to get what you've always gotten. If Jenner had continued his earlier ways he probably would have finished no better than 10th again—in fact, he might have slipped much further back as others worked harder and might pass him by.

In today's Scripture, Paul clearly declares his priority. He speaks of putting no confidence in the flesh—an interesting statement. We live & move in the flesh & find much of our daily satisfaction in the flesh. It's what we see, breathe & for the most part sense. But this is Paul's clarification point. In all his letters he lays out the distinct choice between the priority of following Christ or not & says whatever gains were made in his life before Christ, in his new life he considers those earlier gains losses—and here is the central nugget—all for the sake of Christ.

The key word here is righteousness. The great basic need of life is to find fellowship with God & be at peace & in friendship with Him. The way to that fellowship is through righteousness, through the kind of life, spirit & attitude toward

God that He desires; in other words, it's a right relationship with Him. Prior to what we read today, Paul says that all his life, he'd been trying to get a right relationship with God. But he finally gave up, realizing it was futile. He couldn't create a goodness of his own, no matter how strictly he followed the Law; for us we might say no matter how hard we tried to keep the 10 Commandments. Instead, he came to a humble faith in God as Jesus told him to do & found the fellowship he'd sought so long. He discovered a right relationship with God isn't based on your own effort of trying to be good, but on faith in Jesus Christ. It's not achieved by any of us, but given by God & accepted in trust.

Does any of this sound similar to what we discussed during advent? Hope, peace, joy & love, we found, are all gifts from God, that we cannot earn, & are different from the world's un-derstanding of them. Nor can they be taken away by any life circumstances. They're gifts. They are from God. So it is with righteousness—a gift from God that cannot be taken away! Any other way is futile & wrong. If you know Christ & have received Him personally, then you can grasp that gaining Christ surpasses everything else in importance. Then righteousness comes—flows—through faith in Christ, not from ourselves. And the benefits, in spite of the loss of what we pre-viously valued & clung to, are so worth it, for the sake of Christ. It's a priority worth striving for, taking Christ at His word & accepting the offer of God's grace!

They say practice makes perfect. Really, practice makes determination or persistence. Small changes over a long period can make for huge changes. James, in his epistle, uses the example of a ship's rudder; turning it just slightly over the course of an ocean crossing makes a huge change in final destination. There's enormous difference in the salary of a pro baseball player who hits .250 v 1 who hits .300. But think about it. In 20 at bats, what's the difference between the 2—1 hit! Small changes

over a long time make a big difference. And it's easier to maintain those changes when you've begun them. Starting a diet or fitness program or beginning to quit smoking is so difficult. In the same way, making Christ the priority, (an infinitely profound choice), is a straightforward change of perspective, that over a lifetime will cause your life to change so much for the better as to make your former life unrecognizable in some respects.

Paul acknowledges he hasn't attained all that Christ offers. If he hasn't, we can relax knowing we're in good company. But more to the point, he assures us it's not up to us; it is Christ who has taken hold of us—so we can “press on”, persevere to take hold of the life that Christ wants for us. What's at stake? Winning the gold medal, the prize for which God calls us heav-enward IN Christ Jesus! There's no room for complacency. An all-in response is what's called for.

Paul explains what “knowing” Christ looks like. It's a personal, intimate knowledge, not simply an intellectual knowledge or a knowledge of facts or principles. Paul's aim wasn't to know about Christ; it was to personally know Him, including knowing the power of His resurrection. This isn't just a past event or something that happened to Jesus. It's much more—a dynamic pow-er at work in the life Christians guaranteeing the importance of this life & this body in which we live. It was in the body that Christ rose & it is this body which He sanctifies. 2nd Of course it's the guarantee of life to come. Because He lives, we shall live also. 3rd, it's the guarantee in life & death & beyond death that the presence of the Living Lord is always with us. So, the resurrection of Christ is the guarantee that this life is worth living, the physical body is sacred & the guarantee that death isn't the end of life; nothing in life or death can separate us from Him.

“Knowing Christ” also implies knowing the fellowship of His sufferings. In

some strange way, when we suffer, we share the suffering of Christ. To suffer for the faith is a great privilege, not a penalty, as we share the very work of Christ. Finally, to “know Christ” means to be so united with Him that day by day we come to share more in His death so that finally we share in His resurrection. We share the way He walked, we share the cross He bore, we share the death He died & finally we share the life He lives for evermore.

Now, “pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” It's awe-some to realize Christ has a purpose for each of our lives. Paul encourages us to press on for Jes-us; keep that thought & purpose foremost in your hearts & minds every day. So we can never rest on our laurels. What's past is behind us; former achievements are no excuse for relaxing. Rather, we are to think of what we still have to do for Christ. We're to reach out for the things that are in front of us—going flat out to the finish. Now isn't that great counsel for the start of a new year?

A high school science teacher tested his class with a demonstration, taking a glass con-tainer & filling it with some big rocks. When asked if they thought the container was full, the stu-dents agreed it was. “Not so”, he replied, taking out some smaller stones & continuing to add them. When he stopped, he again asked if the container was full. The students were more cautious this time, answering, “Probably not”. “You're catching on”, adding sand, & after a similar quest-ion added water. “What's the point of the experiment” he asked. One student answered, “I guess to show us when we think we're doing all we can we can always stretch to handle one more thing”. Sign that kid up for the MinMan team! “No”, replied Mr. Wise. It's so you'll see you have to start with the big rocks—life's priorities—your faith, family, edu-cation, relationships, looking after your health—& only after that can you add life's daily little scen-arios.” It brings to mind: “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand”.

What if we changed our typical New Year's resolutions & began with the big rocks? What lessons has God taught me this past year & base my resolutions on those.

Small changes lead to significant results. I want to speak about a teen who wasn't getting along with his parents. He confided in his youth pastor that things weren't going well—the ex-changes, when they existed at all, were laden with criticism, cynicism, harsh words, short temp-ers, testy times. The youth pastor guaranteed if the teen did one small thing—if he expressed un-asked-for thanks or gratitude once a day to his parents, singly or together, things would improve. The young man was skeptical; it didn't sound like much. The youth pastor agreed but repeated, “Try it & I guarantee things will improve. The boy tried it & came back saying he couldn't und-erstand how or why things with his parents had improved so much. Small changes, persisted with over time, make for great results. Do you resolve to be grateful for God, for the life He's given you, for family (and for friends)? A spirit of thanksgiving creates a greater dependence on God & on others. Ultimately, life is a gift that's intended to be shared & given away.

If you're not familiar with Trivial Pursuit, all aspects of life are found on the rim of the wheel—questions about Arts & Entertainment, Sports & recrea-tion, History & Culture, Geogra-phy, Science & Literature. All the players can be on the rim of the wheel or on the spokes, but only one can be at the hub. What's your hub—sports, food, mon-ey, the stock market, girlfriend/ boyfriend /spouse, health, education, work? What change do you need to make to have Jesus at the hub & keep Him there? All of life circles around & is held in place by that hub—Jesus.

If you are living half-heartedly for Christ, resolve to put Him at the centre of your life. Invite Him to be real to you, to be the priority of your life. He paid in full for our wrong priorities (sins). He stands at the door of your heart, knocking, waiting to be

invited in as your first priority.

What changes will there be when Jesus becomes that first priority—little changes at 1st, then multiplied over time? Today's Scripture speaks of leaving behind our confidence in the flesh, our desire for things of the world & replacing them with—well what? The list is impressive:

vs. 1: rejoicing in the Lord

vs. 8: knowing Jesus as Lord and gaining Him as Christ

vs. 9: being found in Him & so having real righteousness, not self-righteousness; rather, righteousness from faith in God—His gift

vs. 10: knowing the power of His resurrection and fellowship

vs. 14: pressing on toward the goal, “winning the gold”—God calling us heavenward in Christ

vs. 15: God uniting us with Him

vs. 20: citizenship in heaven

We eagerly await a Saviour—the Lord Jesus, who longs to transform us to be like Him! Our joy & crown is our love for Him & then for one another. Stand firm in the Lord. Which pri-orities/resolutions do you choose? Which ones will lead to real, lasting & beneficial changes in your life & those around you? Your homework? Review, reassess your resolutions & priorities this week. See if Christ is truly at the centre. If not, He invites you to invite Him to be your hub.