

HOW TO CHANGE YOURSELF IN THE UPCOMING YEAR—AND FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!

INTRODUCTION:

Just out of curiosity, how many of you want 2020 to be **exactly** like 2019? Just what I thought—we all want to see some things change. **What** is it that we want changed? Some might want their circumstances... or employment situation...or finances...or health to improve. Others might want attitudes...or behaviors...or priorities...in family or friends to change. Still others want to see changes in our political climate—or in the White House!

I wonder, though, how many of us are desiring to see change in **ourselves**? I wonder if we focus too often on changes that we want to see in *circumstances* or *other people* that we neglect to consider changes that we ourselves ought to be making. And I wonder if we think enough about the fact that God desires to change us? We can—and certainly should—have goals in regards to our relationship to God, but shouldn't we also consider that God has goals for us?

He does, doesn't He? So what is God's goal for **you**? On one hand, it would be absolutely crazy for me to go around the auditorium and, one-by-one, call your name and tell you what I think God's will is for you in the upcoming year. On the other hand, there are certain things I can emphatically say **are** God's will for you.

For example, if you are **not saved**—if you have never trusted Jesus and Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins—I can say without hesitation that it is God's will for you to be saved! II Peter 3:9 states that the Lord is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” God' goal is not for us **just** to be saved, however. If you **are** child of God, I can also unashamedly say this—it is God's will for you to be more like Jesus in 2020 than you were in 2019. Stated another way, it is God's will for you to **grow** as a Christian.

Is that your goal? Is that my goal? It should be, shouldn't it? We are going to look at that very thing this morning. Take your Bibles and turn to Philippians 3:8-14. The title of my message—although a bit clunky and long—is this: “How to Change Yourself in the Upcoming Year—and for the Rest of Your Life!”

1. The Desire to change (vss 12-13)

A. Seen in Paul's dissatisfaction

Notice how many times Paul states he is not **satisfied** with his present condition:

--v 12 “Not as though I had already attained”

--v 12 “...either were already perfect...”

--v 13 “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended...”

Paul is making sure his beloved friends in the church at Philippi—he calls them saints in 1:1—know without a shadow of doubt that he has **not** arrived and that he wants to be more like Jesus! Let's think for a moment of the one who is writing this. Who is writing this to them? *Paul, of course!* But who is Paul?

--Paul; the servant, who has obediently served God the last 25-30 years

--Paul; the missionary, who has 3 missionary journeys under his belt and has traveled close to 8000 mi

--Paul; the writer of Scripture, who had been given an abundance of revelation directly from Jesus Himself and who had been transported to heaven and seen things too wonderful to put into words

--Paul; the prisoner, who was writing to them from prison because he chose to obey God rather than man

Even after all he had done—and was now doing—for God, Paul **knew** that he was not yet what he should be. If that isn't convicting, I don't know what is! Do any of us even come close to the dedication and determination and sacrifice that Paul made? We haven't, have we, and yet it doesn't seem to bother us! This is not Jesus—God in the flesh we are talking about. This is Paul—a man—just like me and you!

When we compare ourselves to Jesus—which of course we should—I fear we often have the mentality that “Jesus is perfect—and since I know I can’t be, I’m not going to even try!” Did Paul have that attitude? He didn’t, did he? Why do we? Why are we so satisfied to **not** grow as Christians when Paul was dissatisfied?

I’ve already stated it a couple of times, but how do we know **spiritual** change is what Paul had in mind? It is...

B. Seen in Paul’s declaration

Notice the middle of v 12 “...but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” The Greek word that “apprehend” is translated from is the word *katalambano* and means “to lay hold of so as to make one’s own; to seize upon; to take possession of.”

Let’s not hurry past this. Paul is saying, “I follow after”—I pursue—“if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ.”

--I want to grasp that for which Jesus grasped me’

--I want to lay hold of—and make for my own—what Jesus has laid hold on me for’

--I want to take possession of what Jesus has taken possession of me for’

Although God may not have “seized” *us* quite as dramatically as He did the apostle Paul, He did lay hold on us for the same purpose He laid hold of Paul. Why does God save us; what is His purpose in doing so? Is it just to free us from the penalty of hell?

Romans 8:29 “For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be **conformed to the image of His Son**, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

What Paul is saying then, is this: ‘Christ laid hold on me to save me and make me like Him—and that is what my pursuit and goal in life is going to be. I have not attained—I am not already perfect—but I’m going to pursue that goal. That is my desire; that is what I follow after; that is the main thing—and the one thing I do!’

Are you happy with where you are at on the road to Christ-likeness? Paul wasn’t—and neither should we be. But just being dissatisfied with where we are at—and declaring where we want to be—is not enough, is it? There are some **decisions** that need to be made if change is going to be made. Good *intentions* are not enough; they need to be followed by good decisions and acts of the will.

2. Decisions required to bring about change (vss 13-14)

A. Focus: “but this one thing I do” (13b)

Notice in our Bibles that some of the words in this phrase are italicized which means they were added by the translators to help us understand better (hopefully). You really get the idea of the focus if you leave out those words: “but one thing...” One thing—that’s it! I’m obsessed with one thing and that is what I follow after and press toward.

I doubt that Paul was an athlete himself, but on more than one occasion he used athletic metaphors to get his points across. I Corinthians 9 is probably one of the more familiar.

I Corinthians 9:24 “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.”

--There is only one winner in a race—only one receiveth the prize. “So run, that ye may **obtain.**”

Obtain what? Obtain the prize. In other words, run to win!

I Corinthians 9:25 “And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.”

--Everyone that “striveth for the mastery”—that wants to be the best at what they do—“is temperate”—self-controlled; extremely disciplined—“in all things.”

--Are athletes only careful about what they eat? They are careful about what they eat...and what they drink...and the medicines they take...and when they sleep...and what they wear. There is a focus—an obsession—and everything they do is filtered through this thought: will it help with my goal—or **hurt**?

Ever hear of the Ironman Triathlon? It is a 2.4-mile swim...followed by a 112-mile bike ride...followed by a run of 26.2 miles! How much training does it take to get ready for such an event? Around 15-20 hours per week—like taking on a part time job! Years ago, I remember hearing about a married man with a young child who was going to participate in this race. If my memory serves me right, this guy basically left his family for the 5 months prior to the race to do nothing but train. That is an obsession!

Decision one, then, is there needs to be a commitment—a focus—on what it is that we want changed.

B. Forget the past: “...forgetting those things which are behind...” (v 13)

Is Paul saying we are to forget everything in our past and not remember anything? I don't think so.

In fact, in this very chapter Paul shows that he remembers what he was like before he was saved. We see that in verses 4-6.

Paul remembered how the Thessalonians were when he met them. **I Thess 1:3** “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;”

Paul also told the Thessalonians to remember how *he was* when he was with them:

I Thess 2:9 “For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God.”

i. Don't fixate on past failures

What if I decide I'm going to take up running again and train for a half-marathon—a 13.1-mile race? It has been almost a year since went running—except for the 100-yard dash I did against my grand-daughter back in July! I can fixate on how long it's been...and how much it is going to hurt...and that I got heat exhaustion the last time I ran a half marathon...or the possibility that I could tear a meniscus in my knee again!

More important than running, suppose you see the little challenge I have in the bulletin about reading the NT through this year. Your mind says, 'That's a great idea—I can do that! I can certainly free up 10 minutes a day to read my Bible.' But then you have this thought: 'I've tried this once...or twice...or three times before and I failed each of those times. The same thing is going to happen again this year, so why bother?' That is exactly the attitude God through Paul says we must fight **against**. We need to forget the **failures** which are behind.

Another part of forgetting those things behind is...

ii. Don't rest on past successes

What do I mean by that? Here's an illustration that I believe might help. I certainly don't want to embarrass her, but I think pretty much all of you know one of our daughters is pregnant! I know I'm biased—and hopefully this doesn't sound too weird being I'm her Dad—but I think she is doing really well on her weight. She looks like the same “girl” to me—with a football in front—that before long will look like she has a basketball in front! Suppose she were to say to herself, 'I didn't have any problems with my weight when I carried my last baby 4 years ago so I don't think I'll have any problems this time.' That is resting on past success.

Now if she remembers how she ate 4 years ago—and tries to eat the same way—that is learning from past success, not resting on it. If, on the other hand, she decides to sit on the couch for 16 hours a day and eat nothing but cookies and ice cream—but still thinks she will have a healthy pregnancy—she is obviously resting on past success but will get a very different result!

What are the principles of growth; the decisions we need to make to bring about change?

1) Focus on the desired change. Let it affect your thinking and decision-making.

2) Forget the past. Fixating on past failure—or resting on past successes—doesn't help in the present. Learn from past mistakes but don't let them cripple you. Be encouraged by past successes—but don't rest on them.

Thirdly...C. Reach forth unto those things which are before (v 13c)

We see that in the last part of verse 13 “reaching forth unto those things which are before,” “Reaching forth” is an interesting phrase and it comes from a Greek word that appears only once in the NT. We might not be familiar with the word, but we are familiar with the idea.

It means to “stretch out to or towards; to stretch one’s self forward.” You see it in your mind, don’t you? Olympic runners running as fast as they can and as they near the finish line, what do they do? They “stretch out” their chest in an effort to break the tape first! That is the idea here. It is stretching and straining and putting our whole being into it.

Paul is putting his whole heart into running this race and living his life for God. It is not half-hearted; it is consuming every ounce of his being.

D. Press toward the mark (v 14)

It is noteworthy that the word for “press” comes from the same Greek word that is translated “follow” in verse 12. It can also carry the idea of “pursue” and “run after.” Comparing it with “reaching forth” in verse 13, I think the emphasis is on persistence—on sticking to it.

--In verse 13, Paul says reach, and stretch and strain—emphasizing the **effort**

--In verse 14, “press on” means to keep after it, don’t quit, keep running—emphasizing **consistency**

3. Defeat should not define our race

Can we enjoy progress during the race—or does it come only at the end? The Christian life is a marathon—not a sprint—and there are numerous distractions that can knock us off the course—and weight that can bog us down. But we can make progress on the road to Christ-likeness. We can see and sense change—and be encouraged by it.

Phil 1:6 “Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:” We can have confidence that God is working on us because He says He is!

II Cor 3:18 “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” As we look at God in His word, we will change!

II Cor 5:17 “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” We can look at our lives and see old things that have passed away...

Are you seeing spiritual change and growth in your life? If not, you should ask yourself two questions.

1) Am I really a child of God? Dead things don’t grow—but alive things do!

2) Am I seeking spiritual change and growth? Pretty safe to say if you aren’t seeking it, it won’t happen!

4. Delight most certainly will come at the end of the race

--What does the winner of the Ironman Triathlon get? Some money—and a medal

--What does the finisher of a half-marathon get? A medal

--What did the winner of the original Olympic games get? Paul reminds us in **I Cor 9:25b** “Now they do it to obtain a **corruptible** crown; but we an incorruptible.” A corruptible crown is a wreath that soon dries up.

--What do we get? An incorruptible crown; one that lasts forever.

--That’s not all we get—we also get Christ! We see Him as He is—and become like Him!

I like what a guy named **Hutton wrote**: “Christ is the end of the race. He is the goal—and He is also the prize. The end of the race is its own reward. And it is enough. To possess Christ is worth the loss of all earthly possessions (Phil 3:7). It is, however, in the end, to give us the inheritance of all things.”

As this sermon—and 2019—draws to a close, I want to end with this question: do you want to grow in Christ-likeness? If you so, you can experience spiritual growth but it has to start with a dissatisfaction of where you are at now. You can't be **just** dissatisfied; however, you have to make decisions:

--You need to focus on Christ—not past failures or successes

--And you need to strain and stretch and keep at it

Take your hymnals and turn to Faithful Men on page 393. We'll be singing a different song in just a moment, but the first part of the first stanza captures well the verses we just looked at:

"I am looking to Jesus, giving all in the race, Pressing upward to gain the heavenly prize."

That's it, isn't it? That's what we should be doing? Are you doing it? Are you willing to start now?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS/QUESTIONS:

1. What's God's will for you in 2020? First and foremost, if you are not saved, you need to be.
2. Child of God, are you tired of "the same old; same old" in your Christian life? God wants you to grow—He wants you to become more like Jesus—but it is a cooperative effort between you and God. You have a part—and He has a part. He will not fail to do His part, but are you doing your part?