

Get the Wording and Actions Right  
December 31, 2017

It is that time of year again. It is the time where we examine ourselves and decide where we need improvement. There was a comic strip this week. One character asked another, "Do you know why we watch the ball drop on New Year's Eve?" The other replied no. "It is because as soon as we make resolutions we drop the ball."

I know some of you don't make resolutions anymore. You figured out long ago that they are too hard to accomplish. They take too much focus and effort and you are already as busy as you were last year. So the likelihood of dramatic change is small. That's what many resolutions are, dramatic change. We want it big and we want it now. But dramatic change, big change is just too hard to integrate into our normal, busy lives.

Despite that, this morning I suggest you DO make a concerted effort to change this year, but instead of a big change, I suggest you try making a small change. Small changes are more easily accomplished than big ones.

The areas of change I want to suggest this morning are not the typical ones. Among the most common resolutions people make are to eat less, or better, and to exercise more. I am not going to focus on diet or exercise this morning. Instead, the areas I will speak to are sins that you may struggle with. Ceasing sin habits will be much more valuable than losing weight.

We are continuing with our study of 1 Timothy. We are right at the place in our text where Paul encourages Timothy to be making progress in five areas of his life. These same five apply to all of us. They will be the focus for us this morning and next Sunday.

**1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV) Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.**

We do not know Timothy's age. It is estimated that he was in his late thirties at this point. Depending on your age, you might not consider late 30's to be young. But we need to see it in the context of that day and culture. A soldier in the Roman army served until 40. Up to 40 you were considered a youth. That is the word Paul uses here.

Irenaeus, who was a church leader between the years of 150 and 202 AD, said that "Thirty is the first stage of a young man's age, and extends to forty..."  
(Irenaeus II. 22.5. Cited in Stott, John *Guard the truth: The message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1996. 35.)

Likely Timothy was in his thirties. Timothy had been with Paul for about 15 years at this point, so it is doubtful he is still in his 20's. But even in his late 30's Timothy was younger than the elders of the church at Ephesus where Timothy is serving. This would account for the encouragement of Paul about Timothy's age. In his favor was the fact that Timothy had been serving faithfully as a missionary with Paul for the last 15 years. That carried a lot of weight.

An example of this is when I was in seminary. I had to do a semester of field work under the supervision of another pastor, one who had graduated from seminary. I asked my

seminary professor if my current pastor, Jack Oliver, could be my field work supervisor even though he had never finished seminary. My professor was familiar with the inner city church that Jack pastored. Jack had been there for over a decade. My professor said that being at such a church for that long was equal to finishing seminary and Jack supervised my field experience.

Timothy's 15 years serving with Paul qualified him for the leadership role he had at the church at Ephesus, though he was younger than the elders at the church. But not everyone would see it that way. Some would not well accept his leadership simply because of his age. So Paul writes of how to overcome this. These are words of wisdom that all our teens and young adults should heed.

**1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV) Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.**

**You earn a reputation of maturity by showing evidence of being mature.**

This encouragement is for us all. It certainly applied to me when I arrived at this church at the young age of 30. It could still apply to me now in relation to you who are in your 70's and 80's. This encouragement is meant for all of us as Christians. Every Christian should be making progress in Christian character and serving as an example to other Christians.

Paul comes back to this idea of progressing toward maturity a few verses later.

**1 Timothy 4:13-16 (NIV) Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.**

Paul encourages Timothy to focus on improving in five areas. He should be making consistent progress so that others will take notice of the change. We would do well to take that advice.

My suggestion this morning is NOT that you tackle all five of these this year. Instead, I suggest you tackle one sin in one of these five areas. As you see success in this one, you will be encouraged to go on to another one.

The first word, speech, covers a lot of territory. There are lots of sins that we can commit with our voice. Let's cover a few of them. Paul deals with a bunch of these in his letter to the church at Ephesus.

**Ephesians 4:25 (NIV) Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully**

**Lying can become a bad habit.**

Some people enjoy lying, enjoy fooling others with their stories. But liars eventually get caught in their lies and their relationships suffer for it. I am not suggesting that all of us lie or that any particular person in our church lies. But it may be true that someone has more trouble with this than most of us. And it would be good to repent of this, this year and improve your testimony for Jesus.

Let's take another example.

**Ephesians 4:29 (NIV) Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths**

**All of us like to joke around.**

But constant levity is a problem for some people. They make light of everything. You can hardly have a conversation about anything serious with them. It soon becomes apparent that the only thing they care about is the attention they receive for their comments. Again, for some people this had grown into a serious bad habit. Their encounters with other Christians become about them. They are acting selfishly and sinfully.

**Ephesians 4:31 (NIV) Get rid of all... slander...**

**The kind of slander that is especially sinful are putdowns and cutting.**

This is using your words to attack someone else. It is as bad as physically hitting them. Such behavior does not become the Christian.

**Ephesians 5:3-4 (NIV) But among you there must not be even a hint of... obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking...**

**Some people use bad language for its shock value.**

There are people who like to use foul language, like to cuss, like to use sexual innuendos and bathroom humor. They like to see how different people react to it. Such language has become more common on the streets of our country, in the movies, on TV, and in music lyrics.

Some people use such language to intentionally push the idea that these words should be normalized in our culture. They want to downgrade these words from obscene and impolite to normal and acceptable. I have had conversations with such people. In their hearts, they KNOW these words are wrong. These same people would not dare to talk that way in court, in church, or in polite social settings. They know these things to be sinful. They want to promote sin rather than clean up their language.

Polite speech has not changed. Impolite speech has not changed.

There are other sins associated with how we talk and what we say. It may be that you need to repent of such a sin. If you have a sinful speech problem, let your prayers include the following.

**Psalm 141:3 (NIV) Set a guard upon my mouth, O Lord. Keep watch over the door of my lips.**

**Psalm 19:14 (NIV) "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to Thee, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."**

The word speech is pretty clear. The second word, in the NIV, is life. That isn't clear at all. Other translations include: **life, behavior, conduct, demeanor, the way you live, manner of life, or your actions.** That is a great deal clearer.

You may think of yourself as a good person, a person of integrity, sincerity, and talented. But no one will know of your integrity, your sincerity, your talent or your good will unless you live it consistently in your actions. Your words can say one thing, but your behavior will show who you truly are.

**There are two things that should guide our behavior: worship and witness.**

**1 Peter 1:15 (NIV) But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;**

**The word holy has the basic meaning of separation.**

God is holy because He is separate from man, from his creation. God is not part of the universe. We usually speak of the universe as encompassing everything we see, all the planets, moons, stars, and space. But God is not part of that universe. God is outside of creation. He is also perfect in all of His characteristics. This is the holiness of God.

**Our holiness refers to being separate from the world and given over to God.**

Worship is the act of giving God worth by dedicating ourselves to Him. So the whole concept of us becoming holy is connected to worship. If we want God to know how much we appreciate Him, how grateful we are for salvation, then we will show that in our behavior, not just our words. We worship God out there every moment of every day as much as we do in here on Sunday mornings. Worship should guide our behavior in the world.

Worship should guide our behavior. So, too, our witness should guide our behavior. The way we live should attract people to Jesus.

**1 Peter 2:12 (NIV) Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**

**1 Peter 3:1-2 (NIV) Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.**

Notice that our behavior, how we consistently conduct ourselves, can have a big impact on others. It can attract them to Jesus. Or it can make Jesus look bad.

Now, this was supposed to be about small changes to make. So let's consider some specifics of behavior with some questions.

Do you steal? If you take anything from a coworker, employer, teacher, school, neighbor, or family member, without permission, you are stealing.

Do you borrow without returning?

Are you constantly late?

Are you always forgetting things, like appointments and meetings and responsibilities?

Do you make a habit of bad driving, aggressive driving, pushing the speed limit, tail gating, running stop signs, using the phone to dial or text while driving?

Do you fail to keep your promises? Are you unfaithful?

Such behaviors and more make our message about Jesus seem unimportant in the eyes of others.

Many centuries ago, a man in the Army of Alexander the Great who was also named Alexander, was accused of cowardly actions. He was brought before Alexander, who asked what his name was. He replied softly, "Alexander."

"I can't hear you," the ruler stated.

The man again said, a little louder, "Alexander."

The process was repeated one more time, after which Alexander the Great commented, "Either change your name or change your conduct."

Our behavior can either attract people to Jesus or drive them away. If you have a sinful habit that is driving people away from Jesus, you need to repent of this sin. Work on this, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and bring it to an end.

This is all we have time for today. But let us all end this year asking if there is a habit of sin that needs to be repented of. This, most of all, is what we need to improve in us.

**Is there a habit of sin, no matter how small, in your behavior or speech?**

I may not have hit on your sins this morning. But we all sin. And we do so consistently. I urge you to make repentance of sin your resolution. You KNOW this is God's will for you. You can count on the help of the Holy Spirit. Take time today to examine yourself for sin. Ask God to reveal the sin in you, and repent.