



-- Video – What about Resolutions?

As Jerry Seinfeld might say, “What’s the deal with New Year’s resolutions? “ Why, for example, is the woman in that video resolving to stop drinking so much coffee while holding an extra tall latte in her hand? And why does another woman in the video say about New Year’s resolutions, “You can’t break ‘em if you don’t make ‘em,” as if breaking them were her ultimate goal? Why, moreover, do more than 80% of New Year’s resolutions falter and fail? Why is it that so many of us have so much trouble seeing real change happen in our lives? In other words, why do we do what we do?

Well, our culture routinely insists that our wrong behavior is really someone else’s fault. “Blame it on your mother. Blame it on your father. Blame it on your upbringing. Blame it on something!” In fact, any one of us who applies enough effort to the task will likely have little trouble defining at least a dozen ways in which we are victims. For my part I could fashion myself a victim of discrimination against Polish people, discrimination against short people, and reverse affirmative action. I could claim to suffer from urban bias, religious intolerance, and a host of stereotypes that are unfairly cast upon me because I am a Christian or a pastor or a cat owner or a brunette or, alas, a Bengals fan. And, truly, I could blame all of my wrong behavior on the fact that I am so badly persecuted because I am so ravishingly handsome.

However, according to Scripture, none of this victimization is ultimately responsible for my sins or yours or anyone else’s. Now, don’t get me wrong here: Many of us have had powerful experiences that have left profoundly important marks on our lives...some for good, some for bad. However, God’s Word makes clear time and time again that we can never ultimately blame our circumstances for the things sinful things that we do and say. Rather, the simplest, most biblical answer to the question, “Why do we do what we do?” is the heart.

Listen to what our Lord says about why we do what we do in Luke 6:45. He says, *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”* Notice carefully what Jesus is saying here: He is declaring—in no uncertain terms—that our behavior is simply the overflow of our hearts.

Please hear this: Our attempts at meaningful change fail so often because we are too often aiming them at the wrong thing. We aim at changing our behavior while God’s instructions teach us that we must change our hearts first. Proverbs 4:23 stresses this point very strongly when it says, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”* Notice: According to this verse, the things that happen to us are not the factors that ultimately define what we do. No, it makes clear that our *hearts* are the wellspring of life. In other words, our circumstances don’t shape our hearts; they show our hearts as they really are.

Therefore, significant change will never come merely because we declare that we want it and set forth to do it. Rather, real change always begins with heart change. In Matthew 23:25-26, Jesus pleads with His opponents to understand this very point, when He urges:

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”*

You see, too many of our attempts to change, and especially our New Year’s resolutions, tend to fail because we approach them as those determined to clean the outside of the cup and dish, but we leave the inside matters of the heart unchanged. We want a new physique on the outside, but on the inside we still love fried chicken more than we love superior health. We hear God’ call to tithe, but deep down, we are still more attracted to the thrill of the whimsical purchase. We know that we should study our Bibles and pray more, but in our hearts we still like the glow of the television screen more.

And here is the point, what we really want most in our hearts will win out in the end. In other words, we do what we do because we want what we want. Our hearts are the heart of the matter.

I mention all of this for this purpose: It my hope and my prayer that you and I will wholeheartedly journey to Jesus Christ in 2009. Even as we discussed two weeks ago when we examined the long and arduous trek that the wise men took to worship Christ, so too let us make it our passion to journey to Him and worship Him in earnest in this year that has just begun. And if this purpose is truly going to be our passion, and if we are going to be successful in this quest to Christ, then we must prepare our hearts for the journey.

As we consider how to do this, I invite you to look with me at one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture, because I know of few texts more appropriate for this training than the instruction we find in these verses.

-- Read Ezekiel 14:1-6

-- Pray

In verse one, we encounter the case of some elders who are approaching Ezekiel in order to ask him for advice from God. At first glance, it would seem that they are doing a good thing. However, in verse three, God indicates to Ezekiel that there is something seriously wrong with these elders—idolatry. What is more, God identifies to Ezekiel a specific type of idolatry at work within them—idolatry of the heart.

Notice that this is not the kind of idolatry that we might at first assume. It is not a cultic idolatry, in which these elders are bowing down to the false gods and graven images of foreign peoples. In fact, these men are coming to Ezekiel to seek out the God of Israel. No, this idolatry is more personal and more fundamental than the ritual or cultural idolatry. It involves idols that have taken root in the very hearts of these men. This idolatry indicates something or someone other than God has captured their affection and is ruling over their hearts.

You see, whether we admit it or not, every person in every place at any time is a worshipper. As certain as any other aspect of our identity is the truth to which when we often attest when we sing, “You and I are made to worship.” In every situation, every one of us bows to something for the simple reason that God has made us that way. Therefore, just as surely as we are breathers who are always breathing, you and I are always worshipping—not necessarily by deliberate choice, but by the very essence of our existence. In his excellent book *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, Paul David Tripp puts it like this:

“As worshipping beings, human beings always worship someone or something. This is not a situation where some people worship and some don’t. If God isn’t ruling my heart, someone or something else will. It is the way we were made.”

Therefore, the pertinent question is not, “Are you worshipping?” We know that for everyone everywhere the answer to that question is a always a resounding, “Yes.” No, the best question is not, “Are you worshipping?” Rather, the truly important question is, “*What* are you worshipping?” What have you worshipped in your life? What have you worshipped this week? What are you worshipping right now?

And that is why, in verse four, God says, “*I will answer him myself in keeping with his idolatry.*” In essence, what God is saying here is something like this: “Because you have idols in your hearts, it is of no use to discuss anything else with you, because you simply won’t see it... you just won’t get it.” He is telling them that the impediment of heart idolatry is blinding them from true change and that the only way to remove the stumbling block before their faces is to deal with the idols in their hearts.

-- Illustration – Frustration with the video camera:

- Me: “Aargh! I turned the power on, put the tape in, corrected the light meter, adjusted the focus, and even held my mouth just right. Yet, no matter what I do, the stupid little viewing screen does nothing. I think it’s broken!”
- Stephanie – “Uh, you’ve got the lens cap on, Genius.”
- You know, it turns out that all cameras are like that. You have no hope of success until you remove the lens cap.

Well, in the same way, God’s Word is telling us that unless we remove the stumbling blocks before our faces by eliminating the idols of our hearts, then we have little chance to grow in holiness. Let me quote Paul David Tripp again, who writes, “This is the principle of inescapable influence: Whatever rules the heart will exercise inescapable influence over the person’s life and behavior.” In other words, unless we identify and address the heart issues that lie behind our behavior, our efforts at change will ultimately fail. Thus, idolatry of our hearts, and not our behavior itself, must be our chief target as we aim to be changed into the likeness of Christ.

Then, in verse five, we have the great privilege to hear God’s heart, when He says, “*I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.*” God loves us. Not only that, He alone knows what is

best for us. And in these words we hear his passion for our hearts. We see that our Heavenly Father's great desire for us is that our greatest desire will be Him. He wants our wants, and, by His matchless love, He calls us to love Him supremely. Thus, whenever we fall into idolatry of any kind, He wants to recapture our hearts to Him. Just as was the case with the elders of Israel in our passage, and just as was the case with the wise men we studied two weeks ago, God is calling you and me to journey daily take up our crosses and make the journey to Him and to give ourselves entirely to Him. Doing so means attacking the idols of our hearts so that we might be spared from the snare of sin and recaptured by His perfect love.

With those questions in mind, look with me now at verse three, because God's response there gives crucial insights about how the heart functions. God says to Ezekiel, "*Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces.*"

There are stumbling blocks everywhere in this life, aren't there? I mean, the simple fact that we live in a fallen world full of fallen people (ourselves included) means that the presence of sin and the opportunity to embrace it lurk all around us and would delight to ensnare us. Just in our own little town there are stumbling blocks of potential idolatry everywhere, whether it be the presence of alcohol and drugs, or internet connections to a world of lust, or false religions peddled by people who distort the Bible or ignore it all together. All of those, however, are idols "out there." We have the opportunity to perceive them from a distance and, by God's grace, avoid them.

What we learn from verse three, on the other hand, is that idolatry of the heart is a much more sinister creature, for the stumbling blocks it sets up are not "out there," but rather "right here." Notice: God tells Ezekiel that the idolatry in the hearts of these men has "*put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces.*" Whereas the fallen world around us provides a limitless abundance of stumbling blocks that we must avoid, idolatry of the heart creates stumbling blocks that we cannot avoid. // They lie right before our faces, and until they are removed, they will distort and obscure everything else in life.

Finally, in verse six, we are blessed to read God's remedy for idolatry of the heart. He declares, "*This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!*" Hear this: Real change is not about resolutions; it is about repentance. // While it results in doing right, it begins by admitting wrong. If we are going to journey to Jesus together in 2009 for the greatest glory of our great God, then we must begin that journey by

identifying the idols of hearts, repenting of them, and doing our best to put on the likeness of Christ. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 4:22-24:

*“Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

Therefore, as we prepare our hearts to journey to Jesus, the task before us today and throughout this year and, indeed, for the rest of our lives is this: Be vigilant in the search to identify the idols of our hearts, repent of them, and, by the power of the Spirit of God at work within us, labor daily to become like our Lord in service and in love until that great day when our holiness will be perfected in heaven.

So then, how do we do that? How do we identify the idols of our hearts? That is, how do we know which desires in our hearts are, to some degree or another, setting up stumbling blocks before our faces and keeping us from God’s best?

Theologian Ken Sande provides this definition:

*“An idol is not simply a statue of wood, stone, or metal; it is anything we love and pursue in place of God, and can also be referred to as a ‘false god’ or a ‘functional god.’ In biblical terms, an idol is something other than God that we set our hearts on, that motivates us, that masters or rules us, or that we serve.”*

And I will offer this definition that I have often said before and now reassert in it this context (I have left blanks so that you can write out the entire definition): An idol of the heart is anything that we will sin to get or sin because we do not get...anything we will sin to get or sin because we do not get. This must be true, because the moment we consciously sin, we choose to obey a desire that, for that moment at least, is greater than our desire to please and obey God. // Any desire that we obey above God is, necessarily, an idol of the heart.

So let us camp upon that thought for a moment and look to identify the idols of our hearts by asking ourselves two crucial questions.

1.) What are you willing to sin to get?

-- When you intentionally lie or stretch the truth, what are you after? Whatever it is is an idol of the heart.

-- Colossians 3:9 – *Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices.*

- When you are rude or uncaring or gossiping about someone else, what are you trying to get? Whatever it is is an idol of the heart.
- Ephesians 4:32 – *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

2.) To what unmet desires do you react sinfully?

- When you whine, or complain, or sulk, or argue, what did you want that you didn't get? Whatever it is is an idol of the heart.
- Philippians 2:14 – *Do everything without complaining or arguing.*
- 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – *Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*
- When you burst out in unholy anger, what are you so angry about? Whatever it is is an idol of the heart.
- Ephesians 4:26 – *“In your anger do not sin.”*
- James 1:19-20 – *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

As we consider these questions, surely we can agree with John Calvin, who described the human heart as “a perpetual factory of idols.” However, we can also see the truth of another comment Calvin made regarding this subject, when he said, “The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.”

You see, it is fine to want that raise at work, but not if you want it so much that you will fib to get it or whine when you don't. Girls, it is o.k. to want a boyfriend, but not if you are willing to sin against God to keep him or gossip about the girl who steals your man. Men, it is fine to have hobbies and interests, such as hunting or basketball or golf, but not if those interests become more important to you than church, or family, or God. Women, it is fine to desire comfort, but not if that desire is so great that it leads you to avoid the difficult things God wants you to do. Boys, it is good to have fun, but not if doing so makes you lazy about spiritual growth or disconnected from God.

Thus, as we prepare our hearts to journey to Jesus in 2009, let us ask ourselves this one outstanding question that I first learned from a professor of mine named Dr. Stuart Scott: What am I willing to sin to get or sin because I do not get? And as God convicts us of sinful desires, let us repent of them, turn to God's Word for instruction, and put on the new self, created to be like Christ in true righteousness and holiness.

In summary: Real change begins with heart change. Therefore, more than mere resolutions, let us engage in meaningful repentance and see how powerfully the living God can transform our lives and our church by His grace and for His glory.

- Explain green handout.
- Pray