

You can be a better person a year from now than you are today. But you have to listen. Listen to your supervisor, your teachers, your neighbors, and your colleagues. They often see you better than you see yourself. Listen to what you say to yourself about yourself. “Why do I keep doing that? It gets me into trouble, and I feel bad about it, but I keep doing it.”

Listen to people who love you when they point out your faults, especially when they say it in anger. I know that sounds strange, but people who love you often can’t bring themselves to tell you hard truth about yourself when they are their usual sweet selves. They can only do it when they are angry. So, even though their anger may make you angry, it’s important that you try to hear the unpleasant truth they tell you in an unpleasant way.

All these people, including you, can be relied on to tell you how you need to change to be a better person. My encouragement to you is that you can be a better person a year from now than you are today. You can look back and say, “I changed in 2012. I wasn’t sure a year ago that I could change, but I did it.”

I can encourage you like this with confidence, because I have changed. I am almost approaching butterfly status compared to my caterpillar-like existence 25 years ago. I have been able to change dramatically, because **I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength** – Philippians 4:13. Seeking to live my life in deference to Christ and His commands has helped me to discover and do more of God’s purpose in the people and circumstances of my life for the past 25 years.

I know people without any faith can change. I believe God was helping them, and they just didn’t know it. But I had to tell you the truth about the changes in my life and about the One who changes my life from one season of life to the next. He is why I can say that you can be a better person year from now than you are today. So, I beseech you: Defer to Christ and His commands.

Wanting to be a better person at the dawn of 2013 than you are today is why you make New Year’s resolutions. But if you make them, you can’t be casual and haphazard about them. You need to be purposeful. Let me show you how.

Choose Your Target

Last Sunday, I shared with you a list of the top ten New Year’s resolutions for 2012. Let me remind you of what they are.

Spend more time with family and friends.

Make time to exercise.

Lose weight.

Quit smoking.

Enjoy life more.

Quit drinking.

Get out of debt.

Learn something new.

Help others.

Get organized. (<<http://pittsburgh.about.com/od/holidays/tp/resolutions.htm>>, accessed Dec. 19, 2011)

Those are worthy resolutions. You can probably add one or two that didn’t make that list, but they make perfect sense for your life. Now, if you are going to be purposeful about your New Year’s resolutions, you have to dismiss most of the ones on the list I

just read. You have to choose the most important one or maybe two resolutions and work exclusively on them. Change is hard, and if you try to change too much, you'll end up unchanged and frustrated. So, pick one or two at the most to pursue in the year ahead. What I say next may help you to be purposeful in pursuing your goal and realizing your dream of a better you. Let's get started.

Make It a Goal Worthy of God

First of all, make sure it is a resolution worthy of Christ. Look with me at Colossians 1:9-10a: **For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you – by the way, I do the same; I pray for you everyday – we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will though all spiritual wisdom and understanding.** Here comes what we need to hear: **And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.**

What personal change in 2012 do you think would be most worthy of Christ? Listen to your conscience, and here's a helpful hint. It ought to be hard. If God is greater than your biggest problem, then go for the gold! Target the change that you know will challenge you the most. Pursuing that will be worthy of Christ.

I know this may be a way of approaching life that you are not used to. Doing anything because it is worthy of God may be a completely new idea to you. That's okay. That's where you are today. Just try it. Just ask yourself, "If I really thought Christ cared about changes in my life, what change could I make that might be worthy of Christ?" Asking that question will give your New Year's resolution a new gravitas and meaning.

There is a corollary to making resolutions that are worthy of Christ. Let's say you have settled on a difficult change you need to make that is worthy of Christ. That's good, but stay purposeful. You have to say to yourself, "What will it take for me to do this?" You have to count the cost.

Look with me at another passage from the Bible: Luke 14:28-30. Jesus said: **"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"**

Suppose you wanted to get out of debt. That's a New Year's resolution that is worthy of our Lord. It is difficult. But where do you start? First, you need to identify how much debt you have. You need to ask what you have to do to reduce that debt by 50%, then 70%, some day all of it. What I wouldn't want you to do is give up.

This church can help you. Two weeks from tomorrow night on Monday, January 23, at 7:00 p.m., the church offers what we call Financial Peace University. It is a 13-week course that teaches practical skills, gives knowledge needed to make sound decisions with your money, and it will help you to achieve your goal of getting out of debt and to experience financial peace. Don Rowe, a financial adviser, leads the study. The first session is free. If you stay for the whole course, the cost is minimal.

Can you see what it means to count the cost of keeping your New Year's resolution? You need first to be realistic about what you need to change. "I have \$X thousand in credit card debt. I am X pounds overweight. I paid X dollars in overdraft charges to my bank. It seems I never see my children because of my workload."

Then, you start listing possible changes you can make in order to correct your problems. If you can find practical help in making those changes, then move heaven and earth to get that practical help. There is practical help for every human problem imaginable. Take advantage of it. Count the cost. Be purposeful and deliberate as you set out to keep your New Year's resolution.

Know Yourself

So, let's assume things go well. You settle on a difficult change you need to make that is worthy of God. You say to yourself, "What will it take for me to do this?" You count the cost. That's good, but stay purposeful. Be realistic about yourself. You got into debt all by yourself. You weren't careful about your diet. You let your ambition run away with you, and you are always at work. That's why you never see your children. Stay purposeful. Know yourself.

I want you to hear the most realistic, the most sobering self-knowledge that you will hear in any language on earth. Look with me at Romans 7:15. The Apostle Paul said it about himself, but you're going to think he's been reading your mail. Here it is. **I do not know what I am doing. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.** My guess is that you know from first hand experience what Paul was saying.

The apostle came back to the same idea in verse 19. **For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.** I don't want you to miss the point here. There is something in every one of us that loves what is good. There is also something in every one of us that is lawless. The lawless streak in you can override the good you love. It's that strong, and it can do it when you least expect it, and it can do serious damage to your New Year's resolutions.

The lawless streak in your nature is what made you hesitate a moment ago, when I said that your New Year's resolution for 2012 ought to be hard. The better you know yourself, the more you know that your New Year's resolution could come to nothing, because you may choose to continue doing what you have resolved to change.

You will have failures in the year ahead. That's why next Sunday's topic is so important: "The Blessing of Failure." Being hard is what makes change good. Don't give up when you let down. Don't be an all-or-nothing person. Expect mistakes. Expect failures. But don't resign yourself to failure. We'll explore that next Sunday.

We need to stop talking for a moment about New Year's resolutions. This lawless streak in our nature takes us into deep waters. I can want to do something good and then deliberately refuse to do it and instead do something I know is bad. That self-knowledge is what causes many people to start thinking seriously about God. That self-knowledge is painful. I do not simply do bad things; something in me wants to do bad things. I actually know what is good, and I choose what is bad. What's wrong with me? When you start thinking like that, the Christian idea of repentance begins to make sense. After all, if I am at odds with myself, I must be at odds with God.

It is tempting at that moment to want to say, "I'll try harder." But that's a trap. Trying harder is where your painful self-knowledge came from in the first place. You knew what was good, and you tried hard to do it, and you didn't do it. You chose not to do it. Repentance is not about trying harder. It's not about blaming someone else for your puzzling lawlessness. It is about taking responsibility before God for your lawlessness. You take that responsibility when you acknowledge the lawless streak in you and the

behavior and the distance from God it causes. Repentance is about turning back to God.

Turning back to God is not making restitution to God for your lawlessness. The good news of Christianity says that Christ died for our lawlessness, and God raised Him from the dead to bridge the distance between Him and us.

The decisive turn back to God is when you believe that God raised Christ from the dead and say so publicly. If you have never made that decisive turn, why not do it right here, right now? Don't worry about saying the right words. Just tell God you believe He raised Jesus from the dead. If you do that, be sure you say so publicly. Don't be a secret Christian.

Back to New Year's resolutions and self-knowledge! Look at one more Bible passage in Acts 8:28-31. It's the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. He had been to Jerusalem to see the king. He was on his way home. Verse 28 says: **On his way home he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it. Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading," Philip asked.**

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. He needed help, and he asked for it.

You need to do the same. You have made a resolution worthy of God. It is difficult. You have counted the cost. You know the lawless streak in you is the greatest danger to success. That's good, but stay focused. You can't do it alone. Big, worthy changes can't be done alone. Be accountable to someone. Confide in someone the personal change you hope to make in 2012. Share your strategies for achieving the changes. Find someone who will pray with you and for you, and who will ask you the tough questions. Pastor Mark Smith will address this issue on January 29.

Who Is It For?

I have one more consideration that makes your purpose personal. Who benefits if you keep your New Year's resolutions? Are you doing them just for yourself, or do you have someone else's happiness and well-being in mind?

For example, who else stands to gain if you lose 40 pounds? You will certainly feel better and look better, and your health will improve. But if losing 40 pounds wards off diabetes or coronary heart disease, your spouse and children will have a better chance of having you around and involved in their lives longer. If you aren't married, your friends and your employer and others who look up to you will benefit.

Once again, the wisdom in the Bible shines through when it says, **Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others** – Philippians 2:4. And did you know? Looking to the interests of others is a measure of your love for God. 1John 4:12 says: **No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us.**

We are back to where we started last week: Put God first. And we are back to where this sermon began: Defer to Christ's commands. So, have you ever thought seriously about putting God first and deferring to Christ's commands? When you do that, those New Year's resolutions are not about you; they are about the people in this world, who count on you. You become a blessing to them.