

The Re-Solution
Ephesians 3:1-12
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There's a current flowing through our culture at this time of year. New Year's Resolutions. Self-improvement. This means that Christian *and* non-Christian alike are engaged in a kind of spiritual formation. I find it fascinating to notice the similarities between Church and culture. The Church is about personal transformation: becoming disciples of Christ, being shaped into the image of God. New Year's resolutions capture this idea of becoming a better person.

The origins of the New Year's Resolution go all the way back to 153 B.C. when January 1 was fixed as New Year's Day on the Roman calendar. The Romans had a mythical god-king named Janus for whom the first month of the year is named. Janus comes from the Latin *ianua*, an entrance gate. Janus had two faces, which allowed him to look both forward and backward in battle. So Janus made a good god of doorways and gates because both can be passed in either direction. He was made the namesake for the first month of the New Year for obvious symbolic reasons: Janus could look both back on the past year's events and forward to the future year. Janus and the New Year season became connected with the notion of resolutions. Many Romans sought forgiveness from their enemies and also exchanged gifts before the New Year began.¹

Our history shows us that human beings have a built-in desire to improve their lives. I believe it is a God-given desire. Every person is born with a desire to become a better person. It is this desire that is present in virtually every religion on the face of this planet. The process people use to become better people varies greatly. Some use meditation and prayer. Others teach self-denial and asceticism. Some preach service to others and non-violence. There are many religious rituals and practices designed to help people become better people. New year's resolutions are secular culture's way of achieving this goal.

Do you know the most popular resolutions people make every year at this time? A survey of 300,000 people determined these as the top 10 most popular resolutions:

- 1) Weight loss/Get in Shape
- 2) Stick to a budget
- 3) Debt reduction
- 4) Enjoy more quality time with family and friends
- 5) Find a spouse
- 6) Quit smoking
- 7) Get a better job/Change careers
- 8) Learn a new skill/hobby

¹ Research Findings on Resolutions:
<http://pos-psych.com/news/kathryn-britton/2007010726>
http://www.goalsguy.com/Events/n_top-ten-resolutions.html
<http://www.proactivechange.com/habits/resolutions/research.htm>

- 9) Volunteer/Serve people
- 10) Get more organized

According to the research how many Americans make resolutions each year? Answer: 40-45%. How long do resolutions last? 25 percent don't make it past the first week. 71 percent make it past two weeks. After one month: 64 percent. After six months: 46 percent. A person who makes a New Year's resolution is 10 times more likely to attain that goal than someone who does not make a resolution.

In one study people who expressed interest in changing a habit or problem in January were followed for six months in phone interviews. Roughly half the group attached a New Year's resolution to the behavior change, and half did not. Six months later, 46 percent of resolvers were successful still, but only 4 percent of non-resolvers had maintained the behavior change.

Apparently persistence is the key to life change. Only 40 percent of people keep their top resolution on the first attempt. The rest try and fail and try again, with 17 percent finally succeeding after more than six attempts.

Here are some resolutions on the funny side. Slide one: Always replace the gas nozzle before driving away from the pump. Two: I will try harder to drive within the speed limits. Three: I will keep an extra safe distance when driving behind police cars. Four: I will no longer park the BMW next to fire hydrants. Five: I will never try to defuse an explosive device with a known practical joker!

What if we put some space between some letters in the word, resolution? Would it help if we saw resolution as re – solution? We all have problems that need solutions. Someone once defined maturity as “realizing the most important lessons in life...are the ones we thought we already knew.” Much of what it means to grow and learn and be transformed is to find re-solutions to the old problems of life. If we're not engaged in healthy eating habits, we know it! Let's stop fooling ourselves. We know what to do. If we're disorganized we know that it creates problems and we know what needs to be done to find a solution. So our resolutions become re-solutions...solutions to the old problems of life...again and again.

If the research shows that 25 percent of resolutions are busted by January 8, then we don't need just a solution. We need a *re-solution*. That which needs attention will continue to present itself in the transformation process. In creating a New Year's resolution, everyone is in essence saying, “I'm going to re-solution this. The old solutions certainly haven't worked. Time to re-solution my life.” God echoes that sentiment, and the gospel provides the means to extend it to people — through forgiveness, grace, prayer, community and the empowering of the Spirit.

Despite how tragic or dark one's life seems, and despite how many times people have failed in an area of life and obedience that needs fixing, a re-solution is always at hand in the gospel of grace. Part of the divine scandal of forgiveness is that no matter how many steps we have walked, or run, away from God, we need only one step to return to God.

In our scripture for today Paul is addressing an Ephesian church that had some problems in need of solutions. A notable one is the suspicion that some Jew-Gentile disunity may have been rumbling through the community (Ephesians 2:11 ff.). The church “family” appears torn apart by “who-is-in-and-how” religious dissension.

Paul's solution is not new. It's the same good news he has been preaching for years. He has no other solution for his own life or the lives of the Ephesians other than the grace of God. It will require change and the Jewish Christians had better realize that everyone is to be included in this new kingdom of love. God takes people on grace despite their sense of unworthiness. God's solution is to offer them forgiveness and grace *despite* their track record. This same gospel is also a re-solution. Grace and forgiveness go with us every time we fall short of God's hopes for our lives.

As we begin to grasp this, then the gospel becomes our resolution. We resolve to live motivated by grace and forgiveness. We cannot achieve the life change and "goodness" that we would all like to live up to. So a motivation to fix our own lives or to win God's approval falls short. We just respond to love with love. We resolve to live the gospel that re-solves us time and time again.

This past week Kim and I took our kids and their friends to see the movie "The Great Debaters" which I highly recommend. This film happens during the Great Depression in Marshall, Texas. It is about a debate team at Wiley College, an African-American Methodist college. In the film we learn that the first stage of a debate is a resolve. For example, during one debate when the undefeated team were up against a white team in Oklahoma City the topic was school integration. Resolve: blacks and whites should be educated together. The white debater conceded their points but argued that this was not the right time for blacks and whites to be integrated.

Samantha Booke rose to give an impassioned rebuttle and said, "Is it gonna come tomorrow, is it gonna come next week, in a hundred years, never? I say the time for justice, the time for equality, the time for freedom always, is always right now!"

Think for a moment of how you and God desire you to have a better life. What is it that needs to change? That bad habit? That destructive anger? That lack of exercise? When will you resolve to lose that extra weight, or to seriously study the Bible, or to give more generously? You and I need a re-solution for the problems in our lives. And the time for a re-solution is not tomorrow, or next year. The time for re-solution is always right now!