

Making resolutions work

(Philippians 4: 12-14)

Happy New Year! I hope that you had a wonderful Christmas.

One of the most encouraging things about news years, new weeks, and new days is the word 'new'. The word "New" means we get to start all over again.

I'm wondering how many of you have made New Year's resolutions? Here are someone's New Year's resolutions I found on the internet.

- 2014: I will watch my calories until my weight is below 12 stone.
- 2015: I will watch my calories until my weight is below 13 stone.
- 2016: I will try to develop a realistic attitude about my weight.

Or how about this one:

- 2014: I will work out 5 days a week.
- 2015: I will work out 3 days a week.
- 2016: I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week.

How are you doing so far? Has anyone broken a resolution yet?

The title of my talk today is "Making Resolutions Work". I think that often our resolutions don't work for simple reasons. We set resolutions based on our own perspective rather than God's. We try to achieve them in our own strength. And we try to do it on our own.

Let's see what the bible says about an alternative way to approach this.

Philippians, Chapter 4, verses 12-14

My talk today is based on Philippians chapter 4 verses 12-14. This was a letter written to the first Christian community established in Europe, in our language we might call it a church plant. During the time of writing the letter, Paul, the author was in prison.

So that's the context, let's read just a short section:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

This morning I'd like to make three simple points based on these verses:

- The first (from verse 12) is that contentment comes from trust (the 'secret of being content' that Paul refers to).
- The second (based on verse 13) is that with God, we can face any situation.
- And finally (from verse 14), the importance of doing this together.

(1) Contentment comes from trust

When you think of the year ahead, I wonder what you might be facing? You might have something exciting coming up: a new job, or getting married. For Mike and I, it's having another baby. Or maybe you are facing redundancy, or a failing relationship. Maybe you are dreading returning to work, university or School, or maybe you are raring to go.

The truth is we just don't know what each of us might face this year. Whether we are looking forward to 2016 or dreading it, anything could happen. This being the case, how can we prepare ourselves?

I think that Paul's use of language in the letter is important. He doesn't say he is permanently happy. He is not speaking about being in a good mood. Given all the bad things that are happening around us - or might be happening to you personally - none of us can claim we will always be happy. Instead Paul talks about being 'content', being satisfied with what God sends his way. And note that Paul *learned* to be content. It is not an instant attitude but something that had to be studied, and practiced.

So how do we do that?

When I was a teenager I was in a church and I had seen that sometimes people would fall over when they were prayed for. One time I was prayed for, and I was basically pushed over. It wasn't God, it was clearly some over-excited prayer team eager for me to experience God's presence, but they forgot to let Him be in charge. Anyway I grew up fearing the presence of God and any time I was prayed for I would say to God "please don't do anything".

One evening I went to listen to an American evangelist. After the talk there was a prayer time and many had gone forward for prayer. I knew I should go up, my heart was racing, so I plucked up the courage and went to the front.

There were a number of us in a line and we were prayed for in turn. One by one like dominos, they fell. My heart sank, and I thought "how am I going to fake this?" I kept looking down the line and it was soon my turn. In a split second I just decided to say to God: "If you are good then this can't be a bad thing, I'm going to trust you."

The next thing I remember is a sense of peace like no other feeling I've felt before. I felt I was in that moment forever, and when I opened my eyes I realised I was lying on the floor.

My point is not about falling over but about trusting God. Trusting God was an act of the will, a decision to let go, and it not being about me. By making that decision I learnt a little more about trusting God.

Thinking about me now, I feel quite nervous about how a second child is going to work out. I feel insecure about whether Ethan will still love me as much, or think I'm abandoning him. How will I cope emotionally? How will I manage with two children and a husband making demands of me? Just like back then, what I need to do, and keep doing, is give it back to God, give my relationship with Ethan to God, my fears, my insecurities, my doubts. Keep asking him for peace and not let the insecurity and fears take control.

Paul says: *I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* This was very real for Paul as he was writing from prison, most likely facing a death sentence from the Roman authorities. He was able to trust God and he learned how to be content.

(2) Pouring Strength

Now let's focus on the middle verse, 'I can do everything through him who gives me strength'. There are several different ways of translating this sentence, here are a few that I found helpful:

- "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (King James Version)
- "I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me strength and power." (Living Bible)
- "I am ready for anything through the strength of the one who lives within me." (J.B. Phillips)

This is a verse of unlimited possibility. But for some of us it also seems impossible to understand: how can Paul claim to be able to do anything? And what does that mean for us?

This week I learnt that the last part of that verse ("strengthening") is a participle in the Greek. It means "to pour strength into." It's like pouring milk into a jug, or water into a glass. It's something empty that is filled up.

It's a picture of us facing the problems of life—hopeless and helpless—and in each situation, Jesus is pouring his strength into our lives.

“I can do all things through Christ.”

In this verse, it's not as if Paul is saying, “I can do anything I can dream up.” Instead, Paul is speaking about the varying circumstances of life. Through Jesus we can do everything God wants us to do this year. We can fight every battle he wants us to fight, we can endure every trial, and we can overcome every temptation through Jesus. Whilst that sounds impossible, God is making it possible by pouring his strength into us.

If you are a follower of Jesus that doesn't make you better than other people. It won't mean you don't face problems. It doesn't mean you are tougher or wiser than anyone else. Like everyone else, Christians suffer. The thing that makes a difference is that whatever we are facing, Jesus is pouring his strength into us, so we can face any situation that comes along this year.

(3) Doing Life Together

This section finishes with Paul thanking the church for their support. Looking into another letter Paul wrote, he expanded this point saying:

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together [...] but encouraging one another [...].

Paul is emphasising the importance of community and I agree with him. I love it when we come together to help and support one another.

I personally am not the best at asking for help but I am getting better. I especially had to during this pregnancy. I was very poorly in my first trimester. Then Ethan was very poorly, and a hospital visit was needed. I was struggling emotionally and physically. Thanks to people from my small group, Belly Buttons and friends from this church, help wasn't far away. Meals were made for us, we were being prayed for and very much looked after. Without this help and support I'm not sure how I would have managed. I trusted God, and God provided from the community around me.

We have heard this morning about the new small groups starting up, so I'd encourage you to sign up and consider those groups one of the places you can get support and encouragement from others, whether it's encouragement for a dream you want to pursue this year, or support for a challenge you are going to face. Whether you like small groups or not, consider joining something new and potentially life changing.

Conclusion

So to summarise. Trusting God is an act of the will. Paul learned the secret of being content in any and every situation; he learned to trust God. And because of his trust in

God, he was confident about his ability to face any situation that could come along in life. Finally, he emphasises the importance of doing life together.

What does this mean for us in 2016? Some of us are facing marital difficulties, some financial difficulties, some career difficulties, some health difficulties. Others may have exciting plans for the future, but making them real seems impossible.

If your New Year's Resolution is to lose weight, or make more money, or experience something new, that's great. I don't want to trivialise any of those things, indeed, they may be from God.

But I want to suggest something deeper: that trusting God, turning to Him to strengthen us, and doing life together, will provide a foundation for all of us for the future regardless of our health or weight or income, or whatever else features in your New Year's resolution.

Whatever you may face this year, or what you would like to achieve, I pray that you will be able to trust God; that you will find a community of people to do life together with; and that God will continue to pour his strength into you, that you may do everything God asks you with the help of Christ who gives strength and power.

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