



First Focus

On Renewal

The freedom from our past

Knowing Christ is greater than all of our achievements. The New Year is a time of new commitments and endeavors that we often begrudging call "resolutions." As Christians, we must look at the heart behind the resolutions in order to see any true benefit.

So why do we desire change or improvement at the New Year? Is it motivation by a **great shame of our past**? Or is it driven by a blurry image of our value? Some of us gain our sense of satisfaction through achievements. This too will end not only in failed resolutions but also a deeply discouraging cycle that continues way past our failed efforts of change. So what does the gospel message say to this? **It says that a greater glory has been made accessible to us by the only one truly capable of the new.** We are not the only ones working to conquer our darkness. In fact, His efforts are directed toward us joining His efforts because let's face it, we really stink at improving ourselves.

We are often committed to reading the Bible every day for the entire year. This is a great opportunity to enter into in the process of examining our heart. Ask yourself, why would I be satisfied in this tangible, concrete proof of "walking with God"? **Knowing Christ is greater than all of our achievements no matter the context of the secular or religious, the public or private.** Let's make this commitment as well to any action plan, **I will seek to lay down all of me so I can rejoice in all of Him!**

Resolutions go well until the joy fades. **What we truly need is renewal.** Spiritual renewal is a dynamic, social-psychological experience of being released from the weighty effects of guilt and sinful behavior and the restoring broken relations between man and God and among ourselves. This is a forgiveness of sin. It is a freedom, a release or a "letting go." **Did your New Year's resolution give you freedom?** This renewal is the forgiveness of sin through knowing Christ. It is not a piece of paper we keep in our back pocket. This renewal releases us to **new, continuous experience** of Christ in us today and tomorrow, in our efforts, and in our satisfaction. But far from being passive recipients of renewal, we respond to God's reconciling mercy in various ways, especially through repentance, baptism, confession, prayer and forgiveness of others.

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On Groups

Think about the last time you were the "new guy?" Some of us remember the first day of work at a new job and meeting tons of new people. Others go back to school or college, when at the first of the semester, there would be an amplified sense of awareness and excitement.

Random things stick out. Our brains are on overload and basic functions are not on cruise control because we know we never get a second chance to make a first impression. Guests at a new church maybe in a more complex situation than these major life events!

Proper awareness of this heightened intensity is essential to groups ministry. To be a group that flourishes, guests must come first in everything we do. This is not simply that we want them to come and occasionally invite a friend, but that we adjust everything to make room for an outsider. This starts with being ready and expecting them. In fact, my biggest concern for groups who have late comers, or have just a few members is not their attendance records or disappointment in people's personal commitment. But that those things send messages to any potential guests of the group.

Even innocently, we cannot let guests catch us off guard. Put yourself in the shoes of a guest. Is this conversation inclusive to everyone or is it a running joke within a cliché? Catch them up to date with what is going on at our church so they feel like they are in the loop. Truly listen to understand and not just listen to reply. Put it on your calendar to call them next week to invite them to go somewhere for lunch. What message does your group's prayer requests suggest? Some can be self-absorbed, others can communicate a passion for Christ!



On Salvation

A large part of our perspectives and values are unconscious to us in our 'moment by moment' experience. Thus in a large part of how we operate and function we are unaware of why we are doing what we are doing.

This plays a big role in a core issue of the Christian walk, our salvation. If we are not careful, this unconscious engine will transform salvation from its **altruistic nature** to something with an **ego-centric essence**. Self-centered salvation is not in God's purposes (Rom 1:5, 5:15) and is completely divorced from the biblical narrative.

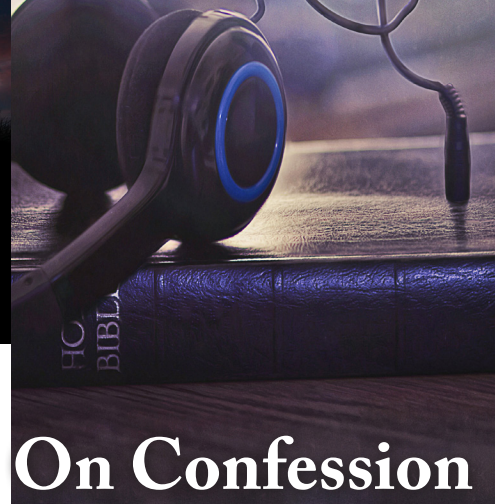
This was generally the problem for the Pharisees, who distorted salvation to something with a **nationalistic, ego-centric message**. What they missed is something we often miss. Abraham was blessed in order to be a blessing to others (Gen 12:2, 22:18). They were called to be the means to which God brings redemption, peace and reconciliation to the world. Paul refers to this as the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). If we miss this, it only leads to the distortion of salvation's message into an engagement of **practical, individualistic behavior that ultimately benefits only the practitioner**. Now no one admits that their faith only benefits them. That is why each one of us must do the soul-searching, difficult work of uncovering our true thoughts and exposing them to the revelation of God through Jesus found in scripture.

I can think of no better place to start with than **faith, salvation, and the kingdom of God**. Does the content of our prayers seek to expose the desires of God? Or do they seek to convince God to be active in our plans? Am I trusting God to be enough for today? Or does my faith claim

simply trust Him to be enough in an unspecific future? Do I have a consumer mentality toward my community of faith? Biblical faith is about cultivating a **covenantal relationship** which is built on a mutual trust. Biblical faith is not simply a practical tool to serve our ultimate good.

Salvation is the narrative of the expression of God's love through Christ's life and death that exposes the **beautiful depths of God**. Salvation exposes this great value everyone has from being **created in His image**, not that you or me or one group are any more important than an other person. Do you believe that you "get it" and other people don't? Do you try to correct people to your way of thinking instead of encouragingly guide them to the mysterious love of God via relationship?

Faith and salvation reveal the entrance and essence of the kingdom of God, here and now. It is a place to celebrate and eat with everyone as honored guests of the King. **We don't simply wait for the kingdom of God, we participate in its completion**. It is only because of unmerited favor that we have the privilege and honor to be this light to the world. Why do you think God has delivered you from evil? Why do you believe God has purified you from your sin? Why do you think God has recreated a relationship with you through Christ? **There is self-centered and Christ-centered way to answer each of these questions.**



On Confession

Christianity is a confession, not an explanation. Confession has from the outset been the framework of Christianity. It is a declaration of faith. The Jesus movement was distinguished from the rest of Judaism by its declared confession that Jesus was Messiah. We attempt to explain what we legitimately can, but we will always confess more than we can explain. We fully confess God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even though we cannot fully explain the Trinity. We fully confess the resurrection of Jesus Christ, even though we cannot fully explain what it means that the Son of God has inaugurated a world beyond the realm of death. A room and space for the unknown is necessary for our faith. Consequentially this room and space is good for the soul.

Scripture has no interest in "proving" itself—it has no need to do this and makes no attempt to do so. The Bible is not a scientific text or even an end in itself, the Bible is the Spirit-inspired sign that points us to the true Word of God—the Word made flesh, the great divine mystery we confess (John 1). Any approach to the Incarnation that does not treat it with room and space is a cheap unsatisfying effort.

We are freed to live by faith instead of living as if we have all the answers. Have you ever had felt pressure from a spiritual discussion to be a complete expert? Do you think the disciples were complete experts? Even the highly educated Apostle Paul loved to speak about the "mysteries of God" (21 times throughout the New Testament!) Perhaps one of my favorite places is in 1 Corinthians 4:1 **"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."** As disciples of Jesus, we meditate, absorb, and even deconstruct from many profitable angles. We do this in order to worship a God truly greater than ourselves and not to remove the mysterious nature of truth and divulge into self-worship.



On Patience

The great anchor of hope

Hope is the key to patience through purification. In the book of Revelation, the letters to the whole Church constitute a message of purification and judgment from the exalted Christ. These harsh messages are addressed to believers **to shock them into holding fast**, turning back to youthful vigor or to waking up (Rev 2:1–3:22). This is the risen Christ's prophetic judgment which urges confidence and **a patient endurance**; it is the other side of the apocalyptic manifestation of God's saving plan. It is the same God standing behind Revelation who makes possible the Church's **"patient endurance,"** which, in scripture describes the same reality that elsewhere in the New Testament is described as **"hope."** The theme of judgement

in the book of Revelation is most likely the one you have become accustomed to hearing. But what about the theme of **purification?**

Purification is the great anchor of hope! (See Hebrews 6:17–20) Tribulation, temptation, trials, suffering or even sin itself must be explicitly viewed as the means of **purification.** They all participate in the process of purification which creates endurance, character, hope and salvation (Romans 5:3–5). However, they all can result in a dulling of the senses. The disciple can enter into a survival mode and all efforts are constricted as they wait for the next blow. But this is not how we were intended to travel this process. This is why the "defibrillator" message to the seven churches was needed.

Christ wants us to more than just not quit or give up. He wants us to live with a vigor and mindfulness that is striving to expand the renewal of all things in His Kingdom **to see the glory of God clearer than the complexities of our circumstances.** This requires a **"trust the process"** mentality and an open honesty about the reality of our heart, and a clear vision that Christ is all we need. Many Christians understand they need to place their hope on "being with Christ." But they fail to make the **immediate connection** that Christ is here on earth, tabernacling with us through the Spirit. In other words, hope does not have to wait until heaven. As we call upon him now and get to know Him, He will bring heaven to us!

On Parenting

There is no such thing as a perfect parent.

No matter where we are on life's journey, we all need to hear this message and allow it to encourage us, to challenge us, and to help us forgive ourselves as well as others.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent.

Some of the things that we put the most energy and effort toward are the things that we place immense pressure for it to be exactly as we envision it to be or our satisfaction and enjoyment becomes greatly tainted. We cannot allow the great challenges and journey of parenting to choke the joy and blessings from it.

Throughout scripture, the writers equate children to blessings. This is not simply a rose-colored sentimental

approach to little ones. Childhood in the 1st century was difficult and dangerous, in fact, it is estimated that only 50 percent of children lived past 10 years of age. Their common childhood experiences included hard work and abuse along with play and education. Although children could be valued and loved by their parents, in general they were seen as unfinished adults, prey to vices that they could not control and thus subject to strict discipline, not simply to learn but to be protected. So we could also say there is no such thing as a perfect child as well.

This too contains great encouragement. There is a lot of pressure on children in this world and we must recognize that as well. We are all unfinished. Patience takes

center stage for both the parent and child. We are called to reflect a perfect love, but this love does not distort the truth into a sentimental lie that sweeps deep flaws under the carpet. **This love is absolute.** Through it we see that we are more loved than we dare hoped for, and more flawed than we even imagined. We must take the posture of Christ as with his disciples. He showed patience, consistency, compassion, and yet challenged their heart to trust completely. He invited them to see his hurt, frustration and suffering. The disciples then saw that Jesus would guard them as they **discovered their divine vocation.** As parents and children, we will not be perfect, but through the life of Christ we find a greater joy in a challenging process of discovery and transformation.



Conversation Starters

On Renewal

1. Which attribute of God do you find yourself least able to imitate or understand?
2. Why do we value the experience of "being known?"
3. If you are willing, share a time when knowing someone or being known by someone impacted your situation, or when being misunderstood caused you pain.
4. Compare your desire to be known with God's desire for His people to know Him. How might our desire to know and be known give us insight into the God who created us in His image?

On Salvation

1. In terms of human relationships, do you trust a person more when you do not know that person very well or after you have come to know him or her quite well (assuming that the person is essentially a trustworthy and reliable person)? What does that fact tell you about how your trust in God might increase?
2. Is it possible that people would profess agreement with every true doctrine on salvation and still not be born again? Why or why not?
3. During this week, read Acts 13. How would you describe Paul's message to the Jews as he preached to the gentiles?

"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."

1 Corinthians 4:1–2 ESV



On Patience

1. Do you have a tendency to grumble when you are going through trials? How do you respond when someone else is grumbling to you about his or her own life?
2. What does it look like in your own life to be patient in the midst of your own trials and suffering?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10 how patient are you (10 being very patient)? What would others say about you?
4. Do you think that we as a church trust one another to hear the Spirit? What would it look like for me to trust you to possess His Spirit? What problems could we encounter if we attempted to trust one another in this?

On Parenting

1. What is my greatest area of weakness as a parent? My greatest strength? What are my spouse's?
2. What did my parents do particularly well? In what ways do I hope to be different? (Is there any forgiveness that needs to happen there?)
3. In what areas are my children most vulnerable?
4. How authentically do I speak with my kids? Am I building a bridge of trust and security through my honesty and openness with them?
5. Am I striking a good balance between protecting my kids and equipping them for whatever they may encounter when they step outside of my home, now and in the future?