

## Resolution: Be Intentional

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-13; Psalm 138; Colossians 3:1-11

*Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.*

[When you leave a field alone, it] never, by any chance, produces wheat or barley. Leave it alone, and there are rank weeds, and thorns, and briars, showing that the natural set of the soil is towards producing that which is worthless.”<sup>i</sup>

I have shared this quote with you before. It is from a sermon Charles Spurgeon delivered in London in October of 1890. Thousands of people were listening that evening as Spurgeon spoke about the love and forgiveness we have in Christ — and about the need to be purposeful in our journey of faith instead of blindly fumbling and stumbling along. Spurgeon likened this to the way we approach some other things:

If I were a carpenter and had to make a box, I should not think about it after I had made the box. I should think, before I began to cut my timber, what sort of box it was to be. In every action, a man thinks before he begins, or else he is a fool.”<sup>ii</sup>

We are at week two in our series on “Resolutions.” This past week, we heard the good news that, every single day, God offers you and me the opportunity to begin our lives anew. You and I can have a clean slate every day, because for all time and for all people God through Christ has granted us pardon and mercy. As I said last week, “It is finished.” God implores us to have confidence that this is true, for us to believe and trust and base our lives upon this good news made reality in Christ. God implores us, and what remains is for you and me to consciously, actively, eagerly tell God, “Yes.” For us to consciously, actively, eagerly respond to God’s offer of new life by — well, why don’t we go to our Second Lesson for this morning and hear what it has to say about the kind of response God wants?

Our Second Lesson is from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians who lived in Colossae, in what is now Turkey. Paul begins this letter by telling the Colossians that he never stops praying that they will “be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that [they can] lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as [they] bear fruit in every good work and as [they] grow in the knowledge of God.”<sup>iii</sup> To gain that “spiritual wisdom and understanding,” Paul explains, the Colossians will need to start living as people who know they have been set free — and set apart — by the death and resurrection of Christ. After all, Paul asks them, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?”<sup>iv</sup> We read our Second Lesson, now, listening for how you and I can stop doing that — how we can stop living as if we still belonged to the world.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the anger of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free; but Christ is all and in all!

While you have your bulletin open, please look at the first section — just below where it says, “The Lord’s Day.” We have today’s date, and right below that is a verse from Psalm 138. Please read that verse aloud with me: “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” One more time: “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.”<sup>v</sup> In that one, short verse, we get a lot of information, beginning with the fact that you and I are here for a reason. The Lord of the Universe has a purpose for us — a purpose for you, for me, for the people up the street from us, and for the people on the other side of the globe. God has a purpose for each one of his children. Paul had a memorable way of putting this. In several of his letters, Paul talked about how each of us is one, particular part of a single, unified body. This means two things: first, that each one of us is unique; and, second, that each

one of us is vital. We do not all have the same function within the body, Paul said, and each and every one of us is necessary if the body is going to function as it should.<sup>vi</sup> If any one of us thinks that we make up the whole body, all by ourselves, we suffer delusions of grandeur. But, the even larger mistake we can make is to think that the body can do just fine without us. Not so. Each and every one of us is indispensable in the world that God has designed.

The world that God has designed — you and I do not have a full, clear picture of that world. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul assures us that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”<sup>vii</sup> But, as things stand right now, you and I see the world and our role in it as though everything was just a reflection in a dirty mirror. For now, you and I “know God’s will for us only in part.”<sup>viii</sup> But, that part that we are able to know is enough to get us going. What you and I can discover and know about God’s will for us will be enough to get us started — if we will only trust, as we said together a few moments ago, that the “the Lord will fulfill his purpose for [us].” Which brings us to Resolution #2 of the four Resolutions we are examining this month. We began last week with the resolution to *Begin Anew*, and this week we resolve to *Be Intentional*.

The advice “be intentional” is very much in vogue, these days. A whole industry has grown up around the notion that the key to being successful in both our public and our private lives is for us to “be intentional.” Folks with such titles as “relationship coach,” “life coach,” and “motivator” are producing books and videos and conducting seminars to help the rest of us learn how to “live with intention.” The key premise most of these coaches and motivators adhere to is that most of us squander the countless opportunities we have to make choices in our lives. Motivator Hal Urban wrote *Life’s Greatest Lessons: 20 Things That Matter*, and he says, “One way of looking at life is to see it as a daily series of choices. . . . From the time we wake up in the morning until we go to bed at night, we’re making choices. If we’re not, then someone or something else is making them for us.”<sup>ix</sup> Here are some of the choices that Mr. Urban says you and I are free to make:

- We are free to choose our character — the type of persons we become. We can allow ourselves to be molded by others and our environment, or we can commit ourselves to self-development. We can become less than we are capable of, or we can become all that we are capable of being.
- We are free to choose our values. We can let the media tell us what is important, or we can decide for ourselves. We can base our standards on what others are doing, or we can base them on what we know is right and good.
- We are free to choose how to treat other people. We can put other people down, or we can lift them up. We can be self-centered and inconsiderate, or we can be respectful, helpful, and kind.
- We are free to choose how to handle adversity. We can allow ourselves to be crushed, to give up, and to feel sorry for ourselves. Or, we can choose to look for a source of strength within us, to persevere, and to make the most out of what life deals us.
- We are free to choose our own purpose. We can wander aimlessly, or we can search for a meaning in life, and then live according to it. We can live to please only ourselves, or we can find a cause that is greater, one that helps us understand and appreciate life more fully.
- We are free to choose our attitude regardless of circumstances. Mr. Urban says that our choice of attitude is the most important choice we will ever make, because it affects everything we do in life.

There is a lot of very good stuff, here, and the notion that you and I repeatedly confront some crucial choices is well supported in scripture. On Moses’ final day as the leader of the Israelites — as they were about to wind up 40 years of wandering in the wilderness by crossing the River Jordan and entering the promised land of Canaan — on that final day, Moses told the people they had a choice: they could choose to love God by walking in his ways, or they could choose to turn their hearts away from God and eliminate God from their lives. The choice was one of life or death, and Moses urged the Israelites to, “Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you...”<sup>x</sup> Moses knew that God offered the Israelites full and authentic life, but Moses also knew that the Israelites were free to turn God down. So, Hal Urban and the other “life coaches” are not wrong to tell us that every day we face some critical choices. But, Mr. Urban has gotten a few things badly skewed, and he is wrong about what is the most important choice we face. Our most important choice is not what our attitude is going to be, but whether we will accept or reject God’s lordship over our lives.

As Moses told the Israelites thousands of years ago, the choice whether to accept God's lordship of our lives is a choice between life or death. We can choose to accept God's love and walk in his ways, or we can choose to turn our hearts away from God and put God out of our lives. That choice confronts you and me today, and it will confront us again tomorrow, and the next day, and every day we remain on this earth. Throughout each and every day, you and I must decide whether our next action will be according to the will of God, or according to our own will or the will of the people around us. That choice is always before us, but God will never force our hand. God will never force you or me to accept his Lordship of our lives. Instead, God gives us the freedom to choose his love and to seek to know his purpose for our lives. If you and I pray "thy will be done," we can expect God to show us his will, but then God will allow us to decide whether to go where he leads.

Mr. Urban also is wrong about something else. Despite what he and all the other life coaches and motivators might tell us, these choices that confront us every day — how we follow through on our choices does not have to depend upon our own inner abilities and strength. We can draw upon the ability and strength of God. God makes his ability and strength available to us through his Spirit, and God invites us to depend upon him. God does not call you and me to "commit ourselves to self-development," but to accept Spirit-development. God does not call you and me to become self-empowered, but to be Spirit-empowered. God does not call us to muster our own personal willpower, but to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us and sustain us. Most important, God does not call you and me to "choose our own purpose" and then be self-motivated, but to seek after his purpose and be led by him.

If you and I leave our lives up to chance, we will never grow into the full and complete beings that God had in mind. Out there on our own, relying only on ourselves, you and I can expect to produce a lot of rank weeds, and thorns, and briars, showing our natural set towards being far less than God created us to be. But, if we go the other way — if we heed the words of Isaiah, in our First Lesson for this morning, and choose to seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon God while he is near — then God will fulfill his promise. God will lead us in joy and peace; instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. God will make our lives a sign to one and all that he is the Lord of Mercy who can and does accomplish his purpose in us. That is God's offer, God's promise. All that remains is for you and me to be intentional with our response, for us to consciously, actively, eagerly tell God, "Yes." For us to consciously, actively, eagerly allow God to show us his purpose. For, the Lord will fulfill his purpose for us, and his steadfast love will endure within us forever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Christ's Plea for Ignorant Sinners*, sermon delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, October 5th, 1890.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Colossians 1:9-11

<sup>iv</sup> Colossians 2:20

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 138:8

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 12:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:14-26

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 8:28

<sup>viii</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>ix</sup> Hal Urban, *Life's Greatest Lessons: 20 Things That Matter*, Fireside Books:New York, June 2005

<sup>x</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19-20