

It's New Year's Day, which means it's time for that peculiar ritual of resolution making. We could call it the ritual of Good Intentions. Because making resolutions has become something of a cultural joke, something we all participate in. I want to be fit this year (why do you think gyms make you pay your membership a year at a time? Because they bank on New Year's business!). I want to read more. I want to spend more time at home. I want to be more spiritual.

That's the one that always killed me. Growing up in the Church, New Year's was when I always decided that THIS would be the year I finally read my bible more or prayed more or whatever.

And of course, we know that the joke of Resolutions is that they are gone by February. Gyms are pretty slow in November and December. And while a few of us keep our resolutions, most of us let them fall by the wayside.

Today, I want to challenge Beaver Creek Nazarene to be a people who are better than average. I want to be a part of a Church, part of a people who use 2012 to become more than we are right now. I want to be a part of a Church in January 2013 that blows our January 2012 minds.

And I bet if I were to take a poll, ask how you think we can grow as a Church, as a whole people, in 2012, we'd get a handful of answers.

You'd say, We probably need to read the Bible. We should pray. We should fast, or give generously. Some of you might suggest keeping Sabbath.

And you're right. These are all practices, disciplines that would help us to become a Church full of people who look more like Jesus in 2013 than we do at the beginning of 2012.

Like any resolution, our problem isn't that we don't know what to do. Our problem is motivation. And while that's true with all kinds of resolutions, it's perhaps particularly true with religious resolutions. Because we know we're supposed to be good. We have a sense that we *should* be "godly" or "spiritual" or "holy". But we struggle with actually doing the things that we're told make us that way.

So today, I want to offer you some encouragement. This is a pep talk. A "You can do it!" directed at everyone who's ever made a resolution and not kept it. It's a love letter to Beaver Creek Nazarene, full of hope that 2012 will be the best year this Church has ever known.

I want to start with Paul's words to the Church at Colossae. Paul had never visited this Church; he'd only heard about them. And right at the beginning of his letter to them, he offers a prayer for them that he says he always prays. Let's listen in:

"We have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us

from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins." -- Colossians 1:9-14 (NLT)

Now, there's a troublesome bit right there at the beginning I want to call your attention to:

Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord (1:10)

Several translations follow the Greek more closely, reading "So that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord". The Greek word comes from the marketplace, where they used scales to weigh coins. [picture of scales] The heavier a coin, the more gold or silver it contained, and the more worth it had.

So it seems Paul is saying that we are to live lives that are worth God. And that's enough to get us feeling defeated before we even get started. In fact, that's why so many of our resolutions to be better Christians fail.

We tend to think of these Spiritual Practices in one of two ways. Some of us feel that we have to earn God's love and grace. We feel worthless - that as we are, we have no weight, no spiritual substance. Maybe we have a rough past or we've been told for too many years we're not good enough for someone. Maybe you grew up in a Church where you were told God only loved you if you were holy enough, which of course you aren't. Whatever the case, when you stand on that scale in your mind, you're hopelessly outweighed. There's no way you're ever going to be "worthy" of God.

So you try. You read your bible. You pray. You go to Church. You give. Whatever. You do all the things you're told to do to be holy, to be worthy. You either end up a burned-out legalist who looks good but is empty inside or a defeated quitter. Either way, you never escape that feeling that you're just not ever good enough. You never feel God's Grace, God's love because you can't earn it. You feel like no matter what, it's still sitting back there on layaway, waiting for you to finally build up enough to buy it. But no matter what, you can't seem to do enough to **EARN** God's love and grace.

Or maybe you're on the other side. You recognize what a gift you've been given in God's love and mercy. But now you feel a debt. You think nothing's free, and so you're going to work to keep this gift you've been given. Your scale actually doesn't look terribly different from the Earners. God's gift has created an imbalance. Now you're in God's debt. And you have to work to repay God, so you read your Bible and pray and fast and give and you keep piling up your works onto your side of the scale, hoping your holiness will somehow make you worthy of God's gift. Because you don't want to lose it. But no matter what, you can't seem to do enough to **EVEN** those scales.

Both the Earners and the Eveners have the same problem: we assume that somehow it's our working that makes us worthy, weighty enough for God. [Let's just put the Scale here, piled up with our works - maybe a Bible, prayer, a rake, food, etc. - but still unbalanced] But God is infinitely more generous than we could ever be. And God's love and grace are infinitely more vast than we could imagine. [It would be funny to do a = infinity symbol next to whatever you use to represent God (maybe a Trinity?)] Nothing we do, no amount of good works will ever even the scales. The Good News of the Gospel is that we are caught up in the arms of an outrageously, irrationally, totally ridiculously, insultingly, wildly generous and good God.

So let's be very clear: You can never earn God's favor, God's love or God's grace.

Never.

Nothing you can ever do will make those scales even. You will never be weighty enough to be worthy of God.

Never. Ever. Ever. Never.

You can not EARN God's love.

God loves you without regard for who you are or what you've done. Right now. You are loved by God more than you can imagine. Right now, you are loved fully and truly, as much as God can love. And you didn't do *anything* to earn it. God loved you as much when you were born as God loves you now. And God will love you fully and truly for the rest of eternity, long past when you die.

And what did you do to earn that love?

And what can you do to lose that love?

Okay... glad we're clear on all that.

So back to that troublesome phrase:

Then you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him (1:10)

What can Paul possibly mean that our lives could be worthy of the Lord?

It has to do with what he's already told the Colossians. Let's read his earlier words:

"We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God's people, which come from your confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven. You have had this expectation ever since you first heard the truth of the Good News. This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace. You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you." -- Colossians 1:4-8 (NLT)

Remember that Paul's never been to Colossae. He hasn't had the chance to meet this Church, to be a part of what they do. But he's heard from his friends about them. And their reputation is sterling. He's been hearing about their faith in Jesus, the love they show to everyone around them. And he's heard that they're participating in the Gospel, that the Good News of Jesus is bearing fruit among them, just as it's bearing fruit in other places.

So then Paul prays this prayer over them:

We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then **you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him**, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. (1:9-10)

What we see here is Paul outlining a sort of Spiritual Growth Spiral (**make this happen**). Paul prays that God will give them knowledge of God's will, spiritual wisdom and understanding. And that leads to a life that is holy - pleasing to God, worthy of God. A life that is fruitful. But then *that* holy life leads to more knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Which leads to a holier life. Which leads to more knowledge, wisdom and understanding. And so on and so on and so on. (**so the Spiral can be K/W/U leading up to Holiness/Worthiness leading up to K/W/U and so on up and up**).

Paul prays that God will do this in the Colossian church. Not that the *Colossians* will do that themselves. This isn't an instruction. This is a *prayer*. Paul is asking GOD to do this among the Colossians. And here's the cool thing about all of this: Paul is confident that God is going to answer his prayer because God is clearly *already* working in the Colossian Church.

That's what he said at the beginning of the letter - that the Gospel is already bearing fruit among the Colossians. That their devotion to God and their love for their community is already the stuff of legends, that they're being talked about. And so because Paul knows God is already working among them, Paul can pray, asking God to continue working among them. Shaping them and teaching them and leading them. Making them holy. Making them worthy.

Because that's the secret. That's the truth of this whole thing. You want to know what makes you worthy of God? What makes your life pleasing to God?

God does. (**Maybe on the other side of the now-even scale, have all my works plus that same infinity**)

Think about it: Is your kid the best kid in the world? Of course they are!

Why? Because objectively they're the cutest, smartest, fastest, most sporty, most musical, whatever?

Nope.

Because they're *yours*. Your love for them is what gives them their worth, their weight.

So too with us and God. If God is working among us, if God is working in us, then we are becoming people who live lives worthy of God.

Are you an Earner or an Evener? You need to hear this good news: God's love, God's grace, God's mercy, God's favor, these are all yours. You don't have to try to earn them. You don't have to pay it back. They're yours. Your worth comes from God's love for you, not from anything you do.

So the only real question is: Is God working among us here at Beavercreek Church of the Nazarene?

I can answer that with a resounding Yes. Do we have a reputation in our community for love and giving? We most certainly do.

How many yards of mulch have we sweated over and shoveled? How many playgrounds have we cleaned for the children of our community? How many of you were here late into the night or early early in the morning to help the High School put on the AfterProm in this building? We had carnival rides in our parking lot and giant inflatables in our classrooms until about 4 hours before we gathered to worship!

Through Feed the Creek, how many tons of food have we packed into backpacks so kids can eat on the weekends? Did you know that a few *bars* in town have Feed the Creek collection barrels in them? That's not *normal*, you guys!

How many kids with terminal illnesses had a Christmas this year because of our generosity? Did you know that our fifth graders volunteered to work at the Kid Again party? Even the children of our church have found the joy of loving through serving.

And do I even need to mention Home in Benin? We heard a story from one of our own, of 30 children half a world away who don't have basic necessities like a bed of their own, a kitchen or a place to learn. We started with a goal of \$56,000 in five weeks, enough to give each child their own bed. We don't even have numbers since Christmas yet, but we've already collected over \$90,000 for this new home.

That is fruit, brothers and sisters. Lives are being changed all over the world because of what GOD is *already* doing right here in the Beavercreek Church of the Nazarene.

So do I think that 2012 is going to be an amazing year for us? You better believe I do. With every fiber of my being, I am confident that as amazing as all that was, we haven't seen *anything* yet. And I want to be a part of it. I want God to give me more knowledge of his will. More spiritual wisdom. More understanding. I want to live a life that is more worthy of God. I want God to do these things in my life, and I want them for you, too. I'm convinced that we are going to see more and better fruit in 2012 than we've ever seen before.

Because what's at stake is the whole world. Literally. Do you know what the first mention of fruit is in the Scriptures? It's in the beginning: Genesis 1. When God created humanity, God gave us this commandment:

"Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. " Genesis 1:28 (NLT)

This fruit that God is bringing forth among us is the original purpose we were created. We want to fill the whole world with the good fruit of what God is doing among us here at Beavercreek Nazarene. We are so grateful for what God has done for us and through us that we want to share it, spread it around.

That's what the Spiritual Practices are all about. We read the Scriptures, we pray, we fast, we keep Sabbath, we give not out of obligation. And not out of fear. They are a grateful response to what God has done. And they prepare us to be a part of what God is going to do next.

I can talk about Home in Benin with no shame. Zero. I get to brag about you, how generous you've been, how mind-blowingly above and beyond you've stepped up to the plate and I have not a trace of apprehension. I'm not being churchy. I'm not being pushy. I'm not shoving the Bible down someone's throat.

And the people I tell are *blown away*. And they're excited. And they want to be a part of it.

THAT is the Gospel. We are bringing HOPE to a dying world. We are joining in God's rescue mission. That's why elsewhere Paul calls us Ambassadors of Reconciliation.

And you. Right here. Right now. You're a part of it. God is working in and around you. Whether you realize it or not.

You think you'll never be able to follow through on those resolutions? Not on your own. But you're not on your own. God is with you. God is working in you.

So what do you want to do in 2012? Do you want to become a reader of the Scriptures? A prayer? Someone who makes time to be with your family? A generous giver?

These things are not beyond you. God wants them for you, and they will prepare you to be a part of what God does next.

So what do you do? How do you succeed at your resolutions? How do you faithfully respond to God's generosity, confident that God will teach you and make you holy?

Jim Collins introduced a principle in his excellent new book called the 20 Mile March. He asks us to imagine that we're going to walk across the US, from Los Angeles to Maine. So the first day, we walk 20 miles. And we stop.

Not because we're tired. In fact, we're feeling really good. We're excited about this new adventure. We could probably cover 40-50 miles if we wanted. But we stop.

The next morning we wake up, and we do another 20. We're getting into the desert. We wake up the next morning, and it's hot. We think about waiting it out, maybe covering a little less ground, but we stick it out. 20 miles in the desert. And the next day and the next until we're out of the desert and onto great landscape and beautiful weather again. We're in better shape by now and we could walk a lot further, but we stick to 20 miles.

Then we hit the mountains. And it's cold. And the walk is steep. Getting 20 miles is *tough*. But we do it. Every day. Then we hit the plains. And so on and so on.

Twenty miles. Every day. Whether it's easy or hard.

And eventually, we reach our goal.

But then Collins asks us to imagine that we start the same journey, but this time, we travel like we feel. That first day, we cover 45 miles. But the next day we're tired and it's hot. So we rest for a day. Go maybe 15 miles the next day in the desert. 5 the day after that. Out of the desert, we cover more ground - maybe 15-25 miles a day. Maybe 30. But we hit the mountains and slow waaaaay down. By the time we clear the mountains, it's winter and we decide to slow down, wait it out. You can imagine how quickly we'd reach our goal then, can't you?

How many of us approach our resolutions the same way? We rely on our own power, on our feelings, to tell us if we're successful. So we start out big - working out an hour a day, three times a week. Running a mile a day right off the bat. Cutting all fats and carbs out of our diets. Reading the bible for an hour every day no matter what. Praying for thirty minutes a day.

But then, the glamor of our resolution wears off and we realize that this is going to be a lot harder than we thought. That change doesn't happen over night. That the pace we've set for ourselves isn't realistic. It's not sustainable.

So we fade away, and quit. Defeated.

What if instead, we sought out our own 20 Mile March? A simple, measurable, regularly attainable goal that I could realistically achieve?

20 Mile March: A simple, measurable, regularly attainable and realistic goal.

Maybe I could resolve to read one chapter in the New Testament five days in ever week.

Or I could resolve to spend five minutes before I leave my bedroom at the beginning of every morning in prayer.

Or I could resolve to give \$5 every Sunday.

Or I could resolve to spend one hour every Saturday playing a game with my family, with no electronics on in my home.

Not because I have to. Not because if I do I will earn God's love or pay God back for saving me. Remember: those are free. Those will never change.

No I would embrace these practices as the path to true freedom. Because I believe God has something ahead of me, something that's bigger than I can imagine, and I want to be ready. I want to be a part of it.

So I commit to my 20 Mile March. Like football practice. It's not glamorous. It's not always fun. But it gets me ready for the big day.

Brothers and sisters, 2012 is going to be a big year for Beaver Creek Nazarene. And I'm so thankful you're a part of it. Because God is going to exceed our wildest dreams this year. This year is going to be outrageously, indescribably, ridiculously huge in the life of this Church.

And I want you to be a part of it. I want you to be ready.

So please enter into a time of prayerful reflection with me:

Imagine yourself sitting in this same seat on Sunday, January 6, 2013. What do you want to be true about you that isn't true now? What has God done in your life in the past year? What fruit is evident in your life that wasn't a year ago?

One year from now, what has God done in your life?

Now, prayerfully consider what practice you might implement to point yourself in that direction.

What practice can orient you towards God's direction for you?

Finally, consider what a 20 Mile March might look like. How can you implement that practice in a simple, measurable, attainable and realistic way?

What is your 20 Mile March for 2012?

<prayer>

Benediction:

We have 364 more days of 2012 left.