

Intentions Don't Guarantee Conversion

A sermon by Rev. David Johnson

I'm sure you've heard it said, "Necessity is the mother of invention." How many of our great inventions have come from someone's frustration with lack or limitation. I dare say most of our modern technology has been created for the simple reason that someone wanted an easier, simpler, or cheaper way of doing something. After all, isn't the old adage, "If you want to find the easiest way to do a job, assign it to the laziest person."

However, creativity requires that a person long for, or at least be open to, change. I saw a documentary the other night on the lives of the aristocracy in 18th and 19th century England. One line caught my attention, "Labor was cheap...everything was done by hand." In other words, "Why use or create any new technology, when labor was plentiful and cheap?" But when laborers demanded higher pay, suddenly, there was an interest in new approaches for tasks leading to fewer workers.

"Necessity became the mother of invention." People visualized what life would be like outside their present realities. They had to see with eyes that weren't bound by the limitations of the average person. This type of foresight can be difficult for some, as it requires seeing beyond the ordinary self-destructive despair that *nothing will ever change*. But this same challenge can also motivate others through a type of creative discontent.

Building on this principle, we are entering a time of year that can be quite difficult for many people; a time of regret and depression for some, but a time of quiet contemplation and resolve for others. You see, it is at this time of year that we look back over the footsteps of the past year and retrace our paths. Was this a year of good or bad choices, strong or poor health, prosperity or ruin? Most of us fall somewhere between these extremes.

For many, however, this turning of the pages of 2022 may leave mixed feelings of both joy and regret. Some areas of life have improved, while others have deteriorated. There have been births in some families, while the sadness of death has visited yet others. Age always takes an annual toll, but if our general health remains good, most of us feel fortunate.

It's intriguing then, that for all the blessings we experience each year, it is the problems that seem to get our attention. Rather than focusing on our assets, we tend to give our attention to our need. And so, it is at this time of year that we sharpen the old pencils and take out the pads of paper and begin formulating the coming year's resolutions for improvement or change.

Some of our resolutions deal with health, exercise, or weight loss. Others pinpoint our vocations as the area of change. There are hobbies we've long since put aside that will be restored. Others see the need for better monetary

practices and vow to increase their financial wisdom and savvy. But how many of us take inventory of our spiritual health or pietistic progress at the end of each year? How many spend the time evaluating our families to see if they have strengthened or weakened spiritually.

Some time ago, I heard Pr. Alistair Begg make mention of this in one of his broadcasts. He was preaching from Galatians about the need to consistently "grow in Grace." But what caught my attention was this comment, "*As I get older I am struck with the reality that I am literally shrinking...physically. But I have to ask myself, does that mean that I am destined to also shrink spiritually? No! But I have to be determined to keep that from happening.*"

So as we move into the year 2023, here are a few questions to aid your self-evaluation:

1. **Was I consistent in my devotional time with God? Did I spend more quality time on: my smartphone, my fishing pole, my computer, my spouse, my TV remote control, or my Bible?**
2. **Did my spouse and I have regular times of fellowship, Bible study, spiritual conversation and/or prayer?**
3. **Was my time wisely spent; balancing spiritual, family, and other activities?**
4. **Did I encourage my family in their relationship with Christ?**
5. **How was my church/Bible study attendance? When was the last time I skipped a secular event to go to church/Bible study rather than the other way around?**
6. **Who got more of my money this past year; God or the cable/internet/wireless phone company?**

You know, the world preaches spirituality as just one of many facets of life. But God says that our spiritual health is foundational to the whole of life.

Matt 6:31-34 "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?'" 32 "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34 "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

This slip into compromise or full-blown apostasy can happen so subtly, so easily. Little by little our attention becomes distracted, our values change as we absorb the influences of our society. Suddenly we find that our spiritual foundations have cracked and our footings have sunk in the shifting sands of cultural relativity. We see God's people do this in our Old Testament lesson for today from the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 63:7-14 I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, According to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, Which He has granted them according to His compassion And according to the abundance of His lovingkindnesses. ⁸ For He said, "Surely, they are My people, Sons who will not deal falsely." So He became their Savior. ⁹ In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the angel of His presence saved them; In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old. ¹⁰ But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them. ¹¹ Then His

people remembered the days of old, of Moses. Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of His flock? Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them,¹² Who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, Who divided the waters before them to make for Himself an everlasting name,¹³ Who led them through the depths? Like the horse in the wilderness, they did not stumble;¹⁴ As the cattle which go down into the valley, The Spirit of the Lord gave them rest. So You led Your people, To make for Yourself a glorious name.

God's people were ardent in their walk with God. But time and inertia took their toll. They lost their focus and "*rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.*" So God had to get their attention once again. Verse 10 states, "*He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.*" Eventually the people returned, but not until they turned their faces back to the old ways, remembering the truths of Moses and the faithfulness of God.

Likewise, the two characters in today's epistle lesson (Peter and John) understood their need to be focused and dedicated to the ways of God. They had heard God's call and chose to arrange the rest of their lives around those promises. All the way through Acts 3&4, they ministered to the people (*healing and preaching*), even under threat of persecution and punishment. The Holy Spirit's motivation had moved them to an intense conversion and commitment. And nothing would stop or slow them in this calling.

Acts 3:3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he {began} asking to receive alms. **4** But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!" **5** And he {began} to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. **6** But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene--walk!" **7** And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. **8** With a leap he stood upright and {began} to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

God desires to fill our lives with all the goodness and promise purchased for us by Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary. He has given us His resurrection power to live godly lives in pursuit of His promises. We must make these goals our priorities and we will find the rest of our lives falling into place (*though not without hardship*). If we don't, we will find ourselves here one year from now with the same frustrations, empty goals, and lots of regrets. I pray that is not the case! It wasn't for Peter and John:

Acts 4:31 And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and {began} to speak the word of God with boldness.