

Pressing on Towards the Goal in the New Year

After church on Sundays my family will often turn on the radio program Car Talk and if you've ever listened to the show you know that at the end of every show, Ray, the younger of the Tappet brothers, will close the show by saying, "well, you've done it again. You've wasted a perfectly good hour."

Some people look at the New Year as just another day on the calendar, no different than any other day, not a big deal. But if you've been in Grace Community any length of time, than you know that I look at it as a pretty significant event – after all, it only happens once a year! – and that I always preach a message about tackling the New Year with a fresh determination to make it count. As we come to the end of 2013, I hope no one here is thinking, "Well, I've done it again. I've wasted a perfectly good year." But I do want to encourage all of us to take a fresh look at what God has called us to accomplish and how we can better position ourselves to accomplish those things in the coming New Year with a resolve *not* to waste the gift God has given us of another year and a fresh calendar.

Phil. 3:7-14

Title: *Pressing on Towards the Goal in 2014.*

Paul is describing to the Philippian church how his life's trajectory was radically changed by finding Christ. He was going in one direction when Jesus appeared to him and called him to leave his old life behind and live for something much higher, to live for the surpassing worth of Christ.

That's true for all of us too. When God saves us, He also calls us to live for a higher purpose and a higher prize. The purpose is accomplishing the work that God has called each of us to accomplish with our lives and bear fruit that brings God glory and the prize is knowing Christ better and the eternal reward God has prepared for those who serve Him faithfully. There's nothing bigger or better in all the world to give our lives to, and we can do this no matter what our vocation or responsibilities are, no matter what season of life we're in. Whether you own your own business or work for someone else or are a stay at home mom or are currently unemployed, God wants to use us as redemptive instruments in whatever context or setting He has us in. With that in mind, I want to share the three words that I pray the Lord will use to encourage and inspire you to seize this coming year for the higher purposes of Christ. The words are *reflect*, *simplify*, and *act*.

1. **Reflect on the blessings and lessons that 2013 held**

This first point might surprise you in light of the fact that Paul says that he forgets what lies behind, but in context I don't believe that Paul is advocating a kind of spiritual amnesia where he never looks back or reflects on lessons learned. In fact, in the previous verses he looks back to describe what he once was and how his life was changed forever by encountering the living Christ.

What I think he means when he says he forgets what lies behind are the set of values that once ruled his life before he came to know Christ. The law-based, performance-centered religion that once meant everything to him is now rubbish compared to the surpassing knowledge of Christ and he'll never go back to it. It has no draw for him anymore – he forgets what lies behind in the sense of no longer living for what he once lived for.

But Paul is actually a man who reflects deeply. He tells the Philippians in chapter one that his prayers are fueled by his remembrance of them and their partnership in the gospel. In more than one place he

relates his own past in a way that reveals that he has processed it and absorbed the lessons God had for him from the past. Testimonies are forged by remembering the past in light of what God did. So it is a good thing to reflect on the past from time to time. It's good to...

a. Reflect on your blessings

In our home on Christmas morning, as is probably true in many of yours, we give out one gift at a time to each person and then wait as each one opens the gift. When our kids were younger it would test their patience (and maybe it still does) because they wanted to open up their gifts as fast as they possibly could. We had to slow them down because they would just tear open a gift, look at it for a nanosecond and then grab another gift to open as fast as they could. Come to think of it, that's what I did when I was a kid too and my parents had to slow me down – drove me crazy! But we can all be a bit like that with the gifts that God gives us. God gives us gifts and blessings and we just open them and move on to the next gift. Thanks God, keep 'em coming!

Before we open the gift of a New Year, it'd be good to take time to reflect on the blessings God poured out in 2013. Provisions, answered prayers, times when He met us right where we were and gave us strength to go on. There's an old hymn that says, *Count your blessings, name them one by one*. For my family, we've been blessed on numerous fronts in regards to our health. Several of us underwent minor surgeries and came through healthy. I had a small mass that had to be removed and tested and for two weeks Janice and I had to live with the uncertainty of whether it was cancerous or not and all the thoughts and roads your mind can go down with that possibility. It wasn't cancerous, which is a gift from the Lord, but I don't want to forget to thank God for that gift.

As a church, we finally own our own building. I still remember the day I got the news that we had to move out of Corning West and the discouragement I felt, which led me to desperately look for something for us to buy and God led me to the building we closed on three weeks ago. That's a gift from God – let's reflect on God's provision and goodness. What blessings has God given you this past year? If you can't think of any, the problem isn't that God didn't give any – I guarantee He did. Probably you opened them so fast and put them aside looking for the next blessing that you barely noticed them. Thankfulness is cultivated by taking time to reflect on our blessings and thanking God for them.

b. Reflect on the successes and failures of 2013 and the lessons learned

"We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience." — John Dewey.

Have you had successes this past year? Have you had failures? God hides lessons in both successes and failures that are very valuable, but as Dewey said, we need to reflect on them in order to learn those lessons.

I happened to be reading a little of financial guru Dave Ramsey's story and early in his marriage he and his wife were borrowing money to buy homes and flip them. Dave borrowed too much and the bank called in his debts and they lost everything over two and a half years. He said this:

"I remember being so scared I couldn't breathe. I would stand in the shower and cry. I met God on the way up, and got to know Him on the way down. We hit bottom." It was a massive failure, but it led Ramsey to relook at everything he believed about finances and changed his entire life. God can use failure to teach us some amazing lessons. And most of all, we can find God's nearness in times of failure.

But God has given you some successes too and He can turn those successes into deeper convictions and wisdom as you reflect on them. I'm not just talking about financial or career successes. Some of the sweetest successes are relational – working through a conflict successfully (not damaging but strengthening the relationship), helping someone else when they're going through a hard time, discipling someone in their walk with Jesus.

As we close out this year, let's not be so quick to move on. Let's reflect on the blessings and the lessons that God has had for us in the year.

2. Simplify what God has called you to do to a few things

I think we'd all agree that Paul lived a very productive life. He did work that mattered and he did it well. But he reduced his life to one single pursuit: *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:13-14)*

One thing I do. He didn't try to accomplish fifty things well; he was focused on one thing – the particular, individual call of God on his life. As believers we should all press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, but what that upward call looks like will vary from believer to believer.

As we prepare to move into our new building in a few months, a sense has been growing in my heart that this is going to be a significant opportunity for us as a church, one that we want to steward well to the glory of God. I think it will help bring us more definition as a church, but I also realize that for us to be more fruitful we probably need to narrow, not widen, our focus. God has shaped us as a church body to accomplish certain things, but not everything. If we spread out too thin, we dilute our limited resources and will accomplish very little. Our discipleship needs to be focused – how are we going to invest our time in growing disciples? Our evangelism strategy and church planting strategy needs to be focused – how will we reach out to the unchurched (we know God calls us to) and how will we go forward planting churches (we believe God has called us to do that too)? Our mission giving needs to be focused so that we're having some impact with our missions giving. The needs in the world are too great for us to give to every need we become aware of.

What's true for us as a church body is true for each of us as individuals too. God has shaped you for a particular purpose – an upward call – and He has gifted you to accomplish that call as you depend on Him. If you know what God has shaped you to do, do it with the kind of passion that Paul describes. If you don't know what God has called and gifted you to do, spend time in prayer and thought about it. Consider how God has shaped you – what you love, what you're good at, what opportunities are before you. We often tell our kids that you want to have a job you love doing. Of course there are aspects of every job we may not love, but when we love doing what we're doing, rather than just doing it to make a living; it adds a passion and joy to our lives. Simplify your focus to just a few things.

3. Act to do those few things to the best of your ability and for the glory of God!

After acknowledging that he hasn't arrived, Paul describes his attitude in terms of action verbs: *I press on...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...I press on toward the goal...* None of us have arrived. None of us is perfect. None of us are where we want to be. And there is a freedom in realizing that we never will be in this life. We're saved by grace through faith in Christ – not by our performance. But the life of a disciple isn't meant to be driven by excuses but by a God-centered press towards what God has for us. Prayer, faith, obedience, and repentance are all actions that press us towards God's goals for our lives.

We're all pretty familiar with the cynical sayings about New Year's resolutions. I've shared many of them myself:

New Year's Day now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual. Mark Twain

A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one Year and out the other. Anonymous

I've experienced the same futility and frustration. But is it wrong to resolve to change in specific ways we want to change? What if someone wants to start taking care of their health – is it wrong to resolve to exercise faithfully? Or if someone wants to be less selfish, is it wrong to resolve to look for opportunities to reach out and love others? Why can't we keep resolutions and should we keep them and how can we get better at keeping them if they're good and reasonable resolutions for growth and improvement?

Matt Perlman, in his blog, *What's Best Next*, has this observation:

Most people don't keep their new year's resolutions because they don't translate them into their schedule. It's that simple.

If you make a resolution, but don't plan time to actually accomplish it, it usually won't happen. It won't happen because it remains merely an intention. And intentions that aren't specifically translated to "actionable zones" tend to be treated by your mind as "nice to do, but not necessary to do" items. The result is a hit-and-miss approach. Some days you remember and follow through, and others you don't.

In other words, intentions wither and die if we don't act on them.

a. *It's easier to act your way into feeling than it is to feel your way into acting*

If you're waiting to feel like acting, you may be waiting a long time. Let's say one of your desires/intentions is to help suffering people in some way. Remembering the second point, figure out that one or two ways, whether it be through adoption or giving to a disaster relief, or giving time to go and serve physically in some needy place. The Wilber's will be doing that in just a couple days. But we can have a desire to do that, an intention to do that, but that desire will wither if we don't translate it into action. Even small steps of action can get momentum going in our lives in ways that big desires that never take small steps can't.

Or maybe you're fighting discouragement or even depression. Don't wait for your feelings to motivate you to do what you know you should, do what you know you should and your feelings will likely follow. And if they don't, at least you've done the right thing.

Or maybe you are having trouble loving someone. Act as if you love them and your feelings of love for them will begin to stir. It's easier to act our way into feeling than feel our way into acting.

b. *Eat a frog every morning*

Mark Twain once wrote, *"Eat a live frog every morning, and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day."* The point is, do the thing you least want to do first and you'll feel better about what the rest of the day holds. Some of us have the problem of procrastinating – especially on things we don't want to do. Do that thing you are most likely to procrastinate about first thing and the day will get easier from there and it will set the tone for the rest of the day. Eat the frog first thing in the morning and you can be pretty sure the rest of the day will improve.

New Year's Message
Allen Snapp
Grace Community Church
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As believers we live in and by some massive and beautiful concepts. We are saved by faith in Christ, we are daily in need of God's grace, we have truths and principles in scripture that we hopefully are learning about every day. But the danger is that we can start thinking because we know something we are doing it. Concepts can overtake action and we live in a concept disreality. Action is essential to getting the work that matters done, and doing it better. So let's recommit to action – doing what God has called us to do, and asking Him and trying to learn how to do it better. For the glory of God, and the good of those around us.

By God's grace, we have been given the gift of another year. Of course, we don't know what this year holds, and none of us is guaranteed to be here the whole year. But let's press on towards to high goal of living for Jesus and bearing fruit that brings him glory. In the specific way that He has called each of us to do that.

Reflect. Simplify. Act. And see what God does with 2014. Let's pray.