

A CLEAN SLATE

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Mark 1:14-15

I John 1:5-10

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin, as a young man, composed a master list of 12 resolutions by which to improve his life. Later on he added a killer 13th, "Imitate Jesus and Socartes." He notes in his autobiography that he had particular difficulty with:

- #2, Silence– avoid trifling conversation;
- #3, Order– let all things have their places;
- #5, Frugality– waste nothing.

Ben kept track of his performance in a small book. He entered a black mark each day after each resolution that was broken. He intended to keep using the book, eventually erasing old black marks as his performance improved. But, there were so many erasures and then new black marks over the old, the pages developed holes. Finally, he resorted to keeping his records on a piece of ivory so the black marks could be wiped off with a wet sponge.

Benjamin Franklin certainly is to be commended for the seriousness with which he took the formation of his character. He did develop an admirable character and that contributed to his enormous influence in the formation of our nation.

But, I think we can all identify with Ben's problem. While in a technical sense, one day is the same as another, a New Year feels like a fresh start to us. Resolutions are an honest admission of defects in our lives coupled with hope for improvement. In that sense, I think making a few New Year's resolutions is a great idea. Yet, self-reform is usually rather discouraging if we are brutally honest with ourselves. We can feel like the pages of our lives develop holes from too many black marks, too many repeated failures, like Ben's book.

The Good News, the Gospel, is that we really can get a fresh start, a clean slate for all our failures and sins– complete forgiveness. That's why Jesus came. God recognized our inability to transform ourselves. He has provided for us a way to have a new heart with new power and motivation to live like Jesus lived. While this message isn't anything new to most of you who've been Christians for very long, it is easy for us to make one of two errors.

- We can fail to fully appreciate the power of God's forgiveness and His help in living a life of discipleship. Then our Christian walk can become heavy with duty and performance to make up for our weaknesses and sins. The joy evaporates from our faith and our steps are dogged with a sense of failure.
- Or, we can go to the other extreme of becoming rather casual about sin with an attitude that says, "God forgives me, so why try too hard to overcome temptation? I'll go ahead and sin now and repent as soon as it's done."

I've often staggered between those extremes. It is hard to keep a balance that treats sin

as seriously as God treats it and yet not fall into the opposite ditch of joyless obsession with performance. Our two texts this morning can help us stay on the road this year.

REPENT

Repentance is always and everywhere the first word in the Christian life. The Gospels begin with John preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mtt. 3:2). Jesus begins where John leaves off in our first text, Mk. 1:14-15:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Jesus ends his preaching with commissioning his disciples to preach the same message in Lk. 24:47,

...and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.

The preaching of the early church recorded in Acts never strayed far from the theme of repentance and forgiveness of sins. You see it in Peter's sermons and Paul's sermons. And in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, it is the message to the last of the seven churches, "be zealous and repent."

Repentance must always precede forgiveness. This is not because God likes to see us groveling before he grants forgiveness. It is simply because we can't go in two directions at once. The word, "repent," in the Greek means "to turn around." So, repentance is the choice, the action we take to turn around and begin to go God's way. I'm afraid there is a lot of pseudo-repentance going on among Christians, saying, "Forgive me, Lord," but with no serious intention of turning around. I read about one young mother who corrected her five-year-old son for sticking out his tongue. She threatened to put hot sauce on it the next time. During family prayer time that evening, this little boy prayed, "Jesus, help me like hot sauce."

Also, remember repentance is not an emotion, but a decision. Certainly there *may be* a lot of emotion involved. But realize we can also be very sorry and emotional yet not decide to change. At the core, repentance is a decision we make. It is deciding we've been wrong in thinking we could manage our own life and be our own god. It is deciding that the God in Jesus Christ is telling the truth. It is a decision to turn from our path and follow Jesus.

Now, let's look at the ongoing nature of this walk with Christ, because we're never done with sin.

LIGHT AND TRUTH

I John 1:5-10 lays out a marvelous path for us to follow.

5 *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

6 *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.*

- 7 ***But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.***
- 8 *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*
- 9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*
- 10 *If we claim we have not sinned,
we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

As I'm sure you picked up in our text, John uses light and truth interchangeably. We still do this with expressions like: "The light dawns..." or "Now I see..." In cartoons, you even see a little lightbulb over the head of the one who "gets it." So, to walk in the light means to walk and live according to the truth. And, all that is true is of God. All that is false is of the devil. A decision to "walk in the light," or in God's truth is deciding to follow Jesus— for He alone is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (Jn. 14:6). John makes it clear, we can't walk with God and hide from the truth. The light of His truth needs to expose everything within us that is false so that we can be purified from all sin.

John strengthens this affirmation by adding, "...in him there is no darkness at all." Darkness is cold, confusing, frightening, and intimidating; whereas light is warm, inviting, dispelling confusion and fear. In fact, darkness is nothing in itself. It is the absence of light. You don't open the door of a dark room to let the dark out. No, when you open the door you let the light in. You don't turn on the dark or turn off the dark with a switch. You turn on the light or turn it off. By saying: "God is light, in him there is no darkness at all," John is affirming that there is nothing deceptive or confusing about God. God is warmth, beauty, life-giving invitation.

Superficiality and denial are constant dangers for us. John cuts through all the fluff and our rationalizations in his hard-hitting approach. Every other verse deals with the opposite of "walking in the light (truth)." Listen again to vs. 6, 8, and 10:

*If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness,
we **lie** and do not live by the truth (6).*

*If we claim to be without sin, we **deceive ourselves** and the truth is not in us (8).*

*If we claim we have not sinned,
we make **him out to be a liar** and his word has no place in our lives (10).*

Cover-ups are spiritually dangerous. Often we aren't very serious about secret sins— as long as they're undetected, we ignore them. John uses strong language to alert us. He warns us we need to be brutally honest and not settle for a covering over of reality.

Too often, we settle for superficial makeovers. Have you heard that extreme makeovers are in? Of the 6.6 million cosmetic-plastic surgery patients in 2002, nearly one third had multiple procedures at the same time. Total makeovers include cosmetic dentists, Botox injections, and other cosmetic enhancements as desired. The average costs runs \$20,000. Of course this doesn't change anything about who the person really is inside.

Just the outside looks better.

How serious are we about a spiritual makeover that changes the stuff deep inside us? Can you find some pockets of pride inside? How about sins of jealousy, lust, greed, laziness, or gluttony? Actually, John is giving us a prescription for a spiritual makeover. Fortunately, it doesn't cost \$20,000, and it makes real changes. Unfortunately, it is still costly. It requires searching honesty with our souls under the light the Holy Spirit provides through God's Word.

But, as we take sin seriously and deal with it, we have an incredible gift. I put it in bold in the bulletin text. It is right in the center of our selection, vs. 7–

***But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.***

Two wonderful gifts come to us by walking in the light. Fellowship with one another and forgiveness of all our sins so that we have fellowship with God.

The idea of hidden, covered-over sin destroying intimacy is something we know. Truth is necessary for true intimacy and fellowship. We experience it in our marriages, with our children, and with friends. If we are not being honest; if we hide what we've done or who we really are; if we deny our failings; what happens? The closeness we once enjoyed is gone. When we can be totally transparent with another person, revealing everything– the good and the bad– we experience the amazing joy, the freedom, and the love of total acceptance. Isn't that how it was when you "fell in love" with your spouse? Being truly in love means being able to share anything and everything, and that creates intimacy. When that wonderful intimacy is lost, we sometimes treat it as a mysterious "happening," like, we just no longer love each other. But when that happens, the solution is to begin doing again what you did when you "fell in love." That includes things like spending time together, honestly talking about your inner feelings, listening to and appreciating the other person in their uniqueness. Feelings of intimacy will return.

Likewise, our fellowship with God depends upon honesty– being real before Him. When we face up to things as they really are with no cover-ups or denial of our sin, we have this wonderful promise of a clean slate before God. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." And then it is repeated again, in vs. 9 so we can't miss it, saying that if we confess (come clean about our sin) God promises to not only forgive us but clean-out the mess, "purify us from all unrighteousness."

Of course denial is an incredibly subtle tendency working in our personalities causing us to often not even see our most serious sins. That's why we must constantly examine ourselves by The Truth, The Light, as God reveals it in Jesus, who is the Light of the World. We need to let the truth interact deeply within us. This passage concludes with reminding us if we are not aware of sin in ourselves, "his word has no place in our lives." We need to give his word, through daily study of the Bible, a place in our lives so

the Holy Spirit can expose the ways we may have deceived ourselves.

When you begin feeling your relationship with God has gotten superficial; when you lack that intimacy and closeness you once enjoyed; when you're just going through the motions with your devotions; it just may be an indicator that you've got some darkness inside disrupting that fellowship with God. Usually for me, when the joy and intimacy in my walk with the Lord evaporates, if I examine my heart, I find something there I've been ignoring. It might be some anger I've not dealt with, a resentment toward someone, a virus of jealousy I've let grow, a bit of self-pity I've nurtured, some guidance I've not followed because it seemed too threatening, or even an anger toward God at the unfairness of things. Invariably, at the root I discover a truth I've pulled-back from facing. But as I've faced the sin, confessed it to God, that wonderful inner cleansing takes place restoring the peace and joy of the presence of Jesus.

WALKING

"Walk in the light" speaks of movement. In our Christian lives, there is never a place we can settle down— a place where we've arrived. We must keep moving. God keeps revealing new truth in us for us to obey. With that truth we often need to repent of some sin we've ignored. You see, sin is a lot like crab grass, where it is impossible to get all the roots out. You become aware of little connections of a sin, rootlets running throughout your life, intertwined in many things. In the case of something like pride, there seems to be no end of discoveries of ways it has woven itself into our hearts. But, we don't need to root things out. That's God's job and he promises to do it. Our part is to just be open, confessing, and Jesus in his redemptive work on the cross removes the sin.

That's a good way to live this new year. Our walk is not about a morbid preoccupation with our failures and sins. Rather, we need to know how to deal with them, to be rid of them, so we can enjoy unhindered intimacy with God and fellowship with one another.