

The Word Does the Work

Means of Grace
Pastor Josh Black
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New Year's Resolutions

This morning we begin a new series on how we become more like Jesus. It's called "Means of Grace." There will be six sermons in this series on the Word, prayer, the ordinances, pastors, fellowship, and our habits. Each of these plays a vital role in discipleship. This morning, we're going to cover the Word. But before I do that, I want to give an extended introduction to the whole series.

How many of you made New Year's resolutions for 2018? Statistics show that about half of Americans make resolutions.¹ I read something interesting this week about the other half—those who don't make resolutions. Most of them are over 50.² Why do you think that is? Maybe it's because the more you live your life, the more disappointments you face. Belief in the possibility of change starts to wane. One writer says that when we're young, we're like baby sea turtles bursting with determination to make it over the dunes to the ocean beyond. But then the seagulls swoop in and start picking us off one by one.³ So often our dreams and goals are dashed.

It only takes a few days before most people start failing on their resolutions. "Hashtags like *#resolutionfail* start trending on social media hours into the New Year."⁴ I looked on Instagram yesterday and found over 1,800 pictures with the hashtag "resolutionfail" attached to them. My favorite one was this: a picture of Charles Barkley taking a nap on a treadmill with a bag of donuts in his hand.

It's true; we struggle with achieving our goals. In fact about 90% of people report failure to follow through on their resolutions.⁵

But in light of this reality, I'm not advocating giving up on resolutions. I think the New Year provides a new opportunity to think about what matters most. And to try to make progress toward our goals. We shouldn't allow cynicism and failure to keep us from intentional living.

It's not resolutions that I have a problem with. But I do find it troubling that most of the resolutions people make have nothing to do with spiritual growth. Over 80% of the resolutions people make are either health related or finance related.⁶ They have to do with our physical well-being. But Paul admonishes us to train ourselves for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7)⁷. He says that bodily training is of some value, but godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come (1 Tim. 4:8).

So I want to encourage you this morning to make a resolution to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ this year.

¹ "[New Year's Resolution Statistics](#)." Statistic Brain.com, January 1, 2017.

² "New Year's Resolution Statistics."

³ Hyatt, Michael S. *Your Best Year Ever: A Five-Step Plan for Achieving Your Most Important Goals*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2018, 12.

⁴ Hyatt, 12.

⁵ "New Year's Resolution Statistics."

⁶ "New Year's Resolution Statistics."

⁷ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Vision, Intention, Means

But how can you grow as a disciple this year? How can you avoid the high rate of failure that follows on the heels of most resolutions? Dallas Willard has written widely on spiritual formation. And he says that if you want to make progress in discipleship you need three things. You need vision, intention, and means.⁸ I think he's right.

First, we need vision. We need a clear picture of what we're trying to accomplish. We need to begin with the end in mind. And thankfully, we've been given this vision in Scripture. The church is called to make disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify God (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). And what does a disciple who glorifies God look like? They look like Jesus. A growing Christian is becoming more like Jesus. They will be marked by love, as we talked about at this time last year. They'll love God, love others in the church, and love the lost, just like Jesus (Matt. 22:37-40). So that's the picture. That's the vision of this church. And if you're a Christian, that should be your vision too.

Willard says the second thing we need to accomplish our goals is intention. We need a strong resolve to actually follow through. The Bible calls us to be intentional. Peter commands us to make every effort to become like Jesus (2 Pt. 1:5-8). To be diligent to confirm our calling (2 Pt. 1:10). And Paul *labored* so that Christ would be formed in the Galatians (Gal. 4:19). He *toiled and struggled* with all of Christ's energy to present the Colossians mature in Christ (Col. 1:28-29). He admonished the Philippians to *work out* their salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that God works in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

The third thing we need to be successful with our goals is means. We need a strategic plan and smart tactics for achieving our goals. In other words, we need more than a picture of the ends; we also need to have means toward those ends. And God has given us certain means in his Word. We believe God has provided at least six means of grace. That is, he's given us six ways the gospel can grow deep in us and go wide through us. He's given us six ways to become more like Jesus. And this is what we're going to cover over the next couple of months: the Bible, prayer, pastors, fellowship, the ordinances, and habits.

What I want to do this morning is to talk about the first means of grace, the Bible.

To organize the rest of our time I want to do two things: First, I want to look at what the Bible has to say about the Bible. How does the Bible help us to become more like Jesus? Essentially I want to talk about a theology of the Bible. But I want to give you more than theology. I also want to give you practical ways that you can place the Bible at the center of your New Year's resolution to become more like Jesus. And so the second part of my sermon will deal with application.

THE WORD DOES THE WORK

Let's begin with theology. We have a saying at First Free. We believe that the Word does the work. Or to expand that statement, we believe that the Word of God does the work of God in the people of God by the Spirit of God for the glory of God. But why do we say, "The Word does the work?" I want to offer three reasons.

⁸ Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 2002, 85-90.

The Word is Powerful

First, God's Word is powerful. The Word is like the power plant of the church.⁹ In Kansas our power comes from a number of sources: nuclear sources like the Wolf Creek plant; coal based sources, like Sunflower Electric near my home town Garden City; and natural gas sources like the one in Hugoton or south-central Kansas. This is where our power and light come from. But in the church, our power and light come from the Word of God. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul says, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

Paul says the apostolic Word—the gospel that Paul preached to the Thessalonians—was not merely the word of men; it was the very word of God. And that word was at work in the believers at Thessalonica. The Word of God is powerful. It does the work of God in sanctifying us, in making us more like Jesus. As Mark Dever says, "God's Word has always been His chosen instrument to create, to convict, to convert, and to conform God's people into his image."¹⁰

God works through the agency of his Word throughout Scripture.¹¹ Isaiah 55:10-11 says it this way. "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." God's Word is intentional and effective. It's like a heat-seeking missile. It seeks to get God's work done in the lives of God's people. And it accomplishes that goal!

The New Testament says something similar. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Paul said, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). Most of you are familiar with what Paul said in Romans 1:16. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The author of Hebrews says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). James says that we are brought forth by the word of truth (Jas. 1:18). And calls us to receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (Jas. 1:21). Peter says, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pt. 1:23).

Hopefully you get the picture. The Word of God is powerful, in creation, in conversion, and in sanctification. It's like the power plant of the church. The Word does the work.

Our destination is to become like Jesus. But the fuel that will power our trip toward our destination is the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the first and most important means of grace because it is the power of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3).

⁹ Bullmore, "[Holding Forth the Word of Life](#)," Sermon, Crossway Community Church, January 6, 2013.

¹⁰ Dever, Mark, and Paul Alexander. *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2005, 33.

¹¹ Dever, 34.

The Word is Enough

Second, God's Word is enough. There's a temptation in evangelicalism to think that the gospel is simply something that gets us *into* the kingdom of God. But once we're in, we move on to other means. We need something more sophisticated than the basic gospel of Jesus Christ. But the New Testament teaches us that we never graduate from the gospel. It's not just a prerequisite course to get us into the higher level courses. In fact, the gospel is the whole curriculum for the school of Christ.

Listen to what Paul said to the Corinthians. "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:1-2). Here Paul is establishing that the word was powerful to save the Corinthians in the past, when they first heard it. But it's also powerful now, in the present; it's the gospel in which they stand and by which they are being saved. And it will continue to be powerful in the future, all the way until the end of their lives. It has a pervasive effect in their lives from the beginning of the Christian life to the very end.

The whole of the Scriptures point to and anticipate the gospel of Jesus Christ. And you don't ever graduate from the gospel. It's not simply the front door that gets you into the Christian house. Sure, it is the front door. But it's also the foundation of the house, the roof that covers and protects the house, the walls that hold the house up, the furnace that heats it; you get the point.

So many evangelicals today want to move up and beyond the gospel when it comes to spiritual formation. They're looking to Catholic mysticism and contemplation. They're looking to the smells and bells of Eastern Orthodox worship to get to a higher life. They're looking to ecstatic prophecies of Pentecostal apostles, and signs and wonders. Peter says that we have all we need for life and salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says that the Word of God is all we need for growth in grace. The Word of God is enough. It's sufficient.

Remember what Paul said to Timothy? "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:14-17). The man of God spoken of here is referring to Timothy, the pastor of the church at Ephesus. He's saying, you have everything you need in the Scriptures to be complete in your ministry. They are a sufficient means of grace. Continue in the Word of God. Don't think you need to move on to more "advanced" material (cf. 4:4). Your task of making disciples is a big task. But you have everything you need in the Bible to do your job. Preach the Word, Timothy (4:2)! That's all you need. The Word of God is enough.

The Word is Life

The last thing I want to say about the Bible is related to the first. God's Word is life. I agree with Mike Bullmore, when he said, "The working of the Word *is* the life of the church."¹² That's quite a statement. Obviously the Word is at work *in* the life of the church. But that's not what Bullmore says. He says, "The working of the Word *is* the life of the church."

¹² Bullmore

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we should worship the Bible. Christ is the head of the church. It's from him that the body has life through the Spirit (Eph. 4:15-16). We worship God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that being said there's such a vital connection between Jesus and his words. Jesus himself repeatedly made the connection between the life we have in him and the Word. In Mark 8:38 he said, "For whoever is ashamed of *me* and of my *words*...of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes...." In John 15:7, Jesus said, "Abide in *me*, and my *words* in you." In John 8, Jesus said to his disciples, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Later Jesus says that God's *Word* is the truth (Jn. 17:17), but he also says that he is the way, the *truth*, and the *life* (Jn. 14:6). Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? *You* have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).

Do you see the connection? If we want to be his disciples—to become like him—and if we want to live in Christ, then we have to live in his Word.

Eternal life is not just something that happens to us after we die. Eternal life is something that we have now by the Spirit. It doesn't simply refer to the *quantity* of our life. It refers to the *quality* of our life. Eternal life is knowing Jesus, living in him, abiding in him. As we abide in him we bear fruit (Jn. 15:4). We become more like Jesus. That's our goal. That's our resolution. But we can't abide in him if we don't abide in his Word. We can't have life if we're not living in his Word. That's why if we want to grow in Christ-likeness we have to let the Word of Christ dwell richly in us (Col. 3:16).

APPLICATION

Do you see how powerful the Word of God is? It's a means of grace. The Word does the work. It's what God uses to save us and to sanctify us. And it's all we need to become more like Jesus. If that's true, then we need to live our life in the Word. But how do we do that? With the rest of our time, I want to offer two applications. We need to hear the Word and we need to read the Word.

Hear the Word

First, we need to hear the Word. This is the most basic way we take in the Word of God. We simply listen to the Word being read in our service on Sunday morning and we hear it preached by the pastor. Some people think hearing the Word in church is so basic and elementary that they may take it for granted or even disregard its importance. Now that probably sounds self-serving coming from your pastor. So let me read to you what the late Jerry Bridges of the Navigators said about this.

We are living in a day when this method tends to be lightly regarded by many people as being a somewhat ineffective means of learning spiritual truth. This is a serious error. The Lord Jesus Christ himself has given to his church people who are gifted to teach us the truths of his Word, to remind us of the lessons we are prone to forget, and to exhort us to constancy in application. We need to heed those whom he has given to us for this purpose.

None of us ever becomes so spiritually self-sufficient that he does not need to hear the Word taught by others. And most of us do not have the ability or the time to search out on our own the 'whole [counsel] of God' (Acts 20:27). We need to sit under the regular teaching of a man gifted by God and trained to expound the Word of God to us.¹³

¹³ Bridges, Jerry. *The Practice of Godliness*. Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 1983, 47-48.

I would go so far as to say the most important spiritual discipline of your week should be your time in corporate worship where you hear the Word of God being read, sung, prayed, and preached. Of all the ways the New Testament commands us to take in the Word of God, all of these happen each Sunday morning in our corporate worship services.

Now one of the reasons hearing the Word of God in the corporate setting is minimized is because it can be seen as too passive; it's too easy for it to go in one ear and out the next. And that's a good point. But my response would simply be to say that hearing the Word on Sunday doesn't have to be passive or shallow.

The Bereans didn't listen to Paul's sermons passively. They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11). I would encourage you to be active in hearing the Word preached. Read the passages for the upcoming week ahead of time. Come prayed-up, eager to hear the Word. Then go and study the Scriptures after Sunday morning to see if what I say is so. And then go apply the Word.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk. 11:28). This is important. The goal is not simply to passively hear the Word. The goal is to keep it or to obey it.¹⁴ So, when you listen to the Word on Sunday, take note of the ways it's calling you to respond and then seek to apply the Word to your lives throughout the week with the help of other believers.

That's one of the reasons we advocate sermon-based small groups here at First Free. Lectures can be ineffective. But lecture-lab models are more effective. Sermon-based small groups are designed to be a lecture-lab model where you can hear the Word on Sunday, then apply it throughout the week with the help of your small group.¹⁵ If you'd like to know how to get involved in a sermon-based small group, I'd encourage you to reach out to Pastor Matt.

Read the Word

Let's look now at the second way to take in the Word of God. We need to read the Word. There's nothing more basic to taking in the Word of God than going to church. But what about the other six days of your week? If you want to experience the power and life of the Word of God, you need to cultivate a habit of reading it yourself daily.

Church attendance is becoming less frequent in this country. But the frequency of personal Bible reading is worse. One poll said that only 18 percent of born again Christians read the Bible every day. That saddens me, but doesn't surprise me. What surprises me is that 23 percent of Christians say they *never* read the Bible.¹⁶

Now there are some of you here who would like for me to talk about memorizing the Word, meditating on the Word, and studying the Word. And I'm for all of that. If you're growing in Christ, you'll certainly want to do these things and will make progress in them. But if the Bible reading statistics apply at all to First Free, it seems like we may need to start with the basics of reading the Bible. You can't memorize, meditate, or study, if you don't even read the Bible. So let me make a couple of practical suggestions. Get a Bible reading plan. And get a devotional or a Study Bible that will guide you through that plan. I'd encourage you to get a plan that takes you through the whole

¹⁴ Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 2014, 24.

¹⁵ Osborne, Larry. *Sticky Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2008.

¹⁶ Whitney, 27.

Bible. I've used Don Carson's plan in his book *For the Love of God* many times. It gives you a plan and some comments on the passages you're reading.

Some people are so overwhelmed by the task of reading through the whole Bible. But did you know that you can read through the entire Bible in less than 72 hours? That's about how long an average audio Bible is—72 hours. That's less time than the average American spends in front of the TV every month. Think about that. If you swapped out your media time for Bible time, you could read the whole Bible in four weeks. If that's too daunting for you, think of this. With just 15 minutes a day, you can read the whole Bible in a year. Or even easier, five minutes a day will get you through the Bible in less than three years.¹⁷ Regardless of your pace, I'd simply encourage you to get a plan and start reading.

Don Whitney tells the story of a man from Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured. He lost his eyesight and both of his hands. He was a brand new Christian. And one of his greatest disappointments was that he couldn't read the Bible. But then he decided he would try to read the Bible using Braille. Since he didn't have any hands, he tried using his lips. But he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips were too badly damaged. But one day, as he brought one of the Braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the characters and he could feel them. Like a flash he realized, I can read the Bible using my tongue.

At the time this story was written, he had read through the entire Bible four times.¹⁸ That's remarkable! And quite motivating. If he could read the Bible through four times with his tongue, then surely we can discipline ourselves to read God's Word too.

This is a means of grace that will bear fruit in your resolution to become more like Jesus this year. It will be power and life for us!

¹⁷ Whitney, 29.

¹⁸ Whitney, 30-31.