

It's the last day of the year. Before us stretches a brand new block of time—365 days, pure, unsullied like a fresh blanket of snow, clean and white like unused paper. Tomorrow we're going to start making tracks through it, marking it up and using it. Before we just barge right into the New Year, I want to tell you that I believe New Year's resolutions can be very helpful in becoming more positive and healthy Christians. I encourage you to do it and in a moment I'm going to give you some to consider.

Here's my guide to making an effective New Year's resolution: 1) don't make them so ridiculously easy to accomplish that it's not worth resolving in the first place. 2) Don't make them so ridiculously difficult that you set yourself up for failure. The purpose of the resolution is to raise the bar on your behavior and push you just a little further that you would normally go. 3) Don't make more than 3 resolutions or you won't keep track of them and they will soon be lost in your daily life. Resolutions should be narrow, focused and achievable with some extra effort. 4) Make your resolution public. There's nothing like the social pressure brought by a public promise to release within us motivational power we did not think we had. Remember that committed behavior always outperforms uncommitted behavior. If you want to succeed in your resolutions tell them to your family and friends—go public.

Here's my list of resolutions for you to consider: 1) in 2018, I will read through the New Testament, 5 chapters a week. The purpose of this resolution is for you to grow in spirit and in truth. You can also use it to shape the spiritual life of your family if you read together with your parents, your kids or your spouse. If enough of us make this resolution then it will bring a rich harvest of unity, compassion and faith to our church family. 2) In 2018, I will be open to all the miracles God wants to work through me and our church. A lot of miracles didn't happen in the Bible because people were too busy, they had other competing interests or they just preferred to nurse a negative attitude. It was Jesus who said, "All things are possible with God." He is looking for churches that are open to a miracle when God offers it in God's own time. Are you open to being part of a miracle? 3) In 2018, I will pray that 20 new people will publically confess faith in Jesus Christ at the front of our church. God wants our church to grow in numbers and we can be part of God's mission by specifically praying for his will to be done. The Apostle James said this about prayer, "You do not have because you do not ask." Wishing and hoping is not how God gets things done. God gets things done through prayer. He's looking for partners who will pray for his mission to be accomplished among us. There's the list for the New Year: read the New Testament, be open to a miracle and pray for twenty confessions of faith. At the end of this message, I'm going to give you a chance to make these resolutions public.

Romans 12 is about relationships and it forms the magnificent conclusion to which the whole letter has been pointing. Paul says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers by the mercies of God...” (12:1) The mercy of God is what Paul has described in detail for the first eleven chapters. It is because of this mercy shown to us in Christ that Paul exhorts us to launch ourselves into three key relationships—with God, with the church and with others.

The first is with God. There are two things we must do that will affect everything else. The first is to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. In the ancient world worship was a matter of taking live animals to the temple and killing them as an offering to the deity. Pagans did this to express thanks or to earn some favor from the gods. Jews did this in Jerusalem to express thanks or make atonement for sin. Paul now proposes a radical new understanding of worship and a radical new form of worship. Temples are now obsolete. God does not ask for the dead bodies of cows, sheep or goats. God wants your body. He doesn’t want you to die for him, he wants you to live for him.

He wants your ears so that he can speak to you of his hopes and dreams for you. He wants you to listen to the assignments he has for you. He wants your eyes so that you will see the potential and the good that is in the worst of your neighbors. He wants you to turn your eyes away from the decadence and greed to what is true, good and beautiful. He wants your mouth so that you will speak kind words and give your lips to blessings not curses. He wants your feet so that you will be swift to get up and serve others. He wants your hands to be open in generosity. He wants your stomach so that it no longer rules over you with its cravings and desires. He wants your heart so that it beats with compassion like his. Christianity is a religion of flesh and blood. God wants your body—every part of it to glorify and serve him. The only alternative to giving your body to God is to keep it for yourself. There is no middle way, no half-and-half split. God wants all of you or none of you. Present your bodies to him.

The second thing is to completely change the way we think about life. Christianity is a thinking religion. We are to be transformed in the renewing of our minds. We need to stop thinking the way the world thinks and start thinking in light of the Kingdom of God. As J.B. Phillips once translated it, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” Jesus Christ does not confront us with lists of laws to follow but he offers us a new way of thinking by which we will have the ability to discern what is the will of God in any circumstance. The old mind is debased and evil. The old mind was guided by the flesh and always oppositional to God. “The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot.” (8:7) But to “set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (8:6) Sometimes you see a business with a sign in the window, “under new management”. They want you to know that their products and services have not changed but the thinking behind it all has. When you

become a Christian, your talents and abilities don't change. Your basic personality characteristics don't change. If you were an introvert before faith in Christ you'll be an introvert after. What does change is your thinking. You are under new management. You know the mercies of God. You know the coming judgment day. You know you are bound for glory and this knowledge completely changes the way you think about everything in this world. Your judgment is different because your logic is completely different. Christian logic starts with a completely different premise: Christ will come again in glory!

To simplify all your relationships you start with a basic foundation: give your body and mind to God. So what does this look like in my daily life at church? It looks like a humble attitude focused on appreciating the gifts of others and using my own gifts to their fullest potential—being one body with diverse members.

What does it look like in the world? Here is where Paul clearly echoes the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Attacks on churches in Egypt and Pakistan this Christmas remind us all that radical Islam wants Christians dead. We can only make relationships more and more complicated if we return evil for evil. We cannot allow ourselves to adopt the thinking of a terrorist—filled with the lust for power, domination and vengeance. Such a way of thinking will not end well—what is required is a new way of thinking. Keep the mind of Christ. The enemies of Christianity are many but we must not let them determine how we think and act. If we do then they have truly mastered us and we are in utter defeat.

What does it look like in my marriage? Paul captured it well in 1Corinthians 7:4, "The husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does; likewise the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does." Wow. What would happen if I stopped thinking about marriage as my path to self-fulfillment? What would happen if we started living for each other and built a truly common life together? What would happen if I gave my spouse authority over me? That's new thinking!

What does it look like with my children? It means I stop letting the world squeeze my family into the cult of success. The cult of success is the biggest rival to the Christian church in our area. On any given Sunday morning the worshippers of success are out there on the fields, in the gyms and the practice rooms. They are rehearsing, learning, practicing and playing games. They are traveling, shopping, and aspiring to achieve success. Or perhaps Sunday morning is the only time left to sleep, to do laundry or to recuperate from the relentless pursuit of success. Now success is not a bad thing but if you make her your goddess, she will drink your blood. The new way of thinking is to put spiritual and moral formation first in life and to set your family life decisively on the things that are eternal.

What does it look like at work? It looks like workers taking an interest in each other's lives. To be a Christian is not to stand aloof from others but to celebrate their births and marriages and to go to their funerals. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. To live in harmony means we don't look at our fellow workers as rivals to fuel our jealousy nor should we think them inferior in any way. In light of God's mercy we've come to put away our arrogance and pride and live a life of kindness and generosity towards those who are outside of our faith. In this new way of thinking we've come to honor every human life as one for whom our Lord suffered and died. They are precious to him and so our thoughts about them are guided by his cross.

Simplify. All your relationships will change for the better when you give your body to God and adopt the mind of Christ.

So now let me invite all those who wish to make the three resolutions for the New Year please stand, put your hand over your heart and repeat after me:

*Today with the help of God, I resolve to read through the New Testament; to be open to miracles and to pray for 20 confessions of faith at Highland United Methodist Church in 2018.*