

A New Year's Calling

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Happy New Year!

After all the celebrations and eating and drinking, are you happy to be back into a routine?

I love the Christmas and New Year season - it brings closure to the year and sets the pace for a new one.

As much as I resist doing a 'New Year's Resolution' type message, I almost always go back to it!

It's in the air!

All over you look, diet plans, exercise plans, success plans, self improvement of every kind plans!

And I think they're great!

Yes, for many of us our resolve to change things doesn't always go as planned, but better to keep trying than not try at all - for who knows, we may find success one of these years!

For many there is success! Their resolve sticks and they have made positive changes in their lives.

How many of you here are resolved to do something different this year?

What's your New Year's resolution?

Is it to stop bad habits, start good ones?

Overcome a fear?

Change something about yourself you don't like?

How many of you have set spiritual goals?

What spiritual goals have you set?

To begin our year, I was thinking it would be nice to start with an encouragement.

An encouragement to align our spiritual priority.

What do you think that might be?

Paul has a nice summary in Ephesians chapter 4.

Reading from Ephesians 4,

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

² *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

²⁹ *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

³⁰ *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

³¹ *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*

³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph.4:1-2 ; 29-32 NIV)*

These are some of my favourite verses in the Bible.

Especially the last verse, ‘Be kind to one another. Be compassionate to one another. Forgiving one another - just as in Christ God forgave you.’ V32

In some English versions that word for compassionate is translated as ‘tender-hearted’.

I like that phrase, tender-hearted.

These verses have served to give me strength when I’m not feeling tender hearted, or kind towards others.

As we read the words from those verses, did you find them to be a good reminder of what our spirituality should look like?

Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, has a few agendas in his letter.

One of them is unity.

The theme of unity is found in quite a few of his letters.

We should not be surprised, for all of us have our own agendas, and when they clash with the agendas of others, well, there’s a clash!

Selfishness rules, love takes second place.

Paul is reminding them of their salvation, the love of God poured out for them and not to be afraid to embrace this new way of life.

In verse 1 he says, *“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”*

The calling they have received is into salvation and into God’s plan for the universe.

To live worthy of the calling is to have worth the matches the actual value.¹

¹ HELPS Word Studies, axios, worthy; Bible Hub.

Paul says it looks like this;

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." V2

Humble - this is an inside-out virtue produced by comparing ourselves to the Lord rather than others.

This brings behaviour into alignment with this inner revelation to keep one from being self-determining.

For the believer, humility means living in complete dependence on God with no reliance on self.²

When we truly understand faith, it comes with an awe of Jesus Christ, and an acute awareness of how short we fall from it.

It's humbling!

Jesus truly is amazing - and I'm not talking about the miracles - I'm talking about his willingness to completely trust God even when he knew it would cause him tremendous pain.

We shy away from faith at the mere thought of missing out on a pleasure!

Humility is a virtue found in one who has had a genuine encounter with Christ.

Gentle - implies having power but does not use it for selfish gain, does not impose on others - the opposite of a bully.

Being gentle also implies bringing others along and giving them time to come to an understanding.

This leads right into the next phrase Paul uses, to be patient and bear with one another in love.

This refers to a refusal to give up hope for improvement in a broken relationship.³

It's saying, give each other time to think things through.

Don't be quick to write someone off - even if they are wrong!

Everyone makes mistakes, and everyone needs grace to overcome and recover from them - or even discover them in the first place!

Jump down to verse 29 where it says; *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."*

² HELPS Word Studies, tapeinophrosunes, humble; Bible Hub.

³ Francis Beare, Interpreter's Bible Commentary, pg.683.

Unwholesome talk - that which is rotten, putrid, as in rotting fruit and vegetables, and rotting meat.

Unwholesome - that which is of poor or bad quality.

Does our speech build each other up?

In my first church I was the Assistant Pastor and was asked to run the Youth Group.

There was a tendency within the group to use a type of humour which cut each other up.

You know the kind of humour I'm taking about? The kind that makes fun of someone.

I hate that kind of humour. It's unwholesome talk.

It wasn't long before I put a stop to it. There wasn't to be any kind of joke made at the expense of another person. Ever.

Remember, people may be laughing it off, but inside how do you think they feel?

Some of those kids came to me and thanked me for changing that.

Instead, what should we be doing?

Saying what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Our conversations should be helpful - we should leave feeling built up rather than run down.

Use our language to build and benefit others.

Positive language is so important - because we are hungry social beings and our words are either poison or food.

We will come back to verse 30 as it points to the concluding comments.

Verse 31, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."

How many of us have felt those feelings?

Of course - all of us have! Perhaps even still today!

Bitter or resentful? Is there something in your life you feel bitter over or resent?

How about rage, intense emotional anger? Does it wash over you in an uncontrollable, or almost uncontrollable wave?

Anger? This is a different word used here. This involves calculated vengeance or punishment.

It's an internal disposition which steadfastly opposes someone.⁴ This is holding a grudge - you're in it for the long game.

You're plotting to get someone back for something.

Brawling? No, not like a bar brawl - this is shouting over each other in an argument.

Has anyone here ever done that?

I'm pretty good at it as I have a loud voice!

Oh yes, I'm guilty of many of these things!

How about slander?

Speak bad of anyone? Want to paint them in a bad light to someone?

Oh, you don't actually have to lie about them, although that's also a big part of slander, you can just say lots of bad things about them - even if they are true, you're presenting it to make the person look bad.

Slander is also abusive language and twists the truth. It switches right for wrong in a deceptive manner. You know, things that sound right but we know are wrong - a type of justification of something we know we should disapprove of.

Finally malice - here we have spite again - to do something wicked to someone else.

An interesting point about this word for malice, it means the underlying principle of evil which is present, even if not outwardly expressed.⁵

Even if not outwardly expressed!

Remember our message back a couple of years, "What Are You Thinking?"

Of course you do!

It truly is as Jesus said, we are guilty by virtue of our thoughts and feelings.

We may have to re-visit that message some time this year - it's a good one!

Then Paul ends on a positive note in verse 32 where he says; "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*"

I love those words - be kind to one another. That word for kind is both kind and good at the same time.

Be good and kind to each other.

⁴ HELPS Word Studies, anger; Bible Hub.

⁵ HELPS Word Studies, malice; Bible Hub.

Compassionate - to have gut-level sympathy for each other.

Forgiving one another. Immediately Paul knows this one is perhaps one of the most difficult.

So he reminds them, God is the model of forgiveness - the extreme lengths to which God went to secure our forgiveness - remember that, and forgive each other.

Paul can encourage the Ephesians, and us, to look to these things - to let go of self-fulfilling demanding behaviours such as bitterness, anger, slander etc.

And with good reason - He can encourage us to let those things go and embrace love for one another because there is provision!

Christ has provided for us - you are loved! God will meet your longings, God will see justice is done - trust!

This year, may we resolve to live a life worthy of our calling.

True self improvement manifests in how we treat each other.

Remember earlier I skipped over verse 30? Here is it; it says; *"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."*

We grieve the Holy Spirit by how we treat each other!

The Holy Spirit is very involved in our day to day activities - and God, who is love - is most concerned with how we treat each other!

This is not about salvation as Paul makes clear.

We are saved by grace through faith - a point Paul made loud and clear earlier in this letter to the Ephesians. That's why Paul adds in 'we are sealed for the day of redemption.'

He's making it clear, this is not about earning our salvation.

This list of encouraging loving behaviour towards each other is not about earning our salvation - it's about being the people we are called to be and stop grieving - causing pain - to the Holy Spirit by the way we treat each other.

The Spirit is very involved and concerned about how we treat each other - this is true spirituality.

And it starts with our thoughts and attitudes.

In verse 23 of our chapter Paul calls us to *"Let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes."* (NLT)

Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus - they, just like us, did and did not respond to the moving of the Holy Spirit.

Paul paints the picture of what a life worthy of our salvation looks like, and what life without that salvation looks like - the list of bitterness, anger, slander, and the list of humility, kindness, patience and compassion.

Respond to the Spirit who is love, and it will look like this! Says Paul.

It's not 'try harder' it's 'let the Spirit have it's way in you.'

As Francis Beare in the Interpreter's Bible Commentary says on this chapter, *"In the Christian context, it is love for each other which gives rise to those attitudes."* (pg.684)

Paul is not giving us a list to follow, but beacon to show us what our relationships with each other should look like when we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Why do we do the things we do?

Why do we sometimes hurt each other and at other times don't?

We are not living by the Spirit.

We are living in our own efforts to follow that list of prescribed behaviour.

Paul isn't calling the Ephesians to follow a list, but to help them walk in the Spirit.

Morality in Christianity is not about following a list of prescribed behaviour - be kind, compassionate, forgiving etc.

It's about recognizing those are the fruit of love.

God isn't looking at humanity to find those who follow the rules - God's looking for those who will receive and respond to Him.

Interpreter's Theodore Wedel, speaks exactly to his point when commenting on our passage and says;

"Many a reader of the gospels must have noted how little Jesus seems to be interested in whether the people he meets are good or bad.

But Jesus was intensely interested in WHY they were good or bad, and in what relationship they stood with himself and with the Father.

They called Jesus 'a friend of publicans and sinners' Matt.11:19. To the pious citizens of Jerusalem he could say, 'The publicans and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you' Matt.21:31.

The WHY of morality is the important question. People can be outwardly virtuous and even pious, for many reasons. The motive may be fear, or love of fame, or emulation of beautiful ideals, or above all, pride. God will be the judge.

But what is the WHY of Christian morality?

Revelation of the love of God is the WHY of Christian morality.

It is a morality of response and not, first of all, of human achievement.

It is the fruit of a divine gift and not the product of humanity's attempt at goodness.

The WHY of Christian morality accordingly speaks little of virtues - these being but outward signs - but says much of the reborn heart." (pg.702)

To live worthy of the calling is to respond to God who is love.

The fruit follows.

In response to what God has done for us, in our thankfulness and openness to the Holy Spirit, we will see it manifest as humility, kindness, patience, compassion.... As love.

As we struggle to yield more and more to God in faith, we may have to put in some effort to put away the things that hurt each other.

May we put them away in faith - trusting God is just, God knows our deepest longings, and God loves us.

This year, find rest in your calling, and as we yield to the Spirit, we will live worthy of that calling.

Amen.