

Ambition: The Resolutions of the Apostle Paul

Straight Talk – Part I

Selected Scripture

Introduction

I would like to give some thoughts from my heart to yours. I think today, more than any other day of the year, many of us will find a little niche somewhere to be alone, and with a piece of paper and a pen, will jot down what we call, “New Year’s resolutions”.

I talked with a fellow this morning, who told me he had a New Year’s resolution of losing fifteen pounds. He said triumphantly, “I did,” and then added, “but I gained them back.”

It is interesting that in the New Testament, the apostle Paul used the word “resolution”. It is translated several different ways. In the Old English, it is the word “ambition”. Paul only uses this word three times, and I want to look at these with you today.

What were the resolutions of the apostle Paul? What were the ambitions of his life? I believe, if we can discover what they were and inculcate them into our lives, we will be different people this year and will be much more effective than we were last year.

Resolution #1 – Be Ambitious To Edify

Paul’s first resolution is in I Thessalonians 4:11. It is to be ambitious to edify.

Let us look at this passage, beginning with verse 9.

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life . . .

Paul says to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life. That is an interesting thought. To understand it better, we need to look at the history of this Thessalonian church.

The church at Thessalonica had its share of loafers, talkers, and busybodies. In fact, in II Thessalonians 3:11, Paul refers to this body when he says,

For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.

Now Paul is not saying, “Zip it up when you come to church.” I think he is talking about making it your ambition to talk correctly and lead a quiet life in reference to being a busybody. In other words, lead a quiet life when it refers to sticking your nose into other people’s business, but when you want to speak, speak in a certain kind of way.

I think he is referring, in this verse, and he will talk about it later in the epistle, to being quiet and not talking unless you are going to be ambitious to edify. He is saying, “I want you to edify one another when you speak.”

Look, in fact, at I Thessalonians 5:11, where Paul talks to them about the way they are to use their mouths.

Therefore encourage one another . . .

The word “encourage” is hard to translate. It literally means, “to strengthen one another with words.”

So Paul is not saying not to talk, he is saying that when you talk, you should strengthen one another; when you speak, you should encourage.

He also says, in the same verse,

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

The word for “build up” refers to “building a house”. It was used throughout the gospels in reference to building buildings. However, in this verse, Paul uses it to say that we are to build one another’s lives.

Paul, in fact, will say, in Romans 14:19,

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

You and I are to make it our ambition that when we speak to each other, as we live in this body and interact with one another, we edify each other. We are to be ambitious to use our tongues in a way that will encourage, motivate, and build each other up.

Paul says to pursue the things which lead to edification. Let us look at what these things are. Turn to Romans 15.

- In Romans 15:5, Paul tells us one of the things to pursue in order to encourage and build up. I believe he is describing a desire for unity among the believers.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,

In other words, “I have a desire; I have a pursuit; I have an ambition that I will be like-minded with you. I will put off the incidental things about which I may disagree with you and I will pursue unity; I will pursue sameness of mind.”

Paul is talking to an early New Testament church, yet he could say the same thing to us. He could say, then and now, “Pursue a desire for unity.”

- In Romans 15:6, Paul gives us a second thing to pursue that we might encourage and build up one another. He says that there is a delight in worshipping together.

so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you recognize, ladies and gentlemen, that when you meet together to worship, you are in the process of edifying one another? We talk about the fact that we worship God when we meet together, and that is true. However, there is an intangible; an unspoken way that we build each other up and encourage those around us when we meet together in the worship experience.

This is the reason that we leave encouraged – we have rubbed shoulders with other saints who face the same battles; the same difficulties; the same trials; who share the enthusiasm over the victories. There is a delight in worshipping together that is edifying.

- Paul tells us a third thing to pursue in Romans 15:7-8, in order to encourage and build up. He says there is a demonstration of love.

Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers,

It is fascinating to know that I edify you; I strengthen you when I accept you as you are.

There is a building up process in this body that takes place when we worship together, when we strive toward unity together, and when we accept each other. These are the things that Paul says, “I want to be ambitious about pursuing. It is my ambition to edify.”

Resolution #2 – Be Ambitious To Testify

Paul gives a second resolution in Romans 15:20. It is to be ambitious to testify.

And thus I aspired [am ambitious] to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation; but as it is written, “They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.”

Do you remember the story in the New Testament, in Acts, chapter 5, when the apostles were put in jail because they were teaching the people the truth of Jesus Christ? Do you remember that an angel came and let them out in a miraculous way? In verse 25 of that chapter, we are told that they were back again,

. . . in the temple and teaching the people!

So all the Sanhedrin and all the religious leaders called the apostles together and, in verse 28, the high priest says, and you can almost hear the grit in his teeth,

. . . We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name . . .

Do you remember what the apostles said? They said, as we are told in verse 29,

. . . We must obey God rather than men.

When we talk about the ambition to testify, one of the problems in our New Testament church of this century is that we have moved evangelism out of the realm of obedience and into the realm of convenience.

For these apostles, it was a mark of obedience. For us, it is a mark of convenience. I wonder if it is our ambition this year, to testify.

When people hear the word “evangelism,” I know what they think – the same thing I do. They think any word that ends in “ism” means they need a course and instruction and a syllabus. All of that is great and is available. However, there are only three qualifications that make an evangelist, which is nothing more than a bearer of news. That is all the original word means. An evangelist is one who bears news. There are three qualifications.

A messenger is one who has received a message from someone, has been told to deliver it to someone else, and obeys. All of us are evangelists. We have received a message that Jesus Christ is alive. We have received, in Matthew 28:19-20, the commission to go and tell the rest of the world this message. Now it is a matter of whether or not we will obey. May this year be a year in which we are ambitious, not just to edify one another as we worship, but to testify when we leave this huddle and hit the streets where there are people who have never heard.

I once read a quote that I have never forgotten. Someone referred to an evangelist, or a herald, as simply, “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

Believe it or not, I had a great test today. It is wonderful for me, in that little “ivory palace” office, to prepare a message. However, God always runs it through me sometime during the week.

This morning, I was reviewing, and praying, and preparing. It was very quiet in the building, but I heard the doorknob move a little. I thought, “Somebody is here.”

I got up and opened the office door, but no one was there. I looked out through the glass in the door that leads to the outside, but I still did not see anyone. Then, I heard a voice behind me, “Here I am.”

There stood a sharply dressed young man in a uniform. He was a security guard who was making his rounds, as he periodically does, and in the process, he checks the doors. I had never seen this fellow before.

He said, “I’m just checking to make sure the doors are locked.”

I said, “Great. Have a good day.”

I shut the door and no sooner had I shut the door, than it hit me, “You dummy! You’re about to preach

on being ambitious to testify – and here is a guy who has time on his hands and you are walking away from it.”

So, as you have probably done before, I stood there and sort of, debated with the Lord, thinking, “I can’t . . . It’s too late . . . I can’t just open the door and holler down the hallway, ‘Are you ready to die?’ He’d probably pull his gun out and shoot me!”

Then, while I was standing in that office debating and literally, thinking, “What am I going to do?” because I was so impressed, just having reviewed this, that I should be ambitious to testify, there was a soft knock on the door. I opened it, and there he stood.

He said, “I forgot to ask if you wanted the front door locked.”

I will tell you, this was one of those great opportunities in which the Lord gave me a second chance. I had the opportunity to share the gospel with that young man.

Let me tell an interesting story that I read this past week. Before I begin, however, I will tell you that it did not take place at the seminary which I attended. There was a group of seminary students who were told to address a congregation of two hundred people. Their topic was to be “The Good Samaritan”. These seminary students studied all week in order to be ready. Unknown to them, however, the talk was just a ploy.

An actor had been given the assignment to be on the sidewalk, between the students’ residence and the main building, on the day of the talks. When each student approached, the actor was to gasp, grab his chest, and slump to the ground. The results of the seminary students’ reactions were going to be tabulated.

It is almost sadly humorous that more than 50% ignored the actor – walked around him, stepped over his legs – and continued thinking about their sermon on “The Good Samaritan”.

Can you imagine this? The fellow on the sidewalk gasps, “Will you help me?”

“No, I can’t. I’m on my way to speak.”

“What’s your subject?”

“On helping people.”

Men and women, we have been given a sermon; we have been given a message to give to people. However, so often they come into our lives and they

leave without ever hearing. They are beggars who are starving for the lack of bread – and we have the bread.

That person you rub shoulders with at the job is starving to death. That next door neighbor is starving to death. Those fellow classmates are starving. There we sit – well fed and plump – with the news that can bring them bread.

Paul said,

. . . I [am ambitious] to preach the gospel...

So two resolutions we should have are to be ambitious to edify and to testify.

Resolution #3 – Be Ambitious To Please God

Paul gives a third resolution in II Corinthians 5:9. It is to be ambitious to please God.

Let us look at this passage, beginning with verse 6.

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.

This is the third time that Paul has used this word “ambition”. He says, “I am ambitious to edify the saints. I am ambitious to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am also ambitious, and you can quote this over the entire experience of my life, to please God.”

It is fascinating that he does not say, “I am ambitious to please God because, if you live right, God will make you a little wealthier; God will restore your health; God will smooth out all the wrinkles; God will make your life very comfortable.”

No. Do you know what Paul says? Look at the next verse, II Corinthians 5:10. He says, “I am ambitious to be pleasing to Him. . . .”

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ . . .

I have never known Paul to lay a guilt trip on anyone, but it is interesting that he says, “I live to please God because, in my mind, there is the constant thought that one day, I will stand before Him and give an account of my life.”

Now do not misunderstand this. There is some erroneous thinking and preaching that I have been exposed to, that at the judgment seat, it will be determined whether we will go to heaven or to hell. The fact that you are at the Bema seat is proof that you are part of the Beloved and you are on your way to heaven. The Bema seat is where rewards are given out by the Judge on that elevated platform. He did not whip the losers; no one was there that lost – they all won. Yet, Paul has the thought, “I want to live my life in such a way that when I stand before God, I crave this from Him – that I pleased Him in my life.”

If we live with that ambition, how would we handle that business deal; how would we walk in that school setting; how would we live before our neighbors? We would live with the ambition to please God.

I think, if we had that ambition, we would number our days as the Psalmist did. He said, in Psalm 90:12,

. . . [Lord] teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

One of the seminary professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, a brilliant Hebrew scholar, took this literally. He learned, according to the statistics, that the average person lives to be seventy years of age, which is about 25,550 days. So he figured, according to his age, how many days he had left. Then, he took a calendar every year, and marked the number of days he had left. That is living with your days numbered – with the ever present thought, that I think is inspired by the Holy Spirit, that each tick brings you closer to seeing Jesus Christ personally.

If you are twenty-five years old, you do not have a long time; in fact, about 16,425 days. If you are thirty-five years old, you have less, or about 12,775 days. If you are forty-five years old, you have even less, or about 9,125 days. Think about this – only that long.

We do not know how long our ticker is designed by God to last. However, if He does not come and rapture the church, everyone of us, sooner or later, will come to the end, when that ticker in our breast will stop.

If we lived in light of this, would we seriously give our lives for a car; for something to hang in our wardrobes; for a promotion; for a paycheck? No. We would be ambitious to please God.

Conclusion

Do you want some resolutions for this year? Be ambitious:

- to edify,
- to testify,
- to glorify.

These ambitions will change your life.