

# Forgetting the past, straining ahead

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning, everyone, and Happy New Year. I'll add that to everyone else's this morning. And New Year's resolutions, I'm not sure if you're one of those people who has New Year's resolutions. I personally highly encourage it, at least give you something to sort of work forwards, if you like. I'd be grateful if you could turn 1 Corinthians, grab a Bible, either physical Bible over here somewhere, and also on your app, 1 Corinthians 3 would be fantastic.

Top 10 resolutions for last year, New Year's resolutions for last year were number one, only do exercise you enjoy. Number two, healthy eating. Number three, turn off the self-view on your Zoom calls. Number four was review your relationship with alcohol. Number five, find a new hobby. Number six, travel more. Number seven, volunteer. Number eight, meet someone.

I'm assuming that's romantic as opposed to just meeting someone randomly. Number nine was to sleep more. And number 10 was to start therapy. So that's not my New Year's, that's New Year's resolutions.

Number, so my New Year's resolutions for this year, number one, and I've got five of them. Number one, to forget about myself. Number two, to read the entire Bible and the New Testament and Psalms twice.

Number three, to not buy any new pieces of clothing. With two caveats. I don't wear secondhand underwear. And I don't wear secondhand joggers. There's a reason for that. It has something to do with injury.

[ 1 : 50 ] Number four for me is to run my first ever marathon. Number five is to set a PB running a marathon. So providing I do number four, I should automatically do number five.

What are your goals for 2023? Particularly, what is your discipleship goals? In other words, the question that we constantly ask ourselves around here is what might be your next step?

Now, our summer series here in January is called Running the Race. It's based loosely around Hebrews chapter 12, verses one to three, sorry, one to two, which says, Since we are surrounded by such great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

So what we've got here in January is five standalone messages around the theme of running the race of discipleship. A few of them will be biographies of those who have the, you know, some of the great, greats of the faith from past eras who have run the race and set a great example for us.

What is I'm doing today, what is intriguing about today's passage is that it gives us a way to see ourselves, to start this new year in seeing ourselves differently.

[ 3 : 22 ] And seeing particularly how we might change. And it's totally different than traditional culture or contemporary Western culture on how it views we are to change. Up until the 20th century, traditional cultures believed that a too higher view of yourself was the main cause of personal problems and the breakdown of relationships.

And society. The Greek word for it is the word hubris, an excessive pride and arrogance and overly high confidence in oneself.

In our modern Western culture, we have developed the exact opposite cultural consensus. Our belief today, which is deeply embedded in everything, is that people, when people feel bad about themselves, they do bad things to others.

It's that is, the main problem is low self-esteem. And all you have to do is to put people on the right path of self-improvement and you will advance society.

And so the question is, do we fix ourselves and fix our own issues, issues between people, by a higher view of ourself or through a lower view of ourself?

[ 5 : 02 ] Which one's right? One Corinthians 3 and into 4 gives us an approach to the way of seeing ourselves that is absolutely different than the traditional way or the contemporary way.

The way that we see ourselves in 1 Corinthians is to forget ourselves. Real enduring change can come about when we actually forget about ourselves.

So maybe 2023 is the year to find true freedom in your life by forgetting about yourself, which is why, for me, it's number one on my New Year's resolutions.

So if you're someone who likes to take notes, I've got three points. The fragile ego, the transformed ego, and how to get a transformed ego. The fragile ego.

The Corinthian church, if you read earlier in 1 Corinthians 3, you'd see that it's a church that's filled with all these divisions. Paul shows that the real core issue of those divisions is pride and boasting.

[ 6 : 13 ] In chapter 3, verse 6, he urges them not to take pride in one person over against another. They're flocking to certain leaders and taking their sense of worth attached to a particular leader.

The word Paul uses here for pride in chapter 3, verse 6 is in fact an unusual word. The word literally means to be overinflated.

It means to be swollen. Something that is beyond its proper size. It's swollen, inflamed, it's ready to burst.

That's the condition, it says, of the natural human ego. And the ego is therefore empty.

The ego that is puffed up and overinflated is just a bunch of gas. It's nothing at its centre.

[ 7 : 21 ] The ego is empty. The ego that is puffed up has nothing at its centre. Spiritual pride is the illusion that we are competent to run our lives by ourselves.

Achieve our own sense of self-worth. To find a purpose big enough to give us meaning in life without God.

Not only is it not possible, but the overinflated ego is also painful. We do not notice our body until something goes wrong with it.

That's the nature of it. It'd be pretty rare for us to think. Like, I've never actually gone at the end of it. My goodness, my elbow is working really well today.

Just, well done. You know, it's not until something's wrong with the elbow that you notice it's either not working or it's now working brilliantly.

[ 8 : 33 ] The ego often hurts because of something unbelievably wrong with it. It is always making us think about how we look and how we're treated.

It is very hard to get through a whole day without feeling snubbed, without feeling ignored, without feeling stupid, without getting down on ourselves in some way or another.

That's because there's something unbelievably wrong with our sense of self. And therefore the ego is incredibly busy trying to feel the emptiness, to deal with the pain.

It's busy comparing and boasting. In verse 6, there is no full stop after the word pride.

It says, then you will not take pride in one person over against another. And that is the very essence of the fragile ego. It tries to feel its emptiness, to deal with its pain by comparing itself to other people.

[ 9 : 52 ] In his chapter on pride, in his classic book, Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis points out that pride, by its very nature, is competitive.

He writes, pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person.

It's competitive. In other words, we're only proud of being more successful, more intelligent, and more good looking than the next person.

That's his point. When we're in the presence of someone who is in fact more successful, more intelligent, more good looking, then we are, then what we have there is a loser sense of the pleasure of what we had.

It then becomes a problem with us. And so we tend not to gravitate towards people who make us feel bad. We gravitate towards people who make us feel better about ourselves, because we are by nature competitive.

[ 11 : 01 ] The hollow ego is competitive. It's fragile. Anything that is overinflated is always in imminent danger of being deflated.

Empty, painful, busy, and fragile. The normal state of the human self without God. And Paul wants the Corinthian church here, and us, to know the difference that Jesus Christ makes.

And how the Christian gospel has transformed things for him, and how it can be for us too. Which is my second point, the transformed ego. In verses three and four, Paul shows them how the Christian gospel has transformed his sense of self-worth.

He says, he writes there, I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear. But that does not make me innocent.

It is the Lord who judges me. Now the word translated judge here, it has the same meaning as the word verdict. It's referring to that, if you like, elusive stamp of approval that we all crave.

[ 12 : 25 ] We all crave. Some of us have grown up in families where we've never had that elusive stamp of approval. Always striving, always seeking to fill the empty ego.

And what says here, Paul's saying his self-worth is not tied to that. He's not tied to the Corinthians' evaluation of him. Now most parents would say to their child at some point, especially when they're having problems with other kids, you know, in the schoolyard or something like that, we would normally say things like, it doesn't matter what your friends think of you.

It doesn't matter what other people say about you. Any parent ever heard them repeat those words? It doesn't matter what other people think about you. In our modern world, there seems to be only one way of dealing with low self-esteem.

And that is fix it with high self-esteem. We tell someone that they need to see that they are a great person. They need to see how wonderful they are.

And Paul's approach here is very different. He cares very little if he is judged by the Corinthians, but he doesn't turn that around and go, well, I think really well of myself.

[ 13 : 51 ] So it doesn't matter what you say about me. He says, I don't care what you think about me, but I don't care what I think about me either. I don't even judge myself.

It's as if he says, I don't care what you think and I don't care what I think. Look carefully what he says in verse four. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

Now, I'm pretty sure that Paul would not say, or that he would say, it's a very significant trap to set your own standard, your own bar of standards.

You know, the way you can feel better about yourself is to set your standards so low that you will meet it every time. We feel rotten because we often can't live up to other people's standards, and so the answer is to boost our self-esteem by living up to our own standards, and we just keep dropping them.

That can't deliver either. We cannot keep our own standards. Did you know a little bit of a tip for you who do set New Year's resolutions?

[ 15 : 07 ] Only 8% of people will follow through with their self-improving New Year's resolutions. 8%. 92% will break those resolutions, will give up on those resolutions by the end of January.

So what's the answer? Set less resolutions? Set really low resolutions. That makes us feel terrible because we realise that we're the type of person who just constantly lowers the bar.

Every time we break our standards, we just lower them. Boosting our self-esteem by trying to live up to our own standards is a trap. And Paul here does not look to the Corinthians for the verdict that he's a somebody, but he also doesn't look to himself to get the verdict that he's a somebody.

Now, he's now moving into a territory that very, very few people know anything about. And this is the Apostle Paul, to this day, still rated in the top five most influential people in human history, to this day.

And this is what he writes in 1 Timothy 1, verse 15. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

[ 16 : 46 ] Not that I was the worst, but of whom I am the worst. We are simply not used to someone who is that incredibly confident, volunteering that sort of opinion about themselves.

Someone who is totally honest and aware of all sorts of moral flaws, and yet at the same time has incredible poise and confidence.

A man who literally changed the course of human history. A man who Western civilization is built on. When he says that he does not let the Corinthians judge him, nor will he judge himself, he is saying that he knows about his deep failures, but he does not connect those deep failures to his identity, to his sense of self.

He does not see his sin and let it destroy his sense of self. Nor does he look at his accomplishments and congratulate himself.

He sees all kinds of sin in himself and all kinds of accomplishments, and yet he refuses to connect any of those things to his sense of self.

[ 18 : 18 ] Paul is saying here that his ego is not puffed up, it's filled up. It's like he's reached a place where his ego draws no more attention to itself.

When he does something wrong or something good, it's not connected to him anymore. C.S. Lewis again in Mere Christianity makes a brilliant observation right at the very end of his chapter on pride.

If we were to meet a truly humble person, we would never come away from meeting them thinking that they were actually humble.

They would not be always telling us that they were a nobody because a person who keeps saying that they're a nobody who's got low self-esteem is actually a self-obsessed person.

The thing we would remember about meeting a truly humble person is how much they seem to be totally interested in you, in us. And how happy and at peace they were whatever the circumstances are in life.

[ 19 : 45 ] The essence of a transformed ego is not thinking more of oneself or thinking less of oneself. It's thinking of oneself less.

It's the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It's not a high self-esteem. It's not a low self-esteem. It's not even about self-esteem.

A truly humble person is not a self-hating person or a self-loving person. They are a self-forgetful person. For example, the self-forgetful person would never be devastated by criticism because they don't put too much value in other people's opinions.

The fragile ego is either devastated by criticism or they're not devastated by criticism because they do not listen to criticism. They won't accept criticism.

The person who's a self-forgetful person is the complete opposite. When someone whose ego is filled up gets criticised, they're not devastated, they listen to it and they see it as an opportunity to change.

[ 21 : 16 ] Wouldn't you want 2023 to be like that for yourself? Wouldn't you want to be a person who does, who neither needs honour nor afraid of it when you receive it?

Someone who does not lust for recognition nor, on the other hand, frighten to death of it. Don't you want to be the kind of person who does not admire what they see in the mirror but not cringe by what they see in the mirror?

Don't you want to be the kind of person who in your imaginary life doesn't sit around daydreaming about successes that gives you an edge over others? Or perhaps you tend to beat yourself up to be tormented by the regrets of your life?

Wouldn't you like to be free of all of those things? Wouldn't you like to be the athlete who wins the bronze medal and yet is thrilled to celebrate with the gold medal winner?

Because you've got to be there to experience their brilliance. This is the possibility for you and for me if we keep on going where Paul is going here.

[ 22 : 45 ] We can start to enjoy things that are in fact not about me. We can actually enjoy things for what they are or people for who they are.

They are not just there to fill up my emptiness or your emptiness. That's the transformed ego. That's the life, the blessed life of self-forgetfulness.

And our society has got no categories for this kind of life. Don't know where to put this kind of life. So how do we get this transformed ego?

Paul tells us he got to this place. He says, my conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent. The word translated innocent comes from the word justify. He's saying that even if his conscience is clear, that does not justify him.

What Paul is looking for is a verdict, the ultimate verdict that he is important, that he is valuable. We look for that ultimate verdict every single day of our life in all kinds of situations and people around us.

[ 24 : 02 ] The problem with self-esteem, whether it's high or whether it's low, is that every single day we are on trial. Every single day you're on trial.

There is this prosecution and there is defense sitting on either shoulder. Everything we do is providing evidence for the prosecution or evidence for the defense.

And some days we feel like we're winning the trial and other days we feel like we're losing the trial. And Paul says for him the trial is over. It's done. He is out of the courtroom because the ultimate verdict has come in for him.

He knows that the Corinthians can't justify him and he knows that he can't justify himself. He says it is the Lord who judges him. What Paul is saying here, it is only, only in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that Paul and us get the final verdict.

And crucially, he says, it comes before any performance on our behalf. Most people get their self-image from being a good person and hope that eventually they will get a verdict that confirms that they are a good person.

[ 25 : 31 ] Performance leads to a verdict, in other words. All the great religions and philosophies of this world work on that principle. Performance leads to the verdict.

It is only in the Christian faith, only in the Christian faith, does the verdict lead to performance. In Christianity, the moment we believe, God says, you are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.

Only in Christianity do you get the praise of the praiseworthy before anything that you've done. And in spite of all the things that you have done that you shouldn't have done.

or Romans 8 verse 1 which says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The moment you trust in Jesus Christ, God credits Jesus' perfect performance to you as if it was your own.

And he adopts us into his family. The verdict is in. And now we perform on that basis. because he loves us and he accepts us.

[ 26 : 50 ] We don't have to do things that just build up our reputation. We are free now to do things for the joy of them, simply for the joy of them. Free to help other people in order to help them, not because it makes us feel better about ourselves, not because it's filling up our emptiness and building up our ego.

In Christianity, Jesus Christ went on trial instead. Jesus went into the courtroom on our behalf. He faced the trial that should be ours so that we don't have to face that trial ever.

He took the condemnation that we deserve for our lack of performing to God's standards of perfection. perfection. And we just simply need to ask God to accept us on the basis of Jesus.

That's it. And when we do, the only person whose opinion actually matters looks at us and he finds in us a person more valuable than all the jewels of the earth.

Now, perhaps that's brand new for some of you here today. Don't let this moment pass you at the beginning of 2023. This is fundamentally revolutionary, as it has been for millions of people for centuries.

[ 28 : 21 ] Keep looking, keep digging, keep asking questions. There's a lot to discover. I've covered a lot of ground in a very short space of time. There are lots of pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to put together.

But keep looking, keep searching, keep exploring the Christian faith. Understand the whole picture. Make it, can I encourage you to make it of central importance in 2023.

But maybe you're in a different position. maybe you've already trusted in Jesus, maybe done so for many, many years. But every single day you find yourself being sucked back into that courtroom.

Keep getting sucked back into it. And all I can tell you is that you must relive the gospel every single day.

We must live the gospel every single, every moment we pray, every time we gather as a church, every time we feel rejected. Forgetting self-remembering the gospel of Jesus Christ is the key to treasuring Jesus and embracing diversity and discomfort for us as a church.

[ 29 : 35 ] It's the key to letting go and finding true and enduring rest. We have to relive the gospel in every single experience of life.

life. We need to relive the Christian gospel on the spot and ask ourselves, am I putting myself back into the courtroom here?

Am I turning this around to be about me again? Like Paul, we can actually live day by day saying, I don't care about what you think. I don't even care what I think.

only care what the Lord thinks. And he's the one who has said, you put your trust in Jesus, you are my much loved child.

The verdict is in. So embrace Jesus and all of his work more and more each day this year.

[ 30 : 34 ] Put self-forgetfulness at the top of your new year's resolutions and pray for the help to remember Jesus moment by moment, to preach the gospel to yourself moment by moment and what he has achieved for you.