

2017 The year to forget ... yourself

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[0 : 0 0] morning. It's good to be in church with you this morning. I'm not sure if you're one of those people who sets New Year's resolutions, but the top 10 New Year's resolutions for 2017 are improve fitness, eat better, quit smoking, quit drinking, learn something new, travel more, volunteer, meet someone that is like a partner, sleep more, and get out of debt.

And as of this morning, a New Year's resolution for me is to check with Sam what he's wearing for church on Sunday. Couple dressing is not appropriate, in my opinion, at any time, let alone if it's one of your work colleagues. Another goal for me for the next couple of years is in fact to run the city to surf before I turn 50 and to do it in personal best time.

Given that I've never run it before, I should be able to hit the second goal, providing I get the first goal. And so far it's going okay. I've been seeing a physio, an exercise physiologist, and a masseur to deal with the injuries that I've already created in my body.

I was doing a little bit of reading on New Year's resolutions, and one of the articles that I read said this, the New Year is when you think about the past and most importantly, reflect on how you can improve yourself for the upcoming year. Self-improvement, or at least the desire for it, is a goal shared by all Australians, which is why so many of us make New Year's resolutions in the first place. Unfortunately, only a fraction of us keep to our resolution, which experts estimate only about 8% commit to the very end. 8%. There is something in all of us that loves this idea of a fresh start, improve things that we don't like about ourselves. And I'm certainly committed to those things myself. I want to change. I want to grow. I cannot compute with an individual who's settled and comfortable. I want to see change and transformation. I think that that is, in fact, one of the key elements about the journey of the Christian life. Even as we've sung this morning, oh, for a closer walk with my God. That is, I desire to change from where I am at the moment.

What is intriguing about today's passage is that it gives us a way of seeing ourselves and how we change that is absolutely, totally different than traditional cultures or even contemporary Western culture. See, up until the 20th century, traditional cultures believed that a too high a view of yourself was the main reason that you had personal problems and the reason why there was so much evil between people. The Greek word for it was hubris or is hubris. It's an excessive pride. It's an arrogance.

[3 : 1 1] It's an overconfidence of yourself. And so in our modern culture, we have developed a total opposite cultural consensus. Our belief today, which is deeply embedded into everything in our culture, is that people feel bad about themselves and do bad things to other people because of low self-esteem, not high self-esteem. Low self-esteem is the reason why there is drug addiction and domestic violence and our jails are full and so on and so forth. It's an attractive theory because you don't have to make any form of moral judgment on another individual in order to deal, or society, in order to deal with society's problems. All you have to do is put people on a path of self-improvement. That's how you fix society's problems, which is why our prison system aren't called prison system. It's called a corrective services. So in the most part, we believe that we can correct people. There's a bunch we don't think we can correct and so they never get released, but some others we think we believe that we can correct people, put them on a path of self-improvement. On the other hand, the way you dealt with these problems in traditional society is that you would clamp down on people, you'd convict them and call them really bad, nasty people. You'd make a judgment on them. And so do we fix our issues and the ones that we have between people and the ones we have between nations by everyone having a higher view of themselves or everyone having a lower view of themselves? That is, by high self-esteem or low self-esteem?

1 Corinthians gives us an approach to the way of seeing ourselves that is absolutely different than both the traditional and the contemporary way. A way to see ourselves in 1 Corinthians is, in fact, to

forget ourselves, which is why I've titled this sermon, 2017, The Year to Forget Yourself.

It's, I've got the title of it from Tim Keller's little book, which is where I get most of my ideas from in this book, The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness. The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness. So maybe 2017 would be the year to find true freedom, freedom by forgetting yourself. The Corinthian church was full of divisions. Different people had connections with different prominent leaders. One person was mentored and disciplined by the apostle Paul. Another was mentored and disciplined by another leader in the church, like Apollos, for instance. And these relationships became the basis of power plays between groups within the church. Paul shows that the real core issue is pride.

It's boasting. Chapter 3, verse 21 starts off with, no more boasting. That's the very first verse that Sam read. And then in chapter 4, verse 7, it says, why do you boast? And in chapter 3, verse 6, he urges them not to take pride in one man over against another. Verse 6 gives us a glimpse into the natural condition of the human ego. The word Paul uses here for pride is an unusual word.

It's not hubris. The word literally means to be overinflated, to be swollen, to be beyond its proper size. And so what he does in using this word, he invokes a painful image of an organ in the human body that is bloated because so much air has been pumped into it. It's swollen, it's inflamed, and it's ready to burst.

[7 : 27] That is the natural human condition. And he uses that word about seven times in the New Testament to refer to the natural human condition.

The ego is empty. It's full of air. The ego is puffed up and overinflated and there's nothing in the middle of it.

So spiritual pride is the illusion that we are competent to run our own lives, to achieve our own sense of self-worth, and to find a purpose that's big enough to give us meaning in life without God. And it can't do it. And so the ego is painful. We do not notice our body. I don't know if you've noticed this, but you don't notice your body until there's something wrong with it.

I never knew that I had a hip flex until it started to play up and started to cost me money to fix. It would be pretty rare for us to think how, you know, I walked down into Chatswood yesterday, and I was walking down there. I wasn't thinking how brilliantly my elbows are working today.

[8 : 42] There's just no problems there at all. I didn't even think about my elbows. Until, unless of course there was something previously wrong with my elbows, or something became a problem with my elbows.

Parts of our body draw attention to themselves if there is something wrong with them. And the ego often hurts because there is something unbelievably wrong with our ego.

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, ignored, feeling stupid, getting down on ourselves, thinking about how someone else has done it to us in the past.

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

It's busy comparing and boasting. There's no full stop. In verse 6, there's no full stop after the word pride. It says, And that's the very essence of the human ego.

[10 : 00] It tries to feel its emptiness, to deal with its pain by comparing itself with other people. In his chapter on pride in mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis points out that pride is by its nature competitive.

Pride, he says, 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 are only proud of being more successful, more intelligent, more good-looking than the person that we're hanging with, which is why we tend to hang with people who make us feel good.

In other words, that means they're people who are lower than us. When we are in the presence of someone who is more successful, more intelligent, more good-looking, then we lose all pleasure in what we had.

That's because we really had no pleasure in it at all. We were proud of it. We were proud of it. Which means the ego is always fragile.

[11 : 16] It's like a balloon full of air, ready to pop at any moment. Anything that's over-inflated is in imminent danger of being deflated. Painful, empty, busy, fragile.

That's the normal state of the human self. Paul wants the Corinthian church and us gathered here today to know the difference that Jesus makes and how the Christian gospel transformed things for him and how they could do it for us too.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul shows them how the Christian gospel has transformed his sense of self-worth. He says, The word translated judged here is the same meaning as the word verdict. It's referring to that elusive stamp of approval that we all crave. We all crave that elusive stamp of approval.

And Paul does not look to the Corinthians or to any human court for the verdict that he is a somebody. It's as if he says here, I don't care what you think.

[12:42] I don't care what anyone thinks. Paul's self-worth, his identity is not tied up with other people's evaluation of him.

Now that doesn't seem terribly unusual, does it? Really. Most parents would say to their child at some point, especially when that child is having problems with other kids or other people, we would say to them, It doesn't matter what your friends think of you.

You hear yourself saying that, parents? It doesn't matter what your friends think of you. In our modern world, there seems to be only one answer for the issue of low self-esteem, and that is fix it with high self-esteem.

We tell someone that they need to see that they're a great person. We need to help them to see that they are wonderful, who they are.

We tell them that they need to set their own standards and accomplish their own standards and then make their own evaluation of themselves. Paul's approach could not be more radically different.

[13:57] He cares very little if he's judged by the Corinthians or any human court, but he says he will not even judge himself. It's as if he's saying, I don't care what your opinion of me is, but then again, I don't care what my opinion of me is.

That's radically different. I have a low opinion of your opinion of me, and I have a low opinion of my opinion of me.

I don't care what I think either. He says that about his own opinion, even though he declares himself in this passage of having a clear conscience.

Look at verse 4. He says, My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. He knows that even if he does have a clear conscience, that doesn't necessarily mean he's innocent.

You know, Hitler may well have had a clear conscience. It doesn't make him innocent. And I'm pretty confident that Paul would say that it is a trap for us as we do today in the modern Western society set your own standards.

[15:14] Pretty sure Paul would say that's a trap. That's not the answer. You see, we feel rotten when we can't meet our parents' expectations or our friends' expectations. We feel rotten when we can't meet society's expectations.

And so the answer in the individualistic West is to boost your self-esteem by setting your own standards. And it can't deliver either. We can't keep it around.

Only 8% of people follow through with their new year's resolutions. So maybe the answer then is to set incredibly low standards.

And then we feel rotten because we know we're someone who's set incredibly low standards.

Boosting our self-esteem by trying to live up to our own standards or someone else's standards is in fact a trap.

But Paul does not look to the Corinthians for the verdict that he is a somebody but he also does not get it from himself. And so now we start to discover where Paul finds that sense of self and he moves into territory that is...

[16:25] we frankly don't know anything about. Paul was a man of incredible stature. I'd be happy to argue that he is one of the most influential people in history.

Given that he wrote one third of the New Testament and something like two billion people in this world say that they're followers of Jesus. I'd make that make Paul pretty influential. And yet in 1 Timothy he says Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

Not I was the worst of whom I am the worst. We're not used to someone who has incredible poise and confidence volunteering to give us that kind of an opinion of themselves.

Someone who is totally honest and aware of all sorts of moral flaws and yet who has incredible poise and confidence. When he says that he does not let the Corinthians judge him nor does he judge himself what he's saying there he says that he knows about his sins he knows about his flaws he knows about his failures but he does not connect those things to his sense of worth and identity and self.

He does not see sin and let it destroy his sense of self. Neither does he see an accomplishment and congratulate himself.

[18:03] He sees all kinds of sins in himself and all kinds of accomplishments in himself but he refuses to connect those to who he is his identity his sense of worth.

Worth. And what Paul is saying here is something that's terribly astounding. He's saying that his ego is not puffed up it is filled up.

Not puffed up it's filled up. It's like he has reached a place where his ego draws no more attention to itself than any other part of his body.

It's not constantly hurting. When he does something wrong or something good he does not connect it to his sense of worth. C.S. Lewis in *Me Christianity* makes a brilliant observation about gospel humility at the very end of his chapter on pride.

He says if we were to meet a truly humble person we would never come away from that meeting thinking that they were humble. They would not be telling us about that they were a nobody a humble person would not be telling us that they were a nobody because a person who keeps saying that they were a nobody is a self-obsessed person.

[19:30] The person with low self-esteem is just as self-obsessed as a person with high self-esteem. The thing that we would remember for that meeting Lewis says is how much they seem to be totally interested in us and how happy and at peace they are with themselves.

You see the essence of Christian humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself it's thinking of myself less.

Thinking of myself less. It means I stop connecting every experience and every conversation and every interaction with another individual to me. It's somehow a reflection on me.

It's the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It's the ego that's not puffed up it's the ego which is filled up. It's not high self-esteem it's not low self-esteem it's not even about self-esteem.

A truly gospel humble person is not a self-hating person nor a self-loving person they are a self-forgetful person.

[20:51] An example of what this might look like for instance the self-forgetful person would never be devastated by criticism. A person who's devastated by criticism is putting too much value on someone else's opinion.

Our society tells the person who is thin-skinned and devastated by criticism to deal with it by saying to themselves who cares what other people think? People are either devastated by criticism on the one hand or they are not devastated by criticism because they do not listen to it which is the opposite problem.

They will not listen to it or learn from it because they don't care what other people think. In other words, our only solution to low self-esteem is pride and arrogance. The person who is self-forgetful is the complete opposite.

When someone whose ego is filled up gets criticized, they're not devastated. They can hear it.

They can see it as an opportunity to change. As we launch into 2017, don't you want to be like that? Wouldn't you want to be a person who does not need honor, nor be afraid of honor?

[22:17] Don't you want to be a person who does not last for recognition, nor on the other hand to be frightened to death of recognition? Don't you want to be a kind of person who does not admire what they see in the mirror, but also doesn't cringe at what they see in the mirror?

Wouldn't you like to be the type of person who in your imaginary life does not sit around daydreaming about the successes that would give them the edge over other people?

If only I did this, I could finally beat my brother. Or perhaps you tend to beat yourself up and to be tormented by regrets.

wouldn't you like to be free from that? Wouldn't you like to be the athlete who wins the bronze and he's so thrilled to celebrate the gold medal winner because you just happen to be there when they did this brilliant run and you experienced it?

Don't you want to be free to do that? This is a possibility for you and for me if we keep on going where Paul is going here.

[23 : 31] we can start to enjoy things that are not about me. That is my work's not about me, my sport's not about me, my siblings are not about me, my friendships are not about me.

You can actually enjoy things for what they are. That is they don't exist to fill my ego, to puff up my ego.

Don't you want to be like that? this is gospel humility because it's the place of blessed self forgetfulness and peace and rest.

Our society doesn't know what category to put this stuff in. Simply just thinking of myself less. It's the key to people like us getting on and solving differences and treating each other as we ought to be treating each other.

So Paul tells us how he got to this place of self forgetfulness. He says my conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent.

[24 : 40] The word translated innocent comes from the word justify. It's the same word he uses right throughout Romans, right throughout Galatians.

Here Paul is saying that even if his conscience is clear, it does not justify him, it does not give him that stamp of approval. What Paul is looking for is what we are all looking for and that is that ultimate verdict.

That ultimate verdict that we are important, that we are valuable. We look for that ultimate verdict every day in all kinds of situations with everyone around us.

every single day, every single day, every single day, every day, we put ourselves in the courtroom, so to speak.

Notice what Paul says, he says, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court in verse three. And I think he's speaking metaphorically there, I don't think he's actually in a courtroom on trial.

[25 : 44] However, the problem of self-esteem, whether it's high or low, is that every single day you're on trial. There's the prosecution, there's the defense.

Everything we do is providing evidence for the prosecution or the defense. Some days we feel like we're winning the trial, some days we feel like we're losing it, and Paul says, for me, the trial's over. He's out of the courtroom because the ultimate verdict is in, and he knows that the Corinthian church can't justify him. He knows that he cannot justify himself. He says, it's the Lord who judges him.

It is only God's opinion that counts. It's only in the gospel of the Lord Jesus that Paul and us get the final verdict, the ultimate verdict that we all crave for.

And crucially, it comes, the final ultimate verdict comes before the performance. Most get their self-image from being a good person and hope that eventually they will get a verdict that confirms that they're a good person.

[27 : 05] That is, my performance leads to the ultimate verdict. verdict. All the great religions and philosophy of the world work like that. Performance leads to the verdict.

Follow this set of rules, follow this guidance, this wisdom, and you'll get maybe the verdict that you're looking for. Every day you're in the courtroom hoping the verdict swings your way.

In Christianity the verdict leads to performance. In Christianity the moment we believe that God says, this is my son in whom I am well pleased.

Or Romans 8.1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The moment we trust in Jesus God credits Jesus' perfect performance to us as if it was our perfect performance.

And he adopts us into his family. We get the ultimate verdict of approval. God can say to us just as he once said to Jesus you are my son whom I love with you I am well pleased.

[28 : 13] The verdict is in. And now we perform on the basis of that verdict. Because he loves us and accepts us we don't have to do things that build up my reputation.

Free now to do things for the joy of doing them. Free to actually help people in order to help people. And to do it with a sense of joy.

Not because it makes me feel better about myself. Not because I've got a New Year's resolution to volunteer. And self-improve. Not so that I can fill up the emptiness of a consumeristic culture.

In Christianity Jesus Christ went on trial instead of us. Jesus went to the courtroom. It was an unjust trial. It was a kangaroo court as we say in Australia but he did not complain.

He faced the trial that should be ours so that we do not have to face that trial anymore. He took the condemnation that we deserve for our lack of performance to give us his perfect performance.

[29 : 25] performance. And we simply need to ask God to accept us because of what Jesus has done. And when you do, the only person whose opinion counts looks at us and he sees us as being more valuable, of much more worth than all the jewels of the world.

Now, perhaps for those of you who are here today, some of you, this is totally new. Can I say don't let this pass you by?

This is revolutionary. 2017, make it the year to forget yourself and to embrace Jesus. Set us a New Year's resolution. Keep digging, keep looking, keep asking questions. There is so much to discover. I've had maybe 30 minutes on this so far and I have covered a whole bunch of ground in a really short space of time. There are lots of pieces of the jigsaws to put together.

Why did Jesus have to die? Why did he rise from the dead? Is he really the son of God? Keep looking until you understand the whole picture and you find this place of peace and rest in him.

[30 : 38] Make this a matter of central importance this year. But maybe you're in a different position. Maybe you trust in Jesus. You might have been trusting in Jesus for so many years but every day you're finding yourself just sucked back again and again and again into that courtroom.

You do not feel that you're living like Paul says here. You're getting sucked back in and all I can say is that you have to relive the gospel every day.

you have to relive the gospel every time you pray, every time you come to church and interact with someone else, every time you feel rejected, every time someone changes something that you had a hand in building or creating, forgetting self and remembering the gospel is the key to treasuring Jesus.

It's the key for us as a church to embracing diversity and discomfort as a church. It's the key to letting go and finding rest. We have to relive the gospel in the supermarket.

We have to relive the gospel when we're doing the dishes. We have to relive the gospel when we're raising our kids. We have to relive the gospel in our marriages. Everything. Everything.

[32 : 03] Asking myself, am I constantly being drawn back into the courtroom? Where's my identity? Where's my security? Where's my sense of worth? And like Paul, we can say, I don't care what you think.

I don't care what I think. I only care what the Lord thinks. And he's the one who says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and you are my beloved child.

With you, I am well pleased. Embrace Jesus and all his work more each day this year.

Make it the year to forget self. Put self-forgetfulness to the top of your New Year's Eve resolutions, or forget New Year's Eve, just make a New Year's resolution.

And pray for the help to remember Jesus moment by moment and what he's achieved for you. relive the gospel every time you're in the courtroom.

[33 : 07] Amen.