

New Beginnings / COB / 01.01.17

Introduction

- † Those of you who know me well, do I celebrate Valentine's Day? do I celebrate Mother's Day? so do you think I celebrate New Year's Day? I call these "Hallmark Holidays," because I am convinced they exist only to sell cards and candy and such stuff. They mean nothing to me.
 - So do you think I am likely to write a New Year's sermon? Anyone have a bulletin? What is the title of the sermon this week? New Beginnings. That sounds suspiciously like a New Year's Day sermon.
 - Either way, my assertion today is that Jesus offers us new beginnings.

New Spiritual Life

- † We talked last week about how even in the womb we have both corruption and guilt. Because of this, we are born spiritually dead in the sense that we are not intimately connected to God, the source of spiritual life. But Jesus offers us a new beginning, because he offers us new spiritual life.
 - Let's look at that in Scripture. Turn in your Bible to **Ephesians 2.4-5 NET: But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even though we were dead in transgressions [our sins], made us alive together with Christ— by grace you are saved!**
 - We were spiritually dead. God by grace saved us to be spiritually alive.
- † Were any of you really obviously dead in your transgressions before meeting Christ?
 - We all were, really, but most of us still like to have some denial about it, and it is true that some of us were more obviously spiritually dead because, even compared to our sinful culture – we stood out as grossly sinful.
 - These are the people who give the best testimonies, right? Someone who used to be a drug dealing gang leader or a murderer or a rapist or a child molester, and now goes everywhere preaching Christ and serving others! Jesus by grace offers spiritual life to some of our most obviously spiritually dead people, and this brings glory to God because it is such a miracle!
 - For everyone one of us, this regeneration is an act of grace, it is a gift we do not deserve. And with regeneration to spiritual life, this grace brings the imputed righteousness we discussed the past two weeks, when God accounts us to be as righteous as Christ. Furthermore, this grace brings us forgiveness and mercy instead of our just punishment, reconciliation into a healthy relationship with God, adoption into God's family, separation out of the world for God's purposes, and our redemption, our freedom from the power of sin.

New Power Over Sin

- † Let's talk about that freedom a little. Turn in your Bible to **Romans 6.2b-6 NET: How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we**

too may live a new life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection. We know that our old man [our old way of life] was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

- † Jesus offers us a new beginning because he offers us new power over sin.
- If you feel a need, a compulsion, for alcohol or any other kind of drug, Jesus on the cross set you free! If you struggle with sexual lust, pornography, adultery, or any other sexual problem, Jesus on the cross set you free! If you tend to overeat, overspend, or come late to church, Jesus on the cross set you free! If you are arrogant, manipulative, hyper-critical, hypocritical, or mean, Jesus on the cross set you free!
 - If you have any spiritual or emotional bondage, Jesus on the cross set you free. If you have put your faith in him, you are now spiritually alive, experiencing renewal of your mind and transformation of your character, and you are empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit! You can resist any temptation! And you can be healed of that temptation over time.
- † Who will testify that this is true? Tell me, from what has Jesus set you free?
- Last week, when I was adding lots of soy sauce in my illustration to represent my sin, I mentioned that I used to be quite a liar. It was a sport for me. One time I bragged to my college girlfriend about how good a liar I was. She was sure I could never dupe her. So I waited half an hour. Then I worked the conversation to our parents and mentioned how my father used to manage a McDonalds and so I had this manager's book with all the ingredients and temperatures and such, which was true, and then I sold her on the idea that I knew the secret recipe for Big Mac sauce. You know, two whole beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun; it's the special sauce that makes it so special.
 - She was intrigued. I baited her a little by dismissively saying it mostly was just ketchup and mayonnaise. "So what's the big secret?" she wanted to know. I said, "Well, there's a secret ingredient that gives it a unique special flavor, but it is a little strange. How so? There is nothing wrong with it, but they're afraid the public would stop eating as many Big Macs if they knew what was in it; it just sounds weird." She really wanted to know, so I swore her to secrecy. Then I revealed that the secret ingredient was a secretion from the intestine of a camel. Of course, she told her friends. It was a fun day for me, in my flesh.
 - This week, I was listening to a sermon on line, and the preacher asked what is your driving motivation? Without thinking, I said, "truth, God's truth." The man who used to lie for fun, lie his way into trouble just so he could lie his way back out, who lied so much in some situations, that he could not remember what was the truth anymore, now is driven by a passion for God's truth. Jesus offers us a new beginning because he offers us new power over sin.

Transformed to live for Christ

- † Who you are determines how you will live. Your character determines your lifestyle. So the person driven by truth hates all deception. The person who once lived in the flesh now can live for Christ. Do you believe this is so? Does Jesus offer us a new beginning by offering us a new way of life?
- Turn to **Titus 2.11-14 NET: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and**

godly lives in the present age, as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good.

- † A people who are truly his, godly, eager to do good. Twenty years ago, that was not me; I was living in sin. I was living with my girlfriend. I had the world's attitudes, like take what you can get, look out for number one, pursue a life of leisure and wealth. I had the world's deceptions: that I was somehow a good person despite not living for Christ, that I had cause to be arrogant and vain, that I was smarter than everyone else, that I should always get my way. Jesus set me free from all that.
 - In one shocking moment, he caused me to rethink who I was and how I lived. I prayed to God that I knew I had been living my way, but I now would commit to live his way, to do anything he wanted of me. God moved me out of my entire life situation – housing, job, girlfriend, all gone – into a new situation where I would know my desperation for him and find nurturing from the body of Christ. I began a journey that continues today of allowing Jesus to renew my mind, transform my heart/character, and thus change the way I live.
- † A people who are truly his, godly, eager to do good.
 - Do you think that would involve spending all our time in our comfort zone or taking risks to serve in new ways? Do you think we would want a church that catered to our likes and desires or we would want a church that pushed us to live out the commands of Christ?
 - Andrew this year left his comfort zone way behind to travel to Bolivia for an international missions trip involving little children and public performances of music and drama. He already was serving almost every week by running the visuals, recording the service, and editing the sermon for the web. Now Andrew might take a bigger role in missions, as well as in our communications and social networking. On Christmas Day, he told me he was asking for a regular night off from work, so he could get involved in one of our small groups to accelerate his growth and equipping while serving his others in love. Jesus offers us a new beginning by offering us the chance to live for him.

New Chances in Life

- † That is all good spiritual renewal. What about the physical realm, our day to day life situation? Does Jesus offer us new chances in life?
 - Sometimes. Sometimes he does, and sometimes we have to settle for the spiritual blessings. The murderer who is convicted might be preaching Christ and communing with Christ in prison for the rest of his life. My friend who had a drunken accident is living out his new life with Christ in a wheelchair. Sometimes we have made awful mistakes that haunt us or affect our lives even though we have forgiveness.
- † But lots of times, yes, Jesus offers us a new beginning with a new chance in life.
 - Sometimes this is just a matter of taking the next step of growth: the eighteen year old who forges his/her own path in college or the workplace; the person who takes a better job at a different company; the disciples who shifted from following John the Baptist to following Jesus.
 - Sometimes this is the realization that even after sad events, Jesus offers a new beginning. Some of you have had to recover from divorce or widowhood; like LeeAnn, many of us have lost jobs;

whatever happens to us, Jesus offers us a new chance at life if we continue walking with him by faith and obedience.

- So whether I had to move from one bank job to another or I gave up banking entirely to pursue ministry, Jesus offers us new beginnings with new chances in life.

† Turn to the book of Ruth. Three women lost their husbands. One woman abandoned God altogether to return to her previous culture.

- Let's look at another, Naomi's response, in **Ruth 1.20 NET: But she replied to them, "Don't call me 'Naomi'! Call me 'Mara' [Mara means "bitter"] because the Sovereign One has treated me very harshly."** In the book of Ruth, Naomi lives on the bottom line, in the flesh. So tragedy left her bitter and forlorn.
- What about the third woman, Ruth? Ruth chose to cling to God. And Ruth had learned God's Word, and chose to live on the top line, by faith and obedience. So she chose to trust God, work hard, and use God's Word to find solutions to their problems. In the end, God gave her a godly man for a husband, and gave her a son who would become the grandfather of King David.
- Whether you need to develop your life or to turn your life around, Jesus offers a new beginning with a new chance at life.

New Beginnings for the Church

† Can a church enjoy a new beginning? Oh sure. Look at the Corinthians. In Paul's letters there, he was very critical of just about everything they were doing. He even said he was not going to go see them, because it would be too painful for them if he had to scold them in person! But he never gave up hope that they could change and start to get things right.

† Can a church enjoy a new beginning? I thought so forty-two months ago, when I came here.

- One thing I sensed from talking with the search committee and elders before I came was that the church was in a bit of a crisis mode. The church had lost more than half of its people, including half of its leadership. So the focus at that point was to keep the church functioning. I hoped we could get ourselves unified, healthy, and focused again on Christ's mission.
- When I came up to visit the first time with just the elders, the search committee, and their spouses, I pitched the concept of making this a missional church through multiplying discipleship. In other words, we would focus the church on fulfilling the gospel mission, the Great Commission. We would cast vision and reshape the church, edifying, encouraging, exhorting [if necessary] everyone in the church to grow into mature multiplying disciples, who were eager to share the good news with those outside the church, to ensure they themselves were growing, and to teach each other inside the church.
- Mark called me later to say that everyone agreed this was a biblical vision for the church, but they were not ready themselves to commit to it. Maybe I should have stayed in Florida, but I thought, if I came here and preached God's Word, and was passionate and enthusiastic and committed, then one by one I would win you over. And you know, that is what is happening! We had three successful purpose-driven small groups this year, more people are expressing interest all the time, and we now have five people getting mentored to equip them for life and ministry, and I am only mentoring two of them, so we have multiplication starting to happen right here in our church.

- Now this process takes a long time to bear fruit; it has taken forty-two months just to get started, really. But this is the long-term answer to many of our problems. The way you build spiritual leaders, the way you sustainably grow your church, the way you develop unity is through this missional, multiplying, approach.
 - I know some of you are uncomfortable with this. You are welcome here anyway. But you might start to grow dissatisfied, because you realize you are missing out and you resent that you need to change to engage and grow here. When you sense that dissatisfaction, I hope you will trust this is God's vision for the church, and engage with us, rather than leave or complain.
- † Another problem we had all those months ago was that we were disorganized. Many people were not serving anymore; we had to pay people to mow the lawn and clean the church, because nobody would volunteer to do it.
- Some who were serving with good hearts were doing their own thing, without any coordination with the church as a whole or accountability to the elders. We didn't have plan back then for continuously developing the ministry skills of our teachers or small group leaders. We could not even articulate why we were doing some of the things we were doing.
 - I believed that we could build a team here, one that would play to our diverse strengths and have each other's backs regarding our weaknesses, a team of people who would communicate, coordinate, and cooperate, even though it might seem inconvenient, because the cause of Christ is so important. And we would offer ongoing coaching and training for everyone who would teach or lead, so they would continue to grow and become even more effective, and thus they would find their ministry to be more fruitful and fulfilling. It's a nice vision.
 - I still think this is possible. We are not there yet, but we have made progress. Most of our regulars are serving in at least one ministry of the church, so we have teams for lawn care and cleaning. About half of us are teaching in some capacity every month, so we have rotations to teach in the nursery and the children's classroom, we have teachers for the adults and youth on Sundays, and we have teams teaching weekly in CSB and GEMS.
 - We are trying to offer periodic training. Where this has worked best has been in small groups and mentoring contexts. For example, Dan, Matt, Dave, and I spent a couple of months talking about how to teach children and teenagers more effectively, with live experimentation one Sunday and during VBS, and I think all four of us improved because of this experience.
- † Now here is the hang up for some of us: growth, improvement, new beginnings require change, and that sometimes is hard even if it is desired.
- This church has a fifty-three year heritage. There is much that is good in that heritage, but how much is so essential we should cling to it? We are committed to teaching God's Word accurately and holding up our evangelical and dispensational beliefs. We are committed to missions and evangelism. These things are a good heritage and we should cling to them.
 - But just about everything else should be on the table for discussion about how we could be more fruitful for Christ. If we need to change our music or our rug or the way we dress or the way we do small groups, so that we can take people from being dead in their trespasses to being multiplying disciples of Christ, then we should make those changes, even if it makes us uncomfortable, even if we don't want to change.

- † One thing we really need to make all of this work is unity. Unity in our sense of purpose, our biblical vision for the church, the goals we derive from that vision, and the methods we will use to achieve those goals. At the beginning of last year, we had four core meetings to promote this unity.
- This church often has struggled with unity. It has experienced two major church splits because its pastors could not get along with its lay leaders. What happened just before I got here was not the same, but gave the same result, a mass exodus of people from the church.
 - Over the past forty-two months, the elders have encountered resistance sometimes, when we have asked you to buy in to what we are doing and how we want to do it. Again, I would say, we are making progress, because more and more, we are learning to work in teams, with leaders coached by the elders.
 - But this remains a problem. So I propose that we spend some time in the Sunday school hour the next couple of weeks, talking through what the elders prayerfully believe is our plan, and giving the rest of you the opportunity to participate in shaping that plan and to understand and buy into it more fully. Then I think we should meet together the first Sunday of every month, to talk a little about how we relate to each other. It has been a mistake of the elders not to have these discussions before, because we can avoid a lot of misunderstanding and hurt feelings, if we all share expectations of how we are going to work together.
 - I believe in this church, and that Jesus offers churches new beginnings. We started over in large part forty-two months ago when you hired me. I would like to continue building on what we have accomplished in that time, but in some ways we need to start again, to learn together how to do life and ministry together. I hope you will pray about that and choose to engage with us.

New Beginnings for a Pastor

- † Even pastors need new beginnings. Sometimes this involves leaving one ministry for another. There has been a lot of talk about that lately, most of you hoping I will not leave, some of you hoping I will.
- Of interest to me is whether a pastor can experience new beginnings in the same church. I have proposed radically changing my role, shifting to be unpaid and part-time, so I could take care of my daughter. I am willing to remain as senior pastor, guiding our church in its development, while handing off much of the day to day ministry work to an associate pastor; or I am willing to step aside and hire a new senior pastor, myself remaining as a lay elder. Either way, I would be changing a lot about what I do and how I see my role in the church.
 - Also of interest to me is whether a pastor like me can experience new beginnings in how he works. The past forty-two months have been hard on me. I have absorbed some of your pain as your pastor; I have been hurt by some of you; our occasional relationship issues and disunity stress me; I have felt frustrated with God's slow development of each of us and of our church together; and I am stressed because we cannot get everything done we need to get done and we cannot offer everything we would like to offer in ministry. All these struggles are normal for a church, but I have to change how I deal with the emotions they provoke in me.
 - I have talked with two counselors and several pastors in the past two weeks. I am learning more about pastoral burnout and sustaining emotional health. I will heal emotionally, I will make adjustments so I can be more healthy and productive in the long-run, and I will become a better pastor. Those sound suspiciously like New Year's resolutions. That's ok, because I believe Jesus offers us new beginnings.