

FOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Adapted from John R. W. Stott's "Salt & Light" in *Christianity Today*. October 2011, p.p. 38 to 42.

Text: Matthew 5.13 – 16 (in pew Bible p. 958 / in large print Bible p. 1490).

Intro: -Christmas Season is almost over – *as we move into the Feast of Epiphany:*

- events that first revealed Christ's identity to the world / Gentiles.
 - Magi's adoration / Christ's baptism / *first miracle @ wedding of Cana.*

-today I'm blending the themes of Epiphany with New Year's resolutions:

- **illust.:** Resolutions

-too often, Resolutions leave us with a sense of failure and lack of power.

- Alienation was originally a Marxist word used to describe the separation of the worker from the product of his labour.
 - in time the term was broadened to describe the frustration of ordinary people who are excluded from the processes of decision making.
 - do we have any influence / power? *That's the question.*
- Influence can describe a selfish desire for power.
 - but it can also be used in an unselfish way, such as when Christians refuse to knuckle under the status quo.
 - Christians can be determined to influence society for Jesus Christ.
 - are we powerless / is this quest hopeless?

-too often we are pessimistic:

- society is rotten and beyond fixing / *the second coming of Jesus is the only hope.*

-need to remember that people are not rubbish – *made in the image of God.*

- that "likeness / image" has been marred by sin but still has infinite value.
 - Jesus himself said that although you are evil, you are able to do good things and give good gifts to your children (e.g. Luke 11.13).

-today's text is very familiar, teaching us about the influence the Church should have on a non-Christian environment.

- the world is like spoiling meat and the Church is the salt to preserve & enhance – *don't lose your tanginess* (v. 13).
- the world is like a dark night and the Church is like a bright light to reveal & illuminate – *don't hide your brightness* (v. 14).

-need to be fully committed to Jesus by seeking to influence our community.

- not be lazy or shortsighted, unbelieving and disobedient, hiding our light (v. 15).
 - put off sub-Christian alienation and pessimism.
- our **mission** = "a family oriented congregation, that shares Jesus Christ."
- our **goal** = bring people to Jesus so they will "know Him & make Him known."

Take Home Point:

-Jesus' followers should influence the world in ways which glorify our heavenly Father (v. 16).

- in an article by John Stott, "Salt & Light" published in *Christianity Today*, October 2011, he gives 4 resolutions we can make to increase our influence within Saskatoon.
 - in this way we can truly celebrate the Feast of Epiphany and offset sub-Christian alienation and pessimism.

1. PRAYER

-John Stott emphasized that there is power in prayer and this is the first thing we should do to change our community.

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity (1 Timothy 2.1, 2).

-if violence, indecency, oppression and secularism have:

- crowded out peace, modesty, justice and godliness, *a major reason is that the Church is not praying as it should.*

-during our Family Prayer on Sundays and Prayer Time on Wednesdays, as well as in our individual quiet times throughout the week:

- we should bow before God and bring to Him the world and its leaders, and cry to Him to intervene.
- we should be global as well as parochial.
 - John Stott: Do we not share the global concerns of our global God? We should express these concerns in our prayers.
 - seek to reveal Christ to the world *by praying powerfully.*

2. TRUTH

-John Stott continues by examining our belief in the power of the truth of the gospel in evangelism.

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile (Romans 1.16).

-Stott relentlessly states that God's truth is much more powerful than the Devil's lies.

- do you believe that *or are you a pessimist?*
- illust.: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

-we need to Christianly think and speak the truth *in order to influence our community.*

- cannot force people to respect Sunday as a day of rest and corporate worship.
 - don't just quote Bible verses but also draw on arguments that show psychologically and physically, human beings need one day's rest in seven and it is socially good for families to come together on Sundays.
- cannot force people to respect marriage as the only legitimate form of cohabitation.
 - **illust.:** The Case Against Living Together

-God's truth has power, in both its biblical and non-biblical guises.

- **seek to reveal Christ** to the world by creatively speaking the truth.

3. EXAMPLE

-John Stott adds that truth is powerful when it's argued but even more powerful when it's modeled.

- people need not only to understand the argument – *they also need to see the benefits.*

-for example, a Christian family living in a neighborhood or a public housing development can model truth for the whole community:

- parents can demonstrate mutual love & honour, as well as devotion & fulfillment.
- children can powerfully demonstrate a balanced life of security, discipline, & love.
- family can exemplify a home not turned in on itself but turned outward – entertaining strangers, and involvement in the concerns of the community.

-we will all make a difference for good or ill:

- Christians are a marked people and the world is watching.
- God's major way of transforming old society is to implant his new society.
 - our different values, standards, joys, and goals ought to contrast the world's and "glorify our Father in heaven" (v. 16).
 - **seek to reveal Christ** to the world by consistently modeling the truth.

4. GROUP SOLIDARITY

-John Stott concludes by highlighting the power of a dedicated minority.

- **illust.:** Robert Belair

-that was the way of Jesus.

- He began with a small group of 12 dedicated people.
- within a few years Jewish officials were complaining that the Christians were turning the world upside down (Acts 17.6).

-commitment to each other / a vision of justice / to Christ will produce an amazing result.

- groups that will pray together, think together, formulate policies together, and work together in the community.

-**illust.**: Solidarity

- go beyond Sunday Morning @ L.A.C.C.
- seek to reveal Christ to the world by *loyally serving together with other followers of Jesus.*

Conclusion:

-so you see, we are challenged to make four resolutions:

- pray powerfully, proclaim truth creatively, model truth consistently, and serve in unity.

-do you want to see our national life made more pleasing to God?

-do you have a vision of new godliness, a new justice, a new freedom, a new righteousness, a new compassion?

-do you need to repent of sub-Christian pessimism and alienation?

-will you reaffirm your confidence in God's power, in the power of prayer, of truth, of example, and group commitment?

-**illust.**: John Stott: Let's offer ourselves to God, as instruments in his hands – as salt and light in the community. The church could have an enormous influence for good, in every nation on earth, if it would commit itself totally to Christ. Let's give ourselves to him, who gave himself for us (John R. W. Stott's "Salt & Light" in *Christianity Today*. October 2011, p. 42).

-**illust.** Retaining Tanginess

-**Closing Hymn:** #452 Make Me A Blessing (all verses).

Resolutions

RESOLUTION #1:

2005: I will read at least 20 good books a year.

2006: I will read at least 10 books a year.

2007: I will read 5 books a year.

2008: I will finish *The Pelican Brief*

2009: I will read some articles in the newspaper this year.

2010: I will read at least one article this year.

2011: I will try and finish the comics section this year.

RESOLUTION #2:

2005: I will get my weight down below 180.

2006: I will watch my calories until I get below 190.

2007: I will follow my new diet religiously until I get below 200.

2008: I will try to develop a realistic attitude about my weight.

2009: I will work out 5 days a week.

2010: I will work out 3 days a week.

2011: I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week.

(TensionNot.Com)

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the legendary Soviet dissident, believed in the power of truth over lies. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize in literature, he gave a speech called "One Word Of Truth." "Writers," he says, "haven't got any rockets to blast off. We ... haven't got any military might. So what can literature do in the face of the merciless onslaught of open violence? Truth. One word of truth outweighs the whole world." Truth is much more powerful than bombs and tanks and weapons (John R. W. Stott's "Salt & Light" in *Christianity Today*. October 2011, p. 41)

The Case Against Living Together

Consider an article which appeared in the American magazine *Seventeen* in 1977 called "The Case against Living Together." It's an interview with Nancy Moore Clatworthy, a sociologist at Ohio State University. For ten years, Clatworthy had been studying the phenomenon of unmarried couples living together. When she began, she was predisposed towards the custom. "Young people," she said, "have told us it was quite wonderful." And she said she believed them. It seemed to her to be a sensible arrangement, a useful step in courtship in which couples get to know one another. But her research, involving the testing of hundreds of couples, married and unmarried, led her to change her mind. And she concluded that living together was not doing the things the couples expected it to do, especially with girls. She found them uptight, fearful, looking past the rhetoric to the possible pain and agony.

Clatworthy makes two points: In the areas of happiness, respect, and adjustment, "Couples who live together before they're married have more problems than couples who marry first." In every area, the couples who lived together before marriage disagreed more often than the couples who hadn't. Living together, she concludes, doesn't solve your problems.

Her second point was about commitment, the expectation a person has about the outcome of a relationship. Commitment is what makes marriage and living together work. But here's the problem: "Knowing that something is temporary, like living together unmarried, affects the degree of commitment to it. So unmarried couples are less than wholehearted in working to sustain and protect their relationship. And, consequently, 75 percent of them break up. And especially the girls are badly hurt." She concludes, "Statistically you are much better off marrying than living together, because for people who are in love, anything less than a full commitment is a cop-out" (John R. W. Stott's "Salt & Light" in *Christianity Today*. October 2011, p.p. 41, 42).

Robert Belair

According to the American sociologist Robert Belair, at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, “We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision” (John R. W. Stott’s “Salt & Light” in *Christianity Today*. October 2011, p. 42)

Solidarity

In 1943, 230 women were arrested as members of the French Resistance and sent to Birkenau. Only 49 survived, but this in itself is remarkable. These women were as diverse a group as could be imagined. They were Jews and Christians, aristocrats and working class, young and old. Yet they were united by their commitment to the French Resistance and to one another.

In her book *A Train in Winter*, Caroline Moorhead reconstructs the story of these women through the journals and memoirs of survivors. Noting the mutual dependence that made the difference between living and dying, Moorhead highlights how the solidarity of these women to one another and to their mutual survival sustained them through unspeakable horror and torture.

In many accounts of Holocaust survivors, the hellish conditions of extreme deprivation and torture drove many to hoard whatever meagre resources they could save for themselves. And how could they be blamed? Survival became the only goal – no matter what the cost, even to others. Yet in most of the cases with these French women in Birkenau, their solidarity toward each other trumped the selfishness that engulfed so many others. As Moorhead writes, “Knowing that the fate of each depended on the others ... egotism seemed to vanish and that, stripped back to the bare edge of survival, each rose to behaviour few would have believed themselves capable of.” Moorhead recounts that when unrelieved thirst threatened to engulf one of their members in utter madness, the women pooled together their own meagre rations to get her a whole bucket of water.

Altruism of this magnitude is seldom seen. Putting one’s own needs first is as natural as breathing, and just as unconscious. Yet adversity sometimes coaxes out the best and the most beautiful in human beings (Margaret Manning “Solidarity” in *A Slice of Infinity* at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia. Copyright (c) 2011).

Retaining Tanginess

Many years ago a man named Mr. Maundrell was touring the Holy Land and checked out a small salt mine near Gibul. It was on the side of a hill. There was a cliff about 12 feet high which had been made by people continually digging out salt. The most exposed surface looked like salt and sparkled like salt but due to the rain, sun, and air its savour was dissipated. However, once you chipped below the surface – the substance connected to the rock, the inner part was still salty.

If we lose our contact with Christ's life, we may look like salt but our influence will be negligible (Adam Clarke in "Matthew To The Acts" in vol. 5 of *Clarke's Commentary*. Nashville: n.d., p. 68).

In the ancient world, earth contained many impurities that resembled salt. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities could be leached out, leaving a residue that was of little effect. In biblical Israel savourless salt was apparently scattered on the earth layer of flat roofs. This helped to harden the soil and prevent leaks; and since the roofs served as play grounds and places for public gathering, the salt was trodden under foot and not valued as a precious commodity (D. A. Carson in "Matthew" in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Regency / Zondervan, 1984, p. 138).