

New Year Day Service

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] a question with which I'm going to begin this morning, and that is, have you made or considered any New Year resolutions? Well, I don't know if you have, if you've even given thought to such a matter, if that's something that you did in the past, but well, you haven't got time for such nonsense. Now, I don't know what your thoughts are on the matter. Maybe conscious of how in the past resolutions were made and swiftly broken. You think it wiser to avoid them altogether.

Well, let me suggest one that you might want to consider this morning as you look ahead to the year that has begun. How about this as a resolution for God's people, for you as a believer? I resolve to know Christ. I resolve to know Christ. Without wishing to be disrespectful to any resolutions you have made, I would suggest that you might be well advised, yes, even to ditch them and focus on this one, I resolve to know Christ. Now, I claim no originality for this resolution.

It was the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians of his resolve to know Jesus Christ. And I want us to consider this resolution. But we need to be clear on one thing as we consider this resolution, and we'll turn to the passage where Paul expresses himself in this way. It's found in 1 Corinthians 2.

2 Corinthians 2. But before we turn to the passage, and very particularly the words and the content of this resolution, I would say this. If our consideration of this resolution fails to result in resolution, then we will have wasted our time. If all we do is consider and explore and examine the resolution of Paul and maybe have a better grasp of Paul and maybe have a better grasp of what it means and its content and its implications and all of the things that we can perhaps usefully do as we look at the passage that we're going to look at in a moment. If that is all we do, then we have done very little.

Our consideration must lead into resolution on our part also. Well, the passage is in 1 Corinthians chapter 2. We read in Acts and chapter 18, and the reason for reading that passage is that it provides the background to this passage. In Acts, we're given an account of Paul's first visit to Corinth, and we have described how it was that he arrived there, and we're given some insight into what he did there. And so that's useful to have as the background to this letter that he then subsequently writes to the believers in Corinth, and particularly as in our passage, he makes specific reference to the visit that we have read of in Acts or recorded for us in Acts. So 1 Corinthians chapter 2, and we'll read verses 1 to 5. 1 Corinthians chapter 2, reading from verse 1.

[3 : 2 5] When I came to you, brothers. We've read in Acts of that occasion. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. As we consider this passage and what it reveals or portrays, I think we can do so in the following way. We can identify a twofold resolution and a twofold recognition. A twofold resolution and a twofold recognition. And that gives us four points in total, and we're going to be looking at them sequentially, one after the other. But what I think is more helpful in terms of visualizing this, I don't know how much visualizing things helps you, but I would encourage you to visualize these as two parallel pairs, the twofold resolution and the twofold recognition. In a moment I'll say what I'm talking about, but visualize them in that way. And we'll look at them each in turn as four different points, I suppose, but have that in your mind's eye.

Twofold resolution, twofold recognition. Well, what am I talking about? Well, what is the twofold resolution? First of all, a resolution to know Christ. It's very clear in what Paul says. But secondly, a resolution to make Christ known, which is the context really of what Paul is dealing with. He's talking about his task that he had performed in Corinth of making Christ known, of preaching the gospel. So, you have this twofold resolution, to know Christ and also to make Christ known.

But this twofold resolution goes hand in hand and must go hand in hand with a twofold recognition, recognition, which is as follows, a recognition of our weakness and a recognition of His power.

The resolutions will be meaningless and it will be impossible to keep them in the absence of this twofold recognition of our weakness and of His power. So, let's think of these aspects of what Paul says here. First of all, a resolution to know Christ. And we'll maybe detain ourselves a little longer here and then in what follows, spend a little less time. A resolution to know Christ.

[6 : 46] I think we can approach this resolution from a number of directions. And the first one we can term in this the priority of knowing Christ, with a stress on the verb, on knowing Christ. Paul is writing to the Corinthians and speaking about his preaching ministry in Corinth. He speaks about how he came to them and how he proclaimed the testimony about God, and he describes the manner in which he does so. This is his subject matter. And given that he is writing about his preaching ministry in Corinth, we might have expected him to say something along the lines of, for I resolved to preach nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It would have been a perfectly reasonable thing for Paul to say.

It would have tied in very well with what he says before and after, I resolved to preach nothing. While I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. But that's not what he says. He doesn't say that. Rather, he says, I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Why is that? Sometimes, given that Paul is speaking so much about his own preaching in Corinth, it's sometimes just assumed that, well, he's just using this verb to know is almost synonymous with to preach. The content of his preaching was Christ and Him crucified, and of course, that's true.

But I don't think Paul intends what he says here in verse 2 simply to be a reference or only to be a reference to his preaching. He deliberately employs the word know. I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Why is that? Well, I think the reason why Paul expresses himself in this way is that Paul knows very well that even before preaching or proclaiming or announcing the gospel, his priority must be knowing. For a very obvious reason, you can't preach what you don't know. You can't declare what you haven't discovered for yourself. You can't testify to that which you have not seen. Notice, indeed, the use of the word testimony there in verse 1, where Paul says, I proclaim to you the testimony about God. The word testimony there is a very common

Greek word that we come across very often in the New Testament, martyrian, where we get the word martyr from in English. And it means a witness, a witness. And that word is a word that ties in with what we're saying. You can't witness something you haven't seen yourself. You can't witness to something you haven't experienced yourself. And so, Paul, when he speaks of the resolve that he determined on arriving in Corinth, he expresses it in this way, I resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Our priority must be to know Christ. Okay, but what does that mean?

The lexicon or the dictionary gives three main meanings of the Greek verb that Paul uses here and that we have translated know. And together, I think they provide a helpful, a composite picture of what it means to know Christ. The verb can be used in these three different ways. And indeed, it can on occasion, as I would suggest it is being done here, be used to convey all of these meanings together. It can mean to know about, to know about something or somebody. It can also mean to become intimately acquainted with a subject matter or indeed a person. Or it can mean, and this is a slight variation in meaning, to come to know or to come to understand a subject or, in this case, a person. And does that not helpfully get across what is involved in knowing Christ? It does involve knowing about Him, who He is, and what He came to do, and we're going to come on to that. But it also involves becoming acquainted with Him, coming to know Him in a personal way, coming to understand Him and to deepen our understanding of Him. Paul resolves to know Christ. And so, we can describe that as the priority of knowing Christ.

[11 : 50] But moving swiftly on and really picking up on something we've just said, there's also the aspect of the content of knowing Christ. What is there to know about Christ? Who is it that we need to become acquainted with? Who are we to come and know and understand ever more deeply? To pick up on the meanings of the verb. Well, what does Paul say? Paul speaks of knowing Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

And in these brief words, we have the heart of the matter, Christ's person and Christ's work, His identity and His mission, who He is and what He has done, Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Jesus Christ is, of course, a shorthand for Jesus the Christ, who He is. And it's interesting that this is the very matter that we're told occupied Paul's preaching in Corinth. There in Acts chapter 18, in the passage that we've already read, and in verse 5, what do we read? When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. This was what he preached about, establishing, demonstrating the identity of Jesus Christ. Who is this rabbi of whom I speak? Who is this Savior that I tell you about? This Jesus, He is the Christ. He is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the promised Savior, Jesus the Christ.

And we could say so much on this, but we're not going to. Simply to say this, as we consider this resolve of Paul, and I trust one that we can adopt for ourselves, to know Christ. When we think of His person, He is the person, He is the person, He is the person, He is the person, He is the person, also His work, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When we consider the work of Christ, there is so much that we could profitably focus on. In these past days, we've, I believe and trust, profitably focused on His incarnation. We can profitably focus on His teaching as it's recorded for us in the Gospels.

We can profitably focus on the signs and miracles that accompanied His preaching. And of course, we must and can do all of these things. But Paul rightly recognizes that the crux of the matter is the crux of Christ. The heart of the gospel message is Christ crucified, Christ dying for sinners, Jesus Christ dying for your sins, Jesus Christ dying in our place, Jesus the Christ paying the price of sin demanded by the justice and righteousness of God. The very matter that the world finds so distasteful, and this of course is what Paul recognizes, that this message of the cross was so distasteful to His hearers. It was a foolishness to Gentiles, a stumbling block to Jews. And it was so 2,000 years ago and nothing much has changed. The comedian Jimmy Carr, and if you've never heard of Jimmy Carr, you're really not missing out on much. But for those of you who have, or even those of you who haven't, you may have heard of him in connection, if not his comedy, if we can call it comedy, but you may have heard of him in connection with his tax avoidance. He was one of a number of celebrities who had some clever way of not paying taxes. Anyway, that's by the by. He was interviewed on the one show just before Christmas, and he was asked about his views on Jesus. And he said, I like Jesus.

[16 : 09] Quite promising start. I like Jesus. And then he said something along these lines. I don't know the exact words he used. He says, I like Jesus the early years. The early years. The manger, the birth, Christmas. I like that. But then when he got older, he got a bit wacky. When all the blood started coming in. Don't like that part. And doesn't that really echo what so many people would also think, even if they don't verbalize it. Jesus, the early years. I'm comfortable with that. But don't give me the cross. Don't give me blood. Don't give me dying for sins. Don't give me any of that stuff. Jesus, the early years. Well, it's nothing new. It's nothing new. But Paul knew, as we must also know, that the heart of the gospel is Christ crucified. But we preach Christ crucified is what Paul has said in this very letter in the previous chapter. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. The priority of knowing Christ, the content of knowing Christ,

His person, and His work. But let me suggest another angle at which we can come at this, and that is the need to grow in knowing Christ. And I won't dwell on this, but I'll simply ask you one question. Do you think that Paul resolved to know Christ for the first time on arrival in Corinth?

Was this the first time that Paul resolved to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Do you imagine that's the case? It seems inconceivable. I'm sure Paul, on any number of occasions, resolved to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He did so in a particular way as he arrived in Corinth, and maybe there are reasons for that. And many people try and identify and explore what reasons there might be. His previous experience in Athens, where he had come from and arriving in Corinth, and we're not going to go down that road this morning. Simply to say this, I am sure that it is the case that this was not the first time that Paul resolved to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

He knew Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and yet he is able to say, I resolved on that occasion to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And clearly what Paul has as his aspiration, his expectation in so resolving is to know Jesus Christ more, to know Him more deeply, to know Him more richly, to know Him more closely, to understand more fully Christ crucified. And so, even as one who knew Jesus so well, knew so deeply about His atoning death on the cross, He is able to resolve to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And we don't need to dwell on the application for ourselves, the need to grow in our knowledge of Christ. And finally, as we think of knowing Christ, let's just comment fleetingly on the result of knowing Christ. And though it's not something that comes out very explicitly in our passage, we can declare, we can recognize that the result of knowing Christ is that we become ever more like Christ, which is indeed, of course, the Father's great work in us, that we would become like His Son Jesus. And the more we know Christ, the more we become like Christ, it was, of course, the same Paul who was able to say, as he wrote to the Philippians,

I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death. Will you resolve to know Christ? But moving on, and much more briefly to what follows, a resolution to know Christ, but also a resolution to make Christ known. The purpose and consequence of knowing Christ is to make Him known. As we've already commented, we are witnesses. We testify to what we know and experience and discover. And what do we make known? Well, in the language of Paul in verse 1, we make known the testimony about God, or the testimony of God. And the language Paul uses here in verse 1 is rich and helpful in identifying two necessary strands to our proclamation. The message comes from God. It is the testimony of God. I think it's preferable to the testimony about God, though that is also true. It comes from God. But though it comes from God, it comes from God. And we have no message of our own, we proclaim that which we receive. Nonetheless, we are the ones who have to announce it. And these two things go together. We receive the message. It's the testimony of God. But we are the ones who declare it. And of course, the message itself is that which we have resolved to know, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That is the message. That is what we need to know, and that is what we need to proclaim. We have no other message.

[21 : 45] It's immaterial if our message is deemed unpalatable or not user-friendly or unlikely to be believed. We have one message for every age and for every culture and for every man, woman, and child. One message. Jesus Christ and Him crucified. There is no other message. A resolution to make Christ known. But notice also that this task of making Christ known is the task of all who know Him.

In our passage, the focus is on Paul's preaching. But it is clear that Paul understood speaking about and for Jesus as every believer's calling. Just notice very quickly how the letter begins. In chapter 1 and in verse 2, it's identified to whom the letter is directed in the first place to the Corinthians.

But notice how Paul carefully identifies that his audience is much greater than just the Corinthians. In verse 2, he says, to the Corinthians, but then together with all those everywhere who call in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. You can't get more inclusive than that. All those everywhere who call in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. That includes us. We call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we're included as the recipients of this letter. And with that in mind, notice what he goes on to say in verse 4, I always thank God for you because of His grace given you in Christ Jesus, for in Him you have been enriched in every way in all your speaking and in all your knowledge, because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in all your knowledge. And in all our knowledge is confirmed. And in all our knowledge, His testimony about Christ would be confirmed. What is this speaking and knowledge that Paul is speaking about?

Well, the knowledge he is speaking about surely is their knowledge of Christ, their grasp of the truth. And the speaking he is talking about is their speaking about Christ, the telling forth of the truth.

And for Paul, it is clear that this is the duty and privilege of every believer. Not every believer will be a preacher in the sense that Paul was, but every believer is a speaker. We are all to speak the truth, and we will speak that which we know. We will witness to that which we have seen and experienced.

[24 : 29] A resolution to make Christ known. Will you, at the beginning of this year, resolve to make Christ known? But I said that this twofold resolution, a resolution to know Christ and a resolution to make Christ known, go hand in hand with a twofold recognition. And the first aspect of that is a recognition of our weakness. Notice how Paul describes his own condition as he embarks on making good his resolution to know Christ and to make Christ known. In verse 3, he tells us, I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. Now, to what does the weakness that Paul speaks of refer? It's usually understood to refer to Paul's sense of his own inadequacy to do justice to so great a message and so great a task to proclaim Christ. But could we suggest that Paul's recognition of his weakness refers also to his knowledge of Christ? He has resolved to know Christ and to make

Christ known. He's certainly conscious of his weakness in the matter of making Christ known. But is he not also conscious of his weakness in the matter of knowing Christ, of knowing Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Well, that certainly is true of us, is it not? We're conscious of our weakness in the matter of communicating Christ. But are we also conscious of our weakness even in the matter of knowing Jesus Christ and Him crucified? We are weak. We don't need to dwell on that. We I think we'd all be agreed on that. But let me ask you a question that may sound a bit of a conundrum. Is our weakness a weakness? Is our weakness a weakness? In the light of what Paul says, it's our greatest strength. Because our weakness conforms to God's purpose. In verse 27, which really is part of this same discourse, certainly part of the same lecture, notice what Paul says, but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are. And he goes on, our weakness, your weakness, conforms to God's purpose. And our weakness magnifies God's strength. Again, we know what Paul shares with us of what the Lord said to him as he wrote to this same group of believers in Corinth in his second letter and in chapter 12. But he, the Lord, said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

It's okay to be weak. In fact, it's a necessary condition for knowing Christ and making Him known. But we end with this. A recognition of our weakness must go hand in hand with a recognition of His power.

However, Paul is conscious that despite his own weakness or in the midst of his own weakness, his preaching was powerful. But powerful in what sense? Verse 4, he says, My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. What does that mean, a demonstration of the Spirit's power? The word that is translated demonstration carries the meaning of rigorous proof. What Paul is saying is that his preaching was accompanied by rigorous proof of its power. And what was that proof? Not passionate delivery, though it may well have been, but spiritual results. The Corinthians, to whom he writes, were brought to faith. That is why there is a church in Corinth that he can write to. This was the proof of the power that men and women were brought to faith. Sinners repented. Men and women and boys and girls were converted. This is the demonstration of the Spirit's power that Paul speaks of here.

Why is this necessary, or is this still necessary? Well, of course, it's a foolish question. Nothing has changed. In our preaching, in our testifying, in our speaking as believers, we stand in absolute need of the Spirit's power. Only the Spirit of God can bring conviction and conversion. In the absence of the Spirit's power, not a single soul will be saved, not only in this congregation, but across the city and indeed across the land. With Paul it was necessary, and equally with us it is. The message that is proclaimed, the word that is spoken concerning Jesus Christ and Him crucified must be accompanied by a demonstration of the Spirit's power. But in this, I would have you, and I would have myself, be encouraged, because the Spirit of God is among us to save. The Spirit of God is no reluctant participant in our witness, in our speaking, in our preaching to a dying world. Yes, we recognize and gladly and willingly recognize our weakness, but we do so hand in hand with a recognition of His power. Will you then resolve to know Christ? Will you resolve to make

[30 : 46] Him known? And if your response is, but I am so weak, I've failed so often, but if you recognize that you're weak, that is a good thing. Gladly recognize your weakness, and joyfully recognize and rely on the Spirit's power. Let us pray.