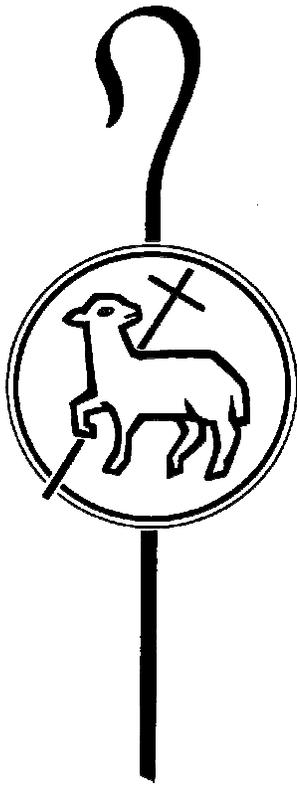


feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

January 8, 2013

Dear Church Family,



This is the time for New Year's reflections and resolutions. For some, this is a regular practice in their lives. Others may have given up on it, having applied themselves too many times with little or no results. But what does Scripture say about resolutions, about putting in effort to improve our lives? We considered that question by looking at 2 Peter 1:1-15 focusing on verse 5, "*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith....*". Peter has established in the previous verses that our relationship with God is founded upon the work of Christ, not anything we do. So our effort is not about gaining that all important relationship. However, without the effort to pursue the qualities that Peter then lists, we are in danger of *being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Surely our adversary, the devil, wants to render us ineffective and unproductive and one way he can do that is to undermine our efforts and diligence in pursuing spiritual maturity.

He is behind the heresy that teaches that effort on our part is a denial of grace and we are to live passive lives relying on the Holy Spirit to do all the work. He is behind the struggle that so many have with self condemnation when they perceive that their efforts are not measuring up. His accusations often cause them to embrace a theology of passivity and steer away from necessary effort on our part. He also has another tactic that is particularly effective in our lives.

When Peter says to add to your faith, he uses a word that means to richly supply. So he is calling for lavish effort, not just minimal effort. Most of us know what it is like to put great effort into something. Usually we do it to achieve something that we feel is worth the effort. Paul uses the example of athletes in 1 Cor. 9:25, "*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*" Athletes are lavish in their efforts to maximize their talent in order to be the best. To the extent that they add diligent training to their talent is the extent to which that talent will bear fruit in their lives. The opposite is true as well. Their talent can be wasted and not bear fruit. Peter has already said that we have all the talent we need for godliness (*his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness*). We too can waste that talent and be unproductive.

This leads to the stumbling block that many face in our culture. To what extent do we lavish effort and apply diligence in other areas of our lives, but not in our spiritual lives? How does this dynamic appear in our hard-driving, achievement-oriented culture? We work so hard in other areas of our lives, or we might say other areas of our lives are so demanding, that we are frankly worn out. When it comes to our spiritual lives, we just want to relax and take it easy. There is a common complaint about our plates being too full. But what are they full with? We do not have the time or energy to apply to our spiritual growth and pursuit of God because they are being spent elsewhere. In the parable of the sower, the description of the seed amongst the thorns, which causes the plant to be unproductive (same Greek word) is so appropriate. The imagery of thorns choking the plant from the seed is the opposite of lavishly supplying. Thorns divert or use up what the plant needs for growth (sunlight, water, nutrients). Luke identifies the thorns as worries, riches and pleasures.

Let's consider that this is by design. We live in a secular culture, under the influence of a powerful enemy of the cause of Christ. We should expect it to be set up to divert our efforts from serving and glorifying God. If we simply try to add effort in our spiritual lives to lives that are caught up in the pattern of secular culture, we cannot do it. We may have the desire to do it, but we do not have the ability and our efforts do not last long. We cannot make every effort to add to our lives that which the world sees as effective and productive and at the same time make every effort to add to our lives that which makes us effective and productive in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. One of them has to give way to the other. The hard, disturbing and sad truth that we must face is that much of the time, effort that would otherwise be devoted to our spiritual lives gives way to our worldly lives. Too often we seek first the things and concerns of this world (which are right in front of us) and try to add our spiritual efforts or commitments with the time and energy that we have left over.

We need to tackle this problem by clearing away the thorns and freeing up time and energy in our schedules. We will need to be counter-cultural to some extent in how we live our lives. This will require that we be alert and attentive to our lives and how we are living them. The answers may not be easy or simple, and they will differ for different people. However, we definitely need each other to figure this out. That is why the focus in homegroups this winter will be a study about our time and energy, where we are applying effort in our lives and to what purpose. Each week you will have a different focus to consider as you live your life and discuss with your group when you come together. This is not an opportunity to prove to yourself or anyone else that you are doing well. Instead, we should all have Paul's attitude from Phil 3:12-14, *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

We are trusting Christ to be our shepherd in this effort and lead us into more fruitful lives that bring Him glory. It was fitting to begin this study by celebrating communion together in remembrance that he gave his life not only to save us, but as Paul says, to take hold of us. In Him are grace and peace in abundance and His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness. He is not only able to shepherd us to more fruitfulness, he is completely committed to it.

Pastorally yours,
Bo

P.S. This would be an excellent time to join a homegroup if you are not already in one.

<http://www.christour shepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)