

New Year's Resolutions: Learning from Jonathan Edwards

It's hard to believe yet true. The year 2008 has arrived! As we begin the new year many people have made new year's resolutions. It's an excellent time to take inventory. Someone rightly stated, "An unexamined life is not worth living." It's very important that we take time for self-examination on a regular basis. We can easily be active, busy, doing lots of "stuff," but grow dull and frustrated and ineffective for God's kingdom purposes.

Think of the north star for a moment. It's always there in the north sky. It's dependable. It's a guiding point. If you are traveling and think you're lost you can look to it to regain focus and perspective.

There are certain passages in the Bible that accomplish the same type of thing in my life, "north star" kind of passages that I look to often, that keep me on target. Here are some of them...

Psalm 16:8

Colossians 1:28-29

Psalm 139:23-24

Romans 12:1-2

Discuss: What passages of Scripture are like the north star in your life?

God also uses His people to help us take inventory. For instance, this weekend our church board will be meeting at Scioto Hills Camp for a planning retreat. We'll be taking inventory of the church and our part in it, seeking God's purposes for the church, and preparing to move into the new year in ways that will please and glorify Him.

Two years ago, at a service like this one, I told you about a mentor of mine. I'd like to call upon his help again. Actually I've never met this mentor for he lived 300 years ago (born October 5, 1703). But through his memoirs he has mentored me, and I'd like for him to speak to you as well. His name is Jonathan Edwards.

Some information about the man Jonathan Edwards:

--born in 1703, died of a smallpox vaccination in 1758

--a latter day New England puritan

--an evangelist, pastor, educator, author, missionary, and college president

--he pastored 23 years in Northampton, Mass, saw revival twice, once in 1735 and then again in the Great Awakening of 1740; Edwards became known as "The Theologian of Revival" because of the books he wrote about it.

When he was 19 years old he wrote 70 resolutions that I'd like to show you. We looked at these two years ago and we'll do so again this evening. We can learn from them. They reveal what was important to Edwards and should be to any who has a passion to live for the glory of God. We won't look at all 70, for the sake of time, but copies are available, and you can read them on the web at <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/text/Personal/resolut.htm>. I've selected several of his resolutions for discussion...

First, note his introduction to his resolutions:

“Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake.

Remember to read over these Resolutions once a week.”

Discuss: From this, what are the marks of a good resolution?

--Grace is necessary.

--Our plans are to be in submission to God's will.

--We need regular review of our resolutions. For Edwards it was weekly.

Here's resolve #1...

1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriad's of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.

Discuss:

--What verses from the Bible support this resolution?

--What does this resolve teach us about Edwards, about what was important to him and should be to us, and about how he approached life (and so should we)?

4. Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.

Discuss:

--How would our lives be different if we made and kept this resolve?

7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

Discuss:

--What are some examples of things you would NOT want to be doing in the last hour of your life?

9. Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.

Discuss:

--Some would say this sounds morbid. Do you agree? What benefit is there to think about your own death?

10. Resolved, when I feel pain, to think of the pains of martyrdom, and of hell.

Discuss:

--What would be the outcome of this resolve?

17. Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

Discuss:

--What are some examples? What do many people “wish” they had done when they come to die?

19. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour, before I should hear the last trump.

Discuss:

--What does this indicate about the way Edwards approached his life?

25. Resolved, to examine carefully, and constantly, what that one thing in me is, which causes me in the least to doubt of the love of God; and to direct all my forces against it.

Discuss:

--What are some things that could cause us to doubt God’s love?

--What can we do to defeat such things?

28. Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

Discuss:

--Put this resolve in your own words...

37. Resolved, to inquire every night, as I am going to bed, wherein I have been negligent, what sin I have committed, and wherein I have denied myself: also at the end of every week, month and year. *Dec.22 and 26, 1722.*

Discuss:

--Put this resolve in your own words...

--What would happen if we implemented this resolve?

46. Resolved, never to allow the least measure of any fretting uneasiness at my father or mother. Resolved to suffer no effects of it, so much as in the least alteration of speech, or motion of my eye: and to be especially careful of it, with respect to any of our family.

Discuss:

--What is Edwards here resolving to do?

--What difference would we see in our families if we implemented this resolve?

52. I frequently hear persons in old age say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again: Resolved, that I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age. *July 8, 1723.*

Discuss:

--What do people in old age often regret?

--Why do we often follow in their footsteps instead of learning from their confession?

54. Whenever I hear anything spoken in conversation of any person, if I think it would be praiseworthy in me, Resolved to endeavor to imitate it. *July 8, 1723.*

Discuss:

--This is such a practical resolve. How so?

--Give an example of this...

55. Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell torments. *July 8, 1723.*

Discuss:

--What apparently did Edwards think a lot about?

--Why do we tend to think so little about heaven and hell?

56. Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.

Discuss:

--Put this in your own words...

--All of us struggle with lusts and particular sins. What does this resolve teach us is necessary if we are to overcome?

57. Resolved, when I fear misfortunes and adversities, to examine whether I have done my duty, and resolve to do it; and let it be just as providence orders it, I will as far as I can, be concerned about nothing but my duty and my sin.
June 9, and July 13 1723.

Discuss:

--Edwards is saying, "I will do what's right in every situation, regardless of what bad thing might appear to result if I do so." What are some adversities that might result if we do our duty?

To sum it up...

There's much we can learn from this man of God. In the preface to Edwards' "Memoirs," the following observation is made about the young man Edwards (in light of his resolutions):

"The man who could thus write [these resolutions], was not one who could easily trifle with sin, or who could enter any of its paths without the immediate reproofs of an offended conscience. This holy man trembled even at the distant view of sin; he could not willingly come near and survey its enticements...He knew no happiness except that connected with a conscience void of offense...The writer lived as seeing him who is invisible; he set the Lord always before him; encouraging upon all occasions an earnest concern for the glory of God, the grand object for which he desired to live both upon earth and in heaven, an object compared with which all other things seemed in his view but trifles. If this were attained, all his desires were satisfied; but if this were lost or imperfectly gained, his soul was filled with anguish."^[2]

Discuss:

Grace made it possible for Edwards to think and write the resolutions we have just considered. Furthermore, grace made it possible for him to be the man so commended in the above words. But the truth is, WE have the same grace available to us. That being the case...

--Why do we not make resolves like these, and more importantly, why do our lives so often not show the fruit of resolves like these?

--What needs to change most in your life, starting right now, in order for you to be a person who, like Edwards, is living with a passion for the glory of God?

^[1] Adapted from similar material used at WBC on a Wed evening 12/28/05

^[2] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, xxii-xxiii.