

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

James 1:13-15, 22-25 ¹

Well, here we are at the hinge of the year once again. Have you made any resolutions yet? No? Well, when you look at the mirror, do any resolutions suggest themselves to you? How about when you look at your checkbook? Your house? Your office? Shall I go on?

Whatever we resolve, whether to do more of this and less of that, to do a better job managing our spending, our eating, our weight, our devotional life, our investing, our children, or our work, we already know that making the changes will be harder than we want them to be—or else we'd have already made them.

I remember one Christmas in Louisville when we joined the YMCA as a family. When we showed up in January for our first efforts at fitness, we saw signs around the building that said, "We know it's a pain to have all these 'new resolution' people clogging up the system, but don't worry—they'll be gone soon." Do any of you know what I'm talking about?

Most of us underestimate how difficult it will be to make significant changes in our lives. Or maybe we're not entirely honest with ourselves about our desires. If I were to be honest with myself and with you, I'd have to say that my New Year's situation looks like this:

1. I'd like to lose weight without changing what I eat.
2. I'd like to learn Spanish without studying it.
3. I like to become physically fit without exercise.
4. I'd like to save money without changing my spending habits.
5. I'd like to experience the benefit of Sabbath rest without missing anything.
6. I'd like to deepen my walk with God without spending any more time with God.

What would your list look like?

New Year's resolutions almost always have to do with discipline, and practicing helpful disciplines of just about any sort helps to align our emotions, our wills, and our habits with God's grace-full purposes for our lives. But our transformation is very slow, rather like the way the running water of a creek polishes stones in its path, and we easily become impatient. In an age when our computers and our communications operate at mind-boggling and steadily-increasing speeds, we're accustomed to thinking that "faster is better."²

Yet no matter what our computers can do, spiritual growth is seldom faster than physical growth. Some would go so far as to say that the speed of spiritual growth is "agricultural." Paul suggested such a speed when he wrote, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*" (Galatians 6:9).

In order to make spiritual progress, we must steadfastly choose to continue our disciplines, whether we ourselves see progress or not. There's a reason for the slow pace of our growth. Richard Foster noted that "On our own we are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine."³

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 30, 2012.

² My first pc operated at eight million cycles per second. The fastest of today's pc's can approach four billion cycles.

³ Richard Foster, in Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperCollins, 1991), p. 91.

Just as a jeweler works to remove microscopic flaws from a diamond that no ordinary person would ever notice, so God works in your life and in mine to make us able to contain His glory. C. S. Lewis wrote that God intends to make you and to make me into “dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.”⁴

With all this as background, let’s turn our attention to resolutions and changes once again. Toward what end do we make resolutions? To make more money? To have a better retirement? To live longer? To know and love God more deeply? How badly do we desire these things?

We tend to get what we desire with our whole heart, and the fact is that the more in love we are with God, the easier it is to do the things that take us to Him (Hebrews 12:2). Unfortunately, our 24/7/365 multi-tasking lives are so busy that keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing is pretty hard. A global survey recently indicated that more than forty percent of Christians around the world say that they’re often or always in a hurry, and sixty percent of surveyed believers said that the busyness of their lives gets in the way of their relationship with God.⁵ We desperately need to make choices that simplify and focus our lives.

On the subject of staying focused, what’s the first thing you think of when you see this picture of General David Petraeus? Hold that thought. There was another famous General named David before him, who became the leader of his nation after a very successful military career. Like General Petraeus, King David had enjoyed a rather meteoric rise to power, yet for all the good they both did, they may be most remembered for their sexual sin.

King David, at least, came to such an outcome because he had stopped nurturing his relationship with God. The deep love for God that had given David the courage to fight Goliath and that had inspired the 23rd Psalm had now withered away. The deep love for his people that had made David a great warrior had eroded so badly that he no longer even went to battle with his troops.

David would never even have seen Bathsheba had he been where he was supposed to be and had he been doing what he was supposed to have been doing. David would never have committed adultery with Bathsheba had he kept his life connected to God’s power so that he could resist temptation. David would not have had Bathsheba’s husband murdered to cover his own tracks had he remained grounded in God’s moral standards.

I doubt that either of our Generals ever made a New Year’s Resolution List that included the goals of discarding his deepest moral values or of forfeiting spiritual authority in his home and community, but they both achieved those goals. As we move into 2013, you and I will do well to remember the importance of staying focused on keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing; and we need to stop telling ourselves that allowing small sins to remain in our lives don’t really make any difference. Here are two stories that reinforce the point

“Our washing machine was going full blast,” Amy Beukema wrote, as I was “catching up with the laundry from our family vacation. Suddenly, our oldest daughter yelled that the washtub was backing up. I plunged my hand into the almost overflowing washtub and felt the drain. Nothing. I called my husband. We bailed out the water and then took apart the trap. There was no obvious clog. My husband used a plumber’s snake to try to remove the obstruction without success. Then I noticed something was missing.

“Where’s the lizard?” I said.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 85.

⁵ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/survey.christians.too.busy.for.god/11977.htm>

“What lizard?” my husband asked.

“That rubbery, toy lizard that was lying next to the sink.”

“You mean the green thing that swells to 100 times its size when it gets wet?”

“The lizard was in his smallest, driest condition when the laundry had begun. Somehow it had fallen into the drain. On its journey through our pipes, it began soaking up every drop of liquid until it completely sealed off the water flow.

“My husband frantically tried to reach it with the plumber’s snake, but it was well out of reach. We then tried a bottle of chemical drain cleaner. Not only was the stuff ‘safe for pipes,’ it was gentle on rubbery lizards too.

“Finally, we gave up, and I called a plumber. I began to tell him the problem, and he knew exactly what I was talking about. He’d run into similar lizards before. He soon drilled through the blockage, and \$123 later, we were able to finish the laundry. Like our toy lizard, sin often starts small, and then grows to life-choking proportions.”⁶

Donald Miller is one of the up-and-coming authors on today’s Christian scene. He lives in Portland, Oregon, not too far from Nathan & Lisel. Here’s a story he told on himself that makes the same point:

“I lived for a time with my friend and mentor John MacMurray, where the first rule is to always tell the truth. John and I were sitting in the family room one night when he asked about my new cell phone.

“I got it free,” I told him.

“How did you get it for free?” he asked.

“Well, my other one broke, so I took it in to see if they could replace it. They had this new computer system at the store and they didn’t have their records. They didn’t know whether mine was still under warranty. It wasn’t, I knew, because it was more than a year old. The guy asked me about it, and I told him I didn’t know, but it was right around a year. Just a white lie, you know. Anyway, the phone was so messed up they replaced it with a newer model. So, I got a free phone.”

“Did you ever see that movie *The Family Man* with Nicolas Cage?” John asked. “There’s this scene where Nicolas Cage walks into a store to get a cup of coffee. And Don Cheadle plays the guy working at the counter. There’s a girl in line before Nicolas Cage, and she’s buying something for ninety-nine cents, and she hands Cheadle a dollar. Cheadle takes nine dollars out of the till and counts it out, giving her way too much change. She sees that he is handing her way too much money, yet she picks it up and puts it in her pocket without saying a word. As she is walking out the door, Cheadle stops her to give her another chance. He asks her if there is anything else she needs. She shakes her head no and walks out.”

“I see what you’re getting at, John,” I say.

“Let me finish,” he says. “So Cheadle looks over at Nicolas Cage, and he says, ‘Did you see that? She was willing to sell her character for nine dollars. Nine dollars!’”

After a little while, I spoke up. “Do you think that is what I am doing with the phone? Do you think I am selling my character?” And to be honest, I said this with a smirk.

⁶ Amy Beukema, Western Springs, Illinois.

“I do,” John said. “The Bible talks about having a calloused heart. That’s when sin, after a period of time, has so deceived us we no longer care whether our thoughts and actions are right or wrong. Our hearts will go there easily, and often over what look like little things—little white lies. All I am saying to you, as your friend, is, watch for this kind of thing.”

“I went back to the store the next day. It cost me more than nine dollars, but I got my character back.”⁷

Donald Miller’s friend helped him refocus on the reality that the end never justifies the means . . . it determines them. Means and ends are joined, like a river flowing into a lake. If there is poison in the river, there will be poison in the lake.

I want to pull all this together by suggesting seven brief principles that can help us realize the reordering God wants to bring about in our lives this year. Following the military theme with our Generals, I’m going to call this “Remember What You Learned in Boot Camp.” I suspect that they both had known these principles in the past, but in the press of life, they had failed to Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing . . . as we often do after them.

1. Satan and the forces of darkness are real (Luke 10:18; Ephesians 6:11-12). The universe is far stranger than we have imagined, and its most significant dimensions are not perceptible to our ordinary senses. Satan is never more successful than when he has us convinced that he is a fantasy of superstitious minds. Satan and the forces of darkness are real, and it is they who are our Real Enemies.
2. Satan is a liar and a master of disguise. Many of the dangers we face don’t look evil. Dennis Rader, the BTK serial killer, was a Cub Scout leader and the equivalent of the Chair of the Deacons in his church, and the Bible tells us that Satan himself can masquerade as an angel of light (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:14-15). As Klyne Snodgrass put it, “Evil rarely looks evil until it accomplishes its goal; it gains entrance by appearing attractive, desirable, and perfectly legitimate. It is a baited and camouflaged trap.”⁸ Satan really is a liar and a master of disguise.
3. Satan intends to destroy us. From Genesis 3 through Revelation 20, Satan’s every effort is to frustrate God’s purposes and to prevent God’s redemptive action in human lives. Peter wrote, “*Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour*” (1 Peter 5:6).
4. Satan knows your weaknesses—all of them—and he will use them to his advantage. As one of my African friends once commented, “Satan knows where my goat is tied.” Satan how to “get our goat!” Satan knows which temptations are the biggest problems for you and for me. He will ambush us when we’re vulnerable, when we’re lonely, or tired, or sick, or discouraged. He will also ambush us when we’re successful, using our strength against us, like a martial arts expert of the first order. And Satan is guaranteed to ambush us any time we are trying to grow spiritually. *The one thing we can count on is that we will be ambushed.* (Matthew 6:13, 26:41)
5. Bible study is not for wimps; it’s for warriors (Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:17). When Jesus was doing “hand-to-hand” combat with Satan in the wilderness, the only weapon He used was the Word of God (Matthew 4:1-11). When Paul listed

⁷ Donald Miller & John MacMurray, *To Own a Dragon*, 2006.

⁸ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 339).

the personal protection we need for spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, the only weapon he mentioned was “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*” (Ephesians 6:17).⁹

Only if we know the Bible well will we be able to recognize when it’s being used to camouflage evil rather than to serve the Good. Only if we know the Bible well will we be able to recognize when things are being taken out of context and twisted to suit false purposes. And only if we know the Bible well, internalizing it through much reading and study, will we be able to deploy its truths in spiritual combat.¹⁰

6. Knowing the Bible will only help us if we do what it tells us to do. Jesus not only knew Scripture, He obeyed it. Satan knows it, too, and he’ll use it against you if you’re not prepared to do battle. Our ability to resist temptation is rather like a spiritual muscle. It grows stronger with exercise, and the repetitions get easier (Luke 6:46; 1 Corinthians 10:13). But knowing the Bible well will only help you if you do what it tells you to do.
7. Keep your eyes on the goal. My Dad grew up plowing with a mule, and although I’ve never done that, I remember his admonition about plowing as applied to life: “The secret of plowing a straight furrow is to keep your eye on the end of the row.”

Jesus defeated Satan by knowing, claiming, and acting on the Truths of the Word of God. Jesus returned from His desert combat with great spiritual power, and His life began to produce amazing results. That can happen in our lives, too.

As A.W. Tozer put it, “Anything God has ever done, God can do *now*. Anything God has ever done anywhere, God can do *here*. Anything God has ever done for anyone, God can do *for you*.”¹¹

What do you need to let God do in your life today to get you ready for abundant life in 2013? Where do you need to refocus? What “little things” do you need to remove from your life? What priorities need reordering? Will you do it?

On our own, we’re no match for the challenges ahead, but the strength God offers is sufficient for the need. Let us say with Paul, “*I can do all this through him who gives me strength!*” (Philippians 4:13).

⁹ “Prayer in the power of the Spirit” could also be understood as a weapon, both offensive and defensive (Ephesians 6:18).

¹⁰ Here’s a quick quiz to see how prepared you are for battle:

1. Can you name the books of the Bible, in order?
2. Can you summarize the message of each book of the Bible without notes?
3. Can you name the major themes of the Bible?
4. Can you describe the major types of literature in the Bible, how they are different, and how they function?
5. Can you find any reference in the Bible in less than 15 seconds?
6. Do you know the difference between a Bible commentary, a Bible concordance, and a Bible dictionary, and can you use each effectively?
7. Do you know where to find the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Love Chapter?
8. Can you explain the process of salvation concisely and clearly, using Scripture?

¹¹ A.W. Tozer, *Leadership Weekly*, October 9, 2002.