



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Resolved This Day

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 1, 2012

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. ²Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. ³This is good and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. ⁵For there is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. ⁶He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time. ⁷And I have been chosen as a preacher and apostle to teach the Gentiles this message about faith and truth. I’m not exaggerating—just telling the truth.

⁸In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy. 1 Timothy 2:1-8, NLT



Making Resolutions

A few years ago at about this time of year a journalist was approaching one of those “big birthdays” — the kind with a “zero” at the end — and it was causing him to be introspective about his life, past and future. In a newspaper call and in his blog he invited readers to submit their suggestions for how he could improve himself. These would be not only his new year resolutions, but because his birthday was close to the change in the calendar they would be his “rest of life” resolutions as well.

Since he was turning 40, he chose what he thought were the best 40 submitted. They were across a wide spectrum. There were, of course, the mundane and typical (those resolutions most frequently made — and broken):

- ◆ Lose 10 pounds
- ◆ Quit drinking
- ◆ Pay off credit card balances
- ◆ Stop smoking
- ◆ Find a volunteer task
- ◆ Go back to school

Others were pretty wild—of the “bucket list” variety:

- ◆ Climb Mt. Kilimanjaro
- ◆ Write your autobiography
- ◆ Run a marathon
- ◆ Skydive and scuba dive
- ◆ Read all the plays of Shakespeare

And some were very serious and touching:

- ◆ Tell your parents you love and are grateful for them once a week
- ◆ Take your daughter out for a date night
- ◆ Take a silent retreat
- ◆ Explore how to run for public office

Quite a list: 40 things to do to change your life. What would you put on your list of 40? It got me thinking—but, candidly, it was a bit overwhelming. I am just not able to concentrate on 40 new things at once. My brain, my energy level and my ambition are far too limited. If it’s going to work for me, as a resolution for New Year’s or for a milestone birthday or for recovery from surgery or for a new chapter in life, the list is going to have to be shorter!

Two Great Objects

One of the great heroes of western democratic society, and also one of the greatest and most effective Christian leaders of any century, was a man whose name is not widely known to Americans—and especially to younger generations, who tend to be overwhelmed with contemporary culture and technology to the neglect of our history and values. His name was William Wilberforce. He was a member of the British Parliament in its days of world empire. He served from the time of the American Revolution in the 1770’s through the 1830’s. His iron resolution and political skill brought about staggering changes for the good in the United Kingdom and across the far-flung British Empire. He’s buried in Westminster Abbey with the greats of his nation. If you’re interested in history and don’t know the story of Wilberforce, there is a glaring gap in your knowledge.

A child of affluence, privilege and the finest education from Cambridge, he set off on a career of building power and enjoying pleasure. He was a skeptic and agnostic in his beliefs until a profound change began in his life. He and a friend read together a book that explained the logical foundation of the Christian faith, and then they read through the New Testament. Wilberforce sought out a most remarkable older man named John Newton—now a pastor, once a slave ship captain whose life was turned towards God and who is best-known today as the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*. After wrestling through his doubts and questions, William Wilberforce decided that he did truly believe God’s Word, and he made a personal commitment to be a follower of Christ.

Less than a year after this great change in his thinking and life, Wilberforce wrote the following on a blank page of his diary: “God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of morals.” These were his two great resolutions. From that time on he applied his efforts to them. In 1807 his tireless work resulted in the abolition of the slave trade across the Empire. The rest of his years were devoted to founding charities, mission organizations, and sponsoring legislation that literally changed the morality and the social fabric of Great Britain and, by influence, the rest of the world—from improving child welfare and economic conditions to spreading the Gospel around the world.

First Church Goals for 2012

If a man of the intellect, influence and skill of Wilberforce found it necessary to focus on two great resolutions (rather than 40), I think that’s a good template for a church like ours. As we are launching ourselves onto a new sea called 2012 today, many of us have already thought about our resolutions and plans and goals. Perhaps you’ve already made your personal list.

This first day of the new calendar is a perfect setting for me to lay out the two great ends or purposes that First Church will be pursuing in the year before us. While we will do many things, corporately and individually, these two shall serve as our repeated overarching themes and goals.

Goal 1: Read the New Testament

This year will be “The Year of the New Testament.” We will focus our energies in our worship services, our educational opportunities and in our personal lives on reading and understanding this book, the second portion of the library we call the Bible. We are asking you to prayerfully consider under-

taking this challenge over the next 12 months: to personally read the New Testament. Why is this our first goal? There are a number of reasons:

In terms of its effect on human history and culture, **the New Testament is the most influential book ever written.** I do not believe a person can consider themselves to be fully and properly educated if they have no knowledge of this book. Western society for 2000 years has been profoundly impacted by it. New ideas and concepts the world had never seen before are found here. Our understanding of marriage and the ethical standards that provide the bedrock for a healthy society, the values of the work ethic that have built the modern world, the rights of individuals, the dignity of women, the concern for the poor, the establishment of limits on the power of human government, the essential dignity and worth of every human life, and the principles of transformative servant-leadership were found here before they were anywhere else. Ancient Greek and Roman culture had nothing whatsoever like the teachings of Christ and His apostles. If you read the New Testament, you will be amazed at how foundational—even how taken-for-granted—these truths are.

The New Testament is much shorter than the Old Testament—less than one-third its length. It is much easier to understand than the more ancient part of the Bible, written as it was in a world substantially closer to the urban and cosmopolitan culture of the 21st century. The New Testament is actually a fascinating and engaging story. It consists of four separate and interlocking biographies of the Greatest Man who ever lived, a book of the history of events that immediately followed Christ's life, and then personal letters and reflections by the earliest followers of Christ. It's a few hundred pages long, shorter than many best-sellers most of you have read in the past year. Those who read the New Testament are surprised by how quickly it reads and how fascinating its message is.

The New Testament speaks with a unique and personal power and relevance. Millions and millions of people have read its pages and been convinced that they are actually plugging in to the mind of God and receiving a personal Word from their Creator. Though culture and society have changed since its writing 20 centuries ago, human nature and relationships, and all the truly important issues of life, remain the same. Thus we can confidently say that the New Testament is not "ancient" but rather "timeless."

There are many different ways available to us to experience the New Testament. In the course of the next 12 months we will be following a daily

reading plan. Copies of it are available for you to pick up today and in future weeks; you can slip one into your Bible and use it—five to ten minutes of reading each morning or evening is all it takes. We are blessed with a multitude of English translations that are very readable and interesting.

Many Sundays our focus in worship services will be on some portion of the New Testament that hundreds of us have read that week. Every Sunday we will offer a time of discussion led by one of the pastors, designed to talk through the message and implications of that week’s reading portion.

But there are other options for how to reach the goal of putting the New Testament into your brain. Paul Simon claimed there were “fifty ways to leave your lover”; Forrest Gump’s friend Bubba proclaimed the dozens of ways to prepare shrimp. I don’t know how many ways there are to read the New Testament, but there are a bunch—depending on your personal lifestyle and preferences. You can read entire books of the New Testament at a single sitting, the way you would a novel. The Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of John or the Book of Acts would have a special power and interest if you went through them in a concentrated dose, like you would read John Grisham. You can listen to the New Testament as it is read by a professional actor—and there are many recordings, available on CD’s at bookstores and easy to download online. If you enjoy audio books (for example, when you’re on a long car trip or walking your dog around your neighborhood, strolling the beach, riding a bike or fishing in the bay); you may choose to listen to God’s Word on your CD player. There are e-book versions for Kindle and Nook and iPad. There are outstanding film versions of the major stories of the New Testament, including a two-hour feature film on DVD called *Jesus* (available in our BookCenter). You can watch the world-changing events unfold on your flat screen or computer. There are lots of ways to make 2012 your personal “Year of the New Testament.” If you will try it, in any form or fashion, you will be blessed—and your mind and soul will grow.

Goal 2: Pray for Our Nation

In obedience to the commands of the New Testament, we will seek as a congregation of Americans to pray earnestly for our nation in the year ahead. I don’t need to convince you that our country—and, indeed, our interconnected and mutually dependent world—are facing a number of critical challenges and problems.

Some economists and commentators are predicting disastrous financial consequences, including impending worldwide collapse. Some are predicting nuclear war with Iran or North Korea. Many politicians, of all parties and ideologies, are insisting that the upcoming presidential and congressional elections in November will determine the future course for our country in a profound way. (In fact, many of their fund-raising appeals are based on the assumption that, if the “other side” wins, America will be headed over a cliff of doom to the right or left.)

If ever in our lifetimes we needed motivation, in addition to the words of scripture, to engage in serious and concerted prayer for our nation, we sure seem to have it now. I Timothy tells us 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” (I Timothy 2:1-2). And so we will, frequently throughout this year, when we gather together corporately to worship. And we are asking and pleading with you to do the same in your personal life. We have a small booklet available in our BookCenter entitled *Prayer for Our Nation*. It is nonpartisan and solidly anchored in biblical faith. It can be a wonderful guide and help to spending a couple minutes each day lifting to the Lord our country and our world for His mercy and intervention.

While our public worship will seek the Lord on behalf of our upcoming election as well as for our economic and cultural and international peace, we will *not*, as a church, be endorsing any candidates or parties. In times of polarization and heightened emotions, to choose a controversial opinion in an election season will only divide people. I Timothy also says to us as a church: “In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy.” Partisanship angers and divides and stirs controversy. There are places when we must engage in that debate. But the New Testament warns us not to do that in our times of worship, so that we not be diluted or distracted by these things that separate us.

Of course we have strong feelings; if we didn’t love our country and care about its future it wouldn’t matter to us. I have strong feelings, as do you. I will be happy to talk with you, in settings where it is appropriate to honestly speak and respectfully listen. I gain a great deal from discussions about politics and economics and morality and social issues. I am constantly trying to learn and grow, and to discern how I should use my time and influence and vote in a free democratic society. But in our times of worship we will follow the wisdom of scripture and intentionally keep ourselves free from “anger and controversy.”

Is Prayer Irrelevant?

Some may think that prayer is irrelevant, that it's ethereal and unreal and doesn't make any difference. There may be a person here this morning who thinks that way. I will argue the opposite. And I will summon to the witness stand a person who may surprise you.

One of the leading intellectual and political lights of 18th century America was a man named Benjamin Franklin. He was a man of a brilliant mind and oratorical skill; an author and publisher, a scientist and inventor, a diplomat and statesman. He was highly respected around the civilized world of his day—and was the living proof to his contemporaries in the enlightened and cultured states of Europe that the colonials in America were clearly not just a bunch of rustic simpletons. Franklin is often spoken of, by historians with their own biased viewpoint, as being an early example of a modern skeptic and cynic. But I am convinced from my study of his life that any youthful unbelief he had was changed by his experiences in watching the hand of God's providence at work through the momentous events of his times.

Near the end of his life, the American Revolution behind him, Franklin was part of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 that was attempting to hammer out a working government for the newly-independent United States. At one point in the bickering and partisanship of the political process it looked absolutely impossible that any agreement could ever be reached, so far apart were the disputing factions. Franklin rose and made the following appeal to the delegates:

In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were very aware of the danger, we daily prayed in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers were heard and were graciously answered. I have lived a long time. And the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs the affairs of men!

And the Lord, in His mercy, intervened again to guide us into the drafting of a Constitution that has become the template of freedom for billions around the globe.

If Benjamin Franklin was convinced that prayer made a difference, then so am I. If the New Testament commands Christians to pray for our nation and its leadership, then I'm going to do so. And I invite you to join me in this great spiritual labor. If Christians across this land earnestly seek God in the coming year, what might He do in response to those prayers?

Will You Resolve?

Those, then, are the two great goals for 2012. Before you as witness, I resolve this day that I will spend time this year putting the greatest Book in all history into my brain again. And I will devote myself to praying, with unbiased and nonpartisan love for my native land, that God will again work in “the affairs of men.”

Will you join me in these two great purposes? ■

