

New Year New Start, Part 4

Hebrews 6:1-3; Ezra 7:8-10

1. Acquire God's Word.

- Ezra 7:10a; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

2. Apply God's Word.

- Ezra 7:10b; John 3:20-21; James 1:22-25

3. Advise others in God's Word.

- Ezra 7:10c; 2 Timothy 2:2

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New Year, New Start 2021

Part Four

“In the 1924 World Series, the New York Giants and the Washington Senators were tied after six games. Griffith Stadium in Washington DC was packed for the final game on October 10. The series was tied, three games apiece. In the ninth inning of the seventh game, the score was tied, two to two. The Giants came to bat; three batters came up and all three got out. The Senators’ fans started screaming. Washington could win the game with a run in the bottom of the ninth.

The first two Washington batters were put out. With two outs, up to the plate stepped a batter by the name of Leon “Goose” Goslin. The fans felt their hopes drain because Goslin was not a great hitter, certainly not a home run hitter. The pitcher threw two strikes. Then two balls. When the pitcher threw his fifth pitch, Goslin stepped into the pitch, and by the crack of the bat you knew the ball was going somewhere way out in left center field.

The center fielder went back. The other fielders also ran toward the fence, hoping the ball would not go over the fence for a home run. The ball hit the top of the fence and bounced into play. One of the fielders chased it down. Goslin, meanwhile, was between second and third bases. The third base coach thought this might be the only chance to win, so he waved Goslin home.

The throw from the outfield was cut off by the shortstop, and then relayed to home plate. Goslin slid into home in a cloud of dust, but everyone could see that Goslin had slid under the catchers tag and beat the throw. The home crowd went crazy.

The catcher followed the routine of throwing the ball around the bases, just in case, while waiting for the umpire to make the call. The umpire delayed his call. After consulting with the other umpires he cried, ‘You’re out!’

The fans went crazy. They threw pop bottles and yelled obscenities. Washington player/manager, Bucky Harris, along with his team and fans rushed onto the field, protesting the call. The umpire secured order and announced, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the batter is out...not because he didn’t beat the ball at home plate but because he didn’t touch first base!’

The game went into extra innings. It became the longest game seven in World Series history. Finally, In the bottom of the twelfth inning, the Washington Senators scored with the winning run.¹

¹ Angel Martinez, colorful and well known Hispanic evangelist from San Antonio, Texas, remembered this World Series story in his special message “Play Ball.” <https://kirbypines.com/2018/11/28/missing-first-base/>

Here's why I tell you that story; too often in our Christian lives we charge ahead, but we forget to cover all the bases, and in doing so we make things a whole lot more difficult for ourselves and the rest of our team – our church.

We are in the fifth message in our series called “New Year, New Start,” learning how to live this year to the fulness that Christ has for us, pandemic and politics notwithstanding. We began on the first Sunday of this new year with a baptism service. Then we looked at God's promise that he will do a new thing in our lives and in our church in this year. Next, we learned that we can have a *perfect* year, if we live all-in for Christ, completely committed to Him and living fully for him in the power of the Spirit. We learned that the perfect life God has for us is a life of love – love for God, love for others, and love for ourselves.

Now, if we are going to maximize that life of love, we've got to make sure we cover our bases! We don't want to charge ahead and then find out that we missed first base. We must be committed to the disciplines necessary for our continued growth; we don't want to get lax or lazy.

For some reason, we often get the idea in our Christian life that if we just keep showing up – we show up for church and maybe we spend our lives showing up to Sunday School, and maybe if we're feeling really good, we might put something in the offering – but if we just keep showing up like that, then *that's* what it means to be a Christian. But that's *nowhere* near the kind of life that God has for us to live in Christ. If all you are doing is getting spoon-fed on Sundays, you are malnourished! Listen to Hebrews 6:1-3 - -

“Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.” (Hebrews 6:1-3, niv)

Did you see that? The basics are repentance, faith, baptism, prayer for others, the resurrection, and judgment. Those are the *basics!* And yet there are many Christians that aren't even baptized, let alone moving beyond those things. If all you understand in your Christian life is the basics, all you've done is hit the ball and you're just standing there in the batter's box. You need to get moving!! Today I want to share with you a simple three-step mindset and process that we find in one seemingly obscure passage in the Old Testament. This passage has always been a source for me to go back to and remember, and to measure my own growth by.

It comes from the Old Testament book of Ezra. Before we look at it, let me give you a little context. Ezra is considered to be the one who wrote the Old Testament books of 1st and 2nd Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The Jewish people had been in captivity in Babylon, but the people were now beginning to be allowed to go back to Jerusalem. Ezra helped rebuild the Temple, and Nehemiah led the people in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem as well as rebuilding the community of God's people. Ezra and Nehemiah led a revival among the Jewish people – you can read about that in Nehemiah 7-10 (Nehemiah is one of my favorite books of the Bible). In Ezra 7 we see a short narration of Ezra's arrival from Babylon and a description of Ezra:

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. *For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.* (Ezra 7:8-10, niv, italics added)

If you saw where it said “the gracious hand of God was on him...” you might wonder what that means. That’s because Ezra had made a 900 mile trip in just four months – a trip made without cars or even horses, but at the slow pace of walking, and it was a route that was filled with dangers of being ambushed, robbed, and taken captive. To have made that trip without incident, and in such a short amount of time, is evidence that God’s hand was on him. God’s gracious hand is on you too, Christian, but it doesn’t end with that; it *starts* with that; there’s more that you must do.

From the last part of that description, we learn three things that Ezra did that sets the example for you and me, too, if we are going to continue to grow in Christ and be used by him in this new year.

The first thing we must do if we are going to grow spiritually is to...

1. Acquire God’s Word.

Notice that it said that Ezra had “devoted himself to study...” the Law, which is another way to say that he was devoted to studying the Word of God that they had at that time. He was devoted to it; out of his love for God, like we talked about last week, he wanted to learn all that he could from God’s Word. If we want to grow, we must also have this devoted desire and practice. We must devote ourselves to acquiring God’s Word, and the most effective way to do so is to study it. Why do we study it? Because, according to the Apostle Paul’s letter to Timothy:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, niv)

I want you to listen to that passage out of another translation of God’s Word called “The Message” Bible. It’s not on the screen, so just listen:

“There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us. I can’t impress this on you too strongly.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, tmt)

When we study the Word of God, it will correct us where necessary, it will train us to be holy – to be “perfect” like we talked about a couple weeks ago – and it will equip us to make a difference in our community for Christ. I don’t know how to stress this enough, other than to tell you that *you cannot separate the Christian from knowing God’s Word*. You cannot be a Christian without studying God’s Word; at least you won’t be a Christian for long without it!

No matter how many times you read the Bible, you will learn something new every time; you never stop learning.

When our boys were little, I would get up in the morning and spend my time reading and studying the Bible before they got up. Sometimes one of the boys would wake up and come out while I was reading and studying. One morning our middle boy, Ryan, who was five at the time, came out from his bedroom and saw me reading. He knew I did this every morning for as long as he could remember. He came out and sat on the couch across from me, watching me for a little while, and then he said, “Dad, aren’t you ever going to finish reading that book?” My answer was, “No, I’m not. Because every time I read it, God shows me something new.” I won’t ever stop reading and studying it because I need it – we need it – if we are going to grow at all as Christians. We must be like Ezra and be devoted to acquiring God’s Word through studying it! Take advantage of the classes that we offer; in fact, there is a new schedule of classes that you can sign up for. There are our core classes like the next one we are offering – the 102 class, in which we teach you some of the essentials you need to grow in your faith. And we have new classes that are each on only one Wednesday evening – you can sign up for any of them. You’ll find them on the app or on our website.

The second thing we must do is...

2. **Apply God’s Word.**

Ezra was devoted to studying God’s Word and we’re told that he was devoted to “observing the Law of the Lord.” When it says “observing,” it doesn’t mean that he sat there looking at it or watching it; it means that he applied it his life; he obeyed it and put it into practice.

For Ezra, to know the law of God was to know God’s mind – to understand God’s thoughts and plans – for Ezra’s own life as well as for God’s people. So it was impossible for Ezra to merely study it; it had to be lived, and lived in such a way that others could see it.

Jesus reminds us of this when he said:

“Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” (John 3:20-21, niv)

When we apply God’s Word to our lives, we will live in a way that is so contrary to the world around us that it will be obvious by our lifestyle – what we say and do – that it will be as different as night and day. It will be plainly seen! Just as you cannot separate the Christian from knowing God’s Word, *you cannot separate knowing God’s Word from obedience* to it. If we truly know God’s Word, we will obey it. God’s Word comes alive by the Spirit in the life of the Christian who studies it. If that doesn’t happen in you, either you are not studying it, or you are not a Christian. James tells us in the Bible:

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives

freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.” (James 1:22-25, niv)

I want you to hear this passage also from The Message translation because it is so descriptive of the depth of meaning in that passage – again, it’s not on the screens, so just listen:

“Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear! Those who hear and don’t act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like. But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.” (James 1:22-25, tmt)

Application *must* follow acquisition. Obedience must follow understanding. It is a danger to your Christian life to not obey.

In July 1976, Israeli commandos made a daring raid at an airport in Entebbe, Uganda, in which 103 Jewish hostages were freed. A week earlier an Air France Airbus A300 jet airliner with 248 passengers had been hijacked by two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

When the Israeli commandos began their rescue raid, in less than 15 minutes the soldiers had killed all seven of the kidnappers and set the captives free.

As successful as the rescue was, though, three of the hostages were killed during the raid, and here’s why: as the commandos entered the terminal, they shouted in Hebrew, “Get down! Crawl!” The Jewish hostages understood and lay down on the floor while the guerillas, who did not speak Hebrew, were left standing. Quickly the rescuers shot the standing kidnappers.

But two of the hostages hesitated – maybe just to see what was happening – and they were cut down as well. One young man was lying down and actually stood up when the commandos entered the airport. He, too, was shot with the bullets meant for the enemy. Had these three heeded the soldiers’ command, they would have been freed with the rest of the captives.²

Those who knew the command but didn’t obey it lost their lives. It will be very costly for you and me if we acquire God’s Word but we don’t apply it to our lives – if we don’t obey what it says.

One of the best ways to learn to obey God’s Word is in a small group; that’s where we encourage each other, spur one another on, and hold each other accountable. If you aren’t in one, now is a great time to join one!

The third example that we get from Ezra’s life is that, as we acquire God’s Word and apply it to our lives, it means we will also...

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Entebbe

3. Advise others in God's Word.

It wasn't enough for Ezra to study God's Word; he also had to obey it. But it doesn't stop there in our spiritual growth. Like Ezra, we must also advise others, or teach, or disciple others in God's Word. Remember that passage says that "Ezra devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, *and to teaching it's decrees and Laws in Israel.*" (Italics added) As Ezra understood God's Word, he knew that not only should he live it out, but so should the people around him. As he experienced the blessing of growing in God's Word, he wanted to tell everyone he could about how great life in God is. He knew enough to know that others needed to know. So the disciple became a discipler. Just as you cannot separate the Christian from knowing God's Word, and knowing God's Word from obedience to God's Word, *you cannot separate obedience from discipling others.* If you are a disciple of Jesus you will make disciples of others. After all, isn't that the real proof of having learned something; not only to have acquired and applied it, but to advise others – to teach it to others. So you can read the next book in the Old Testament – Nehemiah – and you'll see exactly what happened as a result. Take some time later to read Nehemiah 7-10 and you'll see how Ezra taught others and it resulted in a huge revival. It is an amazing story.

God desires to do the same through us. Again in 2 Timothy, the Apostle Paul – the teacher – tells Timothy - one of his young disciples, that now it is his turn to teach others:

"And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Timothy 2:2, niv)

Did you catch that? God led others to reach you so that he can use you to reach others, and on and on. I don't care who you are, what you do, or how long you've been a Christian. If you are a disciple, you must be a discipler. You must share what you know with someone who doesn't know. Your OWN growth depends on this. If you do not share the Good News with others and teach others what you've learned, you will not grow. Here's a great way: sign up for one of our classes with someone you want to disciple, then talk about it together after class.

A man hiking out of the Chugach mountains of Alaska hoped to make it to camp before a deadly blizzard hit. He was too late. The blizzard struck with such a fury that he was unable to see even two feet in front of his face. The windblown snow and ice knocked him off his feet as he struggled to find his way. Although he knew that he was only a short distance from camp, he had lost his sense of direction and couldn't determine which way to go. Finally, in the dark of night, he slumped down into a snow bank – cold, wet, and totally exhausted. He could not go any further. He resigned himself to die.

As he lay there in the snow, he thought he heard something – a faint cry, like the whimpering of a puppy. He called out to it and tried to crawl toward the sound. Sure enough, it was a dog that was also lost in the storm. The puppy had somehow been separated from its mother and was freezing to death. The man quickly began rubbing the dog's fur, trying to keep the dog's blood circulating so that the dog would survive. He warmed the dog with his breath, continuing through the night to try to keep the little puppy alive. The next day, scouts from the village found both the man and the dog alive. They

discovered that the man, by working to keep the little dog alive during the night, had kept himself alive as well.³

When we disciple someone else; when we love others enough to share with them the Good News that we know and when we disciple others, we do a lot of good for *them*, but at least as importantly, we *ourselves* are changed. We benefit. We grow. We become more like Christ. Which, in turn, compels us to make even more disciples of others.

If you are feeling spiritually empty, you may need to stop thinking about yourself, acquire God's Word, apply it, and start advising others in it. The way to spiritual health and life is to acquire it, apply it, and advise others in it.

Pray

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded you. And surely He is with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, revised for message)

³Wayne Rice, *Hot Illustrations, 1993 Youth Specialties*