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# TRANSFORMED

Changed...For Good!

Philippians 3:12-17

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Do you know what's significant about February 14? I'll give you a hint – it has nothing to do with hearts, flowers and candy. Statistically, February 14 is the date at which 80% of all New Years' resolutions are officially declared dead and forgotten. Stunning, isn't it? Within seven weeks the goals we set to improve our lives each New Years are abandoned.

I see this pattern every year. In January, the gym that I belong to is packed with people I've never seen before. They're running on my treadmill, using my locker and sweating on my mat. I mean really, who do these out-of-shape interlopers think they are? It's like walking into church and finding someone sitting in your seat! The first couple of years that I had a gym membership I gave serious consideration to quitting toward the end of January, but now I've learned not to panic. Because every year it's the same thing. By mid-February the treadmill, the locker and the mat are all mine again. Did you know that most gyms over-sell the number of memberships that the facility can handle because they know that many of those memberships won't be used for more than a month? They count on us failing to sustain our resolutions.

The problem isn't that our resolutions are bad. It's that change is hard, and it takes more than a goal and good intentions to make real, lasting change. And that's important for us to know because over the course of the last seven weeks during our Transformed series we've been setting goals, making resolutions for change. In fact, if you've got your Transformed workbook with you, open it up to pages vi and vii and you should see the goals you've set over the course of this series. Take a look at them. I'm guessing that they're good goals. I'm guessing that if you accomplished those goals you'd see some significant, positive transformation in the most important areas of your life.

Because I long to see those changes in your life and mine, and because I'd love for us all to say in December that we are more like Christ than we were back in April and May,

I want to share some wisdom from St. Paul on staying committed to our goals. This wisdom comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians. But before I read this passage, I want to set the context.

Making a commitment to follow Jesus in the first century was no easy task. Early disciples were often cast out of their families, ostracized from their communities, and faced violent persecution from both the Jewish authorities and the Roman government. So, it should come as no surprise that many people who made a commitment to follow Jesus in the first century gave serious consideration to giving up the faith. And that's exactly what was happening to disciples in the ancient city of Philippi where Paul had planted a church. Some of the people who responded to Paul's preaching and committed to following Jesus and were baptized were now thinking of turning back to their old ways. In the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages the Philippians not to give up, but to press on toward the goal of faithfully following Jesus. Let's read Philippians 3:12-17 [New Living Translation].

Those words must have had a profound impact on the Philippian disciples who were thinking about walking away from the faith, because history tells us that the Philippian church thrived. I want to share with you five simple but powerful practices from Paul that will help all of us keep our commitments to transformation.

First, **focus forward**. Throughout this passage Paul uses the metaphor of running a race. And if you've ever run in a race you learn pretty quickly that looking backward is a bad idea. It not only slows you down but it can trip you up. Paul encourages disciples to focus forward on the finish line.

And that's true in relationship to our goals. If you want to achieve your goals, focus forward. That means at least two things. First, it means keeping our eyes on the goal we've set of aligning each area of our lives to the life of Christ. In fact, one of the simplest and most effective ways of increasing the likelihood that you'll achieve your goals is to read them every morning. Otherwise we forget and fall back into old patterns. And no matter what goals we've chosen during this Transformation series, it's important to remember that our focus is on the finish line, which is becoming more and more like Jesus in daily life.

But second, focusing forward means letting go of the failures and setbacks we are bound to experience along the way. Holding onto them will merely slow our progress

and discourage us. Maybe today as you reflect back on the goals you wrote, you realize that you've already failed to keep your commitments. That's OK. Let it go. What matters isn't what you did yesterday, but what you'll do today. Focus forward.

Second, **stay in the Word**. Paul called the Philippians back into the truth of God's grace revealed in Jesus. And that's great advice for us, too. Immersing ourselves daily in the story of God's love revealed in Jesus grounds us in grace, reminding us that transformation is ultimately the Spirit's work in us, not our work. The truth of God's Word combats the voice of our inner critic who tells us that we are worthless failures and that we'll never succeed. That's a lie! The truth is, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us! Remember our theme verse, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed through the renewal of your mind." Nothing will continually renew our mind like filling it with God's Word. Let me put it another way: when we fix our minds on God's Word, God fixes our minds!

Third, **surround yourself with the right community**. The company we keep has an enormous impact on us, especially when we're trying to make change in our lives. Some people will try to pull us back into old habits and old ways of being. But they will not help you move forward. That was certainly true of the Philippians and Paul warned them about it. Instead, surround yourself with people who will encourage you, cheer you on and hold you accountable. A healthy small group can be a tremendous asset when you're trying to make change. And for some of us, the best way to stay in the Word is to read it in community because then we hear it from multiple perspectives. We wrestle with it together. I can't emphasize enough how surrounding yourself with supportive community will help you grow spiritually and dramatically increase your chances of achieving your goals.

Fourth, **follow successful examples**. I love Paul's boldness as he writes to the Philippians. He says, "*Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example.*" What great advice! Sometimes we just need a little inspiration when we're trying to make change in our lives, and some of the best inspiration can come from those who are achieving the very goals we've set for ourselves. Did you set a goal of establishing a daily devotional life? Find someone who has one and ask how they did it. Did you set a goal of surrendering a negative attitude and asking God to give you a positive outlook? Find someone with a positive outlook and ask how they keep it. And if you're hesitant to ask, just remember that most people love talking about their successes. They'll gladly share with

you the struggles they faced along the way, and how they overcame them.

Finally, **don't give up; give it up!** It's tempting to give up when things get tough, or when we're having a bad day, or when we've failed and think, "Why bother?" But rather than give up, we're called to "give it up." That is to say, we're called to surrender, to confess that we cannot change ourselves and admit that it is the power of the Spirit at work in us that ultimately changes us into the likeness of Christ. It isn't so much about our effort; it's about the Spirit's work. As Paul writes in a chapter earlier in his letter to the Philippians, "*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*" (Phil. 2:12-13 NIV) That way, when you do experience real change in your life you won't pat yourself on the back; you'll lift your hands in praise of the One who accomplished in you what you could not accomplish in yourself.

Next week we're beginning a summer-long series on how we're called to partner with the Holy Spirit to accomplish Jesus' mission in the world. When we pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we're giving voice to our mission statement as a church. We're called and empowered to partner with God's Spirit to reveal the Kingdom of God's love right here. That's why it's so important for us to lean into the Transformed goals that we set. God uses broken, transformed, Spirit-filled people just like you and me to usher in the Kingdom.

So, here's what I want to challenge you to do today. If you're committed to the goals you set and to living into St. Paul's wisdom, I want you to express that commitment. In a moment we're going to sing, and as we're singing I want to challenge you to come up to one of the chalkboards and write down one goal from this Transformed series that you're willing to commit to. If you've set a goal for each week of this series, a gold star for you! I challenge you to write down the goal that you think will be most difficult to achieve. Now, this all might seem silly, but that simple act will accomplish two important things. Physically writing those words deepens the commitment of our hearts, and stepping out inspires others to do the same, reminding us that we're not taking this journey alone. In addition, we'll be praying for you and for these goals at our staff chapel on Tuesday.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today is NOT February 14. Today is NOT the day we give up. Today is the day we commit ourselves to being transformed for God's work in the world. Let's sing, and let's commit ourselves to the Lord.