



Catalog No. 7307

Various

1st Message

John Hanneman

January 1, 2012

TAKING INVENTORY: A TIME FOR REFLECTION AND COMMUNION

I love the painting you see on the screen behind me of a bench at St. Remy by Vincent Van Gogh. The empty bench is very inviting to me. It invites me to sit and spend time with God, simply “waste time” with Jesus. That is our goal on this New Year’s Day 2012. New Year’s is always a great day for reflection, to look back at the past year and notice how God has been moving in our lives. I don’t want us just to review the year based on circumstances and events, but to contemplate the hidden movements of the Spirit – the undercurrents of God’s presence – to see how God was at work in our hearts and our relationships.

To help us reflect thoughtfully, I want to talk about four ideas presented by James Wilhoit in his book, *Spiritual Formation, as if the Church Mattered*.¹ Indeed the Church does matter because it is the local assembly where we are being formed into the image of Jesus. The four topics for reflection are: receiving, remembering, responding, and relating.

Receiving

The first topic for reflection is *receiving*. When we become Christians we instantly begin to ask, “What should I be doing?” It is easy to carry our performance-oriented world into our emerging spiritual life. In other words, we measure our spiritual life through our performance and church activities. But foundational to our life in Christ is what we receive from God.

We just celebrated Christmas and we were reminded that Jesus is God’s greatest gift to humanity; we were invited to receive this infant in our hearts. This baby Jesus, God coming to us in the flesh, is the one to whom we were to open our hearts and receive him in. That is how we begin our spiritual journey, by receiving Jesus. John says,

to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God (John 1:12–13 TNIV).

Your life in Christ began simply by receiving Jesus. But as we continue in our journey, it is important for us to continue to receive. The act of receiving is essential to a healthy and vibrant soul.

James Wilhoit writes, “Christian spiritual formation requires that we actively and continually receive from God. We need to be extraordinary consumers of his grace; we need to receive his words of love and correction, his forgiveness, his

affirmation, his life, and the list goes on. Without receiving from God, there is no true formation.”²

I love that phrase, “extraordinary consumers of his grace.” We live in a consumer society, but the object of our consumption needs to change from material possessions to the grace of God.

In order to receive from God, three perspectives are helpful. First, we need to have a profound understanding of our sin (both personal and corporate) and what the cross says about our sin. Our sin is deeply internal and cannot be solved through a sin management program or through self-effort.

Second, we need to have an awareness of our yearnings and longings and bring these to God and allow God to be the source of what we receive to answer these longings. No idol, nothing in this world, is going to satisfy the longings of our heart (an “if-only” cure).

Third, we need a deep conviction that all growth comes from grace. We continue to rely on receiving grace after conversion. As we spend time with God and pray, it is not so much a matter of what we say to God – it is listening to what God says to us. Prayer, then, is not so much giving God our wish list as it is receiving from him the grace we need daily, even hourly. I am reminded of the words of Isaiah inviting us to come and receive even though we have nothing to offer to God:

**Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters; and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!**

**Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.**

**Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?**

**Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.**

Give ear and come to me;

listen, that you may live. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

Isaiah invites us to simply come to God with empty hands because we don’t have anything to offer. We can’t buy anything from God. We simply come to receive from God. Looking back on this past year, what did you receive from God? Perhaps you received a deeper sense of God’s love or an affirmation that you have been unable to obtain through your own self-effort. Maybe it was grace or comfort in the midst of suffering. Maybe it was a release from the burden of guilt. Perhaps it was the ability to love someone who has hurt you deeply.

What would you want to receive from him today? As you search your heart, what would you tell God that you wish to receive from him today?

Remembering

The second topic for reflection is *remembering*. This idea is deeply rooted in the people of God, because in the Old Testament, Israel was always encouraged, even commanded, to remember their spiritual history, their spiritual story.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you ... to teach you that people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8.2-3).

The reason Israel was instructed to remember the Lord was so they would not forget him. Forgetting is the opposite of remembering. The danger that Israel faced and that we face today is our tendency to forget the Lord.

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deut. 8.11-14; 17-18)

We remember God so that we don't forget God and start believing that we have done it on our own. What Israel was to remember was the work of God in their lives, primarily his works of salvation and deliverance, his works of grace and provision, and his faithfulness throughout the generations to keep his covenant promises.

**Give praise to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing of him, sing his praises;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced
For he remembered his holy promise
given to his servant Abraham.
He brought out his people with rejoicing,
his chosen ones with shouts of joy
(Psalm 105.1-3, 5 42-43)**

Just like Israel, we have individual stories and corporate stories. Our individual story is important – how God has delicately woven the tapestry of our life, how he brought salvation to us in Christ, how he defeated the enemies we have faced, how he has resurrected us to new life. And our corporate story is equally important. We must not see ourselves merely as a lone Christian; we must always see ourselves as a part of the community of faith, both local and global, those who have put their trust in Jesus. And we share a salvation history with those who have gone before and those who will come after.

It is so important for us to know our story and how our story connects to the gospel story. Our life is not a series of random events. We don't separate the events of our life into those things that were good and those that were bad. We see our life holistically as the work of God to form us into Christ. We see everything as grace and cause for gratitude. We can even be grateful for our sins because they lead us into deeper intimacy with God and that becomes part of our story. All our life, everything is part of the tapestry of salvation that God has woven as our story.

As we reflect on this past year, we might look for the spiritual themes that took shape in our life and how they connected into our larger story. What was God doing? What was I learning? Can I see God's faithfulness? What have I been able to let go of or submit to? Remembering the Lord is designed to lead us into praise and thanksgiving because we realize that the Lord Jesus is the captain and shepherd of our soul – and we are not.

In a moment we will take part in the Lord's Supper, the sacrament given to the church so that we may never forget but remember our Lord Jesus Christ – his life, his death, and his resurrection.

Responding

The third topic for reflection is *responding*, rendering service to the Lord. When we take the time to receive from God and remember the Lord, we cannot help but overflow with the desire to serve and love other people. We are designed to be pipes not buckets. We don't just fill ourselves, but what fills us flows out of us into community.

This is what Jesus said in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38).

Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit; we come and receive, and what we receive flows from within us out to others. James Wilhoit writes, “When we see holiness as merely avoiding bad action, we become passive and wall ourselves off from the world. True piety leads to service, but false piety leads to self-protection. True piety produces depth of soul; false piety yields shallow hypocrisy.”³

Responding to the Lord is not just for some people who seem to be particularly endowed with miraculous gifts. Rather, each and every one of us is created uniquely in God to function in this world and in the church as a vessel for the Lord. “Serving has such a formative effect because it provides clear evidence that my contribution matters.”⁴

Your contribution, whatever it is, uniquely given to you by God, really matters.

In this regard, let me offer a couple of things to think about. First, it is important that the size of the pipe coming into our hearts matches the size of the pipe going out. If our intake is a 1/2 inch pipe and our outflow is a 2 inch pipe, sooner or later we are going to run dry and burnout. This often happens in Christian ministry. You have to keep some balance.

Second, service is not about filling a ministry slot but about loving people. The Lord quoted Isaiah 61 when he described his ministry:

**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion (Isaiah 61.1-3)**

This is not a list of ministry slots. We have been called into the same ministry of evangelism, counseling, comforting, encouraging, teaching, and praying, and have been empowered by the Holy Spirit toward that end. Much of the time this doesn’t take place in a defined, public way. More often than not it is out of the way, where nobody notices. Service is more of a calling than a Christian duty that I ought to do.

Service comes by centering our lives on the gospels, cultivating a spirit of hospitality, developing compassion for a broken world, practicing forgiveness as a lifestyle, and learning that it is not about me. When we respond to God’s grace, these desires just well up inside of us. They aren’t burdens to do in our own strength, but rather are life-giving opportunities empowered by the Spirit of God.

Larry Crabb writes, “A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who turn their chairs toward each other because they know they cannot make it alone.”⁵

God never intended us to make it alone. So we might ask, “How has God been using you in the lives of others this past year?” What serving opportunities were life giving to you? Can you see a sense of calling in those things? What might he be calling you to do this year? Remember, you don’t have to do everything and no one else needs to see it.

Relating

Finally we can reflect on the idea of relating.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25 TNIV).

We all have a variety of relationships – people we desire to witness to, counselors who help us deal with crisis and heal from past wounds, mentors who help us develop our abilities in our careers and guide us like a coach, disciples who train us in how to study the bible, lead bible studies and intercede in prayer, and spiritual directors who help us to listen to the Holy Spirit in our lives.

But perhaps most overlooked are spiritual friendships. Spiritual friends are people on a relatively equal basis who meet to support, encourage, and pray for each other’s spiritual journey. Most of us have people who we trust and share our lives – the real stuff of what is happening deep down in our hearts, the “down and dirty.” It doesn’t take much to take our friendships to a deeper level by simply asking, “Where is God in midst of this circumstance? When you think about what is going on inside, what might God be saying?”

“Spiritual friendship is a relationship devoted to paying attention to the invitations of God in our lives and supporting one another in making a faithful response.”⁶

Spiritual friendships are cultivated by being intentional about our relationships, and these friendships require that we keep relational commitments – letting our yes be yes and our no be no. Spiritual friendships create safe space where we can confess sin and seek accountability. This is one of the things that keeps the church healthy, having people in our lives to whom we really confess our sin. When we bring out the darkness in our hearts and expose it to the light of Christ, the power of sin is broken. Spiritual friendship is also about learning to keep confidences and avoid gossip. Gossip is devastating to the community of faith because it divides people. I know the effect it has had in my own life, forcing me to withdraw from community rather than enter more deeply into community. Finally, spiritual friendships develop skills of listening and discerning. Don’t be thinking about what you want to say when the other person stops talking. Listen to what someone is telling you. Discern it from the Holy Spirit. That is spiritual friendship and all of us can have this kind of relationship on a weekly basis, which can become an aspect of our spiritual lives that encourages our growth in our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we close off this past year, we might reflect on the people in our lives. Do we have spiritually enriching relationships? What relationships do you have that support, challenge, and encourage spiritual formation? Are we investing ourselves in community, or are we just going to church and then going about the rest of our lives with the remainder of our week? With whom might God be calling us to develop a spiritual

friendship? Of course, as a pastor here, I contemplate how our church can help develop these types of relationships. I hunger for that for you because I have seen how valuable these relationships have been in my own life.

“Most of the deeply forming events of our lives will come in the midst of relationships. ... Relating is where the rubber of formation teaching and longing meets the road of life.”⁷ E. M. Bounds wrote, “People are God’s method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better people.”⁸

Conclusion

Hopefully I have given you some things to ponder today. I encourage you on this first day of a new year to reflect on the four aspects of spiritual life we discussed – receiving, remembering, responding, and relating.

As we come now to the Lord’s Table, let me offer this prayer so we can begin a dialogue with God:

Holy One,
 there is something I wanted to tell you
 but there have been errands to run,
 bills to pay,
 arrangements to make,
 meetings to attend,
 friends to entertain,
 washing to do ...
 and I forget what it is I wanted to say to you,
 and mostly I forget what I’m about,
 or why.
 O God,
 don’t forget me, please,
 for the sake of Jesus Christ ...

O Father in Heaven,
 perhaps you’ve already heard what I wanted to tell you.
 What I wanted to ask is
 forgive me,
 heal me,
 increase my courage, please.
 Renew in me a little of love and faith,
 and a sense of confidence,
 and a vision of what it might mean
 to live as though you were real,
 and I mattered,
 and everyone was sister and brother.
 What I wanted to ask in my blundering way is
 don’t give up on me,
 don’t become too sad about me,
 but laugh with me,
 and try again with me,
 and I will with you, too.⁹

1. James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation, as if the Church Mattered* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 2008).

2. Wilhoit, 77.

3. Wilhoit, 161-162.

4. Wilhoit, 151.

5. Larry Crabb, quoted by Wilhoit, 161.

6. Ruth Haley Barton, quoted in Wilhoit, 186.

7. Wilhoit, 191.

8. E. M. Bounds, quoted in Wilhoit, 186.

9. Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace* (Quoted in *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, Ruth Haley Barton, IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2008) 33-34.