

**Directly trying to perfect ourselves doesn't work**  
*Sermon by Andy Wurm, Christmas 1, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2018*

As we wind up 2018, ready to start a new year, with resolutions of new behaviours and attitudes, we are given a helpful reminder of something to undergird the year ahead: we are 'God's chosen ones, holy and beloved' (Col. 3:12). By that Paul doesn't mean we are more special than others. Rather he is referring to our knowing that we are valued and loved by God. It's at the core of our faith. Everyone is valued and loved by God, but not everyone is aware of it. We should be. And when we are, it makes all the difference. If all humanity comes to know it is loved by God, then it will be better able to fulfil its purpose as stewards of creation.

Paul provides a list of attitudes and behaviours (compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, admonition, gratitude), not as things to strive for, but what should be possible if we live in the awareness that we are valued and loved. They go hand in hand really, so he's trying to encourage us to let those attitudes and behaviours be manifest in our lives.

Any of us could have written that list. We all probably have our own version of it in our heads, except that certain attitudes and behaviours take priority over others, because they are the ones we need to develop. For example, I may be the most patient person in the world, but struggle with forgiveness. And the possibilities of what might be on our list are far wider than Paul's list. It might include things such as overworking or laziness, addiction to technology, addiction to alcohol, being unfit etc.

The end of the year and beginning of a new one is an opportunity to take stock, check what's not right in your life and commit to making it right. Paul's reminder that we are valued and loved by God is a good start, even if only because it motivates us into working to change our attitudes and behaviours, for example, if a person is valued and loved by God, then why would they be striving for attention from others? Or if a person is valued and loved by God, why would they be anxious about missing out on things, and therefore be competitive with others? Such behaviours are unnecessary, which indicates either a lack of awareness of being valued and loved by God, or the presence of factors that prevent awareness of it affecting our behaviour. That means there is work to do, i.e. translating what is believed into action.

In theory, knowing you are valued and loved by God should be enough to change your behaviour and attitudes, however, it doesn't quite work that way. Somewhere else, Paul says he can't start behaving in ways he wants to, and he can't stop behaving in ways he doesn't want to. The problem is that most of our attitudes and behaviours are deeply ingrained, and our will power seems unable to penetrate too far below the surface. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic, suggests two paths that can help us change.

He suggests that bad habits are very hard to break by a direct attack. We often end up focussing too much on the bad habit, and our state of mind becomes dependent on the degree to which we are triumphing over it. It becomes more important than it is and can even grow in significance in our lives – like the person who worked so hard on his weaknesses that he developed strong weaknesses. A better approach is what John of the Cross describes as cauterising our bad habits, by focussing on what is good in our lives, and nurturing our virtues, so they eventually burn out our bad habits.

An example would work like this: say you are someone who responds angrily to being ignored, what you could do is work on being generous. The more generous you are, the less you will find yourself responding as you did before, because your heart will grow bigger. When giving away becomes more important to you, not being noticed becomes less important.

John's second suggestion is to reframe the instinct that lies behind your bad habit, and reframe it into a higher love. We start by examining why we behave as we do. Why do I get so angry? Why do I want revenge? What is at the bottom of this? Surprisingly, the answer is love. It's not that we lack love, it's just that we have problems with our love. Most of us actually want to be kind and generous to others, and wish the best for them, even though at the same time we are sometimes selfish, petty and caught up in our addictions.

Ron Rolheiser says that we have these bad attitudes and habits not because we aren't motivated by love but because, at certain points, our love is disordered, wounded, bitter, undisciplined, or self-centered. But it's still love, the best of all energies, the very fire of the image and likeness of God within us. So before anything else, we need to recognise and honour the energy that lies beneath and drives our bad habit. And then we need to reset that energy into a higher framework of love. It's the opposite of repression. (When we repress habits or behaviours, we go against our own energy, and so we fight against ourselves, and that doesn't work. Unconsciously the old self will hold on or reassert itself.)

How do we reset our energy into a higher framework of love? That's not so much a matter of effort as letting be. It's taking Paul's reminder that we are valued and loved by God and allowing ourselves to experience it, so that the experience will transform us. We do that by taking our love that is disordered, wounded or whatever, and offering it to God. Simply sit with God and show God what's there and offer it to God in prayer, for example, saying 'God, I want everyone's attention because my step-father never gave it to me. As much as I try, I can't change that, so over to you'. Don't even ask God to fix it, just let God see it, let God have it. And it's important here to not be ashamed of our personal disorder, wounds or whatever. We need the same attitude as we should bring to saying the *Confession of Sin* in public worship. We need have no fear of doing so, because we are confessing our sin to the One who loves us – not to one who condemns us. There is nothing we could do to make God love us more, so we can relax when saying the confession. We're not grovelling to One who is against us. All it means is acknowledging we are flawed like everyone else, and allowing ourselves to be set free of it. It's a liberation.

We are valued as God's chosen ones. Like everyone else, we are valued and loved by God, but unless that affects the way we behave, it doesn't mean anything.

In closing, I must say something about today's *Prayer of the Day*, which begins 'God of community, whose call is more insistent than ties of family or blood..' That's pretty close to the bone for today, as I finish up at All Souls' and head for the hills. The prayer reinforces Paul's words really, because it's saying that while things such as family are of value, there is something of even greater value, which is God's love – what it does to us and with us, and what it calls us to be and do.