

Dear Friend,

I spend many hours each week writing with the use of a computer. I regularly complete one document and begin another. I begin each new document by clicking on the icon at the top of screen entitled "New Blank Document." A blank, white screen immediately pops up and I begin to type. When I type, I put down on the "paper" in black and white letters, the immaterial thoughts in my mind. I make visible what is invisible.

Every twelve months we are given a "New Blank Year" upon which to write. As we end one year and begin another we have the opportunity to evaluate what we've "written" and to consider what we want to "write" this next year. We cannot edit what we have written but we do have the opportunity to lay out the theme and major plot lines for what we want to write on the blank sheet of 2004. I want to suggest that each of us take some time in the next few days to do some critiquing of what we wrote in 2003 and some planning for what we want to write in 2004.

There are a number of intriguing passages in the Scriptures that describe how our invisible faith becomes visible. In Mark 2 we are told the story of four people who carried their paralytic friend on a stretcher to be healed by Jesus. When they discovered that there was no way to get near Jesus, due to the large crowd gathered there, they went on the roof, dug a hole through the roof and lowered their friend on his stretcher in front of Jesus. Mark 2:5 says, "When Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, 'My Son, your sins are forgiven.'" Their trust was made evident by their actions. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love." James writes in his letter, "Show me your faith apart from works and I will show you my faith by my works."

As Christians, who profess to trust in Jesus Christ as the all-satisfying treasure of our lives (Luke 9:23-26) we ought to consider how our faith is being shown in our actions. Here is a question we can use to look at what we've written and to plan what we will write in 2004. "In what ways did I show (will I show) that Jesus Christ is the center of my life? How do I demonstrate in how I use my time, how I spend my money, how I relate to my family, how I do my work, how I relate to the members of my church, etc. that I love Jesus Christ more than anyone and everything else?"

There are several things we need to remember when we engage in this sort of self-examination. First, we must do this with God's help. We need to pray as David did, "Search me O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts." Second, we need to remember, especially as we consider the past that we have a great high priest who has shed his blood for our sins so that we have free access to God, not because of what we have done but because of what he has done. Third, when we see evidence of faith, we should praise God for his grace because it is as true of us as it was of Paul, "By the grace of God, I am what I am."

Fourth, we need to plan to change. The means God has appointed for our growth in holiness are no different from how humans change in any other area of their lives. We believe that a desired behavior is more necessary to our happiness and so we act on what we believe. Let me give you an example. 1 Peter 3:9 says, "Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult but with blessing because to this you were called, so that you might inherit a blessing." You believe, based on this

promise, that the way to experience the presence and the power of God in greater ways is for you to stop returning insults when your spouse (co-worker, sibling, parent, etc.) becomes angry with you. You plan in advance, ways you are going to not speak when you are treated poorly and ways you are going to seek to bless this person when they insult you. Your response to this person is the subject of your prayers, not him and his behavior. As you refrain from retaliating and seek to bless the one who injures you, you are making visible, your invisible faith.

Finally, as we engage in this evaluation and planning, we need to do it in the community of faith. It would be wise to tell someone else how you are evaluating last year and planning for the next year. We need the input of others to keep us from two errors, being too hard on ourselves and not being hard enough. Involving other trusted friends in our year-end assessments can be a great assist to our writing a more God glorifying treatise this next year.

Writing by grace,