New Years Day Service

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[0:00] Well for a short while together this morning I'd like us to turn to the passage that we read in 2 Corinthians and we can read again from verse 17 where Paul writes, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed, behold, the new has come.

New Year's Day is a unique day in the calendar. A new year has begun, it's a new chapter and in so many ways it's a fresh start. It's often a time of optimism for the year ahead.
It's a time of determination to do things differently. It's a time of excitement about the opportunities that the coming year might bring.
So it's a really positive day but at the same time it can easily be a time where we maybe feel a little bit frustrated thinking there's so many things that I wish were different.
It can be a time of anxiety where we look ahead and we think well I'm not sure what's going to happen. But I think the key thing though about New Year's Day is that it's an opportunity to stop and think.
[1:17] And if there's anything that's true about Scotland on the 1st of January in 2022, it's that the busyness of life, the pressures of work, the relentless flood of communication, information and entertainment that we receive every day, all of that means that people hardly ever have the opportunity to stop and think.

So that's what I want us to do today. And as we do that I want us to ask the question, what difference does the Gospel make? To my life?
What difference does the Gospel make to my life as we start a new year together? And that's a massively important question for everyone here, for everyone watching at home. For everyone who's a committed disciple of Jesus, we've got to get that question right because it's crucial that it's the Gospel and not something else that we use as the framework to shape both how we understand life and also how we behave in every aspect of our lives.
For anyone who's maybe not sure where they stand with Jesus or for somebody who's a believer but lacks assurance or for somebody who's maybe slipped back in their faith, you've got to get this question right because it'll help you take the next step forward in following Jesus.
And for anyone who's not particularly interested in the Gospel, for someone who's consciously saying no, I don't want it, then you've got to get this question right as well because if you don't then you don't even know what you're rejecting.
[2:58] And there's a very good chance that you're dismissing a version of Christianity that isn't Christianity at all. So we've all got to ask the question, what difference does the Gospel make to your life?

Now obviously that's a very big question and we could spend all year thinking about it. Today I just want to focus on one or two key things and to help us all stay alert after staying up to the midnight last night, we're going to draw a diagram.
You must be thinking, oh well, no surprise there. We might start, might as well start the year as, start as we mean to go on and we're going to draw a lovely diagram to help us today. So in terms of our lives, firstly we need to draw us three periods, we've got the past, the present and the future.
These three are distinct but inseparable, that's a phrase that we often use in terms of theology but it applies in lots of other parts of life. Past, present and future are distinct but inseparable.
So we're right here today in the present but our present today is hugely shaped by our past and that inevitably is going to have a massive influence on our future.
[4:12] I mentioned a few weeks ago that I have a thorough dislike for scary movies and I think that that comes from my past and one incident in particular that I can remember is that I was at a friend's house and in the background there was, I can't remember what it was, it was either

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Gremlins or Critters that was on the telly.

Now anybody who grew up in the 90s may remember those films. It was on the background I kind of saw it and it scared me and as a result of that right now in my present I hate scary movies and in my future I ain't watching any and so it all connects together, they're distinct but they're inseparable. Our past, present and future are all profoundly interlinked and in terms of thinking about them there's two big categories that shape how we view each of these, our past, our present and our future.
In fact these two categories are possibly the biggest influences that define people all around us in Scotland today and the categories are stuff that's been done by me, by me, by myself and stuff that's been done to me.
These two categories have a huge influence and make a massive difference to our past, our present and our future, our lives are shaped both by what we have done and what has been done to us.
[5:46] Now that can refer to positive things in lots of different ways. An example of that is school, now anyone here who's in school be thinking I thought you said positive, school's not positive but thinking globally, thinking historically, school is a very positive thing and if you think about school there's lots that you've done and in saying that I'm not just talking to people who are currently in school but to all of us, there's stuff that you've done that shape who you are so you studied, you worked hard, you learned and there's been a lot that's done to you so you've been taught, guided, corrected, steered and helped and the result is that now in the present you are educated, you're able to read, to write, to count and that then shapes the plans that you can make for the future because it gives you opportunities that you wouldn't have had otherwise.

And there's loads of different other examples of positive stuff done by us, positive stuff done to us that have a beneficial effect on our past, our present and our future but more often than not the biggest influence on our lives is not the positive experiences that we've had, it's the negative ones and it's these that I want us to think about more because these are the ones that are more powerful. So in terms of our past we can look back and see things that we've done that we regret and we can see things that have been done to us that have left bruises. So that can happen in a thousand ways in terms of stuff done by us, things that we've said that we wish we hadn't, mistakes we've made, bad choices that we've taken and things that people have done to us, things that they've said to us or opportunities that have passed us by or things in life that didn't turn out the way that we wanted them to in terms of career or relationships or whatever it may be. All of that, all of these things can leave us frequently plagued by the questions, why did
I do that and why did that have to happen to me? So in terms of our two big categories, our past can be full of regrets and bruises. The key point though is that all of that shapes our present so putting arrows in our diagram to say that these things that happen in our past have a huge influence on our present. So in terms of things that we've done that we wish we hadn't done that can leave us feeling insecure because you think oh I'm just so disappointed with myself and we can lack self-esteem, we can lack self-confidence. In terms of the stuff done to us it can leave us frustrated, hurt, maybe even bitter. Now in saying this I could have chosen different terms, these are just pointing us to general categories of experience, resentment, frustration, bitterness. When you see that word bitterness it's just referring to all of that stuff. The things that we've done leave us a bit insecure, the things done to us leave us frustrated and bitter. All of that shapes how we approach the future.
On the one hand there's pressure, pressure to achieve, pressure to impress others, pressure to make sure we don't make the same mistakes again and on the other hand there's fear, fear about what might happen, fear that we will muck up, fear that we might get bruised again. Now whenever we do a diagram like that, especially one that's supposed to kind of describe life, we've got to acknowledge that a diagram like that is always at risk of oversimplification because life is never really a neat diagram with categories and lines and all that stuff.
Life is much more like a plate of spaghetti or a tangled web where everything is tied up and interlinked. So I do kind of just acknowledge that this is an oversimplification and there's a sense in which everything overlaps both vertically and horizontally. But despite that and recognising that, I do think that it's helpful to think in these categories. I find it very helpful to think in these categories because I think that they accurately describe how many, if not all of us, feel as we go into 2022. And you can test that. And the best way to test it is just to apply each aspect of the diagram to your own

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life. So do you look into your past and see regrets? Do you see things that you wish you hadn't done, wish that you'd never said? Do you look into your past and see bruises and think, that hurt? And I wish that hadn't happened to me. Do you come here today with insecurities?
[11:01] So that might be about what you've achieved, or it might be about how you look, or it might be about how other people think of you. A good way to test is to ask yourself, do you ever feel judged by other people? And so often that can be related to the insecurities that we might have. Do you come here today with frustrations, maybe even with bitterness, about something? A good test for that is to ask yourself, have you ever said the words, that's not fair. And often that sentiment can come from a frustration, maybe even from a bitterness. Do you look at the year ahead and feel pressure? Pressure at school or at work? Pressure in terms of money or in terms of success or status? Do you look at the year ahead and feel worried? I feel all of these things. And I'd be amazed if there's anyone here who doesn't. And the key point is that all of these work together to shape and define us. Our past, both what we've done and what's been done to us, shapes how we feel right now in the present, and that has a massive influence on how we approach the future. In other words, the arrows on the diagram are very, very powerful. And the end result of all this can manifest itself in two main ways. For some people, the priority is to protect yourself. So we can keep people at arm's length, shy away from risks, just stay in the background and very often we just want to hide, which don't want anyone coming near to us. So some people, the priority is to protect yourself. For other people, the priority is to prove yourself. So they'll push themselves forward. They'll look for attention. They'll work hard to impress others. And this is a fascinating thing that you see right from the school playground in infant years of primary, right through to the workplace, all the way coming up to retirement. That you can see two types of people. On the one hand, you can see the people who have little or no self confidence. And on the other hand, you can see people who are absolutely full of themselves. And yet both these kinds of behavior come from the same source. The person who won't let anyone else near them is dominated by their regrets and bruises. And that's why they want to protect themselves. The person who wants everyone to give them attention is dominated by their regrets and bruises. That's why they want to prove themselves. And we're all one or the other, or a mixture of the two in different parts of our lives. And we are particular experts at this in Scotland. And the proof of that lies in the fact that whenever anyone asks us, how are you? 99.9% of the time we are going to reply by saying, I'm fine. And in that response, occasionally we are fine.

But very often we're either trying to protect ourselves because we don't want anyone to come too close, or we're trying to prove ourselves because we don't want anyone to see our weaknesses. Or we're doing a bit of both. Maybe all of this sounds a little bit depressing and maybe it is, but it's crucial that we think about it all because all of this stuff dominates people's lives today. Now I don't just mean dominates in terms of church. I mean in terms of Scotland, our nation, Western secular society in 2022 is dominated by this kind of stuff.
Our nation's full of people who are defined, whose lives are defined by the negative things that they've done themselves or that have been done to them. That's part of the reason why social media, sport and shopping are so popular because they're a great distraction.
They're a great way of taking our minds off these things. They're a great way of masking our insecurities and they can even be a way of making ourselves look more impressive to others. That's part of the reason why relationships are breaking down so frequently in our society because when somebody wrongs us, we feel bruised and we resent it. It's the other person's fault. They're the ones who've got a problem. In fact, they are the problem and relationships break down very easily. And this is part of the reason why the NHS is facing a mountain of mental health issues because all over Scotland people are under pressure to the point of breaking. People are fearful to the point of being crippled. Today, as we start a new year, our past, our present and our future are all shaped and defined by the things done by us and the things done to us. The two key questions arise. One is, do you agree with the diagram? Do you think it's accurate? That's just something I want you to go away and think about. Do these categories accurately reflect what you see in the world around you?
[16:20] Like that, I'm not saying it is, it's just my attempt and there's probably better ways to think about it, but it's good to just think in these categories. I'd love for you to go and think and chat a little bit more about whether you think that's an accurate description of life today. That's one key question. The other key question though is, what difference does the Gospel make? Well, first of all,

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the Gospel doesn't take any of that away. Now you might think, well, that's not particularly helpful, but it's actually one of the things that makes the Gospel utterly brilliant. The Gospel is brilliant because it doesn't pretend that life is rosy and nicey, nicey. The Bible has got no interest in vague, therapeutic, wishful thinking. The Bible is utterly realistic. And one of the key things about the Bible is that it recognizes these two categories, the reality of the influence of the stuff done by us and the stuff done to us. The Bible confronts us with the fact that we are accountable for what we have done in our lives. And you can see that clearly in chapter 10 of chapter five that we read, speaking about the fact that ultimately we are all going to have to give an account to God, to Jesus in his judgment on the final day. But the Bible also recognizes the fact that we are on the receiving end of suffering ourselves. Paul speaks about that in chapter six, speaking about hardships, calamities, riots, imprisonments and all sorts of disasters that can happen. In other words, the Bible diagnoses the fact that we are all victims and villains. We are all sinners and sufferers. That's why if you look at the

Psalms, they're full of two things. They're full of confession for the stuff done by us. They're full of complaint about the stuff done to us. The Bible recognizes it so clearly.
So have I been wronged in my life? Yes, I have. Have I done stuff wrong in my life? Yes, I have. And all of that's because of the reality of sin. The world is broken and so are we.
And that's why the framework that the Bible gives us helps us to so accurately diagnose all the dynamics that we see in the culture around us. The Gospel doesn't pretend for one minute that these things aren't there. And it doesn't take these things away from your past or your present or your future. So what difference does the Gospel make? The answer is that the Gospel gives us a new category. We are so often defined by what's been done by us and by what's been done to us. In the Gospel, we are defined by what's been done for us. And that's the incredible truth that lies at the heart of the Gospel, the fact that God has done something amazing for us. Now the whole Bible works together to tell us the fullness of what He's done. But there's a brilliant summary of it in the passage that we read in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 17 to 20. Here we have this wonderful summary of what
God has done for us and the difference that it makes, the fact that we are a new creation in Christ, that the old has passed, the new has come. That Gospel is initiated by God. You can see that in verse 18, it all comes from Him. It's His choice, His plan, His initiative and His aim is to bring reconciliation. You can see that key word in verse 18, but it comes up several times in this passage. Sin has broken our relationship with God because we've rebelled against Him. We've made God our enemy, but God wants to exchange that enmity for friendship. He wants to restore us back into our relationship with Him. But the only way He can do that is to deal with our sin. And in order to deal with our sin, He sent His Son to die in our place. He sent His perfect Son to die in our place. That's why you can see in verse 21 there it says, for our sake, He made Him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Him, Him, we might become the righteousness of God. It's all about what He has done for us. And that transforms our past because in Jesus, we are a new creation.
[21:45] That's what Paul says so powerfully in these verses, just in verse 17. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed, the new has come. And that emphasis on the old passing is so, so important. Through the cross, our sin has been placed on Christ, His righteousness placed on us. Something new has happened. We are a new creation. But that doesn't just transform our past, it also transforms our present because in Christ, we now have a new identity. And as Christians, for anyone who is a Christian or anyone who becomes a Christian, we are now in Christ, as Paul says in that verse 17, there's that key phrase that we are in Christ. That is where our identity lies. We are a new creation.

And he doesn't say the new will come. He says that the new has come. It's transforming our present now. We are His. We are united to Him. That is where our security and our identity lies. But it doesn't just transform our past, doesn't just transform our present, it transforms our future because it gives us a new purpose. As verse 15 says, the transformation that the Gospel brings means that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for Him, who for their sake died and was raised. We don't just receive reconciliation. We proclaim that as His ambassador. And it all fits together so powerfully. The fact that we're a new creation in the past, the fact that our past has changed, that we're a new creation, that gives us a new identity today, that gives us a new purpose for tomorrow. There's this crucial fact that these things are distinct, but they're inseparable. If you are a Christian or if you become one, this is what defines you. You're no longer defined by what's been done by

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you or by what's been done to you. You are defined by what's been done for you by God through His
Son, Jesus Christ. And the key point I want to leave with you today and for you to take away with you is that if we understand all of this better, it makes a massive difference for us all as we go into 2022 together. And that applies whether you're a committed believer or whether you're not sure yet where you stand. For so many of us as Christians, we can be held back by the fact that we don't understand all of this accurately. And the mistake that we make is that we will maybe think of the past and we'll maybe think of the future, but we don't connect it enough with today. So we might look back and think, you know, we think of the cross, we think of the fact that we're forgiven and we're so thankful for that. And we look forward to heaven the one day when we'll be with Jesus and all that's broken and wrong will be put right. But right now, today, we're still plagued with regrets and bruises from our past. We're still enslaved to ongoing insecurities and bitterness. We're still crushed by the pressure and worry of what might lie ahead. And for people who maybe aren't yet Christians, it's so easy to think, well, yes, I know that I need Jesus for my future. I know that I need to get myself sorted before my life ends. But the gospel won't do much for me now today. And if anything, I think it might spoil my life. And the key thing that we all have to realize is that if we understand the gospel more accurately, it's going to make a massive difference for right now. And for every day of this year that lies ahead. But what we've got to realize is that the gospel doesn't change the words on the diagram. It doesn't change the words on the diagram, regrets, bruises, insecurities, bitterness, pressure, fear, we are all going to have all of them this year. The gospel doesn't change the words. The gospel changes the direction of the arrows. Because of everything that God has done for you, we now have a new way of dealing with all of the rubbish things that life throws at us. So for everyone, whether you're a Christian or not, if you look back into your past and you see regrets about what's been done by you, the gospel is pointing to you to the fact that Jesus has taken all of your sins, all of your mistakes, all your failings, everything that you wish you'd never done. He's taken that so that it is not counted against you, as verse 19 says. Isn't that just amazing? So often we can find ourselves looking back and we can think of all the times that we've mucked up and they can just mount up like a pile of regret of stupid things that we've done. But when we put our trust in Jesus, God turns around and says, I'm not counting. It's all been dealt with. If you look back into your past and see bruises from things that have been done to you, the gospel is pointing you to the fact that Jesus brings healing and restoration and justice in a broken world. Jesus has come to put right everything that's gone wrong. Jesus will call every injustice to account. Some of that might happen now. All of it will happen in the future. And ultimately,
Jesus will heal every bruise, every scar, and in the new creation, he will wipe away every tear from your eyes. And all of that means that the next time a regret stabs you in the heart, or the next time a bruise tries to resurface from your past, you can say, clear off. Because the arrows don't point that way anymore. Jesus has dealt with it all on the cross. If you look at your present and feel insecure, the gospel is pointing you to the fact that your identity is now in Jesus. You have a new identity in him.
It's not about what you've done. It's not about what's been done to you. Your identity is in Jesus and in what he has done for you. Now that means that the gospel is telling you that you are so precious, that you're so valuable, so treasured. Your God's beloved child, he loves you so much, loves you that he made him who knew no sin to be sin for you, that in him Christ's righteousness might be placed upon you. You're so precious to him. That's the stuff that defines you now. If you feel bitter about what's been done to you, the gospel tells you that your identity is now in Christ. You don't need to be defined by the way in which other people or life or circumstances have hurt you or let you down.
[29:31] You don't need to keep a record of wrongs. In fact, doing that is only hurting you. In Christ we've been forgiven. In Christ we forgive others. And the moment we do, the grip that bitterness has over us is immediately released. If you feel pressure about the future, the gospel is pointing you to the fact that you now have a new master. You're no longer a slave to what everybody thinks of you or what everybody else expects. We are now his and we're living for him. And no matter where you live, no matter what your job is, no matter how much you earn, no matter what your circumstances are, that gives your life a purpose and a meaning and a fulfillment that nothing else can bring. And if you feel fear about the future, then the gospel is telling you that you're safe. You're secure. You are his because you're made for him. That's the whole purpose why you exist. In Christ it does not matter what our circumstances are and that means that it's okay if challenges come.

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Paul described so many of them in the verses we read from chapter 6. So many difficulties that he faced and the great message of Paul in these verses is that none of it matters. Does not matter if at the end of 2022 we end up richer or poorer, healthier, weaker, more admired, less admired. None of that matters because we've got a new purpose, a new goal. And what I want all that to help us to see is that the difference the gospel makes is not that none of these things will arise in our lives. The difference is not whether or not they come into our experience. The difference is what we do with these things when they do come.

And we need to make sure that in our understanding the arrows are pointing in the right direction. We've all got to recognize that the gospel makes you a new creation. It provides you with a new identity. It gives your life a new purpose. And so those arrows that were once so powerful in defining us and restricting us and beating us down, they've lost all their power because we can point them all to what Jesus has done for us in the gospel.

And that is what I want all of us to take with us into this new year. That is the reality that we have to take with us for every single day of our lives.

I want to conclude by looking at the words in verse 2 of chapter 6. These are quite famous words. Paul says, in a favorable time I listen to you, well Paul quotes and says, what he says, in a favorable time I listen to you and in a day of salvation I've helped you behold. Now is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation. Now these are wonderful words and often used very evangelistically to emphasize the fact that now is the time to respond to the offer of the gospel. And that is so true and so, so important. But I don't think that that's all that this means. This verse doesn't just mean that today is the day that you should come to faith if you haven't yet, even though you should. And that's absolutely true. But it means more than that. And the reason we know it means more than that is because these words were spoken, written to Christians. Paul wasn't writing to evangelize them, they were already believers. He's writing to teach them. Paul doesn't just mean that if you're not a Christian now is the day of salvation. He also means that if you are already a Christian, how you live your life today and every day this year must be shaped by the gospel. Because your salvation is not something that's awaiting you in the future, that you just have to kind of just muddle through the muck of life and hope that you'll get there in the end. The gospel is not a ticket to something nice in heaven at the end. Now today is the day that's transformed by everything that Jesus has done for us. And that means that your life today must not be defined by what's been done by you or by what's been done to you. It must be defined by what has been done for you in and through Jesus Christ.

And the more we can understand and recognize that it will make a massive difference to all of our lives for every day this year. That's what the gospel is all about. And that's what people who reject the gospel are rejecting. And they'll just carry on. I was nearly finished as well. I was nearly done. That's just wrecked my conclusion. Never mind. So often people are just defined by what's been done by them, done to them. The gospel gives us a new category that we're defined by what's been done for us. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for what you've done for us. We thank you that in you we have, that we add a new creation, that we have a new identity, that we have a new purpose. Please may that shape the way every single one of us thinks today and every day this year. In your name we pray. Amen.

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