

New Years 2026

New year's messages are my once a year musings on themes that I think are valuable for me for the year ahead. And because I am thinking of them, you are the poor souls that get to hear them.

To start I want you to think about what makes you productive. I have a list for myself as I am sure you could construct one as well. Most of my work is on a computer generating content for messages that I hope are edifying, engaging, interesting and understandable. So what are those elements?

1. I need lots of inputs: dictionaries, commentaries, language tools, and secular texts.
2. I need lead time to think, reflect, and ruminate. I have to work ahead.
3. I need a specific space to work.
4. I need a specific time to work.
5. I need to block distractions.
6. I need to start writing even if I have few ideas.
7. I work in fits and starts.

The point is I have created a process and an environment that allows me to be productive. I say this to help explain an interesting phenomena; and that is we all create environments for ourselves to get the work done that we have to get done.

However, what is really interesting is when that environment expands and others begin to come under its influence. For example, if two or three of us got together to do a particular task or form a business, there would be some melding of each individuals personal styles, and from that dynamic, values are defined and shared, goals and purposes are set, processes are developed, tasks are allocated, and the work gets done. The fascinating thing is this process usually occurs implicitly. We adjust and accommodate to one another, often by trial and error, until we reach some consensus as to how to work together in a productive and amiable fashion. The resulting environment or ethos of this process is what we call culture.

The word culture comes out of the Latin word colere, which means to cultivate. The great Roman, Cicero, used a derivative of the term, culturi animi, to describe the cultivating of the mind and soul. By the 1800's the term expanded to include the arts, education, and the shared language, values, beliefs, and customs of a particular people or society. Attached to culture are rituals, ceremonies, and customs that define and distinguish it from others. But most importantly, culture defines an environment where there exists a set of values, rules, expectations, with a common sense of meaning and purpose, that are unique to that space. It is a story you tell about yourself, your business, or your family that details who you are, where you came from, where you are going, what is important to you, and what animates you.

In small spaces, with few people, cultures tend to be implicit. You just get a sense of what the vibe is and go along with it. In larger organizations cultural values and ideals are often explicit, they are written down in a mission or values statement and are articulated by leaders and staff so everyone knows what to expect and how one should operate. However, even in large organizations, multiple implicit micro cultures exist within departments, or among different organizational functions.

Whether you acknowledge it or not, every organization has a culture. Every workplace, every school, every church, every community organization, every non-profit, every team, every town, city, state, and nation, and every family has a culture. Now some of you are single or divorced and I get that, but every person has a way of working, of being, of relating, that creates a micro culture in itself.

Now here is the part we perhaps have all experienced, there are good cultures and there are bad cultures. Notice, the definition of good or bad depends on your reference as you are the judge, but most of us would agree a good culture is one in which you want to belong; whether it is a work place, a church, or a community group, it is a space where you feel wanted, encouraged, validated, appreciated, and cared for (why? -because your story matches theirs) On the opposite end of the spectrum, a bad culture is a space where you feel marginalized, unappreciated, discouraged, and you don't want to contribute more than you have to (why?- because your story and their story doesn't match).

Now the question naturally arises, how are cultures set? In smaller implicit organizations (and those small implicit cultures that exist within larger explicit cultures) culture is usually set by the dominant person of power within that space. Sometimes the overwhelming personality of this person is the culture-think Elon Musk or President Trump. In large explicit organizations culture centers about the mission of the enterprise and is articulated by management through however many layers exist within it. Successful organizations are those with a clear mission and aligned leadership as to how to execute that mission, which lends itself to creating an environment for getting the work done.

But I am not here to talk about large explicit cultures. I want to talk about domicile cultures. Domicile means home. What is the culture of your home? It does not matter if you are married, have kids, or are single, every home has a culture; an environment that reflects who you are and what is important to you.

My boys would tell you the general culture of our family was one that valued hard work, education, order, keeping your word, playing hard, competition, challenging yourself, and having fun. Every domicile has a culture. To identify it just start thinking through the values and expectations you express to your kids, and if you are alone, what does your home tell others about yourself?

Why do I bring this all up? Because in addition to the everyday things of your home, everyone here has also created a spiritual culture at home. Spiritual culture comes from the story of your heart. If you love God, the expression of that love will be like salt that will flavor your whole home. If you are casual, or lukewarm about your faith, it will also show. I just want you to think about it and be honest with yourself about what it is. For example, on one end of the spectrum if one rarely comes to church and are not involved in church activities you have created a family culture where attending church and being spiritually involved is not important. On the other end, if one does family devotions, prays together, talks about spiritual things, and try's to attend church regularly, then you are demonstrating to your family (and if single-to others) that spiritual things are important. I am not trying to be legalistic or judgmental about this. I just want you to reflect on it.

In Josh 24, Joshua is addressing the nation which he has gathered at Shechem to renew their commitment to God. In verses 1-13, he reviews what God has done for the nation, how God had chosen

Abraham and brought him from Ur to Canaan. How God had given Abraham Isaac, and from Isaac, Jacob, and Esau. He talked about Jacob's descent into Egypt, and then how Moses and Aaron had led the people from Pharaoh's hand. Joshua detailed the miracles God did to bring them out of Egypt, how God had protected them, and provided for them. And finally, how God had opened and delivered the land to them. Joshua then mentions the foreign gods which their ancestors had worshipped in Ur and in Egypt, and the gods of the Amorites of whom they had just conquered. Then Joshua gives them a command and asks a question in Josh 24:14-15a, *So fear the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord alone. But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live?* In other words, Joshua is saying, we as a nation are at an inflection point. Going forward, who will we serve? What God do we want?

Before the nation answers, Joshua gives them his answer in Josh 24:15b, *But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.* Note what Joshua has done, He has made his choice and has defined his family's culture. When you come into my house—we will be:

1. serving the God who brought Abraham out of Ur,
2. the God who performed miracles and delivered us from slavery in Egypt,
3. the God who rescued us from Pharaoh's army,
4. the God who sustained us for 40 years in the Wilderness,
5. the God who defeated the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.
6. The God who has now given us the land.

This is who our family will be serving. Then Joshua asks, what about your family? Who will you be serving? This was a big question in 1400 BC and it is still a big question today.

So, I could ask you to articulate your spiritual culture, but I am not going to put you on the spot, rather I put myself on the spot and I asked myself, what is the spiritual culture of my home? And then a second question flowed from the first, and that is, what attributes do I want that culture to be characterized by?

The First Question

What is my family's spiritual culture? —or what do I want it to be? This is a hard question but I settled on Deut 6:5, I want my family's culture to be this: to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.* So, I want someone to come into my house and know we love the Lord. Ambitious, yes, Difficult, yes—but remember culture is set by your heart. And I want the story of my heart, your heart, the collective heart of this church, to be one of love for God and each other. Amen.

The Second Question

What are the attributes I want my family's culture to be characterized by? And here are three pairs of attributes or characteristics as to how I want my love for God to be manifested. Note I said pairs for each are closely related to one another. These attributes are an expression of God through me. Please feel free to use them as your own.

Knowing and Pursuing

I list these attributes for they are the core of any close relationship. If you want to know someone, then you must pursue them. I mean there is an intention to meet, spend time with, and pursue the person you want to know. This applies to our relationship with God as well as our spouse, or friends. There is a pursuing and there is a knowing. Many Biblical writers expressed this desire,

Pursuing and Seeking

David, Ps 63:1, *O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water.*

! Chron 16:11, *search for the Lord and for his strength; continually seek him!*

Jeremiah, Jer 29:13, *"You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart".*

Jesus, Mt 5:6, *God blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.*

Peter, 1 P 2:2-3, *like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk, so you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.*

Knowing

Jeremiah, Jer 9:23-24, *This is what the Lord says: "Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. ²⁴ But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the Lord, have spoken!*

John, Jn 17:3, *and this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

These are but a few examples. Here is the bottom line. When people come into your home and spend time with you, would they know you are on a pursuit to know God? When I was courting, all my room mates knew what I was doing. They could see it. I was on the phone, or off to a date, talking about the most beautiful woman in the world. They knew I was on a quest. What is the vibe in your home regarding God?

Humbling and Repenting

I use these two words together because they are closely related. I say them because when one reads the Bible, you are humbled. It reveals everything about you: your motivations, your deepest secrets, your wayward thoughts, and your selfish intentions, as Heb 4:12-13 says, *the Word of God is powerful, sharper than any two edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints, and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.* Or in Ecc 12:14, *for God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*

The Word humbles you and with humility there comes a deep awareness of sin and inadequacy. Which is a good thing for it leads to repentance—a desire to turn from sin, to forsake it, and to see you cannot do it on your own; only Christ in you can.

In 2 Chron 7, God appears to Solomon after he had built and opened the temple and He responds to Solomon's prayer of dedication. In verse 14 he gave Solomon an attribute that God wanted the people to be characterized by; *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

Note the link; there is humility-to see yourself as God sees you –to empty yourself of pride and self-righteousness and admit one's shortcomings; then there is repentance. Now I understand this command was given under the terms of the Mosaic covenant, but Jesus and the new testament writers noted this same attitude to be manifested in us;

Humility

Mt 11:29, *take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart.*

Phil 2:3-8, *Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. ⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. ⁶ Though he was God,^[a] he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges^[b]; he took the humble position of a slave^[c] and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,^[d] ⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

James 4:10, *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.*

1 Pet 5:5-6, *And all of you, dress yourselves in humility as you relate to one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."^[a] ⁶ So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor.*

Repentance

Mt 4:17, Jesus says, *Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

Acts 3:19, *Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*

Rms 2:4, *the kindness of God leads you to repentance.*

2 Cor 7:9-10, *I am not sorry that I sent that severe letter to you, though I was sorry at first, for I know it was painful to you for a little while. ⁹ Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain caused you to repent and change your ways. It was the kind of sorrow God wants his people to have, so you were not harmed by us in any way. ¹⁰ For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow.*

Using and Serving

In Rom 12 Paul starts off the chapter asking us to be living sacrifices, *Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship.* He then goes on in the rest of the chapter to tell us what this looks like.

Using

In verses 4-5 he says we are all one body yet many members each with a different function. Then in verses 6-8, he notes that each member of God's body, the church, has received a unique spiritual gift to serve that body. The best way to think of your spiritual gift is it is a unique way in which the indwelling Christ wants to express himself through you for the benefit of the body as a whole. He then lists some of these gifts; prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. When you think about it, Paul is describing a specialized area of service that he strongly encourages us to use. This is why Paul is emphatic about it in the way he writes, if you have the gift of prophesying, then prophesy, if serving, then serve, if teaching, then teach, and so on. Peter encourages us to do the same, for in his 1 P 4:10 he writes, *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.* So here is the point, use your gift. Your family will see it. Your neighbors will see it. Your church will see it. And God will be pleased to express himself through you.

Serving

Then in verse 9, Paul switches from the specific to the general. *He says love must be without hypocrisy,* (some translations have *love must be sincere*). and then Paul lists some general virtues and attributes that should be true of all believers, no matter what your special gift is that he mentioned before. Paul notes what sincere love looks like: *Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one*

another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.^[6] Do not be conceited.¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. These are all general requirements of all believers and reflect true Christian love to others, and these are the things I want my home to be characterized by.

I want to conclude with something pretty simple. Remember culture is set by your heart. If you love someone you will think of actionable ways in which to demonstrate your love. It just will bubble out. You do not have to work at it, it is not a chore, it is not a burden; you do it because you love that person and you want to please them and give them gifts. This is a talk about your love for God because that is what a home culture reflects. Rms 12:9 says, *let love be sincere*. Let love be sincere within your domicile. Let the indwelling Christ express himself through you in the unique and beautiful way for which he designed you. Amen