

## Entering a New Year

---

### I. Background

- a. Tomorrow is last day of the year; the following day is New Year's Day.
  - i. "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." (**Romans 14:5**, NKJV)
    1. Some people ignore New Year's Day and consider it artificial. To others, it marks an important change worth noting (or even celebrating).
  - ii. However, at the very least it includes
    1. New calendars.
    2. New tax year; reconcile the books.
    3. Sunlight is returning; days are again starting to get longer (after winter solstice on 12/21),
    4. Christmas holiday is winding down; family may be departing, soon getting back to "normal life". In the meantime, pause for many with vacation and holidays; more time than usual to reflect.
    5. Can take time to look backward to last year.
      - a. Births, deaths, new friends, marriages, departures, major life transitions for many in the past year.
    6. Also, an opportunity to look forward, to take stock of life and make plans.
      - a. This should go beyond the traditional "New Year's resolutions" (which generally don't last long anyway).
      - b. Things you want to focus on, change, accomplish in the year ahead.
      - c. Some of us may not be here next year at this time.
        - i. Read **Ecclesiastes 7:1-4**.
          1. Think about death frequently; and be prepared to die. This will help us focus on what is most important and keep us from being distracted with the frivolous things of life.
        - ii. "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." (**Ephesians 5:15-16**, NKJV)

- iii. Our time is short. We should take care as to how we spend our time, so we are able to make the most of each day.

## II. A Few Things for Us to Think About, Looking Backward

### a. Read **Luke 17:11-19**.

- i. Don't be like the nine lepers who neglected to thank the Lord for what He did for them. God has been very good to us. Have we been too busy, or too preoccupied to stop and give thanks?
- ii. Count your blessings and be thankful to God. Take time to remember and to thank the Lord for things He has done for you. Be grateful.

### b. Read **Ezekiel 33:12-20**.

- i. Some may look back at the last year with regret due to failures, sin, and personal shortcomings. Perhaps you find it painful to look back at the past year of your life; but look back anyway with God's perspective, which may be different than your own!
- ii. First, an admonition to those who did well in their personal righteousness this past year.
  1. If you have been righteous in some area of life, amen! But don't be complacent. You need to stay on the path until the end. We learn from **Ezekiel 33** that if a righteous man turns to wickedness at the end of his life, God will not remember the man's prior righteousness; and *that man will perish*.
  2. From **Ezekiel 18**, this "righteous" way of life included:
    - a. Helping the poor; not being greedy and selfish;
    - b. Maintaining sexual purity;
    - c. Keeping your word; and
    - d. Walking in the commands of God.
  3. Another sobering word of caution to those who have been striving to be righteous, from *The Imitation of Christ* (a classic Christian devotional work from the early 1400's) by Thomas a Kempis, at the end of chapter 2:
    - a. "The deepest and most profitable lesson is this, the true knowledge and contempt of ourselves. It is great wisdom and high perfection to esteem nothing of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of

others. If you should see another openly sin, or commit some heinous offense, you ought not to esteem yourself the better; for you know not how long you shall be able to remain in good standing. All of us are frail, but you ought not to think anyone more frail than yourself.”

- iii. Second, a word of encouragement for those who have struggled with sin and personal failure this past year.
  - 1. If you have been unrighteous in the past year, repent. God wants you to repent, and is happy to forgive those who do, despite past wickedness. He does not want anyone to perish.
    - a. There is no room for feeling discouraged and depressed, looking back on your failures and sins. Simply repent, so that you can be forgiven by God and restored.
    - b. Note that the Scriptures here do not say that “*no one* is righteous”. According to Ezekiel, people *are* able to live lives that are *called righteous by God* (however, not necessarily the same as flawless).
    - c. It may seem odd to us, but God is *warning* the righteous while *giving hope* to the wicked (if they repent).
  - 2. Other Scriptures to encourage you to repent from past and present sins include:
    - a. “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.” (**Proverbs 28:13**, NKJV; similar to **28:14** in the LXX)
    - b. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (**John 3:19–21**, NKJV)
    - c. “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” (**James 4:7–10**, NKJV)
      - i. This is very encouraging. **James 4** is addressing Christians involved in sin; and it promises us that God will draw near to *us if we draw near to Him*.

- d. “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” (James 5:16-18, NKJV)
  - i. Again, this is very encouraging! God wants to heal us and tells us how we can be healed if we have fallen into sin.
  - ii. This is a great time to take inventory, to confess our sins, to repent, and be healed!

### III. A Few Things to Think About Going Forward, into the New Year

- a. Devote yourself to active, daily study of the Word of God.
  - i. Read **Deuteronomy 8:1-3**
    - 1. They gathered it every morning (6 days a week) and ate it every day. It was the food that sustained them in the Wilderness.
    - 2. This happened for 40 years, *to teach us* a lesson.
  - ii. Read **Psalms 1:1-3**
    - 1. Meditate on the Word of God day and night. Think about it, as a sheep or cow chews its cud over and over, throughout the day.
    - 2. Become an active reader. Wrestle with the Scriptures; ask the hard questions and then seek out the answers.
    - 3. Take the training wheels off and throw out the crutches of commentaries and most study Bibles. Wrestle with the Scriptures directly. It will make you wiser.
  - iii. It is important to read all of the Bible; not just the favorite parts you already may be familiar with. *All of it* was written for our benefit (**Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16-17**). If any books you have never read or have not read in a long time, make it a point to read those.
    - 1. Many are regularly on a plan to read through the entire Bible in a year, which is an outstanding practice. You need both the Old Testament and the New Testament.
    - 2. More important to be reading regularly and deeply, and all the Bible, than to be on a specific timetable. If it takes you longer than 12 months to read through the entire Bible, that is fine too.

- b. Don't just be *religious*; live a life pleasing to God. (Read **James 1:19-27**)
  - i. Be swift to hear; a good listener. Slow to speak, and slow to anger.
  - ii. Receive the word implanted in you. Do what the word of God says.
  - iii. Keep a tight rein on your tongue.
    - 1. Read **Psalm 141:1-3** (numbered **Psalm 140** in the LXX)
    - 2. Beware of engaging in destructive gossip and slander.
    - 3. Tell the truth all the time.
    - 4. No room for profanity, coarse joking nor taking the Lord's name in vain.
    - 5. If we don't keep a tight rein on our tongues, our religion is useless.
  - iv. Practice pure and undefiled religion, which the Scripture describes here as requiring two things:
    - 1. Look after widows and orphans in their distress. Be a giver, unselfish, help those in need.
    - 2. Keep yourself unspotted from (or unpolluted by) the world.
      - a. Internet, movies, music, radio
        - i. Challenges and decisions in my own life include the desire to read the news online.
          - 1. In my mind, I consider these news sites to be littered with the equivalent of "man-eating Venus fly traps": enticing pictures with links that lead to very bad places.
          - 2. While I have avoided clicking on those traps, the effect of being on even mainstream news sites on the internet can be to plant worldly thoughts in my mind. I don't need that!
        - ii. "Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits." (**1 Corinthians 15:33**, NKJV)
        - iii. "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord..." (**Hebrews 12:14**, NKJV)
      - b. Satan is the ruler of this world. He wants to get into our hearts and minds, to influence and pollute our thinking.

- i. Are you being polluted by the world? If so, what do you need to do to clean it up? Decisions to fast from media, curtail influences, etc.?
- ii. Viewing many typical, popular sites on the internet can be similar to eating out of a trash dumpster. While a dumpster may contain some good food, it is mostly garbage!
- c. As a group, we don't have specific rules that go beyond Scriptural commands regarding media. However, we should be striving to the high standard of the Word of God, each of us in our personal lives. And calling and challenging each other to do likewise.

#### IV. Take the Axe to One Vice This Year

- a. This is one final challenge as you look ahead to the New Year. This type of challenge may be more encouraging for those who tend to get overwhelmed by too many things to change in their character and life.
- b. From *The Imitation of Christ*, chapter 12:
  - i. "If we esteem our progress in religious life to consist only in some outward observances, our devotion will quickly have an end. But let us lay the axe to the root, that being freed from passions we may possess our souls in peace. *If every year we would root out one vice, we should soon become perfect men.* But now oftentimes we perceive it goes contrary, and that we were better and purer at the beginning of our entrance into the religious life than after many years of our profession. Our fervor and profiting should increase daily. But now is it is accounted a great matter if a man can retain but some part of his first zeal."
    - 1. Don't just focus on external things. Lay the axe to the root of the spiritual problem (sinful desires in our hearts).
    - 2. If we could root out only one vice each year, Thomas says we would sooner become "perfect men". I assume perfect here means complete, not necessarily flawless.
    - 3. Thomas observed that most Christians over time become less zealous, rather than more.
      - a. **Questions:** What do you think? Why are so many Christians spiritually flat? Are most Christians more zealous at the time of their conversion, or years later? What about you?
- c. I encourage you to identify even one vice to repent of (or positive attribute to add) over the next year, that you may become sooner a more perfectly complete and zealous disciple of Jesus.

**V. Conclusion: Take Stock of Your Own Life and Make Decisions**

- a. Take a personal inventory of your life, looking back.
  - i. Take time to thank God for the many blessings He has bestowed on you over the past year.
  - ii. If you had a great year, don't be complacent. Keep going; and keep growing in personal righteousness.
  - iii. Where you see sins in your life, repent. Confess your sins and come into the light. God is eager to forgive and forget your past sins.
- b. Looking ahead to the next year of your life:
  - i. Realize that life is brief; this may be your last year. Live accordingly, and always be prepared for the hour of your death.
  - ii. Be devoted to the Word of God this year. Read it every day; wrestle with what it means; meditate on it day and night; put the teachings into practice in your daily life.
  - iii. Keep a tight rein on your tongue; avoid gossip, slander and any evil speech. Strive to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.
  - iv. Seek pure and undefiled religion. Sacrifice to help those in need and do what it takes to keep yourself from being polluted by the world. Take a hard look at the influence of media in your spiritual life; make the changes to life a holy life.
  - v. Choose one vice to conquer in your life this year; and put the axe to the root of the tree.