

# NEW YEAR, NEW YOU

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As I reflect upon my ministry through the years, I hope that I have been very clear about one thing: Jesus Christ died for our sins (yours and mine). And that means that He died in our place, as a result of our sins, and to pay for our sins; in other words, to receive the judgment that *should have been* ours, to cancel the debt that *was* ours, and to restore us to *friendship and fellowship* with our Creator, the God of the entire universe.

Are we clear about that?

This exchange has four glorious and immediate effects:

- 1) Genuine guilt has been erased. You may stand unashamed before Almighty God.
- 2) The power of sin to deceive you has been broken. You can overcome temptations.
- 3) The Holy Spirit has come to dwell in you, your spirit has been reborn, and eternal life has begun in you.
- 4) God's merciful love has begun to fill your heart.

Is there any better way to begin a new year?!?

Is there anyone here who is still carrying your own sins—with their threat of judgment still to come? I pray that you will be free from that dread today!

Is there anyone here who still feels powerless against temptations? I pray that God will awaken His power within you today!

Is there anyone here who still carries grudges against people who have wounded, mistreated, or disrespected you? Remember that vengeance belongs to the Lord alone. Grudges only make you the prisoner of your own pain. I pray that you turn the hostages of your judgment over to God, and that you yourself will be set free today!

There are also many other things that Jesus Christ has accomplished for us by His death, His resurrection, and His return to Heaven. And the rest of the story will not be told until He returns again for the Church that He bought with His own shed blood.

The Holy Spirit has called our congregation to draw closer to God. We have designated the next three weeks as "21 Days With God," an opportunity to quiet yourself and listen more closely to His whisper, to remember the needs of others, to grow in faith, and to become better acquainted with the God of your salvation.

Is this legalistic religious pressure to conform? No. No one is obligated to participate, nor will anyone be marginalized for non-participation.

But there is strength in numbers, and the support of your peers will make a positive difference in your walk with and experience of God.

To that end, I have prepared a daily devotional, based on the Book of John, to lead you through these three weeks. Using this devotional booklet, or the daily emails, we will read through one chapter of John's Gospel each day and then focus on a brief passage from each chapter for reflection, prayer, and thanksgiving.

For some of you, this may be the formation of a new habit of spending time with God and His words, and thinking more deeply about your faith and daily life. I am genuinely excited for you, because I believe your faith will be catapulted to a new level. You will discover life-giving truths and gain memorable experiences with God.

Of course, some of you already are faithful to a daily devotional; I am not asking you to replace it, but instead, to supplement it for the next 21 days with the one I have prepared, so that we all might be "on the same page."

May I say a word about *how* you use this (or any other) devotional? (I'm afraid that the pressures and demands of our busy lives constantly threaten to encroach on our spiritual well-being.) If you read the Bible or a devotional like you would down a quick cup of coffee as you rush out the door to work—that is, hastily and thoughtlessly—you will derive little benefit from your effort. Most people who have given up on the habit of Bible reading and study have done so for this very reason: they pursued it as a duty, rather than an opportunity.

That's religion; that's not relationship.

Some people treat prayer-with-fasting in a similar way, as a duty to be fulfilled (a check box to be checked off), rather than an opportunity to be "filled with all the fullness of God."

That kind of behavior is a sign of persons still steeped in immature religion, performing in order to please themselves, and hoping to please God also. If you keep score for yourself spiritually, you are still in bondage.

## **He Died, We Died**

Let me explain. Not only did Jesus Christ die for us, but when He died, we died also. His cross was effectively the death of the entire human race, for He represented all of us.

Not our physical death of course, but our spiritual death. Those, and only those, who put their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, gain a new spiritual life, and a new spiritual identity. And that life is governed by new principles; the old rules don't apply anymore. Here's one way that Paul, the apostle of Christ, described it:

*Colossians 2:20 You have died with Christ, and He has set you **free from the spiritual powers of this world**. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,<sup>21</sup> "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? <sup>22</sup> Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. <sup>23</sup> These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.*

When a person comes to faith in Christ, there is simultaneously a death to self—a death of self-determination and self-reliance.

When Jesus becomes Lord, I no longer am. I forfeit my independent self-rule. I embrace a submissive posture toward Christ.

In so doing, I become free from many things; among them, the "spiritual powers of this world."

*AMP: material ways of looking at things... the world's crude and elemental notions and teachings of externalism*

*NAS: the elementary principles of the world*

*GW: the world's way of doing things*

*MSG: pretentious and infantile religion.*

## **Mere Human Teachings**

Paul continued:

*Colossians 2:20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,<sup>21</sup> "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? <sup>22</sup> **Such rules are mere human teachings** about things that deteriorate as we use them. <sup>23</sup> These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.*

Former slaves do not move into freedom easily. What is familiar remains more mentally comfortable, even when it is painful.

So, we have a difficult time living as truly free people in Christ. We tend to bring with us old habits, especially those that are commonly encouraged by the culture around us.

For instance, we have been freed from having to follow the Law of Moses, but we scarcely notice, because we have our own substitute laws, and we elevate them to a similar level of so-called necessity, even trying to impose them on others as so-called spiritual obligations.

Then we look down our noses at those who ignore or violate “the rules.” We try to nag them, or shame them, into compliance, satisfying only ourselves that we have done a good deed, when actually we have simply perpetuated spiritual slavery—both theirs and ours.

Paul gave examples of what he referred to: “*Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!*”

AMP: *human precepts and doctrines*

NET: *human commands and teachings*

CJB: *man-made rules and teachings*

You do not need *laws* from the outside to control your appetites, if you have *life* on the inside.

## **The Illusion of Piety**

*Colossians 2:20* You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, <sup>21</sup> “Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!”? <sup>22</sup> Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. <sup>23</sup> **These rules may seem wise** because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person’s evil desires.

MSG: *They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic.*

AMP: *self-imposed rigor of devotion and delight in self-humiliation and severity of discipline of the body*

ESV: *self-made religion*

## Beware

I have a reason for sharing this passage with you today. I hope that you will join me in renewing our quest for God's presence and grace during "21 Days With God." I hope that you will choose some form of fasting to enhance your pursuit, for fasting is to prayer what a fulcrum is to a lever—without changing the tools you work with, it multiplies your effort.

(The booklet suggests a variety of ways to participate in fasting, whether daily food or some other preoccupation, that will release you to seek the Lord.)

But our fasting will be a waste if it only "gives the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic." God isn't moved because you beat yourself up. He doesn't answer your prayer because He pities you. That is "self-made religion."

We fast in order to quiet the things that ordinarily distract us.

We fast to become more sensitive of spiritual things.

We fast so that our faith may overtake our worldly reason.

Yes, you will get out of life according to what you put into it. But that is a qualitative equation, as much as quantitative.

"Self-made religion" will only get you more religion, no matter how much you invest.

But true religion—faithful relationship with God—will release His purpose in your life.

Here's to a New Year and a New You!