

Pastor Letter: New Year's Resolutions (1/8/23)

I have been on vacation for the past week hoping to spend some quality time in the woods chasing whitetail deer with my black powder muzzleloader during the day. I have been rereading the New Testament epistles during the evening hours. A severe cold and freezing temperatures have limited my hunting adventures but has given me the opportunity to study some of the reasoning behind why the NT epistles were written and the changes the writers were encouraging their readers of those letters to embrace.

The New Year is also an opportunity for many of us to incorporate some necessary changes in our own lives. As we turn the pages of the calendar on the beginning of a bright new year, we resolve to introduce those much-needed modifications to our daily habits, normal routines, or regular practices. These desired changes may be physical, emotional, or spiritual in nature. Looking backward on our many failed attempts to alter our miserable and disgruntled lifestyles, we are determined to successfully adhere to this year's new plans to improve our misguided daily existence. This year we are going to persist for more than one week of implementing this year's ambitious resolutions before observing failure once again.

We have recently been bombarded with TV commercials highlighting various dieting programs, exercise equipment, and healthy home delivered meals. With the coming new year, many manufactures are flooding the airwaves with advertisements for purchasing new cars, trucks, household furniture, nonstick cookware, insurance, fast-food bargains, and new pharmaceuticals. They are hoping to tap into your resolutions.

What I have gleaned from my study of the NT epistles is that we can not make these necessary changes to our daily lifestyles on our own human power. The evil powers in this fallen world are masters at constantly tempting us with everyday physical desires. Many of those transformations we wish to accomplish each New Year are overcoming some form of human physical desire. Each year we fail at our resolutions because we use our own limited physical abilities to overcome those unwanted physical temptations.

My wife shared with me a most unusual obituary of the husband of one of her childhood friends. The man had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior late in his life. Although he had contracted a long-term terminal illness, he faithfully served Christ during his diminishing health. The final sentence in his obituary described his final days with only the scriptural passage reference, Ephesians 6:10-18. This pericope highlights daily putting on the whole armor of God with spiritual prayer. This man apparently lived these words even in the midst of struggling with declining health.

Our scriptural passages this week document the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon two significant individuals. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, writes an oracle about what most commentators label "the first of four servant songs." Isaiah records, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations," (Isa. 42:1). The commentators debate the identity of these 4 servants depending whether they are using a Hebrew or a Christian lens to interpret Isaiah's oracle. What they all agree on is that the servant has been anointed with the Spirit of God in order to accomplish God's eternal plan.

Our New Testament passage from the gospel writer, Matthew, records the baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Matthew writes, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so

now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented,” (Matt. 3:13-15). This statement helps us to understand why a sinless Jesus the Christ needed to receive a baptism of repentance from his cousin, John. The human Jesus needed to receive the Holy Spirit so he could fully identify with sinful humans and obediently serve the Kingdom of God.

Matthew further records, “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,’” (3:16-17).

Both the OT servant and NT Jesus were anointed with the Holy Spirit in order to enable each of them to accomplish the specific mission that God the Father had instructed them to undertake. Both could not accomplish their assigned tasks with ordinary human efforts. They required the direction and power of the Holy Spirit to achieve God’s will for their specific divine mission.

During this morning’s worship service, we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper as well as the ordination / installation of Ruling Elders. We also commission 4 trustees to service this congregation for the next 4 years. We will invoke the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these individuals during those liturgies in order that they too will receive the direction and power of the Spirit to accomplish the mission Almighty God has called them to serve. The vows they will make before God and our congregation is very similar to the New Year’s Resolutions we have made on January 1, 2023.

The only difference is how many of our resolutions are bathed in the direction and power of the Holy Spirit? Typically, we attempt to meet those difficult challenges using our feeble human endeavors instead of seeking divine spiritual assistance from the triune God. We would be much more successful if we would prayerfully put on the whole armor of God when we thought about what changes we wish to make and how we would best accomplish those selected resolutions?

We fail because we are engaging in spiritual warfare against the evil powers of this world using our limited human weapons. Typically, it takes at least 30 days to change a habit, including arming ourselves with spiritual disciplines. Spiritual tools such as daily Bible study, reading scripture, prayer, fasting, devotions, meditation, and journaling can greatly enhance our chances of maintaining our chosen New Year’s resolutions.

When the spiritual war is raging and we feel like we are all alone and losing the heated battle, we can recall the words spoken by Isaiah, “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness,” (Isaiah 42:6-7). Remember we are never alone and the spiritual battle belongs to the Lord.

May this week’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper also help to enhance your union with Jesus the Christ, equip you for spiritual battle, and empower you to answer His call to faithfully serve the eternal Kingdom of God.

Pastor’ Larry