

New

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

01 03 2010 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

## Introduction

**Happy New Year!** Believe it or not, we have entered 2010. No matter how many times we write “2009” on our checks in the coming weeks, another year has come and gone. I’ve begun to sympathize with those folk who leave their Christmas decorations up all year around. No sooner do I take them down than it is time to put them back up again.

When I was younger, older adults talked about time passing more quickly as one grows older. I thought that was the silliest thing I had ever heard. Now I know it is true. These days I could use a clock’s hands for a fan as they spin around faster and faster.

### I. A New Year

The first days of the New Year are a natural time for introspection and reflection. January’s name comes from “**Janus**,” the Roman god (guardian) of gates. Janus had two faces that looked forwards and backwards.

What an appropriate name for the first month of the year. This is a time when people naturally **look back** over the past year. We take stock of the last twelve months and the changes that occurred. In cartoons, the past year is often depicted as an old man aged by the passing months. We also **look forward** to the New Year and a fresh start. We anticipate a “Happy New Year” filled with opportunities. Cartoons represent the newborn year as a baby, bright with hope and promise.

One of the minor joys of my life is opening a **fresh calendar** for the New Year. The pages are crisp and clean without appointments, responsibilities, things to do, or places to be. Anything seems possible. *Then* real life intrudes. Paper and pen are put to paper. Soon the Day-Timer’s pages are filled with all of life’s activities. By year’s end, the calendar will be worn out and so will I!

In many ways, a “new” year is just a **legal illusion** and a calendar convenience. Nothing really changes from December 31 to January 1. The stroke of midnight did not miraculously create a better world. Neither will tearing a page from the calendar transform our lives. The New Year will be more of the same old, same old.

And yet . . . there is still something **magical** about New Year’s. For a moment, we envision how life could be different. We are inspired by the possibility of fresh starts and new beginnings. One author wrote:

*Perhaps the best reason for having calendars and marking life in new years is that the cycle itself offers hope. We need fresh starts and new chances, the conviction that beginnings are always available, no matter how many we have blown.”*

Louise Fletcher Tarkington wrote a poem that expresses our human desire for second chances:

*So I wish there was some wonderful place  
Called the **Land of Beginning Again**,  
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches  
And all our poor selfish grief could be dropped,  
Like a shabby old coat at the door,  
And never put on again.*

Is this New Year just an illusion? Or could the future really be different from the past? Today I want us to explore how the next twelve months can be a year new in more than name alone.

## **II. Resolutions Made and Broken**

This weekend is the traditional time to make New Year's **resolutions**. We vow to become new and improved models of ourselves. During the holidays, we overindulged in **too much** of too much: too much food, too much television, too much spending. The birth of a New Year inspires resolutions of diet, exercise, and thriftiness. Businesses take advantage of the predictable pattern. A multitude of commercials advertise exercise equipment, weight-loss plans, and credit counseling.

However, resolutions born at midnight on December 31<sup>st</sup> seldom survive the first weeks of January. Habit is a hard master to overthrow. Even if a rut is a grave with two ends kicked out, it is still OUR rut, comfortable and cozy. By mid-month, the new and improved model greatly resembles the old and not so improved model!

<i>Ziggy cartoon: "If this is the first day of the rest of my life, then I'm in trouble!"</i>
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We can scoff at the idea of New Year's resolutions and lasting transformations. Yet all of us possess a deep-seated and sincere desire to make some significant changes in our lives. We dream of becoming a new and improved model of ourselves.

## **III. Repentance**

I've got good news for you today. We serve a God of fresh starts and second chances. Today can be different from yesterday; and tomorrow can be different from today. This year can be new in more than name alone.

Our Scripture lesson today from 2 Corinthians 5: 17 declares: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creation**; the old has gone, the new has come.*" This transformation occurs in a moment but it also lasts a lifetime. Our "re-creation" in Christ is both event and process as we grow into the image of our Savior.

Jesus began his ministry by saying, "*The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent, and believe in the gospel.*" Repentance is the continuing activity of turning from sin and turning towards holiness. We are works in process as the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sinfulness and calls us to righteousness. This morning I invite you to practice the divine discipline of **repentance**.

A teenage boy was hired to paint a woman's house. He thought of a shrewd way to half his cost and double his profit. The teenager bought half of the latex paint necessary to do the job and then diluted it with water. The thinned paint went on easily and quickly.

Just as he finished, however, a dark cloud appeared out of nowhere. The rain poured down and washed all the paint off of the house. Then a voice thundered from the heavens, "*REPAINT, YOU THINNER!*"

On this first Sunday of the New Year, God confronts our sin and calls us to repent. It is more than just feeling sorry. It is resolving to live differently than we have before. Consider these five movements of repentance.

#### **A. Visualize the Resolution/Goal**

What do you WANT God to transform in your life? I would encourage you to actually write your desire for repentance in one strong sentence on a single piece of paper. Underneath the statement, write a paragraph that specifically describes the details of your resolution. Visualize what the end result would be.

Business consultant, Steven Covey, says that we should always "*begin with the end in mind.*" Our mind is to become like Christ. Envision what your life would look like as a completed child of God.

Golfing legend, **Jack Nicklaus**, used mental imagery his entire career. He wrote: "*I never hit a shot even in practice without having a sharp in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First, I 'see' the ball, where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I 'see' the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behavior on landing. Then there's a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality. Only at the end of this short, private, Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball.*"

We can use spiritual visualization in partnership in repentance. We can imagine a life free of physical addiction, illicit relationships, nursed grudges, overwhelming anxiety, senseless prejudice, explosive tempers, and hateful rumors. These visions pattern our minds and hearts into a new reality that leads to action.

#### **B. Plan Your Life, Live Your Plan**

Living life backwards. Figure out where you want to go and then plan backwards in order to arrive at our final destination. We intuitively understand how to do this.

Examples: School paper, meal, home repair project, etc. We visualize the end result and then figure out how to get from there to here. And then here to there.

#### **C. Create Objectives**

After we have set our goals and visualized the final outcome, we have to figure out how to get from here to there. Final goal can be overwhelming. So we break it down into manageable steps. "*By the yard, it's hard. By the inch, it's a cinch.*" Baby steps teach us to walk, run, and then fly. New behaviors become habits.

Create objectives that are concrete and measurable. Then assign them a date. This gives us a roadmap or waypoints along the way. We only have to handle is today—how we act today determines who we become.

#### **D. Evaluate**

Plan time to evaluate your progress along the way. In the Apollo space flights, the lunar command module always had to make a “mid-flight correction” during its approach to the moon. When we are off course, we correct our trajectory and aim anew for our goal.

#### **E. Reengage**

Be flexible and smile. Circumstances, obstacles, laziness, and old habits will sometimes take us off course. Give yourself a break and don’t beat yourself up. Instead, reengage and begin again. I think this may be one of the most important concepts of repentance.

During my last **wellness exam**, I failed my cholesterol test. Guess I should have studied harder. I scored a bit north of 200 which caused my primary physician to furrow a brow and clear his throat. So I’ve been TRYING to watch what I eat, but it’s not easy.

A while back, however, my son and I found ourselves at Town Center Mall during lunchtime. By its own volition, the car drove itself to “The Varsity.” So we went inside for lunch. Dining at “The Varsity” requires the indigestion of their famous hot dogs. If you’re going to have a hot dog, then it might as well be a chili dog; and if you’re going to have a chili dog, then you’ve got to have a chili-slaw dog. And if you’re going to have a chili-slaw dog, then you simply must have fried onion rings on the side.

Let it never be said, however, that I am not a man of self-control. I chose to forego a fried pie with ice cream, AND I self-righteously ordered a diet Coke. After the meal, I could feel the blood in my arteries coagulating with deep fried grease.

Humans wrestle with temptations of various kinds. We engage in a lifelong struggle to determine if we will control our desires or our desires will control us. Passions make wonderful servants but terrible masters. In the journey from “who we are” to “who we ought to be,” many stumbles and falls occur along the way. What we do AFTER tripping determines our ultimate failure or success.

After my splurge at “The Varsity,” I could have berated myself mercilessly and gone on a cholesterol binge. Or I could recognize my momentary failure for what it was and strive to do better in the future. The first path results in continuing failure. The second path leads towards possible success.

An old proverb advises: *“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”* It’s not in the Bible, but the words illuminate a sound, spiritual principle. Allow God to pick you up, forgive you, and move on.

### **Conclusion**

*“Repent and believe in the gospel.”* In Christ, we ARE new creations—where the old is passing away as the new takes it’s place. In this first month of the New Year, we have the wonderful opportunity to Begin Again. The time has come to put away our

yesterdays along with calendar pages tattered and torn. The future can be different from the past, and God gives us today as a present to unwrap and open. We can make the year new in more than name alone.

The *Invitation to Communion* in the old Book of Worship called God's people to repentance. It began: "*Ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and intend to lead a new life . . .*" The invitation still stands today. And on the first day of a new year, there is no better time to respond.

In 1755, John Wesley held a service on New Year's Day, challenging his church members to renew their vow to serve God and neighbor. It was a powerful time of worship during which many lives were transformed.

It has become a longstanding tradition in the Methodist Church to hold ***Covenant Renewal Services*** at the beginning of a New Year. Today in response to God's Word, I invite you to turn to #607 in your hymnal and let us join in "***A Covenant Prayer.***"

*I am no longer my own, but thine.  
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
 Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
 Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
 Let me be full, let me be empty.  
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
 I freely and heartily yield all things  
 To thy pleasure and disposal.  
 And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
 Thou art mine, and I am thine. SO BE IT!  
 And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
 Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen!*