

"God's New Year's Resolution"

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2 Corinthians 5:17-21 • January 8, 2012

What is so special about a new year? Really it's just another day on the calendar, isn't it? Even if it is a new calendar. But there's something about a new year that captures our imagination. I think a lot of it has to do with our love of things that are new. For example, I am constantly amazed at the supposedly "new and improved" products that come out every year. Is dish soap and toothpaste really getting that technologically advanced every year? And how do you have "new and improved" peanut butter?

I don't know if you've noticed this new tactic yet, but I have seen several products lately that have that familiar starburst that usually calls our attention to the "new and improved" label. But they say, "new and improved packaging." Really? Is that really an improvement?

And yet we fall for it because we want the best, the latest, the newest products we can get. Maybe that's why so many of us make New Year's Resolutions every January. We want to be new and improved. So we resolve that this year we really are going to improve. We're going to change the way we eat or exercise or read or whatever. Notice that nobody ever makes a new year's resolution to worry more or to eat more chocolate. No, we always resolve to do things that frankly we're not likely to achieve.

As a result, most of us fail at our resolutions. How many of you have already broken your new year's resolution this year? The problem is that we just aren't very good at making ourselves

"new and improved." That's the bad news.

The good news - and by the way, the word "gospel" means good news - the good news is that in Christ, God does for us what we can't do for ourselves. Listen again to verse 17: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come." In other words, if you are "in Christ," which means that you trust in him as your Lord and Savior, then you are new and improved. You are a new creation. Notice that it doesn't say that you *might* be a new creation. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

Notice also that verse 18 says, "All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself." You could say that it's God's new year's resolution to reconcile us to himself in Christ by not counting our sins against us. It's a promise that He makes throughout the Bible and one that He keeps. Isaiah 43 says, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

The important point here is that it is God who chooses us and redeems us. There is nothing that you or I can do to earn God's love or to earn our way into heaven. "ALL this is from God. It is God who chooses and God who does all the work of salvation. But that doesn't mean that we just go on with our own lives as if nothing has changed. There are responsibilities that go along with this new life in Christ.

In Reformed theology we say that God has elected us for service as well as salvation. In other words, God has chosen and redeemed us for a purpose. He has a job for us to do. Verses 18 and 19: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself AND gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, *and entrusting to US the message of reconciliation.*" Then in verse 20 Paul says, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

Now that we are "new and improved," we are the representatives of Jesus here on earth. God has given us a message that He wants the world to hear. Paul summarizes that message here when he says, "be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become he righteousness of God." He wants each of us to share that message with people that He has put around us.

Listen to Romans 10: "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone proclaiming? And how are they to proclaim unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim the good news!'"

Now that doesn't mean we are supposed to stand on the street corner and scream "turn or burn." The idea is that you share the good news with people around you. A great example of this concept is a game called "sardines." This is typically a youth group game and it's like

the opposite of hide-and-seek. In sardines, one person hides while the rest of the group tries to find him. Anyone who finds the person who is hiding must then hide with him. This goes on until the last person finds the group.

It seems to me that this is how God intends for us to spread his message. In Christ you are reconciled to God. For each of us there is a time when we finally begin to understand what Jesus did for us. Our eyes are opened to His incredible love for us and the Bible begins to make sense. From that moment on our life is forever changed. We want to know Jesus more and more. By the way, if you have never experienced Jesus' presence in that way I would encourage you to pray every day that He would reveal Himself to you. I would be happy to pray with you if you would like.

At that point you become an ambassador for Christ. You tell someone else about Jesus and then the two of you stick together. As this keeps going, pretty soon there's a whole group of you. We call that a church. That's how God has designed the church to work. It's not about the bricks or the stained glass or the programs. The church is the place where people who have God's message of reconciliation get together and help each other to live it and learn to share it.

Let me conclude by pointing out that part of being a new creation in Christ means that we have new eyes. It means that we have a new way of seeing the world. In Ephesians 1:18 the Apostle Paul prays that we would have the eyes of our hearts enlightened. His prayer is that we would be able to see Jesus for who He really is - God Himself - and also that we would other people the way God sees

them, as people who are created in His image and are precious to Him. Because when we see people that way, we will do everything we can to make sure they, too, are reconciled to God.

So whatever resolutions you have made this year, even if you have already broken them, consider adding one more: be reconciled to God. Because you already are. You are a new creation in Christ, not of your own doing but by the work of God. But that means you have a job to do. As you go through this next week, remember that you are ambassadors for Christ. You are His representative at work or in the grocery store or around the dinner table. So spend some time reading about Jesus in the gospels. Ask Him to reveal to you something about Himself that you don't know. No matter how well you know Christ, you can always learn something new. Then share what you discover with someone else. Finally, look for ways to help people to be reconciled with God and with each other. My prayer is that you would have the eyes to see it.

Amen.