

The Most Important New Year's Resolution
Weekend of January 1, 2006
Sermon on Deuteronomy 30:11-20
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: New Year's Resolutions Are Fairly Popular

Moses once wrote—and we echo this: *Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.* Amen.

Dear fellow Christians—entering into a new year:

Have you made your new years resolutions yet?

Well, if you're going to be making any of them, chances are you have already done so! I've read that forty percent of Americans do intend to make new years resolutions. And among those who do make new years resolutions, the average number of resolutions is two. By far, the two most popular ones, by the way, are losing weight and quitting smoking.

Now, do most people keep their new years resolutions?

No, eighty percent break them. And that's probably why most people don't make them in the first place. But a new year's resolution can be useful, I suppose, if at least it moves a person along the pathway to more virtuous action.

Theme: The Most Important New Year's Resolution

I guess it's with that in mind that I'd like to offer to you today what I consider to be: **THE MOST IMPORTANT NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION.** It's a new year's resolution for two thousand six which, with prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, I genuinely hope that we all learn to keep.

Part One: The Problem Presupposed by Our New Year's Resolution

You know: every new year's resolution presupposes a problem, right? A person's problem is that he is out of shape; so, he resolves to exercise. A person's problem is that he smokes, and he can feel it hurting his health; so, he resolves to quit. A person's problem is that he drinks to excess; so, he resolves not to do so any longer.

In God's Word to us today, the Israelites have a problem—or at least a potential problem. This is Moses addressing them, just as they are about to enter into the Promised Land of Canaan, some thirty-five hundred years ago. Moses states the problem: ***But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.***

Whoa! That's a pretty serious problem! You see, God had promised the Israelites as an inheritance a land flowing with milk and honey. They were about to enter that land. But just as they are about to do so, God warns them, "The inhabitants of this land and others worship other gods. If you fall into the temptation of doing the same, you'll get killed, and you'll forfeit all the blessings I've promised you in this excellent land."

Do we face the same problem? Absolutely! God has promised us as an inheritance a land flowing with milk and honey: paradise through Jesus Christ. But the people of the earthly land we are inhabiting now worship other gods: their pleasure, their

possessions, and themselves. And if we fall into that kind of idolatry, we also will face eternal destruction.

Oh, and it would be so easy for us to fall into such temptation! It would be so easy for us to say, “My pleasure is my sleep on the weekends, and so I just can’t go and worship my Lord.” Our flesh craves that! Or, “I myself need my money so that I can treat myself by going out to eat every week or more often, so that I can treat myself by taking that expensive vacation every year or more often, so that I can treat myself to that big new house—and so I just don’t have anything else to give to my Savior.” And our sinful flesh drives that! Finally, “I need to be responsible for me, above all things.”

And those attitudes threaten to send us straight to hell.

Part Two: The Solution Offered by Our New Year’s Resolution

So, there’s the problem. Every new year’s resolution presupposes a problem, like that. And every new year’s resolution offers a solution. When a person’s problem is that he is feeling distant from his family, spending more time with them is what aims to resolve that problem. When a person’s problem is that he keeps falling into lust and fornication, marriage might be what aims to resolve that problem.

So, the Israelites’ temptation to worship other gods—what was the solution to it? Moses says: ***This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.***

Moses was speaking to people the Lord had already chosen. God also now gave them power to choose him back. And so, Moses says to the Israelites – God says to the Israelites – choose life!

And how, exactly, could the Israelites choose life? Moses elaborates a little bit earlier: ***See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.***

That’s obviously the solution to the Israelites’ temptation to follow other gods. They need to follow the true Lord instead. They need to love him. They need to keep his commands. And then, the Lord promises them overflowing blessings.

Is the same thing true for us? Yes, the same is true for us! Through confidence in Christ, our inheritance – eternal life – is ours!

I mean: Did past years see you in your bed or in your house or with your friends, but absent from the Lord? Christ Jesus entered this world to rescue you, and he has forgiven you! He is your new year’s resolution to the age-old problem of your sin! ...Again: Did past years see you spending your every penny on yourself, without so much as a thought of how you might best serve the Lord with your money? Christ Jesus grew into manhood to rescue you, and he has swept away your sins! He is your new year’s resolution to the problem of your sin! ...Or: Did past years see you living for yourself? Well, Christ Jesus paid the penalty for the debt of yours, when he suffered God’s damning anger on the cross for you! He’s your new year’s resolution to the problem of your sin!

You see, then: Christ Jesus, whose godly resolution never failed, has sent us straight to heaven!

Part Three: The Possibility of Our Completing Our New Year’s Resolution

Still, I don't think I've gotten to your personal new years resolutions yet. I mean: Jesus is the best new years resolution there is; he resolves the problem of our sinfulness. But generally, your new year's resolutions are things for which you yourself are responsible. So, is there something this year that Jesus makes you responsible to do?

Well, let's return to the example of the Israelites. Their problem is the potential for idolatry. The solution is following the Lord. And how is that going to happen? Moses reports: *Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, THE WORD is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*

The word – the Word!!! – is very near you.... Obey it! That's what the Israelites needed to do!

And that's what we need to do, too! There's a worthy new years resolution! In fact, it's the most important one you could possibly make. This year – year two thousand six – ahead of losing weight, ahead of quitting smoking, ahead of spending time with family: you absolutely need to resolve to hear and to read God's Word!

Suppose that, during the first couple months of this new year, Satan tempts you sorely—with pain, so that you doubt whether God still loves you. Or let's say Satan tempts you with sin or with crime, so that you are try to hide your transgressions rather than admit them or get them forgiven.... Only God's Word – read regularly! – is going to protect your soul by directing you to Christ. So, you need to resolve to hear and to read God's Word this year!

Or: suppose that, during springtime of this coming year, Satan engenders some severe conflict in your family.... Only God's Word is going to give you the conviction to stay with your spouse until death parts you. Only God's Word is going to give you the forgiveness toward your children or parents, the love for your children or parents, and the guidance for your children or parents to keep you together. That's why you need to resolve to hear and to read God's Word this year!

Or: suppose that, as summer approaches, Satan troubles you at school or at work.... Only God's Word is going to comfort you to know that Christ is always with you, that he will never leave nor forsake you, and that you need not despair over workplace abuse or unemployment, over ridicule or low grades. That's why you need to resolve to hear and to read God's Word this year!

And then, let's suppose that, during autumn of this coming year, your life is required of you and you approach your death.... Only God's Word can keep you trusting in Christ in such a way that you are ready for that day. It means that one of your new year's resolutions for January two thousand six, and February two thousand six, and March two thousand six, and – you get the picture! – has to be to hear and to read God's Word!

Conclusion: New Year's Resolutions Require a Plan

Of course, you know how it is with new years resolutions. About the only way they're going to do any good is if you have a plan to implement them. And very often, the only way they're going to do any good is also if partner with someone to whom you're answerable.

So, I encourage you – I really do! – that as you walk out of this church and hop in your cars today, make a specific plan to hear and to read the Word of God this year. Maybe your plan is that you will pick up a Meditations on the way out the door, you'll set it on your end table, and with your morning coffee, you'll read it—or around the

supper table with your family. Maybe your plan is that you will take those Bible tapes you bought – or you will buy some tomorrow – and on the way to work or school, you’re going to listen to them in the car. Maybe your plan is that you will pick up a Bible and read one section or one chapter – maybe also with your family – at supper or before bed. Or maybe, you’ll decide you need to get into Bible Class Monday at nine or Tuesday at four—where we actually have assignments and hold one another accountable for reading the Bible. Or maybe you’ll decide you need an entire review of the Scriptures – or that you need to get to know the Bible for the first time – and you’ll join Bible Information Class this Wednesday at seven.

Now, is all that bother worth it? Well, is it worth it to be sure of your salvation through Jesus Christ? Is it worth it so to be filled with his love that it overflows to others through you? Is it worth it so to be guided by his Word that your conscience is clean over the way you are serving him?

So, make those plans to study the Scriptures—and execute those plans! And I might even ask you about them again sometime soon...! Amen.

Moses once wrote—and we echo this: *May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.* Amen.