

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS – Prov. 3:1-7

New Year, 2012 #1

The Houston Post recently carried an article in which it quoted a local marriage counselor. The therapist had just met for the first time with a couple having some marriage problems. To break the ice and get the conversation started on the right track, the counselor had asked the couple to identify what they thought the root cause of their problem to be. “When do you think that your problem began?” he asked. The wife responded immediately, “It all started when we thought it would be cute to think up each other’s New Year’s Resolutions.”

We are at that time of year when many evaluate their lives and make what they feel to be constructive resolutions for the New Year for self-improvement. This can be a good and helpful time that is necessary in our lives. But it can also be a dangerous time. It can be a time of self-defeat and discouragement if we once again make a resolution that has already failed dozens of times only to face another defeat within days of our resolve. Or it can be a time of conflict if we become too involved in making resolutions for others. Warning: New Year’s Resolutions are to be made for yourself. Do not attempt to make a resolution for your spouse. The flip-side of the coin is true as well. Many, having failed over and over again in the past, might be tempted to make as their resolution this year a commitment to never again make another New Year’s resolution. They will rob themselves of the important discipline of self-examination and self-evaluation.

I have found that the vast majority of resolutions that are made fall into 3 major categories.

*There are the resolutions that focus on making us look better or live healthier. Commitments to exercise more or stop destructive habits or diet would fit into this category.

*There are the resolutions that focus on being more successful in life. Commitments to get more education or work harder for that promotion or start a savings program would fit into this category.

*And there are resolutions that focus on changing our personal character so that we get along better with others. Commitments to become more patient or volunteer for some community program or reconcile with someone would fit into this category.

*I like to call these 3 classifications of resolutions Physical Welfare, Prosperity and Peace. And it’s interesting that our Resolution Revolution that our Parish Nurses are sponsoring this year help guide us in these categories.

History warns us that the vast number of resolutions will be broken before the month of January is concluded. All of these resolutions will have been made in good faith. All of these resolutions will have been made with the best of intentions. All of these resolutions will have been made because they were needed.

But the vast majority of these resolutions will not be implemented long enough to change the lifestyle. Why is this?

Well, the simple truth is that the vast majority of the resolutions that are made at this time of year will be made with just the resolve of the will relying upon the strength of commitment. If this were sufficient to effect long-term change, it would have already happened. For the simple need for these resolutions shows that there is an awareness of some insufficiency. If there were sufficient power in the flesh to make the changes necessary, those changes would have been made long ago.

Lasting change comes with an awareness that we cannot bring it about just with our own strength. When we realize our need for help, then lasting changes can be made. Sometimes a person will look for that help in the accountability of another person. Sometimes a person will look for that help in some kind of instructional book that will give them more insight. Sometimes a person will look for that help in the strength of a support group. But the greatest and most effective source of help that we can find is from God Himself. The Apostle Paul found that source of strength when he wrote, "I can do all things through God who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).

I want to take 4 Sundays in January to look at 12 of the best resolutions that any of us can make. I can confidently call these 12 of the most admirable and constructive resolutions because they were given by the wisest person who lived in his day. These 12 resolutions are all found in Proverbs 3. And it is interesting to note that King Solomon began this passage by promising great rewards to those who would adopt these resolutions into their lives. READ Prov. 3:1-4:

PR 3:1 My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
PR 3:2 for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity.
PR 3:3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
PR 3:4 Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

Solomon says that the teachings or resolutions that he is advocating would bring 3 wonderful results into the life of the person who adopted them. They would prolong life for many years, they would bring prosperity and they would win favor and a good name in the sight of both God and man. They would bring Physical well-being, prosperity and inner peace.

Now we know that these resolutions are worthy because they were given under the inspiration of God. So if we adopt them, relying upon God's divine strength to enable us to achieve them, then we can make

the significant improvements in our lives that we desire through New Year's Resolutions. We plan to look at the first 3 today and then continue with 3 more each week as the Lord wills.

Resolution #1: Become a more loving and faithful person.

PR 3:3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.

When Solomon wrote to bind love and faithfulness around the neck and write them on the tablet of the heart, he was saying to make these 2 personal characteristics (love & faithfulness) such an integral part of our lives that they just flow from within us and are always with us. To have love and faithfulness written on the tablet of our hearts means to have them as an integral part of our inner being. To bind them around our necks is to have them always with us. When something comes from the heart, it comes from our innermost being, who we really are. When we want to make sure that we don't lose something, we tie it around our necks or wrists or fingers. A godly person is one who has love and faithfulness just flow forth from his innermost being at all times.

Now God's standard stands in stark contrast to the superficiality of the world. Certainly, almost everyone in the world would agree that love and faithfulness are good and worthy characteristics. But the world is satisfied with a superficial expression of love and faithfulness. As long as a person intends to be loving and faithful or appears to be loving and faithful, that is all that matters.

Some time ago, I was listening to an interview that was being conducted of an actor. I don't remember who the actor was, but I will never forget the answer that he gave to a question that was posed to him. The interviewer asked the actor what he felt was the most important attribute to successful acting before the camera. The actor responded without hesitation. "It's sincerity. People respond to sincerity. If you can fake sincerity, you've got it made." Now the amazing thing is that this actor answered this question with an absolutely straight face, and the interviewer accepted the answer without any challenge at all. Neither the actor nor the interviewer seemed to see the inconsistency of faking sincerity. As I thought about that scene for some time, I began to realize that this really represents the viewpoint that many in the world have concerning love and faithfulness. The most important thing is not to actually have them. The most important thing is to appear to have them. For that actor, whether or not he was actually sincere about his role was not what mattered. It was only important that he appeared to be sincere to his audience.

Now we must realize that God does not place a premium on superficial character. In fact, God is very displeased with it. He calls it hypocrisy. The Lord Jesus Christ reserved some of his harshest criticisms for the Pharisees who appeared to be one way to people but were really quite different in their private lives. The

reason why God desires character that emanates from one's inner being is because that is how He Himself operates. God is love; God is faithful. That is who God is. So when God acts in a loving manner and when God is true to a promise that He makes, He is not putting on an act, but He is rather just being who He is. God desires for His people to become more and more like Him as they grow in their spiritual maturity. So becoming a more loving and faithful person is a worthy resolution for any Christian to make. Are our thoughts and actions consistently loving towards others? Are we people of our word? Do we keep our promises to others? To become more loving and faithful is one of the best New Year's Resolutions that we could make. We are going to have to rely on God's strength to achieve that resolution, but we know that He will help us because it is His will for us to become more and more like Him. And this resolution if achieved will bring rich rewards. For verse 4 tells us that if we make love and faithfulness an integral part of our lives, then we will win favor and a good name in the sight of both God and man. God values love and faithfulness because these character traits reflect His own character. So we can be sure that God will be pleased if we grow in these areas. But people around us generally value love and faithfulness as well. People recognize the inherent goodness of love and faithfulness. So as we grow in these areas of our lives, we will likely gain more and better friends as well.

Resolution #2: Grow in our faith and trust in the Lord.

PR 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
PR 3:6 in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.

Now trusting in God is believing in him. Trust begins by believing that there is a God. This faith alone brings greater wisdom and insight to life, for it helps us to begin to put together some meaning to our existence. By believing in God we are able to understand better how the world came into existence and how we got here on this planet that we call earth and what our basic purpose is in life. But Solomon is advocating a trust in God that goes beyond simple belief in His existence.

*the trust that we find in this passage is a wholehearted trust. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. The faith that is spoken of here is a sincere faith, a committed faith, not one that is half-hearted. *the trust that we find in this passage is an exclusive trust. Lean not on your own understanding. The faith that is spoken of here must be preeminent in our lives, it is not a cooperative type of effort where what we think is right and what God thinks is right are put on equal terms.

*the trust that we find in this passage is an all-encompassing trust. In all your ways acknowledge him. The faith that is spoken of here is all-encompassing. It is not a convenient faith that is evident in our lives just when we feel like it or when it is useful to us, but it must be a solid, foundational pillar in our lives.

Now there are many accomplishments in life that can be achieved without faith in God. A student can go all the way through school and graduate with a degree without any faith in God. That is obviously possible and many students graduate without trusting in God. A person can get married and have a family without any faith in God. Again, this is most obvious from our daily observation. Many families in our community don't have any faith in God. A person can get a job and have a career and even make a lot of money and not have any faith in God. The business world is filled with examples of career people who don't trust in the Lord. A person can achieve all of these and other accomplishments and not trust in the Lord.

But there is one achievement that cannot be made without faith in God. And that is the most important accomplishment in all of life. This is to be pleasing to God, to be accepted by God. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote, "For without faith, it is impossible to please God." Heb. 11:6. Without faith, without believing in God, without trusting in God's provision for the payment of our sins through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Now if our ultimate purpose here on this earth is to glorify God as the Bible teaches, then we can immediately see how indispensable faith is to our ultimate success in life. It doesn't matter how many degrees we get, it doesn't matter how large our family is, it doesn't matter how much money we make in our career, if we aren't pleasing to God through faith, we won't be successful or fulfilled in our lives. There will always be a void, there will always be an emptiness, there will always be an instability in our lives.

People often ask the wrong questions today. People are often asked if they are pleased with God. Are you happy with God? Is he meeting all of your needs? Are you pleased with him? In fact, you might remember a Gallup Poll that was taken this past year on how people felt God was doing. God's job approval rating. There is a far more foundational question in life. That is whether God is pleased with us. Has God accepted us into his family? God can only be pleased with us if we have faith. For without faith, it is impossible to please God. And one day, when we all stand before him at the judgment seat, the question of whether or not we were pleased with God is not going to be raised. All that will be important on that day is whether or not God is pleased with us.

Knowing that God is pleased with us gives great confidence and stability to us in life. That is the reason for growing in our faith and trust in the Lord being a most worthy resolution that we could make for this New Year. The promise that is given is that if we trust in the Lord with all of our heart, He will make our paths straight through this New Year. In other words, as we grow in our faith, God will guide us in His perfect will as we walk through this New Year.

Resolution #3: Don't be overconfident or wise in our own eyes.

PR 3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes;

Frankly, this is perhaps the major reason why so many of our resolutions fail in the first place. Most resolutions do not fail because they were not good ones. Most resolutions do not fail because they weren't sincere enough. Most resolutions fail because they were only made and attempted in the strength and confidence of the one who made the resolution. The attitude was I can do this in my own strength. But if that presupposition were really true, there probably would have been no need for the resolution in the first place for the person would have already made the desired changes long ago.

One of the greatest temptations that we face as human beings is to be wise in our own eyes. This leads to an overconfidence and pride that is very destructive to us. It is destructive because it puts us in an adversarial position with God who is the source of the help and strength and grace that we need.

One of the most important verses in the Bible for each of us to memorize is very short and simple, but profound in its message. It is found in James 4:6. It simply says: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Do you want God's help in keeping your New Year's Resolution? Well, if you do, you are going to have to be humble. Because God considers those who are proud to be His enemies. He opposes them. But God takes compassion on those who are humble. He gives his grace and strength and help to them.

One of the best resolutions that a person can make is to become more humble. Now this is also one of the most difficult and slippery resolutions. For humility is as difficult to maintain as it is to achieve.

My father often told me an anecdote from the life of Dr. Harry Ironside who was the long-time pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. I was born when my dad was pastor of a small mission church of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. Harry Ironside was the Senior Pastor of Moody Church and dad, because of his position, sat on the board. Dr. Ironside had been wrestling with this matter of humility in his life. He desired to achieve more humility but didn't know exactly how to go about it. So one day, he got the idea of placing himself in a very embarrassing situation so that he might attain greater humility. He actually painted a large sign on 2 pieces of thin plywood. Tying them together with 2 pieces of rope, Dr. Ironside put the signs over his head making himself a human billboard. Then he walked all around downtown Chicago for a couple hours receiving the looks and ridicule from people passing to and fro. Having sufficiently humiliated himself, he then returned to his office at the Moody Church. According to his own testimony, the first thought that entered his mind after he had sat down behind his desk again was this one. "You know, there aren't many men that I know of that would have the character to go through what I just went through for the past couple of hours."

One of the reasons why we all have such trouble attaining and maintaining humility in our lives is the misconception that the world has placed on this critically important virtue. The world associates humility with a poor self-esteem or some kind of self-degradation – like what Dr. Ironside futilely tried. But humility is not

some kind of superficial piety that we put on like a mask. Humility is an acceptance of the reality of life.

Humility is seeing life like it really and truly is.

The Bible teaches us that we have all been created in the image and likeness of God. It further teaches us that we are all dependent upon God every moment of our lives. We are only able to exist by His sustaining grace. God's enemy and the world system that he has authored tries to tell us that we can get by very well on our own. They tell us that we don't need God in our lives. If we listen to God's enemies, we become puffed up in pride. Our pride puts us in an adversarial position with God who then withholds his grace and help from us. The reason God must withhold his grace from us is the simple fact that if he gave us His strength while we were trusting in ourselves, we would credit it to our own wisdom which would further bolster our pride. So God opposes the proud. But if we accept the true reality of life that God is our creator and sustainer and that we are totally dependent upon Him for both our existence and well-being, then God gladly and generously showers His grace upon us. This is true humility – simply seeing life like it really is. And God gives his grace to the humble.

Well, we will continue with points 4-6 next Sunday, the Lord willing. But these 3 resolutions are very worthy ones indeed to start with:

*become a more loving and faithful person

*grow in our trust in God

*don't be wise in our own eyes

If we adopt all 3, we are going to have to rely upon the grace and strength of God to achieve them. For if we trust in our own resources alone, we have already broken all three. But as we trust God to give us the grace that is needed, we will find a new power and strength in our life that will enable us to become more and more like our creator and Lord.