

GNITN

#271

Resolutions, Traditions, and Faith: Navigating the New Year

Hitting The Gym

When asked about what the most popular New Years resolutions were for 2022, the top three were to exercise more, to eat healthier, and to lose weight. That's not surprising, though since our advertising media constantly preaches about these three ad infinitum. And it might also happen to be a doctor or two in our lives telling us the same things when we go in and tell them about our aches and pains. Whichever came first, the list is the same every year. And we usually think about doing it in January so we can make it a habit every month. Sadly for us and happily for workout facilities who get money monthly from a lot of people who never show up past that first month, the way those gyms look in December are vastly different than what they look like in January.

How Do We Know When The New Year Starts?

According to various web sites, the tradition of celebrating a new year goes back at least 4,000 years in ancient Babylon. However, they started their new year with the first new moon of the vernal equinox, which was a day in late March. They weren't the only culture to celebrate starting over, but the reasons and times varied based on quite a few things, mostly agricultural or astronomical. And the rituals were also varied. January 1st though was the brain child of one Julius Caesar who many believe decided to make it the first day in the first month of the Roman calendar as we read in an article found on [history.com](https://www.history.com):

Over the centuries, the calendar fell out of sync with the sun, and in 46 B.C. Julius Caesar decided to solve the problem by consulting with the most prominent astronomers and mathematicians of his time. He introduced the Julian calendar, which closely resembles the more modern Gregorian calendar that most countries around the world use today.

As part of his reform, Caesar instituted January 1 as the first day of the year, partly to honor the month's namesake: Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces allowed him to look back into the past and forward into the future. Romans celebrated by offering sacrifices to Janus, exchanging gifts with one another, decorating their homes with laurel branches and attending raucous parties.

We may not honor a lot of that list, but we do seem to like those parties.

Christians Got In On Things

If you are Methodist, you may know about what is called *The Covenant Renewal Service* and you may have participated in one. Here is a little more about this from an article from umcdiscipleship.org:

In 1663 Richard Alleine, a Puritan, published Vindiciae Pietatis: or, "A Vindication of Godliness in the Greater Strictness and Spirituality of It". In 1753, it was again published in John Wesley's A Christian Library. Wesley used one chapter, "The Application of the Whole," on Monday, August 11, 1755, in what probably was the first real celebration of the Covenant Service in the Methodist movement.

Wesley found the service rich and meaningful, as expressed in his Journal: "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted" (April 1756); "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable

blessing" (October 1765). "It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences ... I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backslidings" (January 1, 1775). In London these services were usually held on New Year's Day. Around the country the Covenant Service was conducted whenever John Wesley visited the Methodist Societies.

Nowadays, according to the above referenced cite, this is what happens:

The heart of the service, focused in the Covenant Prayer, requires persons to commit themselves to God. This covenant is serious and assumes adequate preparation for and continual response to the covenant. Leaders of worship must take seriously the need to prepare the congregation for this service, possibly through study sessions and prayer.

The leaders must also assume responsibility to assist persons to be faithful to the covenant, possibly through meetings for spiritual discipline.

The Wesley Prayer

According to Methodist tradition, Wesley wrote a prayer for the service and here it is:

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 for 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.

Obviously it is filled with old phraseology, but the sentiment is sound. And I tend to like how it resets our lives for living another year which is the point of this lesson, really.

Tradition Isn't Bad

Some people look at the mainline churches and their rituals and routines with disdain, preferring the leading of Holy Spirit which we equate with a freer manner of worship and service.

However, God is not a God of disorder and I've been taught that Holy Spirit works through preparation as well as through inspiration. Just because a service has a planned regimen and timing doesn't make it bereft of God's moving. We can learn a thing or two from these traditions as long as they're based on Biblical truths. It's when we become like the Thessalonians and quench the Spirit that we are out of balance. But it must also be said that if we are chaotic like the Corinthians who Paul told to do things decently and in order we are also of need of correction. As we explore Wesley and the Methodist ways of doing things at the beginning of a new year, it's not bad to reexamine how things played out the previous year and make changes for what God has in store for the next twelve months. Reflection can be depressing, but it can

and should be a way of assessing what went right and what didn't and a time to figure out how to avoid the pitfalls and potholes of the previous year and let Holy Spirit make the needed adjustments for you.

Are Making Resolutions Biblical?

There are some who think it's wrong to make yearly resolutions outside of what the Bible already tells us to do. I found a short article on the topic from ligonier.org that may help us on this question. The author, *Buck Parsons* starts off on the topic this way:

It seems that every December, many people make well-intentioned resolutions for the new year. With premeditated bursts of enthusiasm, they are caught up in a whirlwind of peculiar, and sometimes public, activities that puzzle even neighborhood children. We witness surprising promises and new year's manifestos whereupon we are summoned to behold what sweeping changes may come in the new year.

The skeptical observer may ask: Is all this new year's fervor genuine? Is it helpful? Is it really necessary? Moreover, the curious onlooker may ask: Is it even appropriate to make resolutions? After all, shouldn't we at all times and all seasons seek to live wisely, obediently, and biblically?

He then uses a well-known minister, Jonathan Edwards to help us simplify our list of resolutions: *The nineteen-year-old Jonathan Edwards knew his weaknesses and was aware of the destructive nature of his sin, so he resolved to establish certain priorities and principles in his life in his effort to live entirely for the glory of God. He helped pave the way for us as he prefaced his seventy resolutions with these words:*

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake.

These simple introductory words of Edwards not only provide us with a glimpse into the mind of one of history's greatest thinkers, but they also provide us with a glorious insight into the heart of a young man who had been humbled and mastered by the Lord God Almighty. We would therefore do well to consider Edwards' prefatory remarks as we seek to glorify God and enjoy Him forever in our churches, our homes, and our hearts.

What were some of those points? Buck gives just a few.

Resolving Sensibly

The gist of this one is really just to make sure you're not making changes with emotion and feelings. Here is how the author summarizes this point:

"Being sensible," Edwards begins his preface—we must be sensible, reasonable, in making resolutions. If we hastily make resolutions out of an illusion of sinless perfection, it is likely that we will not merely fail in our attempt to keep such resolutions but that we will likely be less inclined to make any further resolutions for similar desired ends. We must go about making resolutions with genuine prayer and out of a thorough study of God's Word. Our resolutions must be in accord with the Word of God; therefore, any resolution we make must necessarily allow us to fulfill all our particular callings in life. We must consider all the implications of our resolutions and be careful to make resolutions with others in mind, even if it means implementing new resolutions incrementally over time.

Resolving Dependently

We basically we have to realize that, without God's help, we can't hope to make any lasting changes in our lives:

"I am unable to do anything without God's help," Edwards admits. We must be honest in grasping the simple truth that every resolution must be made in dependence on God. And while every Christian would respond by saying, "Well, of course we must depend on God for all things," most Christians have been sold the world's bill of goods. They think that once they become dependent on God, they will have immediate strength. They repeat the world's mantra: "Whatever doesn't kill me will make me stronger." While the principle is generally true, such thinking can foster an attitude of proud independence. We must understand that being able to do all things through Christ who strengthens us means that we must depend on His strength continuously in order to do all things and to keep all our resolutions (Eph. 3:16; Phil. 4:13; Col. 1:11). In truth, whatever doesn't kill us makes us weak, by God's conforming grace, so that in our weakness we will rely continuously on the strength of our Lord (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

Resolving Humbly

This point is a hard one, as it is akin to asking God for patience which we know what will happen next:

"I do humbly entreat him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions." In making resolutions for the glory of God and before the face of God, we must not come into His presence pounding our chests in triumphal arrogance as if God must now love and bless us more because we have made certain resolutions to follow Him more. In reality, the Lord in His providence may choose to allow even more trials to enter our lives; in His unchanging fatherly love for us, He may decide to discipline us even more in order that we might more detest our sin and delight in Him. We should approach Him in humble reliance on His grace as we seek not merely the blessings but the One who blesses.

Resolving For Christ's Sake

This one is pretty simple as well and would also seem pretty obvious, yet we need to add it to our process:

"So far as they are agreeable to His will for Christ's sake." We cannot resolve to do anything with a presumptuous attitude before God. The whole matter of making resolutions is not just goal setting so that we might have happier lives. We are called by God to live according to His will, not our own—for Christ's sake, not our own—for it is not to us but to Him that all glory belongs (Ps. 115:1).

So rather than initially make a detailed list, we should start, like Edwards did and lay the groundwork with these steps. Any list after that will then come from Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. Too simple? I'll take my chances on this method.