

What New Year's Resolution Does God Want Us To Make? A Study of John 20:19-21

Big Idea: Seek seven.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 19:1-10; 24:45-47; John 6:38; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:14-15

Introduction:

1. It's a new year and with it come ► New Year's resolutions. Last week, I got to wondering: What are the most common New Year's resolutions people are making in America right now? What are the most popular resolutions for 2009?

I have an answer. It's probably not entirely accurate because all I did was Google for some lists of resolutions, and then I identified the resolutions that seemed to appear on pretty much every list, and then I identified some themes. Hardly scientific, but my results are probably not far off. Here are the ► top five New Year's resolution themes in no particular order:

- A. One common resolution theme has to do with ► my health. This includes resolutions such as, "lose weight," or "exercise more," or "eat right," or "drink less," or "quit smoking."
- B. Another common resolution theme has to do with ► my finances. This includes resolutions such as, "pay off debt," or "save more," or "stick to a budget."
- C. There's also ► my relationships, which includes resolutions like, "spend more time with family," or "find a soul mate," or "make new friends."
- D. There's also ► my career, which includes resolutions like, "get a better job," or "go back to school," or "get organized."
- E. There's also ► my enjoyment, which includes resolutions like, "take a trip," or "have more fun," or "try something new."

So there's my top-five-resolutions list. I like it. At one time or another, I've made most of these resolutions. And I'd like to do some of them right now.

2. And then I got to wondering: What do these resolutions have in common? Is there an overriding theme?

I think there is. There are a lot of "Mys" on the list: *My* health. *My* finances. *My* relationships. *My* career. *My* enjoyment. So it seems to me that these resolutions are mostly about self-improvement, making my life better, making me a better person.

Nothing wrong with that.

3. And I suspect the resolutions of professing Christians aren't much different. Some spiritual stuff might crack the top five, but much of it is probably still mostly about self improvement. I'm going to read the Bible more. I'm going to pray more. I'm going to go to church more.

Nothing wrong with these things. They're good.

4. But I wonder: ► What New Year's resolution does God want us to make? That's the question I'd like to address this morning. What New Year's resolution does God want us to make?

At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I have an answer. But you may not be ready for it. Not quite. So we're going to prepare.

- I. In preparation for answering this question, we're going to observe communion this morning, the Lord's Supper. We're going to take communion and then take up the question: What New Year's resolution does God want us to make?

Communion is good preparation for answering the question because it helps us to remember what Jesus was resolved to do. It helps us to remember His priorities.

Was ► Jesus' priority self improvement? Again, nothing wrong with self-improvement. Self-improvement is fine. I like it. It's good.

But did Jesus model self-improvement for us? Do we take communion to commemorate Jesus as the guru of self improvement? I don't think so. On the contrary, Jesus modeled self sacrifice. Self sacrifice in obedience to His Father's will. Self sacrifice for the benefit of others.

You see, self-improvement programs generally don't include crucifixion. Humanly speaking, crucifixion was not Jesus' personal preference. We know this because, on the night before He was to be crucified, Jesus asked the Father to spare Him the cross. He ► prayed,

^{ESV} Matthew 26:39 . . . "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. . ."

Nothing wrong with wanting to find an easier way. But Jesus sacrificially surrendered his personal preferences, his prerogatives—you might even say He surrendered His self improvement—to the will of His Father. He ► prayed,

^{ESV} Matthew 26:39 ". . . nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

The ► bread we're about to eat represents the body of Christ sacrificed on the cross for us in payment for our sins.

The juice we're about to drink represents the blood of Christ shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.

Together, the bread and the juice represent the price God paid for the greatest gift ever. The gift He offers freely. Freely by His grace and love. Freely to anyone who will simply believe Him for it. The free gift is eternal life.

Some self-improvement program: Set aside your prerogatives and die to yourself so that others might live.

In a moment, I'm going to pray. Then, as the music is played, I invite you to reflect upon and give thanks for what the Lord resolved to do for you on the cross. If and when you're ready, you are free to get up and go to any one of the stations around the room to eat the bread and drink the cup symbolizing that you identify with and embrace what Christ has done for you.

Father, thank you for the cross. For your sacrifice. For dying so that we might live. Amen.

(Communion here)

- II. Just three days after His crucifixion, Christ's followers are still grieving and confused and directionless and guilty. They had expected Jesus to conquer His enemies and set up His kingdom on earth right away. Instead He had been arrested and crucified. And along the way, every one of them had abandoned Him. They all bailed.

Now what? What are they to do now? Jesus had given them assignments before. But now Jesus was dead, and He seemed to leave them no assignment.

Left to themselves, with no clear assignment, no mission, no purpose, no resolution in view, the disciples did what we tend to do. They become inwardly focused and self-protective. They huddle up. They congregate behind closed doors. The doors are closed because the disciples are afraid of being persecuted or worse, martyred, at the hands of those in the culture antagonistic toward Christ and His followers. The opening words of ► John 20:19 set the stage:

^{ESV} John 20:19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews . . .

They've circled the wagons. They've isolated themselves. They view their culture as a threat.

Just then, the resurrected Christ appears to them. Verse ► 19 says,

^{ESV} John 20:19 . . . Jesus came and stood among them . . .

Now, put yourself in the disciples' sandals. They are already afraid. And now the Messiah—the guy they thought was dead and gone—He shows up. I'll bet their hearts pounded frantic questions. Is this a ghost? Is this for real? Is Jesus ticked because we bailed on Him?

Jesus assuages their fears. Verses ► 19 and 20 say,

^{ESV} John 20:19 . . . Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

I’ll bet the disciples were glad on at least two fronts. First, this was their beloved King who was now resurrected and alive. And second, they expected Jesus to now conquer His enemies and set up His kingdom on earth. They expected this to be His inauguration.

Jesus affirms the first idea by showing them the scars on His hands and His side. Yes, He is indeed alive.

But He corrects the second idea. This is not His inauguration. It’s theirs. You see, it’s a new day, a new year, and new age in which the saving work of Christ on the cross is finished, but the work of His followers is just beginning. And now, there is a new assignment, a new mission, a new resolution. Verse ► 21 says,

^{ESV} John 20:21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

The key words are at the ► end: “I am sending you.” There’s the assignment: “I am sending you.” There’s the mission: “I am sending you.” There’s the resolution: “I am sending you.”

The words of Jesus originally spoken to the first followers echo down through the ages to every follower: “I am sending you.” It’s as if Jesus is standing right here among us. He shows us the scars on His hands and His side. And He looks us in the eye and says, “I am sending you.”

So, it’s 2009. ► What New Year’s resolution does God want us to make? Wouldn’t it have something to do with Jesus sending us? Is there anything more important?

III. Well, exactly what does Jesus mean when He says, “I am sending you”? A closer look at what Jesus says in ► Verse 21 helps us.

- A. First of all, the original Greek word translated ► “sending” is significant. The idea behind the word focuses on the sender who is being represented by the ones sent.¹ Thus, ► the ones sent—that includes us—we are His emissaries, His ambassadors, His agents.
- B. And notice that Jesus makes a comparison. He says ► that the Father sent Him. And in that same way, Jesus is sending us. He says,

¹ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “πέμπω,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

^{ESV} John 20:21 “. . . As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

Somehow, our assignment from Jesus is just like His assignment from the Father. Somehow, Jesus is sending us for the very same reason the Father sent Jesus. Jesus’ purpose is our purpose. His mission is our mission.

Well, what is the mission we have in common? Jesus tells us plainly in ► Luke 19:10:

^{ESV} Luke 19:10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

The Father sent the Son for this purpose: ► to seek and save the lost. Now the Son is sending us for the very same purpose: to seek and save the lost.

So, Jesus is saying to you and me, “The Father has sent Me to seek and save the lost, even so I am sending you to . . .” What? To seek and save the lost!

The original words translated ► “the lost” literally mean the ones who are perishing, the ones who are dying, the ones who are being ruined.² Clearly, this refers to those whose sins have not yet been forgiven, those whose spiritual debts have not yet been paid, those who have not yet received the free gift of eternal life—in short, those who have not yet believed in Jesus Christ.

So the words of Jesus tell us that we are being sent as His representatives to seek and save the lost. Some call this the Great Commission.

- IV. Did that make your list of personal New Year’s resolutions, to seek and save the lost? I confess, it hasn’t been on mine. Not consistently. And not for some time.

Why not? Why isn’t this a common New Year’s resolution among believers? Why has the Great Commission become the great omission? I suppose there are lots of reasons.

As a leader of this church, I haven’t helped much. I’ve been assuming what I should have been emphasizing. Assuming that outreach would naturally occur instead of emphasizing why and when and how and where it should.

Another factor I suspect is fuzzy thinking. It’s common in Christian church circles to think of the lost as seekers, and, yes, there is a sense in which the lost may be seeking something. But Jesus emphasizes that we believers are the seekers. God the Father is a Seeker. God the Son is a Seeker. And we believers are seekers. That’s who we are. A major part of our identity in Christ is that we are seekers. We seek the lost.

² W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “ἀπόλλυμι,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

And if you think about it, that's the only part of our identity in Christ that is temporary. We will be worshippers forever. We will be beloved children of God forever. But we are seekers only for this lifetime. We won't be seeking and saving the lost in heaven.

And that makes the seeking all the more urgent right now. In fact, to seek and save the lost might just be the only reason we believers are still here on earth. It doesn't seem like God would keep us here on earth for primary purpose of self improvement. After all, once we've believed, our best self improvement move would be to skip earth and go directly to heaven. So why are we still here? To seek and save the lost.

I suppose another big reason that many of us don't think of ourselves as seekers is because we're afraid that we just can't do it. When the preacher says, "seek and save the lost" we think, "evangelism." And when we think, "evangelism" we think of it as an embarrassing event—an event in which we awkwardly try to shoehorn some kind of gospel sales pitch into an otherwise unrelated conversation, and then we try to close some salvation deal. And we know this doesn't really work very well today. Unless our objective is to be obnoxious. (And I'm afraid that objective has already been accomplished by many of the brethren.)

But I'd like to convince you that evangelism is not so much an event; it's a relational journey of loving our neighbors and friends. About a month ago, Pastor Patrick described it as a lifestyle. It's a lifestyle or journey every believer can take. One small step at a time. It begins with being a lot more intentional about investing in relationships with unbelievers, not as targets, not as conquests, but as friends we choose to love. And the journey progresses every time God uses us to draw an unbelieving friend a little bit closer to Christ. As such, evangelism is a process—a process that advances every time a misperception is clarified, every time stereotype is broken, every time a rejection is reconsidered as it relates to Christianity.³ When someone looks at you and thinks, "Wow, he's not the self-righteous, judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, simple-minded evangelical I thought he would be," that's a part of the process of evangelism.

- V. I want to talk more about this journey and how it will affect the entire church in the weeks to come, but for now, I just want to challenge you to add two words to the top of your list of New Year's resolutions for 2009. Two words: Seek seven. That's ► the big idea of my sermon: Seek seven. What New Year's resolution does God want us to make? My answer is: Seek seven. Let me explain.
- A. I'd like you to ask God to use you to draw seven people a little closer to Christ in 2009. I'd like you to pray that God would use you to nudge seven people toward a relationship with Jesus this year.
- B. But I don't want you to worry about how you're going to do it. Not yet.

For now, over the next week or so, I want you to simply ask God to help you identify who the seven are. That's the next step. Ask God for the seven.

³ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches In A Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 192.

In the weeks and months to come, my primary goal is to help you to seek your seven. My sermons are going to be about how you can seek your seven, and how I can seek mine.

And to further support you in your seeking, we are going to transform Moon Valley Bible Church into the kind of place where you are excited to invite your seven. A warm, friendly, safe place to find grace. A place where the not-yet-convinced feel like they belong long before they believe. A place where anybody from any background in any situation can immediately feel welcome and valued.

More on this later. For now, first things first. We're going to climb this mountain together. But we're going to do it one step at a time. So don't look up. Look down. Down at the next step.

Identify your seven.

- C. Just identifying the seven can take a little work. Let me offer some suggestions.

I invite you to prayerfully think through a typical week. Who do you see? Who do you talk to? Who do you work with? Who do you buy from?

Think of the faces. The coworker at the office. The friend at school. The check-out person at the grocery store. The neighbor next door. The person at the fitness club. The regular customer you have. The receptionist at the vet. The server at the restaurant. The father in law. The brother. The daughter.

Who should be in your seven?

As you pray and think through the candidates with whom you interact, consider the following guideline: the closer the better. Let me explain what I mean.

1. Those with whom you are relationally closer will generally be better candidates for your seven. The closer the better. Closer relationships generally mean more opportunities to be used by God to draw that person toward Christ.

I suspect God has already been at work bringing people into some kind of contact or relationship with you. And so identifying your seven may simply be an exercise in noticing what God has already been up to.

So, relationally, the closer the better.

2. And the idea applies not only relationally, but also geographically as well. Those who are geographically closer to Moon Valley will generally be better candidates for your seven. The closer the better. Closer proximity means it

will be easier to invite people to join you at Moon Valley to check it out. The closer they are the more likely they will be to come. The closer the better.

So, who are your seven? Ask God to help you identify them. That is your assignment this week.

- D. I can't help but dream of the possibilities. What might happen if we all seek seven? Well over five hundred people now call Moon Valley their church home. And let's say we all seek seven. Do the math. That's over 3,500 people! People who matter to God. People for whom Christ died. People who are lost without Him.

The words of Jesus originally spoken to the first followers echo down through the ages to every follower. It's as if Jesus is standing right here in front of you. He shows you the scars on His hands. He shows you the scar on His side. And He looks you right in the eye and He says, "I am sending you."