

Resolutions: Man's And God's

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On the Roman calendar that much of the world uses, one year has ended and another has begun. The beginning of a new year is the time when countless millions of people make New Year's resolutions. Perhaps many church of God members have done so as well.

The tradition of making a New Year's resolution—promising or vowing to oneself to do an act of self-improvement or something kind toward others—is more common in the Western hemisphere. As we know from experience, most of these resolutions focus on the self.

Not to be the bearer of bad news, but depending on which survey one reads, the success rate for accomplishing these resolutions is quite bleak: 88 to 92 percent of people never reach their goal. According to *Time* magazine, the top-ten most-forgotten New Year's resolutions are

1. lose weight and get fit,
2. quit smoking,
3. learn something new,
4. eat healthier and diet,
5. get out of debt and save money,
6. spend more time with family,
7. travel to new places,
8. be less stressed,
9. volunteer, and
10. drink less.

The world would probably be a better place if people would keep their promises to themselves!

Reasons for Failure

Many of the things church of God members endure over the last months of the year stem from pagan origins, and the New Year's resolution is no different. This tradition is believed to have originated with the Babylonians making vows to their gods. Similarly, the Romans began each year making promises to their god Janus, after which the month of January is named. In the Medieval era, the beginning of winter was the time when knights would take the "Peacock Vow" to re-affirm their commitment to chivalry.

As it has done for centuries, Catholicism practices similar things during the time of Lent. Even Jewish people make New Year's resolutions, though, of course, they do it when they believe the new year begins, at the Feast of Trumpets. Many church members do these same things. At the Feast of Tabernacles, one commonly hears people say something like, "After the Feast, I'm going to do such and such."

Well, how did it go? If we made a promise to change something in our lives, are we part of the 10 percent who reach their goals, or have we succumbed to the pressures of life and failed like the 90 percent? Making resolutions and setting goals are not necessarily wrong, but why do so many fail? According to *Time*, the reasons people abandon their resolutions are actually twofold: First, they set unrealistic goals, and second, they set too many of them. It is commonly suggested that setting smaller goals on the way to reaching the larger or long-term goal will help a person see a progression of accomplishment.

Many of us have been in the church for decades. What kinds of goals did we set during our early years as babes in Christ? Have we made progress toward them, or are we still struggling to perform some of the basic things of God? Have we progressed to meat, or are we still taking milk, as Paul says in Hebrews 5:12-14?

Did we make any resolutions last year, perhaps last Passover or last Feast? It will not be long until Passover is once again upon us, when we are commanded to examine ourselves (II Corinthians 13:5). Doing so is not always an enjoyable task, but it is one we must face if we are to reach our ultimate goal of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

While the words "goal" and "resolution" do not appear in the Bible, it contains endless instruction in how we are to live our lives, whether from a self-help, physical, or spiritual perspective. Perhaps the first set of instructions that come to mind would be that of God's law in the form of the Ten Commandments. As we have all heard before, if everyone kept just one of God's laws—say, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15)—we would live in a totally different world! How much healthier would everyone be if the whole world kept the food laws given by God in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14?

Apostolic Put-Ons

Consider another list of instructions. It is not a formal list of numbered laws, but it is indeed a list that we should be making a part of our everyday lives. The apostle Paul is not the only one to speak in these terms, but throughout his writings he uses quite a few "put ons":

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Romans 13:11-14)

It makes an interesting Bible study to go through the New Testament and note all the times the apostle tells us to put on some character trait or virtue. There are quite a few of them. We "put"

something on or off or away or through or in or down or up all the time, and doing so oftentimes does not require a lot of thought. Being a transitive verb, “put” cannot stand alone; it must have an object. There must be a thing to which that the action is done.

The English word “put” is used several hundred times in the Bible. The Greek equivalent is used 29 different ways, and the Hebrew uses its similar word in almost twice as many ways. It is a little word that we take for granted most of the time!

For the most part, Paul’s use of “put on” is positive, but in our day a put-on can be and is frequently used in a negative way: to mislead someone, perhaps as an act of teasing or for amusement. The entertainment world is full of these. Many televangelists do the same things, putting on an act to get the people to respond and support them.

In Romans 13, Paul, having mentioned several of the commandments of God, writes, “It is high time to awake out of sleep” and then “put on the armor of light” and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” First, we see that he is attempting to wake the Roman congregation up! Maybe he is referring to the Parable of the Ten Virgins, in which the virgins were all asleep. The apostle says that we do not have time to waste! In his inimitable way, he is urgently scolding them: “You’ve been asleep too long! Wake up and get dressed!”

One of the first things we do after waking from a night’s sleep is that we dress—we “put on” our clothes for the day. The Bible contains scores of references to clothing, and depending on the context, its significance can be physical, economic, social, moral, or spiritual. While clothing is indeed functional, it has multiple uses: It can protect, conceal, decorate, or display or represent a person’s current moral and spiritual state, good or bad.

When we see what people wear—or perhaps worse, do not wear!—in public, most Christians are astounded or perhaps dumbfounded. Too much is being displayed that ought not to be! How people clothe themselves can give an observant person a window of insight into the wearer’s moral character, social status, or just his or her present circumstance. When we add a situation to a person’s choice of clothing, as shown by the man not wearing a wedding garment in the Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14), we can also ascertain a great deal about a person’s attitude toward others, especially toward God.

What do we put on for the world to see? What spiritual state or attitude toward others do we display in what we put on? When I was growing up, and as boys do, would get a hole in my clothes, my mother would patch them so I did not have to go to school with clothes that were full of holes. As my mother used to say, “You don’t want to go out looking like a hobo!” But now it is fashionable to buy clothes with holes already in them!

More Than Clothing

Needless to say, the world around us is in a sad spiritual state, but its condition does not mean that we are without options. We always have a choice in how we react to what is going on in our culture. Job provides us succinct guidance in Job 29:14, saying, “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me.”

His words parallel what Paul writes in Romans 13:12: “Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.” “Cast off” can also be translated as “put off,” but the translators probably used “cast off” to indicate a stronger action, meaning not just “remove” but “fling away.” Kids do them when they change their clothes, usually flinging them all over the room!

In this verse, the apostle paints a word-picture of someone casting off clothing that is so foul and disgusting that all he wants to do is to throw it as far from him as possible. He does not want to be contaminated by it anymore, nor does he want to be identified by it any longer. As Christians who live under the light of God’s truth, we should likewise not want to have any contact with those “works of darkness.”

The goal of putting on Jesus Christ should be at the top of our list. It is a lofty goal that will take our entire lifetimes to accomplish. It goes hand in hand with, as Paul states it, “put[ting] on the armor of light.” As we know, light illuminates. It is a symbol for truth, which we have been granted the insight and help, not only to understand, but also to practice. Given that our society is moving toward uncritical open-mindedness and false tolerance for all, truth is becoming a rare and thus valuable commodity that we must hold closely—in fact, wear it as a garment! As deceit abounds, it becomes more urgent that we put it on and guard it!

In Colossians 3 appears another passage in which the apostle Paul expands this “put on” metaphor, instructing us what to put off and then what to put on:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. . . .Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. . . .

But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. (verses 1-2, 5, 8-14)

First, Paul tells us why we should start making changes: We have been raised with Christ in baptism, and now it is time to seek heavenly things. But this means putting to death whatever is in us that reeks of earthliness—all those sins of the flesh. This is putting off the old man, what we were before our calling, along with all our evil deeds.

Then we must get to work on the new man. Paul even provides a list as to how to go about it! As we diligently begin to put on the attitudes and actions of Christ, the weaknesses and sins of the old man will begin to fall away because the heavenly and the earthly, the old and the new, cannot coexist for

long. If we keep at it, and it becomes an ingrained habit, putting on the new man will become as easy as getting dressed for the day!

Our list of goals or resolutions have already been made for us in the pages of God's Word. Unlike this world and its New Year's resolutions, we cannot just abandon them after a week or two. They must become part of us as we prepare to put on eternal life and immortality in the Kingdom of God.