

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Personal Spiritual Enhancement

By Steven Harper

It's that time of year again, when we think about another calendar year passing and another one beginning, we look back at our accomplishments for the past year, we do a little self-examination to see where we need improvement, and then we plot out our goals for the calendar year via those annual New Year's Resolutions. If we dared look back at this last year's resolutions [if we remember what they were], we likely found that several were left undone, some were not quite accomplished to the degree we desired, and others were completely forgotten. Maybe even purposefully.

But if you are truly interested in bettering yourself, may I offer a few suggestions for resolutions? In spiritual matters, improvement is always a good goal, for none of us is perfect, and yet we seek to be pleasing to the Lord in all we do, so we persist in not perfection [for we know we have already failed that], but in simply being the best we can be as servants of the Lord. The fact that Paul told the Thessalonians that they were doing exactly what they should have been doing, but then told them, *“Excel still more”* (1 Thess. 4:1, 9-10, NASB), should tell us that we can always improve, regardless of where we are in our spiritual knowledge and maturity, and regardless of what we are now doing or have done in the past. Again, since none of us is perfect, there will always be room for improvement; let's aim for that this year. Let's aim for personal spiritual enhancement.

Draw Nearer to God. There is not a man or woman, adult or child, on earth who cannot benefit from drawing closer to God. James' admonition to the early disciples is just as valuable and relevant as it was in the first century: *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”* (James 4:8). And therein is the benefit: He will draw near to you! Being nearer to God means enjoying His blessings, learning of true godliness, holiness, and righteousness, and then imitating Him in those attributes – thus becoming a better disciple in every way.

But drawing near to God requires certain things of us before that can be possible. The first and most obvious thing should be the realization that we cannot continue to walk in sin and ungodliness. The psalmist admonishes us, *“You who love the Lord, hate evil!”* (Psa. 97:10). It is simply not possible to love evil and sin and draw near to God, for the two are contrary to one another. In fact, the wise writer tells us, *“The fear of the Lord is to hate evil”* (Prov. 8:13). Love and respect for God means we hate what He hates, and that we flee and avoid those things while striving to be more like Him in all we do and in all we are. There are few things that demonstrate our love for God better than our sincere imitation of Him.

If you are not a Christian, though, you must understand that it is your sins that stand between you and God, and you cannot draw closer to Him until those sins are removed. But here is the problem: We cannot remove sins by our own power. Here is where we must humble ourselves before God and submit to His will for us, that those sins might be removed and we be reconciled to Him. That reconciliation was made possible through the blood of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:10), but we have no access to that power unless and until we are baptized into Christ. That was the message of the gospel the very first time it was preached (Acts 2:38), and it is in that act of faith, humility, and complete submission He will do what we cannot (Col. 2:12-13). When He takes those sins away, it is then we may be reconciled to Him! If you are not yet a Christian, draw near to God in this way!

Regularly Do Honest Self-Examinations. Instead of waiting until December 31 to assess the year's success or failure, it would make more sense and be more effective to make regular self-examinations throughout the year – maybe even daily. Christians cannot take for granted that we are pleasing to the Lord just because we call ourselves His people; the letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2-3) should tell us that sometimes

churches fall short and are in danger of being cut off from His blessings. It is for this reason we must heed the admonition of Paul, made to the Christians of Corinth: ***“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified”*** (2 Cor. 13:5). These words tell us that Christians can in fact be ***“disqualified”*** – declared by the Lord to be ineligible and unfit for the reward. This is something that should motivate us to regularly examine self to make sure that doesn’t happen to us.

So, how can we know? The only sure way to know whether we are pleasing to the Lord is to consult His word regularly, compare our lives to that of faithful disciples, review His commands, and make an honest assessment of self. Paul’s admonition to Timothy was one worthy of our consideration here: ***“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”*** (2 Tim. 2:15). Note that Paul said we must ***“Be diligent”*** in this endeavor; diligence is necessary because this is a serious matter – pleasing the Lord. If we find that we are not pleasing to the Lord, we can be sure the consequences of displeasing Him are not going to be good for us.

Compare Yourself to Jesus, Not Your Brethren. While we are examining ourselves, looking for ways to improve, let us not at the same time make the mistake of merely comparing ourselves to other disciples as the gauge of success or failure; they are not the standard. Jesus is the standard! The truth is, almost everyone can find someone who is “worse” than themselves [arbitrarily speaking, of course] and can also then fall for the “good enough” attitude. But, friends and brethren, if we are always comparing ourselves to Jesus, we will clearly see that we have room for improvement!

And beyond this false standard, there is the reality that we tend to see the faults in others easier than we see our own faults. Jesus addressed this when He admonished us, ***“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?”*** (Matt. 7:1-5). Paul addressed this, too, asking, ***“Who are you to judge another’s servant?”*** (Rom. 14:4), and, ***“But why do you judge your brother?”*** (Rom. 14:10). The problem Paul addressed was Christians comparing their personal opinions to that of others and, of course, the opinions of others were inferior! Funny how that works. Or not.

There are many areas of our lives where God has given us liberty to act, and we should not presume we have the market cornered on righteousness and holiness. As Paul showed the Roman brethren, there are some things where brethren may differ, but both ways are pleasing to the Lord, so let us be content with that and not use our personal opinions of “how things should be,” and expecting everyone to live according to our standards. Quit judging yourself by your brother and, at the same time, quit judging your brother by you. We are not the standard!

Make this year the one where you strive to be a better you – better in Christ, better for Christ, and better because of Christ. When He is our goal, we can only get better. Let’s go! ■



Abraham Lincoln said of Americans:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.”

Service Times — Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM — Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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