

Starting the New Year the Right(eous) Way *“Repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15, ESV)*

Many people begin a new year with the intention of making changes and turning over a new leaf – perhaps even making a fresh start. And there certainly is nothing wrong with endeavoring to kick bad habits or make improvements to our earthly lives. One thing that God would have every one of us do is begin each year, in fact each day, in the righteous way. The problem is that we cannot walk righteously in God’s sight by our own efforts.

See, God demands perfect holiness – perfect love of Him and neighbor. But as the Apostle Paul reminds us: *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12, ESV).* *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin” (Romans 3:20, NIV2011).*

My friends, our obedience to God’s Law (His Ten Commandments), that is to say, our efforts at loving God and neighbor, can never make us righteous in God’s eyes. So, how do we enter the year of our Lord (anno Domini, AD) 2024 in righteousness? Well, *“it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith” (Galatians 3:11, ESV).*

So, Jesus tells us: *“Repent and believe in the gospel.”* But this is no small or easy task for you and me. In fact, it’s impossible for human beings, who are conceived & born dead in their sins, to *“repent and believe in the gospel”* by their own power. For hating, rejecting, and turning away from sin doesn’t come naturally to sinners. Neither does trusting in Jesus and His message of absolution and deliverance. For *“[repenting] and [believing] in the gospel”* isn’t like deciding to lose ten pounds in the new year, or like giving up tobacco products, or like planning to spend more time with loved ones. This also isn’t a New Year resolution that we can discard in February and just say, “O well, I gave it my best shot.” For *“[repenting] and [believing] in the gospel”* is a matter of life and death – a matter that has everlasting consequences.

See, there is a lot at stake for us. So, we’ll want to start the new year in the righteous way. But the fallen sinner’s inability to obey God, or to choose Him, or to do anything that will earn His favor and acceptance, makes it appear that we don’t have a lot of reason for hope as we look at 2024. But don’t let appearances cause you to despair. Hope is plentiful. For out of His incomprehensible love for us, God works repentance in human beings through His convicting Word. And through His saving Word He also creates and gives the faith to believe the Good News that God’s Son perfectly kept the Ten Commandments on our behalf and suffered the judgment and everlasting punishment that our evil and rebellious behavior deserves. And through this saving faith, the Christian receives all the forgiveness, deliverance, and new & unending life that Jesus earned – His precious gifts of salvation which are offered by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel in the Word and the Sacraments.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I do *“not [have] a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:9, ESV).* *“There is no difference between Jew and*

Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Romans 3:22b-25a, NIV2011). “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28, KJV).

My fellow Christian, baptized into Jesus, you and I start this new year the righteous way. For we have been declared right with God through Jesus. If this doesn't sound like a typical New Year resolution plan, it's because it isn't. Personal lifestyle changes at the beginning of the calendar year are human plans. Our eternal salvation is God's plan and God's work – His gift that He freely gives to us. ***“For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV).***

See, over and over again the Bible tells us that our righteousness before God comes only from Christ and is received through faith alone. Therefore, believers in Christ now ***“repent and believe in the gospel”*** – they daily walk in their Baptism. For *“[baptizing with water] indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever”* (Quoted from “The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Part Four,” Luther's Small Catechism, Concordia Publishing House, ©1986).

And the Savior who was born in Bethlehem for us, who went to the cross to sacrifice His life into death for us, and who bodily rose again and later ascended into Heaven for us, promises to sustain us through His Means of Grace as we await the day when our Savior who ***“[is] making all things new” (Revelation 21:5, ESV)*** will return to usher His church into resurrection glory where His people shall live with Him forever in ***“a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13, NIV2011).***

See you in church throughout 2024,
Pastor

P.S. - Shay and I thank everyone who sent us cards and gifts this past Christmas. Your thoughtfulness and generosity are very touching and deeply appreciated ~ Pastor.

