

A NEW YEAR'S EXHORTATION FOR 2017

As we enter a new year many of us are believing and looking forward to the wonderful things that the Lord will bring forth and establish within our nation, the world and of course within our own lives. I believe and I am in agreement that God is going to do great and wonderful things in this new year as well as in the years to come leading up to the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

As I say that, I must also add that I believe they will be wonderful because they will all be parts of the sovereign plan of our sovereign God. A sovereign plan geared towards ushering in His Kingdom here upon the earth. However, God's ways and thoughts are not the same as ours. His sovereign plan may not look like what we think it should look like or should be. We must never forget that the scriptures are very clear concerning the end times and the preparation for the second coming. They state that it will be a difficult time, even for the believer. It may be very different from what we may be expecting but none the less, God's sovereign will shall be accomplished and He will be in total control.

In saying that, I would like to briefly discuss what I also believe is very important to the heart of God in this hour as well as for the coming year. While many are declaring that there will be great things happening and great breakthroughs (which I agree with) I also believe that the true heart of God was, is and always will be about the "attitude" of our own heart concerning our relationship with Him. What is primary to the heart of the Father is to be in relationship, an intimate relationship of "oneness," with you and I. The primary purpose for Jesus' first coming was not just to establish His Kingdom on this earth but it was to re-establish the relationship between God, the Father and His most beloved of all creation. Jesus said that "...ye must be born again..." which meant that we were all dead – spiritually dead by being separated from God because of sin. Jesus' primary mission was to be the "perfect, spotless Lamb of God" sacrificed for the sin of the world at His crucifixion. Through His powerful resurrection, He defeated both sin and spiritual death thereby making a way for the restoration in the relationship between God and Man. Through Jesus and all that He accomplished, we can be "born again" and made alive unto God. (Romans 11:6)

Jesus' most heartfelt prayer is found in John 17:21, *"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."* I believe that Jesus is continually praying this prayer as our "Great Intercessor." This was and still is the heart of the Father - that we would be "one" with Him and His Son Jesus as well as with each other in Him.

So what does this restoration in the relationship between God and man really mean for us? First of all it means that all those who "received Him" and "believed on His Name," were given a new identity – "Sons of God." (John 1:12) This means that as a believer we are children of the Most High God and members of the "household of faith." The scriptures say that we are "joint heirs" along with Jesus to all that is found within the Kingdom. (Romans 8:17) This is so very, very wonderful. However, many times as believers we stop here. We rejoice in this fact. We stay right here and then make doctrines and precepts on this very true fact. I am not disagreeing with this at all. I agree with most of the thinking concerning "who we are in Christ." Although, I do think we have gone a little overboard in some things and have taken it to some inordinate extremes. That, however, is for another discussion.

What I would like to bring to our attention concerning being "joint heirs with Jesus" is that we, as believers, love the fact that we are joint heirs with Jesus to all that is within the Kingdom as well as being able to do the works of the Kingdom – which as I said previously, is wonderful. Unfortunately, many times we forget the other aspect of our inheritance. We know that a great part of our inheritance is that we now have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Through Jesus, we inherit the promise of the Holy Spirit, not only for His

power and authority but most importantly so that we can now live in the same character and personality of behavioral and moral excellence that Jesus walked and lived in.

We are always taught that the twelve Disciples/Apostles moved in great power and authority, which they did. There is no dispute in that. We concentrate on that aspect of their life and ministry. However, what we sometimes fail to realize is that what really got people's attention was not only the wonderful works they did in the Name of Jesus but that their character and manner of behavior, their lifestyle, totally changed. What I am trying to say is this - if we want to enjoy all the wonderful power and authority, as well as the benefits and privileges that come with being a "child of God," then we must also act, behave and walk in the moral excellence of a "child of God." Hmm... Let's take a "selah moment" and pause and think on that.

What I would like for us to re-examine this year is another aspect of our relationship with our God. I am referring to the fact that we are always to be "disciples of Jesus." As you have heard me define this term previously in many of our discussions, the definition of the term "disciple" goes beyond the thought of being a pupil or a student of someone. At the real heart of the matter when it comes to defining the term "disciple" is the aspect in that it involves "changing your lifestyle to that of the one that you are choosing to follow." Now I do understand that a part of Jesus' lifestyle was doing the works of the Kingdom such as healing, deliverance, preaching and teaching, as well as evangelism, etc. This is all very true. And the previously mentioned items are to be very much a part of the lifestyle of the disciple of Jesus. However, again, I believe we many times stop here and think that if we are doing these things that God is well pleased and therefore we are true disciples of Jesus. This is where I feel we sometimes come up short.

What may come to your mind as I say that is the "Parable of the Talents" and Jesus expressing the words "*...well done good and faithful servant.*" Wasn't He speaking about doing the works of the Kingdom?" Well, let's briefly examine this parable and see what it is saying. I encourage you to read this parable found in Matthew 25:12-25 before we continue. Remember, in its context within Matthew this parable is given by Jesus to His disciples at the very end of His ministry while He was with them just prior to His arrest. This parable was the second to last parable that He used to teach His disciples to prepare them for His death and His "going away."

In this parable, Jesus was expressing that even though He may be leaving them, there will come a time when He will return. In the mean time, anyone who "professes" that they are His disciples will be given "**His goods.**" The "talents" ("*His goods*") in this parable are mistakenly taken to mean actual talents and abilities of an individual. However, I think that the "talents" spoken of and given by Jesus also represent aspects of His character and nature ("*His goods*") that He manifested and role-modeled as He walked the earth. As His disciples we are to represent Jesus through a lifestyle that expresses His character and personality, as well as His power and authority, while He is "away" for the unsaved to see and therefore, desire.

In this parable, we see that Jesus recognizes that each individual is different. He gives each one the opportunity to reveal what is truly in their heart concerning being a true disciple of His as He gives them of "**His goods** *...to every man according to his several ability...*" (Matthew 25:15) Jesus gives those who "say" they are His "servants/disciples" the opportunity to express what is the "attitude of their heart" towards Him and who He really is to them within their heart - Is He their Lord (their absolute, supreme and final authority in their life) or is He not? Could these "talents" represent "God given opportunities" to express the "fruits," the character and personality of the Christ-like lifestyle that is to be expressed by His true disciples during these "end time days?" Could they be representing the actions and behavior of a lifestyle of moral excellence that point to Jesus as well as the works of the Kingdom? In living and manifesting this Christ-like lifestyle could it truly be a tool that would draw the hungry and thirsty unsaved to the truth and hope that only a new life in Christ can give?

In this parable, the three servants were given the opportunity to express their lifestyle in Christ through a lifestyle of mercy and love towards others. It is also a lifestyle of true holiness through repentance whenever they would "miss the mark." It is not a "legalistic" concept, but rather it is an attitude of the heart that simply desires to "delight the heart of my King." We see that two of the "servants" did express this lifestyle and both received their "reward." However, the most telling aspect of their reward and what really expresses Jesus' main thought in this parable is found in Matthew 25: 21, 23, "... *Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.*" Remember, the term, "**thy lord**," as we discuss now the third "servant."

The third servant came and gave account. Instead of giving an account and taking full responsibility for his actions, he blamed his master. He expressed his true attitude of heart concerning his master. In Matthew 25:24, 25, the third servant told the "master" exactly what was in his heart. We can say that out of the abundance his heart, his mouth spoke. The "man" (Jesus) in the parable repeated the "servant's" words in a "sarcastic way, - *Oh so you knew that I was...*" The truth of the matter was that this "servant" did not really know his master nor did he know his master's heart. This man who lived in the midst of true servants, those who truly knew and loved their master, thought he could get away with just being with the other servants and "just blend in" without being a true faithful servant. Jesus was saying that it doesn't work that way. Every heart will be exposed.

The third "servant," who we now know was **never ever truly** a "servant," just a pretend servant, never really "knew" his Lord. He did not know Jesus. Jesus was never, "**thy Lord.**" Jesus was never this third man's Lord. The result was that he was thrown into, "*outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" This one who was pretending to be a "servant" in the midst of true servants had his wickedness "found out" and exposed. So will it be when Jesus returns. Each person's true heart and motives will be revealed.

Let's return to our definition of the term "disciple." We said that it meant to "change your lifestyle to the one that you are choosing to follow." Doing the works of the Kingdom is wonderful and should be done. After all, "*faith without the works is dead.*" (James 2:18, 20, 26) However, we must also remember what Jesus said about the "works" in Matthew 7:22, 23, - "*Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*" Now, I am quite aware that Jesus is not telling us that the works of the Kingdom are not important for His disciples to bring forth. Notice, however, what Jesus is saying concerning the most important thing to Him. He is declaring that the most important thing to Him is that we "know" Him and that He would know us. He is referring to the fact that the most desirous thing to His heart is that we have a close intimate relationship of oneness with Him and the Father. We also need to notice that Jesus infers that someone who "does the works" under false pretenses has an attitude of heart that is full of "iniquity," Hmmm...

If we place Matthew 7:22, 23 in its proper context within the scripture, we will see that it is towards the conclusion of Jesus' teaching commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount." This "sermon" begins back in Matthew 5:3 with what is commonly referred to as the "Beatitudes" or the "Blessings." This "sermon" was really Jesus' first main teaching to His first disciples. The very first thing He tells His first disciples in His very first major teaching to them is that if they are truly to be His disciples they must first be "poor in spirit..." In its simplicity this simply means that if we desire to be a disciple of Jesus we are to first of all recognize our need for God and for a Savior to save us from our sin. As a person truly recognizes and acknowledges their need for God they then turn towards Him and cry out for help. This is the "born again" experience in its most simplistic form. For if a person's "attitude of heart" is truly sincere in this then Jesus is very clear in stating that the Kingdom of heaven and all it entail is theirs.

Jesus then proceeds in this “sermon” to continue with a teaching that covers many, many things. All of which really speak to the root issue for Jesus and the Father concerning the true disciple of Jesus and the true child of God. It speaks to the issue concerning what the true “attitude of heart” must be for a true disciple of Jesus, as well as a true “son of God.” If we look closely at this teaching, Jesus never mentions the actual works of the Kingdom such as healing, deliverance, preaching, evangelism, etc. What He does teach is what the true character and personality of the true disciple of His should be. To name a few, Jesus speaks of the true disciple being “pure in heart,” being a peacemaker,” being merciful,” being the “salt of the earth,” being a light to this world.” He goes on to say that He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. What He meant by that was that He came to show us a living role model of living out the moral and behavioral aspect of the commandments of God. He was the Living Word, incarnate. He was the Law, God’s “instruction manual,” in the flesh.

Our problem is that we neglect to realize that the word “Torah” which is commonly translated to the word “Law” really means “instruction.” The Torah is really the instruction manual to a Godly, holy, consecrated and sanctified lifestyle. Of course in our sinful state we could never live it. However, through the atoning work of Jesus and through the infilling of the Holy Spirit, we as believers and disciples of Jesus, are now fully capable of ***living the same moral and behavioral lifestyle*** that Jesus lived and walked in. Did you hear what I just said? Each of us is now fully capable of living the lifestyle of behavioral and moral excellence that Jesus role modeled. Why? Because He has given us the Holy Spirit; the same Holy Spirit that dwelt within Him. Therefore, being a disciple of Jesus means that we are to make a quality decision to change our lifestyle to that of the one that was role-modeled for us by Jesus.

I am exhorting and encouraging myself as well as everyone that may be reading this to truly take a “lifestyle check.” If we are truly disciples of Jesus then each of us should desire to be living a lifestyle of behavioral and moral excellence that was exemplified by Jesus as He walked and lived on this earth. As I said, take a “lifestyle check” as well as an “attitude of the heart check.” Each of us need to “take stock” of what we are doing and why. Is the attitude of my heart that which desires to simply bless the heart of my God, not just with works of the Kingdom, but with a lifestyle that seeks after and walks in the behavioral and moral excellence of Jesus? Do I need to make some major changes? Do I need to reflect and repent before the Lord and “turn from my wicked ways?” Am I living a “double life?” Am I outwardly looking like a disciple of Jesus by doing the works but in secret I am still steeped in iniquity?

In this New Year I am truly excited and looking forward to what the Lord will be doing in preparation for the soon return of our King. I am also open to whatever that may look like for I desire God’s will to be done in the way that He will do it no matter what or how I think it should or should not look like. However, in the midst of all that, we must remember that Jesus will be coming for a Bride that is without spot or blemish. Jesus will be coming for those that He truly knows, by the attitude of their heart, are truly His disciples. He will be coming for those that are His true disciples who have made the decision and choice to totally change their lifestyle – their behavioral and moral conduct - to that of the One (Jesus) that they are choosing to follow. I exhort and encourage each of us to truly take stock of “why we are doing what we are doing.” If you need help or accountability seek after faithful friends or trustworthy leaders that can come along side and keep you accountable.

Let this not just be the year of the “breakthrough” but let it be the year that each of us “break free” from “*that sin which so easily besets (entangles) us.*” (Hebrews 12:1) As true disciples of Jesus, let us be resolute in desiring to truly prepare our own lives with an attitude of our heart that simply desires to bless the heart of our King. Let us be resolute to present our lives as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to the One whom we adore, worship and love. Not just in works or deeds but with a lifestyle of true moral excellence.