



## God-Pleasing Resolutions

As a new year dawns, many people, including the people who sit in the pews of LCMS congregations, will be making New Year's resolutions. These resolvers will be seeking to get their physical house in order by resolving to lose weight, quit smoking and work out more often. Resolvers also may seek to get their financial house in order as they know that the debts of the previous years, combined with the credit card bills that will be coming due from the recently completed Christmas shopping season, prevent them from

giving, saving and planning for the future. Still other resolvers may seek to get their spiritual houses in order as they commit to a more faithful and robust worship life, devotional life, and life of service to the Lord and neighbor. The list here is not in any way exhaustive. It will vary from congregation to congregation, but the sentiments will not. As a new year dawns, it gives birth to new resolutions.

Resolvers resolve because they know that the life they are living is

not always what they want it to be. Obesity statistics in the United States (*78.6 million Americans are obese according to The American Journal of Medicine*) help us understand why resolutions for fitness and weight loss continue to be favorite resolutions. Financial statistics (*some 25 million middle class homes live paycheck to paycheck, according to a CNN article from June 2014*) are informative for understanding why many use these New Year's resolutions as motivation to get their financial house in order. Anecdotal evidence in congregations indicates that many members would love to grow in their devotional lives as well. These evidences and more offer a clear indication why many seek to turn over a new leaf in one or more areas of life as a new page on the calendar is turned. If this is the case in the general population, it is also most certainly true of those who sit in the pews of LCMS congregations.



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But what often happens to these resolutions? They fail. Various studies show that nearly half of our resolutions make it beyond the first month of the new year. With so many of these resolutions failing so soon, it tends to add yet another layer of guilt upon the one making the resolution. Failure upon failure heaps more burden on those seeking relief. In many ways it is far better for the millions of people who don't make resolutions. At least these non-resolvers don't have to deal with the guilt of both past failures and the failed attempt to change. As Deuteronomy tells us: *"If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth"* (23:21-23 ESV).

To resolve or not to resolve, that is the question. Is it better for the person to make a resolution and fail? Or should the resolver just decide to live with the situation that would give rise to a resolution in an epic sense of fatalism? Resolutions come from situations where the individual knows that change could and should be made. So to not resolve, especially in the area of our spiritual life or even stewardship, would be clearly wrong. But if the resolution will likely lead to more failure and grist for the devil's mill to grind upon the individual, what is a person to do?

From the perspective of the biblical steward, there really is only one way to begin to address this issue. The first and most important resolution is to resolve to not start in the wrong place. Every New Year's resolution begins with the individual. Resolutions talk about what the individual will and will not do. Resolutions appeal to human



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interest and human effort. The child of God, on the other hand, knows that there is indeed nothing good within us that will provide fertile soil from which to grow godly resolutions. The Scripture tells us *"out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person"* (Matt. 15:19-20 ESV). There can be no godly result when a resolution is rooted in that which is evil.

As stewards of our Lord's kingdom, we know that things are not always right within our lives. We so often get things out of order when it comes to the priorities of the Lord's work in our lives, in our congregations and in the LCMS. For this reason, as stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to us, there is the temptation to join in the rash of resolutions being made. But this would be to start in the wrong place. Faithful stewardship only flows from what the Lord has already done. Our Lord has

poured out His Holy Spirit, called by the Gospel and enlightened with His gifts the individual and corporate steward in the one true faith. In Holy Baptism, the Lord calls. Through the Holy Scriptures the Lord enlightens. Through the Holy Supper the Lord keeps. Where is the individual? Only in the position of receiving!

This is a critical resolution for faithful stewards. The steward can only work, keep and give, for the sake of others, what has been received from the Lord. Faithful resolutions in the area of personal stewardship of the Gospel can't start with the individual and ever hope to succeed. Resolutions to re-order financial stewardship in the life of the follower of Jesus Christ can only result in positives when this starts not within the person, but within the Word and work of the Lord in the life of the individual. This proper starting place removes the burden of resolution from the individual and allows for

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true freedom. The Lord who calls us is faithful even when we are not. There is nothing more liberating for a steward of God!

Godly resolutions begin with the Lord. They also then lead to repentance. We know that we sin and fall short of the glory of God. Resolutions that follow the movement of Confession and Absolution are the only godly ones. The Lord calls. The sinner falls. The Lord restores. The saint follows. This is the only pattern of resolution that will ever work!

When New Year's resolutions in the area of stewardship begin with the Lord, they take on a whole new perspective. These re-ordered resolutions have a vastly different “why” to them. The why of these resolutions are not rooted in sinful selfishness or vain conceit. The why of a resolution, ordered by the Lord, flows from grace. When the individual is led by the Lord to recast some of the traditional resolutions in the light of the Gospel, they become very noble and salutary. Those health and weight

loss resolutions sound more like this: “Because the Lord has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members as a gift to be used by Him and for Him, I will endeavor with His help to get them in shape so that I can be better used by the Lord to serve Him.” A re-ordered financial resolution might sound more like this: “Because the Lord has given me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land animals and all I have, I will endeavor with His help to better use these God-given resources for the extension of His kingdom and not mine by getting out of and staying out of debt so that, as I have freely received, I may freely give.”

Should congregations encourage New Year's resolutions? Only if they start in the right place! Resolutions that start with human desire and human effort are bound to fail and end in deeper bondage. The Lord has not called us to this! However when the resolution starts with the Lord, leads to repentance and forgiveness, He and He alone can and will lead them to results that are truly pleasing to Him.

