

Dear Class Member,

Around New Year's Day, many people make lists of resolutions or promises to themselves, in an effort to become better persons. As Christians, we have clear guidance from the Bible, but still need to recalibrate our lives when they become out of sync with our professed faith. Resolutions, recalibrations, renewal and repentance will be the topics of our next class.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, here is the lesson.



For Many, New Year's Resolutions Offer a Path to Self-Improvement

The Wired Word for the Week of January 9, 2022

In the News

New Year's resolutions are made every year by people who want to change their lives and become better people. On January 1, *The New York Times* provided some words of wisdom from people who made resolutions to pursue their dreams, at a variety of ages from their 40s through their 80s.

Richard Klein moved to Mumbai to become a Bollywood actor in his 40s: "Dream a big dream, then figure out what all the little incremental steps are to get there, and hit those steps one by one. There are always obstacles. Loved ones can be an obstacle, money can be an obstacle. It's not easy. There's lots of sacrifice involved, but you can dream a big dream and make it come true."

Vica Steel enrolled in seminary to become a Lutheran pastor in her 50s: "Be as open as you can be. Be as honest as you can be about who you are. Because ultimately, love overwhelms."

A TWW consultant started hunting in his mid-50s and got his first elk -- a cow -- at age 66: "I did all the field dressing alone and without guidance. It was a bit intimidating, to be sure. What has surprised me is, when talking to others who are hunting, I often find those younger than I -- and apparently more fit -- to have stopped hunting, believing it now too hard and beyond their physical abilities. While a person should not be foolhardy, each of us should examine ourselves honestly and reasonably in order to determine what is a reasonable risk. (And, yes, I intend to apply for an elk tag next year, when I'll be 67.)"

Dierdre Wolownick climbed El Capitan for the first time at age 66: "You first have to figure out why you think you can't do something and ask yourself if that's a valid point. Look, there's somebody telling you every step of your life what to eat, what to wear, that you can't sleep without this drug, and it's all nonsense. You can decide for yourself what you think you're capable of."

Russ Ellis recorded his first album of original music at age 85: "Do something that involves other people. Even one other person. Getting out of a groove -- sometimes you just need company. There's this fantasy that creativity is something you do alone, by candlelight. No! Do something with other people who are as genuinely interested as you are."

Phyllis Raphael found new love in her 80s: "Do something new that you normally wouldn't do, or something you hadn't planned on doing, or something you're passionate about. Take an acting class or a cooking class, or go to a museum. These things let you connect to other people you might not have met ordinarily. It can make

your life more lively. Pick up the phone. Send an email. Think of something you want to do and then ask someone if they want to do it with you. Don't be afraid to let things happen."

According to Kelsey Dallas of *Deseret News*, religion has long been a source of resolution inspiration, but its popularity is waning. According to a new study by LifeWay Research, 52% of Americans made New Year's resolutions related to their relationship with God back in 2015. That figure had dropped to 29% in 2021.

African-Americans and evangelicals are more likely than others to set goals related to their faith, according to the surveys. And religiously unaffiliated Americans, unsurprisingly, are among the least likely to make resolutions related to God.

Health is the most common subject of New Year's resolutions, according to both the 2015 and 2021 surveys. Significant shares of all age groups, races and religious backgrounds said that they had set goals related to their diet or weight. Dallas admitted, "Health was definitely top of mind for me last week as I debated what intentions to set for 2022. I'd like to work my way up to running a 10K and start cooking more meals at home; chasing both of these goals would likely help me lose weight."

More on this story can be found at these links:

10 Insightful Tips From People Who Prove It's Never Too Late. *The New York Times*

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/style/new-years-resolutions-quotes-tips.html>)

Which Americans Make Resolutions About Religion? *Deseret News* (<https://email.deseret.com/state-of-faith-2022-01-03>)

Applying the News Story

Not all Christians make New Year's resolutions, but most feel the need, from time to time, to change direction and return to the path laid out in the Bible. We call this renewal or repentance. Connect stories of New Year's resolutions to the challenge of becoming realigned with the Christian faith.

The Big Questions

1. What has been your experience with New Year's resolutions? If you have made them, how well have you done in keeping them? Have they involved health, diet, weight, or some other topic?
2. When have you pursued a big dream, and what was the result? If you were successful in achieving it, what factors played a part? If you fell short, what did you learn? What would you have done differently, if anything?
3. *The New York Times* reports that Vica Steel enrolled in seminary to become a Lutheran pastor in her 50s. When, if ever, have you followed a call from God to go in a new direction, and what was the result?
4. What does it mean to you to make a resolution to get closer to God? How is this connected to renewal or repentance?
5. Several of the people featured in *The New York Times* noted a connection between resolutions and relationships with other people. How have you found that your spiritual resolutions have benefitted from a community of support and accountability?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Ezekiel 14:6

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. (No context needed.)

The prophet Ezekiel was taken into exile in the city of Babylon more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. He understood the exile to be a judgment against the Israelites for their idolatry. In chapter 12, God said to Ezekiel, "Mortal, you are living in the midst of a rebellious house, ... Therefore, mortal, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight" (vv. 2-3). Then, in chapter 14, a group of elders who had "taken their idols into their hearts" came to Ezekiel (v. 3). God ordered the prophet to say to them and to all the Israelites: "Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations." The heart of the biblical command to "repent" is to turn away from sin and return to God, making a change of mind, heart and action.

Questions: When have you felt a need to make a change of mind, heart or action? How did this help you to return to God, if at all? What type of repentance does the Christian community need to do today, in your opinion? Where do you see idolatry being a problem today?

Daniel 1:8

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. (For context, read Daniel 1:1-21 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Daniel+1%3A1-21&version=NRSV>).)

This book is named for the prophet Daniel, who was taken into exile in Babylon when King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. Stress was high for Daniel and his fellow Israelites, and many wondered what it meant to stay true to the God of Israel in a place so far from home.

In the first chapter, a group of young men, including Daniel, is taken to the palace to serve in the king's court. The king gave them each "a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine" (v. 5), but Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with this food and drink. Instead, Daniel set up a contest in which he and his fellow Israelites were given only "vegetables to eat and water to drink" for ten days (v. 12). At the end of that period, Daniel and his colleagues were compared to the men who had been eating the royal rations, and the vegetarians were found to be in better shape. "To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams" (v. 17).

Questions: When, if ever, have you resolved to eat a healthier diet, and what was the result? Were the results positive, physically and spiritually? If so, how? If not, why not?

Matthew 25:40

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (For context, read Matthew 25:31-46 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+25%3A31-46&version=NRSV>).)

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the story of the judgment of the nations, in which the king separates the good sheep from the bad goats. All had been given opportunities to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome strangers, but only the sheep had done this. The king invites the sheep to inherit the kingdom because they served him by serving "the least of these who are members of [his] family."

TWW team member Frank Ramirez comments, "The individuals who are separated at the judgment had a choice to make -- to resolve to make -- and even though they don't seem particularly aware of who Jesus is, or that they served or didn't serve him, they made consequential choices. It seems as if to some extent resolutions -- the resolve to live according to the Good News of Jesus Christ -- are predicated on the assumption that we can make changes in our lives."

Questions: Where do you see opportunities to serve Jesus by serving "the least" of his brothers and sisters? How can you make changes in your life to better do this? What are the consequences of taking such actions or failing to do so?

Romans 14:13

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. (No context needed.)

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a community he had never visited, and it begins with a compelling definition of the gospel: "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (1:16). In chapter 12, he shifts focus and begins to offer practical guidance in how to live a new life in Christ. Then, in chapter 14, he urges the Romans to "[w]elcome those who are weak in faith" (v. 1) and refrain from judging one another. Since all Christians will eventually stand before the judgment seat of God, Paul advises them to "no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another."

Questions: Where do you see value in refraining from judging others, but leaving that judgment to God? What would it mean for you to resolve to live in such a way that you do not put stumbling blocks or hindrances in front of others? How would this be an act of personal or congregational renewal, in your opinion?

For Further Discussion

1. Many churches and other organizations have mission and vision statements. What concrete commitment might you offer, as a New Year's resolution, in support of your congregation's mission and vision?
2. The very first name for the followers of Jesus was "the Way" (Acts 9:2 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+9%3A2+&version=NRSV>)). Jesus refers to himself as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+14%3A6+&version=NRSV>)). When do you feel a need to recalibrate your course and return to the way? What helps you to do this?

3. TWW team member Frank Ramirez says that Weight Watchers "assumes that we will backslide, stray from the path, and do so deliberately, but instead of thinking, well, that's it until next January 1, we can forgive ourselves and get back on the wagon." How is this a healthier approach than waiting until a new year to make a change? Whether the needed change involves eating or some other behavior, why is it important to "forgive ourselves and get back on the wagon"?

4. What plans are you making for 2022? If you're interested in making personal resolutions, whether about health, religion or some other goal, check out Mya Jaradat's guide to goal-setting (<https://www.deseret.com/2021/12/31/22860154/new-years-resolutions-how-to-make-them-and-how-to-make-them-stick-goal-setting>).

Responding to the News

Resolve to make one change of heart, mind or action that will move you closer to the way of Jesus Christ. This could be a choice involving personal health or diet, or it could be a decision that impacts your service to others or your attitudes toward brothers and sisters in the community of faith.

Prayer

God of new years and new beginnings, help us to turn to you in faith and action, and to recalibrate our lives in ways that align us with your will and your way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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