

Stepping Off on the Right Foot
 Jeff Clinger
 December 30th, 2007

Leveticus 23:23-32

23 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁴Speak to the people of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts. ²⁵You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall present the LORD's offering by fire.

26 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁷Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves and present the LORD's offering by fire; ²⁸and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the LORD your God. ²⁹For anyone who does not practice self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people. ³⁰And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people. ³¹You shall do no work: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your settlements. ³²It shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.

Over the last several days most of us have now completed our Christmas celebrating. The goodies have been eaten, the presents have been opened, the family has been visited, and the houses have been trashed, and cleaned up again. Following all of the Christmas celebrating we now turn to the next great American holiday – New Year's Eve.

With the coming of New Year's Eve and the New Year, many people celebrate different traditions and rituals. If you were to name some of the most common ways of celebrating the New Year, what would they be? And when all of the partying and staying up late and ringing in the new year is complete, many people are left facing the resolutions that they've made.

I tried to find some statistics about how many people make and keep resolutions each year, but I wasn't able to track down any hard and fast data. So, I thought I'd take

an informal poll this morning. Please raise your hands as you're comfortable in response to the following questions:

- Have you ever made a new year's resolution?
- Have you ever given up on a new year's resolution?
- Have you ever given up on a new year's resolution before February?
- Have you ever managed to successfully follow through with a new year's resolution?
- Out of curiosity, what were those resolutions that you've been able to achieve?

Gary Ryan Blair is the President of GoalsGuy Learning Systems. Through writing and lecturing Blair seeks to help people set goals and design strategies so that they can live a meaningful life and leave a lasting legacy. Through his work with GoalsGuy he has created New Years Resolution Week with the hope that during January 1st – 8th of each year people will be able to put together focused goals, detailed plans, and firm commitments to their individual lives, their relationships with others, and their professional lives.

From a survey with more than 300,000 respondents Blair's company compiled the following list of the Top Ten New Year's Resolutions:

- 10. Get Organized
- 9. Volunteer and Help Others
- 8. Learn Something New
- 7. Find a Better Job
- 6. Quit Smoking
- 5. Find My Soul Mate
- 4. Enjoy More Quality Time with Family and Friends
- 3. Debt Reduction
- 2. Stick to a Budget
- 1. Lose Weight and Get in Better Physical Shape

I won't presume to speak for any of the rest of you, but I can confidently say that I've had several of these on my list of resolutions in the past and several of them are resolutions I've never been able to accomplish.

So what is it about this holiday that inspires us to think about change in our lives? The best I can tell is that it must just have something to do with how we're wired as humans. It seems that the ending of something and the beginning of something else creates in us that need to reflect and to evaluate. And so we think about things that we wish were different in our lives, we might even say them out loud to our friends or family, we might even take time to write them down, but when all is said and done, little ends up changing. We make these resolutions for the new year, but there doesn't seem to be any sticking power, nothing that motivates us for the long run.

Admittedly, New Year's Eve is a big celebration in our culture. There are special parties, special television programs, we tend to stay up later than we might otherwise, we tend to eat and/or drink just a little bit too much, but why? Where does all of the fuss over the New Year come from? It isn't a religious holiday – it doesn't have a clear background that can be traced – it seems to have simply evolved into the holiday that we know today.

As I began preparing for this Sunday's sermon through the fall and what I might be able to share in terms of inspiration for the New Year, I found myself thinking about the New Year's celebration of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Not the celebrating that they will do tomorrow night when we change our calendars from 2007 to 2008, but the celebrating that they do each year during the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The foundations for the celebration of these holidays come from the 23rd chapter of the book of Leviticus:

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The celebrations of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah are the most important holy days for Judaism. And I think that we have a thing or two to learn from some of the practices observed during these celebrations.

In modern Judaism Rosh Hashanah is observed on the 1st and 2nd day of Tishrei and marks the beginning of the ten “Days of Awe” that lead up to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These two holidays together constitute what are called the High Holy Days, the most important religious celebrations for Jews. During Rosh Hashanah the new year is celebrated as a day of fasting and prayer. The Shofar, a traditional horn, is blown as a way of symbolically awakening people from their slumber and preparing them for a coming day of judgment. Special prayers are recited and special worship opportunities are offered during Rosh Hashanah. During the afternoon of the first day a special service is held near naturally flowing water and people have the opportunity to cast their sins into the water. Many observe the custom of throwing stones or bread into the water as a way of symbolically casting off sins.

All of this attention that is given to the casting off of sins during Rosh Hashanah is an intentional part of preparing for Yom Kippur which is celebrated on the 10th day of

Tishrei at the conclusion of the High Holy days. During the celebration of Yom Kippur the central themes are reconciliation and atonement, reconciliation with God as well as with the rest of God's creatures. The idea can be summed up like this – if we want to ask for forgiveness from God, we need to first ask for forgiveness from one another. If we are sorry for the ways in which we have treated God, we need to show that we are sorry for the ways in which we have treated one another. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur people repent of their sins, strive to live better lives, apologize for their wrongdoing, and seek reconciliation from God and from one another. Talk about a powerful way to start the new year!

How different are these practices from what we so often do to ring in the new year?! Just think how much more meaningful and impacting our New Year's celebrations could become if we were to learn a thing or two from our Jewish Brothers and sisters. So, what would it look like for us to change some of our system for making resolutions?

I decided to try something new last year when it came making resolutions and I found it to be quite successful. It's something that I think has the potential to make a difference for all of us if we're willing to take it seriously. In terms of making resolutions for change, what if we disconnected them from the celebrating that we do on December 31st and sought to connect them to the celebrating that we do on December 24th?

Traditional New Year's resolutions tend to begin something along the lines of, "In the coming year I want to blank" or "During this next year I'm going to blank." When we hang our hopes for change on a simple want or an empty promise to ourselves we are

bound to fail. But what if instead of making New Year's Resolutions, we made Christmas Resolutions? What if we began our resolutions by saying, "I am so grateful for the gift that Christ is in my life and I want to respond faithfully to that gift by *blank* in the coming year. It's quite a bit different than simply making a resolution isn't it? Now, I won't bore you with the details, but will testify to the impact that framing my resolution this way made last year. I am happier and healthier now than I have been for years and I have been intentional about doing that as a response to the gift that Christ is.

On New Year's Day, 1919, Georgia Tech was playing California in one of those great New Year's traditions – college football. Late in the second quarter, Roy Regals recovered a fumble for California, and in his excitement he became confused and began running in the wrong direction. After racing sixty-five yards he was finally tackled by his own teammate at the Georgia Tech two-yard line. California attempted to punt from deep in their own end zone, but the kick was blocked and Georgia Tech scored a safety. In the locker room at halftime, Roy Regals sat in the corner with his hands buried in his face, crying. The room was silent. The coach didn't make his usual halftime speech, but shortly before the team was to take the field for the second half, he said, "The starting team is going back onto the field to begin the second half." The whole team left the locker room, except for, Regals, who remained in the corner, face in hands. "I can't do it, Coach," he said. "I can't play. I've ruined the team." The coach said, "Get up Regals. The game is only half over. You belong on the field."

We have all made mistakes, we have all done things that we're not proud of, and we all have room to grow as we seek to become the people that God would have us be. The beauty of our relationship with God and of the opportunity that we have to start anew

this season is that the game is only half over and that we belong on the field – we were created to live and to do all that we can. Even when we've made mistakes God calls to us like that coach telling us to get up and to get back onto the field.

The good news this Christmas season and this new year, is that God loves us and that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and whole. As we seek to do these things, to make positive changes in our lives and in the world, I hope and pray that we might all realize that we can't do these things on our own. I hope and pray that we all realize that we need community and that we need God. I hope and pray that this New Year might just be the perfect opportunity for each and every one of us to step off on the right foot.