

“By the Grace of God”
Galatians 3:23-29
New Year’s Day
The Circumcision of Our Lord
January 1, 2017

I. Playing by the Rules

New Year’s Resolutions: good or bad?

On the good side, I’m all for people bettering themselves. Face it: bad habits don’t require willpower or planning. We just slip into them as we go along. There’s a reason why people write books about pursuing excellence—no one needs a game plan to chase down mediocrity. Now and then, it’s good to take stock and see if our habits need changing; and, along with smoke detector batteries, the start of a new year is as good a time as any.

On the bad side, New Year’s resolutions have become a punch-line. People declare intentions—often grounded more in Christmas cheer and holiday optimism than reality, and for the most part they’re going to simply give up in a matter of days or weeks. Good intentions accomplish nothing. We need fewer people to say, “I’ll try”, and more who just do what needs to be done.

Good and bad, New Year’s resolutions are a reminder of your very-human condition. God has given you His Law, so you know what you should be doing. But you’re also sinful, and you often fail to do it. That’s why I offer this encouragement to begin this sermon: play by the rules, but don’t live by them.

Before you take one step into 2017, let’s be perfectly clear: the Law doesn’t care who you are, what you do or what you intend to do. I point you to verse 23 of our epistle: “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.” Think of the Law as a prison cell, with barred window and heavy door. It doesn’t matter if you’re old or young, man or woman. It doesn’t care if you’ve tried to do more good than bad. It doesn’t matter if you’ve made millions, helped the poor or made a complete mess of your life. If you’re locked inside the prison cell, you’re locked inside and you can’t get out. The cell doesn’t care who you are or what you do or what you’ve tried to do. Likewise, neither does the Law.

For another example, check out the start of the next verse: “The Law was our guardian until Christ came.” The word for “guardian” there is an interesting one. In Greek, it stands for the slave who would accompany his master’s child to school, and his job was to make sure that the kid got there on time. The slave made sure he didn’t dilly-dally, stop at the arcade or play hooky. It didn’t matter if the kid was in first grade or eighth, or if he was the firstborn or eighth-born. The kid couldn’t sweet-talk the slave into anything, either: the guardian knew very well that he took orders from the master, not the child. Likewise, the Law takes orders from the God who spoke it, not from you. You’re fooling yourself if you think you can change it to conform to your particular sin or vice.

So there you go. The Law is like a prison cell and the no-nonsense get-to-school slave. It doesn’t care who you are or what you do or what you intend to do. In the eyes of the Law, you don’t matter. You can change it as much as you can change the law of gravity. The Law simply says, “Thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” Except it doesn’t stop there. It goes on to say, “If you shalt not, even just once, then I’ll kill you. Doesn’t matter who you are—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Disobey me just once, and I’ll kill you dead.”

All of this puts you in an interesting position. On the one hand, it's good to do the right thing, and to work hard at doing so. Greater effort leads to better results. The more attention you pay to marriage and family, the stronger they will be. The more you help out your neighbors, the more you'll be respected. The more you tell the truth, the more you will be trusted. The more you focus on good nutrition and exercise, the healthier you're going to be. The more you make it a habit to study and meditate upon virtuous things, the better off your mind will be—and your words and actions will follow. Whether or not you make formal resolutions at this time of year, you have goals and plans for the upcoming year. You have in mind things you want to do or places you want to be—maybe in the way of career or relationships or vacation. Or, at least, you have in mind things you don't want to do or places you don't want to be—hospitalization, incarceration, ruined relationships or a car wreck alongside the road. Nothing's guaranteed, of course—all sorts of disasters can happen to you in a dying world. But in general, the more you work at following the Law, the better off you'll be. That's why I say "Play by the rules."

But don't live by them. You may have a better life, or at least a less-bad life, by playing by the rules, but heed the text well: the Law of God is holy and good, but it is no friend of sinners. It's strictly pass-fail, and you failed before you were even born. You can't live by the Law: the Law kills. If you think you have life by keeping the rules, you're dead even as you speak.

So play by the rules, but don't live by them. No, live by grace—the grace of God.

II. Living By Grace

As one year turns over into the next, the Church does not fix its focus on man's works of resolutions. Instead, it notes that today is the 8th day after Christmas; and we read in Luke 2:21 that "at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." We turn from the works of man and celebrate this: Jesus is named and Jesus is circumcised.

The name and the circumcision go together. The Law—the rules—said that a baby boy was to be circumcised on the 8th day. If he was circumcised, he was part of God's people. If the parents skipped this, then the infant was not part of God's people—he was cut off from God's people, not recognized by the Lord. The naming went with the ceremony. If the boy wasn't circumcised, he was a nobody—a lost one in the eyes of God. But when he was marked by God, he was a somebody—a beloved child with a name.

Jesus is circumcised and named on the 8th day—according to the rules. He doesn't have to be for His own sake. He is already a beloved child of God. He is, in fact, the only-begotten Son of God from eternity, fully God and now also fully man. So why is He circumcised? For the same reason He is born 8 days before—for you. He is circumcised because that's what the Old Testament Law demanded, and Jesus has come to fulfill the Law. He has come to keep all the rules in order to live a perfect life on your behalf. But there's more to it than that—even as He keeps the Law, He does so by shedding His blood. As you just sang in the sermon hymn, "His infant body now/begins the cross to feel; those precious drops of blood that flow/for death the Victim seal" (LSB # 898:3)

Even as Jesus keeps the Law for you, He is also preparing to die for you. Remember why you don't live by the Law—it kills sinners. At the cross, Jesus is going to become sin and be killed in your place. He dies for your sin and gives you the holiness of His perfect life, and that's why heaven is yours. Even now, on the 8th of His life, the Infant Jesus is keeping the Law for you. Even now, on the 8th day of His life, the Infant Jesus is shedding His blood to save you.

Physical circumcision is no longer required by God: instead, we're told in Colossians 2, it foreshadowed Holy Baptism. Apart from the forgiveness that Christ has won, you're a lost nobody in the Kingdom of God, one who is in the outer darkness. In Holy Baptism, however, God puts His name on you—the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. In Holy Baptism, God marks you as His own and writes your name in His book of life. Why? Because, as our text says, in Holy Baptism you put on Christ. You wear Him as your righteousness. You wear His perfect life—His perfect Law-keeping; and His Father says, “When I look at you, I see a perfect, God-pleasing life lived, because I see My Son.” You wear His cross and His death; and His Father says, “When I look at you, I see that your sins have already been died for, because I see My Son.” You wear His resurrection; and His Father says, “When I look at you, I see one who is dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus. Heaven is yours—because I see My Son.”

The Law—the rules—said, “I don't care who you are—Jew or Greek, slave or free, man or woman; I'm going to kill you.” In Holy Baptism, your Father in heaven says, “I don't care who you are—Jew or Greek, slave or free, man or woman; My Son died for you. Whoever you are, you're not excluded from His grace. And because you're not excluded, I do care for you. I know you by name. You are Mine.” So much does God treasure you that He gathers you in to hear His Word. So much does God treasure you that He, who has clothed you in His Son, now feeds you His Son's body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

That's why you live by His grace—because His grace gives life. Jesus died and rose for you to make it so, and gave it to you in your Holy Baptism.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, I pray that you have a blessed New Year. By all means, play by the rules. As Christians, you have been set free from sin to live according to God's Law as best you can. But remember that while you should play by the rules, you do not live by the Law. You live by grace, the grace won for you by the incarnate Son of God. Whatever your resolutions or goals, whatever your intentions, and whatever actually happens in the upcoming 12 months, whether triumph or tragedy, your life is secure in Christ and your salvation is certain. God says it is so for you, His baptized child, because you are forgiven for all of your sin.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen