

# Sermon for 12/30/07

## *Christmas I Matthew 2:13-23, (RW01)*

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, AMEN

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**Bottom Line: Making New Year's resolutions for self-improvement is good. But self-improvement for God is even better. Making goals to 1) glorify God and 2) becoming more Christ-like, lead to resolutions that are not temporary, but eternal. Praise God AMEN**

**1) NEW YEARS' RESOLUTIONS!** At midnight tomorrow, the year **2007** will be over. If we don't pass away before tomorrow night, we will have received another gift of **12 months, 52 weeks, 8760 hours, 525,600 minutes, and 31,536,000 seconds**. It's always good to "reflect" upon what we did last year, but it's not nearly as important as looking ahead to what we will do for the new year; **2008**. Typically many people make **New Years' resolutions** right about now. A **resolution** is a plan for the way we will live our life in the near future. Some will take these **resolutions** seriously, working hard to implement their goals. Most however, (in fact **8 out of 10** according to recent polls), will give up on their **resolutions** with the first month or two. There is a whole slue of people who don't even make **resolutions**, for that very reason. That's leads to an interesting question: **should Christians make New Years' resolutions?** I believe the answer is yes, and I'd like to tell you why.

**2) GROW IN GOD'S GRACE!** Any one here, remember the very first words or phrase in this congregation's Mission Statement? That's right: **to grow in God's grace!** Then we go on to explain "how" we are to do that - through the **Great Commandment**, (which is to love our God and neighbor), and through the **Great Commission** (which is to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them in the ways of the Lord.) That is the **purpose** of God's church. It's Biblical, Gospel centered, and the truth. Ironically, some folks can agree that "the church" should be **Growing in God's grace**, without realizing that a congregation cannot do these things unless **Growing in God's grace** becomes the **personal goal** for each of it's members.

**3) A PLAN!** Remember, God created you for a **special purpose**. You are here to be in a deepening relationship with God, and to serve Him by helping to build His Kingdom. You are here for **no other reason** than to grow in God's Grace! *Are you?* Did you in the year 2007? And will you continue to be transformed in the year 2008? Remember too, "**salvation**" in Christ came as a *free gift*, but "**discipleship**" which follows later, requires *your participation!* Now that the Christ child - the **gift of Christmas** - has arrived, how will you in your "discipleship" show your thanks? How will you grow in God's grace? The Bible says it helps to have **a plan!**

**4) THE RIGHT QUESTIONS!** Most of the reasons 8 out of 10 people can never keep a resolution is they didn't have a **solid plan**. And those plans they do have; are often worldly and unimportant plans with no spiritual or eternal significance. If you're a follower of Christ, everything you **do** should be centered in Growing in God's grace, and in helping to build something of *spiritual* or *eternal* significance. Let's first see how we did this past year: Take a look at the resolutions you had for building the **Kingdom of God**? Did you even have any? Isn't that why you and I, as children of God, are here? Then how do you as a Christian change, develop the right resolutions, and develop a **plan** to implement them? With all the thousands of things and resolutions you could busy yourself with, how do you **sort through** them to find the right ones? You begin by asking **the right questions!**

**5) WILL THIS GLORIFY THE LORD?** First of all, you need to ask "**Will this goal glorify God?**" Open your Bibles to **1 Corinthians 10:31**. And while you're looking up 1<sup>st</sup> Cor 10:31 lets reflect on the meaning of "**Glorify**." Before a resolution can be evaluated as to whether it **glorifies God** we should know what it means. Simply put, the things you say or do "**glorifies God**" when it makes the "**invisible**" **God** "**visible**" to someone else. So... When you sing in the choir, and the music touches hearts and makes the invisible God visible to others - you have given **glory to God**. When **care** for a sick friend, **teach** Sunday School, **pray** with a friend who is suffering - you give **glory to God**. When people study your life-style and say, "Hey, whatever they have found, I want it!" then you have **glorified God**. When your **Words** and **actions** reveal the Love of Christ to others, you are giving Him **Glory** - making Him *visible*! So... a resolution to "**make** more money" may be a selfish goal that does nothing to make God visible to a hurting world. On the other hand, a resolution to **give** more money to Godly ministries that transforms people's lives definitely **glorifies God**. (READ **1 Corinthians 10:31**.) "**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**" Your entire purpose for being here on this earth is to fall in love with Christ and give **Glory** to Him? That is, make Him **visible** to others! Did your last year's resolutions offer to help you do this? The best resolutions do.

**6) MORE LIKE JESUS?** Then ask yourself: Will this goal make me **more like Jesus?** Every Christian is called to become **more Christ-like** each and every day. If Christ isn't living **more** in your heart now because of what happened in the year 2007, then you may have **wasted 365 days!** If the Old Adam and Eve within us did not **shrink** in importance, as Christ **grew** in importance then, then we have not **grown** in our faith. If we do not reflect the *heart of Christ* **more** than we did the year before, we have **not** grown in His grace, and we need to see what can be done about that **this** year. (I cannot emphasize enough how important being in a small group is, and how studying the bible and applying it to your life can transform you and make you more Christ-like!) So, as we evaluate our resolutions then for this coming year, we need to ask "Would Jesus have spent His time this way? Would Jesus have made this a goal?" If so, then it's a **good** resolution! Anything that makes us **more like Jesus**, is a good resolution!

**7) POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD?** The next question to ask as we contemplate and evaluate our resolutions is : Will this goal make a **positive contribution to the world?** Changing **the world** may seem to be an overwhelming task, but God isn't asking you to change **the world all** by yourself. What He **is** asking you to do is simply **contribute** to it with the very **specific** spiritual gift you were given, in a very **specific** way, in a very **specific** little corner of the globe. It's important then to **measure** the resolution's **impact** on others. Will this goal make a **positive contribution** to your family, church, community, your co-workers, neighbors, and world? The **best** resolutions go **beyond** ourselves and *touch the lives of others* around us in a **positive** way.

**8) ENHANCE MY ABILITY TO WITNESS?** Next we need to remember that building the kingdom of God has **very little** to do with buildings or facilities: God makes it very clear that **temples** don't impress Him much. But bringing His children **back** into relationship with Him is what a **servant's life** is all about. So we ask: will this goal **enhance my ability to witness?** The Lutheran Church in America has struggled in recent decades to **reclaim** its original **evangelical nature**. Luther believed in the "priesthood of all believers" and that means *understanding* and *acting upon* the concept that reaching out to the unchurched, and the needy, and the lost **cannot** be left to the pastor or a few church leaders. And **Christ** shows us quite clearly that **Evangelism** (which is simply sharing Christ) should be a **lifestyle**, not just an idea. Do you have any **specific** goals for getting involved with people who *need* to know Jesus Christ?

**9) WITNESSING – A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE!** In the next church newsletter, you will be getting a message from me that should cause some concern. In a nut shell, it says that if **witnessing** does not become a **lifestyle** for the members of ASLC **now**, we will shut down in a year or two. Though the first signs are **financial concerns** as number decline, those monetary discussions simply emphasize a failure on our part to make **witnessing a Christian lifestyle**. If you and I do not make *sharing Christ's love* an **intentional** goal as disciples, it won't happen. And if you think it is the **Inreach/Outreach Committee's responsibility**, or the **council's**, or the **staff's** job – you have **NOT** spent enough time reading the scriptures and God's will. It's this simple: **IF** Christ is living in you, **IF** Christ is directing your life, **IF following Christ** is your #1 goal in life – then you will be moved by the Holy Spirit to **share** the love, light, and power of Jesus Christ with others. So, do you have any goals for **2008** that specifically get you involved with unchurched people so that you can be a **witness** for Jesus Christ? Is there **someone** in your family, neighborhood, school, business, hobby club, or health club that you can **reach out to**? Do you have any resolutions planned for next year to enhance your **witnessing**? ...to make it a greater part of your **Christian lifestyle**?

**10) EVERYONE BRING ONE!** *Can I suggest one?* **Everyone bring one!** That is, if **everyone** in this church made it **an intentional goal** this year to **bring one** other person into the embrace of Christ's love, and into this church family – we would **double** the size of this congregation. A by-product of **everyone bringing one** would be more worshippers, more singers, more ministers, more blessings all around! Imagine the additional gifts of **time**, **talent**, and **treasures** they each would bring to our ministries! But the **greatest blessing** will be the **joy YOU** receive as you watch *someone else's life* be **transformed** in *life-giving ways*, - all because the Holy Spirit **used YOU** to invite and bring a child of God **back** into His loving embrace! I guarantee you, once you have been used by God to unite a lost lamb with the Divine Shepherd – **you will be hooked!** And Witnessing will become a **lifestyle!** **Everyone bring one** – it's a *resolution*, an *intentional goal*, that will make Jesus smile!

**11 ) SCHEDULE.** These 4 questions are intended to help you develop and evaluate resolutions for the year 2008 - but it will all be for **not, IF** we do not **organize** our lives around these goals. Let's face it, if you do not **schedule** the important things in your life, you won't do them! EX: If you have made the goal of *getting closer to God* and your activity is to read a chapter of the Bible a day, then you need to **schedule the time for this, or it won't happen!** Maybe you can take the goal of getting back in shape, the goal of being a better witness in your community by **combining** the two in one activity - by joining an aerobics class through the county park

department. But if you don't do the work of signing up, and then putting the class into your calendar, it won't happen! Maybe you wanted to glorify God through music and wanted to join the praise band or unity singers, but if the group practices aren't on your **calendar or schedule**, it just won't happen.

**12) Some pointers!** The fact is, growing in God's grace takes **time and hard work!** So don't be your own worst enemy - **think smart, act smart, schedule smart!** A few **pointers**: **1) do everything with/in prayer**. Search for resolutions prayerfully, prioritize your life prayerfully, set your schedules prayerfully. Let God lead the way! **2) Go Slow** - you probably can't work on changing everything all at once. If you're like me, there are a couple of dozen things you could be working on - but the key with resolutions is to *make a couple* and *stick to them*. Better to work on a few and succeed, than work on everything and accomplish very little. **3) Lean on the Lord**. God never asked you to grow in His grace without **providing** what you need to do so. Remember: resolutions are not just self improvements, they are self-improvements **for God**. We want to be more **Christ-like** - and He wants us to be more like Him. So cast away your **independent** pride and "lean on Him". Use **His** strength, **His** wisdom, **His** direction, and you will grow in His grace. **4) If you mess up and break a resolution - don't give up!** God is all about forgiveness and new beginnings. Start afresh - don't wait until next year. **5) Tell a friend about your resolution and ask them to help you keep track of your progress**. There is a reason Jesus sent His disciples out by two's rather than alone. We can get discouraged alone. But programmed **accountability** and **encouragement** is a true gift to one another! These five **pointers** will help you keep your resolutions!

**13) GROW IN GOD'S GRACE?** Friends, **making resolutions is a very Christian thing to do**. By doing this we say to God: I want to grow, I want to grow closer to you, and to others. It says I want to **grow in God's grace** so that everything I say and do **gives glory to God**. I want to **grow in God's grace** so that I can become more **Christ-like**. I want to **grow in God's grace** so that I can make a **positive contribution to the world**. Making resolutions says that I want to **enhance my ability to witness** to others. Ahead of you are another 52 weeks, 365 days, 8760 hours, 525,600 minutes, and 31,536,000 seconds and we call it **2008**. Will we waste it? Will we be satisfied simply to maintain? Or will we prayerfully resolve to **Grow in God's grace?**

**14) RESOLUTIONS!** On the back of the sermon note cards you received in your bulletin this morning, there is an opportunity to go home and *prayerfully* put down a few **resolutions**. I am not *naïve* enough to think that **all of you** are at that point in your faith-walk where you see the **importance** of continued spiritual growth. If your heart is open to that possibility, **that desire to Grow in God's Grace will come**. But I do pray that there are enough of you who have been touched and motivated by the Holy Spirit, to be **ready** and **willing** to take the *next step* in your Spiritual Growth. ASLC's future will depend upon it. The time for **intentionally** sharing Christ's love with those in need, has come. And I cannot help but believe that there are many of you who have recently looked upon the **Christ child** in the manger with awe and reverence, and been touched by the miracle of Christmas,... so that the need to **thank** Him is pounding in your heart! **And Growing in God's Grace is the best way to give thanks**. The **best resolutions** are the ones inspired by God and empowered by God! They are **spiritual** and **evangelical**! And the best part? - a spiritual **resolution** is something you and Jesus do together! **Praise God, AMEN**

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**Confessional Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, we confess that too often Christmas comes, goes, and then we slide back into our routines with our lives unchanged. Forgive us and help us to respond to your awesome gift, (*yourself*), with awe and thanksgiving. Forgive us for forgetting that time is a gift, and that we have limited days on this earth with which to help you build your Kingdom. Forgive us when we become *satisfied* with our faith walk, and help us to grow ever closer to you. Help us to give up the need for comfort and routine, and anticipate the adventure of Growing in your Grace. Help us Lord to become more than we are. Help us to believe that with you all things are possible.

Lord, we confess that not enough of our life is spent in giving Glory to you. Forgive us for lives that do not make you visible to others through the things we say and do. Forgive us for maintaining worldly attitudes rather than trying to be more like Christ. Called to help you build your Kingdom, help us to seek and make a positive Christ-like impact on those around us. Forgive us for not sharing our greatest gift – you, with the world around us. Replace our fears with the boldness to share your love with those you place in our daily paths.

And now, although you know us better than we know ourselves, listen as we share in a moment of silence, those other parts of our lives that need to be forgiven, washed clean, and made anew.

**(Silence)**

Lord, we pray you would help us to Grow in your Grace. Increase our faith, our compassion, our need to share the life-giving gift of Christmas. Help us to grow closer to you, our families, friends, and all who need your love. Inspire us and empower us with resolutions that reflect your will and love for all.

**AMEN**

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**Assurance of Forgiveness:**

Friends, listen to the good news: the Lord who calls you and empowers you to Grow in His Grace, has heard your confession and lovingly forgives you all your sins. Go, and let Him help you become more than you are. Let Him mold you, shape you, and transform you that you may increasingly reflect His grace in everything you say and do. AMEN

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**Opening Prayer: Christmas 1, 12/30/07**

Dear Lord, another year passes and another year comes. We gather here this morning, asking you help us to make sense of it all. As we reflect upon the life-giving gift of Christmas, we ask you would guide us in understanding what that means for the days, weeks, and the months ahead. As we seek purpose and meaning, guide us and reveal your will for our lives. Show us how to grow in the coming year - how to grow closer to you, to our loved ones, to our friends, and to those who are lost and walking in darkness. Open our eyes this morning to the grace and love that transforms the lives of everyone it touches. Touch our lives with power that heals our wounds, mends broken hearts, forgives our sins, and gives us hope. So “fill us” with your Holy Spirit that those who meet us will sense your presence in our lives, and in the things we say and do. Keep transforming us this morning through your word and sacraments that we may become your hands, feet, and voice to a hurting world in need. Bless us that we may become blessings to others. In Jesus Name, AMEN

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**First Lesson: Isaiah 63:7-9**

Prophets and angels are “messengers” of God that are called to say “Come and see” what God has done for you... Today Isaiah calls the people of Israel to remember God’s past mercies given out of the Lord’s loving-kindness towards his chosen people. The people are reminded that they were redeemed by God’s love and pity. This message is never made more clear than during the season in which we celebrate the birth of Christ.

Jesus Christ?

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**Resolutions that help us**  
**“Grow in God’s Grace”:**

Key: Harmonize your **schedule** around these goals!  
(If you don’t schedule it, it won’t happen!!!)

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**Pointers:**

- 1) Do everything with/in prayer.**
- 2) Go Slow** - you can’t work on changing everything all at once.
- 3) Lean on the Lord.**

Remember: resolutions are not just “*self-improvements*”, they’re self-improvements **for God.**

- 4) Don’t give up!!!** If you ***mess up*** and **break** a resolution - **don’t give up!**
- 5) Tell a friend about your resolution and ask them to help you keep track of your progress.** (A resolution without accountability is doomed.)

**Goal:** “Resolutions” that reflect a thankful response to the “Gift of Christmas” - Christ! ***And “Growing in God’s Grace” is the best way to give thanks!***

## Sermon Notes:

Four questions to prayerfully reflect upon before selecting a New Year's Resolution:

1) *Will it give* \_\_\_\_\_ *?*

We \_\_\_\_\_ God when *what* we say and do makes the “invisible” God “visible” to others.

1 Corinthians 10:31 - “...whatever you do, do it \_\_\_\_\_ for the glory of God.”

2) *Will it make me more like* \_\_\_\_\_ *?*

“Would Jesus have spent His time this way?” “Would Jesus have made this a goal?”

3) *Will this goal make a* \_\_\_\_\_ *contribution to the world?*

Will this goal make a \_\_\_\_\_ **contribution** to your family, church, community, your co-workers, school friends, neighbors, and world?

4) *Will this goal* \_\_\_\_\_ *my* \_\_\_\_\_ *to the world?*

Since Evangelism should be a “lifestyle”, (not just an idea), do I have any **specific** goals for getting involved with people who need to know Jesus Christ?

## Resolutions that help us “Grow in God’s Grace”:

Key: Harmonize your \_\_\_\_\_ around these goals!  
(If you don’t schedule it, it won’t happen!!!)

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Pointers:

1) *Do everything with/in* \_\_\_\_\_.

2) *Go* \_\_\_\_\_ - you can’t work on changing everything all at once.

3) *Lean on the* \_\_\_\_\_.

Remember: resolutions are not just “*self-improvements*”, they’re self-improvements \_\_\_\_\_.

4) *Don’t* \_\_\_\_\_ *!!!* If you ***mess up*** and ***break*** a resolution - start again!!!

5) *Tell a* \_\_\_\_\_ ***about your resolution and ask them to help you keep track of your progress.*** (A resolution without \_\_\_\_\_ is doomed.)

# Resolutions:

**Goal:** "Resolutions" that reflect a thankful response to the "Gift of Christmas" - Christ! **And "Growing in God's Grace" is the best way to give thanks!**

**Lord, because I believe...**

- I have a need to respond with thanks to the gift of Christmas (Christ),
- that the time you give me is a precious gift,
- you call me to constantly be "Growing in your Grace",

**I would like to make the following resolution(s) for the year 2002, understanding that I can do nothing without your help, love, and power:**

**Examples:**

**Goal: To grow closer to you through a better understanding of your Word.**

**Activity: Join the Bible Study on Wednesday Mornings at 9:30am at ASLC.**

**Goal: To expand my circle of unchurched friends, and get some exercise.**

**Activity: Join the park's afternoon "Aerobics Class", where I will work out and intentionally make new friends with which to share Christ's love.**

**Goal:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Activity:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Goal:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Activity:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Goal:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Activity:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Dear Lord, help me to *intentionally* "Grow in God's Grace". Inspire me with life-giving resolutions, provide me with an organized plan/schedule, and empower me with the discipline, wisdom, and strength to follow the path you have laid out for me. May these resolutions give glory to you, help me be more like Jesus, contribute to a better world, and enhance my witness to those who have yet to meet and love you. In Jesus name I pray, AMEN.**