

Starting Fresh in 2021 Romans 6:15-19

As 2021 begins, I hope you are thinking about starting fresh and making a new commitment to the Lord. If you look in the mirror of your soul, you may not like what you see. We all have consciences that monitor our moral and spiritual lives. When we fail to live as God desires, our conscience pricks our hearts. We feel guilty when we know we have sinned; we feel shame when we consider what kind person could do such things. All people have sinned, but God has provided His grace to forgive. (**God wants us to live holy lives. And we can change!**)

Some people say, *“I don’t need God to forgive me of my sins. There is no such thing as sin.”* In fact, 13% of Americans think this way, they believe the word sin is obsolete. They deny the existence of sin, because they don’t believe in God. They assume they won’t face any consequences for their sins, that God won’t hold them accountable, and that they can go on living as they please. Sadly, they ignore what sin does to their consciences and their memories. But there is an inescapable moral law within, and that moral law within speaks to a moral lawmaker, God. Now even if people say there is no such thing as sin, they will have to admit there is such a thing as crime. And those who don’t want to be judged, do judge the behavior of other people every day. All humans have a moral sense, and that moral sense is God-given.

When people commit a sin, they may not suffer any immediate punishment; but they do feel the prick of guilt in their hearts. They may think they can rid themselves of their guilt by denying they have sinned, or by blaming others, or by blaming God; but these methods do not work. Just because you can act like sin does not matter doesn’t mean that it doesn’t matter to God. Unresolved guilt doesn’t go away, when we know the truth about our sins; the weight of guilt can linger for a lifetime. God doesn’t ignore or forget unresolved sin; He punishes it. God told His people in **Numbers 32:23**, *“But if you fail to keep your word, then you will have sinned against the LORD, and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.”* Beyond that, people with a stained conscience find it hard to respect themselves, because they are ashamed of what they did.

One may over time become callous and refuse to repent. Jeremiah spoke of the Jews in his day who would not listen to God or repent of their sins, even when God punished them. God demands that we be honest about our sin. In **Jer. 5:3** he said, *“LORD, you are searching for honesty. You struck your people, but they paid no attention. You crushed them, but they refused to be corrected. They are determined, with faces set like stone; they have refused to repent.”* Some will do anything to keep from repenting of their sins.

When people refuse to repent, God takes notice. With a broken heart, he punishes them for their wicked deeds. **2 Peter 3:9** says, *“The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.”* And in **Ezekiel 18:21-23** we read, *“But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die. All their past sins will be forgotten, and they will live because of the*

righteous things they have done. “Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live.”

God has always been interested in our being saved and in changing our sinful ways. Zacchaeus, as a chief tax-collector in Jericho, was despised by the Jews as a sinner who had compromised with the Romans. Many thought he became rich by stealing from them. Zacchaeus had climbed a sycamore tree just to see Jesus pass by. Jesus, however, when He saw Zacchaeus, called for Zacchaeus to come down. Jesus was going to His house that day. And **Luke 19:7-10** says, *“But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”*

Jesus, in spite of the crowd, took an interest in Zacchaeus, something Zacchaeus lacked from his fellow citizens of Jericho. His willingness to be with Zacchaeus so touched the tax-collector that he proclaimed his willingness to share his wealth and to right any wrongs that he had committed. He was a changed man, changed in his heart and willing to demonstrate it. That is the true definition of repentance. Repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of ways. Repentance, like faith and love, is essential to a new life.

The prodigal son also shows the value of repentance. This disobedient young man decided to live the life of sin and caused himself great misery. He left everything good and found only loneliness and misery. When he came to his senses he decided to go home, here is how his story ends, **Luke 15:20-23** says, *““So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”* The son had been lost in sin and was dead spiritually. But by coming home in repentance, he was alive and found. He came home repentant, and His Father took him in. Today there are many estranged children of God, who need to come home to God repentant!

And for those who have never become Christians, consider Nicodemus, who came to Jesus acknowledging that He came from God. The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus about a new birth in **John 3:3-7**, *“Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied, “I assure you; no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So, don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’”*

Though Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, he still needed to be born again. No matter who you are, you too need to be born again. The Lord made it clear, unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God! Being born again means you are a new and different kind of person. You have a new life unlike the old one you were living. This means your thinking, your speech, your choices, and your behavior conforms not to this world's culture and teaching, but to the ways and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. **Romans 12:2** says, *“Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”*

This new birth begins with a washing away of the old way of sin and taking on a new life. This regeneration and salvation happen when a person is baptized. **Titus 3:3-7** says, *“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, (How?) by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*

God saves us by washing us clean from sin and regenerating us, giving us a new life in Jesus Christ. We cease living like the world around us and we begin living like Christ, when we are washed or baptized into Christ. **2 Cor. 5:17** puts our baptism and new life this way, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*

Paul explains this in more detail in **Romans 6:3-8**. He says, *“Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ, we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.”*

According to the apostle Paul, baptism unites us with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. In baptism, we are crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, and raised with Christ. And just as Jesus had newness of life when God raised Him up, so God gives us newness of life when we are raised up with Him. Once again according to Paul, this takes place at our baptism! The old body of sin is crucified with Christ, so that our body of sin might be done away with. In baptism we are free from sin and can now live new lives in Christ!

You can choose to live as a slave to sin or as a slave of righteousness. I hope you will choose to be a slave to righteousness. The prodigal son chose to be a slave to sin and suffered for it. You will too! **Romans 6:16-18** puts it this way, *“Don't you realize that you become the slave of*

whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living.”

Sadly, some who have been right with God, chose to leave God through deliberate sin. When David sinned with Bathsheba and was guilty of causing the death of her husband, Uriah, he felt great guilt and shame. He knew the grievousness of his sin, and was aware of what he had lost. In **Ps. 32:3-5** he wrote, *“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah”*

David could cry out in **Ps. 51:10**, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”* God gives us a clean spirit when we repent. There is no greater blessing than knowing that your sins are forgiven and you are right with God.

Now you too can come to the grace of God by faith. Believe in the Lord Jesus, repent of our sins, confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and be baptized into Christ. Ananias told Paul, who was called Saul of Tarsus, in **Acts 22:16**, *“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”*