

BaptistWay Bible Series for January 1: Live by Jesus' interpretation of God's will

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With the beginning of the New Year comes resolutions. The ubiquitous "lose weight" and "exercise" will be on resolution lists. For Christians add to the resolutions a "better" and more "consistent" quiet/devotion time with the Lord.

How does one successfully accomplish these resolutions in life? For diet and exercise, it's easy. Eat less and move more. Well, it's easy in principle, not practice.

How about the quiet time resolution? A better quiet time comes from following Jesus better. What's a believer to do in order to follow Jesus better?

There's no checklist. If there was, then that checklist would become a new law to be followed. Jesus was more interested in guiding principles. In Matthew 5:17-28, his approach to the principles or spirit behind the Old Testament laws is explained.

Jesus on the law (Matthew 5:17-20)

For the Pharisees, Jesus certainly came across as a law breaker. An example would be his apparent violation of the Sabbath laws by working on the Sabbath. He healed or did the work of a doctor on several occasions on the Sabbath day.

Some of the Pharisees might easily have said that Jesus' was a lawbreaker

bent on abolishing the law. Jesus answered that charge before it could be leveled against him. In Matthew 5:17, he stated he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

In fact, he asserted every aspect to the tiniest part would be accomplished before the end. He added that those who broke the law and taught others to break the law would be the least in the kingdom. According to Jesus, who is worthy to enter the kingdom? Those whose righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees.

Now, the Pharisees were known for keeping the law. They had a good reputation in first century Israel. The people admired them, for the Pharisees knew the law and obeyed the law.

Since the Pharisees held such a high moral standard of living, how could anyone's righteousness surpass the Pharisees? Wasn't Jesus instituting a more radical legalism than espoused by the Pharisees? Not if understood in the proper manner.

Jesus on murderous issues and thoughtful sins (Matthew 5:21-28)

The practice of the Pharisees did not work. They kept the letter of the law without keeping its intent. To put it another way, they kept the first nine commandments, which are outwardly evident, but failed to keep the 10th commandment, the one that addresses coveting things owned by others. The 10th commandment is broken in the mind and is made evident only when one of the other nine is broken. Thus, hatred is revealed as murder. Lust is understood as adultery. How is this so?

Take murder for instance. Jesus taught that extreme anger caused one to commit mental murder. The killing was not physical but mental. This distinction between physical and mental does not alleviate the sin that occurs.

The situation Jesus described is serious. Getting along with others confronts us as one of life's most difficult challenges. Sure, there are those who are easy to get along with in life, but there also are those who rub us the wrong way. We have a difficult time getting along with them. We seem to never be able to give them the benefit of the doubt.

In this situation, conflict can occur easily. Jesus taught we should resolve the conflict quickly before it escalates. Only those who resolve such conflict can truly present themselves and their offerings to God.

Jesus applied the same principle to adultery. All it takes in order to commit adultery is the lustful thought. This commandment can be violated mentally as well as physically. Each one, the lustful thought and the adulterous action, cheapen what God intended to be good and pleasurable and thus are considered sin.

Conclusion: Living righteously in 2012

How does one live more righteously than a Pharisee? It seems Jesus did not make it any easier to follow the law.

The key is relationship. A disciple must have a close relationship with Jesus in order to live righteously. By praying, reading Scripture, and counseling with other believers, a disciple will find God's will and be able to live righteously.

Let me illustrate. Think about a child who is told by his parent not to take and eat any cookies from the cookie jar in the kitchen. What is this boy going to do when the parent goes into another room? Right. He's going to get a cookie and devour it. The law failed in what it intended to do.

Now, if we change the situation just a little, the boy will have a better chance at success in obeying the law. What would happen if the parent told the child not to take and eat any cookies from the cookie jar, and then

asked the child if he wanted to go out in the backyard and play catch? Right. The child will not take and eat any cookies, because he is playing in the backyard with his parent.

Jesus wants to do the same thing for us. He wants us to focus on him, and by doing so, we will observe the law. The importance is focusing on the relationship with Jesus. He makes all of the difference in the lifestyle of his disciples.