

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Apparently, a lot of people like making New Year's resolutions. I personally do not. Why? My track record with resolutions has not been stellar. But recently, John the Baptist led me to think of a resolution that places the heavy work of carrying it out squarely on God's shoulders (and they're a massive set of shoulders). Furthermore, I know that this resolution is God's will for my life. And that makes it much more important than, say, eating healthier, or exercising more often (not that those aren't important as well, mind you).

What were John the Baptist's words that inspired me? "***[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.***" (John 3:30). John came as a way preparer. His specific calling was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for the Christ. By all accounts, he had remarkable success! Josephus, a 1st Century Jewish historian, wrote that in John's six month ministry, he had baptized some 300,000 people in the River Jordan. What did he call these people to do? Repent. Acknowledge your sinfulness. Approach your living Lord with a contrite heart, for the Day of Judgment is rapidly approaching.

In the text, above, John is making a statement about **his fame and following**. Make no mistake: John was **not** in this for the **notoriety**. He didn't have a public relations consultant that made sure he got the best exposure to the media. No, John was simply the rough, wilderness character that spoke the truth. No soft clothes, no fancy chariot with white horses. Just a man who ate what the wild produced (locusts and honey), and who gave them God's unfailing word.

As a New Year's resolution, John's words are second to none. "***[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.***" Scripture tells us that God has a precious plan for us. What is it? That the old Adam in us is slowly put to death, and that the new Man, found in Christ, emerges victorious. John's famous statement sums up what you and I are to witness in our lives as disciples: We are supposed to see our old sinfulness fade away, replaced by a more complete obedience to God.

Now, where most New Year's resolutions **fail** is in **the willpower of the individual**. Tell yourself that you are going to grow to be more like Christ this year; that you are going to watch your vices decrease – and you're most assuredly headed for **failure**. In the words of the Men's Warehouse founder, "I guarantee it!" So how do I go about placing this on God's shoulders? I turn it over to Him in prayer and supplication. I take the steps necessary to receive His blessings on a daily basis: Bible study, daily devotions, and weekly worship. Even then, I recognize that the process of becoming more like Christ is not a smooth road. God has to straighten out the dangerous curves and rough patches of my inner being. This takes time. There are forces (Satan and the world) that are going to work on me to convince me that *I* should *increase*, and *Jesus* should *decrease*. There are going to be setbacks. But in the end, God desires for me that I decrease, and He increase – so I can take comfort in His faithfulness to carry it out for me.

What are the **signs** that God is accomplishing this in me? It starts with **the sign of the cross**. The fact that I believe that Jesus died with my sins, and that He rose again so that I might rise again, is the basis for all good that happens in my life. This belief becomes central to life. Springing forth from this

are other signs. It's seen in **the focus that shifts from self, to neighbor**: forgiveness for all the hurt that my neighbor has caused me. It's seen in **the ego that shrinks**: I do not expect that everything in the world is going to revolve around me and what I think. It's seen in the **humility that grows**: I recoil from the spotlight, recognizing that all that is good comes from above. It's found in **a love for the Lord** that results in **a desire to give back the first-fruits** of all that I receive from Him (time, talents, and income).

If I could wish this on St. John's members, oh, what a blessing it would be! Can you imagine the body of Christ in this place, with people that are changing to be more like Christ, each and every day? I can't wish it true. But I can pray for it to come true! I can start with myself, in **my commitment to the means of grace** (being in God's word, receiving His sacrament). As He works in my life, God can use me to be a light to my neighbor. St. Paul put it this way: *"Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to **grow up in every way into him** who is the head, into **Christ**, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when **each part** is working properly, **makes the body grow** so that **it builds itself up in love.**"* (Ephesians 4:15-16; ESV)

From this text we see that all of us have a part to play. We work as individual parts of one body. We grow together. For instance, if you are the big toe that grows bigger and bigger, and your brothers and sisters around you are the rest of the foot that doesn't grow, the prospect of walking together without stumbling becomes bleak. We're in this together. We are blessed together.

How is my New Year's resolution going to work out? It's in God's gracious and loving hands. But know this: **He is faithful**. I know He will do it. Now the bigger question: Will this be your New Year's resolution as well? For the sake of the body, let's pray together that it is. May this year be a time when the body grows together, to His glory. Amen.

Pastor Travis