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Romans 12:9-21

Getting Ready for a Fresh New Start

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Romans 12:9-21 Common English Bible

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.  Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other.  Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!  Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer.  Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home.  Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them.  Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying.  Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart.  Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.  Don’t try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. It is written, “Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back,” says the Lord.  Instead, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.”  Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

How many of you saw the eclipse this past Monday? Wasn’t it the coolest thing ever? I was worried about opening my eyes because of the whole ruin your retina thing. I wasn’t sure how the glasses would work, and when I put them on I could not see a single thing. But I put on the glasses, looked up, and opened my eyes. It was amazing. I couldn’t see anything but the eclipse. It’s like I had tunnel vision and all of my attention was focused on one thing, on the sun. I couldn’t see anything else but the sun.

This is a time of new beginnings as we begin the school year and it is an opportunity to have a fresh new start for all of us. May the Lord grant us our heart’s desire and prosper all our plans. To have a fresh start we have to acknowledge the past but leave it in the behind so we can move forward. Our past doesn’t define our future because of Christ Jesus’ forgiveness and sanctifying grace that transforms us more and more into Christ’s image. When we start fresh, we have to have a target or goal so we can land where we want to land. We want to be able to have that tunnel vision like when we had on our eclipse glasses so all that we can see is our new way of living. We want to move forward with purpose, with intentionality.

I have a vivid memory of September 4 years ago. I had a big project that I was working on, and I felt like if I could just make it through that project, then life would calm down. Then, life would be normal again. Then, I could relax and breathe and exercise and eat well, and do all of the things that I am supposed to do. I could do all of the things that are good for me and that help me to feel connected to God and family and friends. Do you know that after that big project, there was another one and another one and another one? Life is busy and this is the new normal. We might think that we don’t have time to start again or we don’t have the energy to create a new beginning. May Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:17 be ever before you, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” We can have a fresh start, but how?

Getting ready for a fresh new start means trading bad habits with good ones. To stop doing something bad we have to start doing something good. There is this great Bob Newhart skit where he is a therapist and a client comes in. He says that he charges $5 for the first 5 minutes and then nothing for any time after that.  The client says that she has a fear of being buried alive in a box and it is causing her to panic, she can’t go through tunnels or be in an elevator or in a house or anything boxy. So, Bob Newhart says he is going to say two words to her and he wants her to incorporate them into her life. Bob Newhart asks if she is ready and then he yells at her, “Stop it!” The client says, “What are you saying?” And Bob Newhart just repeats “Stop it!” Just stop being afraid. Just stop it. To everything that the client says, Bob Newhart just screams, “Stop it!”

I love what Paul says in the Bible in the passage we read from Romans. Hate evil and hold on to what is good. Other translations say overcome evil with good. If every night you go to a bar, then you need to spend your time doing something different than that. Trade your bad habits with good ones. As Bob Newhart said, “Stop it!” Start doing something good when you want to be doing something bad.

We want this fresh start to be sustainable, because we are in it for the long haul. We will face challenges and we want to overcome them. It’s important for us to remember that nothing great ever comes easily. It’s like when Jesus was talking to large crowds and he talked about carrying the cross and following him. Jesus said none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions (Luke 14:25-33). Nothing great ever comes easily. We want to do things differently. Why is it so hard for us then?

There was a little boy who was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. He had his box of cars and trucks, his plastic pail, and a shiny, red plastic shovel. He was creating roads and tunnels in the soft sand, and he discovered a large rock, like a small boulder, in the middle of the sandbox. He dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. He pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox using his feet. He got the rock to the edge of the sandbox, but he couldn't roll it up and over the wall. The little boy shoved and pushed and pried, but the small boulder would tip and fall back into the sandbox.

He started to get frustrated and tears began to roll down the little boy’s face. A large shadow fell over the boy and the sandbox and the little boy looked up at his dad. The little boy said, “I can’t move this rock.” He started to cry and he said, “I used all my strength, but I couldn’t do it.” The father picked up the small boulder and moved it out of the sandbox. He knelt down before his son and said, “Using all your strength means asking others to help.” We need accountability for our fresh new starts, and we have it because it is not about us. It is about all of us, brothers and sisters in Christ moving together toward Christ. We are not alone.

Remember those eclipse glasses? When I had those on, I couldn’t see anything but the sun. Sometimes we need to have those glasses on so we have our target, our goal, firmly in view and we see nothing else. Then we need to take those glasses off so we can see everyone who is supporting us and encouraging us and praying for us. We need to look around and use all of our combined strength.

We have an exciting problem here at Greenland Hills. We have too many kids and our Sunday School rooms are too small. We thought about taking a wall out and making two small rooms bigger, but it turns out that the wall is important and can’t be taken out. Patrick Beeker, who is doing the bathroom remodel in our old bathrooms by the kitchen looked at the rooms and he said, “What if you moved things around?” It was like a lightbulb had gone off! We could move my office which is in a larger room upstairs into one of the smaller Sunday School rooms. Then our 4th and 5th graders would not be crammed in a small room and they would have their own Sunday School space that was big enough for them to use. But, I have no decorating skills. I looked at the neon green walls in that smaller Sunday School room that could now be my new office and I knew I couldn’t do it alone. I needed strength from all of you to paint the room and move the couches and move the desk and move the books. Preachers have a lot of books. At first I was only seeing the goal of moving the rooms and that was all of my focus and I got overwhelmed. I couldn’t lift that desk by myself and I can’t figure out how to get it out of the room by myself. Kristin Mallory suggested sawing it in half… I can’t do it on my own strength. I don’t have decorating skills, I am not the best at spatial things, I am not the best painter, but when I look at you and think of your skills and gifts and graces, then I have hope. Who are you not seeing today that is your strength?

Getting ready for a fresh start is about leaving the past in the past so we can move forward with intentionality towards a goal. It is about trading our bad habits for good ones, and always looking for accountability because we want this fresh start to be sustainable. After all of that, it still might not stick. We might think that we are ready to make a change in our lives, but as any recovering addict will tell you, you aren’t ready until you’re ready. Are you ready?

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Amen!