

INTRODUCTION

Is this beginning of a new year? Well our calendar says it is. Do you know anything about the history of calendars? For much of the Middle Ages, Europe used the Julian calendar, which Julius Caesar instituted 46 years before Jesus was born. It had a February 29 and 30, so it wasn't completely accurate, and eventually the seasons didn't match the dates. So in 1582 Pope Gregory the 13th came up with a new annual calendar that was 365 ¼ day long. It was named after him, so we call it the Gregorian calendar. To make the switch from the Julian calendar, Italy and most of Europe had to drop 10 days in October of 1582.

However, England and the U.S. Colonies were slower to adopt the Gregorian calendar. They didn't approve it until 1712. To make the transition from the Julian to the Gregorian, they had to erase 11 days in September. So if you want to read what happened in England or the American Colonies between September 1-11, 1712—nothing did. Those days ceased to exist.

Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, but not everyone. If you have any friends who are Greek or Russian Orthodox Christians, you might wonder why they celebrate Christmas on January 7. It's because their churches still use the old Julian calendar.

So with that background, according to our Gregorian calendar, some of us can say, "Happy New Year!" But not all of us, because our Jewish friends celebrated their new year, Rosh Hashanah, this past September 5 and 6. And our Muslim friends celebrated the Islamic New Year, Al-Hijra (pronounced, "he'd' jru) on November 3-4.

I've said all of this to let you know calendars are human creations. The idea of starting over is attractive to us, because we like the idea of "out with the old, and in with the new." But for those of us who follow Jesus, we aren't enslaved to a calendar. There are no clocks and calendars in heaven. The years change, and the seasons change, but in the Bible, God says, "I the Lord do not change." (Malachi 3:6) The Bible says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) The Bible says, "His compassions never fail. They are new every morning." (Lamentations 3:23) And we claim the promise of 2 Corinthians 5:17 that says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

But since we all are tied to a clock and a calendar, January is a good time to ask what your expectations are for this year. Would you like for 2014 to be a year of blessing beyond your wildest dreams? If you would, I can give you some truth that will set you free. These aren't New Year's resolutions. These are daily steps of faith that God will honor.

There is a powerful principle in the Bible hidden over in 1 Samuel 2:30. If you apply this principle in your life, this year could be the year of blessing beyond your wildest dreams.

Before we read the verse, let's set the historical context. There was an old high priest named Eli, who had two immoral and rebellious sons who were priests. But Eli had brought a young man in to help in the Temple. His name was Samuel, and Samuel was faithful to God. God sent a messenger to Eli to warn him about the bad behavior of his sons. He said, "The Lord declares, 'Those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be disgraced.'" (1 Samuel

2:30, HCSV) That's the life-changing principle. Eli's sons despised God, and they ended up disgraced. They had the not-so-bright idea of using the Ark of the Covenant as a spiritual rabbit's foot. They put the Ark on a cart to lead them in battle. Bad idea. Both sons were killed by the Philistines and the Ark was captured. When Eli heard the news, he fell over and broke his neck and died. He and his family were disgraced. But little Samuel honored the Lord and as a result, the Lord honored Samuel. This principle was true 3,000 years ago and it's true today. If you honor God, He will honor you.

Hollywood hasn't made many Christ-honoring movies the last few years. But in 1981, the Academy Award winner for the best movie was "Chariots of Fire." It was the true story of Eric Liddell. Liddell was born to missionary parents in China, but returned to Scotland to attend school. He excelled in rugby and track. He was so fast he qualified for the 100-meter dash in the 1924 Paris Olympics. But a qualifying heat for the 100-meter was going to be run on a Sunday. As a Christian, Eric had made a vow about not running on Sunday. So, he refused to compromise his convictions. He chose not to compete.

He was actually giving up not one, but three possible gold medals because the 4x100 and the 4x400 heats were also run on Sunday and he was on those teams. There was great pressure upon Liddell to change his mind. Even British royalty, the Prince of Wales, appealed to Eric to change his mind and run on Sunday. But Eric politely refused the Prince because His commitment was to a heavenly King, not an earthly one.

Another British runner swapped events with Eric and he qualified for the 400-meter dash. On the day of the final race, no one expected him to win. He was a short-range sprinter, not accustomed to running 400 meters. Just before the race began, American sprinter Jackson Scholz handed Eric a note which read: It says in the old Book, "He that honors me, I will honor."

Eric exploded out of the blocks with that paper crushed in his fist as if it was a 100-meter sprint. Observers expected him to fade, but he threw his head back and ran. He had commented to his sister once, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." With his head held back in his unorthodox running style, Eric crossed the finish line, breaking the world record and finishing five meters ahead of the second place runner. He had won the gold medal in 47.6 seconds! He proved the principle that God will honor those who honor Him.

Do you want to experience a blessing beyond your wildest dream in 2014? There are many ways you can honor God, but let me challenge you in three areas.

1. HONOR GOD BY SEEKING HIM THROUGH PRAYER AND BIBLE STUDY

The simplest way to turbo-charge your walk with God is to set aside a daily quiet time where you quality time with Him. There are a lot of people who are seeking God, but did you know God is seeking people? He's looking for individuals who will love Him with their whole hearts. The Bible says, "The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." (2 Chronicles 16:9, NLT)

God's eyes are roaming the planet looking for people who are committed to knowing and serving Him. His eyes are roaming East Texas searching for people who are truly committed to Him. His eyes are searching through this congregation right now. What does He find when He looks at your heart?

Does He find someone who daily sets aside time to develop an intimacy with Him? The only way you get to know someone better is by spending time with him or her. Christianity isn't a religion where you go through rituals and obey rules. It's a personal relationship where God calls you His child, His friend, His beloved.

Will 2014 be the year when you start having a consistent quiet time with God? There are many tools out there to help you. For many years I've used a daily devotional called *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers. There's an online version and there's even an app you can put on your digital device.

Our friend, Dr. Jim Denison, has launched 2014 by encouraging Christians to give God the first 15 minutes of their day in prayer and Bible study. He offers great online devotionals on his website. Just go to www.denisonforum.org and click on First15.

RESULT: God will honor you with a fresh sense of His presence right when you need Him most!

After Paul had been a Christian for many years he wrote that he wanted to know God and the power of His resurrection. Didn't Paul already know God? Absolutely. But he wanted to know God in a deeper and more intimate way. You can know God, and you can know Him better by spending time with Him.

2. HONOR GOD BY SERVING HIM WITH YOUR ABILITIES

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been watching a lot of football games. At every football game there are two kinds of people: players and spectators. OU Football Coach Bud Wilkinson once said football is a game where twenty-two players who desperately need rest are battling on a field in front of 50,000 spectators who desperately need exercise.

I used to be a football player in high school. I might even still hold an Alabama high school football record—for the shortest punt. In a game against Samson, Alabama, our first and second-string punters had been hurt in the game and the coach said, "Dykes, get in there and punt the ball." That's when I discovered I was the third-string punter on a really bad team. So, I lined up and had three blockers about five yards in front of me. I took the snap and there didn't seem to be much of a rush, so I decided to take a few extra steps before the punt. That's when Herman, one of our blockers, decided to step back to block a rusher. I punted the ball and it hit Herman in his ample bottom and flew backwards about fifteen yards. I fell on the ball before an opposing team member could recover it. It didn't count as a blocked punt because it hit our player. So from the line of scrimmage my only punt in high school was -30 yards. That's not the kind of record I'm proud of, but I suspect it still stands.

Like football, there are two kinds of people who come to church. There are the spectators and the players, the ones who are active serving God. If you're new to our church, it's okay to spend some time being a spectator just watching and getting a feel for who we are and what we do. But if you've been coming for over a year and you're still just a spectator, you aren't honoring God. Through the years I've seen what happens to people who simply come and sit and soak. They sour.

So I want to challenge you to honor God by getting involved in some kind of ministry. The Bible says, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.” (1 Peter 4:10, NIV)

God has given you some natural abilities and some spiritual gifts, and you should be using those to honor Him. At Green Acres we believe every member is a minister, and we believe every ministry is equally important. We never use the “L” word—layman, or layperson. That's because we don't recognize any kind of clergy/layperson dichotomy. We are all ministers. God has a ministry for you at Green Acres. Will you honor Him by getting out of the stands and getting on the playing field?

RESULT: God will honor you by surprising you with supernatural strength

So if you want to change from a spectator to a player, you can stop by the Welcome Center or the Bethany Suite after the service and pick up a document called “Find Your Place in the Body.” It lists some of the hundreds of ministries at Green Acres and you can honor God by using your abilities to serve Him.

3. HONOR GOD BY RETURNING HIS TITHE TO HIM

By now some of you may be squirming and thinking, “Money, money, money, that's all they talk about down there at that church. That's what this preacher talked about the last time I was here.” Well, according to my records, I did mention it very briefly last January 6, when I was teaching from Malachi as we studied the Minor Prophets, so if that's that last time you were here, then you're right.

The truth is I seldom ever talk about tithing. I don't need to because this is such a generous congregation. God doesn't need your money. He owns all the wealth in the universe. But I'm sharing this principle with you today because I want you to discover a new way in which God can bless your life beyond your wildest dreams.

The Bible tells us to honor God with our income. “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first-fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.” (Proverbs 3:9-10, ESV)

You honor the Lord by giving His tithe to Him. The word “tithe” isn't a religious word. It just means 1/10. We all know “half” means 50%. Tithe just means 10%. The Jewish people lived in an agricultural economy, so they would take 10% of the first and best lambs and cows and give them to the priests at the temple. They would take 10% of the first and best of their grapes and

grain to the priests at the Temple.

The problem is that we usually pay every expense and then look to see what we have left to give God. That's not giving Him your firstfruits; that's giving Him your leftovers.

In 1989, the Butterball Turkey Company set up a consumer hotline during November and December to answer questions people might have about their Butterball turkeys. One lady called and said that she had kept a turkey in her freezer for 23 years. She asked, "Is it safe to eat?" The customer rep reported that if the temperature had been kept below zero the entire time, the turkey should be okay, but after all those years; the flavor would have deteriorated, so it wouldn't taste very well. The caller said, "That's what we thought. We'll just donate it to our church." Have you been giving God your leftover turkeys?

If you're not tithing, it might be because you are in financial bondage to debt. If you answer yes to any of these seven questions, you may be in financial bondage:

1. Do you have ongoing credit card debt and you are forced to pay the minimum every month?
2. Do you obtain a new credit card to transfer your outstanding balance to it?
3. Do you have to put off paying bills past the due date?
4. Are you unaware of how much you really owe?
5. Do you have creditors calling you to pay past-due bills?
6. (If married): Do you and your spouse argue regularly about money?

God wants you to experience financial freedom. But that won't happen until you start honoring Him with His tithe. For many years I've practiced and preached a simple financial plan called the 10-10-80 plan. You give God the first 10% of your income every month. Next you set aside 10% for personal savings or investment. Then you reduce your living expenses until you can live on 80% of your income. The 10-10-80 plan will honor God and set you on a path to financial freedom.

Here's what God has to say about tithing: "I am God... I haven't changed... You have a long history of ignoring my commands... Return to me so I can return to you." You ask, "But how do we return?" "Begin by being honest. Do honest people rob God? But you rob me day after day." You ask, "How have we robbed you?" "The tithe and the offering—that's how! And now you're under a curse...because you're robbing me. Bring your full tithe to the Temple treasury so there will be ample provisions in my Temple. Test me in this and see if I don't open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams." (Malachi 3:6-10, *The Message*)

The idea of being blessed beyond your wildest dreams comes from God's invitation for us to test Him in the area of tithing. In the entire Bible, there is only one time when God invites us to test Him. He tests us in many ways, but this is the only invitation He gives us to test Him.

I'll add a personal challenge to God's challenge. Here's the challenge: If you aren't yet tithing, start tithing this month. Give God the FIRST 10% of your income. And try tithing for 2014. And if at the end of 2014 your life isn't MUCH MORE BLESSED than it is right now, come and tell

me about it. And if it's true, here's what I'll do. I'll resign as pastor and I'll walk out of this church and never pick up this Bible again. Why? Because if Malachi 3:10 isn't true, how do we know John 3:16 is true? But I believe Malachi 3:10 is just as true as John 3:16. I've offered this challenge many times through the years. The last time I did it was in 2010. Through the years, do you know how many people have come to me after trying tithing and they said, "Pastor. God lied. I tithed for a year, and my life is in pits. I'm much worse off now than I was when I started?" Zero. Instead I've received hundreds of notes, letters, and emails from people who accepted my personal challenge. And they have told me over and over again that God is faithful to keep His promise.

RESULT: God will meet all your needs in every way—beyond your imagination!

My files are full of the testimonies of people who have put God to the test and started tithing. They have found Him to be faithful.

Janice Rimmer just recently sent me this email: "On December 30, I ordered my end-of-year medications and the amount was higher than usual, but I continued with the order. They arrived on December 31. I went to GABC online to donate my final tithe for the year. I was hesitant for a moment wondering how I could handle this tithe with the larger amount going to the pharmacy. I resolved that I would trust God, and I could manage my deficit unto the next payday.

Today, New Year's Day, I opened the medication order from December 30. I could not believe my eyes. The receipt showed that the amount for the medication was NOT the larger amount that I had expected. The medication total was LESS the exact amount of my church offering! I had an enormous sense of gratitude and thankfulness to God. What a wonderful way to begin a new year by having my Heavenly Father acknowledge my faith with His provision. It's going to be an awesome year!"

CONCLUSION

So, as you face a new year, do you really want God to bless you beyond your wildest dreams? Then honor God, and He will honor you. Honor God by spending time alone with Him every morning, and He will honor you. Honor God by serving Him in some ministry, and He will honor you. Honor God with your wealth by giving Him your firstfruits—His tithe, and God will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing you won't even be able to contain.

But God doesn't just want your first fifteen minutes of a day; He wants you to acknowledge His presence 24/7. He wants you to pray without ceasing.

And God doesn't just want you to serve the Lord here at church two or three hours a week, He wants you to serve Him every day and in every way.

And God isn't just interested in getting 10% of our wealth. What He really wants is YOU, all of you. Let's go back to learn the rest of the story of Eric Liddell, the Olympic Champion. Eric was a national hero and he could have returned to Britain to find fame and fortune. But instead he chose to return to China, where he had been born, to spread the gospel to the Chinese people. In

1943, the Japanese invaded China and Liddell was arrested and imprisoned in the Weifang Internment Camp. That last photo of Eric Liddell was taken when he was a prisoner there. Because Liddell was a national hero, Winston Churchill tried to arrange a prisoner exchange with the Japanese. But Liddell refused to leave and gave up his place in the exchange to a pregnant Chinese lady. They were forced to live under inhuman conditions, with insufficient food and water, and on February 21, 1945, Eric Liddell died. And at that moment, he crossed the finish line for a REAL gold medal. He honored God. Did God honor Him?

Today, Eric Liddell is one of the most honored men in China. The Chinese didn't enter the modern Olympic games until 1984, and since Eric Liddell was born and died in China, he is considered the FIRST Chinese Olympic gold medal winner. In a town near where the internment camp was, there is a large Chinese monument honoring the life and sacrifice of Eric Liddell.

God said, "If you honor me, I will honor you." Now what are you going to do about that?

If you choose to honor Him every day, and in every way, I predict that in 2014, you'll find blessings beyond your wildest dreams.

OUTLINE

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RESULT: God will honor you with a fresh sense of His presence right when you need Him most!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*