

New Year, New Me

Michael Balcomb
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New Year's message
Cheon Hwa Gung, Las Vegas, NV



Good morning, everybody. Happy New Year! How many people are attending your first Sunday service in this building? Would you stand up and be recognized? Welcome. Okay, now how many of you are attending your first Sunday service in 2015 in this building? Please stand up. Everybody, right? So, good morning and, again, happy New Year! The theme of my sermon this morning is “New Year, New Me.” My goal is that by the time you walk out of this building, in just three hours from now—no, just kidding!—you will feel a “new me.”

I've always been fascinated by Revelation 21:5 [“And he who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”], the first Bible reading we

read this morning, because it's so inspiring and uplifting. Here is God, sitting on the throne of the universe, telling us, “I will make all things new.” Elsewhere in the Book of Revelation, it explains what that means. God will wipe away every tear from every eye. There'll be no more suffering, there'll be no more sorrow, there'll be no more death; everything will be new. And for a large portion of my life I was quite satisfied with that idea. But a few years ago, a nagging thought came into my mind: If everything's going to be new, what about me? I mean, I'm not ready, I'm not perfect. I wonder if there'll be room for me in such a completely new world of God. If you know your Bible, you'll realize that this promise that God makes comes after an enormous amount of suffering. Scripture calls it the Great Tribulation, and it describes in pretty good detail the way our world is today. Earthquakes, disease, famine, war, conflict—and remember, St. John was writing this 2,000 years ago, but even so, it was pretty easy to see how the world that is separated from God would be. So God is giving that promise, but there are a whole lot of things that happen first.

I have five children, and for them, to make all things new means, “You're going to buy me a new one, Dad.” For example, my two youngest have been suffering with an iPhone 4S for the last two years. I must be the worst parent on the planet. How could I possibly let them continue to use that phone? It's two years old. Actually it wasn't two years old, so the contract was still running. Every day for about three months they'd be telling me, “Dad, I need a new phone.” And what are they going to do with the old phone when I give them a new one? They're going to throw it away, right? A few years ago, it was all about getting a new computer. Remember when you bought a computer? And pretty soon after you opened the box, it was out of date. “I want a new one!” I used to tell my kids, “I can fix your computer; I can make it work just like new.” “No, Dad, you don't understand. I want a new one.”

So what about God? When He talks about making a new world, and a new heaven and a new earth, does that mean that He's going to discard the earth we live on right now? Who's going to live in that new world, in that new kingdom? Is there going to be a brand-new set of people created by God who never suffered, never sinned, who never had a problem? No, right? Actually—and I have to confess, I went to the Seminary to learn this—the word that God uses for “new” in this scripture doesn't mean that kind of new. It means renewed, repaired, rebuilt, refreshed. It's new in the sense of taking something that may have been tired and broken and damaged, and rebuilding it in God's factory. It's as good as new, it's fresh, but it's still us. It's still this world we live in. In a way I think that's much better. You know, some people believe that at the time of God's Kingdom, only a very small number of people will get in. St. John talked about the 144,000 who would be raised up. Now, if you're in exile on a little island in the middle of the Mediterranean, 144,000 is an impossibly large number. But if you live, as we do, with 7.3 billion people, 144,000 is nothing. If God could be satisfied with that, and see 99 percent of His children, 99.9, still suffering and miserable, that can't be right. What we're talking about is how God renews and repairs and rebuilds us. Just as we are to live and develop and build His Kingdom. Don't you think that's worth learning about? You are essential, and all of us are essential, to the building of God's Kingdom.

Let me say a bit about our founder—you see his picture up here—Rev. Sun Myung Moon. He was born in 1920 in North Korea, not into a Christian family but a Confucian family. However, when he was about 10 years old, his family converted, and as children often are, he became a very, very keen student of the Bible. And for the first few years, he felt like most Korean Christians did, which was that a new world, a new kingdom, would be one that would start by liberating the country from oppression. At that time Korea was occupied by Japan. The Japanese were running the government, the economy, and the average

Korean suffered a great deal. So, for most of them, the thought of a new world, a new kingdom, would be one with no Japanese. Where the Koreans were running their own country and were living at peace, and frankly, that kind of feeling was prevalent throughout the world.

I was born in Nigeria, which at the time was a British-occupied country, and as I grew up I met a number of Nigerian Christians, and when I asked them what was their vision, it was largely that there were no people like me in their country. That was a little difficult to understand.

When he was 15 years old on Easter Sunday in 1935, actually 80 years ago this year, Rev. Moon—he wasn't a reverend then, of course; he was just Sun Myung Moon, a teenager—had a powerful encounter with Jesus. A spiritual encounter. And for the first time he began to understand God's yearning heart for other people, people not like him. He learned that God is interested not only in Christians, not only in Koreans, not only in the people living on the earth today. God is a Parent who's yearning for all of His children who were ever born to come back home and live in His Kingdom of grace and love. It wasn't easy at first, but gradually he realized that, far from chasing out the Japanese and all the people who were in command in his country, his real task was to love them and to forgive them. And when the war ended and the Japanese were leaving in defeat, there was a spirit, which is natural among any occupied people, of "Let's get our revenge." But he felt, "I have to help them leave in safety, I have to help them go home. They may have done all kinds of wrong things, but if I am going to be like God, if I'm going to resemble the Father of us all, I have to help them escape in safety," and that's what he did.

So, renewal, rebuilding, revival—how is God actually going to do that? Think about it for a moment. Think about the world outside, the things you heard on the news yesterday or today. How can even God repair all those things? Is it even possible, or is it just a dream, a nice thing you hear on Sunday morning, and then you go back out and life continues just as it always did?

My conviction is that it's always possible to rebuild and renew the Kingdom of God, and the time for doing it is, in fact, now. Let's think of the first thing that God needs to renew. He needs to renew this planet, right? It's covered with problems, a lot of them caused by human beings.

This morning I was reading an article about how even plane crashes are contributing to pollution. There's water pollution, there's air pollution, there's every kind of damage being done to the environment. We hear about global warming, we hear about all kinds of impurities that have come into the world through careless human activity. Surely God is going to renew this planet to make it beautiful and clean and fresh and holy, just as when Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden. God's Kingdom doesn't include a world that is struggling, polluted and suffering.

The second thing is, God is definitely going to have to cure the ills of human society. The conflicts between religions, divisions based on race, or nationality, or language, or education, or philosophy, or even the things that divide a country like America, wealthy though it is. In other countries that division appears as bloodshed, as slavery, as all manner of oppression, so certainly God wants to heal the human family. If you think about it, no parent can be happy until all of his or her children are okay. You can't think, "Five of them are okay. Well, one of them is in jail. I'm good, five to one." No. A parent is concerned about every one of his or her children and always will be. So certainly God wants to re-create our human community, our human family.

But again, how does He do that? God is invisible, we can't see God, most of us don't hear His voice all that clearly all the time. But the fact is, to renew the world, or to renew the human community, God needs to renew us.

We have about 100 people in this room. Do you think, from God's perspective, if 99 people walk out of here feeling, "I want to be renewed, I'm going to make a difference, I'm going to help build God's Kingdom," but one person leaves feeling, "No, I'm not worthy; surely God is not calling me. When I look at my life and at my reality, I don't think God can use me," how would God feel? Actually, for every person in this room this morning, no matter what language you speak or where you come from, God has a plan for you.

In the Book of Jeremiah 29:11, one of my favorites, God says, "I know the plans I have for you; declares the Lord. A plan to prosper you and make you well and healthy, not to destroy you or harm you." So, absolutely certain, especially as we start this new year, I know God has a plan to bring prosperity.

Father Moon first used the words, "Forgive, Love and Unite" at the time of the Watergate Crisis [of the early 1970s]. Many of you are too young to remember that, but it was a time when America was tearing itself apart. Tearing apart its president, confused about its policy here and overseas. And Father Moon felt, "If America's going to fulfill God's destiny, if this country is going to rise up and take care of others in the world, we have to stop tearing ourselves apart." So the first task for any nation, for any church, for any family and for all of us this year is to forgive.

We all want to be forgiven, right? We've all made mistakes, things that we're ashamed of, sad about. Either to people we love or the ones we want to love but we've hurt. And many feel we've done things that hurt the heart of God. We want that forgiveness for ourselves, but here's a tip: You can't receive forgiveness unless you first forgive. Jesus told Peter that much one time. He said, you have to forgive your brother 70 times 7. That means not only do you have to forgive but also you have to forget. You can't keep a ledger—"Okay, I've forgiven my wife six times, she's forgiven me three times, so I've got three free passes." It doesn't work like that. When you forgive, you have to forget. Father Moon said that actually the definition of love is to give and forget that you gave, and that's really true. The trouble for most of us is that we do it the other way around. We receive and forget that we received. We give and we keep a ledger. That's the selfish way of loving. The true way of loving that leads to forgiveness is to forgive and forget. So I want to invite you today to make a covenant with God: "I'm going to forgive. I'm going to forget all the wrongs and sufferings that people have done to me. I'm going to forgive them all." Because if we take them with us into 2015, it won't be any different from 2014 or any other year.

To forgive, we need to do the second thing: We need to love. Love means putting yourself second, or even third. If you put yourself first, you'll find people running away from you. They won't want to know you, because you always want to take something. But if you practice true love—giving first and forgetting that you gave—suddenly you'll find that people want to know you. They want to learn from you. They want to know what you know about God, and what you know about truth, and about love itself. It's really very simple. We have to live for the sake of others. We have to love for the sake of others, and the only way to do that is to not keep a record. Every new day is a chance to give anew. If we want to make this year new, we have to love with a new heart.

And the last, and maybe the most important of all: We have to unite, because it turns out that our Heavenly Father is not interested particularly in people coming one at a time. Of course, it's good news when a person changes their mind and heart and turns toward God and His righteousness, but if they're just one or two people and the great majority are still hating and divided and not loving each other, our Heavenly Parent, just like you as parents and your own parents, cannot really be happy. So, in a way I see unity as the proof that we've forgiven and we've loved. If we say we've forgiven, if we say we're loving, but we're not working together, we're not supporting and helping each other in unity, actually that means we haven't forgiven and we haven't loved. Unity is the proof that we've become God's real sons and daughters.

Now, none of this has anything to do, really, with what church you go to, what scripture you read, what language you speak at home, whether you're a teenager or an adult or a senior citizen—those things, in God's eyes, are really not so important. Yesterday at our CARP Learning Center, I talked about Father Moon's teaching on the three stages of life. The first stage of life is in our mother's womb. We spend nine months there, and although the mother's womb is no bigger than a watermelon or a rice cooker, for the baby inside it's the entire universe—everything. Perhaps it may hear a few sounds from outside; some people say if you play Mozart or some peaceful music for your baby, it will help them to grow. But by and large, that womb is the whole universe. And when the child is born into the second stage of life, of air, everything of that world is left behind. By the grace of God we're all in the second stage right now.

But what's the purpose of the second stage? Father Moon said it's actually to complete our spiritual growth. Just as in the womb, when all the organs and body parts are developing that the baby needs for his or her life after birth, while we live on earth, our fundamental purpose is to prepare ourselves for that eternal heaven with God. Not some promised land when we die, but as a reality that we experience every day.

One day we will pass to the heavenly world, and we will realize that this huge world, from Korea to Las Vegas to New York to Iran, is no bigger than the watermelon of our mother's belly. In comparison, we will enter into an eternal, limitless love with God and with each other. So, that being said, we have to experience that right here, right now, in order to be prepared for it for eternity. It means that everyone in this room actually has a single common purpose. We're not different. You might be a student, a businessman, a doctor, but from God's perspective we're all exactly the same. We have a common purpose and goal this year, and it is to forgive, to love, to unite, to resemble God and practice His love.

Now I can answer the question that I began this sermon with. How will God build His Kingdom? Not by magic, not with other people, but with me. And through me, and through us working together.