

Well in a few days we will officially be in the year 2014! I think that calls for a bit of an examination.

The story is told of a man who called the doctor and told the doctor that his wife was having problems of hearing and he wanted the doctor to check her out. So the doctor said check her out at home and see how bad it is before you bring her in. Man said how do I do that. Doctor said ask her something from the other side of the room and keep getting closer until she responds back to what you said. So man goes home and she is in the kitchen making supper and from the other side of the kitchen husband goes, “Is dinner about ready honey?” He didn’t hear anything. So he goes to the center of the kitchen and says, “Dinner about ready honey?” Still didn’t hear anything. So he gets up right behind her and goes, “dinner about ready honey?” and at that point she turns around and says for the third time Yes.

The writer of Romans leaves us with the opportunity to also check our lives with some very practical scriptural reminders of how we are supposed to be living.

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. ⁹ For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.”^[a] These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”^[b] ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.

¹¹ This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. ¹³ Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don’t participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don’t let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires. Romans 13:8-13:14

For those of you that have driven a vehicle with a manual transmission you know what it means to slow down by gearing down. If you have ever had your brakes fail or get weak while driving you know that you can gear down and nearly bring it to a stop or at least slow enough you could consider bailing out. There are times in our lives when all of us should downshift and slow down long enough to examine our lives. There is no better time than the week between Christmas and New Year’s.

There are times in life when we all need to gear down and then perhaps gear up. When should we gear down? When we’re going to fast or perhaps doing some things that we shouldn’t be doing.

Let’s be honest. We all do things or fall into a pattern of doing things that perhaps we shouldn’t. I’m talking about little things that we do that we know are not fully pleasing to

the Lord. Or else we may get somewhat sidetracked and are not nearly as devoted to the Lord as we should be.

Didn't Jesus tell us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" in Matthew 6:33? He did but often we don't. Sometimes the kingdom of God is the last thing on our list of "to do's" during the holiday season. And if so, this is when we should gear down, slow up and make some changes in our lives and scheduling.

And when should we gear up? We should always gear up and get moving when it comes to living for the Lord. Can we ever do too much for God? I really don't think so and I don't know of anybody who is even trying to do too much.

Romans 12:11: *"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."*

How can we prepare for the New Year? How should we prepare or should we do anything at all? Some people could care less about doing anything different in a new year but as people who belong to the Lord we should care! We should care about doing better and being better! Doing more and being better.

From the scripture we read, let's think about some things we can do to improve our lives and our relationship to the Lord.

- 1- Wake up
- 2- Shape up
- 3- Dress up

1. **Wake Up!**

¹¹ This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Romans 13: 11 NLT

A few years ago, Michael Vick got a wakeup call. Here's what one writer said about Vick. Dec. 10, 2007. "Now that Michael Vick has gone from icon to inmate, I'm hoping he makes it back to the NFL. Not as the same player or the same person, but as a changed man."

Vick received a 23-month sentence for his role in a dog fighting ring that gambled on pit bulls and killed them viciously. To me, regardless of the length of his sentence, Vick paid dearly for his wrongdoing. He lost millions of dollars and faced financial obligations that threatened to leave him bankrupt. His NFL career was over at least for the present in 2007. His reputation was tarnished, and much of his dignity had been taken away, trading a Falcons uniform and all the perks of superstardom for a cell and the prison uniform.

Vick had nobody to blame but himself. He should have never been involved in dog

fighting and such cruelty to animals. He should have admitted his guilt long before he did. He should have been more careful about the company he kept. Vick was naive, he lied, he broke the law, and he paid a heavy price.

Michael Vick received a wakeup call! He's like the prodigal son and he may soon be feeding with the hogs, so to speak.

He should have known better than to do what he was doing. You would have thought he would have been smarter than that. Why did he get involved with gambling on dog fighting, etc.? I think one reason is because he was famous and rich. And it seems like some people in that arena feel like they can do anything and get away it.

Another reason that Vick did what he did was because of Satan. Let's be honest about this. Satan is still alive and well on planet earth and in sports, etc. He's out to get you and me!

1 Pet. 5:8-9 "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

Preacher Billy Sunday used to say, "I know the devil is real for two reasons. Number one, because the Bible says so. And number two, because I've done business with him." Michael Vick could probably say the same thing.

What about us? What does it take for us to wake up about certain things, about things where we are definitely wrong and don't want to admit it? Most of the time a person has to go down before they can ever go up. But who wants to go down?

Someone said: "On my way to deliver a computer to a customer, I saw a handwritten sign at the entrance of an alley. It read: "Blocked! Do not pass! Difficult to turn back." I continued anyway, only to discover that the alley was indeed blocked by a fallen tree. As predicted, it took a while to turn the truck around. When I finally got back to the entrance, I noticed a second sign. It read: "Told you so!"

God has told us so many times in life but it seems that we don't listen too well!

Some people just keep right on doing the same old things when they know that they are not right. And some day, it will catch up to them and God will do worse than block the road or put up a sign that reads, "told you so!"

Is God speaking to you in some form? Is He trying to tell you something? In a sense, He tells us all to wake up.

Well once you wake up you may need to shape up!

2. Shape Up!

The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. ¹³ Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Romans 13:12-13 NLT

Once we receive a wake up call or get woke up then we need to shape up. Put aside the deeds of darkness. Behave decently.

Someone said: I don't exercise at all. If God had wanted me to touch my toes He would have put them up higher on my body.

Someone else said: I'm in shape. Round is a shape.

I saw an article on the internet recently about body mass index. Do you know anything about body mass index? I just know that I have body mass but I don't want to know what my index number is! Still, I took the test and....I guess I need to "shape up" some. I tried to fudge with the numbers a bit and it still didn't come out to my advantage. Key word is probably fudge!!

Sometimes in the fitness world, (believe it or not I got close enough once to actually hear this) you will hear people say you need to "move more and eat less." Maybe that would work in our spiritual lives as well. Well at least a form of that.

II Cor. 13:5 "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"

I think if we all took a long, hard look at our lives from a spiritual standpoint (meaning God's Word) and then if we are honest enough, we would admit that we need to shape up! But shaping up spiritually may be more difficult than shaping up physically. Old habits are hard to break. It will take discipline. It will take resolve. It will take some old fashioned "want to."

I would be the first in this room to admit that I need to lose weight. I know it, I feel it. I look in the mirror. I get on the scale. I know that I think I am a "big tough guy but believe it or not I have shed tears over it." But If I'm going to shape up I need to be willing to do some things. Maybe even move more and eat less!

But there is a greater priority than that:

What I really need is more study, more Bible study, more prayer, more surrender to Christ in my life. And the more I focus on the Lord, His people and serving others, the less I'll focus on play and pleasure.

The more I focus on the Lord and people, the less I'll focus on myself and my pleasures and my wants and wishes. I don't know really how to even **shake us up** on this one but it is so glaring and real that I need to talk about it with you. Discipleship!!!

3. Dress Up!

¹⁴ *Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.* Romans 13:14 NLT

"What do you instantly know about a well-dressed man? His wife is good at picking out clothes."

Mark Twain once said, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."

There is an actual web site called "Clothes Make the Man." Here is how their ad reads: Clothes Make the Man is dedicated to helping low income and disadvantaged men who are entering or re-entering the workforce by providing them with business and interviewing attire, career development and life-skills counseling, etc.

Can you believe it? Yes. In our world, anything can happen and people try to sell anything. And I do think the world has sold us a bill of good about clothes make the man or the woman. While dressing nice is nice, it's nicer if the person is nice.

Or as someone as said, "It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice."

There is a book entitled, *The Power of Nice*. And the thought is very good. Rather than dressing well, we need to be nice people.

A Small (or Tall) Gesture Can Get You into the Holiday Spirit. You may think buying a stranger a cup of coffee is a small gesture compared to the many good deeds we're likely to read about during the holidays. But a little gesture can be quite powerful! One woman proved it one day by sparking a chain of goodwill that spread holiday cheer for miles at a Pennsylvania Starbucks drive-through.

After placing her order the woman told the clerk that she'd also like to pay for the gentleman in the car behind her. In return, all she asked was for him to do something nice for someone else.

Well, the gentleman in car #2 decided to pay for the car behind him. Car #3 paid for car #4 and so on and so on culminating in a 2-hour chain that reached over 100 cars! The Starbucks employees were overwhelmed by this burst of generosity no doubt making their workday much more pleasant along with all those folks who drove up to the window and paid it forward.

Buying a cup of coffee is a nice thing to do but there are hundreds of nice things we could do for others. But the point is this niceness must come from a heart that is nice. And how does that happen? IT COMES FROM CHRIST who went about doing good while He was on earth.

¹⁴ Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires. Romans 13:8-13:14

More than anything, we need to put on Christ. We need to allow Him to live in us and through us. If He is love personified (and He is), then we need to be like Him and walk in love.

How do we put on Christ? It's no real secret. It's no different than some actor studying for his part in a movie, although it is much deeper and more powerful. As the actor studies and saturates his mind with the person he is to play, he essentially becomes that person. They study for hours and hours the character they are to become.

It is no different when it comes to putting on Christ. We must study His Word and His life! As we look at Him in the gospel accounts we may well find ourselves becoming absorbed and becoming more like Him. How could that be? Because God is at work in us! And He works even more in those who are willing to seek Him.

Peter and John were accused as being with Jesus (Acts 4:13) when the people saw their boldness and the way they lived. WHAT ABOUT US? We all need to dress up with the spirit of Christ. We all need to put on Christ.

Eph. 5:15-18 "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

If you knew that you were going to die next week, would you do some things differently? I bet you would. There would be some things that we would stop and other things we would do! We'd all seek the Lord as never before! We'd pray more! We'd worship more! We'd love more! None of us know when this life is going to be over.

Even though we have a new year it's foolish to think we have lots of time to do what God wants us to do. If there's something that you know you need to do for the Lord, do it now!

Would you join me in committing to live like Jesus this year? You need to be sure about that before you agree to it.

[Richard] Bandler tells one story about visiting a mental institution and dealing with a man who insisted he was Jesus Christ - not metaphorically, not in spirit, but in the flesh. One day Bandler walked in to meet this man. "Are you Jesus?" he said. "Yes, my son,"

the man replied. Bandler said, "I'll be back in a minute." This left the man a little bit confused. Within three or four minutes, Bandler came back, holding a measuring tape. Asking the man to hold out his arms, Bandler measured the length of his arms and his height from head to toe. After that, Bandler left. The man claiming to be Christ became a little concerned. A little while later, Bandler came back with a hammer, some large spiked nails, and a long set of boards. He began to pound them into the form of a cross. The man asked, "What are you doing?" As Richard put the last nails in the cross, he asked, "Are you Jesus?" Again the man said, "Yes my son." Bandler said, "Then you know why I'm here." Somehow, the man suddenly recalled who he really was. His old pattern didn't seem like such a good idea. "I'm not Jesus. I'm not Jesus!" the man started yelling. Case closed.

Sometimes we are quick to say we want to be like Jesus but Jesus said pick up your cross and follow me. That cross might be your job, your family or marriage, your health or it might even involve separation from other because of your faith. In other parts of this world it could even mean death. Are you willing to step it up this year?

Are you willing to wake up, and shape up and even dress up in an effort to live as close to God as is possible?

Though no one can go back and make a new beginning - anyone can start from now and make a brand new end.