

"New Year's Message"
January 1, 2023 | Pastor John Stickl

Hey everybody. Happy New Year. I hope you and your family had a great Christmas week and it is the beginning of a brand new year. 2023 is here. Can you even believe it? A new year, a fresh start, new beginning, second chances. God's mercies are new every morning, and therefore, they are new every year. I'm believing that this is a year full of dreams and hopes and opportunities and new ventures, new revelation and wisdom. That God has been good to you last year and God is going to be good to you this year. So Happy New Year to you and your family, and thanks for joining us quick online today wherever you are in the world. See, every year the week after our Christmas services, we only gather online because we want to let all of our buildings, all of our staff, all of our leaders, and all of our amazing serve team members just rest.

It takes so much to put together what we do every single weekend and I am so grateful for all of the amazing people that use their gifts and their talents, their time, their energy, their resources to create what you and I enjoy every single week. We just let everything and everyone rest this week. I'm glad that you're just joining us for just a few minutes here. Really, this isn't really long. I just want to give you a couple of thoughts as we start this new year. You see, as I've been praying for you and I've been praying for our church and just been seeking God on where we're going, and who we're becoming, and what He's inviting us towards, here's what I just feel like the Lord just keeps bringing me back to. Like, what if this year, what if 2023 was a year of humility and servanthood?

What if this was a year where you really pursued humility in your life? You see, I think it's so easy for us to be blind to how much pride is actually in our lives and how it manifests in so many different ways, but the kingdom is the way of humility. Jesus tells us that His heart is gentle and humble. The Bible says "God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves under God's hand that in due time He might lift you up. There is this constant invitation, all throughout scripture, to be people of humility. Humility isn't putting yourself down, it's choosing to come in agreement and alignment with what God says is true.

Then, servanthood. You see, I think it is so easy for us to worship the god of self, to live our lives surrounding this idol of selfishness where we're in the center and it's all about us. I think, whether we realize it or not, it can be so easy to make everything about us - our needs, our wants, our desires, our opinions, our preferences. But Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, pick up His cross and follow me." He invites us to die to self and learn to live a life of servanthood. What if, as you entered into this year, you just started to ask God, "God, help me grow in humility and servanthood," because that really is the way of the kingdom. Now, I know that might not be the message you're hoping for here as we start a new year, but it certainly is the way of Jesus. As Valley Creek Church, we're on this journey of becoming disciples, of becoming more like Jesus.

If you think about it, if God gives grace to the humble then when we choose to humble ourselves, that's when we discover breakthrough and freedom and advancement and increase.

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It's when we go to new levels and discover new things with God and when we're serving others and we deny ourselves we're becoming more and more like the heart of Jesus. There's something in this invitation, this year of surrender and trust, obedience, holiness, choosing to just honor God with all of our lives. You're going to see that theme and that thread through much of what we do in 2023 - the invitation towards humility and servanthood. In fact, a great way to even start this year is just ask the people in your life, "Hey, can I just ask you, where do you see pride in my life? Where do you see selfishness in my life?"

Now, you might not like the answers to the, to those questions, and so don't get defensive and react and get mad at them, and say, "Well, let me tell you where you're prideful and where you're selfish." No, no. What if you just started with humility, to ask the people that actually see how you come across and say, "Man, can you just help me see where am I prideful and unaware of it? Where am I selfish, and I don't even realize it? Because I really want to become more like Jesus this year and I want His grace to change my life from the inside out." As we start this year, there's just a handful of things that I want to make sure you're aware of and all of these are really part of a journey of humility and servanthood. Just track with me for a few moments as we get started. Because I just want to make sure that you know what's going on. First thing is simply this, we've got a brand new reading plan that starts today - the Book of Proverbs. We're just simply reading through Proverbs here at the beginning of the year because we want to be people of wisdom.

The Bible tells us, "If any of you need wisdom just ask God and He will generously give it to you." That's what Proverbs is. It's a book of wisdom. It's a book of how to live your life. It's a book of God's ways. It's a book full of the very thoughts of God and how to do our life. The Bible tells us that wisdom is supreme. That it will cost you everything you have to get wisdom. That wisdom is better than rubies. That nothing you desire compares to her. Let me encourage you. Let's just start this year; start today. Proverbs Chapter 1 - read today the word of God that is the foundation of wisdom in our life over these next few weeks, so we're just starting with seeking God's wisdom. The second thing is RE is this week. RE - our 3-day encounter with God - Friday, Saturday, and Sunday - RE. Those two little letters that literally mean to go back. If you put them in front of any word, it changes everything.

Restore, renew, redeem, revive, refresh, reignite. Jesus can "re" anything. What we love to do as a church is we love starting the year with a 3-day focus of just seeking after God with everything that we've got. I'm inviting you, our entire church, to consider doing 3 days of prayer and fasting with us for this 3-day RE encounter. Prayer - it's simply conversation with God and seeking after Him. Fasting is when we choose to give up food in our lives to create a hunger and a desperation for God. The whole point of fasting is to kind of break that dependence that we have upon the flesh and the things of this world to create a hunger and a sensitivity towards God.

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Fasting, for you, might be giving up lunch for those 3 days. It might be giving up sugar or sweets. It might be giving up coffee or dinner or breakfast and then taking that time and replacing what you would be doing, the time you would be spending eating and using that time to seek God. What we're going to do on the Friday and Saturday at both our Flower Mound and Gainesville campuses, it will also be available online, is we're just going to open up our worship centers. 24-hours-a-day; you could come in the morning, you could come at night, you could come any time of the day and it's just going to be a sacred space. A place where we believe the presence of God is that we can come in with others and just seek Him. You can come in and just read your Bible, you can walk around and worship, you can pray, you can seek God, you can come to get a word from Him. If you don't know what to do, we'll have a guided prayer experience for you of some things that you can do to have an encounter and an experience with God. But I'm encouraging and inviting everybody - come. If you can only come for 15 minutes, come for 15 minutes. You want to come for an hour, come for an hour. You want to come for 6 hours, come for 6 hours.

You want to come at 6 in the morning or you want to come at 2 in the morning, you want to come in the middle of the day, come in the middle of the day. Come and just kind of set your heart to say, "God, I want to start this year focusing on You, and so I'm here in a sacred space to meet with You." That will be Friday and that will be Saturday and then on Sunday we'll gather together at all of our campuses at our normal worship service experience times. We're just going to seek God together. We're going to break the fast with communion. We're going to spend some time praying in unity and just turning our hearts to Jesus, so RE is going to be amazing. Then, the following week, Circles for our Spring semester kick off. Listen, we hope everybody in our church gets in a Circle. You say, "What's a Circle?" A Circle is where we grow as disciples. The Circles are 3 or more people who gather together to discuss the weekend message, engage the Scriptures, and pray.

We hope that every person in our church gets in a Circle because that's where life change happens. Listen, the weekend experiences, they are essential, but they are not sufficient. We need the gathering as the people of God in the weekend experience, but it is not enough to help us fully become who God has called us to be. Jesus says where two or three are gathered there He is also. We want to be people that get together with other followers of Jesus to grow in our spiritual journey. What if this year, as you pursue humility and servanthood, what if you made a decision about whether or not you're going to engage in Circles, not based on your desire or your interest or convenience or your time, but what if you just said, "God, I don't even know that I want to be in a Circle, but I know You want me to be in a Circle."

"And so I'm going to do it not because I want to, but because I want to honor You with my life. Because I want this year to be a year of obedience and I want to remove the pride and acknowledge I need others and I need You in my life. I want to remove the selfishness because it's not all about me and other people need me in their life as well." What if you just asked God, "God, do You want me to be in a Circle?" And then, whatever He says, what if you do

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that with all your heart? Circles are where we become like Jesus. Then, the following week we're going to do something that I'm so excited about. We are going to kick off reading through the New Testament together. After we finish the Book of Proverbs to start the year with wisdom, for the rest of the year, basically, our entire church is going to read straight through the New Testament together.

Listen, you can do this. I would bet, for a majority of you, you've never actually read through the New Testament. You've read pieces and things and verses and chapters and parts and parcels, but you've never just sat down, and said, "Okay, I'm going to actually read Matthew all the way through Revelation and discover what it has to say about who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and what it now looks like to live in the kingdom of God." We're going to go through it a chapter a day. At the end of every book, there will be a couple days - a day for catch-up and a day for -- an opportunity for you to just reflect through the same 3 questions that will ask you all the way through at the end of every book, so even if you get behind, there'll be makeup space. Then, we'll go into the next book, and we'll go through that. Every book will have a 5-minute commentary on ValleyCreek+ that you can watch with yourself or with your family to just be like, "Okay, the Book of Matthew. Who was Matthew, and who is this written to, and when was it written and what was the big idea of it?" You'll have a framework as you go into it.

But I believe God is going to do something so profound in our church and in your life as we just take the time and the interest and the heart to say, "God, we want Your word and Your way and Your wisdom to shape our lives." Come on, parents, can I encourage you, do this year with your kids. Just like you wouldn't let your kids not do their homework because they don't want to, don't let them not do the reading plan because they're not interested in it. "Oh, they don't like that. It doesn't make sense to them." Guess what, biology doesn't make sense to them either, until they go through biology class and start to absorb it and learn it in their lives. Listen, the Bible says that, "As parents, you're responsible to impress the very word the commands of God upon the hearts of your children."

What better way to now do it with our entire church; to say, a chapter a day, you can do this. We're going to do it as a family, and we're going to believe that God's Word is living and active. That it's a light unto our feet and a lamp unto our path. That the scriptures are working on us. That it is the very spirit and breath of God being spoken into our lives. You're like, "Why are you telling us all of this now?" Because I want to give you the next 3 weeks to prepare. Prepare your mind, your heart, your family, have a vision for it. We're going to give you journals to go along the way through it. On the third weekend that we gather in January. I just want you to be like, "Okay, this is what we're going to do as a family. We're going to --" just like you'd sit down and decide - are we doing this for sports, or these are the vacations we're taking, these are the activities we're going to be a part of, this is what we're going to focus on. All the things, like, work this in. "Let's read through the New Testament together and watch what God will do." Again, not out of necessarily desire or interest, but what about just as a way of worship and honor and obedience?

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"God, You asked me to engage Your Word, so even though I don't want to do it, I'm going to choose to prioritize it in my life this year." Then, the last thing is, that same weekend, we are going to kick-off the Hope Carrier Initiative. For the last couple of years, we have been praying and preparing and wrestling and seeking God and dialoguing and churning through all of it and the time is finally here. We are going to release the Hope Carrier Initiative and try to inspire and mobilize our entire church to be people who live on mission in the everyday realities of their life, people who walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, people who release God's kingdom wherever they go, people who lead the way by hope, people who literally show up into their daily lives and are there to say, "I'm here to change my world in Jesus' name."

I believe it is a whole new realm of discovery and revelation and experience with God and His kingdom that we have never had. I don't want you to miss it. You've got to be here starting the third week of January. From then on, we're just going to go into it. We've got these Hope Carrier journals for you. They'll be part of -- the reading plan will be part of it. I'm telling you God is going to do something incredible in it because it's time to really go on mission with God. This is why Kingdom Culture was so important, because it is the foundation for us to live as people who release that kingdom wherever we go in our daily lives. Okay. I know that was a lot. I super appreciate you letting me share that with you here at the beginning of the year and all I'm trying to do is just give you a framework of, here's where we're going and here's what God is doing.

Let me just ask you, as you start this year, what's your vision for 2023? Like, do you have a vision? Can you look out there and say, "This is what I want to do and this is who I want to become, and this is what I want my relationship with God to look like?" Because if you don't have a vision, you're going to be left just responding to the situations and circumstances that are going to happen all year long. Because whether we like to admit it or not, there are all kinds of things, circumstances and situations, storms if you will, that come into our lives every single year. If we just wait to live in response to the mercy of what happens towards us, we completely miss the point of the life that God has invited us to, which is to initiate and have a vision and go first, and say, "Regardless of what happens, this is the path that I'm going on. This is the direction that I'm headed."

In fact, I could ask it to you like this, and just say, what would define a successful 2023? Have you thought about that yet? Like, if you say, okay, we're at the end of 2023 we're at Christmas time of next year, what would make 2023 a successful year? What you did, money, school, grades, performance, activities, travel? Let me give you some wisdom. Here's what would make a successful 2023. That at the end of this coming year, you look a little bit more like Jesus. That the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control are a little bit more evident in your life to the people around you.

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That would make 2023 a successful year, but you've got to have a vision for it. You've got to say, "God, I want to become a little bit more like You this year. Help me grow in humility and servanthood. Help me take some very specific next steps on my journey with You, so that I can become more like You. God, give me endurance and perseverance when it gets hard. Help me die to myself and help me get rid of my selfishness, because Jesus I'm desperate for You. I need Your goodness and Your grace in my life and I open myself up to You." Come on Valley Creek, it is going to be a great 2023. I'm so proud of you, I'm so grateful for you, and I'm so excited of the direction our church is going.

It's a new year. It is full of the goodness and the grace of God. Let's start taking next steps together and grow in that humility and that servanthood. Let's follow Jesus with everything that we've got because this is going to be a great year. So as you start this year, may you remember that God is good, that Jesus has forgiven you, that you are loved, and everything is possible in Jesus' name.