

FINISH STRONG

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So how many people are ready to start a new year? And how many people will be glad to say goodbye to this year? Okay. You know, I've always observed two very interesting patterns that happen at this time of year, between Christmas and New Year's.

And the first one is that we get very eager and very excited -- very hopeful and optimistic -- about the new year. And then simultaneously we want to get rid of and get sick and tired of the current year, and just want to get it over with.

How many people have ever said or heard somebody say, "I can hardly wait for this year to be over; this year to end"?

And I smile at that, because I think that the same year -- 11 months ago -- we were all excited for it to come! And now we want to kick it to the curb like a ... partner in a bad relationship. [Congregants laugh] We just want to get it out of there! We want to dump it quickly; get something better fast.

Now, the second thing that we do is: we set resolutions. And these are actions and goals, doing new habits. Maybe reading; going to the gym; going on an exercise program. I mean, we do all these things because we want to change our lives. We have all these new actions; new behaviors for ourselves.

And then when we start, and we hit a bump and we get off track, somehow the passion and excitement that started just kind of fizzles, and we end up not doing anything about the goals anymore. Studies even show people who set resolutions: after the first week, 30% have stopped pursuing them. And after a month, 80% have stopped doing them! Some of them have even forgotten what those resolutions were. And they say, at the University of Scranton, they suggested only 8% of people who set resolutions complete them, and some as low as only 3% to 5%.

So, I find it interesting that we get all excited about this new year, and how quickly we give up on the current year. Many of us don't really finish the year; we just kind of kill time and wait until it's gone and the new year arrives.

You know, I don't think that's the most helpful pattern for us, because what ends up happening: we end up repeating the same things over and over again. The change and the excitement that we start with, we aren't really able to transform that into the level of change that we're seeking.

And so how many people have ever started something and not finished it? Anybody? [Congregants laugh] And I would say that we miss out a lot when we don't consciously finish the year. And we miss out a lot from the year itself, and it robs us of being our best in the new year.

Dr. Phil said one of the most important and effective ways for us to feel better about ourselves, to feel more organized, and for us to prepare ourselves for success, is to finish the things that we have started. And so this morning, I looked around my house at the things that I started that I hadn't finished. And before I left my house this morning, I finished half a bottle of merlot ... [Congregants laugh] ... A part of a bottle of Baileys and Kahlua; half a package of Oreos; a third of a bag of Doritos; the remainder of the Prozac and Valium prescriptions ... [Congregants laugh] ... the rest of the cheesecake; some saltines; and half a box of chocolates. And I can't tell you how good I feel about myself right now! [Congregants laugh and applaud]

I'm proud, because I finished strong. [Congregants laugh]

Gary Ryan Blair, who is the president of The GoalsGuy -- it is a training and performance company -- says, "*Many will start fast; few will finish strong.*" And I really believe at this time of year, it behooves us to take the time to finish consciously and finish strongly, and not just wait for the end of the year to start a new year.

So, this morning we're going to talk about three things we can do to finish 2024 strong and to start 2025 on our best footing.

And the first thing we need to do is to **MAKE PEACE WITH CERTAIN THINGS THAT HAPPENED IN 2024.** How many people had some stuff happen this year that you did not like and you did not want? You know, some things that were painful, that were challenging, and even heartbreaking.

So, what in this year do you need to make peace with? What happened this year that you've had a hard time dealing with? I would bet every single one of us had some things that happened to us that were bad; that felt wrong and unfair. I bet every one of us experienced some losses and some conflict and some negative outcomes or mistakes that left us feeling hurt or angry or devastated or sad or feeling shame and regret. Things that made us ask, "*Why? Why did this happen?*" Things that made us hate and resent and think this should not have happened at all. You know, I think there's stuff that we all struggle with in having a hard time facing and dealing with and getting over with.

You know, to finish this year as healthy as possible, I think we need to learn how to make peace with ourselves; how to make peace with the difficult things that have happened. But sometimes we would rather not deal with those things and rather try to sweep it under the rug. Or pretend it didn't affect us as much as it did or just say, "*It's all good.*" But what that has us doing is end up stuffing and holding on and burying those things and not actually dealing with them. Not processing them; not healing them and releasing them in an effective way so we can actually move on to a new year. Because if we don't, we end up just taking it into the new year and living that same level of pain and sometimes dysfunction.

Jesus in the Beatitudes said this: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*" And that means: those who are peacemakers lives will be blessed and enriched. But it takes work to be a peacemaker: to make peace with ourselves; to make peace with others; to make peace with things that happened that we wish that did not happen.

And the greatest way to make peace is to do two things -- is to utilize two powerful spiritual practices. And that is through acceptance and forgiveness. Acceptance and forgiveness are the two things that help us dissolve the pain and the hurt and the judgment and the resistance that we have to things that happened that we don't like. You know, they are not easy practices, but they're vitally important. And they're hugely liberating to free us to move forward and not be stuck in the past.

You know in Buddhism it says pain is inevitable. That pain is a part of life. Jesus said, "*In this life will be trials and tribulations.*" There is going to be some stuff. They say pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. That the real suffering that we experience in life is self-induced. The suffering that happens in life is not just from the thing that happens; it is from our reaction and our resistance to the thing. It is judging it and hating it. And it creates a "pain body" of energy within us that makes it difficult for us to enjoy life and to move forward to create greater possibilities.

You know, acceptance is one of the most powerful and liberating practices, and here's how we do it. The first thing we need to do is: we need to be aware of what it is that we're having a hard time getting over. What it is we're having a hard time accepting.

You know, the second step is to have compassion for ourselves. You know, everybody goes through difficult stuff; nobody handles it perfectly all the time. Sometimes we get triggered' sometimes we

get stuck. It's not anything to be ashamed of; it's a part of the human process and experience.

So being aware ... and I think journaling can help us be aware of what it is. And then second is having compassion.

And third is the process of healing, which is three things. About taking it to God in prayer to help open our hearts, to find acceptance. And then the second one is therapy. Sometimes having someone to talk to is a good thing. And the third aspect of healing to find acceptance: sometimes it's just time. Sometimes just the passage of time loosens and releases these things. But we need to consciously go through this process if we want to make peace with ourselves and make peace with our past.

Eckhart Tolle says this: *"Accept what the present moment contains. Accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it. This will miraculously transform your whole life."*

Let me read it again: *"Accept what the present moment contains. Accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it. This will miraculously transform your whole life."*

That does not sound like an easy thing to do! I am sure we can all think of something that happened in our life that we would not act like we chose this to happen. You know, this difficult passage reminds me of another difficult passage I spoke about last week, when the Apostle Paul said, *"Count it all joy, brethren, when you face trials of many kinds."* Count it all joy.

You know, both that Scripture and this quote are really calling us to a higher level of consciousness; to a higher level of awareness that knows that, whatever happens in our lives, is there for a reason. How many people believe that all things happen for a reason? I think we usually believe that when the good things happen ... [congregants laugh] But it's the other part -- when it's not so comfortable -- to realize whatever's before us is a part of our spiritual growth. Whatever is in front of us is to help us expand and raise our consciousness and to unfold into the fullness of the being we came here to be.

So resisting it, hating it, judging it is not the healthiest for ourselves spiritually, and not for ourselves humanly, because it leaves energy that is stuck in us, leaving us with pain in everything we do in our lives.

It is a powerful spiritual practice to find acceptance in the things that happen. It doesn't mean we have to like them; it doesn't mean that we don't try to change or transform them. It means getting rid of the anger and the turmoil and the resistance we hold towards it; to release that so we find peace.

And you know what happens when we find acceptance? We find peace. And then we are more present; we are more engaged; and we are more centered and empowered to handle those. To learn the lesson it came to teach; to gain the insights; and to transform that situation into something greater and better.

"Blessed are the peacemakers" is saying: this is your spiritual work -- to find acceptance in the areas that you find a difficult a difficult time dealing with.

And so, again, we can change and transform the areas. The only difference is: we're working from a place of peace and acceptance rather than from resistance and anger. Does that make sense, everyone? Okay; say, *"Yes,"* because that's the only answer I have! So, you're going to have to say, *"Yeah. Yeah, Rev, that makes a lot of sense."* [Congregants laugh]

And the other aspect of making peace is forgiveness. And forgiveness is a tough thing, because we have this idea of what life should be and what justice looks like. And when someone violates that by acting in a way that's outside -- that's cruel or mean -- we have a difficult time and we end up holding on to the emotional component; to toxic energy.

I mean, acceptance is already a challenge, but forgiveness can be even tougher. To truly forgive someone who has caused us hurt or pain, or forgive ourselves for doing something that caused ourselves pain or caused someone we love pain, is difficult work.

You know, everybody knows I've said it many times: one of the most powerful prayers -- Psalm 51, Verse 10 -- "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord.*"

You know, the thing about forgiveness: you think you need to know how to forgive. You don't. I always say the number one thing with forgiveness is: Are you willing? Are you willing to forgive? Are you willing to let go of the pain of the past? Are you willing to wipe the slate clean? Are you willing to free yourself to move forward? To utilize that energy to some greater joys and some greater possibilities?

So, what happened in 2024 that you're still holding on to that needs your forgiveness? Forgiveness of yourself or forgiveness of others? Give it to God. God will heal your heart. God will show you how. The question is: you just need to be willing to let it go.

And the first step in finishing this year strong is to make peace with this year. Make peace with the tough things that you had a hard time dealing with through acceptance and forgiveness.

The second way to finish this year strong is to **GIVE THIS YEAR MEANING**. Whenever we think of having a good life and having a fulfilling life, the first thing we think about is happiness. When we're happy, we can have a good life and a fulfilling life. But do you know that there is something else that is more important than happiness in having a fulfilling life and a good life? And that is feeling that our lives have meaning.

I think sometimes we don't realize that we are yearning for meaning more than we understand. You know, the suicide rates around the world are on the increase. The United States reached a high -- a 30-year high -- in suicide recently. And even though objectively life is getting easier -- all the technological investments and improvements, you know, should make our lives better and easier. And yet, more people are feeling hopeless; more people are feeling alone; more people are feeling depression. You know, anti-depression drugs are at an all-time high.

And the predictor of someone being depressed and in despair, and possibly committing suicide, is not a lack of happiness. It is a lack of meaning: feeling our lives have no meaning. Feeling our lives have no value. We are yearning to feel a sense of meaning for ourselves and our lives.

Emily Esfahani Smith -- in her book, *The Power of Meaning* -- says that people who have more meaning in life tend to be more resilient and fulfilled; tend to do better at school or work; and even live longer. Meaning puts things into perspective. It helps us endure and focus and also gives us motivation, drive, persistence, insight and understanding.

How many people ever read the book *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl? A few people. You know, a fabulous book! And he said the thing that got him through that situation and that torture and all that was having a sense of meaning. And his meaning was to be able to get out to tell that story. And number one: his meaning was to be able to get back to his family; to see his family.

Meaning is a powerful thing that we're all seeking. That makes a huge difference in our lives. And here are four pillars of meaning.

The first one is belonging. First: to have a sense of meaning, you know, we have to feel like we belong ... belong to our family; belong to our group of our friends; to belong to school; to belong to our spiritual community in our church. That makes a huge difference! To seek belonging; to be a part of something.

The next one is a sense of purpose. To have goals, and to know that you have talents and abilities, and that you are here to make that difference. To have your life be centered around some level of purpose and goals and pursuing something.

The third one with meaning is about the story that you tell. Like, what kind of story are you telling about your life? If you really look at all the stories, you know, what is the ultimate end of that story? Sometimes we tell victim stories and "poor me" stories. And sometimes we tell stories of being an overcomer and a survivor. There are all kind of stories that we tell. *"I always get hurt."* *"Things never work out for me."* We tell all kinds of stories.

And one of the things for meaning; we all need to look at the stories that we're telling. And to choose: What's a better story for me to tell? How can I move my story towards more positive and productive and purposeful directions that will have value for myself; that make me feel good about myself?

And then the fourth pillar of meaning is transcendence: to know that you are connected to some greater reality and greater good. That there's a flow and an energy and a wisdom and intelligence in life, and you're a part of it. And we're all a part of it. To know that our lives have meaning, not just from the job that we do, but by our very existence: by our very presence, by our very spirit.

Victor Frankl in that book says, *"We always ask the question, 'What is the meaning of life?'"* And he said, *"That's the wrong question."* He said, *"The right question to ask is, 'What meaning do you give to life?'"* Because that is the most important thing: is the meaning you give to your own life. Yes, there is a greater good and meaning. But you need to come to that place where you figure: What is the meaning of my life?

So, what is the meaning of your life? And what meaning do you give to this year? What role did this year play in the meaning of your life? Maybe the meaning of your life and the meaning of this year was to learn or to expand or to heal. Maybe it was to grow. Maybe it was to let go. Maybe this was the year to build up your hope. Maybe this was the year of overcoming or recreating yourself. Of evolving. I don't know what it is, but it's our work to do: to find the meaning of our lives and the meaning of this year.

Next week we're going to do the White Stone Ceremony, and that plays a process of listening to what our soul is calling us to embody; the meaning of what our life is -- and the purpose of what our life is -- in the new year.

To me the second thing to finish this year strong is to give our lives meaning and to give this year meaning. And it's the meaning we give that is most important.

And then the final one is to **ADJUST AND ADAPT OUR ATTITUDE**. How many people have ever dealt with someone -- maybe wait staff or a sales rep; a co-worker; or a family member -- that were a little cranky, snippy and negative? Anybody have to deal? [Congregants laugh] And how many people have ever been cranky, snippy and a little bit negative to deal with? [Congregants laugh] And how many people have ever dealt with someone that was so negative -- so difficult -- they could never say something positive? And they were just draining your energy?

You know, it kind of reminds me of these two guys who always go hunting. One was always positive -- always seeing the positive. The other one always seeing the negative; always finding something to complain about. And then one day the positive guy finds something so amazing and miraculous he wants to share it with the negative guy, because he's sure there's no way the negative guy could see anything negative in this.

And so, what the thing was he found was a bird dog that could walk on water. And so, they both go hunting together as usual. And the bird dog's there. And they shoot the first duck and the duck lands.

And the bird dog comes out of the boat, walks on the water, gets the duck and walks it back and brings it in.

And then the positive guy is smiling, hoping to hear something positive. You know, the negative guy is just frowning and shaking his head. And then second duck they shoot, the dog comes out; walks on the water; brings it back into the boat. And again, the positive guy is smiling like a gopher. And then the negative guy's just a sourpuss. And then it happens a third time, and he can't help himself.

The positive guy ends up saying, *"Hey, haven't you noticed anything about my new dog?"*

And then the negative guy says, *"Yeah, I've noticed one thing. He can't swim, can he?"* [Congregants laugh]

I think we've all heard the expression, *"Attitude is everything."* And it sounds really like a cliché, but you know what? It's really true. Attitude is everything because attitude affects everything. The kind of attitude and mindset we have affects how we see the world; how much good and how much negative stuff we see in the world; how well we handle the ups and the downs; how well and how much we experience joy on an everyday basis; how we handle adversity; how we solve problems; how we are able to see a situation as an opportunity and not as an obstacle.

Attitude is huge when it comes to relationships. To have a positive attitude and open attitude; to listen and to connect; and to share and have an energy that's positive and wanting to be around makes a difference in our relationships. Attitude makes a difference in the work we do: the quality and the amount of work we do. Attitude affects our motivation; it affects our resilience; it affects our focus. There is no part of our life that will not benefit and will not be improved by having a good and positive attitude.

A lady came up to me after service and she introduced herself as a *"snowbird from Chicago."* And she said, *"I was a teacher for"* ... I can't remember how many years. And she said, *"The first day of school every year I talked to the kids about the importance of attitude. That, no matter what they learned -- from PE to geography or math -- that attitude was the over arching thing that would make the difference in their lives."* And it really, really does!

So we need to ask ourselves: What kind of attitude am I living with? And is there a better and more positive attitude I could be holding and living with? Even in our simple interactions; in the way we treat ourselves; in the way that we do our work, attitude matters. Attitude makes a difference.

So Monday, I went to Fry's. Usually, I order my groceries at Fry's and I just pick them up. But I just needed one thing. I wanted some blueberries. So I went to Fry's, and there's a little self-checkout thing there. And there's a guy there, and I said, *"Hey, do you think someone can help me just grab some blueberries?"*

And he said, *"Well, I'll get my manager."*

So, the manager comes over -- his name's Brett -- and he said, *"Sir, how can I help you?"*

I said, *"Well, I'm just picking up one thing. I want some blueberries."*

He said, *"Would that be an 18-ounce container of blueberries?"*

I said, *"Yeah; 18 sounds good."*

"Would you like organic or would you like ...?"

I said, *"Well, either; we could go for organic."*

He says, *"I'll be right back."* He comes back and brings this. And, you know, he cashes me out. And then he says, *"Could I walk you to your car?"*

"Sure!" So, he walks me to the car. And it was such a friendly visit! And the place was busy, but the guy took the time and he was so kind, I just really loved it.

So Friday, I wanted to have a glass of wine. And so, I didn't order all the groceries, so I thought, *"Let me go again."* And so I went there, back at the checkout, they asked Brett if he could help me. And I saw Brett; he was busy. He was busy, like crazy; they were having a rush. And then he sent the message he'd be happy to help me, but I needed to wait a bit.

So I waited a bit, and then he came over. He said, *"What can I get you?"*

I said, *"I'd like a bottle of wine, and the name of it is Bread and Butter."*

And he said, *"Is that chardonnay?"*

And I said, *"Yes."* And then he goes to get it.

And when he's gone, I thought, *"Did he say cabernet or chardonnay?"* So he comes back with a bottle of Butter – that's the name of the wine – Butter. And it is a chardonnay. But I wanted Bread and Butter which is a cabernet! And I had to apologize. I said, *"Man, I am so sorry; I made your walk all the way across there and I'm really apologize."*

He said, *"Don't worry."* So he goes all the way back and he comes back and he said, *"There you go, sir."* And he was as still as positive. I messed up and he was still as gracious and positive as ever. And I have to tell you, I was so impressed what a difference an attitude makes. In the simplest ways, in the biggest ways, it makes our lives better.

And so, my question for you is: Can you think of some situations in your life this year where you really demonstrated a great attitude? Like, you handled something really positively? Really thoughtfully? Really considerably? And can you think of any situations where you may not have dealt with something in the best attitude? I know that might be hard, but ... [congregants laugh] And can you think of what a better attitude might have been for you to handle that situation you didn't handle as well?

And even ask yourself: For 2025, what would be a great attitude you would like embody more of and more consistently throughout your life? You know, what would be a more positive attitude you could have in how you handle and deal and interact in your relationship? What's a more positive attitude you could hold in the way you do your work? What is a more positive attitude you can hold about yourself and your health or the way you view and experience life?

Would it be a more optimistic and hopeful attitude? Would it be a more grateful and appreciative attitude? Would it be a more cheerful and warm and friendly attitude? Would it be a more patient and peaceful attitude? It is whatever we would want to choose! What is an attitude that you know would improve the quality of your life?

Attitude really is the key to success. And learning how to adjust that attitude, I think, is the best way to get the best out of what's left of this year, and to open the door to an even greater year in 2025.

So, I already shared this story with you. But, like, my family had this tradition of getting ready for New Year's. And so, what we had to do in our house – and remember, I'm one of 10 kids. And so, at the time that I remember this, there were like still six or eight of them plus my parents living in the house. So this place got dirty and laundry would sometimes be like two three feet high easy.

And so the thing we had to do was for New Year's was clean the entire house: wipe everything down; I mean, clean everything. Vacuum under the bed; wiping down this, that and the other thing. We had to

clean everything. All the laundry had to be done; every single piece of laundry. We had to go through all the stuff we had, we had to give away or throw away. My mom meant clean when she said clean.

And then we had to all be dressed in our nicest clothes. We all had to have money in our pocket: coins, as well as bills. The house was decorated and the dining table was filled with food: chicken, beef, pork, salmon, and then black eyed peas; you know, all of the things. We had all kinds of food; all kinds of drinks on the table.

And then, when midnight came, we did the countdown. We popped all the balloons; we hugged and kissed each other; sang "Auld Lang Syne." Then my dad would lead us in prayer. We'd all hold hands around the table, and he would lead us in prayer of giving thanks, you know, for the year and welcoming the new year. And then we opened the doors to welcome in the new year air. I was in Canada; it was freezing! [Congregants laugh] But just for a few minutes!

And the thing is: I don't think I appreciated it as much then as I appreciate it now. What a wonderful way to prepare ourselves for the ending of this year we were blessed to have, and then opening a space to begin the new year to live that in the best way.

And I think it behooves us to not just end the year, wait 'til it's done -- "*I can hardly wait till it's over!*" -- but to utilize it, you know. To make peace with the things that didn't go as well through acceptance and forgiveness. To find meaning in our lives: a sense of belonging; a sense of purpose. And then to find what our story is; what the meaning of our lives are. And then, finally, to have an attitude adjustment; to change our attitude. Because a better attitude will always lead to a better life.

Let us prepare for the new year by making sure that, this year, we finish strong.

God bless you all!