Dear Lexie,

Here We Go Again!

I know that I say this at the beginning of each New Year, but I believe it begs repeating: "I can't believe that another year has come and gone." But seriously, it seems like it was just yesterday that we were having this same conversation as we were being ushered ceremoniously into 2014. Where has all the time really gone? In many ways I feel like the prophet Elijah when he was asked by God at Beersheba, after running for his life from the wicked Queen Jezebel, "What are you doing here, Elijah? (1 Kings 19:9) I too am asking myself, "What are you doing here, Charles? And I say that because it feels as though, like you, I was just celebrating the beginning of 2014. Now I recognize that time hasn't actually moved any faster than in times past but for whatever reason, it just feels as though it has.

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The Giving Tree of Life

Did you know that a recent Harvard study showed that simply contemplating generosity boosts your immune system? In addition, the study concluded that giving money to someone else lifted the giver's happiness more than spending it on themselves (surprisingly, the study participants' generally predicted that spending on themselves would make them happier). It turns out, giving actually makes us feel happy! When people give, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust. A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better physical and mental health. Individuals who provided practical help or gave emotional support had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn't. Interestingly, receiving is not linked to reduced health risks.

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And now that we have officially arrived at the beginning of a brand new year, what does it all really mean? Think about it for a moment – Weren’t we in 2014 just a day ago? If we are going to be honest, not much has really changed in just a day, or has it? Although in many ways things have remained pretty much the same as they were the day before, in other ways everything has changed. For whatever reason, there is something powerful that takes place whenever a new year has arrived. There is something about the turning of the calendar page that has a way of infusing our tired and worn lives with a spirit of freshness that can only be compared with being born again. Somehow the dawn of the New Year makes us feel empowered to implement incredible changes in our lives that we felt impotent to make just a mere 24 hours ago. For example, we feel empowered to quit bad habits, repair our finances, lose those unwanted pounds, stop procrastinating and the list, I’m sure, is endless.

So, here we go again! And now that we are finally here, the question remains, where do we go from here? In other words, what new changes are you desiring to see come to fruition in your life that is going to make this year for you drastically different from the year before? And I say this with all sincerity, because if 2015 is not in many ways drastically different than last year, then in many ways it’s just a retread of 2014.

So what will help to ensure that this is not the case? How about if we were to determine in our hearts to follow the counsel of Proverbs 3:5 & 6 to:

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
And lean not on your own understanding;  
6 In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He shall direct your paths.

Honestly, the only thing that will bring about true and lasting change in our lives, that we so desperately need, is a willingness to follow God’s leading in every aspect of our lives. And if there is any resolution that needs to go at the top of our list for 2015, surely this should be the one.
The Giving Tree of Life

Jamie Jean

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.” (Proverbs 19:17; NIV)

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Researchers suggest that one reason giving may improve physical health and longevity is that it helps decrease stress, which is in turn associated with a variety of health problems.

“A cheerful heart is good medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22)

As evidenced by the benefits to our physical and mental wellbeing resulting from giving, God, in His infinite wisdom, designed us to be generous. Furthermore, the benefits extend into an important realm: our spiritual health.

“Money has great value, because it can do great good. In the hands of God’s children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.” (Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, pp. 351, 352)

We often focus on the dangers of money, greed, and financial idolatry. For good reasons, we are cautioned to store up treasures in Heaven and not on earth. But money itself is not bad. There’s nothing wrong with having money. Money is not evil. It is merely a tool. Money can be a powerful instrument for good when put to proper use.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23; NIV)

The problem actually lies in our own hearts and how we relate to money. It doesn’t matter whether we are rich or poor, but rather whether material wealth occupies a priority above our duty to God and His will. Fortunately for us, God built a spiritual safeguard through the gifts of giving and service to others. And He offers this gift freely to those who seek to reflect His character. By serving the Lord through sharing His blessings with others, we put our trust in Him to magnify the positive impact that money can produce when invested in God’s purposes. When we give, we open our hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and it’s actually good for our health. When we keep our earthly blessings to ourselves, King Solomon put it best:
"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; NIV)

Whereas the Bible offers us eternal blessings when we give freely from what we have.

“Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:33-34; NIV)

“The poor man who has faith and confidence in God, who trusts in His love and care, and who abounds in good works, judiciously using the little he has in blessing others with his means, is rich toward God. He feels that his neighbor has claims upon him that he cannot disregard and yet obey the commandment of God: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’” (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2)

Ten days symbolizes a test period in the Bible. The benefits from practicing the gift of giving is something we can assess fairly easily, so I challenge you to give with a generous and trusting heart this holiday season—as well as ALL seasons and see how it improves your spiritual and physical wellbeing. You can start with just ten days and see what happens...

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6:38; NIV)

Please share your personal experiences with giving and the benefits or blessings you've received as a result in the comments section below. I look forward to hearing your stories!

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