

The Inlook-Outlook Letter
Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (January 2011)

This 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' is for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers. When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*.

New Year's Resolutions

What do you resolve to change in the New Year? Often it is helpful to make a list of things we would like to change. When my wife wants my help getting some things done, she knows to make a list. When I do what is asked of me, it gives me a concrete sense of accomplishment as I cross-off each item. Of course, New Year's resolutions may take more time, but next year, one can look back on a list, and cannot hide from the conclusion! Either I accomplished a resolution, or I did not.

Why do people make New Year's resolutions? We make them in order to create blessing and happiness. We are unhappy with some aspect of our life, it might be over-eating, over-drinking, under-exercising, too much isolation, worrying about things over which we have no control, and so on. So we resolve to take steps to correct the way our life seems to be going to give it a better direction.

Can the Bible help? Yes, it can! In fact at almost the very beginning of Jesus' ministry he gives us a list of what scholars describe as "a program of life, a list of desirable qualities or virtues" (New Jerome Biblical Commentary, "Beatitudes", p. 640, 1990): The beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3-12). These qualities are what make us human.

"Beatitude" simply means "blessing" or "happiness". You might say, that the beatitudes are the Christian path to happiness. What if we resolved this year to adopt one or more of the beatitudes? Here they are, and in a list, too!

1. How blessed are the poor in spirit: the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
2. Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance.
3. Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill.
5. Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognized as children of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the kingdom of heaven is theirs. (New Jerusalem Bible, 1985)

We could form some advices and queries, that help us understand each of these better ways of being human:

1. *Poor in spirit*: Do we understand that no one gets through life without reaching the limits of his/her endurance at some point, and that it is no shame to feel utterly defeated? There are so many examples of this truth in the Bible, it would be hard to enumerate them; for example,

King David: *My strength is trickling away, my bones are all disjointed, my heart has turned to wax melting inside me. My mouth is dry as earthenware, my tongue sticks to my jaw. You lay me down in the dust of death* (Psalm 22: 15). Are we afraid to feel like this? When we feel lost in our transgression and far from God, this beatitude is saying it is in such moments that we are closest to God. We need only reach out to Him and *the kingdom of Heaven is ours!* This year can I stay with uncomfortable feelings instead of running from them, and ask God and Friends to help me with them?

2. *Gentleness*: “There is nothing stronger in the world than gentleness” says Han Suyin. Can I let go of the habit of shaming myself and the 'bad feelings' that attend this attitude, and become gentle with myself, thus attaining real strength for myself and others and receiving the *inheritance* I am due?
3. *Mourning*: When I am sad can I simply accept the feeling instead of acting tough? For I have the right to mourn like anyone else, and *be comforted* for my losses.
4. *Hunger and Thirst*: I am empty inside, I am tired of filling myself with the stuff of this world and with my excuses; can I open myself to my savior's promise of food and drink, that will lead me to a life of *goodness and steadfast love...all the days of my life* (Psalm 23: 6)?
5. *Mercy*: Can I show mercy to those who grieve me in place of revenge, and by my example lead them away from evil to *right paths as befits His name* (Psalm 23: 3)?
6. *Purity of Heart*: Are we willing to let go of the childish idea we are not pure because of what we have done? Jesus reminds us in this beatitude no one is 'pure' in this sense. Purity of heart is to “will one thing” says Soren Kierkegaard. It is to be undivided, like God, not to be torn apart by competing desires, but to choose the one God wants for us. We will know which one it is, because when we choose it, we will *see* God!
7. *Peace*: In the New Year can I become a peacemaker? First, I resolve to make peace with myself. I will no longer burden myself with self-recrimination. I will learn to *walk humbly with my God* (Micah 6), and He will guide me to paths of reconciliation. In this New Year I will seek to resolve conflicts peacefully, claiming my birthright as a *child of God*.
8. *Justice*: Those who tell the truth are often opposed by the majority. This is seen in the lives of the Prophets and the “faithful remnant” so often pictured in Old Testament stories, people who faithfully practice God's law in contradistinction to the majority of believers. Many people may not want to face up to their responsibilities towards God and others, to which all of the world's great religious traditions call us. In our tradition, the Ten Commandments tell us our responsibilities: *Live, doing no harm* (Exodus 20: 1-17; Matthew 22: 37-40). Give me the power to live faithfully following Your path in the coming year as an example for others, thus realizing, one person at a time, God's *kingdom of Heaven* on earth.

May the New Year 2011 bring new Light and Many Blessings to You!

May God bless you. **Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below.** Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292, Canton, NY 13617**

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