

“A Clean Slate”

1 John 1:8-9 ¹

What do you think about when you think about “a clean slate”? I suppose one of our most frequent uses of that phrase has to do with beginning a New Year. Or perhaps you remember cleaning chalkboards when you were in elementary school.

I suspect that most of us associate the idea of a “clean slate” with something like the “opportunity to start over without prejudice,” as the *HyperDictionary*² puts it. The idea of “amnesty” is very similar to the idea of a “clean slate,” and we sometimes talk about amnesty with respect to such things as immigration, tax evasion, war crimes, or even software piracy. The idea of filing for bankruptcy carries much of the same meaning. We get to start over.

About a decade ago, New Zealand passed a law commonly known as the “Clean Slate Bill” that allowed persons convicted of offenses that did not result in imprisonment and who have gone seven years without any further convictions, to have their convictions concealed.³ They get to start over.

For those of you who are educators, the idea of a “clean slate” may call to mind John Locke’s theory of “tabula rasa” as set forth in his 1690 “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,”⁴ that jumpstarted the “nature” vs. “nurture” debate about human knowledge and character.

Taking the idea in a different direction, there are a number of “Clean Slate Organizing Services” that promise to help persons

- clean out and organize rooms, desks, and closets;
- sort papers and establish or refine filing systems;
- create highly-functional and aesthetically-pleasing home and office spaces;
- establish goals and manage time to meet those goals; and
- honor your past by organizing photos and mementos.

Another creative approach to this idea is a software program called “Clean Slate” that is designed to protect public access computers from malicious or inexperienced users. Their promotional materials state that “While not restricting users’ activities, Clean Slate will scour drives back to their original state upon reboot or log off. Clean Slate takes only minutes to install and needs no attention, ever, for most installations. Clean Slate restores the computer to its original configuration, no matter what users have done: including erasing files, installing software, downloading viruses and Trojan horses, and altering icons.”⁵

While all of these ideas seem basically positive to me, some kinds of “clean slate” don’t seem so fine. When I was first pastoring in 1980, I was introduced to an unpleasant experience I called “the terror of the blank page,” which I faced every Monday morning as I considered what to say on the next Sunday morning . . . just seven short days away.

While I thankfully don’t see it very often anymore, I have occasionally seen computer screens that said something like “Your hard drive (to which you have entrusted all of the important

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on January 5, 2014.

² www.hyperdictionary.com.

³ <http://www.justice.govt.nz/publications/global-publications/c/criminal-records-clean-slate-act-2004-english-corp-060>.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding.

⁵ <http://www.fortresgrand.com/products/cls/cls.htm>; http://download.cnet.com/Clean-Slate/3000-2653_4-10581292.html

information of your life) has unfortunately suffered a permanent and fatal error. Please reformat (that is, completely destroy all the data on this drive) and then rebuild your hard drive.” That’s most definitely *not* a happy “clean slate”!

Some of you may have seen the 1994 comedy film called “Clean Slate.”⁶ The film stars Dana Carvey as a private investigator who is the key witness in a murder case. But after suffering a head injury during the investigation, he develops a rare form of amnesia that causes him to forget anything that's happened to him the previous day. This makes it hard for him to know who to trust, or if he even knows them at all. That’s not a very happy “clean slate,” either.

And some of you will remember that we’re now making our way through winter toward the second day of February, which is celebrated in some parts as “Groundhog Day.” And that reminds me of the classic 1993 film of the same name.⁷ You’ve probably heard about it, even if you haven’t seen it.

In the movie, *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, an arrogant and self-centered TV weatherman in Pittsburgh who gets the assignment of covering the annual Groundhog Day event in nearby Punxsutawney. While in Punxsutawney, Phil finds himself somehow trapped in a time loop, such that he has to repeat the same day over . . . and over . . . and over again. After spending much of the film indulging in sensual pleasures and making numerous attempts at suicide, Phil finally begins to re-examine his life and the priorities that guide it, and the film eventually comes to a happy ending.

This movie shows us someone who is uncomfortably similar to some of the worst characteristics we sometimes see in ourselves. Phil is arrogant and sarcastic, absorbed in his own discomforts and complaints, without hope, and cut off from other people. And like Phil, some of us this morning may know what it’s like “to do exactly the same things every day and to be stuck in the same place all the time.”

Have you ever discovered that your life has been suddenly catapulted into what feels almost like an alien world, where you have no idea what to expect next and where you seem to have little or no control over your life? Have you ever found yourself indulging in far too much food, drink, pleasure-seeking, or risk-taking because nothing seems to really matter anymore?

Whereas many of us may go through most of our frequently-very-similar days rather “in automatic,” Phil is forced to stop and treat each identical day as a world unto itself, and then decide how he’s going to use it. In the end, he is finally able to break through to a more authentic, intimate, creative, and compassionate self, a self that had been trapped within him, and that could only be freed by the paradox of trapping him in a single day until he got it “right.”

In the beginning, Phil gorges on food because of his despair about his life situation, but in the end, he provides a feast for an old man. In the beginning, Phil tries to kill himself, but in the end, he saves other people. In the beginning, Phil hurts other people and drives them away, but in the end, he encourages other people and they are drawn to him.

In the beginning, Phil is forced to live in Punxsutawney, but in the end, he chooses to live there. In the beginning, he presents a false image of himself in an unsuccessful bid to “win his woman”; in the end, he lets her see who he really is, and she loves him. What a transformation!

And all of this brings us to one more kind of entrapment and to one more kind of “clean slate.” Like Phil, you and I have been deceived, captured, and trapped by what the Bible calls Sin,

⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clean_Slate_\(1994_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clean_Slate_(1994_film)).

⁷ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day_(film)).

and on our own we are unable to secure release from that trap. And as you might expect, the Bible has quite a lot to say about our situation. Here are just a few of those things:

2 Corinthians 3:14 (NLT)

Before we know Jesus, a veil covers our minds so that we can't understand the Truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Jesus.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 (NLT)

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, then the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, he gives freedom. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more.

1 John 2:1-2 (NLT)

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely. He is the sacrifice for our sins. He takes away not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

1 John 1:8-9 (NLT)

If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.

And so, my friend, how is *your* life going as 2014 begins? Do you feel stuck in a rut? Does the future seem dark and confusing? Have you become mired in the muck of your own attempts at living, with little hope that things can ever be better?

Do you remember Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain? We're told that *after six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them* (Mark 9:2-3). While you have that image in your mind, the Bible tells us that *we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 John 3:2).

My friend, if your life feels dirty and soiled at this "hinge of the year," if you're stuck in a trap from which you see no way out, God's offer to you this morning is the very best kind of "clean slate":¹⁸ *"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool"* (Isaiah 1:18). The Good News as we begin 2014 is that this is the very transformation God wants to work in your life!

Your life really can have purpose and hope this year! You can be clean again. You can start over! And because this is true, *dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is* (Romans 12:1-2).

THE END.

No, this is not the end. This is the BEGINNING! By God's grace and through God's forgiveness, you really do have a "blank slate" for this New Year. *What will your life look like when this year is done?* Will you end 2014 trapped in the boredom and futility of being all wrapped up

in yourself, or will this year be one in which you truly do discover **A Life that Matters** and **Relationships that Last?**

Every day offers new opportunities to live for God. We make an initial decision to live for God (to become born again), and then we re-decide in every decision we make every day, to allow God to shape us into the very character and mind of Christ.

In the famous words of Louise Haskins, “I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’ So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.”⁸

My friend, your life can be keen in 2014. *What are you waiting for?*

⁸ M. Louise Haskins, *God Knows*. Cited in John Bartlett, *The Shorter Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Christopher Morley and Kathleen Sproul (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1937; Pocket Books Edition, Doubleday, 1953), p. 158.