

Sermon for January 7, 2018

BMZ Regional Church

Series: “Step It Up”

Text: Philippians 3:13-14; 1 John 1:9, 2:6; James 4:10, 15; Hosea 12:6; Colossians 2:13;

Philippians 4:6-7; Isaiah 41:10

Title: “Step It Up with God”

Introduction: Happy New Year everyone! Welcome to BMZ Church in 2018! I’m glad you’re kicking off the NEW YEAR with us as we start with a SERIES called: “STEP IT UP!” As we begin a NEW CALENDAR YEAR, I HOPE we are ready to begin a NEW FAITH YEAR as well! That’s the whole IDEA behind “STEP IT UP!”

I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but there are certain TIMES in our LIVES we need someone to GET in our FACE and challenge us to “STEP IT UP” in a SPECIFIC AREA of our LIVES... At the TIME, you are NOT too HAPPY about it. BUT, LATER, LOOKING BACK on that MOMENT, you are THANKFUL they did it. WHY? Because it MADE you BETTER!

I’ve had athletic COACHES get in my FACE ... *“Pegram, if our TEAM is going to get BETTER; YOU have to get BETTER! STEP it UP!”*

College = First PAPER turned in wasn’t that good ... Professor = *“Pegram, you’re better than this ... IF you want to PASS this class, STEP IT UP!”* Seminary ... SAME THING!

As a PASTOR, fortunately I always had my DAD pushing me to GET BETTER ... I had to *“STEP IT UP!”*

As a HUSBAND ... last Valentine’s Day I gave my wife a DOZEN red ROSES ... she looked at me, looked at them, looked back at me and said, *“PEGRAM, you gave me the same thing last year. When it comes to GIFT GIVING, you need to STEP IT UP!”*

Okay ... I’m totally kidding on that one ... I only gave her a HALF DOZEN...

If you have your Bible with you, turn to **PHILIPPIANS 3**. If you don't have your Bible with you, no worries. We will put up all the Scriptures on the screen and it's also printed in your program. As a matter of fact, ... *If you haven't already, I invite you to take out your 3-HOLE PUNCHED MESSAGE NOTES and CONNECTION card. On one side, you will see our Scripture for today and on the other you will find a brief outline walking us through our Scripture. You will see that there are blanks to fill in ... Please take the time to do so. Grab a pen and write down whatever else you think is important to you and your faith journey. After worship, drop off your CONNECTION CARD and take your MESSAGE NOTES home. Please Re-read the Scripture and the notes to keep growing and learning. For those of you watching on-line, you can hit the button for notes and for CONNECTION CARD and stick with us. If you are watching/listening later, or IPODing; you can download the outline off our website so you too can take notes. LET’S PRAY (turn off marked lights during prayer)!*

We have people in our lives who CHALLENGE us to STEP IT UP in different areas of our lives ... When was the last time you had someone CHALLENGE you in your FAITH LIFE? Who is it who CHALLENGES you in the ETERNAL STUFF / the IMPORTANT STUFF in your life?

The Apostle Paul understood the importance and WROTE it to the Church in Philippi to REMIND THEM it was IMPORTANT. Read this with me. Ready, GO! ... Philippians 3:14 = ¹⁴ *I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.* ¹ Paul is saying HE is NOT CONTENT where he is in his FAITH. He wants to WIN the RACE of LIFE according to GOD’S Definition of “WIN”! Paul writes that it’s time to “STEP IT UP!” in his FAITH! He’s like a COACH! He’s encouraging his team/church!

¹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Php 3:14). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

My argument is that we ALL NEED SOMEONE, like PAUL, to CHALLENGE us SPIRITUALLY / in our FAITH JOURNEY! The CHURCH plays a part, but at some point, you have to LOOK in a MIRROR and take OWNERSHIP for your OWN FAITH GROWTH!

Let me ask, WHEN was the LAST TIME you sat down and made some SPIRITUAL GOALS for yourself? My GUESS is that many of you have SET some GOALS for 2018 ... Maybe WEIGHT LOSS or EXERCISE / Health Goals. You might have some CAREER Goals you are working on ... RELATIONSHIP GOALS, etc.

BUT, how many of you have set your FAITH / SPIRITUAL GOALS for 2018? I've never met a Christian who wanted to be MEDIOCRE, but I've met a lot of MEDIOCRE Christians. Why? We get STUCK. We end up in a RUT. We get COMFORTABLE and just let the days COME and GO without PUSHING OURSELVES to GROW in our FAITH.

I hope this WORSHIP SERIES is going to CHALLENGE us to PAY ATTENTION to our FAITH JOURNEY in 2018 ... that includes ME! So, we are ALL at different places in our Faith Journey, so I want you to be THINKING about YOURSELF today ... what do YOU need to DO to GROW as a FOLLOWER of JESUS over the next MONTHS?

I don't know about you, but I want to be BETTER at FOLLOWING JESUS when DECEMBER 2018 rolls around. Guess what? That's GOD'S GOAL for your SPIRITUAL LIFE TOO! Listen... 1 John 2:6 = ⁶ *Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did.*
² That does NOT come NATURAL for us ... we need to WORK at it! DO NOT TURN PAGE...

Now, listen, before we get into 2018, would you DO me a FAVOR? Would you PLEASE let the FAILURES of 2017 GO?! Maybe you had some GOALS in 2017 SPIRITUALLY or otherwise and you DIDN'T accomplish them. PLEASE DON'T let those STOP you from STARTING OVER in 2018. God has already let go of our PAST FAILURES and HE wants us to LOOK FORWARD into the New Year.

Now TURN the PAGE ... As we look at FOUR ACTIONS we can TAKE to STEP IT UP with GOD in 2018, Look FORWARD to what GOD can do in YOUR LIFE THIS YEAR!

To STEP IT UP with GOD in 2018, I will:

Here we GO ... Write this down ... #1 =

1. ADMIT MY DEPENDENCE on God.

IOW – We ADMIT WE CAN'T DO IT OURSELVES! You cannot be WHO GOD wants YOU to BE on your OWN! We'll fall SHORT every time! So, the 1st STEP is to ADMIT we NEED GOD! Say, "*GOD, I NEED YOU!*" right now ... out loud! And, in case the person next to you DIDN'T SAY IT; turn to them and say, "*YOU NEED GOD!*"

The first BARRIER to "STEP IT UP" with GOD in 2018 is our PRIDE. It is so hard for we Americans (self-made, pioneers, "I can handle it", Pursue the American Dream on my own) to ADMIT we NEED ANYONE ELSE. And, this is INGRAINED in us from an EARLY AGE. We are told WE can OVERCOME and be the MASTER of our DESTINY...

Think of the MOTIVATIONAL POSTERS we see hanging in people's HOMES/Offices. I thought I'd SHARE some of my FAVORITES today...

How many of you have seen THIS ONE ... the "Hang in There Cat" (Picture)? It's cute ... BUT, sometimes I feel more like THIS CAT (Picture of the "Give Up" cat) ... ***Hanging in there = Bigger Loser!*** Ever felt like that?!

I love the "Never Give Up" MOUSE (Picture)! He's DETERMINED to OVERCOME his OBSTACLES... Unfortunately, I have my MOMENTS I FEEL like this one ... (Obstacles Picture). Like, it doesn't matter WHAT I do!

You've probably seen this one ... "You Can Do It" (Cat Picture)! No obstacle is too big ... YOU can DO it YOURSELF! Unfortunately, I SOMETIMES feel MORE like this one (Picture) "*You better believe in yourself because the rest of us think you're an idiot!*"

THEN ... And, this is the ONE we often BUY INTO! (Author Picture) "You're the Author of Your Own Life". IOW – YOU can DECIDE what your FUTURE is. It is motivating to think I have CONTROL of MY LIFE.

Finally, THIS is MOTIVATING ... (Picture Pretty Poster and Cute Saying).

Overall, I like MOTIVATIONAL Posters and Quotes. We need to be RESPONSIBLE for WORKING HARD to overcome OBSTACLES ... That's GODLY / BIBLICAL. The PROBLEM comes when we think we can DO WHATEVER by our OWN EFFORTS. That can get DISCOURAGING.

Sometimes, it doesn't MATTER how HARD you WORK, you CAN'T reach your GOAL. You CAN'T, on your OWN, overcome that ADDICTION. You didn't GET the PROMOTION ... someone at work was just BETTER than you... Sometimes there is an ILLNESS and there is NOTHING YOU can DO about it.

We are REMINDED we are NOT in CONTROL. We are NOT GOD. We are reminded that we were CREATED to NEED GOD ... like it or not! Look at what the BIBLE says about BEING in CONTROL of our OWN LIVES ... James 4:13-15 = ¹³ *Look here, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit."* ¹⁴ *How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone.* ¹⁵ *What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that."*⁴

You and I CANNOT CONTROL what happens in 2018! We need to ADMIT our DEPENDENCE on GOD! We are NOT GOD! I understand this is HUMBLING! Hard... BUT, there is a GREAT BLESSING if we will ADMIT our DEPENDENCE on GOD ... You no longer have to CARRY the WEIGHT of the WORLD on your Shoulders. You DON'T have to PRETEND you have it ALL TOGETHER or that YOU are in CONTROL!

Here's how James puts it ... James 4:10 = ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.* ⁵ WOW! I like the idea of just ALLOWING the LORD to LIFT me UP! That is GOD'S PROMISE if we will ADMIT our DEPENDENCE on HIM!

Do you want to ACCOMPLISH MORE / GET BETTER in your FAITH LIFE and EVERY OTHER AREA of your LIFE in 2018?!? The SECRET is to place our DEPENDENCE on HIM! Admit we NEED HIM! Hosea 12:6 = ⁶ *So now, come back to your God. Act with love and justice, and always depend on him.* ⁶ Starting TODAY, I CHALLENGE YOU (and ME) to "ALWAYS DEPEND ON HIM"! ACTION to "STEP it UP" with GOD #2 =

2. CONFESS MY SINS to God.

The 2nd BARRIER to "STEP it UP with GOD" might be the SIN in OUR LIVES. It might be the SIN HANGING ON from 2017... Again, the GOOD NEWS is that GOD FORGIVES our PAST so we can FOCUS on our FUTURE with HIM!

Sin is a DANGEROUS thing in our FAITH life. We ALL DEAL with it. None of us PERFECT! To DEFINE: Sin is ANYTHING in our life that is LESS than GOD'S BEST for our LIVES. It's when GOD SHOWS us what is BEST for our LIFE and we say, "*No Thank You GOD. I'm going to DO it MY WAY!*" It's because WE want to be in CONTROL. So, we TURN our BACKS on GOD and FLIP GOD OFF...

¹ Tyndale House Publishers, (2013). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Jas 4:13). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

² Tyndale House Publishers, (2013). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Jas 4:14-15). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

³ Tyndale House Publishers, (2013). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Jas 4:10). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

⁴ Tyndale House Publishers, (2013). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Ho 12:6). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

The Bible says that is SIN. And, OVER TIME, SINFULNESS builds a WALL between US and GOD. We end up BLOCKED OFF from God's Presence / Power / Blessings! When that happens, we do NOT EXPERIENCE the BEST LIFE GOD has PLANNED for US!

And, SIN becomes BAGGAGE that we CARRY through our LIVES! For you, maybe it's ONGOING SIN. It's something you've been dealing with for SOME TIME and you KNOW GOD wants you to get RID of it. OR, maybe for you it's a ONE-TIME SIN and God has FORGIVEN YOU, but you CAN'T FORGIVE YOURSELF! You have REGRETS and you CONTINUE to CARRY that SIN into 2018 and it's HEAVY! That's NOT what GOD WANTS!

Here's the GOOD NEWS. God PROMISES that if you've given your LIFE to JESUS and you CONFESS your SIN to Him, He will NOT ONLY FORGIVE you of that SIN, but will also give you the POWER to BREAK FREE from that SIN!

Once you RECEIVE JESUS as your SAVIOR, CONFESSING your SINS to God is simply ADMITTING to GOD you've MESSED UP. It's telling God that you are SORRY for what you've done and ASKING for FORGIVENESS. When we do that, God LIFTS the BAGGAGE OFF us and FORGIVES us INSTANTLY / COMPLETELY / REPEATEDLY!

No matter what is in your PAST, God will FORGIVE you if you ASK! Listen ...

1 John 1:9 = ⁹ *But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*⁷ I know it's HARD for some of US to BELIEVE this. Some of you are SCARED to come to CHURCH because you are convinced that GOD is MAD at you. God simply wants you to ASK for FORGIVENESS and ALLOW HIM to DO IT! **He wants to GIVE you a CLEAN SLATE and LIFT the WEIGHT!** God's not mad. He loves you!

Listen... Colossians 2:13 = ¹³ *You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.*⁸ You know what that means? It means YOU'VE NEVER LIVED UNTIL you experience the FORGIVENESS GOD WANTS to GIVE YOU!

Maybe today, as we kick off 2018, you need to pray ... Just say a prayer in your heart, something like this. Say, ***"Jesus, I believe you died on the cross so my sins could be forgiven and wiped away. So that I can have a relationship with God. So I can have a home in Heaven. So I can live my life looking forward instead of looking backwards at my mistakes. Jesus, come into my life and forgive me. Be the leader and the Lord of my life. I want to follow you. Amen."***

If you prayed that prayer, would you please LET US KNOW? On your CONNECTION CARD, mark "I'd Like to Know More About: Becoming a Follower of Jesus" (right side) We want to be PRAYING FOR YOU!

Okay, 3rd Action STEP to "STEP IT UP" with GOD in 2018 ...

3. TAKE MY FEARS before God.

Fear PARALYZES. Fear causes DOUBT and INSECURITY. Fear takes our FOCUS OFF GOD! Fear puts our FOCUS on MORE FEAR ... That's NOT what GOD wants for US!

So, heading into 2018, what is YOUR GREATEST FEAR? What is it you are WORRYING about? Causing you STRESS? Losing SLEEP OVER? Is it FEAR of FAILURE? You are NOT willing to TRY something or go AFTER something YOU KNOW GOD wants for you? Is it FEAR of REJECTION? You wanted to ask her out for a long time... Is it FEAR of being ALONE? Is it a FEAR of LOSING SOMETHING? Your marriage, money, etc. When we HAVE those FEARS, they DIRECT our DECISION-MAKING. FEARS CONTROL our lives!

⁷ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (1 Jn 1:9). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

⁸ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Col 2:13). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

So, what is your GREATEST FEAR? Write it down in your notes! We ALL have FEARS, BUT FEAR and FAITH are INCOMPATIBLE! They can't LIVE TOGETHER in the same PERSON!

It is NATURAL to FEEL FEAR. We ALL do and that's OK. BUT, you can't let FEAR CONTROL you and STILL "STEP IT UP" with GOD ... or LIVE the BEST LIFE that GOD has PLANNED for you. So, if you HAVE FEAR, that is a WARNING SIGN. You are NOT RELYING on GOD in whatever area of your life...

God wants us to LIVE out of FAITH, NOT FEAR. So, HOW do I give my WORRIES and FEARS to GOD? Listen ... Philippians 4:6-7 = ⁶ *Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.* ⁷ *Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*⁹

That's QUITE the OFFER from GOD. We can EXCHANGE our FEARS for HIS PEACE. Sounds like we get the GOOD END of the DEAL! We DO! I'm TRYING to TELL you that GOD LOVES YOU more than we can IMAGINE. It's hard for us to UNDERSTAND FORGIVENESS and PEACE. Do you know WHY? It's a GOD THING. It's SUPERNATURAL and we are just NATURAL. God invites us to TRUST HIM with our SINS and our FEARS!

Well, if GOD is willing to ELIMINATE our FEARS, it's going to be SO MUCH EASIER to "STEP it UP!" Stop being afraid of being ALONE and BREAK OFF that relationship ... that's NOT a good reason to be in a relationship.

STEP IT UP and PURSUE the DREAM God has given you. APPLY for the JOB you haven't applied for yet because you are AFRAID of REJECTION! STEP it UP and ASK her to MARRY YOU and quit being AFRAID of COMMITMENT!

STEP it UP and get BAPTIZED as a FOLLOWER of JESUS and become a MEMBER of the CHURCH and STOP being afraid of what OTHER PEOPLE might THINK! Start caring about what GOD THINKS...

I understand this is EASIER SAID than DONE. Your FEARS are BIGGER than you ... BUT, understand GOD is BIGGER than your FEARS! Listen ... Isaiah 41:10 = ¹⁰ *Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.* ¹⁰ That is a PROMISE from GOD!

Okay, 4 ACTION STEPS ... #1 = Admit my Dependence on God, #2 = Confess my Sins to God, #3 = Take my Fears before God and #4 =

4. SET SPIRITUAL GOALS for God.

This is SO IMPORTANT, but ONLY AFTER you have REMOVED the FIRST 3 BARRIERS ... Pride / Sin / Fear ... through the first 3 ACTION STEPS for Today. Once you've done those, let's set some FAITH GOALS for 2018!

We are a GOAL-SETTING SOCIETY, so this should be EASY. Many of you already have your New Year's Resolutions about RELATIONSHIPS, CAREER, HEALTH and/or FINANCES. BUT, what about our FAITH?! Let's look at our KEY VERSES for this "STEP IT UP" series again ... Philippians 3:13b-14 = ...*I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past (2017 is so last year!) and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.* ¹¹

⁹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Php 4:6-7). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁰ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Isa 41:10). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

¹¹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Php 3:13-14). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Paul set SPIRITUAL GOALS in his life. You need to SET SOME GOALS for yours as well. GOALS are STATEMENTS of FAITH! “God, this is what I believe you want for my life. This is what you say is BEST and I’m going to “PRESS ON” toward that GOAL!

In your NOTES, I put some SPACE for you to WRITE DOWN some GOALS. Those are for YOU to WRITE down FAITH GOALS. If you DON’T, you WON’T. If you don’t, you will be sitting here in DECEMBER 2018 and WISHING you HAD!

And, please let me CLARIFY. The most IMPORTANT part of SETTING GODLY GOALS is NOT achieving those GOALS ... the most IMPORTANT PART is WHO you must BECOME to achieve those GOALS. God will CHANGE YOU to be more who HE wants you to BE as you PURSUE GODLY GOALS!

So, what do you need to write down? Maybe, SAY YES to JESUS for the 1st TIME? Maybe go PUBLIC with your faith and be BAPTIZED (Spring 2018). Maybe stop DATING the CHURCH and COMMIT through MEMBERSHIP (Connection Card). Maybe you need to RESPOND WELL to JESUS and SERVE in the Church (Connection Card). Maybe time to get in a GROWTH GROUP (sign ups in a couple weeks) or start a BIBLE READING PROGRAM (get a partner!).

Maybe you are ready to HONOR GOD with BIBLICAL STEWARDSHIP / Finances. Give God FIRST PLACE in that part of your life and bring the TITHE (Biblical).

Three SUGGESTIONS to help you SUCCEED in pursuing GODLY GOALS in your life: #1 = Make it FUN! Give yourself REWARDS for SUCCESSFUL DAYS! #2 = Don’t BEAT YOURSELF UP on the BAD DAYS ... pick up where you left off and keep going! #3 = SHARE your GOALS with someone who will ENCOURAGE you and PRAY with/for you!

Again, if you DON’T WRITE them DOWN, you’re PROBABLY NOT going to DO THEM! Pray for ME and MY FAITH GOALS and I’ll be PRAYING for YOU!

Let’s PRAY!

Next Steps: *Memorize Philippians 3:14*

I will Pray for God to help me to Step It Up in 2018.

Attend as much of the “Step It Up Series” as possible

I will begin to “Step It Up” in this area of my faith immediately: _____

“Truth without Grace is Fundamentalism (Brutality). Grace without Truth is Sentimentalism (Hypocrisy).”

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