

# Looking Forward, Looking Back

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## Introduction.

- A. Although it's hard for me to imagine, today marks the end of my second year as preacher for this congregation. Sunday, April 16, 2006 was the first time I took the pulpit in that capacity here. It's been a long two years. Normally, when people say that, they mean it's been a bad two years, but from my perspective, my time here has been both long and good. It's like I've been here two decades, not two years.
- B. The two-year milestone is also significant here because, at least as I understand the recent history of the congregation, right about now is when the three previous preachers started looking to rent a U-Haul. If you haven't gotten the impression already, let me say plainly that I don't intend to leave Margaret St. now or anytime soon. Both Lauren and I are quite happy here, and I hope you feel the same way about having us.
- C. Because our work here together is much more a marathon than a sprint, it's important for us to pause from time to time to take stock of where we are and where we're headed. If we don't do this, our efforts in future will be random. Unless we consider our ways, we will neither strengthen the good nor correct the less good, except by accident. Of course, this is not something I only think about in mid-April. Just about every sermon I preach is an attempt to address some particular need I see. However, as I preach, because I don't want to get accusatory, I will very rarely reveal what provoked me to preach. Let's be more specific this morning. Let's do some figuring out about where we need to be as a church by looking forward and looking back.

## I. What's Going Well.

- A. Let's begin this examination by considering the things that I think have gone well since I've been here. At the top of this list, I think I have to put **BIBLE STUDY**. I think that as a congregation, we do a wonderful job of imitating the spirit of the Bereans described in Acts 17:11. This is what has to set us apart from the denominations. We can't depend on the priest or pastor up front to tell us what God wants us to do. We can't depend on creed books or commentaries to tell us what God wants us to do. Our relationship with God has to be based on our relationship with His word, by reading it and learning what God wants us to do.
- B. As a congregation, we do this well, and it shows up in several different areas. One of the most obvious is our adult Bible study classes. I believe that I've written the material for every class since I've been here, and my lesson books are geared to a discussion-based format. Unless the members of the adult class are willing to read the Bible for themselves and talk about what they've read, those workbooks are dead on arrival.
- C. Of course, that broad-based discussion is precisely what we've had for the past two years. Both I and the other teachers in that time span have reported a willingness on the part of many brethren to contribute to the class, and I'm confident that classes like that are the very best way to learn the Bible. This interest in Bible study has also been evident in the series of outside studies that Josh Collier has been conducting. His recent study on fatherhood was well attended and well received, and I'm confident that it improved the spiritual understanding of every man who was present. Currently, Josh plans to start the next three-week study in early May, with a study for both men and women on marriage. Let's be sure to make it a success too.
- D. Likewise, this congregation has seen a lot of success in the area of **LEADERSHIP**. There are few things more important to the success of a congregation than the actions of its leaders. This is evident from the importance that we see attached to leaders in Judges 5:2. Circumstances have made this a challenge for Margaret St. in recent days. Although we have been blessed with a stable eldership that does a marvelous job, many of the men who filled other responsibilities, men like Dave Bunch, Rich Bunch, and Bob Priest, have either moved away or are severely curtailed in what they can do. Thankfully, though, we've since seen five men assume the responsibilities of deacons in the church, and we need to commend those five men for all the work that they do, work that is often behind-the-scenes and unnoticed. They really contribute to the success of this church.
- E. However, even as well as we're doing, we can still do better. It's important for every man here to look to take a more active role in the church leadership. Those who are ordinary saints need to order their lives and grow in Christ so that they can become deacons also. Those who are already deacons need to prepare themselves to become elders. Only as we do this can we give this congregation the leadership it needs for years to come.
- F. Similarly, we've all been working on and improving in our **WORSHIP**. I think that this basically comes from our improved understanding of Colossians 3:16. As we've studied together, this verse doesn't just tell us not to use instruments in worship; it also tells us that we are to use our singing to teach and admonish one another. That means that we have to pay attention not just to how pretty the hymns we sing are or how much we like them, but to how edifying they are and how much we get out of them.
- G. In recent months, this congregation has been doing exactly that, and it shows up in two main areas. First of all, it appears in the way that our songleaders develop their worship services. I think it's fair to say that since I've been here, every man who regularly leads singing here has really stepped up his game. The hymns that

they have been selecting show that they're thinking about what they want to say to the congregation, rather than just scribbling down half a dozen "old favorites" to fill the allotted time. Brothers, you've been doing a great job with that. Keep it up. Likewise, I really appreciate the enthusiastic attitude the congregation has had about learning new hymns out of our supplement. For many of us, this is outside of our comfort zone, but I can tell from listening that we're giving it our best shot anyway. Folks, this enthusiasm for new hymns is so important because the hymns we learn now will improve our worship for years and decades to come.

- H. Finally, in this section, I want to commend the congregation for the **LOVE** that we show for one another. We see the reason why this love is so important in John 13:35. The love that we share is what marks us as children of God, and I see it in so many places in this congregation. I see it when Mandie Copley sits with the Eskras to help them keep their ankle-biters under control, so that Pete and Jill actually have the chance to listen to the sermon sometimes. I see it in the way we associate with one another outside of the assembly.
- I. Perhaps most of all, though, I see it in the way that when Shirley was in the hospital, the ladies of the congregation banded together to watch Mabel and keep her out of trouble. Folks, words cannot express how important it was that we did that. It was a very behind-the-scenes thing. Even I don't know who was involved, but Mabel and Shirley know who was involved. Ever since, every time I go and see them, they can't stop talking about the graciousness of those sisters who helped them when they needed it. Something else that I've noticed since then is that Shirley is much less resistant to the idea of worshipping with us. If indeed she ever obeys the gospel, it will be because of that expression of our love drawing her to Christ. Let's always be on the lookout for opportunities like these. We literally cannot calculate the good we do when we love.

## II. Things to Work On

- A. However, even though we are a good church, we are not a perfect church. As we look into God's word, we see a number of things we still need to work on. One of the areas in which we can improve is **ATTENDANCE**. On the one hand, we have Hebrews 10:25 down. There aren't very many of us who struggle with forsaking the assembly, and those who do have been struggling with it for years. On the other hand, though, there are a lot of us who struggle with being here every time we can be here. Folks, that's a problem too, and the problem with it is that we don't have the attitude Paul requires in 1 Corinthians 9:24. When we only come to services once a week or once every couple of weeks, we're not racing toward the prize. We're not running to win. We're running to avoid losing. We're running to keep from coming in last. That's not enough to please God. Jesus was totally committed to us. He gave everything He had for us. That means that each one of us needs to make sure we are giving everything we have for Jesus. Christianity can't just be a hobby. It has to be our life, and if that's our attitude toward serving God, the least we can do is assemble whenever possible.
- B. Another place where we need to run with this winning attitude is in **DOING, NOT JUST HEARING** the word. James emphasizes the importance of this in James 1:21-22. Most especially, this is something we need to work on in the context of working for the church. We're not like the denominational world. We don't have professional pastors and ministers for every role. Instead, if ordinary brothers and sisters in this church don't do something, it very likely doesn't get done. Even though this is true, too many of us are willing to let other brothers and sisters do the work. We sit in the adult Bible classes and send our children downstairs to learn from those classes, yet we don't give back by teaching a Bible class ourselves. We gratefully accept help from others when we're sick or need a hand otherwise, but we don't go looking for other people to help ourselves. Folks, if that's all we do, if we only take and never give, we're little better than spiritual parasites. Now, sometimes that's unavoidable. Sister Lee is in a position these days where she can't do anything more active than pray for us, and God doesn't expect the impossible from her. However, if we are able to do more, we need to remember Luke 12, which warns us that from those to whom much is given, much will be expected.
- C. Another area where we need to work on doing, not just hearing, is in working to bring the lost to Christ. Look at what Jesus tells us we need to do in Matthew 5:16. We need to let our light shine and use it to persuade the sinners around us to name the name of Jesus. Sometimes, folks, I think we don't realize what we have here. I don't think we realize how different our religious experience is from what the other people in our community know. True, we're a simple bunch. We don't have a fancy building, or impressive robes, or elaborate ceremonies, but we have the truth, and we love the truth, and that's worth more than all the buildings and ceremonies in the world. What we offer to everyone is the chance to come to know God through His word. Not everyone is going to be interested in that. In fact, most won't be because they aren't willing to invest the work to gain the reward. However, some will, and we need to look for those people and find them.
- D. As always, the most powerful persuasive tool in the Christian arsenal is the Christian life. As we live in a godly and upright way, the people around us will notice that, and those who have good and honest hearts will be drawn to it. That gives us the opportunity to study with them, or at the least, invite them to services.
- E. As we do that, folks, as we get them through the church-house doors, that does two things: First, it exposes them to the gospel, and second, it gives other Christians the chance to build a relationship with them too, and that relationship has to exist before anybody obeys the gospel. Let's invite others, repeatedly if possible.

**Conclusion.** If you're here already, and you know that you need to obey the gospel, don't let anything hold you back.