

Setting Our Goals

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As a preacher, I tend not to be very good at remembering to write seasonally appropriate sermons. Personality-wise, I'm not attuned to the holiday round. I'm always surprised by the appearance of Mother's Day or Thanksgiving, and I certainly won't have prepared a sermon for the occasion. Those things don't penetrate the fog between my ears.

The one big exception to that is New Year's Day. I'm pretty reliable on my New Year's sermons. Lauren would probably argue that I only remember New Year's because they play lots of college football on New Year's, but I think my affinity for the holiday goes deeper than that. The beginning of the new year is a season of change, a time to get ourselves out of our respective ruts and work on becoming better people than we were last year. There are few holidays that are so seamlessly in line with the gospel. After all, Christ came to bring renewal, to give us all the opportunity to escape our old selves, to transform our lives into something that glorifies God. Every time we open the Bible, we encounter again this call to renewal, and as we do renew ourselves in the image of Christ, we prove that we are His disciples.

This new year, then, offers us not just another opportunity to lose weight, but an opportunity to change our lives in the most fundamental way possible. This could be the year when we really get things together spiritually, when we go through each day with such holiness and commitment that we make God proud. I believe that every Christian here wants to honor Him in that way, but it's easy to fall short of that goal. If we are determined to make a change, but we don't think about how to make it, our efforts may well end up being dissipated and wasted. This morning, then, let's turn to God's word for instruction in how to make our resolution. Let's hear what He has to say about setting our goals.

Understanding

If we want to have goals that are in accordance with God's, the first thing that we must do is to **BE BEREAN**. This attitude is famously defined in Acts 17:10-11. When I'm up here in the pulpit, I tell the brethren that they ought to do all sorts of things. That's what a preacher does, after all. The question is, though, what you should do about those things. Should you listen to me, or should you go on living as you have always done?

The Bereans give us the only way to answer that question. They heard Paul out, but then they studied the Scriptures to learn whether what he said was so. Likewise, everything I say should be held to the same standard. If I'm up here gassing off about my own personal beliefs, feel free to ignore me. I'm just a man, and just as likely to be wrong as any other man. On the other hand, though, if I am faithfully repeating what God has already said, no one can dare ignore that. For one thing, God is never wrong, and for another, He will judge us according to whether we have obeyed.

The most important application for this is in the realm of salvation. I have spelled out what I call God's plan of salvation on literally hundreds of occasions. I maintain that unless a man believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized, he cannot be saved from his sins. There are people here this morning who haven't followed that pattern. If you're one of them, put my claim to the test. Don't rely on what you have heard elsewhere. Open the word of God with a Berean attitude and study it to learn whether the Bible supports what I teach. If I teach the truth, then obey the gospel. If I don't teach the truth, you would be better served listening to a preacher who does, though I would greatly appreciate learning where I'm wrong. We don't dare remain ignorant or unsure about what we must do to be saved. If we don't know the truth, then we must get to know it, and the only way to accomplish that is through study of the Scripture.

Of course, simply hearing or reading the word is not enough. We must also **BE HONEST**. We see an example of people who were not honest in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. The truth of the gospel was hidden from these people because they allowed the devil to blind them to it. Satan has a number of different blinding strategies that he uses. He can blind us with our family traditions, so that we can refuse to follow the gospel because that wasn't what Grandpa did. He can blind us with our love of sin and pleasure. He can blind us with our pride in our own spiritual accomplishments. He can bind us with our laziness. All of those things, and many more, can prevent the truth of the gospel from reaching our hearts. They can keep us from becoming a Christian in the first place, or they can keep us from growing into the Christian that God wants us to be. As different as they are, though, they have one thing in common. They don't work unless we let them. Satan can't deceive us unless we decide that we want him to, and that decision is fatal.

Instead, our reaction should be like the reaction of the Jews on the day of Pentecost, as described in Acts 2:37. This is what God's word is meant to do. It is meant to pierce our hearts, to convict us concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. It is the mirror that points out the difference between who we are and who we should be. There is no more powerful force on earth than the gospel, but if we want it to have its full effect, we must be open to it. We can't nod approvingly at the parts that commend us for what we're already doing, while editing out the sections that step on our toes. We can't allow familiarity with the word to breed contempt, to lead us to ignore a divine commandment the same way we ignored it the last twenty times we heard it. Instead, we must leave our hearts open for God's word, our lives vulnerable to its truth. Discipleship is demanding. In fact, it is the most demanding path that a human being can walk. However, we must listen to those demands if we want to be transformed into the image of our Lord.

As a necessary part of honesty we must **KNOW OUR DEFICIENCIES**. This is Paul's point in Romans 12:3. Certainly, none of us like being around people who have an inflated opinion of themselves, but we often don't realize how spiritually deadly this can be. In fact, this is one of Satan's favorite tools. He loves to get us to believe that we are better than we actually are. This mistaken belief breeds complacency and ultimately spiritual death, and it can pop up in all kinds of different situations. For example, the man who refuses to obey the gospel because he believes that his life already pleases God is someone who thinks more highly of himself than he should. So too is the Christian who is satisfied with his current level of spirituality and isn't interested in spiritual growth. In reality, in the lives of every person here, there is at least one massive spiritual flaw. Do we know what ours is? If we can't come up with it, I would submit to you that the reason isn't that we're already perfect. Instead, we are refusing to see the weaknesses that are truly there. We are thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. Just like the alcoholic who joins Al-Anon must openly acknowledge that he is an alcoholic, we must acknowledge our own flaws, even if only to ourselves and God. If we sweep them under the rug, if we deny that they even exist, we are destroying any hope we have of being pleasing to Him.

Conversely, we must also **KNOW OUR GIFTS**. In fact, this is what Paul continues on to say in Romans 12:4-5. Just like all of our various body parts are different, but each one of them has its own particular function, every Christian in the local church is different, but each one has his or her particular function. This shows God's great wisdom in the way that He created mankind. I shudder to think of what it would be like to be a part of a church in which everyone was just like me! Instead, our differences make us complementary to each other. They enable us to work together to accomplish more than any of us would be capable of alone. That is God's design for the church, but it only works when Christians understand their roles and fulfill them. God expects a particular kind of service from each one of us, and it is our responsibility to figure out what that service is and to serve accordingly. Then, we can work to glorify Him.

Doing.

When we consider this shift from thought to action, we must remember James' admonition to **NOT BE A HEARER**. We find it in James 1:22-24. James' point here is that Bible study is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We aren't going to get to heaven without knowing the Scripture, but by itself, it isn't enough to get us there either. If we listen to the word, recognize what it is calling us to do, but don't put it into practice, we're like the guy who stumbles into the bathroom in the morning, sees that he has ridiculous bed-head, a week's worth of stubble, and a zit the size of Kansas on the end of his nose, but he turns around, walks back out, puts on some clothes, and goes off to a job interview. Sure, knowledge is nice, but if that knowledge doesn't stir us to action, it doesn't do us any good. Instead, we must resolve never to leave the Bible behind. We must take what it tells us through the church-house doors when we leave, or through our own front door when we end a time of private study. Study without action is like faith without works—dead.

Obviously, we must choose to **BE A DOER** instead. James continues on logically to make this point in James 1:25. It's not enough for us to see our spiritual bed-head, stubble, and acne. It's not enough for us to recognize that those are bad things. We need to actually act to get rid of them. Nor, in most cases, can we address our spiritual problems in the time it takes us to comb our hair. Most of the time, the problems that we do have are problems that the devil has spent years or decades in exploiting, and it's going to take that same length of concerted effort to undo all of his hard work. If we want to improve ourselves, we can't forget. Spiritual growth is a marathon, not a sprint, and we must develop the marathoner's mindset of endurance. However, if we bring that level of commitment to the table, we have James' assurance that God will bless us. With His help, all of us can reach the spiritual goals that we seek.

Finally, we must learn what it means to **BUILD THE WALL**. We find this idea in the third chapter of the book of Nehemiah, and a good example of the way that chapter is written appears in Nehemiah 3:28. This is part of the description of the way that the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt after the exiles returned from the Babylonian captivity. Notice that the priests weren't roving around the city, laying a stone here and a brick there. Instead, they were each building the wall in front of their own houses. They did their part and let everyone else alone to do theirs.

In the church, by contrast, a lot of Christians develop the habit of worrying about how others are building their section of the wall. I have to confess, friends, that this is one of my own spiritual weaknesses. I start thinking about how So-and-So should be doing this and Thus-and-Such should be doing that, that I allow my focus on their perceived failure to distract me from what I ought to be doing. Here's a news flash for all of us—there has never been a church in which every Christian was perfect, and there never will be, and that includes this church. When we pull our focus away from our God-given work to start criticizing others, all we do is make sure that we aren't doing our job either. We can spend so much time watching and running down one another that no one in the church is doing anything, and a church like that is guaranteed to make the devil giggle. Instead, we need to do the work that is in front of us.