

Looking Forward, Looking Back 2009

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4-12-09

Introduction.

- A. As you know, one of Lauren's projects this year has been launching a side business for selling custom beaded jewelry. Back in the planning stage, she discussed her idea with others who had side businesses. Among those was Joe and Nancy's daughter Tami. She told Lauren that she should stay in business for at least three years, because it was going to take that long for her to tell whether she would be successful.
- B. It so happens that today marks three years that I've been preaching here at Joliet, and I think that Tami's rule is useful for preachers too. In three years with a congregation, a preacher will know whether it'll work.
- C. Now that I've come to that point, I think I can say this is a congregation that I can work with. Believe me, friends, that's not something I take lightly. I'm certain that there are "sound" congregations that would run me out the door for preaching what I've preached to you for the past three years, because I'm not a do-nothing preacher who's content with soothing a do-nothing congregation. Instead, my impression of you as a church is that you want to hear everything the word of God says, and you want to do it, even when it's challenging or painful. That attitude is precious to me, and I know it is also precious to God.
- D. It's in that light that I want to talk this morning about the things we've accomplished in the past year, and the things we need to accomplish in the next. This has been a great year for this congregation, brethren, but we can't rest on our laurels. There is so much more that we can do, and so much more that God expects us to do. Let's consider some of these things this morning in our second attempt at looking forward, looking back.

I. The Past Year.

- A. The logical place to begin this process is by considering everything that has happened in **THE PAST YEAR**. I think, brethren, that in the past twelve months, we've gone in more new directions and tried more new things than most congregations attempt in twelve years. What's more, we've done this while still staying true to our commitment to the authority of God's word. We need both of those things to succeed in His work.
- B. Chronologically speaking, our first new work has been our **SATURDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDIES**. Those originally began as a men-only study, but under the guidance of our elders, with the able direction of Josh and the hospitality of Joe and Nancy, they've grown into a regular program that involves dozens of Christians. Likewise, our **JULY SINGING** proved to be a tremendous success. For those of you who attended it, you well know that we had a packed house, and those two hours of worship uplifted and edified everyone who was present. It was good not just for us, but for brethren throughout the entire area. I know for a fact that the church in Portage purchased supplements and began a regular singing of its own because of the influence that our singing had on members from Portage. I anticipate that this year's singing will be even more successful.
- C. Similarly, our **SUNDAY EVENING BIBLE STUDIES** have been good for us. Once again, they provide a change from the old routine, an opportunity to look at spiritual topics with a different time frame and from a different perspective. I think they're especially valuable because they give us an opportunity to have women's classes that all our ladies can attend, even those who are currently teaching a regular Bible class.
- D. Concurrently with those evening studies, we've also introduced **BIBLE DRILL**. During our meeting with Alan Yeater, we saw how much our little ones enjoyed him working with them, so we decided we needed a program of our own like that. Josh has done a phenomenal job in teaching our youngsters, I know they've gotten a lot out of it, and we've reached the point where parents and kids alike look forward to our Bible drill sessions.
- E. On a much larger scale, we've also seen great results from our **SERVICE GROUPS**. As you know, our groups dedicated to encouragement, welcome, compassion, young people, prayer, and work were strictly volunteer-only, yet of the members here, two thirds loved the Lord enough to sign up for at least one of those groups. Already, those groups have had a powerful positive effect. John Hamon, Jeff, Joe, Josh, James and John Meyer, and Matt have all done everything we could expect from them, and the brethren have responded enthusiastically. Because of those groups, we're already a better church than we were six months ago.
- F. Probably just as wide-reaching and just as important has been our **CURRICULUM REVAMP** for our lower-level classes. This too was something that our elders wisely decided was important, and just from what I've seen from the sidelines, the ladies of the congregation have really answered the bell. So many of you have invested a great deal of time and energy in it, and you're to be commended for your godliness. I now feel justified in telling our visitors that they won't find a better Bible program for their kids anywhere.
- G. Finally, and most important of all, we have the four **BAPTISMS** that took place since last April. Jamil, Danielle, Dominique, and Jesse are all wonderful, wonderful young folks. We love you guys, and we're proud to have you in our church family. I'm just as thankful, though, for all the friends and family who worked and prayed for their salvation. We all have reason to celebrate these souls who came to Christ.

II. Keys for Next Year.

- A. I think it's fair to say, then, that we've had an excellent year in the Lord's work over the past twelve months. There are so many good things that have happened that I've probably forgotten some of them. However, if we want continued success, we must invest continued effort. Here are some **KEYS FOR NEXT YEAR:**
- B. First, if we want to have success in the Lord's work, we need continued good **LEADERSHIP**. Consider the words of Solomon in Proverbs 11:14. This is often one of the biggest problems that local churches have. Their leaders would be happy if the status quo continued forever, despite all the lost people outside the church-building doors and all the weak Christians inside them. Thankfully, that's not true here. Our elders do a marvelous job leading this church, and the deacons have done equally well in assisting them. However, men, this is not the time to get satisfied with the way things are now and turn your attention to other matters. We've done a lot here, but there is so much more to do. The Lord requires your continued vision, example, and leadership in this church. Step up to the plate. Be a true leader for God's people.
- C. For leaders and for ordinary saints alike, we also need **PERSEVERANCE** in what we have begun. All these great things we've started are worthless if we don't follow through on them. I know you've heard this from me before, but I want to take a slightly different look at the topic this morning. Consider with me Ecclesiastes 5:4-5. Here, we see Solomon getting on the people who vow an offering to God but don't follow through on the vow. The meaning is clear, friends: if we make a commitment to God, He expects us to carry it out.
- D. In this light, let's consider those sign-up sheets that are still on the glass in the back. Not a single one of us was forced to put our names on those sheets. We willingly chose to do so. We made a commitment to a particular area of God's work, and brethren, God expects us to do what we've committed to. He can read sign-up sheets just as well as we can. Whom did we think we were serving when we signed up? The church? The elders? Not hardly. Each one of those names on those lists is a promise to the Almighty, and we need to honor the promises we made. If we said we'd be out visiting the sick and shut-ins, we need to be out visiting. If we said we'd welcome visitors to our assembly, we need to be here in the back after services, talking to them. If we don't do that, if we vow to God but do not pay, He takes no pleasure in our foolishness. Let's persevere in doing what we said we would do so that we can be faithful to our word.
- E. On the other hand, with respect to things that happen inside these four walls, we need to work on **GOOD ATTENDANCE**. When it comes to attendance here these days, there's both good news and bad news. The good news is that with a couple of conspicuous exceptions, just about all of us are here every Sunday morning we should be here. The bad news is that for our other services in the week, our attendance isn't nearly as good. It's like we think we've gotten our time in for the week, and that's all we need to do.
- F. Of course, that's not the way God looks at the assembly. Look with me at Hebrews 10:24-25. The point of this verse is not to set out a minimum requirement we have to meet to avoid being withdrawn from. It's not to draw a little box that we can check by showing up for Sunday morning worship. It's to tell us what the assembly's for and why we need it. We don't come here just because. We come here to stir up and be stirred up, to exhort and be exhorted. We come here to learn how to be disciples of Jesus, and the more we learn, the better disciples we will be. We shouldn't be asking ourselves how much we can get away with NOT assembling. We should be asking how much we can assemble, because if we truly love Jesus, that's what our attitude will be, and if we don't love Jesus, the check mark next to Sunday morning won't help anyway.
- G. Another huge key to our success for the next year is **EVANGELISM**. The Bible quite clearly teaches that saving lost people isn't a preacher thing; it's a Christian thing. Look with me, for instance, at Acts 8:4. Even when they were fleeing persecution, ordinary Christians in the first century went around teaching others the gospel. Some of us are doing a bang-up job at that. For instance, the Cathey family has brought multiple visitors to our assembly, and their efforts led to Jamil obeying the gospel. For most of us, not so much. To the best of my recollection, in the three years that I've been here, fewer than half of the families who regularly worship here have ever brought a non-Christian visitor to the assembly. Folks, that ain't so good. There are Christians who don't even live in Illinois who have brought lost folks through our doors.
- H. Now, I don't know all the whys and wherefores of that, obviously. Maybe we just don't care about evangelism. If so, we need to work on our desire. Maybe we've been inviting people right and left, and it's just that nobody's listened. If so, we need to work on our technique. Regardless, we can do better, and we need to do better. In fact, the elders and I have already begun to talk about the ways that we can emphasize evangelism through the last part of 2009 and on into 2010, just like we're emphasizing our service groups now. However, nothing we do will succeed unless we believe in the power of the gospel and work on saving sinners.
- I. Finally, though, our efforts will surely fail unless we crown them with **PRAYER**. Just one of the many verses that emphasize prayer is Colossians 4:2. No less so than the Christians of the first century, we need to continue earnestly in prayer. In all that we do in God's name, we need to seek His help and His blessing. This is the true secret to our success: not our clever plans, not our awe-inspiring abilities, but the God who is able to take ordinary folks like you and me and use us to accomplish His will. If we are arrogant and forget Him, He will forget us. However, if we place our hope and trust in Him, He will surely give us success.

Conclusion. If you aren't living a life of trust in God, come to Him this morning and begin it.