

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28–30

Dr. George O. Wood

Luke 14:28–30 (NIV)

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’”

I’ve called my message this morning “Getting Ready for the New Year.” Maybe it seems like I’ve jumped the gun just a little bit, but I’m doing it because the next two Sundays we’re going to focus on Christmas themes. Then on December 29th, the last Sunday of the year, many of you will be gone and I also will be gone to Israel, Egypt, and Greece and won’t have the chance to give a New Year’s message. I thought this would be an excellent time, because what I have to say to you will take some weeks to implement. In fact, at the end of this message, I’m going to ask you to locate in your mind a particular time and place where you will take some moments aside between now and year’s end with the Lord and go on a retreat. Maybe it’ll last an hour; maybe it’ll last half a day, maybe it’ll last the whole day. It would be a time in which you can evaluate where you are in life. Specifically ask the Lord what He wants to accomplish through you in the New Year.

The last few weeks on the church staff we have been extremely busy preparing the calendar for the church. I’ve been preparing my own personal calendar. I always find it enjoyable to plan ahead and still always leave room enough to be flexible. I like the beatitude, “Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken.” But there are only twenty-three days between now and the

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

end of the year. I think these can be days in which we can begin to prayerfully consider some New Years' directions and even some New Year's resolutions. I'm part, perhaps, of that vanishing breed who still likes to make resolves going into the New Year.

I can think of some very worthy resolutions and, if they're not already operational in your life, it would be great to make them operational beginning right away and no later than January 1st.

Resolutions like: "I will read my Bible daily." "I will pray daily." "I will verbally witness to four or more persons in the New Year about Jesus." We talk a lot about witnessing, but sometimes we don't specify a specific objective. I would suggest that we specify an objective. "I will give [if I'm not already doing so] 10 percent or more of my income to the Lord's work. I will attend worship services faithfully." "I will pray for the services." "I will be early unless the freeway's crowded." "I will reach out and welcome." In fact, it would be wonderful if we could each make the resolve that we would especially reach out to at least one person and get to know them in more than a cursory way, more than a handshake way, and say, "We're so glad that we're together in the family of God." "I will really participate in worship." "I will keep a journal of the sermons so that during the week I can be fed by what has been shared that Sunday." "I will invite a guest home once a month or once a quarter to break bread with me." "I will be a part of at least one ministry in the church or I will give myself in some way to minister regularly to the needy." That's just a beginning list to get you started, in case you were looking for ideas. Obviously, that list is more church-related and it doesn't include things that are personal or things that are related to family or professional goals.

It is important that we set realistic and measurable goals. For example, it is a good goal and maybe worthy to say, "I want to be more loving," but you can't measure that. How will I know if I've been more loving? But I can measure it if I say, "I will allow myself only three grumpy days

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

in the New Year.” Then I can mark those on the calendar and I will know if I’ve become more loving if I limited my grumpy days.

Maybe there are some who live the Christian life who look at the whole idea of setting goals as somewhat alien to them and suggest that if you really trust the Lord, you don’t need to make plans. You just live from day to day. I would suggest to you today that there are solid biblical reasons for setting goals. I want to share with you seven reasons that I believe are backed up by scriptural teaching on why goal-setting and direction-setting is important and sustained by what the Bible teaches.

I. The first reason why we should set goals is that Jesus set goals.

We’re obviously taught to follow Him and become like Him. We know, as we’ve been going through the Gospel of Luke over these last months, that Jesus set goals. We come to the end of Luke 9 and find that statement that Luke makes, “He set His face to go to Jerusalem.” From that time on, through the next ten chapters, Luke is describing how Jesus is fulfilling that goal that began in Luke 9:50. He set His face. Throughout that span of time, Jesus takes His disciples aside privately three times and shares with them His specific goals. In Jerusalem, He will be crucified after having been betrayed and handed over to be crucified, and on the third day, He will rise again from the dead. When Jesus leaves the earth, the last thing that He says to His disciples, as He lays down a goal for them is: “You’re going to be witnesses of Mine in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world” (Acts 1:8). He gave them a very specific and measurable goal, and they could know whether or not they accomplished it. So Jesus set goals.

Some people falsely assume that the Holy Spirit is unstructured and they live life, so to speak, flying by the seat of their pants. But if you look at the creation and God’s plan in the creation and

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

you look at redemption and God's plan in redemption, you will find a God who plans and who has intention for what He does.

II. A second reason why we ought to set goals is that without goals we live an unexamined life.

Looking at goals helps us to establish priorities and measure whether or not we are becoming what God intends us to become and what we intend to become.

My father grew up in Western Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh. I remember this was one of Dad's very favorite sermon illustrations. He was a pastor. It was in the days when Model A's and Model T's were coming out. Many of the roads in Pennsylvania had not yet been paved, so one drove across dirt or a pathway—a cart pathway. But when it rained or when there was snow that was melting, the ground became mushy and, of course, ruts were made in the road. There were many ruts. You could easily break down in the ruts because the wheels would go through a deep rut and would injure the wheels or damage the undercarriage of the car.

There was this one road that dad always would talk about that had a sign on it. As you entered, you could see, as you were beginning to drive in, that it began with a number of ruts. The sign said this, "Choose your rut well; you will be in it for the next 20 miles." Dad used that as a great statement to say that we're all creatures of habit and we need to choose what set of habits we're going to live with.

Goals help us to examine life. If we don't examine life, we become like the saying that the Scottish playwright came up with, "The life of every man is a diary in which he intends to write one story and instead writes another. His saddest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it." We want to make the finish of our volume consistent with what we started out to do.

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

When we take that time alone to prepare for the New Year, may I suggest that we ask ourselves, “What is Jesus satisfied with in my life? And what is Jesus dissatisfied with? What does He intend to stir up within me?” We might ask ourselves, as well, as we examine our schedule, if we’re letting blocks of hours—whose sequences of time go by mindlessly as though we were drifting—is it possible we are letting life go by unchallenged, parking ourselves before the television or shopping or daydreaming or leisure to excess, and we’re not being driven by our dreams? Instead we’re simply floating with whatever occasion presents itself to us. Live an examined life; goals and purposes help us to do that.

III. Then we ought to have goals because faith requires an object or target.

Goals are that target that faith needs in order to thrive. Just like a person who is in love needs an object or target. You’re not in love with love. You’re in love with someone specific. So we don’t have faith in faith. We have faith for something. And goals give us that target that faith shoots toward. How can I cast mountains into the sea, to use the Lord’s language, if I don’t know which mountain I intend for Him to cast? How can I ask whatever I will if I don’t know what I will? Abraham is identified for us in the Scripture as a man of faith. How God worked with that faith is He gave him a goal, a dream, which only God—by the way—could bring to pass. This is the case of all of our dreams. We think that we can accomplish them, but only God can give us the strength.

One night, God stirred Abraham to get out of his tent and look at the beautiful Palestinian night sky and to see the star-lit heavens, and said to him, “Abram, as many as those stars are which you cannot number, so many will be your descendants.” And Abraham yet did not have a child. Scripture says Abraham believed God. The delightful thing about that—to me—is that when Abraham believed God, he wasn’t believing in God according to some doctrinal creed. He didn’t

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

believe according to the Westminster Confession or the sixteen tenets of the Assemblies of God faith. But what he believed about God was what God had declared to him, “Abraham, I’m going to do this for you. Will you believe it? If you will believe it, you will believe Me.”

Faith gives us that target to reach for. We have been going through the Book of Nehemiah on Wednesday nights. One of the delightful things about Nehemiah and faith is that Nehemiah, right from the moment he begins his work, sees those walls as completed. He has the specific goal. You could have asked him, “Nehemiah, what are you trying to do in life?” He could identify it. “I am out to help others rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.”

Goals allow us to be specific.

IV. Fourth, goals give us an opportunity to be a co-author of God’s will.

What do I mean by a co-author of God’s will? I’m using language that comes out of Philippians 2, where Paul says, “Work out your own salvation, for God is at work in you.” There are these two dimensions—God is working and I am working. Prayer is that creative opportunity in which I come to God and lay before Him my needs and my desires and submit them to His will and to His approval and become, through prayer, a co-author of His will.

I don’t understand many things about prayer, but I know we need to pray. In fact, the first three Sundays of the New Year on Sunday mornings I want to talk about how to be a praying person in the New Year. I feel it’s very vital that we lay a foundation for the New Year in prayer as individuals, as families and as a church.

This I know. There are some things that God chooses not to bring about unless we bring them up in prayer. God has limited His sovereignty to our own intentionality in some areas. Paul is an example of this in Romans 15:23–29. He’s laying plans. He’s being a co-author with God of His will for his life. He says, “I intend to go first down to Jerusalem and bring an offering to the

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

saints. Then I'm going past there to Spain and on the way I'm going to visit you." But all this he held conditionally in prayer. Through his prayer, he was providing direction for what was going to happen. It so happened in his case, God altered his plan.

But the saying is true, and I've heard it so many times, "You can guide a bicycle much easier when it's moving than when it's standing still." I've found that God guides us more easily in our life if we're moving and trekking rather than being passive and simply waiting around. God will guide you and will change your goals, if necessary. But goals help us become a co-author with God of His will.

V. Goals bring a sense of mission to life.

I need to have a sense of purpose in life. Goals bring that sense of, "This is why the Lord sponsored George Wood's coming into the world." Here's why the Lord sponsored you. He put me, and He put you, with a set of people. He wants to accomplish some things through our lives with that set of people. What is it that He wants to do? What kind of character does He want to form in me and in you? What is it He wants us to do in regard to our responsibilities before Him and before the world in which we live? Is there purpose in my life?

I always take delight in the little story that is told of an architect of an earlier century, Sir Christopher Wren, who built great cathedrals in England. The story is told that one day someone came up to two masons who were working on a particular section of wall in a cathedral that Wren had designed and was under construction under his leadership. The person asked one of the masons at work, "What are you doing?" His answer in effect was, "Can't you see? I'm laying brick. I'm a mason." He went to the second mason and said to him, "What are you doing?" And the man paused, and looked up at the arches that were developing and the open sky and the magnificence of the building that was under construction. He said, "What am I doing? I am

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

building Sir Christopher Wren's great cathedral." Both men were laying blocks, but one of them was living with a purpose. That purpose gave him a sense of mission in life.

Whenever I get low on energy, in terms of my own life mission, it's helpful for me to go back to Scripture and also to go to biographies of Christian people. I've found that reading Christian biographies is a very great stimulus to my own faith. One of the things that I've found that is a common thread that unites Christian biographies is that any person who's ever been used by the Lord has had a real sense of mission and destiny. He's had a sense of purpose about life. I take that to transfer to me, that I need that same thing in my own existence.

One of my very favorite people in the story of Christians is the story of Susanna Wesley, which is told as part of the biographies on John Wesley. I want to share, just for a moment, about her life. I think she can be explained only from the sense that she had a sense of mission. Maybe this little story would encourage you to a sense of mission as well. Susanna Wesley was born into a preacher's home and she was the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth child born to her parents. The biographers were not sure. Evidently, at that number you lose count. Those children were all from one mother. Susanna Wesley, at that point, could have, as she grew up in her younger days, copped out and said, "I'm probably here because I'm a mistake." Or "I don't get any attention." Or "I wear hand-me-down clothes." Or "My environment has made me what I am." But she had a special sparkle about her life and, in her teens, she set herself to learning Greek, Latin, French, and theology. In a day when teenage girls would sit at a family dinner table while their pastor father was entertaining noted theological guests and the like, the teenage girl was expected to sit there and be quiet. But Susanna Wesley was not quiet, and her dad often had to get her to be quiet because she was engaging with guests in theological disputes. She married Samuel Wesley, who spent most of his life as a would-be writer, at the age of nineteen. He was a pastor, but he

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

wanted to write and be published. He did not have much success at that and spent some time at various intervals in debtors' prison. In the first twenty-one years of marriage to Samuel Wesley, she gave birth to nineteen children herself. Nine of those children, by the way, died before they were twelve. I'm not making a bid for large families. Hitler's parents would have been better off if they had stopped with number three. That's not the intention of my story. But with all those kids coming, one after another, she could have said, "I can't keep track of all these kids. They're driving me nuts." They would have driven me nuts. "My husband's gone all the time. I can't get the decent things of life. I got the raw end." But she had a sense of mission and destiny and, like many people, she had a phrase that others could use to describe her life. Her phrase in life was this: "Order is heaven's first law." So she set about imposing, with a gentle rigidity, that line upon her life—that sense of mission. Order is heaven's first law.

So, in the Wesley home, when a baby was born, his first three months his clothes were changed on a set schedule, and he was also left to sleep on a set schedule. It didn't get attention if it didn't keep with the schedule. That way, it quickly learned the schedule. I don't know where that would be in child psychology, but it worked for her. All her children were known by the fact that, after the age of one year, they all had learned to cry softly. None of her children cried loudly after one year. I guess there's a reason for that. You can't have that many kids crying loudly and have any kind of sanity in a home. She had three set meals a day. When a child first learned to talk, the first thing that he was taught was the Lord's Prayer. When a child was five, if he or she had not yet learned the alphabet on their fifth birthday, they were expected to learn the alphabet. She herself conducted school six hours a day for her kids. One of her daughters could read the Greek New Testament at the age of eight. Each day, an older child would take a younger child and read him the Psalms and a chapter in the Bible and have devotions with the younger child. After

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

supper, evening prayers began at six. At seven, the youngest child was in bed. By eight o'clock all were in bed. Her fifteenth child, John Benjamin, was named after two children who had died. Charles Wesley, whose hymn "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" was one of hundreds of hymns that he wrote, was John's older brother. She spent, in addition to everything else, one hour alone each week with each child. John Wesley looked back upon his life and said that was the hour that shaped his life.

There have been whole weeks that have gone by that I haven't spent an hour alone with my children. Facing death, she had her children gather around her and she said to them, "As soon as I am released, sing a song of praise to God." And she had selected a particular hymn. She wanted them to hold hands around her bed and sing when she had breathed her last. She insisted on imposing order, even in her death. And she did.

Whenever my wife and I get in any kind of discussion if I say to her, "But Susanna Wesley..." that is a loaded term, so I don't do that anymore. So, husbands don't go home and say, "But Susanna Wesley managed with nineteen kids." She had a sense of mission and destiny. It brought to her son this methodical way of looking at life—order is heaven's first law—out of which arose Methodism, which simply means "people who live by a method"—a sense of destiny.

In our study of Nehemiah, I see that in him. He's at work on the city wall and his opponents who haven't been able to intimidate him finally come and try to negotiate with him and have a peace treaty. They invite him down to meet with them on the plain of Ono. Nehemiah says to them, "I can't come down, for I am doing a great work." He had a sense of mission and that sense of mission helped him distinguish between primary and secondary goals; between things that are

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

really important and things that are not important; and to invest himself in things that were really priorities. Goals bring mission.

VI. Then goals help keep dreams alive.

One of the ways that we cope with suffering and injustice is to live with hope. Joseph's dreams kept him alive when he was in Egypt and in prison. His dreams as a seventeen-year-old boy nourished him when he was a man of thirty and helped him to overcome the temptation to be bitter, because he knew that God's plans for him were for good and not for evil, to give him a purpose and a hope.

Goals keep dreams alive when we're hurting physically, when we're hurting emotionally, when we're hurting spiritually. There's a little phrase I love in the Book of Ecclesiastes. When I was a kid and I preached (I preached my first message when I was about ten years of age—the days when they used to let kids practice on their fellow youth), one of my favorite Bible verses to get up and expostulate on was from Ecclesiastes. "A living dog is better than a dead lion." I liked that because what the writer of Ecclesiastes was saying was that it's better to be alive and be a pup than be something big and be dead. You might be looking at your life and say, "I don't have goals and dreams as big as someone else's." If you're alive, it's better. Stay alive with dreams. They may not be the biggest. But stay alive with them.

VII. Goals create plans.

We need goals, for out of goals flow our agenda for life. I love what a lot of modern writers are talking about in terms of intentionality. That we ought to live life with intentionality. It is intentions that then create the agenda for how we're going to live. I'm so thankful to the Lord that, at the age of ten, I had a very clear call to the ministry and that goal then set in motion plans for the next fourteen years of my life. Sometimes, our goals need to be adjusted as we go along

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

in life. I know that when I set foot on this campus for the first time twenty-three years ago, I was freshly arrived in California and I thought God had brought me to California for one reason. It turned out He'd really brought me here for another. He simply let my goal be the means through which He would lead me. So it's always been ok for me if I lay out goals before the Lord and they don't come to pass. I can say that's fine, because I will be further ahead for having had that goal because God will be able to use my life to redirect me in a positive way.

We need not to be overwhelmed by the dreams and plans that we make. If your list of directional changes for your life gets rather long, don't be overwhelmed by it. In the old McGuffey's Readers, there's a story about a clock that had been running for a long time on the mantle piece. One day, the clock began to think about how many times it would have to tick in the New Year. It counted up the seconds: 31,536,000 seconds. And the clock just got too tired and it said, "I can't do it." And it stopped right then and there. Then in the McGuffey's Readers, someone reminded the clock that it did not have to tick the 31,536,000 seconds all at one time. But rather, it had to tick one by one. And it began to run again and everything was alright.

We don't have to do all of our goals all at once. It's just one day at a time, one moment at a time. That's where the progress is made.

Why set goals? Jesus set them. Without goals we live an unexamined life. Faith requires a goal or an object. Goals help us to be a co-author of God's will. They bring a sense of mission to our life. They keep dreams alive. And they help us create plans.

Could I ask you, between now and year's end, to take some time aside and go on a personal retreat. Jesus did that often. Go on a personal retreat. It may be for an hour. It may be for an afternoon. It may be for a whole day. But go on a retreat. Sit down with the Lord, and take a paper and some pencils or pens, and start out by saying, "Lord, what goals would You have me

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

set? Help me now to examine my life.” Write them down as they come to you. When you get them all written down, after you’ve prayed about them, when you get the direction down which you feel the Lord wants you to go in the New Year, categorize those directions into things you could do for yourself, things others need to help you to do, things only God could do for you. Don’t let any list be complete without that third category. All of us need to be out on a faith edge where we’re living some things that only God can do; that keeps us growing in our Christian walk and faith.

Then when you’re done with all that, take time, ultimately, to share them with someone. We need others’ prayers and encouragement. I saw a semi-truck stuck in the mud a couple weeks ago and it couldn’t get out on its own. It needed a tow truck. Sometimes, we get stuck and we need somebody to come along and help us get unstuck. Evaluate continually. One of the reasons why resolutions sometimes don’t work in our life is because, when we start the New Year, we’re great, but around about March, we begin to break down and miss something for a day or two or a week. Then we try to play catch up, and then we get so far behind we can’t catch up. Don’t ever try to catch up. You can never catch up. It’s like being in a marathon. Once you fall behind, just take it for granted you’re going to stay behind, but make it your goal to finish the race. Get back in the race at the point you left it. Pick it up where you left off and go on. And that will be better for you, and God will work in your heart.

Set a specific time. Do it now. Can you think of your calendar in the next twenty-three days? Do you have a moment in there you could target for a time that you’re going to get aside and pray and meditate and plan for the New Year? Some of my friends have always had a Bible verse they live by—the Lord has seemingly given them a Bible verse for every year of their life. I’ve never taken the time to do that. This year I’ve asked the Lord, “As I plan for the New Year, I want You

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

to give me something from Your Word that all year long I can hang my hat on and that will be a reference point for me.” A great thing about a verse like that is that we don’t know what’s going to happen in three hundred and fifty-five days, but the Holy Spirit gives us a verse, and somehow that verse will become amazingly alive in that period of time. Already, I felt the Lord giving me a Bible verse to kind of hang my hat on.

Don’t let the year come to you in an unordered way. In a way that sort of says, “This is another year.” Let the changing of the calendar mark for you a changing, if need be, in your lifestyle.

Rather than floating through life, ask the Holy Spirit to help you live with intentionality—to bring direction and purpose to your being that in all of your life, that you might please God and live for Him with glory.

Closing Prayer

God, help us to be sensitive to You, to do Your will, to live out Your agenda for our lives. Help us to be persons who are active, who are willing to commit, willing to dream great dreams, and plan great plans, and willing, as well, to do the small things that need to be done that are so essential to the well-ordering of life. As we pray, Lord, maybe the area of concentration for one will be the area of relationship with You; for another, it may be relationship with self; for another, it may be relationship with others. Whatever the area, help us, Lord. And help us to be the kind of people You want us to be in the New Year. Help our goals to not simply be external things. But, indeed, maybe we need to limit ourselves to three grumpy days in the New Year, and maybe we need to make it our intention to completely forgive someone else, whatever that requires of us and whatever process is involved in doing it. We purpose, in our heart, to no longer carry that seed or root of bitterness. Wash us and renew us. And help us to live for the

GETTING READY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Luke 14:28-30

pleasure of Your glory and to run the race of life for the pleasure of Your glory. In Jesus' name.

Amen.