

Priorities For The New Year

Introduction. “Eyes that look are common; eyes that see are rare,” said J. Oswald Sanders. However, regarding COVID-19, a stated phrase of our politicians, pundits, and health care experts has been “No one could have seen this coming.”

And neither could us preachers and the churches we serve. Many of us planned as a theme for the year some variation of “20/20 Vision.” How ironic! The purpose, plans, and programs surrounding what we thought was a clever and timely topic have largely been scrapped due to services being shut down and/or scaled back, classes canceled, fellowship altered, and miniseries modified.

However, 20/20 vision, spiritually speaking, has to do with seeing the unseen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). We’ve turned the page on 2020 and set our sights on 2021. Let’s allow the COVID-19 crisis to open our eyes with 20/20 vision in 2021.

Priorities are actions or conditions that we believe take precedence over others. Living in the world makes it easy to concentrate on the wrong priorities. Here are seven spiritual priorities we need to see with greater clarity as the new year begins.

I. See God’s Supremacy

- A. We’ve been reminded that we’re not in control of our lives as much as we think we are. We see ourselves as self-sufficient, independent, and in command. Like William Earnest Henley penned in *Invictus*, we feel that “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”
- B. Yet, there are many situations and circumstances beyond our control. Ultimately the One in whose hands everything is controlled is the Lord (Psalm 22:28; Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; Acts 17:28; Hebrews 1:1-2).
- C. COVID-19 should remind us of this reality. That should not shake us, but strengthen our reliance on the Lord in 2021.

II. See Your Plans In The Proper Perspective

- A. Think about everything we planned to do in 2020 that was postponed or canceled: Sporting events, gospel meetings, vacations, evangelistic trips, concerts, family reunions, and Bible classes.
- B. We’ve been reminded that all our plans need an asterisk. “If the Lord wills,” James warns, we will do this or that (James 4:13-16).
 1. The folly of forgetting God is another manifestation of worldliness (cp. v. 4). This world is not a closed system; an influence quite outside the material sphere ultimately determines the success and failure of plans.
 2. However, we are not to use “If the Lord wills” as a cliché but as a sober reflection of a heart attitude of total dependence on God’s will.
- C. Seeing that our human plans are not set in concrete should not scare us or keep us from planning in 2021. But it helps us see our vulnerability and to plan with a caveat (Proverbs 19:21; Malachi 1:4; Luke 12:18).

III. See The Value Of Your Faith

- A. Last year has challenged us to exercise our faith instead of fertilizing our fears. While COVID-19 is a deadly virus, more disastrous and fatal to our spiritual health is doubt and fear.
- B. Hopefully, we've realized that fear is a debilitating emotion. Fear makes us skeptical, suspicious, selfish, stubborn, and short-sighted. Fear paralyzes us and degrades our spirituality.
- C. There are lots of people who will not be the same spiritually after this. One of my friends who preaches said that it's decimated their fringe members. The stronger have fared better.
- D. The way you build your faith is to let the word work within you (John 15:3). Christ is within you (Colossians 1:27) because the word is within you (Romans 10:5-8).
 - 1. To that end, we offer Bible classes on Sunday morning and Wednesday night. These are chances for you and your children to learn and experience people of knowledge and integrity.
 - 2. It's so sad to see that so many churches have had to cancel their Bible classes. But sadder still is to see so many Christians who deprive themselves and their children the chance to learn. And for what? The ability to eat lunch earlier? The ability to get homework done earlier? The ability to go to bed earlier? You've got to answer if that reflects "Christ in you, the hope of glory" as described by Paul in Colossians 1:27.
- E. Enter into 2021 with greater faith, less fear, deeper resolve, and clearer vision. Boldly echo the Hebrew writer's affirmation in 13:5.

IV. See The Priority Of Your Relationships

- A. Maybe one blessing of COVID-19 is that we've been reminded how much we need each other. In some cases, the virus has forced families to spend time together. For some, there's more time reading, talking, sharing, and developing deeper relationships.
- B. All of this has increased our appreciation for fellowship. The "one another" (Romans 12:5, 10, 16; 13:8; 14:13; 15:5, 7, 14; 16:16) passages of the New Testament remind us that God created us for community, formed us for His family, and fashioned us for spiritual fellowship. When it comes to our congregation, I hope it means you cling to the people who matter to you a little more tightly.
 - 1. Even though we social distance and don't shake hands or hug as much as we used to, we still definitely need one another. Families need other families to see Jesus Christ reproduced in them.
 - 2. This isn't just a numbers game for us to proudly display on the board here to my right. Your presence, your work, and your input makes this congregation better (Colossians 2:6-10). That's why we work so hard to get you here.

V. See Opportunities To Do Good

- A. During the past several months we've been encouraged by the goodness of others. As often seen during a crisis, it can bring out the best in people. From

people of high worth donating millions of dollars, to those checking on their elderly neighbors, and to volunteers to sent into hot spots to help health care workers, COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to do good (Galatians 6:10). This has been true, not only in our local communities but worldwide.

- B. Scripture is full of tremendous examples of hospitality, both physical hospitality (2 Kings 4:8-10; Luke 19:8; Acts 16:15, 33), and spiritual hospitality (Romans 15:32; 1 Corinthians 16:18; 2 Corinthians 7:13; 2 Timothy 1:16; Philemon 7).
- C. Keep your eyes open in 2021 to new ways of serving, of improved methods of ministering, and of a greater awareness for the needs of the “least of these” among us (Matthew 25:37-40).

VI. See The Importance Of Patiently Waiting

- A. Typically, we don't put a priority on waiting. We see it as a negative, not a positive. Waiting is difficult, and most of us don't like to wait. Possibly, we've learned some benefit to waiting (Psalm 27:14; 62:1, 5).
- B. None of this has gotten over with as fast as we've wanted it to. And we don't know when we'll be able to fully resume everything we're used to doing, but waiting humbly, patiently, persistently, actively, and prayerfully is a good way to begin 2021 (Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 4:6).

VII. See The Priority Of Your Hope

- A. If we've seen anything good come out of 2020, it's that our hope transcends this sinful, broken world. When God made the world, it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31); it didn't have sickness and despair in it.
- B. The world is hoping for the containment of COVID-19. Vaccines are now upon us and perhaps we will even have a cure one day.
- C. However, as we flip the page on the calendar, we know nothing in this life is certain. Our ultimate hope lies beyond the disciplines of science or medicine. It lies beyond political directives or economic incentives.
- D. We march into a new year, regardless of what viruses or transformations of life we may face, with hope, having faith as its foundation (Psalm 16:7-9; Isaiah 41:10). Hope allows us to see the unseen, to press on through problems, and keep our sights focused on that eternal inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Peter 1:4).

Conclusion. Like Paul, I pray that “the eyes of your understanding will be enlightened” (Ephesians 1:18). To paraphrase Peter Block, “Your spiritual vision is not only a roadmap but also a compass.” Look to scripture for guidance, and stay focused on Jesus for direction.

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