

Lessons learned in 2018

- Matthew 6:19-21
- As is my custom, I like to end the year with a sermon on some of the things God taught me during the year. I read the Bible every morning, and as I do I am asking the Lord to show me in the text what is true, what is false that I have believed to be true, what I need to stop doing, and what new obedience I need to walk in. In other words, I try to apply 2 Timothy 3:16 to my personal devotions, as we are doing at home group on Wednesday nights. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” I do NOT always see something in the text that makes it into my journal. But I did write down a number of things this year that encouraged me, taught me, reminded me, or rebuked me. Allow me to share the top six with you this morning, in hopes that you also will be encouraged and disciplined in these truths from God’s Word!
- **1. Lay up treasures in heaven**
- I was prompted to think about this important text from Matthew 6 on March 24 this year. That was the Saturday when I went down to Myrtle Beach with Micah, Blake, and Jesse to clean out my younger brother’s house, who had died on January 10 at the age of 56. In 4 hours, we took everything Eric owned and put it on the street. As far as I know, my brother spent a lifetime storing up his meager treasures on earth, and they were of no use any more. At least, we didn’t think so. But within two hours after we started moving his stuff to the street, people started showing up and combing through it like it was a big yard sale. They brought their trucks and trailers and loaded them with my brother’s lifetime store of goods. One guy asked me if he could come in and see what was coming out next so he could claim it. I said, “No.” The whole scene reminded me of the movie, “The Christmas Carol,” after Ebenezer was shown a vision of what it would be like after he died, if he did not change his current course. Remember the sad old lady trying to sell Ebenezer’s things? Ebenezer didn’t have a friend in the world; his treasure was all wrapped up in his stuff, much like my brother’s life was wrapped up in his few meager possessions. And his dog. Well, we didn’t profit from all the things Eric spent his life accumulating. We just gave them away, and I am sure much of it ended up in yard sales. I remember watching Jesse and Micah carrying Eric’s dog igloo to the street. It took both of them, because it was heavy. A man in a compact car stopped five minutes after it was put on the street, lifted it on top of his little car by himself, and drove off, holding the igloo onto the roof with one hand. I wonder if it made it.
- The day we cleaned out my brother’s house was only 6 days after a thief broke into Micah’s house while he and his family were at church, storing up treasures in heaven by investing in the lives of his church family. Where our treasure is, Jesus said, that is where our heart will be. I was reminded again that what matters most are the relationships we have with the Lord and with each other. Precious stones, gold and silver are not the stuff we buy with a credit card. Those things will all end up in the landfill eventually. But people are eternal. One of my desires in the new year for myself and for all of us is that we think and act intentionally with regard to building healthy relationships at home, in the church, and with the people God has given us influence with in the world. Two of the questions we should each ask as we stand on the threshold of 2019 are these: “Who am I discipling?” and “Who is discipling me?” The treasures Jesus laid up in heaven were first the 11 men whom he disciplined and the multitudes of others whom he touched with his life, his teaching, and his ministry. Let’s see 2019 as a year to invest in at least one person, in intentional discipleship. A disciple (“learner”) is someone who learns to follow Christ and is committed to disciple someone else to do the same. And it results in the second point.
- **2. And they glorified God because of me.** (Galatians 1:24)
- I read the first chapter of Galatians on March 15 this year. That day was the two year anniversary of my older brother’s death, and two months and 5 days after my younger brother’s death. It was a sad day for me,

but I was encouraged by this reminder of Paul's ministry. Paul was the last person on earth that anyone suspected would ever become a follower of Christ. He was a persecutor of Christ, best in the business! But here he was, three years after he met the Lord and was saved, telling Peter and then James the brother of Jesus, the news of his conversion. He was now preaching the gospel that he once tried to destroy. That's true in some measure of everyone who comes to Jesus. Once enemies of Christ, enemies of the Gospel, now seated at his table! That's who Paul was. To his very core. He writes, "And they glorified God because of me." That would be a great epitaph, wouldn't it? That would be a great daily prayer, as well. "Oh, God, may people glorify you today because of me, not in spite of me. Instead of grinding their teeth because of me, help them to glorify you because of me. Instead of shaking their heads because of me, may they glorify you because of me. Instead of avoiding me like the plague today, may they be glad to see me coming, giving you glory because of me." Again, my dear brothers and sisters, how we love the Lord and love people every day matters a great deal.

- **3. When God is against us** (Numbers 14)
- This is after the 12 spies have entered the promised land, and 10 of them come back with a bad report, that the people were like giants and there was no way they could take the land. Only two, Joshua and Caleb had a different report. "We are well able to overcome it," Caleb said to the people, not because Caleb was confident in himself but because he believed that **God does not call us to anything for which he himself will not equip us.**
- You know the story. The people believed the report of the ten and dismissed Joshua and Caleb. Proof again that the majority is OFTEN wrong, but the minority has to suffer the consequences right along with them. At the end of the chapter, when the people saw that God had killed the ten spies who brought the bad report, they were afraid, and so they told Moses that, hey, they WOULD go into the land and conquer the giants there, after all. Moses said, "Um, no, you won't." He said, "Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies."
- Two important biblical principles to remember. First, when we are disobedient to the Lord, and we realize we have been disobedient to the Lord, we often try to 'make up for it' in our own strength. And we end up doubling down on our own disobedience by giving God some dead work instead of what He desires. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17) Second principle: "If God is against us, who can be for us?" God was against them because of their unbelief, because they had ignored the Word of the Lord. When they went in their own strength to do battle, they were routed. (Numbers 14:45)
- **4. Be there at the end. (Luke 8:2)**
- We were studying Luke in our previous home group, and it was Josh Howard's turn to teach. He made the point that Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons, was at the cross with Jesus. Then she was at the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint his body, but instead she saw the risen Jesus. Josh told us, "Jesus healed a lot of people. But Mary was there at the end for the Lord." The thought occurred to me, "If every person who had been healed or delivered of demons or saved by Jesus had come to the cross, there would not have been room for them." And then I thought, "Why weren't they there?" Well, the same reason why I am often not 'there' for Jesus when he is being persecuted today. Because of my fear. Paul may have struggled with this sometimes, I'm not sure. But we know he asked the church at Ephesus to pray for him for boldness to speak. "To that end keep alert, making supplication for all the saints, and **also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.**" (Ephesians 6:18-20)
- **5. How to be LESS hard-headed!** (READ Isaiah 48:4)

- Does anybody besides me resemble that remark? I have a hard head and a stiff neck. A hard head is marked by stubbornness, thinking you're always right, and a very slow trigger on asking for any help. A stiff neck keeps your hard head right where it is, so you don't turn your face to the Lord, and to your brothers and sisters.
- What can we do to become less hard-headed?
- 1. Learn that the Word of God is true that God loves you with a perfect love. That means he also likes you, and his love and his like is not dependent on you or on your family 'getting it all right.' You say, I thought people who are hard headed are that way because they are PROUD of how much God loves them. I don't think so. I don't think they have yet fully received his love or fully embraced grace, God's unmerited favor. They are still trying to earn his love, and make sure everyone else around them is trying as hard as they are to earn his love. **Understanding God loves us and likes us frees us to love Him more.** It also frees us to love our wife or husband more, and to love our children more, regardless of whether THEY get it all right! The hard-headed way of thinking, "I have to get it all right" is legalism. Legalism will lead to either one of two things. First, it produces bound-up, fearful people who simply walk in lockstep to what they believe will make God or others happy. Second, it produces rebels, who eventually throw off all restraints and run headlong into sin. God. Loves. You. Period. Believe it, receive it, and then practice that kind of love with everybody you know.
- 2. Once the thinking is right, then do this. Start the practice of admitting when you are not in the right place or the right mind. Not just to yourself and to God. But practice admitting that to a trusted friend! Like this one? This? This? No, this. Saints, we need to practice this in order to grow, and it goes back to the practice of biblical discipleship. Not one of us can do this Christian walk by ourselves. Jesus did not call one disciple. He chose 12. If you are in a bad place and are afraid to cry out for help from the elders, you are in a really bad place. Satan wants to keep you isolated, but Jesus calls you into the community of the believers.
- **6. We are sons and daughters of the King!** (Read Matthew 17:24-27)
- I have always loved this story, and I always look in the mouth every fish I catch to see if my property taxes are in there. Not really. But I believe we learn three important lessons from this event in the life of our Lord and his disciple.
- 1. We do not need to give offense to those in authority over us, even though we are ultimately under God's authority. The taxes have all been paid for the righteous. The penalty has been provided. But we still live on this side of the veil, and we still have to obey the authorities who, as Paul reminded us, "are God's servants for good." (Romans 13) But,
- 2. God will provide for his own. He will. Jesus said to Peter with this command to go catch a fish, "Peter, you can trust me." He says that to you and me, too. Go to work. Do what you are called on to do. But trust the Lord. He is your provider. Why?
- 3. He loves to give to those who trust Him. We are the sons and daughters of the king. I know we don't live in a palace, and I know we are not tended to by a multitude of servants, like the sons and daughters of earthly kings. No, our treasures and our rewards are in heaven. But we are His. He loves us.