

Reminders from 2022

- 2 Peter 3:1
- When you look at photo albums, whether they are actually bound volumes and you are flipping the pages, or they are digital pictures you are scrolling through, what are you doing but taking time to be reminded of what you saw and what you experienced in the past? You are not looking to see something new but being reminded of something old. Isn't that mostly why we read the Bible and why we listen to sermons like this one? That's what I did in the last couple of weeks as I looked at my journal. I was taking time to remind myself of what I saw and what I heard and what I learned in 2022. And a lot of what I learned this past year, and the same is true for you, was really not something new but a reminder of something true. It is why I chose this verse from Peter's second letter as our text today. Notice he calls the readers "beloved." He reminds them that they are beloved, agapetos, perfectly loved by God. And that he loved them as well and wanted especially to remind them of what they already knew to be true. He said the purpose of his two letters to them was to "stir up your sincere mind by way of reminder." I love that picture of a person who has drifted into the space in between fully awake and in a dead sleep, and someone touches them on the shoulder, stirring them into being fully present again. What is being stirred up? Our "sincere mind." Sincere is the word that means "judged by sunlight," tested and proven. "Sincere" comes from a Latin word that means, without wax. Potters would sometimes mess up a vase (vahhhse) and instead of starting over, they would simply fill the error, the crack or blemish, with wax. Wise buyers would hold the vase up to the sunlight and the wax would be revealed. The truth we have in the Scripture is without wax. It has been tested in the light of God's glory and can be fully trusted. That's what Peter says to his readers. I am writing to awaken you again to the pure truth of God's Word that is not just for our information but for our transformation. The truth indeed sets us free. Let me share with you two truths by way of reminder this morning, followed by an announcement of a class we hope to offer starting in a few weeks.
- **What's the purpose of your practice? (Matthew 6:1-4)**
- Turn to Matthew 6 and let's read the first four verses.
- What is more important, act or motive? Purpose or practice? The will or the heart?
- As I was reading in Matthew 6 this past year, I was struck by this thought. We *are* called to give, to pray, and to fast, but our motive behind it makes all the difference in how God receives it and how he rewards us. So much so that Jesus starts with "Beware." It is an imperative, a command from the Lord. It could be translated, "Be careful *not* to practice your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." The act is not dismissed unless the motive is selfish. In other words, Jesus doesn't say, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness." No, doing righteous acts is not the problem. Practice makes permanent, and what do we want to make permanent more than our relationship with God that works itself out in loving Him and loving people? Jesus also did not say, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness before other people." If that were so, we would not have public prayer time, we would not pass the offering plate, we would not allow people to share testimonies or sing praise to God with a solo, because we do those things before other people. The key prepositional phrase Jesus adds is to not practice our righteousness before other people "in order to be seen by them." If our motive is to be seen and praised by others, then we will receive a reward, but only from those who have seen and admired our action. So what do we do? Say there is no perfect motive and therefore I will not do righteous acts at all? No.
- Jesus says to give but do it privately. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Jesus says to pray in your room with the door shut, where no one is there to hear you but God. Jesus says to fast, but to wash your face and look and act normal around others so that no one but God knows you are fasting. Then what is the promise he repeats each time? "And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." But you say, "I don't care about rewards! I just want to do this as a sacrifice to

the Lord.” That would not be honest, because God designed us to care about rewards. It would also not be completely biblical to not care about rewards. Because Jesus goes on to say (verse 19) that we are not to lay up treasures for ourselves on earth. Instead, he commands us to “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Store up rewards in heaven! They will be safe there. And, most importantly he says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (verse 21)

- What is the summation of this first lesson? Practicing our righteousness for the right reasons brings glory to God and lays up treasures for ourselves in heaven, which is where we want our heart to be turned.
- **Don't let the fire go out. (Hebrews 10:24-25)**
- Turn to Hebrews 10:24-25.
- Even though we were post-COVID in 2022, the effects of the pandemic continued. One of the results for churches everywhere has been a re-shuffling of the deck, where people have moved around some, but the worst part has been that some cards simply fell out of the deck. I wrote in my journal last February, “Online church can be and is a great blessing to the shut-in, but it can also be a great disincentive as well.” What happens when the shut-in becomes a stay-in? The person who could not get out because of the virus or because of other extenuating circumstances can easily become the person who *won't* get out when those circumstances are just a memory. This is what the writer of Hebrews is saying here. Verse 25, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.” The habit of some has become to not meet together with other believers, and the time when the believers are in the habit of meeting, since Jesus rose from the dead, is the first day of the week. The word there for habit is *ethos* in the Greek, which literally means custom, usual practice, or manner of living. We are known by and marked by our ethos, the way we customarily live our lives. If we only gather with the saints when it is convenient to do so, then our ethos, our manner of living, is marked by that. But we are invited into the assembling of ourselves together on a weekly basis. That's why the church was called *ekklesia* in the New Testament, 115 times. It means “called out,” and the people of God are spiritually and by God's grace called out of the world and into Christ, into his body, a local fellowship and assembly of believers. That means they are also physically called out of their homes and called into the place where the church is meeting, if they are physically able. We have to be very careful with the habits we create, especially any habit that draws us away from the physical gathering of God's people.
- The writer of Hebrews is concerned about this and wants the people of God to be concerned as well. What should we do? Verse 24: Let us consider one another. The word means to observe, to notice. We love each other and notice when something is wrong, or when someone has been missing the gathering. That's good, but then we are called to consider “how to stir up one another to love and good works.” The idea there requires a moving towards another intentionally in order to bring them in, draw them back, call them again towards love and good works. And in verse 25, the writer adds, “encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
- I remember the story of a pastor who visited a church member years ago who had stopped coming. They sat together in the man's den, just the two of them, and there was a roaring fire in fireplace. The pastor told the man he missed him at church and encouraged him to come back. The man made some excuses as to why he wasn't coming and ended with, “Pastor, I am doing fine. I'll come back to church one day but honestly, I can't really see the need for it sometimes. I still read my Bible, pretty much, and still pray when I think about it.” The pastor nodded and got up from his chair and walked over to the fire. He took the poker from the hearth and reached in with it to pull one of the small logs away from the burning pile of wood. Then he sat down, and the two men watched in silence as the small log that had been separated from the pile of wood smoldered for a few minutes and then went out. The man nodded and said, “Thanks for coming by, pastor. I'll see you all on Sunday.”
- As we gather today on the very first day of a new year, may I encourage you to continue practicing the things you are so good at: loving one another, meeting needs whenever you see them or when you

hear about them from the elders, taking time to get to know the people God has assembled in this local church. You have been faithful givers this year, as Antioch has had its greatest income in our 35-year history. Because of that, we have been able to add to the missions, local and foreign, that we support, including doubling our giving to all of our missionaries in December. By God's grace, we gave 30% of our income to missions this year. We have also been able to start on some outdoor improvements that will be completed, Lord willing, by spring. A nicer courtyard that extends to a patio beyond it, a concrete pad on the west side for basketball and pickleball, new lights behind the building and electrical outlets beside the "amphitheater" so we can have events there, and more. Those will be a blessing for our relational health as a community of people who love each other and gather to practice that love.

- For our spiritual growth, the elders would like to invite you to attend a Sunday morning study that will begin on January 22, Lord willing, at 8:45am. We will go through the book, *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity*, by Rebecca McLaughlin. The study will last for ten weeks and is intended to help Generation Z, and all of us, believe, understand, and defend the faith. Jude wrote, "Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude 3) Why, Jude? Because people had crept in and perverted the "grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." Wow, there is nothing new under the sun. Those same people have crept into the church and into the minds and hearts of believers today. This book is aimed at teens but will be good for all of us to read and discuss, as McLaughlin will deal with topics like racism, universality, science and faith controversies, marriage and same-sex attraction, gender, feminism, and suffering, among others. I hope you will make plans to attend. A sign-up sheet for those who want the church to order a book or books for them will be in the foyer next week and the week after. The cost will probably be around \$10 per book.
- 2023 has begun. May God continue to add his blessing to the work of Antioch Community Church and all the assemblies everywhere who hold onto his word and do not forsake his name. Let's prepare our hearts for communion.
- Prayer
- Communion