



New Year's Eve
Making Big Plans for the New Year
Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're talking today about making plans for the New Year. How many of you are planners, like you love to get everything down and organized and ready to go. How many of you are go with the flow? It's 11:00; look at that. It's the opposite at 9:00. How many of you make plans and you hate people that mess with your plans? Okay, you're going to hate every moment of this message.

I'm going to show you something and I want your first reaction to it. Whatever your personality, whatever bubbles upside you, just let it out with whatever emotion, whatever expression you want to share as soon as I show you this calendar! Right there, what does that do? I've got boos coming from down here. I've got excitement from over here. How many of you love getting a clean one of these and you just lay in on your bed and roll all over it and rub it and you just love calendars and you love getting things on the calendar. Then someone changes something what you've put on the calendar.

My wife loves this message. My wife is a planner. I'm married to a planner. How many of you are married to a planner? How many of you love messing with that every chance you get? I love it. My wife gets her little floral design Day Runner every year and then she opens it and it's as though she's born again. She loves that Day Runner and she loves putting things in there.

Earlier this week, we were asked by a senior couple, "What is the struggle with your generation and younger not committing to plans?" Any mom or dad here that are tired of their kids not conforming to the plans you make for the holidays and all of that? It can wear my mom out for sure because she's a planner. I think the struggle and one of the observations of my generation and the millennials would be that sometimes we fear committing to something because we think something better may come along. That's a struggle. So, the reason she said no to you when you asked her to go to the dance? She's kind of hoping someone better comes along. If no one does, then she's really going to be frustrated. We do this with planning. We hesitate making plans for fear we don't have all the information, for fear something better may come along.

I tell my friends who do speaking around the country, "Don't ever be one of those speakers that cancels an event when a better event comes along. Be true to your commitment and true to your word."

The scripture says this about planning. We can be afraid of planning. Proverbs 21: 5 says, ***The plans of the diligent lead to profit...*** You want to eat. Hunger drives us on. If you want to eat, be diligent. And diligence is an issue of your character, not an issue of your competency, so whatever it is that you do,

whatever you do for a living, however you earn money for your family, be diligent. And the plans that fall into the hands of a diligent person lead to profit ...***as surely haste leads to poverty.***

So, we're going to give you four big ideas on what you should be thinking about and what you should be bringing of your being as you make your plans for 2018. Some of you are students and you're making plans on what classes to take, what majors to choose. Some of you are trying to pick a college. Some of you are graduating, trying to figure out big plans. You need to move somewhere. You need to get a job. You need to start all of this. Some of you are thinking about getting married. That's a pretty big plan. In 2018, you're getting everything in motion to start married life together.

Some of you are thinking about starting a business, so you're getting all the plans and the spreadsheets and the budgets going. There are some of you in here who are considering starting a show and I'm going to talk about that in a few moments with entertainers. You're thinking about putting a show together and starting your own business. I just want to tell you... and I think there are a lot of entertainers in here that will amen this and if you are, please do amen this. Just because you can sing doesn't mean you can lead in a business. I'm getting some amens. They are all the ones that are going, "I'm going back to being a vocalist because I can't... Dealing with people and human resources and budgets and buildings can wear me out."

Whatever plan you're making for 2018, we want you to consider these four big ideas for your big plans.

1. Align your plans with God's purposes.

You inquire of the Lord, first and foremost. Through prayer and careful understanding of the Word of God, you align all of your plans with God's purposes. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about God's purposes of worship and fellowship and ministry and discipleship and evangelism. That's the purpose for my life, those are the purposes for this church, and I want to make sure my plans, whatever it is that I'm doing in 2018, is perfectly aligned with the purposes God has for me.

Proverbs 19: 21 says this: ***Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*** In Psalm 33, we read ***The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the democrats and republicans, but the plans of the Lord stand firm forever...*** And all God's people said. ***...the purposes of his heart through all generations.*** So, we want to know what those purposes are and we want to know the filter that we should be using when we're making our plans.

I had a professor at Dallas Seminary that shares a story of a friend of his who would never make plans. He thought planning was unbiblical. He thought planning thwarted the Holy Spirit's work in your life. Dr. Wallace kind of put these observations together and I want to share them with you briefly for the person who is anti-planning. The "go with the flow because the Holy Spirit is in me" person. "I want to be open at all times so the Holy Spirit..." Here's what Dr. Wallace said of his friend not wanting to make plans because of being guided by the Holy Spirit.

- 1) This friend is **believing feelings are an infallible guide for sensing the leading of the Spirit.** How many of you have your feelings gotten you in trouble? You've make a major life decision, you made a

big plan off of something you were feeling, and you regretted it later. Okay, we'll talk about that in just a moment.

2) **Believing the Holy Spirit only in spontaneous ways**, that the Holy Spirit can't work through plans. I think this third one is the most important.

3) **Subconsciously**, he said his friend was just at a level he maybe didn't even understand, **rejecting the idea that the Holy Spirit speaks through the scriptures**.

So, as you align your plans for 2018 with God's purposes, I want to share with you a filter. If you've been here for any period of time at our church, you know this filter has been shared multiple times, but it's a great filter to go into 2018 with as you make your plans. We start here and we believe that the authority, the source of truth for our lives is the **scripture**. As we pray and consider plans for 2018, we want to be aligned with God's word. That's the primary.

If truth were a stage, scripture is on the front of the stage. We take everything else about our life through the scripture and filter it through. So, if you're debating on whether you should move in with her before you get married, if you're thinking about making that plan, you don't even have to pray about that. I'm going to help you with that plan. NO! You want to align the planning you're doing with the Word of God. "Should I not file taxes this year?" Let me help you with that. File your taxes. "Should I leave my wife because I'm bored with her?" Let me help you with that. NO! The number of questions that I get asked in a given week... We don't even have to take a moment to pray about this; I can give you an answer immediately. Through the scripture, the precepts and principles of God's word, align everything you're thinking through that.

Number two, we have **tradition** and tradition is behind the scripture. Tradition is what the church fathers said about the scripture. If you grew up Catholic, you know scripture and tradition were placed on the same level. You had whatever the Pope said about the Bible was as true as the Bible. I want you to understand here that what I say about the Bible is not on the same level as the Bible. As we teach the Word of God, the Word of God is the priority and tradition is behind that.

We're not against traditions here, but we don't allow that to be the authority of our church. It's a source of truth. We can read the traditions, we can observe the traditions. Some of you freaked out a little bit... We lost people this past year as we went through *The Creed* series because you grew up in a church that heard "No creed but the Bible." We said, "The Creed is a traditional statement, a concise statement of what we believe, but our authority is the scripture." The Creed was a tradition and we just used that as the outline to teach what the Bible said about each one of those topics in that statement.

Behind tradition we have **reason**. This is the mind's ability to think logically. For those of you who are into apologetics, maybe you love to listen to and study Ravi Zacharias. He's a reasoning guy. If your mind thinks in philosophy and you can shoot people down, their ideas and thoughts, because your mind is just constantly processing and processing. Our ability to reason is a source, but it's not the priority.

These next two are where we really tend to get into trouble when we make big plans. This one is **experience**. Sometimes we can hear someone's story and be like, "Oh, that's fantastic that happened to you, and because it happened to you, it will happen to me." We have to be very careful. We can say, "It happened to you, it might happen to me," but we can't say, "because God did this in your life, he's going to do this in my life."

Pastor Andy Stanley, a couple of weeks ago, said one of the biggest mistakes we've made in the church and it's the reason why a generation is abandoning the church is because we have signed God's name to promises he never made. We do that when your story becomes my authority. I love a good story. I love hearing how God's working in your life. It may be how he works in mine, but it doesn't need to be the authority of my life.

And just because something is happening to you right now doesn't mean you need to guide the rest of your life off of the experience that you had. Your family molded you, they shaped you, but they don't define you. What's happened to you in the past is part of your life experience, part of your story, but it's not who you have to be moving forward.

The next one is **emotion**. This is a great source. I like what Ryan Pannell here at our church says. He says, "Our emotions are like children. We should listen to them, we should care for them, we should honor them, but we shouldn't allow them to make major decisions in our life."

Some of you right now are getting ready to made big plans based on your experience and your emotion and you'll come and tell me, "Oh, yeah, we're getting married. He's so cute." I know, he's adorable. I believe that, but don't make a major life decision based on the cuteness factor. You need a few other things. "He's treated me so well..." that's because he ain't got a job.

We saw another movie. The movies are wearing me out because you see the couple cuddling on the screen. They're cuddling all day long, all week long. The whole movie is about them cuddling and not going to work. Every now and then, I'm feeling Amy's getting the idea, *Why don't we do more of that?* "Because I've got a job. I've got to go to work; I can't stay home and hold you all day." Can I get an amen on that one? Thank you. I'm not guiding my whole life based on emotion. I'm going to listen to them – it's data telling me what I'm feeling; it's important to listen to them – but when I'm making big plans, I want scripture to be my filter, not flipped. How many of you know a Christian right now where this list is flipped? "I'll go to scripture at the end."

I get worn out debating pastors on inconsequential issues from the scripture. I call them non-essentials. We have our essentials. We studied that in the Creed. Then you have the non-essentials. They are areas where we have liberty and we don't need to fuss and fight over them. Whenever you try to have a conversation from the scripture with someone, based on a non-essential, when the argument runs out in the scripture, meaning they are not making any good points, they run to experience. "Yeah, but I know families that..." Yeah, okay, but don't allow that family's experience to become my authority. We stick here with the scripture. Scripture is the filter.

2. Seek input from others.

This is very, very important as you're making your big plans and aligning your plans. You need help. Seek input from others. Please hear me... If you hear nothing else today, I want you to hear what this does not say. This does not say seek input from everyone. This isn't saying put it out there on Twitter and see how everybody responds to it. You want to get guidance from other people who are aligning their life, aligning plans with God's purposes. I'm shocked at the number of people making big plans for their life that are looking to fools for input. Some of you look in too many of your Yelp reviews for your business or your deal and you just have to... Some of those people are idiots. Don't change everything about your life because of one or two critics. Seek the input of others.

The scripture says this in Proverbs 15:22: **Plans fail for lack of counsel...** Before you make a major decision, you need to seek guidance. **...but with many advisers they succeed.** Many advisers... that's when it succeeds. That's why this is not a pastor led church; we are an elder led church. We want a plurality of elders, a group of elders making decision because that's better counsel and you make better plans. You want to make plans with many advisers.

The scripture also says in Proverbs 20: 18: **Plans are established by seeking advice; so if you wage war, obtain advice.** You're getting ready to make a big decision in 2018, seek good voices and mute the bad ones, or turn them down. What if it's your parents? Some of you have parents who don't walk with the Lord and you're now trying to raise your family, seeking guidance from your mom and dad who don't walk with the Lord. They may not be giving you the best advice. You want to find wise men and women who will speak truth to you.

Years ago, when I was kind of deciding "Lord, where are you taking me in life and in ministry. I know I'm a pastor, but what else is there?" God brought Gary Smalley into my life and marriage and family kind of started to bubble up in me. It was already there, but it became a passion. I didn't know if it was something I should do.

Gary started working with me and then he said, "Hey, you're coming to do a conference with me." I was 28 years old and that's what you really want; you want marriage advice from a 28-year-old. It was at Community Bible Church, about 1500 people in San Antonio, Texas. For this conference, Gary gave me the three talks. He said, "Here is what you're going to teach. Deliver them and we'll see how it goes." I just looked at that and thought, *Wow, a man that trusted me like that...*

Afterward... I'll never forget it. He handed me a stack of conference form evaluations based on my speaking. Some of you who have been evaluated know what I'm talking about. I was thinking, *Why do I want to read those? I like who I am in my mind. I enjoy what I'm doing. I'm a legend in my own mind, right?*

He goes, "I want you to read every one of them." I remember putting them down and telling Amy, "I have to do something else. I have to sell insurance or something; this is not my lifelong thing." Then a pastor came up to me in the first service who works for State Farm and he says, "Insurance is a great

fallback; I've never had more peace in my life. When you're done with all this church stuff..." But, I remember thinking *This is brutal*.

If you're one that you seek advice from everyone, you know how to do that. If someone reviews you with evaluations or Yelp or amazon or whatever it is, if you sell a product or you have a business or you do a show and you put your show on Facebook and now you get those one to five star reviews... Everybody loves that review that goes, "I'm hitting one star because I can't get zero as an option." Don't you love that person?

Take out the bottom 10% and the top 10% and throw them away, and then look at that 80% in the middle. That will probably give you a little bit better picture of where you're going. Before you go to war, before you make a major decision, seek wisdom.

If you're a young person considering dating, don't be a fool and ignore the advice of your parents. Seek Mom and Dad's advice. "Do you know this young man?" "I want you to tell me what you think about him?" I tell my kids this all the time. "Hey, that friend there, you need to spend more time with him, you need to spend more time with her." That's because a companion of fools will come to ruin.

Now, when marriage comes about... listen, let's go old fashion here. Ask your dad if you should marry him. Dad doesn't think he's cute. Dad thinks he's a pervert. I'll be really honest with you. This is the man who raised you, this is the man who, according to research, has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on your wellbeing. You ought to say, "Hey, I'm your princess, Dad, is this the guy I should be his queen?" Why would you not do that? Why would you not seek that wise counsel.

This week, I got a call from a dad that said, "Would you meet with my son. My son is 11 years old. He feels that God has called him to preach."

I said, "Absolutely." So, we met for coffee and I sat down with an 11-year-old feeling called to preach. I'm thinking *What kind of questions does an 11-year-old called to preach ask, wanting to know what being a preacher is all about?*

His first question... From an 11-year-old! His first question was, "How do you deal with critics?"

I was like, "All this stuff I brought I won't be needing because we're going in another direction. I said, "It's really simple. You run them off as fast as possible. That's really what you need to do. You don't want a lot of them in the church or you'll be gone. It's either them or you. And when a new church starts in town, you should support that church with everything you've got. Send every critical member you have over to that new church." No, I said... Then we started getting into outlines. How do you do an outline? We're talking exegetical, expository, topical preaching. We're putting an outline together: introductions, conclusions... I'm just sitting there going, *He's seeking wisdom*.

He said, "What would you say to an 11-year-old... How should I live my life for the next several years, getting ready for this?"

I said, "I don't know. I don't get asked this a whole bunch." But, I said, "Don't trade your youth. Don't make a bad trade. Use these times to work on this."

He's already giving messages to his friends. I'm sure those are awesome sleepovers, aren't they? "Sit down and turn in your Bible to Isaiah."

"Can we do PlayStation?"

"No, Isaiah chapter 9, verses 6 through 12."

But, I just love that at 11, he understands it's important to figure out that if this is a direction, he should seek counsel.

I said this in the first service and it's worth saying again here. Some of you are considering starting your own show and we've seen this in Branson like crazy. People who have started a show and as it gets started, you can kind of see the corners that are being cut because of finances. And I get all of that, but we've seen restaurants and businesses and shows that start and stop and a lot of money is lost. That's painful to watch. I'm going to recommend to you that before you start a show you find a seasoned showman in this town and ask him what it takes.

Amy and I joke about this all the time. I want to just put a little tiny shed north on 65, like up around 160 and the High Road area, and before you start a business or show or restaurant in town, you stop in this little consulting shack. That's what I'm going to call it: The Consulting Shack. You pay me \$100,000.00, tell me your business plan, I will tell you not to do it, and you save a million dollars. I think a 10% finders fee for telling you not to do it is reasonable.

There's a place in town that has no parking... I have to be really careful here because... So, there's one place in town that has no parking for customers. We drive by it multiple times a day and it's all the other corners, you know in Downtown Branson... I'm not going to tell you where it is, but it's all the other corners. We've seen business after business go through there. I told Amy that it's the call of God upon my life. The next time I see someone working construction in that storefront, I'm going to walk in and say, "Stop everything! This should not be a storefront. No one will make the walk across the street. I've seen it." And I'll just name everything I've seen in there.

I don't want bad business for you, but you should seek counsel before you go rent a building. You should seek counsel before you rent a theater in this town. And all God's people said... Amen.

If I came to you and said, "Hey, guess what? This year, I'm opening a theme park in Branson." See, you're laughing at me. "And I'm going to compete against Herschend Family and probably, within five years, I'll be blowing them out of the water."

No, you know what? They've got over fifty years of experience there. What would I do if I'm going to open a theme park? Do you think I should sit down and talk to Jack and Pete Herschend? I should

probably sit down and realize they're not just guys that oversee things, they're the guys who literally, with hammers and nails, built the place.

We see things going well and think we can do that. Seek wise counsel. Don't go to war, don't build a theme park, don't start a business, don't choose a major because you think... If you choose a major without talking to someone in that field, that's foolishness. That's why they have this thing called job shadowing. Go see if you want to do it.

It didn't take me long to figure out I wasn't going to be a doctor. That's because I can't stay awake when I see blood. Don't you think it's important to stay awake when you're doing surgery? I think that's a very important thing. And it took the experience, it took time and it took talking to people to realize this isn't it. Some of it's a necessary ending. You need that to end so you can go and pursue what God has called you to do. You find that through seeking counsel, whether that be your parents, someone else in the field, or someone who has tried it and it didn't work. Learn the lessons.

3. Just do it.

After you've sought the counsel... I actually stole this third point. It's not my original idea. I think it's trademarked. Do you know anybody who struggles from analysis paralysis? They never make a plan and they never do anything because they are always fearful. They never do anything because "If I decide to go down this road, there's a lot of risk involved here."

Let me just tell employees who are tired of the boss making more money than they do. There were probably years he didn't. There were probably years she didn't. You're in a company that started up ten years ago. I've heard I don't know how many stories about how in the first several years, not only was there no money made, they drained out their life savings. That's called risk and business is about risk and reward. You show up, work a certain number of hours, and get paid for that. That person is being rewarded because they did it. What are you hold back on? What are you waiting for this year? Do something. Get after it.

You're like, "What if I make the wrong decision?" If you start with making sure what you're planning aligns with God's purposes and you seek the counsel of other people, put your plan into motion and do something with it. Start the business. Close the business to do something else. Get engaged. Get married. Have children. These are all decisions that if you've sought the counsel, do it.

Scripture says, in Ecclesiastes 9, ***10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*** You live now under the sun and, under the sun, you get after it.

Somebody says, "Well, I've got a plan..." I talked with an artist, a musician years ago who was passionate about his instrument, but he couldn't get a job in town, so he was waiting for the perfect job. I said, "The perfect job for you right now is Home Depot, Lowes, Target, Walmart... whoever is hiring. Go get that job until the perfect job come along." That's because in the grave, where you are going, all that activity ceases.

Proverbs 16: 3 says, **Commit to the Lord whatever you do...** “Lord, I have prayed about this. I know it aligns with the purposes of your word and for my life. I have asked countless people who I know are healthy voices, other people who are aligning their lives with God’s word. Put my plan in place. I feel I have a good plan. I am doing it. I am getting after it, so I am committing this to you.” What a great prayer to pray at the beginning of 2018. “Lord, here’s the direction I feel you are leading me. Here’s what I’m going after.” **...and he will establish your plans.** So, you're up to this point in your planning.

4. Be open to the Lord changing your plans.

And all God’s people said... Amen. Now this is in balance. It’s not don’t plan because the Holy Spirit may reveal something to you in May; plan it, get after it, but understand that it may change. In James 4... The context here is James is speaking to an offender. Who is the offender? The offender is an arrogant, business man, someone who says, “I’m going to get after it, I’m going to go, I’m going to make money and profit...” You know people like this. I’ve got people like this in my life. “I’m going to get after it and there ain’t nothing stopping me.”

That’s the attitude he is speaking to when James says this: **13 Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”** Don’t forget to inquire of the Lord. Don’t forget everything we’ve talked about up to this point. **14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.** What he’s saying is you be careful with that attitude; you may put a plan into place and you may run after it and come heck or high water, you’re accomplishing it, but be very careful with that attitude.

15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” Even after you establish a plan and get after it and do it, throughout the execution of that plan, throughout the whole time, “Lord, I’m headed in the direction I feel you’ve called me to. I’ve tried my best to align everything. We have prayed and we have sought wisdom on this and now I want you to establish these plans. I want you to have the Holy Spirit call me by name if I’m doing something or proceeding in a way that does not bring glory and honor to you.

It’s interesting... We talked a lot about life and school and relationships and business, but when the Lord is asked, when Jesus is asked about the cost of discipleship, how much it will cost to follow Jesus, he uses two examples and these two examples are planning examples. He’s going to say, “Before you decide to follow me, before you become a Christian, you need to think things through, you need to have a plan before you become a Christian.”

It kind of goes against all of us who grew up with the altar call. The Lord’s not going to be speaking here in Luke 14... If you have your Bibles, you can turn there. He’s not going to be speaking of an emotional appeal that sometimes we run to in the church where we stir up people’s emotions and get them down to an altar and they’ll give their life to Christ. Jesus says, “Before you give your life to me, you need to think something through. Do you have what it takes to finish what you start?” Anybody can start. Anybody can start a new business. Anybody can start a new show. Anybody can start their degree

program. But, do you have what it takes to finish it? If you don't want to be ridiculed for having an inability to finish... This is what Jesus says. And again, the context is how much does it cost to follow Jesus?

Jesus says, **28** *"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?"* If you've ever general contracted your own house... I've done one and only one; I'll never do it again in all of my life because if you do your own house, it's roughly going to cost you 40% more than you planned. That's because I don't know how to build a house and there's a skill in being a general contractor. And all the general contractors said... Amen. Go hire one of those guys because they know how to do a spread sheet. He says, before you go do this, you need to sit down and figure out what you want, how much it's going to cost, and then you have the money to cover it.

He goes on to say, **29** *"For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it..."* I think about this passage every time I drive by these unfinished subdivisions in our community. There's one of them up here where I think the people went to jail over it. I know there was fraud and stuff involved there, but you don't want to have a neighborhood full of foundations and all the money is gone and you can't finish building it. *"...everyone who sees it will ridicule you, 30 saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'"* This person walked an aisle, gave their life to Jesus, and they didn't have what it takes to follow Jesus. They didn't plan it. They didn't consider it. They didn't think it through.

He uses another illustration. This illustration is of a king. **31** *"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?"* I'm on the battlefield, I have 10 and I was planning on doing the William Wallace thing and storming them. I was going to take them out, but they've got 20? I need to change my plans. This is going to be costly and I will lose.

32 *"If he is not able, he will send a delegation..."* He'll go the diplomatic route, not on the battlefield. *"...while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. 33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."* It takes everything. When you make your plan to follow Jesus, when you give your life to Christ, he says, before these two illustrations, you have to have what it takes to hate your father and mother, your son or your daughter. He's not speaking there of being dishonoring to parents; he's using that hyperbole and that strong language to say following me requires an undivided allegiance. "I need you to prioritize me over your family. Don't follow me unless you can see it to the end."

I've been thinking about that. We had a term in the church we grew up in and we used it all the time. The term was *backslidden*. We used to do a welcome time. We were a small church. We used to do a welcome time and the pastor would stand up and say raise your hand... This is exactly how he said it and then we brought you a guest card. "Raise your hand if this is your first time or your first time in a long time." I can remember, at 10 years old, thinking he just called out all the backslidden people in the church. Raise your hand if this is your first time or if you chose for the last three years not to walk with the Lord. We called it out. It was called *backslidden*.

I'm wondering if they were really backslidden Christians or were they just not Christians? Maybe we had a revival and got people spun up and they came down and they gave their life to Jesus, but they didn't think it through. They started the foundation, but they didn't have what it takes to complete it. I'm not against altar calls. We had one last week, but think through the cost.

So, how does this affect us as a church family? I know for some of you that love numbers, the planners are going to love this last part here. But, talking about 2017 as a church family, we're in a planning week this week and into next week. All of our teams will be meeting on the seventh, next Sunday after the service.

We don't talk a lot about numbers around here, but numbers are important information for us to make decisions on. We don't keep every number on you, but all of you who so willingly gave your thumb print out there at the children's station, we thank you for that because we've been deducting the 10% from your bank account. I just love people and how freely... "Yeah, I'll give you my thumb print; what else you want?" We'll get a mug shot and your social security and that's it. We don't keep track of numbers, but we keep enough track so we can make good decisions and see what the Lord is doing in our church.

I'm going to give you three numbers that say a lot. They help us plan for 2018 and they help us say here's what we've done well, here's what we probably need to get better at or we definitely need to change or add into.

We'll start with the average weekly attendance. Our average Sunday morning attendance is 1,775 people on campus. We have grown every year over the previous year for the past 10 years. So, we've been growing, but our growth rate is slowing down. This number is 1% higher than 2016. So, our growth rate has slowed, even though we're still growing and there are several reasons for that. One may be because you have a pastor that often tells people we're going to do everything we can to keep from going to three services. So, I've asked the Lord to change that in me in 2018. That's probably not the best thing to say to a congregation when every pastor you saw on social media last week was pumping up growth: "Get everybody you can to the Christmas eve services." I just hope these churches have the same amount of enthusiasm for what to do with all these people in 2018.

Our growth rate has slowed down, but I'll give you this number. Baptisms are the highest they've ever been in a year at our church. There were 194 people that stepped into the water to tell people they have made the decision to follow Jesus.

This is another important number. We have 132 new church members. Here's why these numbers are important for us to figure it out. One, these numbers are all growing, but technically, new members should be more than baptisms.

I look at this and our attendance grew by 1% in 2017, but what's interesting is that our giving grew by 110%. So, those two things tell me that your economy is doing better... How many think the economy is doing better in Branson? Four business owners applauded, and they really have nothing to compare it to from last year. Anyway...

That could be part of it for some areas of the country, but another explanation for our giving rate going up much higher than the attendance rate is that your core is becoming very strong. I do want to say this to our church family. There is a strong committed group, there's a strong core here at Woodland Hills Family Church and we need to stay committed to inviting more people. With the addition of the cabin that we paid for with cash in 2017, we believe that we can handle between 2,000 and 2100 people on a given Sunday in our two service times, four services between the Castle and the Chapel.

What we want to encourage you to do, as you make your plans in 2018, we want you to just consider the Sunday column, that gathering as a church family is not like your fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh priority. That as you're making your other plans as a family, you just simply tell your kids, "Hey, listen, gathering with the church family is important. That's the purpose of fellowship, getting together with other believers. We're not going to make church attendance something we do if we've got nothing better to do. It's going to be a priority for us."

If you were baptized this year, here's what I want to say. Many of you did become new members of our church, but many of you did not. That part of your planning is to say, "Okay, I've been attending for a long time, I'm no longer a guest, I'm a follower of Jesus, I'm going to commit to this church and I'm going to serve. I'm going to plug in and I'm going to find my place. I'm going to become a member. I'm going to find out where they need me and I'm going to be there."

For some, serving... I was joking with somebody earlier this morning. We need greeters and sometimes people are like, "I greet until the service begins and then I don't want to miss anything." We'd love for our greeters to have the attitude of "We've got a lot of guests coming here each week and I'm going to stay here at my post to greet new people and welcome them and tell them we're glad that they're here."

And then a lot of new members that haven't found their place yet, just make that part of your planning for 2018.

We've had a great year at Woodland Hills. We're thankful for each and every one of you. If this is your first time at Woodland Hills, we're glad that you're here. If you do not have a church family, we're grateful you're here and we encourage you to come back next week as we kick off a new series called *Seven*. We're going through Proverbs 6: 16-20. The first message next week is on humility and I'll be preaching that. It's a message on humility and I promise you it'll be the best message on humility you've ever heard in your life. Oh, good, that one worked. I tried it out on the band and they were all like, "Huh, well that was kind of arrogant. Oh, okay, that was a joke."

Again, just making Woodland Hills your family as you are pursuing the Lord in your life, to just think through the purposes of your life, to think through the purposes of your church, and to align all of your plans with those.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for our time. I thank you for this church family, what you've done here in 2017 as we are in our 16th year as a church. We're grateful for what you do here and what you do through us and we want everything we plan and everything we do to bring glory to

you. If we're thinking of a plan right now that does not do that, we ask that you call us by name on that. We want to make sure everything we do aligns with the purposes.

As we budget, as we plan for children and student ministry, we want to be faithful to your purposes because we know it's your purposes that prevail, so I want everything I plan personally and everything we plan as church to reflect that heart. May we seek good guidance from other people and get after it in 2018, committing all of our ways to you.

It's in the name of Jesus that everyone agreed and said... Amen.