

Theme: 2020, in hindsight.

- I. The “new normal” of obedience to the truth
- II. Loving concern for our brothers and sisters
- III. The Word of the year

Since you have purified yourselves by your obedience to the truth, so that you show sincere brotherly love for each other, from a pure heart love one another constantly,²³ because you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.²⁴ For

**All flesh is like grass,
and all its glory like a flower of the grass.
The grass withers, and the flower falls,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.**

And this word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.

Every year, dictionaries pick a “word of the year”. This year, Merriam-Webster chose “pandemic.” Others chose “unprecedented,” “chaos,” “chaotic,” and last but not least “lockdown.” While those ring true, they aren’t the way we expected the year to go when it started. Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20. So with our 20/20 hindsight, for a few minutes tonight we’ll look at 2020, in hindsight.

When the ball dropped on January 1, which one of us dreamed we would spend most months this year spaced six feet apart, sporting masks? Yet social distancing may help us understand the purity laws God put in place for his people. If you came in close contact, you needed to wash, or worse, if you became infected, you needed to quarantine until the priest proclaimed you pure. That’s the picture our text begins with: “**Since you have purified yourselves by your obedience to the truth.**” You have become pure. Spiritually speaking, that doesn’t happen by handwashing or social distancing; this purity from sinful contamination comes “**by obedience to the truth.**”

“**Obedience.**” That reminds of our 2020 experiences. Obedience, or lack thereof, as brutality hits the streets. In hindsight, 2020 was an election year; we got to review our role as members of God’s kingdom and our obedience as citizens of an earthly government. But that isn’t the obedience God’s speaking of here. This obedience conforms to “**the truth.**”

How can you do that? Not by “following the science” or getting the right news source. Don’t you find it an odd turn of phrase, though, “**obedience to the truth**”? Might as well follow facts or admit accuracy. Still, when the Bible talks about truth, it’s not arguments people raised in 2020, although we do find many of the answers here. No, the truth is God’s truth, the Word of God. How do you obey the Word of God? Obedience begins with hearing but doesn’t stop there. It then takes the words to heart and molds the mind. Obedience is an attitude that wants to do what someone else wants. “**Obedience to the truth,**” then, is nothing other than trusting God’s Word. By believing the Word of God, we become pure—free from sin’s deadly disease.

As 2020 began, people called it the year of perfect vision. People began planning how to run businesses, organize homes, and live life. But hindsight is 20/20. What we didn’t see coming derailed our dreams.

God's plan for 2020 is on track, though. He also has a goal for your faith, "**obedience to the truth.**" His goal is "**that you show sincere brotherly love for each other.**" This "brotherly love" is the affection brothers and sisters show to one another. In hindsight, 2020 forced us to rethink how we can show brotherly love for one another. Our nation began to talk in greater detail about racism. And while that may be a good start, this brotherly love goes beyond that. The care we have for families. The concern we show for the brothers and sister. But social distancing and isolation have put distance even in families. In hindsight, doesn't that give us new appreciation for our brothers and sisters here in church? Especially after a couple months not meeting in person.

This love God wants is greater than warm feelings or the excitement of seeing brothers and sisters after a couple months apart. God's goal is that we "**from a pure heart love one another constantly.**" In other words, guiltless, unashamed love. The word "love" here is different from brotherly love. This is self-sacrificing love. Love that gives everything, even your life, for the good of another. Love willingly surrenders riches to aid the needy. Love relinquishes freedom for the well-being of a neighbor. Love not all about me or my opinion, but that's centered in *you* and what *you* need.

New Year's Eve provides us a great time to reflect on the past year. It allows us to look on the year with 20/20 hindsight. Looking back lets us learn the lesson. Not a lot of people would call 2020 a good year. Roughly a tenth of a percentage of our population perished in the pandemic. We focus on our own mortality, too. Unless the Lord Jesus returns first, one day each and every one of us will have a date with death, as Peter reminds us in a quotation of Isaiah. "**All flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flowers of the grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall.**"

For all the death and destruction 2020 brought with it, the seasons still stayed the same. Spring turned into summer, summer to fall. The grass grew tall. Maybe you had to cut it. Maybe this year it was higher priority since more people were home more often. Some people planted gardens. Others couldn't. But winter in Wisconsin wiped out grass and flowers. People are the same. We're here one season. Gone the next. We live 70, 80, 90 years if God is willing. One day, our strength dries up; our heart rates drop.

I don't remind you of those things to paint a bleak and hopeless picture of the end. You know this already. Yet as we reflect on the end of the year, we reflect on the end of life. Human flesh is frail. Just look at the greats in the history books. Do you *love* Socrates, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus?

And if that's all we can ever hope to achieve, what hope do we have at building a lasting legacy? This fragile flesh fades fast. We live, and we die. Throughout our lives, we sin. Look back at 2020 with 20/20 hindsight, we have to admit we have not always obeyed the truth. Sure, we may have had more time on our hands, but did you spend more of it in the truth of God's Word? Speaking of "**obedience to the truth,**" how well did you obey the authorities God has put in place—on both sides—in 2020? Which prevailed in your life this year: your agenda, or God's? All these events conspired together were God's plan, yet how often didn't we complain about this decision or that rather than turning to our gracious God in prayer for those who made the decisions? And then there's the love. Did you act the way that made sense to you, or act out of greatest concern for "the least of these," your brothers and sisters, both weak and strong? Our love, strong one moment, fades the next just like the flowers of the field. We have not loved God and people as he wants in 2020. Maybe you, with 20/20 hindsight, have more trouble seeing how you have "**purified yourself by obedience to the truth**" than you can see your own guilt, shame, sin. All our glory surely amounts to flowers. They look good in their season. Yet the best we have to offer is temporary beauty; the worst, worthless weeds.

But "**you have been born again—not of perishable seed, but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.**" In 2020, God's Word was still acting according to his good purpose. Jesus was still at work in this living Word. The Word of God was not contaminated by coronavirus. It was not polluted by politics. And Jesus was working, sending his Spirit through his Word all year. We have a few new faces among our church family who joined us in 2020. We had a number of baptisms, too. In baptism, you also were born again. Born again, so you cannot die again, because it is the living and enduring Word of God that worked in your baptism. The living word of God gives life. God has been at

work in his Word the whole time, calling you to repentance, reminding you of your regeneration, rebirth by the Word of God.

You also were born again into a “forever family,” the family of Jesus. You were born again by the Word about Jesus. In the Word of God Jesus reveals his obedience to the truth: quiet submission to the Father’s will. Jesus lived with 20/20 vision, set on his goal of saving you. So he lived in love for his mother and brothers and sisters—those who delight in the living and enduring Word of God. And he loved from a pure, guiltless heart. His love gave all, even his life; more than a few agonizing hours on a cross, but some 33 years of perfect obedience and sacrificial love. He gave up more than his freedom or his opinion, but the comforts of heaven to give you new birth into his life, death, and resurrection. When you heard this Word of God, you also were joined to it—reborn; buried with Christ and also raised with him. Now your pure hearts love one another, and we learn the lessons of 2020, in hindsight.

So what is the word of the year? “Pandemic?” Pales in comparison to the sickness of sin. Sin kills 100% of all people. It claimed the life of our Savior, who took away your sin. “Unprecedented?” The problems we faced this year may have seemed insurmountable but rest assured, God has a plan. The world turns on itself in rage every year, not just in 2020. “Chaos?” God will not let anything get out of his control. “Lockdown?” The Word of God is not on lockdown. It continues to spread as Jesus sends his Spirit, who works in and through the living and enduring Word of God.

No, our Word of the year in 2020 will be the same as 2021. It’s the same word as 2019 and 2018, too. In fact, it is the Word for all eternity. The Word of God encompasses all we need for our Christian life, because this Word points us most clearly to Jesus our Savior. Our word for 2020? **“This word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.”** Our Word is the gospel, the good news of Jesus. The gospel ruled the world in 2020, as God looks down in love at his children made pure by Jesus. The gospel rules pure hearts filled with love for God and his children. Through the gospel you have been born again to live in purity before God forever.

In hindsight, there may be some things we wish we could make better about 2020. So make 2021 better than 2020. Spend more time in the Word of God that gives you new life and causes you to endure into eternal life! We will be rolling out a plan to read the entire Bible in the coming year. Read the Word about Jesus. Hindsight is 20/20. But 2020, in hindsight, was a year of great opportunity to reflect on the truth of God’s Word, to read it, learn it, take it to heart, inwardly digest it. The gospel message of Jesus your Savior will endure into eternity, where we will, with all God’s ransomed people, forget all the troubles of 2020, and live in the glory of our Savior-God. Amen.