What Stunts Our Congregational Growth?

Introduction:

I. I mentioned this morning that I have been doing a small series of lessons concerning our growth as Christians.

   A. A few weeks ago we related the biblical qualities that help us understand if we are disciples of Christ.

      1. Am I living in the Word of the Lord.
      2. Do I demonstrate love for others.
      3. Am I bearing fruit for the Lord.

   B. We also recognize signs that show our growth spiritually.

      1. I recognize my worthlessness and my worthiness.
      2. I recognize the necessity to follow Truth and Love.
      3. I am both confident in my salvation and cautious.

   C. This morning we noticed areas that can stunt my personal growth spiritually.

      1. Sin.
      2. Suffering.
      3. Fatigue.

II. Tonight, I want to conclude this series of lessons but noticing traits that can stunt our spiritual growth as a congregation.
A. And as we get started this evening we need to initially indicate that congregational growth as a whole begins with us individually.

1. Therefore if we are working to grow spiritually as individuals and we are avoiding the things in life that could stunt our personal growth then as a group of Christians our congregation will indeed grow as well.

2. Yet, there are also a few things in which we need to be aware as a congregation to insure that work and service for the Lord never wavers!

Discussion:

I. One of the struggles that congregations might face that hinders their effectiveness is apathy.

A. Apathy is the enemy of godly zeal and faith!

1. The dictionary defines apathy is the absence or suppression of passion, emotion, or excitement. It is a having a lack of interest in or concern.

2. When someone is apathetic then they simply have no desire to give themselves to a particular endeavor whether partially or fully.

3. Therefore when leaders are attempting to encourage and motivate others, someone that is struggling with apathy will tend to step aside and be uninspiring to the task at hand.

B. An examine of a congregation that was struggling with apathy was the church in Laodicea.

1. The Lord relates that this congregation was neither cold nor hot; they were “lukewarm.”

Revelation 3:15-16
“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot,[fn] I will vomit you out of My mouth.”

2. Jesus directed this congregation that they develop zeal!

Revelation 3:19
“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”
C. Godly zeal is necessary in being a Christian.

1. The Apostles needed to have attitudes that were zealous so that they could transform their lives and be bold in the face of opposition.
   
   a. The Apostle Paul could have been discouraged due to the fact that he was not like the other Apostles; however this did not deter him from having the passion to fulfill the Lord’s will.

   I Corinthians 15:9-10
   “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

   b. Peter and John because of their boldness were able to stand up for the Lord even in the face of great opposition.

   Acts 4: 13, 19-20
   “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.
   “But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.””

   c. These men were not indifferent in their service and labor for the Lord, they channeled their zeal were bold and labored more abundantly for the Lord’s cause.

   d. When we fight off apathy and work to be encouraging and bold then when we face adversity and difficulties we will overcome and also inspire others to do the same.

2. Yet, let us be careful because our zeal and enthusiasm must be coupled in God’s Truth!
a. Paul’s heart agonized because he desired that the people of Israel would turn to the Lord and be saved. Israel had a zeal for God however it was not based in the Truth of Christ.

Romans 10:1-2
“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”

b. There are many in our world today that have a zeal for the Lord, they have great enthusiasm for the Lord; however because of many reasons; false teaching, denominationalism, and theological error; their zealous efforts are not based in God’s Truth, His Word!

c. Jesus related that such would be the case!

Matthew 7:21-23
“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

d. We must study God’s Word to insure that our zeal and passion are indeed coupled with God’s Truth!

e. What a tragedy for someone who has a great zeal and enthusiasm is lost because they did not follow God’s precious Word. Such a thought ought to motivate us to be more zealous to reaching out to others and showing them the Lord’s way more completely.

C. Let us endeavor to not allow apathy to creep into our hearts and lives! Let us recognize the zealous heart of our Lord to provide for us a sacrifice, so that we might gain salvation.

1. This ought to motivate us to be more zealous and enthusiastic in our lives and promoting His love for others.
II. Another issue that can hinder the work and spiritual growth of a congregation is conflict!

A. Indeed we can all think of examples in which the Lord’s church suffered greatly due to conflicts that existed within the congregation.

1. The church in Corinth had several conflicts in which Paul dealt with in his first letter to them.

   a. One of the prominent issues was their lack of unity within the congregation.

   b. Their lack of unity was causing difficulties:

      1) In our attitudes towards each other (I Corinthians 1:12 – “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, etc).

      2) In their acceptance of sin (I Corinthians 5).

      3) In going to the unrighteous to settle differences. (I Corinthians 6)

      4) Even in their worship, they would not take the Lord’s Supper together. (I Corinthians 10:20-34)

2. Shortly after the church began in Jerusalem a dispute took place that was causing the church to struggle.

   Acts 6:1
   “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”

   a. This conflict was causing problems and the Apostles recognized that something needed to be done.

   b. Therefore they selected certain men to several over this problem so that it could be corrected.

B. Today we ought not to despair if (and when) conflict occurs in the church.
1. Since the church is made of individuals that have different personalities, different backgrounds, different thoughts and thoughts, and therefore different perspectives; then clashes will sometimes take place.

2. So what do we do when problems occur.

   a. Conflicts within the church can many times be stopped also most immediately when we all have a desire to solve the issue.

   b. This means we must develop humble hearts and not allow different perspectives to be taken personally!

   c. We must be willing to work together to overcome these types of conflicts.

3. Yet, many times conflict takes place in congregations due to theological issues.

   a. Again this should not surprise us because we see theological issues taking place during the time of the first century church.

      1) When the doors of the church opened to the Gentiles many of the Jews required these Gentiles to be circumcised before they would accept them.

          Acts 15:1
          “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

      2) This became such a conflict within the church that Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem and they “studied” with the Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church.

      3) Through their study they recognized that the Lord’s desire was that circumcision was not a God given directive under the New Testament Law.

   b. Today conflicts still take place within congregations due to theological issues.

      1) To deal with such we ought to be willing to deal with such quickly by opening up God’s Message in proper Bible study.
2) We each must have an open heart and humble heart to Message of Deity submitting to the answer that is in God’s divine Word to us.

3) If we have the desire to know and follow God’s Word then we can solve theological problems and conflicts.

4) Sadly we have seen situations where adhering to God’s Word was of less importance to personal desires and wants. Let us not be someone that goes against God’s Word for personal reasons!

C. Conflicts will happen from time to time and if we do not appropriately deal with them then the church will suffer. Let us honor God and each other.

Ephesians 5:20-21
“giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

III. Another area where the church can be affected negatively is when we allow ourselves to be intimidated!

A. For many years the Lord’s church has thrived in a favorable culture and existence; yet I really wonder how much longer that is going to be the case.

1. It seems that more and more we stand for God’s Word and Truth that others put us down and attempt to intimidate us!

2. This is not true in every situation however our society does not have the same value of God that it once did.

3. We are being intimidated to accept sinful and wrongful lifestyle choices and if we do not then we are labeled bigots and intolerant.

B. The world has attempted to intimidate the church before.

1. We mentioned earlier about Peter and John standing before the Sanhedrin Counsel and other Jewish leaders where they attempted to threaten and intimidate them so they would stop teaching about Jesus.

   a. The Jewish leaders attempted to intimidate Peter and John questioning their authority.
Acts 4:5-7
“And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?””

b. After realizing the boldness of Peter and John and the fact that they demonstrated from where their authority came by healing the lame man in Jesus’ name; these leaders then attempted to intimidate them by openly threatening them.

Acts 4:16-17
“...“What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.””

c. Peter and John did not allow such to affect them they related that they would listen to God rather than man. (Acts 4:19)

d. These men again “threatened” them again before letting them go. (Acts 4:21)

e. Later these same rulers took all the Apostles and placed them into prison for teaching Christ. (Acts 5:17-18)

f. This happened on another occasion and the Apostles told the Jewish leaders that “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

2. We must understand that if we stand for the Lord, this old evil world is going to persecute us with the intention of stifling us from honoring and obeying God!

3. Jesus taught that if the world persecuted Him and attempted to intimidate Him then it will do the same to us.

John 15:20
“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”

C. So as members of the Lord’s kingdom what can we do to overcome the world’s intimidation?

1. We can remember the examples that God has given us of individuals that stood up for the Lord and were not intimidated.
   a. We can remember gentlemen like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah who were willing to be thrown into the fiery furnace rather than fall the threats of men.
   b. We can remember Daniel who was told he could not pray to God and when he did Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den.
   c. We have examples of the Old Testament prophets that were horrible abused because they delivered God’s word properly and faithfully.
   d. These men were faithful to God not matter what happened and we can do the same today!

2. To overcome the intimidation of this world we can rest in the promises of God.
   a. Jesus related that if we seek first His kingdom and glory that all our essentials will be provided for us. (Matthew 6:33)
   b. Jesus promised us that if we do not fear the intimidation of this world but remain faithful to Him, even to the point of dead, that He will reward us in Heaven.

Revelation 2:10
“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

b. When we keep our focus and attention upon Deity and our goal of Heaven then no matter what happens to us on this earth we have a safe abode with Christ!
Colossians 3:1-4
If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

d. When we put our complete trust, faith, and obedience in the Lord then we are more than conquerors, we will gain victory!

I Corinthians 15:57
“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

I John 5:4
“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

**Conclusion:**

I. I am so thankful to be a part of this great and wonderful congregation. Randa and I and our family are so blessed by you.

A. We pray that peace will exist and that our love shines for one another and those outside of these doors.

B. We pray that Washington Avenue will grow. That we grow in our spiritual faith and that we grow by bringing others to the Lord!

C. And we pray that this godly congregation stays strong and completely devoted to Christ and His cause.

II. In order for our congregation to grow spiritually and be able to stand for the Lord and His cause...

A. We must not allow apathy to creep into our hearts and minds.

B. We must overcome conflicts when they arise with hearts that are humble and submissive to one another and the Lord’s Word.
C. And we must not be intimidated by the wickedness and cruelty of this world, but properly focus upon the Lord who will give us the strength to overcome.

III. Tonight, do you need to examine your life to be sure that you are part of the Lord’s wonderful church?

A. Possibly as a Christian you have allowed apathy to affect you, possibly you allowed conflicts to interfere with your love and commitment to the Lord and His church, and possibly you allowed the world to intimidate you and you fallen away.

1. God still love you and cares about you. His family, the church, still loves you and we want to assist you.

2. Do you need to repent asking for the Lord for forgiveness, and do you our assistance to help you travel down the path of righteous?

3. We are willing to pray on your behalf right now and we are willing to do what we can to help you!

B. If you are not a child of God’s, why not consider becoming one!

1. We would love the opportunity to study God’s Word with you so that you can learn and know what God would have you to do.

2. If you know what to do in accepting the Lord’s grace and become a member of His church yet you have been putting it off; why are you waiting?

   Become a conqueror of this world by accepting the Lord’s saving grace through obedience, tonight!

C. If you are struggling with difficulties in life and need our prayers, we would be willing to pray for you!

D. Right now! Tonight! Come as we stand and sing!