

- ***READ Acts 2:40-47*** Acts 2 is such an integral portion of the Biblical and New Testament narrative for it is the establishment of the fulfillment of that which would serve as the body of those who had been forgiven of their sins and united together within Christ. Peter preaches this strong message that convicts the hearers of their part in having the Messiah and Son of God put to death. They ask in **verse 37**, *"Brethren, what shall we do?"* Peter then responds in **verse 38** with, *"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."* The message was clear and simple, and as we just read together many heard and obeyed. The early church grew in leaps and bounds.
- They were growing and thriving in so many different ways as we see at the end of **Acts 2**, and yet we would do well to understand that this growth didn't come without its share of obstacles and difficulties. The difficulties faced by the early church were varied and far reaching. They faced cultural obstacles such as the relationship between church and government, issues of racism, and slavery. They faced religious obstacles such as how to deal with Judaism and paganism. They faced practical obstacles such as how to handle persecutions, how to operate as a church, and how to support all off the work that was being done. Yes, they were experiencing growth, but it wasn't necessarily easy growth. They had their fair share of obstacles that they had to overcome.
- The exact same thing is true for us today. The Lord's churches have experienced, are experiencing, and Lord willing will continue to experience growth in numbers and strength of discipleship, but those things have, are, and will more than likely continue to be a reality even though there continues to be obstacles that are facing church growth. This morning, I would like for us to take some time thinking upon some obstacles that we face as we seek to grow this church in number and strength. There is some good work that is being done, and there continues to be good work that can be further done. Therefore, it is wise for us to consider some obstacles that we very well might face along the way so that we might be prepared to overcome those obstacles when we find ourselves facing them down the road as we seek to be a church that is growing mightily and prevailing. This lesson will be broken into two parts with the first we consider this morning looking at obstacles that we face in seeking inward growth. Then tonight we will consider obstacles we might face as seek to grow outwardly.

I. The Love of the World

A. We can't serve two masters.

1. Jesus makes it very clear in **Matthew 6:24**, *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despises the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."* The main point our Lord is trying to get us to understand is that we cannot have our hearts founded in two different places. If we are wanting to be faithful and growing disciples then we must put our full heart into the pursuit of spiritual growth in this life. We must devote every part of ourselves to living for the purpose of pleasing God and growing to be more like Jesus.
2. Unfortunately, this is much more easily said than done because the appeal of the world and this life is so strong. We live here in this world and there are innumerable parts of it that are enjoyable and fulfilling in different ways. It can be so easy for us to get distracted from our main goal of glorifying and pleasing God through growth by coming to love the world and the things within it. It is a difficult line to walk because there are many things of this world that are completely fine for us to enjoy and participate in. However, these things can't have our hearts. They can't consume us and God should consume us because if they do then we will see ourselves shrinking away from our growth and dedication to Christ through our times, effort, and energy being directed elsewhere.

B. Our love of the world could also be manifested in our being engaged in sin.

1. Not only could we love the perfectly fine parts of this world in a way that negatively impacts our ability to grow in our discipleship, but we must also recognize that our love for the sinful parts of the world will most certainly stunt our growth in becoming more like Jesus. John talks about the dangers of loving the world in **I John 2:15-17**.

2. In this text, we find John warning against disciples allowing themselves to get caught up in the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Disciples who give into anything that their flesh or eyes might desire, and disciples who are so caught up in their pride and arrogance are only hindering themselves from growing in their faiths. Jesus expects for His followers to be as He was on earth. He resisted all of those temptations as He went toe to toe with Satan in the wilderness, and set the standard that we are to follow. If we will resist these urges to love the world then these obstacles can be overcome and we can progress to growth in our faiths.

II. Traditions of Men

A. Traditions of the Apostles are not under consideration as being obstacles to growth.

1. There are some of the Christian faith who consider all traditions or practices to be on equal footing, but this simply isn't the case. We must recognize that there is a drastic difference between the Apostolic traditions that are found within the New Testament and the traditions that men have created that often help to fulfill the traditions of the Apostles.
2. We can read of Paul mentioning the Apostolic traditions that were handed down to the earliest Christians in **II Thessalonians 2:15** when Paul writes, *"So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us."* From this text we should understand that the Apostles had authority to dictate as the early church was to operate based upon them having been with Jesus and having been given a full measure of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:1-4**) and having been told by Jesus that they would lead. (**Matthew 19:27-30**)
3. We can understand what they would have us to do through the same ways that we reason today. We look at what they did, we look at what they said, and we look at logical conclusions we can draw from the two. These traditions are things that we do not have the liberty to alter or change, but we do have freedom in those things that have not been specified. It is in these areas that we can find obstacles if we approach man-made traditions in an inappropriate way.

B. Our manmade traditions should be changed to be as efficient and beneficial as possible.

1. These are traditions in which we have freedoms as to how they are carried out. Unfortunately, when it comes to traditions we often find people separating themselves into two camps. We have the anti-traditionalists and the pro-traditionalists. We have some people who want to do it simply because it has always been done, and then we have others who don't want to do something simply because it has always been done that way. Neither of these approaches are productive or beneficial.
2. Instead, we should approach traditions by asking the question, *"Is this tradition efficiently helping disciples to grow?"* That should be the goal of all of our traditions...to see people bettered by what we are doing. We could go a number of different directions with this, but I'll focus on only one that applies to our congregation here. Consider the change we made in how we schedule our Bible classes. We see in the New Testament that the church is to teach and edify its members (**Ephesians 4:11-16**), and the tradition to accomplish this was for who knows how long had been to have classes for four quarters within a year that either studied the same subject for three months straight or that studied a different subject on Sunday and Wednesday for those three months. It was decided that we would switch things up in an effort to better help our teachers and students by doing eight six week classes that would focus on a single subject. This would allow for students to keep their minds focused on the same thing for six weeks, and it would give teachers an easier time frame to be able to commit to. That is simply an example of not allowing a tradition to hinder an opportunity for growth, and that is exactly how traditions should be approached. Does it help or does it hinder? If it helps then let's keep doing it, but if it is not the best way then let's figure out what is the best way. Sometimes people get hung up when it comes to traditions, but we should not allow them to be an obstacle in our pursuit of growth.

III. Atmosphere of Complacency

A. Each congregation has its own atmosphere and culture that must be carefully cared for.

1. All of this talk about pursuing growth is something that we obviously need to be doing, but we must realize that a real obstacle to doing such is a congregational atmosphere of complacency. Excellence in any endeavor is something that must be conscientiously pursued. Whether we're talking about an athletic team or program, a business, or a church, past success and excellence does not ensure future success and excellence. This church has experienced great success in many different ways from growing in number, adding leadership, and growing in ability and works in the past 8-9ish years since its establishment, and if we want for that success and growth to continue then we must not allow for the atmosphere and culture of this church to be anything but one of a pursuit of excellence and growth.
2. We can look to the Scriptures and read about how the church that was Ephesus grew cold in their congregational culture by leaving their first love. In **Ephesians 2:1-10**, Paul writes that though they had formerly walked with the world they had now been shown mercy and grace which worked with their faith to produce their salvation. They were now to be those who only walked in the good works for which they had been created in Christ to do. In **Revelation 2:1-5** we read of Jesus commending them for the good that they had done, and yet He also rebukes them because it seems as if they had settled into a culture and atmosphere of complacency by allowing their deeds to no longer be motivated by their deep love for the Lord. It seems that this group of God's people were no longer on fire with passion for the Lord, but they were going through the motions, and were in need of repentance. **(v.5)**
3. This church was no longer growing mightily and prevailing for the Lord because they were no longer putting forth the effort and zeal to make such a thing possible. They were going through the motions, and for this Jesus rebukes them. We ourselves must be well aware of the atmosphere and culture of this congregation and make sure that it is always one that exudes excellence or else this complacent obstacle will halt our progress of growth and being strengthened.

B. We must stay well aware because we will never reach a point where we can truly stop growing.

1. There never comes a point in the life of a congregation or individual disciple where we can kick back and put things in cruise control. Everything that we do must be done with a purpose and towards a goal. This was Paul's mindset in **Philippians 3:12-14** as he writes to the Philippians concerning their need to stay focused on the goal ahead.
2. This goal is mentioned in **verse 14** and I am convinced that this goal was Paul's pursuit of being like Jesus in everything that he did. I am convinced of this not only because he wrote at least twice encouraging disciples to imitate him as he was imitating Christ in all things (**1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1**), but he also said that he lived in such a way as if Christ Himself was living through him. (**Galatians 2:20**) Paul's goal was to be as Jesus was, and he knew that reaching such a goal would only result in obtaining the prize of eternal glory in heaven with God. Yet, he could only do this by continually pressing forward. He wasn't allowed to take days off or take on an attitude of mediocrity. He wasn't going to allow that temptation and obstacle to hinder his journey, and we would do well to adopt that same kind of mindset.

IV. Those Who Cause Division

A. The early church had to deal with many issues caused by those who were divisive.

1. When a church is putting forth a concerted effort to help its members to grow then it needs to be ready for Satan's workers to sow seeds of division that can have a major impact on any growth that might be being worked toward. Those who seek to cause division and problems among the Lord's people hinder progress because instead of being able to focus on those things that lead to growth...disciples are having to focus on making sure that they are not divided and fighting against themselves.
2. This has been a ploy of Satan since the very beginning of the church. Throughout the New Testament after the establishment of the church we find men who caused division among God's people in various ways. Paul and Peter both have to address this issue:

- a) *"Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting." (Romans 16:17,18)*
- b) *"If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain." (I Timothy 6:3-5)*
- c) *"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith. But they will not make further progress; for their folly will be obvious to all, just as Jannes's and Jambres's folly was also." (II Timothy 3:1-9)*
- d) *"I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church." (III John 9,10)*

B. The divisions we face might look different, but they bring about the same result...failure to grow.

1. As we see in these verses sometimes those who cause divisions do so through false teachings. Sometimes they do so through being conceited and arrogant. Sometimes they do so through being malicious gossips and uncontrolled. Sometimes they do so through constantly complaining and grumbling as can be found in **Philippians 2:14 & James 5:9**. There seems to have been no shortage of people who were constantly thorns in the sides of the Apostles and early disciples as they were giving effort to grow and be strengthened. It was something they had to overcome.
2. The sad reality is that these type of people will hardly ever be satisfied with anything that the church might be doing to grow. They simply aren't happy unless strife and difficulty are in the air. Therefore, we must stand strong against those who might seek to divide us. We must stand up and speak up against them when they continually grumble and complain, and if it comes to it then we should follow the straight forward command of **Titus 3:10** which states, *"Reject a factious man after a first and second warning."* Those who cause division and strife are just like any other obstacle that might get in our way of growth. They must be faced and overcome so that we might reach the goals that are set before us of growth and excellence in all things.

No one ever said that those things that are worthwhile come easy. In fact, those things that are the most beneficial for us are those things that come with the most obstacles to obtain. Striving to be a church and a people that are growing mightily and prevailing is the greatest endeavor we can engage in, and yet we would be unwise to approach such a goal without understanding the difficulties that will be before us. This morning, each of us have been well informed of the difficulties before us, and may our great and mighty Father in heaven strengthen us to overcome these obstacles to His glory and praise. The obstacles might seem overwhelming to us, but we serve a great God who will strengthen us to do all things. May He truly be with us as we give every effort to grow mightily and prevail regardless of the obstacles without and within that we might face.