

- ***READ Acts 19:11-20*** Here in our theme text for this year, we find the inspired writer Luke focusing on great outward growth that was happening for the church in Ephesus. As Paul arrives in Ephesus we find him doing as he normally practiced by going to the synagogue and reasoning concerning Jesus and His Kingdom. He then moved on to doing the same thing within the school of Tyrannus. All while this is going on, we read that the Lord was working through Paul by performing “extraordinary miracles” through him.
- These efforts and others led to some great success that was being seen in Ephesus. **Verse 18** tells us that there were many who believed and came confessing their sins and turning from their wicked practices. We even see that so many magic books were brought and burned that the total value of such books was 50,000 pieces of silver. As we saw this morning from **Acts 2**, the church was experiencing a great measure of success in regards to adding numbers to the body of Christ.
- However, just as we noted this morning as well, this success didn’t come without there being obstacles that had to be overcome. In **verse 9**, we see that Paul had to overcome the hardened and disobedient hearts of those he was trying to teach. Later we see that one of the obstacles these people coming to the Lord had to face was being willing to lay aside their magic books. They had to give up their way of living in order to for Jesus to be magnified in their lives.
- This all goes to simply show us that success in outwardly growing the church is going to have to come by us overcoming obstacles that stand between us and having people become obedient to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In order for us to expand our numbers, we are going to have to be aware of such obstacles so that we might know how to overcome them. After focusing on the obstacles that face us in growing inwardly within this church, we will shift out focus this evening to focus on those obstacles that will face us as we are actively working to spread the Good News of Jesus all around us. Let’s begin by looking at some attitudes that must be overcome if we want to grow this congregation in numbers.

Obstacles Facing Outward Numerical Growth

I. Modernistic Attitudes Toward Religion and Faith

A. Postmodernism has created numerous issues when it comes to the consideration of religion and truth.

1. There are a couple of real issues that people of the world have with religion and faith as a whole, and we must be aware of such issues and attitudes as we seek to teach people of the Gospel and truths of our God. One such issue we face is the understanding by some that there is no absolute truth that must be understood and acknowledged as being true.
2. Back in 2016, Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year was “post-truth.” If you’re wondering what in the world that word means then don’t feel bad because it truly is not just a head-scratching word, but it is a truly head-scratching concept. This concept states that objective facts and truths should be relied upon less to shape public opinion and understanding, and that emotion and personal beliefs should have more sway. Right off the bat we see the issue with such a concept being accepted by those of the world! We are striving to take them a message that they are lost in their sins and in need of a Savior, But they might very well reject such a thing simply because it doesn’t fit their emotions or personal beliefs! It would be nearly impossible to get someone to acknowledge the truth the need if they are unwilling to even acknowledge truth.
3. Yet, we know that such a thing is absurd. If there is no truth then how can anyone claim anything? In fact(!), how can it be absolutely claimed that there is no truth if there is no truth? Surely we recognize that this reasoning is self-defeating. There are truths in the world, and they are what right shapes our understanding of this world. The truth that we are sinners in need of a Savior is a truth that absolutely sets us free! (**John 8:32**) The Bible even refers to itself as the “word of truth.” (**II Timothy 2:15 & James 1:18**) It is a truth that should bring us joy by realizing that we have hope that extends beyond this life.

4. However, that introduces a second point that not all people see religion and faith as being good and beneficial parts of this life. There are many who believe that religion and faith does more bad for this world than good. One particular website states that religion is bad because it promotes tribalism, anchors believers to the Iron Age, causes believers to be self-deceiving, diverts good deeds and intentions, teaches helplessness, and seeks to obtain power. We could spend a lot of time dissecting each of these accusations, but I am shedding light on them simply because I want to establish that some people have a real problem with religion, and it will be very difficult to persuade such people to listen and accept religious truths if they think in such a way.

B. These poor attitudes and misunderstandings have been around for a long time.

1. And yet this isn't all that much different from how things were back in Paul's day. The Apostle spent much time traveling all over the known world taking the Gospel to people of all walks of life. In Athens (**Acts 17:16-34**), Paul found people who approached religion from all sorts of angles. He spoke with those whom he deemed as religious, but they believed all sorts of different things in regards to religion. They even had an altar built to "AN UNKNOWN GOD." Paul takes this opportunity to logically reason with them that there must be a God, and that they were created in such a way to seek after Him. Through His teachings there were some who came to believe the words of Paul and became disciples of Jesus.
2. What I want for us to take away from Paul's efforts in Athens is the fact that we must be prepared to logically reason with those that we might have the opportunity to discuss Jesus. Some people might already have some sort of belief in Jesus, but at times there will be people who are not convinced at all that there is a Higher Being. We must be prepared to logically reason with them through the questions of whether or not there is a God and what that means in our lives. For those that look at religion with disdain, we must be ready to again take a step back and logically reason whether or not the misuses and abuses of religion are the fault of God or if they are the result of men who have distorted the will of God. These questions and issues are simply a result of the day, age, and culture we live in, but we can prepare ourselves to overcome these obstacles when we find ourselves facing them.

II. False Teachings

A. Teaching the truth sometimes demands "unlearning" that which has been taught.

1. Speaking of the mistakes of men, we need to recognize that much of the work we are trying to do in teaching the truth to those outside of the body of Christ is hindered by us first having to expose that which is falsely believed to be true. Sadly, much of our work in teaching the truth must first begin with the tearing down of false religious teachings so that we might be able to begin establishing a foundation of truth that faith might be built upon.
2. If you have never experienced this first hand then come talk to myself or Austin, Chuck, Duane, or Jason. Ask us about our experiences in trying to teach the truth of God's Word to those who for years have been taught things that are just simply contrary to the pure teachings of Scripture. Come talk to us about trying to teach people about the issues with denominationalism, about God's true plan for man's salvation, about the worship and work of the church. I'm pretty sure I can say with confidence that just about any of us who are active in trying to teach others would much rather have opportunity to teach someone who knows little to nothing about God because that is truly starting from a clean slate. It isn't to say that we can't or won't teach those who have been taught falsely, but it is to say that having to teach those who already have firm beliefs simply makes things much more difficult.

B. We can only overcome such an obstacle by having a proper knowledge of the truths of God's Word.

1. Just as we saw in regards to logically reasoning with those who aren't convinced of God or who see religion as a bad or negative thing, we must put in just as much effort making sure that we know the truths that are found within God's Word if we want to be able to teach others. It is one thing to be able to teach the truth to someone who knows or believes nothing, but it is a completely other thing to be able to teach someone who already has established beliefs concerning faith and Christianity.
2. Now there are some who would look at such effort to point out the misunderstandings of others as being mean spirited and rude, but we should greatly desire to be able to teach others accurately concerning belief in God. This was exactly what Priscilla and Aquila did when they came across Apollos as he was speaking boldly in the synagogue. **(Acts 18:24-28)** They realized that Apollos wasn't completely accurate in what he was teaching. Luke notes that he spoke well of Jesus, but had not become informed of baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and to be added to the body of Christ. Some today would have to look at this occurrence as being an instance where Priscilla and Aquila should've just let Apollos continue to do his thing since he obviously had faith and loved Jesus, but they saw the need to teach Apollos *"more accurately."*
3. I would like to point out the manner in which they did teach Apollos. Luke specifies that *"they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately."* They didn't get in an argument with Apollos. They didn't condemn or act hateful. They simply presented the evidence for what they saw him needing and they allow his honest heart to do the rest. This should be our goal in teaching those who we judge as not have accurate beliefs. We must be loving and caring, and we would do really well to make sure that we ourselves are first *"accurately handling the word of truth"* through having put in the proper effort to learn so that we might help others. **(II Timothy 2:15)** In our part of this country, we will face many religious people, and if we want to help lead them to the Body of Christ then we must be ready and prepared to lovingly show them the error of their understandings of God and His will for us.

III. The Draw of Other Churches

A. People are unfortunately looking for the wrong thing in churches.

1. Right along with the false teachings is the obstacle of trying to bring people into the Lord's church when there are so many churches out there that are so inviting for numerous reasons. When we consider our work here at this church, there really isn't much about us that is extravagant or mind blowing. We don't offer concert-like worship, fun and frolic, and you're definitely not going to see me repelling from the ceiling or riding in on a motorcycle. We are simply a spiritual family that focuses solely on spiritual things in an effort to honor God and show love towards our fellow man. Nothing fancy at all, and I don't apologize for that at all. We are simply Christians that make up this spiritual body that are focused on spiritual things. Our greatest concern is for souls and helping people be more like Jesus so that we can all be in heaven one day.
2. Now compare that to churches that are even within close proximity to here. Consider all of the things that they are offering to people in order to get folks through the door. We see recreation or all sorts and we see entertainment of all sorts as some of the biggest draws that cause people to come to these churches. This has led to an arms race where churches are constantly trying to outdo and one-up one another in the next cool thing that they offer, and the truth is that this is brilliant on the part of these churches. If they are wanting to get numbers through the door then why not pander to the fleshly mindsets that so many in the world possess? Why not offer recreation and entertainment to simply increase numbers? Why not teach things that make people feel good and that don't demand change or holding to a standard of holiness. I don't want to paint people in these churches as being evil hearted or wicked, but I do see them as not putting the focus on where it ought to be. In their zeal to get people in the door so that they might hear something about Jesus, they have simply lost their way.

B. We must stress the need for the church to always remain focused on spiritual things.

1. Sadly, it seems as if so many of these people who go to these churches aren't coming to grow closer to Jesus...the issue is that so many are coming to be entertained or to simply have a good time. They're looking for something that serves them. Add on top of our last point about false teachings. Which church is going to be more appealing: a church that teaches the need for change or the church that says that you are fine just how you are?
2. This sheds light on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the mission of the church is. The typical American version of the Christian church has for the most part been turned into a place where people go to be satisfied in fleshly ways. I don't mean that they are going to do things that are sinful per se, but I mean that they are looking to the church to provide things that we don't find the church seeking to provide within the first century. When we read the church age portion of the New Testament we find an institution that is fully set on the purpose of spreading the Gospel message so that men can be saved. The church began not with entertainment and recreation being offered, but it began by Peter telling men of their sin and their need of repentance. **(Acts 2)**
3. The church's mission is to save the souls of mankind through sharing the Living Water and Bread of Life that can cause the partaker to live forever. However, that isn't what we see being offered exclusively. Instead we see all sorts of recreation and entertainment that is used as a draw to get people in the door. This might seem wise on the outset as I mentioned earlier, but the reality is that the old saying is true. If you bring the people in with a biscuit then you're going to have to keep them with a biscuit. Here in this church, we are offering that which is truly needed to the masses, the Gospel message. And yet it is difficult to bring the people in because they are seeking something more than spiritual nourishment. The reality is that I don't think that anyone here is sorely lacking in the areas of recreation or entertainment. We enjoy both of those things in other ways which are appropriate, but when we think about our goals here as a church body, we care only for souls and what might help people get to heaven.
4. If folks within these churches that do such things take issue with these observations then I would gladly invite them to experiment and get rid of all of it. Get rid of the recreation and the entertainment. Simply focus on spiritual things as a church and see what happens. I believe the sad reality is that worldly and fleshly minded people would much rather be a part of a church that offers fun and doesn't demand that the people come to Jesus to be changed by His truth.

These obstacles and more that could be mentioned are simply roadblocks that we have to overcome as we give effort to share the truth of God's Word with those who are in need of it. While the Lord strongly wills for our success, we must recognize that Satan strongly wills for us to fail when we come up against these roadblocks to our outward numerical growth. May we remain resilient against these obstacles and give every effort with the strength that God supplies to overcome so that we might help this church to grow not just in strength but also in numbers. May it all be done to God's praise and glory.