

Better Way Apostolic Church – Bible Class

Subject: WHAT FACTORS BRING ABOUT GROWTH IN OUR LIFE?

God appeared to Jacob once again when he arrived at Bethel after traveling from Paddan-aram. God blessed him and said, “Your name is no longer Jacob; you will now be called Israel.” (Genesis 35:9-10)

PROBLEMS CAN BE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH.

God reminded Jacob of his new name, Israel, which meant “one who prevails with God” or “one who struggles with God.” Although Jacob’s life was littered with difficulties and trials, his new name was a tribute to his desire to stay close to God despite life’s disappointments.

Many people believe that Christianity should offer a problem-free life. Consequently, as life gets tough, they draw back disappointed. Instead, they should determine to prevail with God through life’s storms. Problems and difficulties are painful but inevitable; you might as well see them as opportunities for growth. You can’t prevail with God unless you have troubles to prevail over.

KEY BIBLE VERSE: Moses called all the people of Israel together and said, “Listen carefully to all the laws and regulations I am giving you today. Learn them and be sure to obey them!” (Deuteronomy 5:1)

SPIRITUAL GROWTH RESULTS FROM LISTENING TO AND OBEYING GOD’S WORD.

The people had entered into a covenant with God, and Moses commanded them to hear, learn, and follow his statutes. Christians also have entered into a covenant with God (through Jesus Christ) and should be responsive to what God expects. Moses’ threefold command to the Israelites is excellent advice for all of God’s followers. Listening is absorbing and accepting information about God. Learning is understanding its meaning and implications. Following is putting into action all we have learned and understood. All three parts are essential to a growing relationship with God.

KEY BIBLE VERSE: Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. (Romans 14:1)

RECOGNIZING WEAKNESSES IS OFTEN THE BEGINNING OF GROWTH.

What is weak faith? Paul is speaking about immature faith that has not yet developed the muscle it needs to stand against external pressures. For example, if a person who once worshiped idols were to become a Christian, he might understand perfectly well that Christ saved him through faith and that idols have no real power. Still, because of his past associations, he might be badly shaken if he knowingly ate meat that had been used in idol worship as part of a pagan ritual. If a person who once worshiped God on the required Jewish holy days were to become a Christian, he might well know that Christ saved him through faith, not through his keeping of the law. Still, when the feast days came, he might feel empty and unfaithful if he didn’t dedicate those days to God.

OUR RESPONSE TO OTHERS’ WEAKNESSES IS A MEASURE OF OUR PERSONAL GROWTH.

Paul responds to both weak brothers in love. Both are acting according to their consciences, but their honest scruples do not need to be made into rules for the church. Certainly some issues are central to the faith and worth fighting for—but many are based on individual differences and should not be legislated. Our principle should be: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in everything, love.

KEY BIBLE VERSE: All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. (1 Corinthians 9:25)

SPIRITUAL GROWTH RESULTS FROM DISCIPLINE.

Winning a race requires purpose and discipline. Paul uses this illustration to explain that the Christian life takes hard work, self-denial, and grueling preparation. As Christians, we are running toward our heavenly reward. The essential disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and worship equip us to run with vigor and stamina. Don't merely observe from the grandstand; don't just turn out to jog a couple of laps each morning. Train diligently—your spiritual progress depends upon it.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH RESULTS FROM SELF-DENIAL.

At times we must give up something good in order to do what God wants. Each person's special duties determine the discipline and denial that he or she must accept. Without a goal, discipline is nothing but self-punishment. With the goal of pleasing God, our denial seems like nothing compared to the eternal, imperishable reward that will be ours.

Prepare for Church Growth, Not Your Current Size

It's tempting for a small church pastor—or its congregational leaders—to say, "When we get larger, then we'll do such and such." But guess what. The nearly inviolable truth I've discovered is that you have to begin doing those necessary things while you're small. So establish a ministry work ethic that dares great things for the Kingdom—even, or perhaps especially, when your resources and personnel appear to be woefully limited.

We make a critical mistake when we say, "Well, some day when we have more people than we will do this or that." Excel when you are small. If you are waiting to grow before you begin doing things right, you will never grow.

Put the Larger Kingdom Front and Center

The Lord dealt rather severely with me in the first year of pastoring regarding our neglect of missions. At that time our monthly missions commitments were \$257; and in the first 8 months of my pastorate, we had not paid a single month's commitments. Finances were tight, and I figured we needed the money more than the missionaries.

Our deacons decided to take one Sunday's offering and pay at least two month's missionary commitments and not pay any church bills, including my salary, until those two months had been paid. That was an astronomical sum to me — \$514 — and our weekly income was only between \$200 and \$300. We never told the congregation about that commitment, but that Sunday the

offering was more than \$1,300. I was amazed. The next day in prayer I asked the Lord what lesson He wanted me to learn and I heard Him say, George, I am not interested in building this church on your personality. I am interested in building it on Mine. If you put Me front and center, I will take care of you. Seventeen years later, our church was giving \$45,000 a month to missions.

Staff for Growth, Not for Maintenance

Many church boards do not understand this vital principle, but our missionaries do. We do not wait until there is a national church before we send a missionary. We do not say, “Oh, when that country has enough Christians, we will send a missionary.” No. We send a missionary ahead of the harvest so the sowing can begin.

Church boards may say, “You know, when we get enough youth or enough children, then we will get a youth pastor or a children’s pastor.” It does not happen that way. We have a great talent pool of gifted young people coming into the ministry — and they are looking for open doors. They are willing to work hard, roll up their sleeves and sacrifice. Let us use them.

Near the end of my tenure as pastor I noticed our junior high group was small and struggling — probably about a dozen kids on a regular basis. The board was reluctant to bring on a full-time junior high pastor because our resources were stretched tight. But they took a step of faith and hired a junior high pastor. One year later we had 200 junior high kids.

Look for staff who will become missionaries within the context of your church. And do not be afraid to step out in faith. In 17 years, we never added a pastoral staff member we could afford to add; but we acted in faith with prudence and believed if we had carefully selected the right person, growth would come.

Glorify the Lord with Excellence

This principle is a catchall: Simply do things right. Glorify the Lord with excellence. Take care in planning the worship services. Do not grab a message at the last minute or off the Internet. Take time to study to show yourself approved of God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed. Do not be a paranoid or controlling leader. Remember it is the Lord’s church, not yours. Hold on to things lightly. Give other people room to flourish in their gifts. Trust people. Treat others as you would like to be treated. Keep order in the house of the Lord. Do not run over people, but do not let them run over you either.

You have noticed that I have been talking about the human side of church growth. I did that deliberately — not in any way to diminish the fact unless the Lord builds the house we labor in vain.