

Looking Forward, Looking Back 2010

M. W. Bassford, 4-18-10

Well, friends, we've now reached the midpoint Sunday for the month of April, and those of you who keep track of such things know what's coming next. Today marks the anniversary of the Sunday I began my work as a preacher here for the Joliet church. I've now been here for four years, and I am truly thankful for the kind providence that led me here to share my life and my work with all of you, and I hope that I will have the opportunity to continue here for a long time.

Because this is a day of such personal significance, it offers me a useful occasion to reflect on our overall spiritual health and the direction we're headed. Of course, I'll never know for sure, but I suspect that there are few churches in the entire brotherhood that have as much reason for rejoicing in the past year as we do, and as much reason for optimism in the coming year. I've been involved with various churches of Christ for my entire life, and I can't remember ever seeing a church as richly blessed as we were throughout the last two-thirds of 2009 and the first third of 2010. We've benefited from a number of other Christians from other churches placing membership with us, but more than that, we've seen a tremendous amount of genuine numerical and spiritual growth. This hasn't been a fluke, either; it's been the result of our work and God working with us. Because this is so, there's no reason to believe that the next year can't be even more successful at fulfilling the Lord's plan for us than this past one has been.

However, if we want that kind of spiritual success, we have to stay committed to the godly behavior that has brought us here and continue to work to improve. This morning, then, we're going to identify what's really been going right, and where we can go in future. Let's look at these things in the 2010 edition of looking forward, looking back.

What We Have

Let's begin this examination by looking at what we have right now as a congregation, at what our overall spiritual health is. Along these lines, one of the most important assets we possess is **GOD'S BLESSING**. We know this because the Scripture tells us that if we have anything good, it's from God. Look at James 1:17. Once we wrap our minds around the idea that we're here because God got us here, that's both humbling and reassuring. It's humbling because it means that we can't take any of the credit for the good things that have happened here. We aren't responsible for people obeying the gospel, or getting restored to fellowship, or maturing spiritually. Those things aren't my doing as the preacher, and, although I'm thankful beyond words for the amazing eldership we have here, they aren't the elders' doing either. Those things happened because God used the saints here as His instruments to accomplish His purpose.

On the other hand, though, once we recognize that God is responsible for the blessings we've seen, that takes a lot of weight off our shoulders. We don't have to be super-competent or super-wise to teach our neighbors the gospel or raise our children in the discipline of the Lord or work together here to build the church. We just have to lean on the wisdom of God. If our success were due to our own efforts and wisdom, this church could easily be headed for disaster in the future, simply because we are all fallible people. However, God is not fallible, and God does not change. If He has blessed our efforts in the past, He will bless us in the future. We need only continue to rely on Him.

Just as the blessing of God is evident in our congregation today, so too is **LOVE**. We see the standard that the apostle John sets for us in this in 1 John 4:7-8. We need to love one another to the extent that God loves us. During my time as a Christian, I've been a member at seven different congregations, and been familiar with many more. I've never seen a congregation more loving than we are, and I may never have seen a congregation as loving as we are. I see it in the way that we all pulled together to help Josh finish his basement. I see it in the overwhelming outpouring of joy and thanksgiving when Zoë was born. I see it in the way that we so constantly care for our sick and shut-ins. When Jeff and Paula did the redesign for our bulletin, they decided that it ought to be entitled "Family Bulletin," and I think that's entirely appropriate, because a Christian family is exactly what we are. Love for one another is the most important attribute a church can possess, and more than anything else, we need to hold on to that Christian love. Without it, we are nothing, but if we love one another and work to serve one another, there is no limit to what we can be and do.

In addition to the love that we share for one another, **JOY** is another one of our most important attributes. This joy isn't the result of good luck; it's the result of obedience to the commands of God. Look at Philippians 4:4. I think we would all agree that this joy is present in the congregation. However, it's here not because we're blindly determined to be joyful. It's because we've dedicated ourselves to the things that produce joy. We've put the time and effort into building the relationships with one another that cause us to rejoice in one another's company. We've done the hard work in putting God's will into effect. Most of all, though, we have this joy because of the relationship with God that we've been building together. It's easy to be a pew-sitter, and it's hard to be a true disciple of Jesus, but the more we strive to be like Him, the more we focus our lives around Him, we find a profound joy that the pew-sitter will never know. Just like the

old, old hymn says: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.” If we dedicate ourselves to that obedience and that trust, regardless of what our circumstances may be, the joy is sure to follow.

Finally, this congregation is noteworthy for the **GROWTH** that we’ve experienced. Once again, this is not something for which we can take the credit, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7. We are responsible for planting and watering, but ultimately, God is the One who causes the growth. We’ve seen this growth in both the numerical and the spiritual realms. As we’ve already made mention, this past year has seen many people join our ranks not just from other churches, but from the community. That’s wonderful. That’s what the word of the Lord is supposed to do. It’s supposed to reach out to the lost and bring them to Him, and all of us have a responsibility to be sharers of the word.

Likewise, this past year has seen spiritual growth. Normally, when people in a congregation talk about how much they’ve grown spiritually, it’s a cop-out. It means that they’ve been stagnating or losing people, and so they fix on something safely intangible like spiritual growth to justify what they’ve been doing. In reality, of course, spiritual growth isn’t an intangible. If a brother is growing in the Lord, he’s going to be doing more for the Lord, and if he isn’t doing, he probably isn’t growing. Thankfully, that increased usefulness for the Lord’s work is exactly what I’ve been seeing in this congregation, and it’s true even in the most challenging areas of the work. I’m quite confident, for example, that there are more people directly involved in evangelism here than there ever have been in my time. That’s great. Let’s keep growing.

What We Need.

In this effort toward continued growth, there are several things we need to focus on. First, we need to emphasize **STUDY**. We see this in a very familiar passage, 1 Peter 2:2-3. If we want to grow, we have to eat, and the only thing that will nourish us is the word of God. The more we grow, the more nourishment we’re going to need. All of us should look to spend more time feeding on the word. For different Christians, though, this is going to mean different things. Perhaps we’re fairly new to the faith, or we’ve had some spiritual struggles recently, so we only come to services about once a week. If that’s our situation, we can feed on the word more, by, say, making the commitment to come on Wednesday nights instead of just Sunday mornings. If we attend two services a week, we can strive to come to three. If we’re already here every time the doors are opened, we can look to study the word, either by ourselves or with others, outside of the assembly. If we do this, we will grow. The word will teach us to be better disciples of Jesus.

Second, we need to work on building up our **FAITH** in the power of God to bless us. Paul emphasizes this power in Ephesians 3:20-21. His point is that if we give ourselves over to the will of Jesus, He will bless us and make us useful beyond our wildest dreams. We may look at ourselves and see all kinds of limitations in our ability to work for the Lord, but the only real limitation is our faith. We serve a God who can take a shepherd and make him a king, who can take a bunch of fishermen and use them to proclaim a message that will endure forever. Those things didn’t happen because David was awesome, or because Peter, James, and John were awesome. They happened because God was awesome, and He is able to work every bit as powerfully in us if only we believe. Brethren, every Christian in this room is capable of becoming an amazing worker for the Lord. No matter what challenges we face, every one of us can become more than a conqueror through Jesus Christ. He will bless us if we ask. All it takes on our part is the desire and the faith.

Third, we need to emphasize **GOOD WORKS**. Paul describes the kind of good works we’re talking about in Galatians 6:10. Whenever we have an opportunity, we need to take advantage of that opportunity to do good. As I said earlier, this is a loving congregation. The next step for us, though, is to make sure that every member of the congregation shares in and experiences that love. It’s wonderful that Josh had 20 people show up to help him with his basement. We need to be a church, though, where ANYBODY who needs help with his basement has 20 people show up, even if he isn’t as visible as Josh is. In this congregation, there should never be anybody who is on the outside looking in. Instead, if we see anyone in that situation, we need to do whatever is necessary to bring them in. We need to do good.

However, even though this doing good applies especially to the household of faith, it shouldn’t stop with them. We should do good to everyone. We shouldn’t just make our presence felt in the basements of the brethren. We should be there when our next-door neighbor or our co-worker needs help with his basement too. All of us owe a debt to Jesus that we can never pay off. Let’s pay that debt forward as much as we can by being a blessing in the lives of others.

Finally, we can be an even better congregation if every one of us looks to exercise **INITIATIVE**. We see Isaiah doing this in Isaiah 6:8. When the Lord needed a messenger, Isaiah didn’t hand Him a list of 20 qualified candidates. He offered Him a list of one. There was no need for God to turn to anybody else because Isaiah was going to take care of it. Like Isaiah, we need to have the heart that says, “Here am I! Send me!” In the church, there are all kinds of classes that need to be taught, visitors that need to be welcomed, and cards that need to be sent. Instead of waiting for someone else to do the work, let’s step up and do it ourselves. Outside of the church, there are countless souls who need to hear the gospel. Instead of waiting for the preacher to get around to them, let’s do it ourselves. Whenever we see a need anywhere, instead of whining to somebody else about how they need to take care of the need, let’s take care of it ourselves. Only then, when all of us are working powerfully for the Lord, can we be the church He wants us to be.