

FOUR ESSENTIALS TO CONGREGATIONAL PROSPERITY

Intro: As a preacher I often have occasion to speak with my fellow-preachers about our common work. And one of the common questions preachers ask each other is, "How is the congregation doing where you are?"

And I'd have to say that that question can be answered from a lot of perspectives.

Sometimes it is commonly measured in what can be easily quantified or reduced to numbers (How many attend? How much is the contribution? How many have you baptized? etc.) This is of course an important way to think about congregational life; but it is not the only one or even most important one.

Sometimes the better perspective involves a more complex analysis that has to do with the spiritual lives of the members, what is not so easily quantifiable; but is absolutely essential to pleasing the Lord--the spiritual atmosphere of the congregation.

As the last days of Jesus' ministry on earth drew near, he focused his teaching to the twelve with a view to preparing them for their future work in the congregations they would help to establish. On one occasion their misguided thinking prompted Him to discuss at length the relationships they would have to one another. That day he discussed four principles essential to congregational prosperity that each of us could well use to assess our spiritual lives. Let turn to Matthew 18.

A CHILD-LIKE HUMILITY

It all began with what was an all-too-frequent problem among the disciples. They were excited at the prospects of the coming kingdom. And failing to understand its nature and thinking of it carnally they entertained notions of who would fill the various "positions" of power and authority. Both Mark and Luke tells us that they had even gotten into an argument with one another on their journey in the Lord's absence. So Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing along the way?" They didn't want to answer; but Jesus already knew the topic of discussion:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 18:1-5)

Maybe the disciples who had followed Jesus for quite a while might have been shocked at his suggestion that what they needed was to be converted! They needed to experience a transformation of character that made them like children in their attitudes toward one another.

To observe little children is to know that they have no exalted sense of self-importance or superiority to others.

Jesus said that those who did not humble themselves like children would not enter the kingdom at all!

Moreover it is those who humbly serve who at last will be regarded as great in the Lord's eyes.

This characteristic of child-like humility is essential to congregational prosperity.

No church can function properly where people cannot accept, honor, and serve one another. Many a congregation has suffered the consequences of a competitive and arrogant "few" who wanted to dominate and control everything and to relegate others to the stands to watch and applaud their actions.

But a congregation that has humble people will work together, each doing what he can and honoring the efforts of others. And that congregation will prosper.

But Jesus' remarks about children led him to another observation.

A WORTHY EXAMPLE

We need to not only imitate these little children as examples of humility; we need to present a worthy example for them to follow.

And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Mt. 18:6)

Several years ago while visiting Capernaum, we walked through what appears to be the remains of an ancient factory that made millstones quite near the ancient synagogue and not far from the Sea of the Galilee. It is not hard even to imagine as Jesus spoke these words that he could have pointed to these very objects as He issues His warning.

Jesus warns of the possibility of being careless and sinning in such a way such as to devastate the faith of those who need our guidance. Jesus considered it a very serious matter!

Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! (Mt. 18:7).

For Jesus, being the occasion of stumbling to an innocent and humble child called for the most drastic measures to make sure it didn't happen.

And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery hell. (Mt. 18:8-9)

In shocking hyperbole Jesus says in effect, you'd be better off plucking your eyes out than to allow them to lead you into a sin that would lead others astray also. It's that serious; and it will not go unpunished by God.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 18:8-10)

Whether children or believers have "guardian angels" or not is probably not that edifying to discuss, but to know that the angels of God watch the face of the Father and are ready to act to carry out His wrath against the wicked can be quite edifying. It will provide motive enough for all of us to watch our step.

Where God's people take seriously their need to present their very best example before children and those that they represent (the lowly and the immature), God's people will prosper. Where that doesn't happen, the loss of souls is inevitable. How many times have churches lost the very ones raised among them because of the poor examples of the adults where those children grew up.

LOVING CONCERN FOR THE WAYWARD

Jesus begins with the attitude of the Father. Like a responsible shepherd he is interested in all his sheep and is concerned about the loss of any of them!

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (Mt. 18:12-14)

But what Jesus metaphorically pictures as rescuing lost lambs He now put in the most practical terms that all can understand.

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (Mt. 18:15)

When our brother sins against you, we need to show loving concern by seeking to go and show him his need to change! Perhaps he will listen. If that doesn't work, get more to help you.

This passage is pivotal:

But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. (Mt. 18:16)

The hope is that the sinner will repent. But if not, the truth has been established by the presence of two or more witnesses.

And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. (Mt. 18:17)

This kind of language troubles many folks, mostly because there is a fundamental misunderstanding about what this "telling" and "listening" is all about! It is the loving expression of concern over a brother who has ceased to faithfully serve the Lord and the loving urging of folks who care enough to try to restore him!

And if such efforts are not heeded, then such a person may indeed be regarded as a "tax-gatherer and sinner," i.e. a person no longer recognized as the object of our fellowship and approval.

Our right to do this is based on the binding and loosing power Jesus gave the apostles themselves and which they exercise in the revelation they gave concerning who can and who cannot be in the church's fellowship. When we do these things we are assured of Christ's presence with us in the doing of it!

Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 18:18-19)

Most of the time people are asking, "Can the church survive this kind of concern?" as if to say, doing what the Lord said would be detrimental to the church. The better question is, "Can the church survive not having this kind of concern?" And the answer to that is, NO! How long do God's sheep have to be allowed to wander away until there are no flock remaining!

And that is the reason it is an important feature of congregational prosperity--not because we want to get rid of people; but because we love them and do not want to lose them!

ONGOING FORGIVENESS

As Jesus speaks, one topic naturally leads to another. To think of those who have gone astray and who need to be lovingly warned is to also become aware of the need for forgiveness among the people of God. It prompted Peter to ask a question about the limits of forgiveness:

*Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (Mt. 18:21-22).*

The parable of the unforgiving slave underscores the need for each of us to be willing to forgive the wrongs of others in our dealings with them.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' He was unwilling however, but

*went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.' (Mt. 18:23-35)*

**This forgiveness is extended with the realization that we ourselves have been freely forgiven by the Father of a debt much greater. And then with the realization a failure to forgive others is a failure to appreciate our own forgiveness and thus be denied it by God at the judgment!
No church can prosper without it.**

Conclusion: What beautiful picture is here described of the relationship God's people have to each other. Humble, pure, concerned, and forgiving. Where these traits exist, God's people can prosper. They are not merely a group of people who agree to exist together in sinfulness; but rather they are a group of people who agree to exist together in righteousness!

Each of us by our behavior contributes to that wonderful atmosphere of congregational prosperity.