

A God-Blessed Church

#2 in Series: ***Let's Be Church***

In the OT, there is a little celebrated prophet named Hanani. He once confronted King Asa and charged him with his lack of trusting the Lord. As a result, the king had the prophet imprisoned... Right in the middle of what the prophet said to the king – we find these words:

2 Chronicles 16:9a

For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...

“What Kind of Church Does God Bless?” I believe that right now God’s eyes are moving back and forth across the earth looking for churches that are fully committed to Him in order to strengthen them.

So, what kind of church does God bless?

First, and most important of all,

1. A God-blessed church has a great commitment to the great commandment.

One day a religious leader, the Bible calls him “an expert in the religious law”, tried to trap Jesus with a question. “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” Jesus replied:

Matt. 22:37 (NASB) “And He said to him, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’”

To love God – with everything we are!

The most important characteristic of a God-blessed church is a passionate unquenchable love for God. The unique thing about Christianity is that it’s about relationship not religion.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines religion as, "*a belief in and worship of God or gods. A specific system of belief, worship, or practices often involving a code of ethics.*"

If we understand Christianity to be nothing more than a set of beliefs or practices we may become "religious" people by definition – but completely miss the mark of what Christianity really is.

It is a personal relationship with God through belief in, commitment to, and a personal life-transforming experience of the living presence of Jesus Christ.

You see – we are incapable of loving God in our own capacity...

1 John 4:19 (KJV) "We love him, because he first loved us."

When we come to know His love – and respond to His love – we are then enabled to obey this command – regardless of the circumstances we face in our lives...

Frederick Buechner (a contemporary – 92yo – Presbyterian theologian – that I will not often quote) – "To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the first and great commandment nonetheless. Even in the wilderness – especially in the wilderness – you shall love him."

One of the reasons so many people are "unchurched" is because they see the failings and hypocrisy and constraints of religion. They meet "religious" people who are uptight, unhappy, and unreal. And because they are intelligent, discerning, and skeptical people – they keep their distance... And who can blame them?

I believe if and when some of these same people meet up with those who genuinely love God – those who are striving to understand and grow in their relationship with the Lord – and are real about their own human failings – they will be drawn to that and then to Him.

The church God blesses is a church that understands the difference between religion and relationship and has a great commitment to the great commandment to love God, in a personal way, with heart, soul, mind and strength – with everything we are!

Worship then is real and heartfelt. Relationships are genuine and transparent. Ministry and service to others flows out of thanksgiving for what God has done for us.

What is it you are striving for in your spiritual life? Is it to be more religious – or to grow in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

A God-blessed church has a great commitment to the great commandment.

2. A God-blessed church has a great commitment to the great commission.

After His resurrection from the dead and before He went back to His Father in heaven – Jesus gathered the 11 disciples and He told them –

Matt. 28:18-20 (NASB)

¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Those are His marching orders for the church! And they are consistent with his response to the religious leader who was trying to trip him up Jesus said, “The first and greatest commandment is to love God with your heart, soul, and mind. And a second is equally important, “love your neighbor as yourself.” The reason we exist as a church, according to Jesus, is to reach out and help others experience God for themselves and then follow Him.

A God-blessed church never gives up trying to meet people where they are and offer them God’s love. That goes without saying, doesn’t it? Yet how many churches seal themselves up within their buildings, isolate themselves from their communities, are completely out of touch with the needs of the people around them!

I just learned last Sunday an interesting truth about our church's history... As you know, on May 5th we will be celebrating 75 years since God established our church here... What you may not know is that our name has not always been *Norwood Baptist Church*. In fact, we started off as *Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church* but about five years after the beginning – the church decided to change the name to better identify and connect to our community!... I think that was a great move!... The question that haunts me today is – how well are we connecting to this community? What can we do to better engage Norwood with the gospel?...

A.B. Simpson (19th and early 20th c Canadian preacher, theologian and author – he was the founder of Christian and Missionary Alliance – committed to getting the gospel to the world) –

“The Christian that is bound by his own horizon, the church that lives simply for itself, is bound to die a spiritual death and sink into stagnancy and corruption. We never can thank God enough for giving us not only a whole Gospel to believe, but a whole world to give it to.”

The church God blesses is the church that never stops reaching out.

A great commitment to the great commandment (love God with your heart, mind and soul) and the great commission (to love others as we love ourselves and help to make them disciples of Jesus Christ) will enjoy being a growing and greatly God-blessed church.

I believe that right now God's eyes are moving back and forth across the earth looking for churches that are fully committed to Him in order to strengthen them. What does God see when He looks at us? And are you committed personally to helping Norwood continue to grow to be a God-blessed church?

I want to add what I believe is a third quality found in God-blessed churches and that is –

3. A great commitment to a great community

We're speaking about a passionate and unquenchable love for each other as the people of God.

Jesus said:

John 13:35 (NASB) "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Too many churches have a culture of fighting, quarreling, bickering – where people are polarized and doing their own thing – and it is evident that God's blessing is not there... Have you ever been in a church like that? You can smell it as soon as you open the door. You can feel the ugly vibes in the air!

A God-blessed church has a great commitment to a great community. It will be committed to these two things:

➤ *Cooperation*

I heard someone say there are two ways Christians are united together. One is be being *frozen* together, and the other is by being *melted* together. Guess which one God wants?

[] An old *Peanuts* cartoon shows Lucy demanding that Linus change TV channels. She threatened him if he didn't do it... Linus asks; "*What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?*" Lucy responds by saying; "*These five fingers... Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.*"... Linus then asks; "*Which channel do you want?*"... Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "*Why can't you guys get organized like that?*"

A God-blessed church is filled with people who function as a team – where we are united by a common mission – guided by a shared vision – committed to living out God's will together!

Listen again to what the Bible says such cooperation looks like:

Phil. 2:1-2 (NASB)

¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

There is no room for lone-rangers!... Either in the kingdom of God – or in a God-blessed church!

We are in this together or we are not in it at all! A great commitment to a great community means cooperation.

Secondly, to have a great commitment to a great community requires:

➤ *Conflict Resolution*

Conflict is an inevitable part of being a human in this fallen world... All relationships are subject to conflict... If you don't experience some conflict in your marriage, your parenting, your work, your family – then you're probably dead or you're not being very real with others.

I am one who avoids conflict... In fact – there are times that I am guilty of being a coward about it... But we should not be so cowardly... do you know why?... Because if we deal with conflict properly – it leads to incredible creativity – it can push us into new directions, new relationships, and new possibilities... That's the key!

God's Word helps us here:

Jam. 1:19 Christian Standard Bible (CSB) “My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger”

Now, does the Bible say, “*Never get angry? Never be in conflict with another person?*” **No** – because God knows as emotional creatures, we are going to experience that... There are times when we're going to hurt or be hurt by someone's words or actions...

God's Word says –

Eph. 4:26 (NASB) “BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger”

Don't sin by letting that anger you feel gain control over you... To state it is a positive way – deal with the anger in a timely fashion – because if not addressed – it will give a foothold to the Devil in our lives...

When you are angry at someone – and you will be – whether it's your spouse, child, parent, co-worker, church member – whoever it will be – don't sit on it – work quickly to resolve the conflict.

A couple of practical things here we need to learn... The first has to do with a way of preventing conflict and the second is a plan of action for resolving conflict once it happens:

- **How to prevent conflict:** I have seen more relationships get really messed up because of something called “triangulation”.

It's easier for me to illustrate what triangulation is... I said something to Sally that hurt her feelings. I didn't mean to. It wasn't my intention. But she was hurt by what I said. Instead of coming back to me directly to tell me how she was hurt and giving me a chance to reconcile – Sally calls Ken... Ken hears her story. In fact he encourages her to tell all the juicy tidbits. Now he's feeling bad for Sally – and he gets upset with me... So now Ken calls me to tell me how upset Sally is... Now we have a triangle of conflict... And here's how the poison spreads. What was once between me and Sally is now between Sally and me and Sally and Ken and Ken and me... So now I have two conflicted relationships. But what happens then when Ken mentions something to Jim at worship band practice and then Jim goes home to tell his wife Michelle? Next thing you know everyone is upset with someone and the conflict becomes unmanageable... (Now note – I used fictitious names to illustrate the point – but I dare say you can think of actual people in your life when you've experience this *triangulation* of conflict...)

But note that it doesn't have to be this way!... When Sally went to Ken he could have stopped the triangulation by saying, "Sally, I'm not the one you need to be talking to about this. You need to talk to Mike and tell him how you feel." Sally would have called me and we would have worked it out without it spreading anywhere else. See how much more effective and healthy that is?... Now, remember that the next time someone tries to pull you into a triangle!

Okay, but what do we do when we are already conflicted with someone?

- **How do resolve existing conflict?**

This won't surprise you – but let me quickly give you an acronym I found in my files – I don't remember the original source... It is a way of reminding us of a healthy plan of conflict resolution... It goes like this – If you've been wronged go for P.E.A.C.E.

P – Pinpoint the hurt. Stop and think about why you feel hurt. What did that person say or do that made you feel hurt or angry? Was it what they said? Was it something in your life that made you hear what they said in a hurtful way? Take some time to gain perspective and try to pinpoint the hurt.

E – Engage the other person in dialogue. After you've gained a little perspective on how you're feeling and why you're feeling that way invite the other person into a conversation. The Bible says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." In other words deal with it as quickly as you can. Call the other person. Don't rely on email or letters. Call them in person...

A – Address the issue in love. Begin by affirming the relationship. Describe how you'd like things to be between you. Then describe your feelings. Identify the specific action or words that hurt you. Be honest but remember you are doing this in love. If your intention is to get even or inflict guilt on the other person God will not honor that. Instead approach them with the intention of making the relationship even better than it was before.

C – Consider their response. Really, really, really listen. Often times you'll find they didn't mean to hurt you. Maybe they've been going through some tough stuff and it's effected the way they dealt with you in that moment you were offended. We never know what's going on behind the scenes of another person's life. We need to consider their response.

E – Extend forgiveness. This is where you ultimately bear responsibility. Will you forgive or hold on to the anger?

Forgiveness is the path to your own wholeness. It's also the path to God. Jesus said, "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14)

Corrie Ten Boom – "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Extend forgiveness. Say it verbally. Go for peace!

I want to encourage you that if you have been out of sorts with someone else – even someone in this room – then do not leave this building until you commit to being reconciled...

A God-blessed church has a great commitment to the great commission, to the great commandment, and to a great community that cooperates as a team and is committed to conflict resolution.