

THE HIGH PRIORITY OF THE CHURCH

1 Timothy 3:14-15

by Andy Manning

- The title of this sermon is “The High Priority of the Church.”

- All of us have priorities.
 - Priorities are things that matter to us. Things that are important to us. Things that we value.
 - Some things are higher on our list of priorities, and something things are down at the bottom.
 - Today I want to give you five reasons why the church should be near the very top of your list of priorities. That the church shouldn’t just be important to you; it should be extremely important to you. It shouldn’t just be valuable to you; it should be extremely valuable to you.

- But think about that title just for a moment. The words “priority” and “church” are not words that we usually see together in the same sentence. When we use the word “priority,” we typically associate it with family – the priority of family; health – the priority of a healthy diet and regular exercise; Jesus – the priority of Jesus – Jesus should definitely be our top priority; but not church.
 - Many Christians would say that church isn’t important at all – they’ve stopped going to church altogether. To them, being a Christian doesn’t require church involvement.
 - Others would say that is important, but it’s not a high priority. These folks attend church when it’s convenient, but it’s rarely convenient. There always seems to be more important things that come up and prevent church involvement. Church is something you should do when you have time; but it’s not something they make time for. They might drop a few bucks in the plate, but they certainly don’t give anywhere near a tithe. And they definitely don’t take the time to volunteer.

- And then there are others who would say that it is a top priority, but you wouldn't be able to tell it from their lives. They know they need to show up, they need to tithe, they need to serve, and they would preach that others should do those things, but if you were to look at the way they actually spent their time, money and energy, church isn't a priority. In other words, for them, church is a top priority in theory, but not in practice. There is a disconnect between what they believe and how they behave.
- But the Bible is clear that the church is important; it is not only a priority, but a top priority; and that it is worth our time, energy and money.
- Let's read **1 Timothy 3:14-15**.¹ "14 I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon, 15 so that if I am delayed, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God. This is the church of the living God, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth."
- 1 Timothy is a letter written by the apostle Paul, one of the top leaders of Christianity in the first century, to Timothy, the leader of the church in Ephesus (modern-day Turkey). And in this passage Paul makes it clear the purpose the letter: to explain how "people must conduct themselves in the household of God." In other words, the purpose of 1 Timothy was to teach Timothy how to build a healthy church. And in this passage there are five reasons the church should be a high priority in your life.

5 Reasons the Church Should be a High Priority in Your Life

1. The church is a high priority to God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the New Living Translation, by Tyndale.

- Paul writes, “14 I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon, 15 so that if I am delayed, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God.”
- Paul wanted to teach Timothy how to build a healthy church. Now he was planning on visiting soon, but because this information is so important, Paul can’t wait. As well, it’s possible that the visit won’t pan out, and this information about the church is so important that Paul can’t take the chance that he’ll never be able to explain it to Timothy. So Paul writes this letter. In other words, it’s clear that building a healthy church is extremely important to Paul, which means it is extremely important to God, because Paul is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- And this is what we find all throughout the Bible – that the church is extremely valuable to God.
- For example, all you have to do to see how highly God values the church is to look at the metaphors that Scripture uses for the church.
 - **The church is called the family of God** right here in verse 15 – that’s what the word “household” means. Is family a priority? Absolutely. It’s a top priority. What’s more important than a man’s family? Well, how about his wife? Of all your family members, your spouse is the most important, right?
 - **The church is called the bride of Christ** in Ephesians 5. Is your spouse a priority? Very much so! What’s more important than your spouse? How about your own body?
 - **The church is called the body of Christ** in 1 Corinthians 12. What in this world is more important than your family, your spouse, and your body? And this is how God refers to the church!
- Not only that, but just look at how Jesus treated the church.

- In **Matthew 16:18** Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the powers of hell will not conquer it.” So Jesus is committed to building the church, His church; and He’s committed to protecting it from the devil.
 - And in **Ephesians 5:25-30** it says that Christ loves the church; He died for the church; He is making the church holy; and He cares for the church. Do you see how important the church is to Christ?
- And as Christians, we are to be imitators of God.² We are to be imitators of Christ. If the church is a high priority to God, then it needs to be a high priority to us. If the church is extremely important to God, how can you call yourself a Christian without making the church a high priority in your life?
 - It doesn’t make sense to say, “I love Jesus, but I don’t like church.”
 - If you’re not passionate about church, then you’re not really into Jesus, because Jesus is passionate about the church. Jesus is all about His church.
 - In other words, Jesus can’t have first place in your life unless you make the church a high priority in your life.
 - And you cannot be a follower of Jesus without being passionate about the church and making it a high priority in your life.
 - Can you be saved? Yes. But you can’t follow Jesus without following His passion for the church.

2. The Bible assumes you will be in it.

- The second reason the church should be a high priority in your life is that the Bible assumes you will be in it.
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² See Ephesians 5:1 and 1 John 2:6.

- In other words, there's no verse that explicitly says, "You need to be committed to the church." Instead, it implies it. It assumes it. Throughout the Bible it is assumed that if you are a Christian, you are going to be committed to the church.
- Look at our passage again. Paul writes in **verses 14-15**, "14 I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon, 15 so that if I am delayed, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God."
- Paul is writing instructions about how Christians are conduct themselves in the church because he assumes that Christians are going to be in the church. He doesn't say, "First, tell all the Christians that they need to get involved with church. Then, teach them how to conduct themselves." He doesn't say that, because it is taken for granted that if you're a Christian, you will be in the church. And we find this throughout the Bible.
- There are many commands in the Bible that are only possible to obey if you participate in the church.
 - **The Bible says in Ephesians 4:15-16 that you have a special work to do in the church that will help the church be healthy, growing, and full of love.** How can you do your special work in the church if you are not participating in church?
 - **The Bible commands regular church attendance in Hebrews 10:25.** This verse doesn't merely say to make sure you watch church on TV regularly, or that you listen to a sermon podcast regularly; it says don't neglect meeting together. How can you obey that command if you are not participating in church?
 - **The Bible commands us in 1 Corinthians 1:10 to guard and protect the unity of the church.** How can you obey that command if you are not participating in church?

- **And the Bible commands Christ-followers to obey their spiritual leaders in Hebrews 13:17.** How can you obey your spiritual leaders if you're not participating in church? If you're not in church, then you don't have any spiritual leaders to obey.
- Let me put it this way. The few times that the Bible talks about people not being committed to the church, it is in negative light.
 - For example, Hebrews 10:25 talks about some Christians who had neglected regular church attendance, and it says don't be like them.
 - 1 John 2:19 talks about people who left the church, and the fact that they dropped out of church proves that they weren't saved in the first place.
 - And throughout the New Testament it talks about church discipline – it says that if someone is living in obvious sin and they don't want to repent after giving them several warnings, then expel them from the church.
 - Put all this together and the only people who aren't committed to the church are disobedient Christians, Christians who aren't really Christians, and Christians who have been kicked out. I'm sure you'll agree with me, I don't want to be associated with any of those groups!
- Simply put, Christianity is a team sport; it's not one-on-one. It's not me and Jesus, it's us and Jesus.
- Christianity is a group project. When I was in school I didn't like group projects. I much preferred to work on my own. And that's the way many Christians are. They prefer to live alone rather than participate in church. But I'm sorry, that's not a Biblical option.
- And think about it. Could it be that the reason God wants us to be in church is because we need the church; we need each other; that the Christian life cannot be successfully lived out without the church?

3. The Bible commands us to live in way that would contribute to the church's health.

- Notice what Paul calls the church in verse 15: the household of God.
- Do you know what that word means? A household is all the people living in a given house. The Greek word is oikos. It's another word for family, but it's not just any family; it's not extended family like cousins and aunts and uncles. A household is immediate family. It's family that you actually live with.
- Do you know why God chose to use the metaphor of a household to describe the church? Because the household metaphor implies responsibility. In other words, if the church is like a family that I live with under the same roof, then I have certain responsibilities. It is my responsibility to contribute to the church's health.
- Think about it like this. If you have a next door neighbor, is it your responsibility to help pay the bills? Is it your responsibility to help with the maintenance and cleaning of the house? Is it your responsibility to mow his lawn, to trim his hedges, to pull his weeds? Is it your responsibility to cook to meals, to wash the dishes, to do the laundry? Of course not! Because you're not a part of his household. But, what if you moved in with your neighbor? What if you sold your house and moved in to the guest bedroom? Now you're a part of his household, and now everything is different. Now that you're living under the same roof, you are responsible for the health of that house. You don't have to do everything, but you need to do your part. You need to pull your weight. And it's the same way with the church. If the church is God's household, then we are responsible for its health.
- If the church is a household, then we have at least four responsibilities in the church.

- **First, we need to obey the Father.** It's the Father's house. He is in charge. If we would all focus wholeheartedly on obeying God in every arena of our lives, imagine how healthy our church would be.
 - **Second, if the church is a household, then we need to love each other.** In other words, we need to get along, and we need to take care of each other. That's what you do in a family.
 - **Third, if the church is a household, then we need to pitch in with the maintenance and upkeep.** In our house, everybody does their part with chores and cleaning and fixing things. Nobody gets a free pass. In the church, everybody needs to find a way to pitch in and help. Find a way to volunteer.
 - **And fourth, if the church is a household, then we need to help pay the bills.** The church is a non-profit organization, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have bills. Your household is a non-profit organization, too, but it costs money, doesn't it? Every organization costs money to run: Schools, charities, government agencies, hospitals, and even little league baseball teams all require money to operate. And the church is no different. The church has staff to pay, rent or mortgage, maintenance and cleaning costs, office supplies, outreach and advertising costs, and on and on. And if you are going to live in the household of God, then you need to help pay the bills.
- **In a healthy household there shouldn't be any moochers.**
 - Do you know what a moocher is? It's somebody who takes but doesn't give. It's someone who benefits from the household but doesn't contribute to the household.
 - And moochers cause problems.
 - Moochers cause a supply shortage, because now we have more mouths to feed but not more money.
 - Moochers cause more work, because now we have more laundry, but not more help.
 - And moochers cause division, because those who are contributing feel used and abused by those who are just taking.

- Do you see how powerful the household metaphor is?
- Many people treat the church like an event to attend, or merely another activity in their busy week, or like a restaurant or a store where they show up to be fed and served. But the church is not an event, it's not just another activity, it's not a restaurant or a store where you get serviced. The church is the household of God, and as members of God's household, we are responsible to contribute to its health.

4. The church is where God shows up big.

- A fourth reason why the church should be a high priority in your life is that the church is where God shows up big.
- In verse 15 Paul calls the church "the church of the living God." The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It means assembly, or gathering.
- The word church means two things.
 - First, it refers to a meeting, or gathering, or assembly.
 - Second, it refers to the people who participate in the meeting, gathering, or assembly. So you could say, "Let's go to church." In other words, "Let's go to the meeting, or gathering, or assembly of the believers." You could also say, "Let's have church." In other words, "Let's have a meeting of the believers, or a gathering of the believers." But you could also say, "We are the church," because the church is the people who participate in the gathering of believers.
 - Let me tell you what the church is not. The church is not a physical building. Church either refers to a gathering of the believers, or it refers to the believers who gather. It never refers to a building. That's why the church doesn't need to own a building to be a true church. There

are churches all over the country that meet in all kinds of venues – houses, bars, night clubs, movie theatres, schools, barns, and on and on.

- But more importantly, I want you to notice that Paul calls the church “the church of the living God.”
- There are many instances when the Bible calls God the living God, and often what it refers to is His manifest presence in the community of believers.
- In other words, the church gathered is where God tends to show up in the biggest ways. Let me explain a little further.
- Do you know the difference between God’s manifest presence and His omnipresence? God’s omnipresence means He is everywhere. When you leave this place, God will still be here. He will be with you as you travel. And He is already at the place where you are going.
- God’s manifest presence means that God is present in a noticeable way, in a special way. Let me give you an example. You know the story of Moses; God used him to lead the nation of Israel out of slavery. God was present in Moses’ life all along, right? Before Moses was born, when Moses was conceived, when he was a boy, a teenager, and when he was a shepherd out in the wilderness, God was with Moses all the time. That’s God’s omnipresence. But one day Moses experienced God’s manifest presence. He experienced God’s presence in a noticeable, special way. One day when Moses was out in the wilderness, he came upon a burning bush. The bush was on fire, but it wasn’t burning up. And God spoke from the burning bush in an audible voice to Moses and called him to go to Egypt and deliver the Jews. Pretty amazing, right? God was always present in Moses’ life, but on that day Moses experienced God’s manifest presence. He noticed God’s presence. He felt closer to God. God showed up in a big way.

- When the Bible says that this is the church of the living God, what it means is that the church gathered is where God tends to show up in the biggest ways. The gathered church is where we are most likely and most often going to experience the manifest presence of God. It's where we will experience God in the most noticeable ways. It's where we will feel closest to God. It's where God will do His biggest work in our lives, and speak to us most clearly. God shows up big at church.
- This is what the Bible means when it refers to the church as the temple of God. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 2:19-22 refer to the church as the temple of God. And it says that the church is God's dwelling place. That's what a temple is. It's a place to meet with God; it's a place where God reveals Himself in powerful ways. That's what the Bible says of the church.
- And that's why the church is such a high priority. In other words, if you want to meet with God, go to church. If you want to encounter God, to experience God's presence, to hear from God, to be comforted by God, to be grown by God, then go to church. **God most likely and most often shows up big at church.**
- Let me put it this way. The Bible says that Jesus loves His church; He is building His church; He cares for His church; He is growing His church and making His church holy; He is protecting His church from the evil one. Notice that all of these verses apply to the *ekklesia*, the gathering of the believers, or to those who participate in the gathering of believers. If you want Jesus to do all those things in your life and in the life of your family, then you need to gather, you need to meet, you need to be a part of the assembling together of the believers. When you neglect church, you miss out on God's manifest presence, on His best blessings.

5. The church is God's plan for redeeming the world.

- The fifth reason to make the church a high priority in your life is that the church is God’s plan for redeeming the world.
- God is on a mission to redeem lost people. To save them from sin, both the consequences of sin and a life of sin. He’s on a mission to rescue people from the kingdom of darkness and place them into the kingdom of His Son. And how does He do that? Through the preaching and teaching of the truth of God’s word. As people hear and believe and obey God’s truth, they are redeemed.³ They are saved.
- Well, what is God’s plan for teaching the truth to the world? The church.
- Notice Paul’s words in **verse 15**. “This is the church of the living God, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth.”
 - A pillar is the same thing as a column. It holds something up. When 1 Timothy was written the city of Ephesus was home to the temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It had a huge, shining roof made out of marble that was held up with 127 columns each over 19 yards high.
 - And a foundation holds something secure. If a building or a house doesn’t have a firm foundation, eventually it will collapse.
- So if the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth, then that means God uses it to do two things.
 - The church holds up the truth by teaching it to people,
 - and it holds secure the truth, protecting it from false teachers. God’s plan for proclaiming the truth and protecting the truth is the church.
- Our mission as a church is to help people far from God become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Another way of putting it is that our mission is to help people far from God become fully devoted to God’s truth. We exist to

³ For verses on the topic of truth, see John 8:32, John 14:6, and 1 Timothy 2:4.

proclaim and protect God's truth to all people. And as we do that, God accomplishes His purpose in the world.

- Let me put it this way: God redeems the world as He works through the church to proclaim and protect the truth.
- Do you see how important the church is? This is why Bill Hybels says the local church is the hope of the world.
- It is the only institution that will last forever.
- If there's any institution worth your time, your money, your energy, your investment, your talents, then it is the church.
- The church should be a high priority in your life. It should be right up there near your marriage and your kids. It's that important.
- Now what I want you to do is to ask yourself, "Is the church a high priority in my life? Is the church as important to me as it should be?"
- How can you tell? Let me get you started. The more we value something, the more we invest in it. If something is really valuable to us, then we will invest significant time, effort and money.
- So I want you to look at your life. How much of your time, effort and money are you investing in the church? None? A little. A significant amount?
- What do you do if you want to make the church a high priority in your life? Let me give you a few steps you can take.
 - First, attend the Newcomer's Lunch and join the church. Why should I join the church? It's a formal commitment to make the church a high priority, because the church is worth committing to.

- Second make Sunday worship a priority. Most church attenders in America attend about once a month. That's not a priority. Make Sunday worship the norm, not the exception.
 - Third, plug in to Home Group. Home Group is how you build relationships with others in the church so that you can minister to each other.
 - Fourth, find a way to volunteer.
 - And fifth, bring the tithe. Just the basics.
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- What if you want to go deeper? Consider becoming a leader in the church – a Home Group leader, a ministry team leader, which is what a deacon is, or even becoming a pastor.

 - Whatever investment you make in the church, it's an investment worth making. Because the church is a high priority to God, and it should be a high priority to us as well.