

IS THE CHURCH NON-ESSENTIAL?

John 20:24-31

I. INTRODUCTION

1. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, churches were deemed non-essential. So, churches all over the country had to shut down in-person services for a couple of months. We had to do church online. Instead of gathering with the church, Christians all over the world stayed at home and watched the pastor and worship team on their computers.
2. But is that really church? Many Christians would say no, and they couldn't wait to get back to church as soon as we opened our doors. You miss something big when you miss gathering with other believers.
3. But other Christians would seem to agree with the government, that the church really is non-essential. Many Christians who attended church before the pandemic still haven't gone back. They prefer church online. You can stay in bed and watch church in your underwear. You don't have to leave the house. You don't have to serve. You don't have to get dressed. You can save on gas. And you don't have to be around people.
4. **One pastor** said, "If absence makes the heart grow fonder, a lot of people must love our church!"
5. This morning I want to talk to you about why being actively and physically involved in church is essential to your Christian life.
6. Our goal is for you to make church attendance a habit, not the exception. Unless something big comes up, you are at church. Our goal for students is that you would continue to make church attendance a priority after high school. That you would never drop out. That even when you have a choice, that you would get in the car and drive yourself to church every week.
7. **Hebrews 10:25** "24 And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, 25 not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching."
 - i. Now, it is obvious from this verse that we must gather together as Christians. It is not okay to neglect church and just read the Bible and pray on your own, and not participate in Christian fellowship. "not neglecting to gather together."
 - ii. Why do we need to gather together? This passage gives us two things we need from the church that we can't get alone:
 1. Motivation to love and serve God.
 2. Encouragement when we face trials.
 - iii. But what about gathering in person? When this verse was written, the internet did not exist. The metaverse did not exist. Computers and smart phones did not exist. So, when he talked about gathering together, he

obviously meant gathering in person. That's the only way you could gather back them. But I wonder if the writer of Hebrews would say the same thing if he lived in the twenty-first century; in the age of the internet and the metaverse. Would he say, "Let us not neglect our gathering together, but it doesn't matter if it's in person or on the phone, or via Zoom, or on the metaverse"?

- iv. I believe wholeheartedly that this text means gathering in person. Virtual meetings may suffice on occasion, when it's the best alternative, but under normal circumstances, we must gather together with the church in person. We can't get the motivation and the encouragement we need unless with we are gathering regularly, in person, with the church.
- v. This morning I want to show why gathering with the church in person is not only a requirement, but it is essential for your spiritual health.

II. TEXT: John 20:24-31

1. *24 But Thomas (called "Twin"), one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.*
 - i. When Jesus rose from the grave, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene. Then, later that Sunday evening, He appeared to the apostles. But one of the apostles, Thomas, was not with them at the time.
2. *25 So the other disciples were telling him, "We've seen the Lord!"*
3. *But he said to them, "If I don't see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe."*
 - i. The other disciples tried to convince Thomas that Jesus rose from the grave, but Thomas did not believe them.
 - ii. He didn't think they were lying, but maybe they were mistaken. Maybe they only saw Christ's ghost, and not the physically resurrected Jesus.
 - iii. Thomas wanted to see and touch Jesus for Himself.
4. *26 A week later his disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."*
5. *27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe."*
6. *28 Thomas responded to him, "My Lord and my God!"*
 - i. Notice Thomas' response to seeing the resurrected Christ. "My Lord and my God!"
 - ii. This was not an exclamation like, "OMG!" Thomas was speaking to Christ. He called Him Lord and God.
7. *29 Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

8. *30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*
- i. This story is why Thomas is famously known as “doubting Thomas.”
 - ii. Thomas was not so much doubting Thomas, as absent Thomas. His doubt was because He was not privy to the same evidence as the other disciples.
 - iii. Why was Thomas absent at Christ’s first appearing? We don’t know. But we know that He missed something very big. Not only that, but imagine the emotional pain and turmoil he endured for the entire next week. Was Jesus truly alive? Would he get to see Jesus as the rest of the disciples did? Why did he miss out?
 - iv. Thomas’ absence had big consequences. Let me read a couple of commentaries on this story.
 - v. **Barclay** “We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ’s Church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness envelops us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of Christ’s people, for it is there that we are likeliest of all to meet him face to face.”
 - vi. **Wesley Study Bible** “We don’t know why Thomas was absent previously; he may have had good and justified reasons. But whatever the reason, it was his absence that caused him to suffer a long week of emotional and spiritual struggle. The best and surest place to maintain faith is in the company of fellow believers.”
 - vii. **Big Idea: When we miss church, we miss God’s plan for our lives.**
 - viii. God’s plan is to grow us, and take care of us, and use us, and encourage us through the ministry of the church. But that’s not possible if we are uninvolved.

III. FOUR REASONS TO NOT MISS CHURCH

1. Support: If nobody knows you, nobody can care for you.

- i. There will be times in life when you need help: sooner or later you will find yourself sick, depressed, discouraged, lonely, grieving, in pain, unemployed, hurt, rejected, etc. And God’s plan is for your church family to come along side you and help you carry your burdens. The Bible commands church members to...Build up one another (Rm 14:19). Have concern for each other (1 Cor 12:25). Restore each other when we are overtaken in sin (Gal 6:1). Serve one another (Gal 5:13). Carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). Watch out for one another (Heb 10:24-25). Motivate each other (Heb 10:24-25). Encourage one another (Heb 10:24-

25). Teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16). Pray for one another (James 5:16).

- ii. In other words, God's plan to meet your needs and care for you is the church.
- iii. In 1996 the Dallas Morning news published a study by the Heritage Foundation, revealing that regularly attending worship services reduces suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, out of wedlock births, and divorce. These people are far happier and healthier, have a lower rate of depression, higher self-esteem, longer and happier marriages, a much higher income, and for the women, better sex.
- iv. But if you are not involved in church, and not physically present at church, and not building relationships in church, then nobody will know you and what you are going through. And if nobody knows you, then nobody can care for you.
- v. One of the ways that God meets our needs is through prayer. The Bible says that you don't have because you don't ask. Another way that God meets our needs is through the church. But again, if you are not involved, and if nobody knows you, then nobody can care for you.
- vi. There are many Christians out there who, if they went through a hard time, nobody in the church would know.
- vii. In the book of Acts, God appeared to Peter in a vision and told him about a man named Cornelius who was ready to hear and accept the gospel. God told Peter exactly when where to go to find Cornelius, exactly what Cornelius' needs were, and Peter went and found him and led him and his entire household to faith in Christ. This is a really cool story, but I hope you realize that this is not how God normally works. That's what makes the story so cool. When you go through a hard time, God is usually not going to appear in a vision to the members of the church to tell them about your needs. He's not going to visit the church in their dreams and say, "This person needs a word of encouragement; this person needs a visit; this person needs some physical help; this person needs; counsel; this person needs financial assistance; this person needs a job, etc." The way that God informs us of each other's needs is through church involvement; through relationships at church. If we are closely involved in church, then the church will find out when you are struggling, and they will be able to care for you.
- viii. This is the wonderful thing about Home Group. We gather together each week not only to study the Bible, but to visit, to share what we're going through, and to pray for one another. And when someone in the group is going through a hard time, the group rallies around that person.

2. Supervision: If nobody sees you, nobody can hold you accountable.

- i. We all live better when people are watching us.
- ii. There's an old saying, "When the cat is away the mice will play." It refers to the workplace. When the boss is absent, everyone relaxes, they play around, they goof off. But when the boss shows up, everyone is on their A-game. We all live better when people are watching us.
- iii. At FedEx, every once in a while the district manager from Memphis, Brad Boseman, will come for a visit. Just the sound of his name makes me shudder. Before he comes, we clean everything up, we get everything in order, we dress our best. We all live better when people are watching us.
- iv. The Bible teaches this principle. Writing to slaves, Paul instructs them to work hard, not just when their master is watching, but all the time. Why did Paul need to write that? Because we all live better when people are watching us. It's just natural. It's unnatural and difficult to work just as hard when the boss is away as when he is watching.
- v. It's been said that character is who you are when nobody is watching you. Why is that? Because it is easy to do what is right when people are watching you. We can call this positive peer pressure. Peer pressure isn't always a bad thing, because when the right people are watching us, we tend to live better.
- vi. One of the blessings of having a large family is that my kids are never alone. They can't get away with anything. If they step out of line in the slightest way, one of their siblings will see it and say something.
- vii. This is one of the reasons why we need church involvement. We all live better when people are watching us. Just by making it a habit to go to church on Sundays, to volunteer, to get in Home Group and build relationships, that positive peer pressure will give you extra motivation to live right.
- viii. This is one of the benefits of being in a small church. In a large church, nobody will notice if you don't show up. In a small church, we all notice. You miss a couple of times and I'll be calling you up, "Is everything okay?" Just that little bit of extra accountability helps us to stay on the right path.
- ix. But on the flip side, if nobody sees you, then nobody can hold you accountable. If you are not involved in church, then other Christians aren't watching you. And they can't hold you accountable.
- x. Nothing good grows in the dark. Just things like mold and fungus. When I was a kid we had a huge oak tree in the front yard, and there was no grass under it. It was too dark. If we want to grow and stay healthy, we need to live in the light. We need to be involved in church where others can see us.

3. Service: If nobody touches you, nobody can be impacted by you.

- i. The Bible says that every Christian has an important role to play in the church. The church becomes healthy and growing as each part plays its role. But if you don't go to church, then you can't do your part.
- ii. When you miss church, the church misses you.
- iii. God has given every Christian a spiritual gift – an empowerment for ministry. There are seven, and each Christian has one (Rm 12:6-8): prophecy, faith, service, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and mercy. Why does God give us spiritual gifts?
- iv. **1 Corinthians 12:7 (NLT)** “A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.”
- v. God gives us each a spiritual gift to be used in the church; to help others in the church; to help the church grow. In other words, your spiritual gift is not yours. It belongs to the church.
- vi. Some Christians act like their spiritual gift belongs to them. They keep it all to themselves, and the church doesn't get any benefit. But that's not why God gives us spiritual gifts.
- vii. You were shaped to serve. Every single Christian has been uniquely shaped by God to impact others in the church. SHAPE stands for spiritual gifts, heart (passions), abilities, personality, and experiences. You are so unique, that you can impact others in the church in a way that nobody else can. But if you don't get involved in church, then you can't impact the church.
- viii. Do you know how you discover your spiritual gifts? By serving in the church. Just start serving wherever you can, any time there is a need. And eventually you will discover how you can make the biggest impact. But if you aren't involved and serving in the church, you can't even discover and develop your spiritual gifts.
- ix. Someone in the church needs what you have to offer – a word of encouragement, or wisdom, or instruction, or rebuke; your expertise; your experience; your knowledge; your strength; your money; your time; your energy; your listening ear. You have something that somebody in the church needs. And God's plan is to meet that person's needs through you. God's plan is to meet the church's needs through you. But that can't happen unless you are involved in church.

4. Sharpening: If nobody observes you, nobody can learn from your example.

- i. One of the best ways that we grow is by learning from the example of others. I like to talk to other pastors, because we can learn from each other's successes and failures. We can learn from each other's example.
- ii. The examples of other people in the church have impacted me as much as anything else. When I was growing up, there were two families in my church that homeschooled their kids. And I noticed something very different, very special about these families. And God used their example

paint a vision for my life and the kind of family that I wanted to have. When I was getting to know Lydia, even before we began dating, I remember telling her, this is the kind of family I want.

- iii. Early in my ministry I read a book by a pastor who said that his vision was to start a church from scratch and then spend his entire ministry building that one church. He's been that that church since 1980 and is still going strong. It was through his example that God gave me a very similar vision – to start a new church and spend my lifetime pouring into it.
- iv. Even before Lydia and I began dating, when we were still just friends, I remember telling her of the kind of life that I wanted. I wanted to start a new church and spend my life there. I wanted a large family, as many kids as we could have. And I wanted them to be homeschooled. God didn't give me that vision for my life in a dream or a trance, He didn't speak audibly, He spoke to me through the examples of other Christians.
- v. The Bible talks about the importance of examples.
 - 1. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he told them that He was setting an example for how they should treat others (Jn 13:15).
 - 2. Paul told both Timothy and Titus, as pastors, to set a good example for their churches (1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7).
 - 3. Paul told the Christians in Philippi to follow his example (Phil 3:17).
- vi. This is one of the reasons we need to be in church. We need church so that we can learn from and be encouraged by the example of others, and they need our example.
- vii. Some of you may be thinking, I'm not good enough to be an example. God can still use as an example of what not to do. When I was growing up, our worship leader had to step down because of a moral failure. He was caught stealing money from his workplace. Did I learn from that? Absolutely.
- viii. I grew up with two big brothers who were into drugs and crime. Did their example benefit me? Absolutely. I saw firsthand the destructive nature of drugs and crime. I saw how horrible it is to spend the holidays in jail. I saw firsthand how their bad choices broke my parents' hearts.
- ix. As parents trying to raise our kids to follow Jesus, we need other adults to be at church and to set a visible example. My kids expect me to be devoted, because I'm a pastor. They expect me to tithe, to attend, to serve in church, to read my Bible and pray at home, to live a holy life. They need to see other Christians who are just as devoted as me to God and to church, even though they are not pastors. I'm so thankful for the godly example of my church family.
- x. **Proverbs 27:17** "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another."

- xi. When we hang around other believers, we sharpen one another. We sharpen then by our example, and they sharpen us.
- xii. But this is not possible unless we are involved in church.

IV. CONCLUSION

1. **Thomas Watson** “Be often among the godly. They are the salt of the earth—and will help to season you. Their counsel may direct you; their prayers may enliven you. Such holy sparks may be thrown into your heart as may kindle devotion in you. It is good to be among the saints, to learn the trade of godliness: "He who walks with wise men shall be wise" (Proverbs 13:20).”
2. There is so much more that God wants to do in and through your life, and it is only possible if you are involved in church, in person.
3. If you are a parent or grandparent, make a commitment today to be in church every Sunday “if the Lord is willing and the creek don’t rise.” Make a commitment that you will get your family to church, and bring your grandkids as often as you can.
4. If you are a student and you will soon graduate high school, make a commitment that you are not going to drop out of church, but that you will stay committed.