

Why You Should Join the Church

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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We're having such a wonderful time studying the account of Luke, anticipating the cross, but this morning, we're going to take a break from that. And I know for some of you that's probably a disappointment. In some ways it is for me because it's kind of breath taking and we have to kind of take it in sort of mini-series, as they call these things these days. And I hate to put it off another week, but what I want to say to you today is really very, very important. So we will take a little bit of a break and we'll pick up the narrative of Luke next week on Thursday of Passion Week, as the Lord eats the Passover with His disciples and then institutes the Lord's table, and then teaches them all the wonderful truths that He taught them in John 13 through 16. And then confronts Judas at the table and dismisses Judas to go out and make the deal final with the religious leaders of Israel and come later that night and arrest Jesus and then the cross. We're going to get back in to that narrative next week.

When we planned this Sunday months and months ago, we didn't know where we'd be in that narrative. And we're going to stick with the plan because it's really very, very important today. As you can tell, the songs we sung were about the church. As I called your attention to a moment ago, Tom wrote a very important article in the Grace Today about the church. There's even a card in there, a little section at the bottom of one of the pages which talks about membership where you can write your name and so forth. I'll tell you more about that a little bit later.

Periodically through the years, we have become very, very aware that we need to have a significant focus on a given Sunday on the issue of belonging to the church. And that's what is planned for today. That's why we've emphasized the church. You heard the choir sing about the church and we've sung about the church and our responsibility and our privileges in being a part of the church. And this is that kind of day.

I remember, I don't know how many years ago it's been now, it's been well over ten years, maybe 12, 13 years, I can't remember for sure. But I had not preached a message on this subject I don't think ever, and I felt very moved to preach on the importance of really belonging to the church, identifying, being accountable, responsible, all of that. And we had, I think, 1700 people sign up and actually join the church. It was unbelievable. We actually had them come to the front and we were shocked at this mass of people. And it was amazing response. In fact, the response was so great it began to circulate around the country and all kinds of Baptists were writing me letters saying, "Send me that sermon, send me that sermon." Baptists are big on numbers in the church. And it really did cause some kind

of fury but for our church it was an amazing, amazing moment. Many of those folks weren't saved even, many of them had never been baptized and we went through all kinds of wonderful, wonderful weeks and all this processing people so they could be added to the church. It was, I think, six or seven years ago, I preached that message again and, I don't know, there were six or seven hundred folks who stepped up and said, "I want to be a part of the church." And that was six or seven years ago.

So there comes a time at these intervals when we need to say, "Wait a minute, folks, you kind of need to rethink your relationship to the church." And that's what we want to talk about this morning. I'm very much aware that we live in a culture of consumers. We live in a culture of people who are used to getting what they want the way they want it, delivered in the form they want it and in the mode they want it and in the method they want it. And it's about consumerism. It's about what I want. It's about me. And people make choices in their churches based upon what they think they like. I understand that evangelical consumerism.

I also understand that there is a large massive disinterest in accountability and responsibility and sacrifice. I understand that. I understand as well the churches themselves, or so-called churches, are indifferent to accountability, indifferent to responsibility. They want to make as minimal a requirement as is conceivable so that everybody will be able to come and nothing will hold them back. I also understand that churches tend to be led by independent entrepreneurial type people who develop a kind of dog and pony show that entertains people and feeds some of their personal assumed felt needs and comes down the track of the kind of entertainment they like. And that's enough for them. I understand all that.

And I understand too that people can pour their energies and their interests into non-church quote/unquote ministries that are big and wealthy and can make great appeals to them through the mail and through the media. And they're very slick at doing all of that. And they're very detached. And the more detached they are, the more comfortable people get. They don't know much about people who run the thing and the people who run the thing don't know anything about them and that's just the way they like it.

In the more recent years of the seeker movement, they tell you when you go to a seeker conference, if you want to build a church, give people full anonymity. Don't make them reveal anything about themselves because that scares people away.

Well that might work for whatever those organizations are, but it has nothing to do with the church. But all those things contribute to the fact that there is a low level of commitment to the church, that people flit around covering all the various options on the landscape, the evangelical landscape, according to whatever their whims at the current moment might be and don't tend to make sacrificial, long-term, enduring accountability and responsibility and involvement in a given assembly of believers. There's just little interest in this. There are actually entire associations of churches in which

there are thousands of churches that disdain the idea of belonging. You just come whenever you want to come, float in and float out and we hope we can scratch you where you itch.

That has nothing to do with the church. We have to rethink this. So this is kind of like Church 101, okay? This is just a fatherly talk from me to you. We even have a kind of lingo, we say, "I go to So-and-so church...I go to Such-and-such a church. My church is So-and-so church and it's on So-and-so street." Or we might even say, "This is my church...this is my church." We understand what people mean by that. And the word "church" has definitely developed that connotation but that may be an English dictionary use of the word church but it's not a biblical use of the word church.

Let me put it this way, okay? This is not your church...this is not your church. This is not your church. You don't come to this church. You're having a little trouble processing that? "This is not your church and you don't come to this church." This is not your church because you are this church...you are this church. You don't come to this church because the church comes here with you. We need to just change our definition a little bit. Grace Community Church is not this campus on this location. But Grace Community Church assembles at this campus. As a pastor, I don't minister at the church, I minister to the church. We just need to clarify that in just a foundational sense.

The church is the assembly of the redeemed, *ek kaleo*, called out. It is the assembly of those called out of darkness into light. It is the assembly of those who have been called affectionately by God into new life in Christ to become a part of the community of those who believe, the family of God, if you will, the body of Christ, the Kingdom. You are this church. This is not your church, you are this church. You are this church because you have made the common confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," in regard to Jesus Christ. You have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and believed in your heart God raised Him from the dead. You've been saved, therefore you are in the church of Jesus Christ. And by the providence of God, you assemble with those in the church who assemble in this place under this leadership and with these people you are this church. So am I.

The New Testament lays this out in such simple terms. Look at 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and let's just get a basic understanding. First Corinthians 1, "Paul, called an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth." It is an assembly of believers collected together in the city of Corinth.

And how do you define them? "They are those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus," meaning separated from sin. "They are saints by effectual calling," an actual sovereign calling to salvation. "Along with all who in every place in every local group call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours." There's just so much in those simple two verses. There is, of course, the body of Christ at large, the one true church, the indivisible church militant alive on the earth today. It is that church that then assembles in smaller groups in various locals. One of the assemblies is at Corinth which is a part of the larger church that involves all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never in the New Testament is the word "church" used for a building or an organization

or an institution or anything like that, as Tom pointed out in the article in Grace Today. It's always used for an assembly of believer collected around the gospel and because of salvation in Christ. But it meets in assemblies in varying places, as it says, all who in every place.

In 2 Corinthians we see it again, this simple identification of the church. "Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy, our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, again, and again in a broader context, and with all the saints who are throughout Achaia." In other words, he says I'm writing to you but I know this is going to go to saints beyond just Corinth, even to those who are in Achaia. And in the first letter he said, "Even to those in every place who gather together, this is written to you." So there is that church universal, there is also the church that gathers in every local place.

In Galatians chapter 1 you see it a little bit differently but essentially the emphasis here on the multiple places in which assemblies of believers gather. "Paul, an Apostle," he says as he begins, then in verse 2, "And all the brethren who are with me to the churches of Galatia." Galatia was a region in which there were a number of cities and a number of churches. And again you have the one church and then you have the churches, the groups of those called out who belong to Christ, who make the common confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians." That is, that assembly of believers who gather together in the city of Thessalonica. They are in God the Father. They are in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the defining spiritual reality of those who constitute the local church at Thessalonica.

He further describes them in wonderful terms as expressing in verse 3, "A work of faith, a labor of love, a steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of God and our Father. They are brethren beloved by God. They are chosen by God. They are elect. They are redeemed. They are assembled." In the second letter to the Thessalonian church, starts similarly, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians who are in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Simply saying this, if you are in God, if you are in Christ, that is if you are redeemed and you are saved, you are a part of the universal church and it is assumed that you will assemble in a local group, that you will belong to a local assembly of believers. Jesus said, "I will built My church." And certainly His church is the church universal but it expresses itself in local churches. If you have been purchased with His blood, Acts 20:28, you are a part of the church. There's no such thing as a believer in the New Testament who exists in some kind of random independent free floating kind of life style. All believers were collected into local assemblies.

Revelation chapters 2 and 3, letters are sent to believers. Where are the letters sent? When you want to send a letter to believers, where do you send the letter? I suppose today you do an e-mail blast if you have the list of all believers in the world. But in the New Testament time, if you're going to send letters to believers, you send them to what? Churches. The epistles of the New Testament written to

churches or church leaders. Revelation, you have the seven letters of the Lord Himself to seven churches because that's where the Lord sent His message because it was obvious that if you were a believer, you were in the church. The Lord spoke to His church through letters written to His church and to the leaders of His church and throughout the history of the church the Lord continues to speak to His church by having called and gifted and prepared pastors and shepherds disseminate His message to His church in every generation.

Really, the New Testament knows of no means to communicate to the church except by the teaching and preaching of the Word of God. That's the only way the New Testament knows to disseminate the truth. I guess another way to say it would be there were no medium ministries in those days. There were no books. There were no tapes or CDs, there were no other means to disseminate truth and verbally one person to others. And the church is the chosen place where that is to happen.

You say, "Hey, we're in a modern world, we can do it a techno way." No, because that's not all that happens. That's the foundation of what happens. And in response to that teaching of the Word of God, the life of the church goes into action and into motion and it requires that you be there not only to hear the truth of God but then to enact the truth of God in the common fellowship for the sake of the impact of the gospel in the world.

If in the New Testament era you happen to move from one city to another city to another city, it would have been pretty traditional for there to be a letter given to you that you could take to the new city to introduce you to the new church. There would be an assumption that when you went somewhere else you would have a letter of commendation. The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 brings up the issue of letters of commendation because some of the Corinthians were criticizing him because he didn't seem to have a letter of commendation from what they thought would be the proper sources.

In Romans chapter 16 the Apostle Paul talks about Phoebe who has been at the church at Cenchrea and she's now at the church of Rome. And he says to the church of Rome, this is what you need to know about this wonderful lady, she's been a helper, she's served, and now she'll be a helper and a servant to you, accept her and embrace her. And there are such indications repeated throughout the New Testament. In fact, when anybody went from one place to another, it was probably very common for them to have some kind of commendation from the church from which they came, to assure the church to which they went that they should be received as believers in good standing. It was important. Why? Because you had to protect the church. The church was protected.

Do you know how protective the church is? If there's anybody in the church that's in sin, what do you do? Go to the person. If they don't respond, you go with two or three witnesses. If they don't respond, you tell the whole church. If they don't respond, you put them out. The Lord wants to protect His church to the degree that even people moving around in the ancient world in the early church were given letters of commendation because the church was concerned to protect itself. It's not a place

where just anybody can come and it's not a place where people who are true believers are supposed to come and go with any kind of anonymity.

There is in the book of Acts a clear indication, if you look back in chapter 2, in the book of Acts, a clear indication that there was a very good record of who was truly in the church. On the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:41, it says that they who received His Word was baptized, great preaching of Peter. And there were added that day about three thousand souls, which means somebody was...what?...counting...counting. In verse 47 it says, "The church was adding to their number, adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Look, they were to be shepherds of the flock that the Lord had given them. Hebrews 13 says that we have an account to give to God for how we shepherd the flock and the first thing that's very helpful is to know who's in your flock. And if you were a shepherd in the ancient world, there were no visiting sheep. You didn't say, "Well, I have my...I have my flock and I have my visiting sheep." Really? "Yeah, they show up about every third day and expect me to feed them and clean them and I don't see them and they go wherever they want to go and maybe go to some other shepherd for a while." There's no such concept. Everybody knew his flock, they knew exactly who was in his flock and he had the responsibility and the accountability to care for his flock. And that's the imagery Scripture uses. The first thing you need to know to be a good shepherd is for whom am I responsible for. If I have to discharge that responsibility, tell me for whom I am responsible. And they knew. They kept record and they kept track and they added to the number. These people were believers who had made a profession of Christ openly and were baptized. So it wasn't hard to identify them, it wasn't hard to count them. It wasn't hard to keep track of them, even though there were many of them and they grew very, very rapidly.

In the fifth chapter of the book of Acts, verse 14, "All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number. They're adding more and more and more and they're keeping account. They know these believers. They know who they are. They've heard their public profession. They've been baptized and identified. They knew them by name. In Acts chapter 11 verse 19 says, "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen, made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus in Antioch..." Persecution always scattered the church and that spread the gospel. "And so they were scattered, speaking the Word to no one except Jews alone but there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began preaching to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them and a large number who believed turned to the Lord."

Here we go again. Number, number, number. They're keeping track of this in some way. And further down it says at the end of verse 24, "Considerable numbers...literally...were added, considerable multitudes actually...were added to the Lord." Now we have not added to the church but added to the Lord. That's a synonym. To be added to the Lord is to be added to the church. To be added to the church is to be added to the Lord. There's no sense that you could be added to the church and not

added to the Lord. Or added to the Lord and not added to the church.

In other words, you can't have a church made up of people who are not Christians with only a superficial interest in Jesus. Nor can you have people who are true Christians who are not a part of the church. You are the church. It's only a question of how faithful you are to discharge your responsibility and to do what the Lord wants you to do as part of the church. You are the church.

I guess we could ask the question...would I want to be a member of a church that was full of people with my level of commitment? And that reminds me of the old...was it Groucho Marx line? "I wouldn't join a country club that would have me as a member." What would the church be if they were all like you at your level of commitment? Well, you are the church...you are the church.

They knew who was in the church. They kept track of it. People were baptized. They knew their name. They knew for whom they were responsible. They shepherded the flock of God over which they had been made overseers. They had that accountability. They were given account, Hebrews 13:17, to God for that responsibility being discharged.

So, it's very different from the mind set today...very, very different. If you're added to the Lord, you're added to the church. You were baptized, you made a profession of faith and you belong to the community of believers gathered together in your local area. For many of you, this is exactly how you live. You're in the Lord and in the church. You're committed to Christ and committed to the church. And you are what Christ designed.

But for some of you, you have been added to the Lord, you're not added to the church. We don't know where you belong. You come, you go, you float in, you float out, you're here, you're not here. We have as many as...what, Tom?...three thousand people that come to Grace Church who have never really said, "I want to be responsible, I want to be a part, I want to be accountable, I want to be cared for, nurtured, taught, disciplined, loved, forgiven...cause that's part of it...I want to be what Christ wants me to be." And I grieve over this...this is a wound to me. And I know it comes from the spirit of the age that we live in.

So, let me give you a few reasons why you need to belong. Let me say this. This is not a commercial for Grace Community Church because there are other churches in this area and in all kinds of other areas. But you need to be faithful to be in the Lord and in the church, known, committed, devoted, responsible and accountable. And if you run from that, that's a spiritual issue. That's a spiritual issue. And let me start with that. It is a spiritual issue, that's point one.

It is a spiritual issue. Why would you not say...I want to be a member here, known, loved, taught, respected, helped, ministered to...I want to be under the leadership, protection, the care, the love of this congregation of assembled believers in this place?" What...what noble spiritual reason for not doing that? What would you come up with? Well the truth is, you know, they're pretty serious over

there. I...I'm kind of comfortable to slide in and slide out, you know, I like what I hear and it's good experience and, you know, I've given my life to the Lord, just don't want anybody expecting too much. I don't want anybody getting too close.

You know what will happen if we get close to you? We'll say, "Hey, guess what, he's just like us. We're all fighting the same battle. I had a guy say to me one time, I talked to him about coming to church, he said, "Well, I'd love to come to your church but I've got to get my life cleaned up first." What do you think we're here for? What do you think, we're a bunch of people whose lives have already been cleaned up? We're all in process all the time. I mean, there are no spiritual reasons not to do this. Certainly no biblical ones. The Bible knows nothing of a free-floating kind of free-wheeling independent Christian who comes and goes willy-nilly at his own discretion. It only knows of those who are in the Lord and in the church and accountable to Christ and accountable, as well, to the church. It is a spiritual issue. Hebrews 10 says, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as a manner of some is and all the more as you see the day approaching." The closer we get to the coming of the Lord, the more important it is that you be a part of the church, that you be here to stimulate one another in love and good works, that you be a part of the redeemed community. It's all that the New Testament knows. It is inconceivable to the writers of the New Testament that somebody would be in Christ and not in the church, a local gathered group of those who are Christ's. It's a spiritual issue. Don't make it any other kind of issue because it is a spiritual issue.

Look, you were redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. God purchased you with His own blood, Acts 20, to put you into the church. Every time a person is redeemed, the Spirit of God places them into the body of Christ. You are in the body of Christ. You are joined to the Lord, you are one with everybody else who's joined to the Lord. Why do you resist? Why do you resist becoming a part of the local assembly of the faithful believers who are fighting the same struggles you are and who will be a great help and encouragement to you in the process? It's a spiritual issue, don't make it anything else.

Secondly, it's a fellowship issue. Go back to what we said in Hebrews 10:24, "We are called to stimulate one another to love and good works." We need each other. It's a fellowship issue. We have been introduced into the fellowship. It's 1 Corinthians 1:9, it's 1 John chapter 1 verses 3, 6, 7, our fellowship is with the Lord...with God and with His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a common fellowship with God and with Christ. But it's also a fellowship with each other, *koinonia*, partnership, that's what that word means, partnership. We are all connected. "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit with everybody else who is joined to the Lord, so we're all joined to each other." That's why Philippians 1:27 says, "We strive together, we strive together for the faith." That, by the way, is a passage worth reading to you. Philippians 1:27, "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel."

Then he goes on in chapter 2 to say, "If there's any encouragement in Christ, if there's any

consolation of love, if there's any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in Spirit, intent on one purpose." That's about unity. You say you want to encourage men in your life? You say you want love in your life? You say you want compassion and affection? You want that in your life? Then you will find that in the fellowship of the church. That's why we're here and our fellowship is defined. If it's defined by anything, by truth and love...truth and love.

I guess in today's vernacular we would say, "Whatever you're going through, we're here for you." And not in a superficial sense, it's a fellowship issue. I'll tell you something else, you cannot live effectively your Christian life in isolation. You can have...do a barbeque in the backyard and you put all the coals together and they all stay hot. Just take one and stick it outside the rest and watch what happens to it...it grows cold fast. You isolate yourself from the intimacy of fellowship in the church, from people's fellowship expectation, accountability, from the opportunity to minister to them, to exercise the one another's toward them as they exercise them for you. Pray for one another, love one another, comfort one another, encourage one another, edify one another, confront one another, rebuke one another, restore one another, forgive one another. All those one another's, and there's many more. That's what it means to engage in real fellowship.

When I grew up as a kid, I grew up in churches. My dad was a pastor and they always had a basement with linoleum on the floor and a shuffleboard on it and old ladies with buns on the back of their heads served red punch and stale cookies. And so that's what I thought fellowship was cause they always called it "Fellowship Hall." And fellowship to me meant bad cookies and diluted punch. I guess that was, you know, as a kid, I was just trying to process what fellowship was. And that's what it was every time I went to the place called Fellowship Hall, that's what happened, while the adults drank coffee. That's not fellowship. Fellowship is sharing common life, or sharing life in common, mutually ministering to one another as to each other. This is essential. This is purifying. This is enriching and enobling, comforting, caring, sharing, bearing one another's burdens and thus fulfilling the law of Christ which is the law of love, as Galatians 6 tells us, the fellowship issue.

Thirdly, it's not only a spiritual issue and a fellowship issue, it's an authority issue. I hate to tell you this, but we're going to talk more about it tonight. But you as a believer are under authority...you're under authority. You say, "Yes, but I'm under God's authority." Okay, you're under God's authority, I'll buy that. "I'm under Christ's authority. I have a personal relationship with Christ." Okay, so all you need is your little personal relationship with Christ and you're under His authority, okay. By the way, who disseminates to you what Christ is commanding? "Oh, I kind of pick it up myself, I have a Bible reading plan." Really, ever come across things you can't understand? "All the time." So you're missing all that part, huh? You say you're under the authority of God which means you're under the authority of His Word and His commands, who is disseminating that to you? Who is holding you accountable for that?

If God commands, and He does, and since His Word is the authority and since we are called to

obedience, don't call me...don't call me Lord and do not the things I say, right? How can you call Me Lord, Lord and not do what I say? And doing what I say means understanding what I say. You will never...believe me...you will never as a believer come under the true authority of your Lord unless somebody is delineating the significance and the meaning of His Word to you. It is an authority issue. You have people responsible to disseminate divine truth to you.

Now let me just expand that a little bit. People who just kind of float over here, they'll say, "I heard a really good message by this guy...good message by this guy...oh this guy over here gave a really interesting...good music over here." You know, at the end of the day, that might be true. This was good, that was good, this was good, that was good. But what you're lacking is continuity and the Word of God is a whole revelation. Is that not true? All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is...what?...profitable." One of the things that shows itself up in the absolute absence of discernment among Christian people today is the fact that they don't have a whole theology. They don't have an understanding of Scripture that is systematic, that has integrity, that is all the parts tough all the other parts. They don't understand the whole revelation. They don't have a sound theology. They just have bits and pieces of little interesting good experiences that don't connect...the dots don't connect. It looks like the bad side of a braided rug. It's just a whole lot of loose ends, some very pretty, but they make no sense.

And if everything is going fine in your life, you can live with that backside of the braided rug kind of understanding. But when you need real help in the crises of life and when you really want to understand the world and the way things are and why they are the way they are, and when you truly want to understand your God, and know your God fully, and know your Christ fully, and know the Spirit fully and understand what God is doing in the world, and enjoy all the blessings and the promises of obedient Christian living, you need a whole integrated systematic understanding of the Word of God. You need a sound theology. You're not going to get that bouncing from place to place and having experiences in different ways.

So when we say, at this point, that we're talking about this particular aspect of the church, it's really a truth issue. I remember doing a radio interview many years ago and the radio...a lady called the radio and she said, "I'm looking for a church, what should I look for?" And the host said, "Look for a place that's carrying and sharing and willing to listen." I said, "You get that in a bar." You get that at AA or a cult, they offer that at Weight Watchers. Well that is not a church. You only want to ask one question about a church, what do they do with the Word of God? That's the only question. What do they do with the Word of God? And some people say, "We don't do anything with the Word of God. We think that gets in the way. People don't want that."

What do they do with the Word of God? We're under authority, the church is where God's authority is mediated through those who are faithful teachers of His Word. That's all we are...that's all we are. As I said, we'll talk more about that tonight. But my authority rests in the truth of Scripture and I bring the

truth to bear upon your life with the means that God has ordained, the preaching of His Word. I know preaching is not popular today. I know I'm a dinosaur, an accronistic(??) in the culture of our time, I'm just doing what the Bible says to do...preach the Word, preach the Word. That's not hard to interpret, that's not brain surgery to figure out. Take the Word and preach it. Preach means to proclaim, publicly, openly. It's an authority issue. And I understand that, believe me, I understand there are people who come in here and say, "Whew, I don't want to be in this church," because they don't want to be under the authority of the Word of God. And it's not just preaching that authority, it's implementing that authority. That is the application of the Word of God in individual lives. And that's what we endeavor to do. Not just from the pulpit, not just from the lectern in classes or in Bible studies or whatever, but person to person, right? Don't we hold each other accountable to that which is authoritative, the Word of God? If somebody is in sin, you go to that person. If somebody needs comfort, you go that person. We try to live out in the community of believers here the Word of God which is our authority. And it's a loving authority. Remember, the law of the Lord is love. The most loving thing the Lord can do is tell us what He wants us to do and have us obey. That puts us in the circle of love where He pours down His blessing. So it is an authority issue which means it's an issue of truth that's at the foundation of life in the church.

Another thing, it's a ministry issue...it's a ministry issue. Every believer has been given spiritual gifts. Romans 12 lists categories of spiritual gifts. First Corinthians 12 lists categories of gifts. First Peter breaks the categories into two parts, 1 Peter 4, serving gifts, speaking gifts. You've been given gifts. You say, "Me?" Absolutely. You've been given certain Holy Spirit designed abilities on a spiritual level to minister to people. That's right. Every believer has that. That's not for you, your gift is not for you. Your gift is for someone else. The Spirit of God builds His church through you.

Now in Ephesians 4 you have this pattern starting in verse 11. "He gave some as apostles and prophets and evangelists and teaching pastors for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry." So we equip the saints, the saints do the work of ministry. What does that mean? You minister to each other using your gifts. However it is that God has gifted you, there are categories, you can read them, 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and those are just suggested general categories in which there are all kinds of blendings and possibilities and minglings so that you are a spiritual snowflake. Nobody like you. You have a blend. You've been painted a color all your own on God's pallet where He dipped in all those categories and painted you. You have a responsibility to do that ministry, and it says here, "For the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, a mature man, the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The Lord builds His body into Christ's likeness through the ministry of gifts and every believer has one. First Corinthians 12, He's given severally to every man, the Holy Spirit has, an enablement that you can use to minister...serving gift, speaking gift, one of those two categories or perhaps even a blending of the two.

So, people have to get past the point that the church is some kind of spiritual show put on so that they can become a spectator. You need to minister. It doesn't have to be formal. You don't have to be in a formal position, wearing a tag and a label and knowing specifically your little gift category. You need a body of people in which the Spirit of God will begin to use you to impact their lives, to cause them to grow spiritually into the image of Christ.

You say, "Could that be actually happening in my life?" That will happen in your life if you're a part of the church and you are faithful. It's a spiritual issue. It's a fellowship issue. It's an authority issue. It's a ministry issue. It's also an evangelism issue...it's an evangelism issue.

What do people who have a loose kind of indifferent, marginal connection to the church have to say to someone who is not a Christian? What do they say?

Well, you know, you want to come to Christ but don't mess with the church, it's full of hypocrites and blah, blah, blah, you've heard it all. I remember a Jewish lady who was going to the synagogue down here some years ago, they have a Sunday class, she was going to that. She saw all the people flowing into the church. She got caught up in the line, she came down here. This is good. She showed up here. I got to know her later, she told me she didn't hear a word I said...and I know that happens, of course. She was just shocked and her statement to me was, she had never ever been in a group where so much love was being expressed. She came to Christ. May be here this morning.

John 13:34 and 35, right? "By this shall men know that you are My disciples because you have...what?...love for one another." It's so powerful to see this church, to experience the love and the life that is in this church. You know, if you're going to say, "Well I'm kind of a free-wheeling Christian," then sort of on your own to make the convincing case...but if you can say to someone who is not a believer, "You know, Christ has changed my life and I would love to take you to meet some people who have had their lives changed by Christ like me." It's a powerful impact. It's like 1 Corinthians 14 where the unbeliever comes in, falls on his face and says, "God is in this place." That's very important.

You know, our corporate testimony undergirds our individual witness, doesn't it? So much can be said about belonging to the church, spiritually. And it's all obvious. If you belong to the Lord, you belong to the church. You don't want to be unfaithful to the Lord, but if you're unfaithful to a local body, you're unfaithful to the Lord.

It's a spiritual issue, a fellowship issue, an authority issue, a ministry issue, evangelism issue...well, all of that needs to be applied And that's what I want to do this morning. I know there are those of you who are saying to yourself, "Look, I didn't know it was this big of a deal." Good, it is, it's huge...it's huge. Not joining the church is saying I don't want to be under authority, I want to avoid spiritual accountability. I may limit my evangelism but I don't think that's as big a deal as you do. See it for what it is if you resist it, because that's what it really is.

We're going to give you the opportunity to do the right thing and if God has brought you here among this group of believers, I think you would know this, there are people all over the world who would give anything to be here and belong. And I know familiarity can breed a certain degree of contempt. But you're here and you need to belong. Look, this isn't my church, this isn't your church, we are this church. And what this church is not a result of me and it's not a result of you, God has done it all...God has done it all. We are weak, we are frail, we are human, we have no spiritual power of our own. Everything that's happened here to the honor of the Lord, the Lord has done by His power. All things are from Him and to Him.

You say, "But we're frail and weak." That doesn't make it less the work of God, it makes it more the work of God. There's no human explanation for this church, no human explanation. When we are weak, He is...what?...strong. We know our weaknesses. You are this church if you're here. You need to be all that you should be to honor the Lord of the church.

As you go this morning, get your little Grace Today, you'll see in there that little membership part and you can fill it out and there are tables out in the patio, you probably saw them when you came in, tables around the patio area out there, turn in that little paper and they'll give you a membership packet and you can prayerfully and thoughtfully take a look at it and begin to go in the right direction. My desire is completely that you would be in the place where God can pour out His greatest blessing...listen...to you. And more importantly, through you. We need you and you need us.

Father, thank You for a wonderful time this morning and thank You for a reminder again from Your precious Word what You want us to do. But beyond our responsibility, Lord, we're just overwhelmed that You would give us this privilege of belonging to Your church, Your Kingdom, Your body to be Your people, the Lord of the universe. You would allow us? There are many organizations in this world, no matter how we try they wouldn't let us belong, they wouldn't let us join, we're too common, too lowly, we're nobodies. We couldn't get in the front door. But You throw the doors open and invite us into Your church, the called out, the assembly of the redeemed so that we can know the fullness of blessing and usefulness and eternal reward and joy. We can't come fast enough, Lord, to embrace this privilege. Work Your work, Lord, in hearts today. Bring us to faithfulness that we might together honor You, the head of the church, whom we love. And we pray for Your glory. Amen.

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