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SERMON OUTLINE FOR PASTORS

THE CHURCH IS FOR ME

Why the Local Church Is Precious, and Why You Need It Every Week

> The church is a treasure worth selling everything to have. Its memories, its present reality and its future are all precious, so make gathering with the church a rhythm and a routine in your life.

MAIN TEXT
Matthew 13:44-46

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SERIES
Stand-alone message

BY
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AT A GLANCE

THE MESSAGE

1. The memories of the church are precious, both the testimonies of what God did and the trimmings of the era you were saved in, and the Bible tells us to deliberately recall them.
2. The reality of the church today is precious, because encouragement, discipleship, revelation and the anointing are available right now and not only in the past.
3. The expectation of the church is precious, because the church is not shrinking but taking territory, and persecution only makes it multiply.
4. Therefore make church a rhythm and a routine in your life, and help the people coming in behind you make it one too.



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PREACHING NOTES

Before You Preach

This message was preached on Back to Church Sunday, with many first-time and returning guests in the room. It is a warm, personal message: most of its force comes from the preacher's own memories of the church where he was saved. Swap in your own. The details matter less than the honesty of a person who found a refuge in the house of God.

It is also, as the preacher admits near the end, "the epitome of preaching to the choir." Say that out loud. The people who are present are the ones who will help the people coming in behind them make church a habit.

Two tones to hold together: humor about the odd things churches have done ("some of it is so dumb"), and real tenderness about what those things meant. Never mock the people who love the old ways. Name objections plainly ("it's my only day off," "I can watch online," "the church disappointed me") and answer them without condemnation.

Introduction

Encourage people to bring a physical Bible. There is no condemnation in it: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). But a Bible in hand helps you follow along, and it will help even more in the weeks ahead.

> **MATTHEW 13:44-46** ESV
>
> 44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, 46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

A man finds a treasure and sells everything to buy the field. A merchant finds one pearl of great value and sells all he has to buy it. Today's subject: **the preciousness of the church.**

There was a chorus in the '90s that sang about how priceless and how precious God's love is. "How precious is your steadfast love, O God!" (Psalm 36:7). How precious is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Illustration: the potato salad. I'm particular about potato salad. The number two potato salad in the world is at a little place called Hoagie Man in Adrian, Michigan. Their sandwiches are fine, but the potato salad is something else. The number one potato salad is MeeMaw's. Part of the reason is that it's

delicious. But more than that, it's precious. You only got it in MeeMaw's kitchen, at MeeMaw's table. And MeeMaw is not with us anymore, which makes it more precious still.

The church is precious. The people, the songs, the messages, and yes, even the buildings.

If you ever want to decode someone's spiritual immaturity, listen for this phrase: "The church isn't the building, it's the people." That's true, but it's usually said by someone who doesn't want to go to the building. Rip the roof and the air conditioners off, and see how many of the people come back.

When I look back, I see how precious everything about the church was to me:

- the receptionist who was there when I got saved, whose husband played an old vintage Rogers drum set;
- the Tuesday night intercessory prayer meeting, with a boombox rolled in on a cart, one little lamp, and a handout called *The Intercessor*;
- Sunday night services, when the preacher took off his tie and things went a little harder;
- the youth group names of the '90s;
- the bass player who hit the same lick every time we sang "Jesus, you're a holy and anointed one," and I'd stand at the altar smiling because I knew it was coming;
- how guests were greeted: "If it's your first time, or your first time in a long time";
- even the choir robes, probably because I didn't have to wear one.

For me, the church was a refuge from a home life of chaos. All of those little things blessed me because they were part of the refuge.

Illustration: "Days of Elijah." Some of what we did was so dumb. When we sang "Days of Elijah," they would roll in styrofoam tombs left over from a Christmas play, dusted with baby powder to look like stone. On the key change into "Behold, He comes," people wrapped in white would burst out of the tombs like it was the rapture, and the church would go wild. If someone pitched that idea to me today, I'd tell them to find another church home. But even that blesses me, because there is a preciousness to the church.

This morning, let's talk about what makes the church precious.

1. The Memories Are Precious

I was saved in 1997, which puts me right on the heels of 30 years of being born again. If you're new to the household of faith, you're building your memories right now. If you've been around a while, you have memories in the church.

The old hymn calls them "Precious Memories," and it calls them unseen angels: they encourage and comfort us. The Bible tells us to deliberately recall them.

> **PSALM 77:10-12** ESV
>
> 10 Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." 11 I will remember
> the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. 12 I will ponder all your work, and
> meditate on your mighty deeds.

REVISIT THE TESTIMONIES

Do you remember when the Lord set you free? When He brought you out of whatever you were in? When He lifted you out of the miry clay and set you on a rock? The psalmist says, "He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock" (Psalm 40:2). "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Psalm 16:6). "You have set my feet in a broad place" (Psalm 31:8).

It's precious to revisit these testimonies of His power. Not only the day you got saved. Someone asked me recently how I was doing, and I said, "Ten years ago I was begging for what I'm feeling right now." Look back at what the Lord has brought you from.

I hope everyone here has one service you can name, a date when God touched you in a powerful way: the preacher, the three things he said, the song, the altar. Go back to those places.

REVISIT THE TRIMMINGS

It's good to revisit not only the testimonies but the trimmings: the songs, the style, the general feel of those moments. Pink, orange, green or purple carpet. The pew where God touched you, even if you love these chairs now.

A pastor's greatest enemy can be people's preferences for how church should be. We can't freeze church in anyone's favorite era. We have to go together where the Lord is calling us. But it is still good to remember.

Illustration: painting the house. Several years ago we were moving, and I spent days painting the house. I caught myself listening to old Brownsville revival worship songs, and I knew it was weird: this is the time for AC/DC, not revival choruses. Then the Holy Spirit spoke to me: "You like these songs because you worshiped to them before you knew how the sausage was made." Ministry is work for me now. The songs from before I was a professional are the ones that still minister to me. They are precious memories.

2. The Reality of the Church Is Precious

This is the here and now.

There is a man in Scripture who lost the thing he was charged to guard, and his excuse was, "And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone" (1 Kings 20:40). It's easy to look back at what was (often through rose-colored glasses) and get so busy going here and there that we miss what the church offers us today.

“Sunday is my only day off.” There’s no condemnation, but you don’t understand the precious reality of the church. There is a refreshing in the house of the Lord, “that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:20).

“I don’t like the songs or the way you preach.” There’s a refreshing in the house of the Lord that has nothing to do with the preacher, the singing, the volume, the lights or the temperature. When people join together and call on the name of Jesus, a refreshing comes through the room.

Some people can’t let go of the past. To them, everything back there was great and everything now isn’t good enough. But you are in the time you’re supposed to be in. If you were supposed to be in the ‘90s, you’d be in the ‘90s. God has you right here.

TODAY THINGS, NOT YESTERDAY THINGS

Today, the church offers you:

- **Encouragement.**
- **Discipleship.** Discipleship can happen in classrooms and groups, but in our church it starts in the pulpit.
- **Revelation.** You can walk into church and hear something that shifts your worldview, your decisions, your home and your work.
- **Power.** You can get a touch from the Holy Spirit today.
- **Anointing.** You can leave with something on you. The anointing makes the difference.

These are today things, not yesterday things.

CHURCH BUSYNESS

Life’s busyness can make us overlook the preciousness of the church. So can church busyness. To everyone who serves: you make this world go round, and we appreciate you. In a season of growth, many serve every single week and are rarely in the room. It is precious to be used by God, to see lives changed, and to know God did a work in someone because you were part of the process. But don’t keep your head down so much that you never look up to receive the touch of God yourself. Stay current on the messages.

Make church a regular event. Get involved. And **speak well of the church**, not “it’s not like it used to be.” Speaking well of the work of God positions your faith to receive from it today.

THE CHURCH STEADIES YOUR SOUL

Second Peter 2 describes false prophets and false teachers, and it says this about them: “They entice unsteady souls” (2 Peter 2:14). Regularly gathering with the household of faith steadies your soul.

People say, “I don’t need to go to church to know God.” But God “gave him as head over all things to the church” (Ephesians 1:22). Christ was not given as head over those who sit in their basement on Sunday

morning.

ANNOUNCEMENT (AS PREACHED)

Optional. Next week begins a long series on the Lord's Prayer. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah: "my house shall be called a house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:7). Believe God for a revival of prayer in the church. Invite the congregation to lift their hands and pray, "Teach me how to pray, Lord."

3. The Expectation of the Church Is Precious

> **MATTHEW 16:18 ESV**
>
> [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Contrary to what you hear on the news, on podcasts and around the dinner table, the church is not getting worse and worse. The church is not shrinking. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is still growing, expanding and taking territory. "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14).

THE TENSION

There is a tension we feel, because the world does seem to be getting crazier. That tension is to be expected. That's the world; it's not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

> **ROMANS 8:19 ESV**
>
> [19] For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

A few verses later, Paul says "the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Romans 8:22). Creation is crying out for the revealing of the sons of God. That is why we are building: there is no other option. We answer the cry of creation and fulfill the Great Commission at the same time: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

It is precious to look toward the future through the lens of faith. Things aren't getting worse and worse in the church, but better and better. There is no mechanism on earth that can stop the church of the living God. A power outage can't stop it. A closed road can't stop it.

THE CHURCH THRIVES UNDER PERSECUTION

The church thrives under a little persecution. That's why underground churches around the world are powerful and growing. Paul calls suffering "this light momentary affliction" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Put a little persecution on the church, and it pops out revival in a generation.

A few years ago the church was told to close its doors. Today we're seeing a stirring among Gen Z that reminds many of us of the outpouring of the '90s.

Illustration: tribbles. In *Star Trek*, tribbles were little furry creatures that multiplied every time you fed them. Feed them a little, and soon they were falling out of the air vents. Feed the church a little persecution, and like a tribble, it multiplies. More people get saved. More revival goes forth.

Conclusion: Make Church a Rhythm and a Routine

This is the big thing: **it's time to make church a rhythm and a routine in your life.** Whether you're here for the first time, here every week, or here once in a blue moon.

Illustration: the dog who knew. A friend's family took their dog to the store with them one day every week. The dog figured it out. On that day, it was antsy all day long, ready to go. Make church that kind of rhythm: when Sunday comes and you're not in the house of the Lord, it feels off.

Make it a routine. You will find every little inconvenience not to come: the parking, your hair, the sweatpants, the missed shower. Fight through it. Come anyway.

> **HEBREWS 10:19-25** ESV
>
> [19] Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, [20] by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. [23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

"I don't need to go to church" is one of the easiest lies to believe, because the church can be a disappointing place. People leave over small things. Some of you have been through pastor after pastor and staff change after staff change. You've seen what other preachers do on the news. And you can watch the best preachers in the world online. I like the internet preachers; I am one.

But **every person needs a church. Every person needs a pastor. Every person needs a Spirit-filled gathering. Every person needs a place of renewal, and they need it regularly.**

A pastor's job is like the priest's job in Deuteronomy 20. Before Israel went into battle, the priest stood before the people to remind them that "the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 20:1). You are about to go into some form of battle. Let me remind you how powerful, good and faithful God is. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). But you can't receive that without showing up.

When you come, we want you to hear about Jesus, to encounter the Holy Spirit, and to sit next to someone who doesn't look like you.

WHO HEBREWS 10 IS TALKING TO

Walk back through the passage. These are not weak believers:

- "since we have confidence to enter the holy places": confident believers;
- "by the blood of Jesus": blood-washed and born again;
- "by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh": living in revelation ("every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God," 1 John 4:2);
- "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith."

And to these people, he says: don't stop meeting together, "as is the habit of some." Have the congregation say, "I need the church."

It's almost impossible to be fully assured in your faith, hold fast to hope, walk in love, love God and serve others without coming together regularly.

THE CHURCH NEEDS ITS DIVERSITY

There is no hierarchy in the church, but there is diversity, and we need it. Often the people who feel most spiritual are the least mature, and the people who say "I don't have it all together" turn out to be the most spiritual. You need people going through something and people who know how to pray through something, and they need each other.

Young believers on fire for God sometimes have "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). You've got knuckleheads and you've got gray heads, and the gray heads need to help the knuckleheads. Small groups, online studies and women's or youth gatherings are good, but they can't replace the whole church gathered: men and women, young and old.

DON'T OVERCOMPLICATE IT

Make the decision today. If I miss a Sunday, I miss too much. It's like a series: every episode matters.

It's easy to do. Don't overcomplicate it. Put it on the calendar. If you can show up to work, to school and to dinner, you can show up to church. Don't let it live out in the auxiliary. Make it part of the core of your routine.

This message is preaching to the choir, because the people who heard it are the people who came. But people are about to come into this church who don't have the rhythm yet. Be the ones who say, "We want you here. Sit with me." Get their numbers. Follow up: "Are you going to be at church this Sunday?" Help make it a rhythm and routine in their lives.



ABOUT

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