

Taking It Seriously: The Church

INTRO: This morning we begin a new series (of sorts) which I am calling “Taking It Seriously.” I say “of sorts” because in many ways this is a natural extension of the series we have just finished in Ephesians.

This series is going to emphasize spiritual disciplines for the church. NOT spiritual disciplines for individuals. America has WAY too much emphasis on individualism, and this individualism has crept into the church in how we view our faith and even how we view the church as a whole.

TRAN: And that is where we are going to start. We need to have a proper view of the church.

- I. The typical mind of a person that hear’s the word church
 - A. Video: “The Church” by Fortyonetwenty
 - B. Did you hear some of the ideas of what church is in there?
 1. Church is money or power
 2. Church is for helping people
 3. Church is for making people better, or giving kids values (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism at its best)
 - C. Now this is what the “person on the street” thinks about church, but I wonder if we took a poll in here, what kind of answers would we get if I reduced it down to one seemingly simple question: What do you think of when you hear the word “church?”
 1. Too often we use it as a label for a building
 - a) “The First Congregational Church”
 - b) Did you see that great big church we just passed by
 2. Or some people think of denominations
 - a) That is not as prevalent in this church because, although we are labeled congregational, we are not associated with a denomination
 - b) But many people think, Catholic, or Baptist, or Lutheran, etc.
 3. We even use this is on language for Sunday morning
 - a) “We are going to church”
 - b) Or while we all sit around the table and Maria’s, “We just came from church.”
 4. The problem is that all of these uses of the term “church” are virtually divorced from the meaning of the term in the NT
 - D. I bring this up because we just came out of one of the best books in the Bible to understand what the church really is and how it functions
- II. What the church is according to Ephesians
 - A. If you remember through the sermon series in Ephesians I told you that the book is neatly divided into two sections

Taking It Seriously: The Church

1. Chapters 1-3 were doctrine, theology, praise and prayer
2. Chapters 4-6 were practical, faithfulness, and obedience
- B. The first three chapters set the framework of function for the practicality in the last three chapters
 1. Put another way - Theology drives practice
- C. The second three chapters display how the workmanship of God from chapter two, this masterpiece that God created out of fallen humanity that was dead in their sins, the church, how it is to function
- D. If you recall your chapter two of Ephesians
 1. First God made us alive with Christ
 - a) This applies to us as individuals
 - b) All of us that have acknowledged and accepted Christ, we are alive with Him
 2. But the second half of chapter two says that it was Jews and Gentiles both saved, both made alive, and formed into one body
 - a) So we while we were saved individually, we were not saved to be alone
 - b) To wallow in a lifestyle of self-centeredness (sanctified though it may be)
 - c) We were saved and placed into a family
 - d) We are linked by being in union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, and a part of this wonderful masterpiece of God's called the church
 3. This masterpiece, called handiwork in the NIV is interesting
 - a) The sentence is plural: "We are God's handiwork"
 - b) But the word "handiwork" is singular - the implication being that all the various parts (people) make up this masterpiece
- E. Now, if we look back over Ephesians at a macro level, we see three analogies that Paul uses to describe the masterpiece, the church
 1. The first is a building in chapters 2
 - a) Built upon the prophets and apostles - and Jesus is the cornerstone
 - b) In Christ we are all joined together to become, "a dwelling place in which God lives by His Spirit."
 - c) It is not a physical building he is describing, but the people
 - (1) And not just the people of a single church
 - (2) It is all who have come into unity with Christ
 2. The second analogy that Paul uses is the body in chapter 4
 - a) Christ is the head - there is no doubt of that
 - b) We often apply this to an individual church that you are each a different piece of the body

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- c) Ever think that Paul meant something wider - bigger - that maybe he was talking about the world wide church of Christ
 - (1) That Christ directs the whole church to meet the needs of the world
 - (2) That Christ has control over all true believers and all true churches that preach the gospel, and He would do so much more if the Baptists would stop saying to the Methodists, “I don’t need you!”
 - 3. The third analogy is that of a bride
 - a) Christ is working to prepare His bride for the wedding day
 - b) Again, think bigger than just our church, and think all true believers and all churches that preach the gospel
 - c) He is preparing His bride “to be holy and without blemish”
 - F. This is the church, the whole church that Paul has in mind, and that we need to reshape our thinking around
- III. The Nicene Creed fits in well here and reminds us of what is in view
- A. We don’t use creeds often in our branch of the family tree, and perhaps we should more
 - B. The Nicene Creed settled issues about the Trinity for the great majority of Christendom, but it has some great reminders for us about the church
 - C. It describes the church as “one holy catholic apostolic church”
 - 1. One is an interesting word - I looked it up and you know what it means? One.
 - 2. Holy just reminds us of how Christ has declared us holy by imputing His righteousness to our account
 - 3. Catholic - Some protestants don’t like that word because protestants and catholics are supposed to not like each other - that whole unresolved reformation thing
 - a) Do you know what the word means?
 - b) Universal
 - c) So the Nicene Creed has called the church ONE and Universal - are we catching the hint?
 - 4. Apostolic means that the church teaches what is in line with the apostles
 - a) So a church like “The Church of Jesus Christ of Later Day Saints” - are they part of this one, universal church?
 - b) NO! Because their teaching is not in line with what the apostles taught.
 - D. What I am driving at here is simple and the Nicene Creed is driving the point home too

Taking It Seriously: The Church

1. Usually when we think of the church, we think “local gathering” - “my personal church”
 2. Where Paul starts from is the Church - all believers all around the world, AND throughout time
 - a) That means my father who passed away 10 years ago, IS part of the church
 - b) I have numerous relatives that were pastors, and as long as they understood the gospel that Jesus died for our sins and He is the only way to heaven - they ARE a part of the church
 3. We must think bigger in regards to the church
- E. As such, I want to turn the corner, and have you keep that larger perspective of the church in mind as we talk about why we come to church
1. Church attendance is what we might call a spiritual discipline for the church
 - a) Seems like a no-brainer
 - b) But surprisingly, so many Christians have knocked this discipline down the priority chain
 2. So I want to go over some reasons for the discipline - all the while I want you to keep the larger picture of the church universal in mind
- IV. Reasons for making church a priority of life
- A. Now let me start by saying what I am attempting seems stupid
1. Great lead-in I know, but think about it, you are HERE!
 - a) So why waste my breathe?
 - b) We should take this show on the road, surprise people in their homes and do the sermon there!
 2. Ahhh, but wait, there is a reason to do the sermon here
 - a) First of all, you will be better equipped to encourage others that should be here after hearing the message
 - b) Second, this benefits you as well
 - (1) This is something that helps you evaluate your reasons for coming to church
 - (2) Maybe you are missing out on things in your faith because you have a block up by having an invalid reason for coming
- B. So let's start with the most basic reason - God said so
1. Most people don't believe that statement - in fact in 1992 47% of Americans believe that the Bible does not command people to attend church
 2. So let's look - go to Hebrews 10:24-25
 - a) The author of Hebrews is referring to the regular meetings of the wider body of believers

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- b) And several of these folks are making a habit of not coming
- 3. To put this in context, the author is writing to people that could face persecution if they identified themselves publicly as Christians - Like attending church would
 - a) Property being seized
 - b) Possible imprisonment
- 4. This is really the only reason we need
 - a) Thinking that we can receive the message of God's grace and forget that with that message comes a family as well is foolish and dangerous
 - b) To speak of loving Christ while neglecting His body, the church is hypocritical
- C. A second reason is that attending church guards against slipping backward in your faith
 - 1. I have seen this time and again about not coming to church or youth group over the years
 - a) And no one intends to slip back in their faith
 - b) And in fact most do not suddenly become heathens - they don't become murderers, or drug dealers, or cheat on their spouse, or any other horrible thing you could name
 - 2. What I have seen is a slow erosion of a passion for Christ
 - 3. The end result is that the person wonders how they got to a place where they value the church, and more importantly Christ so little
 - 4. Now, in fairness, does coming to church mean that a person will not face spiritual setbacks?
 - a) Of course not
 - b) No one progresses in the faith without some spiritual opposition
 - c) But lack of connection to a church family that loves you, supports you, points you toward Christ, and where you can hear the Word of God taught clearly - spiritual setbacks are all but guaranteed
- D. Also from the verses in Hebrews 10 is that we need fellowship and encouragement
 - 1. That "spurring one another on" is fellowship
 - a) Fellowship is far more than a meal, or a good conversation
 - b) It is talking about the deeper, intimate issues of life, and listening to challenges from brothers and sisters in Christ about our choices and thoughts about our spiritual walk
 - c) It is sharing life together
 - d) We all need this

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- (1) Sadly, in most churches, what we call fellowship, falls woefully short
- (2) Fellowship is something we all need to grow in for this church to truly thrive in the way God intends
2. The second key ingredient listed is encouragement
 - a) Encouragement can come in a variety of ways in church
 - (1) You can be encouraged by the good looking preacher's incredible sermon that would bring the grumpiest of people to tears
 - (2) You can be encouraged by seeing a person that is barely able to get in the door of the church without assistance, and see the faith and love that they have in their Savior
 - (a) I remember one guy from the church I grew up in - Ted Trier
 - i) Cute little old guy
 - ii) He would volunteer to sing at services sometimes, and he always sung the same song, and he always had an awful voice
 - iii) But when he sang these words you could not help but be moved, "No one ever care for me like Jesus - There's no other friend so kind as He - No one else could take the sin and darkness from me - O how much He cared for me"
 - (3) You can be encouraged by mature believers that lovingly push you forward
 - (4) You can be encouraged by others that have or are enduring the same life struggles that you are
 - (5) You can be encouraged by the prayers of His saints, the singing of praises, and the the reminder of what Jesus did for us that we receive at communion
 - b) When you have kids you want your kids to be completely emotionally healthy
 - (1) That requires socialization
 - (2) That requires encouragement
 - (3) And each of us as God's children need the fellowship and encouragement that we only get from other believers
- E. Making church the consistent place to be for Sunday morning displays the love and priority we place on Him
 1. Is going to church the only way to demonstrate the priority and love we have for Christ - of course not
 - a) But what a better way - to experience the life together that Paul was talking about

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- b) To experience the faith surrounded by the many others that have come to know Christ's forgiveness and love
- 2. Too many people are too quick to allow their priorities on Sunday morning to be dictated to them
 - a) Work, entertaining guests, going to the ballgame, sports, that project you want to get done at home
 - b) That is all setting your priority for you
 - c) "But you don't get how busy I am Pastor!"
 - (1) Perhaps I don't
 - (2) Let me challenge you though, do you really believe that any of the people that made it to church on Sunday are any less busy than you?
 - d) The author (Don Whitney) of one of the books I used to prepare the message, told this story
 - (1) READ: *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* p. 20
 - (2) I don't mean to do a drive by guilt, but I thought considering the way in which our society presses in on us so hard about taking up time to worship, it was a great reminder of what is to be first
 - (a) And it is a great reminder to parents about what your kids might pick up
 - (b) He obviously knew he was loved, but also saw their love for Christ - and it made an impact
- F. Two more - Going to church follows Jesus' example
 - 1. Luke 4:16 "He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom."
 - a) "But Pastor Keith, that is Sabbath worship that the Jews observed! Ha! Got ya. We don't have to worship on the Sabbath."
 - b) Yep, you got me. Except for one small factor that you are overlooking - worship on the Sabbath was God's ordained manner for worship at the time
 - c) Granted that Paul made it clear that a particular day of the week was not the issue - but it was still clear from what he said that weekly public, corporate worship of God was still ordained by God
 - 2. So we talk about wanting to be like Jesus
 - a) To be like Jesus we follow His example
 - b) That means that we do as "was His custom" and we participate in weekly, public, corporate worship
 - (1) And notice the word I chose there please - participate
 - (2) I did not say attend

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- (3) You are to be a participant in the worship service, not one of the jokers who says, "Alright, I'm here Pastor. Try to keep me awake, if you can."
- G. Last one - which circles around to the beginning - We participate in the local church so that we can be a part of God's grand plan for the world
1. This goes back to the fact that the Church is universal
 2. What the Church does is bigger than just what our little body of believers here in Almont does
 3. But to be a part of what the Church universal is about, you have to be attached to a local body of Christ
 4. It is really hard to claim that you are a part of Christ's body, the Church universal, and reject being a part of a local body of Christ
 - a) The Bible does not talk about lone rangers
 - b) A Christian on his own is completely foreign to the Bible
 5. It is really hard to say that you love Christ and hate His bride
 - a) "Jesus, you are welcome at my party, but your ugly wife has to stay outside."
 6. "But Pastor Keith, the church does not act the way it should a lot of the time in reflecting the head, the bridegroom, Jesus. You seriously want me to enter in to that?"
 - a) YES!
 - b) How many of you have perfect families - a family in which there is no strife and there are not any members of the family that rub people the wrong way?
 - (1) None of you?
 - (2) We all have a crazy aunt or uncle that can be embarrassing, or a cousin that we wish God put in someone else's family
 - (3) Do you think that it would be any different in God's family?
 - (a) And that only raises two more issues
 - (b) First, by saying that God's bride, God's family is too crazy, embarrassing or sinful to participate with, you are setting yourself up as the ideal that others should strive to be like -
 - i) Now if you want to claim sinless perfection, go ahead
 - ii) Give me 24 hours with you and I promise I will find a crack in the veneer
 - (c) Second, by keeping yourself out of the craziness of church, you remove God's sanctifying effects in your life
 - i) It may be that crazy aunt that helps you learn how to be more patient

Taking It Seriously: The Church

- ii) It may be that church person that drives you nuts that God uses to refine your character
7. Removing yourself from the church hurts your progress as a Christian
- a) You are removed from teaching of God's Word
 - b) You are removed from fellowship and encouragement
 - c) You are removed from the people that help refine your character
 - d) It may remove some stress in your life, but it also removes what God has called "His masterpiece," that which stands as a glory to the wisdom of God from effecting your life in the way in which God designed

CONCLUSION: If we are going to take church seriously, we need to do two key things. First, we need to reshape our understanding of the Church. It is far larger than just this building, its ministries, or even just our people. The Church is all of God's people. Second, we need to commit full participation in a local body of believers. The only way to get all the benefits that God designed for the Church universal is to find a local body to be a full participant in.