



The Privilege of Church Joyful Participation in God's Assembly

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Well, to set out on a successful summer road trip you need a few essentials. You need a good playlist on your phone. For me, I need an ice chest that is topped off with flaky, chewable, crushed ice. An insulated cup. A big one would be good. A comfortable driving shirt, a big bag of almonds, roasted and salted would be nice. Of course, a roll of Spray candy, maybe two. But with all of that, if I'm 20 miles past Indio and I run out of gas, my wife is not going to be all that impressed with my preparations for the trip. And if I say, well, that's OK, I'm going to go walk and find a gas station and buy a gas can, and I reach down and realize I've left my wallet at home, I don't think a handful of almonds is going to assuage my wife's frustration with me. That would be a total fail right there.

To successfully set out in life as a Christian, there are a lot of things we think are essential and they may make your life a little nicer, but there are certain things that actually are essential, that God says are essential. And you better have these. If you don't have these, you are going to find yourself in a desert stranded. It's a bigger thing than just kind of having a dry period in your spiritual life. It is what Paul calls in First Timothy, having your faith be shipwrecked. And there's a lot at stake, not only for you, but all the people around you who are relying on you being a vibrant, growing Christian.

The essential that I want to talk about this morning is something that is increasingly dismissed as non-essential, as a matter of fact, it's seen as optional by so many. I've personally known of presidents, for instance, I think of a president of a large Christian organization who said basically, "I'm not interested in that anymore." I think of an interview I saw of a best-selling Christian author who said, "I just don't find it an efficient use of my time. I don't do it anymore." This is growing in popularity and I want to safeguard your life by making sure you don't leave home without it. You've got to have in this thing called the Christian life this essential firmly in place and fully prioritized in your schedule.

What are you talking about Pastor Mike? I want to show you. Go to Hebrews Chapter 10 with me, a familiar passage to most of you who have been around in church. I want to read it backwards here. Not every word of it backwards, but I'd like to start at the bottom. Three verses are all I'll take time to cover. But let's start in verse 25 just to jump into the middle of the sentence to show you what a lot of people today are dismissing as irrelevant, particularly because we can go to the Christian bookstore and we can read books, we can download them, we can listen to Christian radio. We can stream things. We can zoom in on something if we really have to be there.

But here's what the Bible has to say about your Christian life and mine. Verse 25, Hebrews Chapter 10. "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some," and I would say a growing contingent of people who call themselves Christians, but the opposite, meeting together and "encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Now, all of that begins with the sentence in verse 24 that you ought to consider each



individual within the church to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works," that this ought to be something going on in the relationships within the context of the church. Why? Verse 23? Because of the importance of our Christian faith. It's got to be vibrant. It's got to be unwavering. "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope."

You're saying that by the time you get to the end of this life, you want to walk into the presence of your creator and have him say that you are righteous and found in faith in Christ and that he's going to say to you, "Enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," and you're not going to hear, "Depart from me, I never knew you." That's your hope. You're banking on that. And you need to hold fast to that hope. It needs to be a vibrant hope, a hope that demonstrates itself in love and good deeds. And you ought to do it "without wavering, for he who promised his faithful," and he will do it. But you've got to have a faith that is active, a faith that is resolute, a faith that is unmovable, a faith that's unwavering.

And a key element in that is you and I, "considering how to stir one another up to love and good works and not neglecting meeting together," don't neglect meeting together, "as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

A lot of people saying you don't need church anymore. Leaders, people's books I bet in this room that some of you have read in Christian bookstores and they're sitting around in their little studies in their homes, their little cul-de-sac somewhere, writing stuff for you to consume. And they are saying, "I don't really think we need the church anymore as a part of our regular weekly schedule. I don't find it an efficient use of my time."

It's very important that we rethink all of that. There are necessities in the Christian life and it's more than church, I realize that, but there are not many on God's shortlist of absolute necessities. You need the Bible. You need daily interaction with the Bible. You need prayer and you need the church. It's the old school prescription for what you need, and that is more Bible, more prayer and more fellowship with the people in your church. And that's not just potlucks and having meals together. That's what this passage is talking about, which is more than you coming to church on the weekends. It's more than you coming to church on the weekends in person. It's more than that.

It's more than you who are listening on the radio and more will listen to the sermon on the radio than listen in person. And I'm telling you, it's more than you tuning into your favorite preachers on the radio and learning new things about the Bible. It's way more than that. It's you meeting face-to-face with people in the church and you now taking on the role of "stirring each other up to love and good works," because your faith really is going to depend on that essential. You're going to run out of gas in the Christian life without it.

And I've watched several people who have careened into what Paul calls the spiritual shipwreck of their faith because they said, "I don't need this anymore. I'm mature now. I know a lot. I know more than most people in my small group. I know more than the pastor. I don't



need it. I think I can get fellowship some other way. I can get learning some other way. I don't really like the sermons. They don't feed me. I don't like the worship. It's not my style. I'm just not going to be there." And if you think, "Well, you're preaching to the choir, Pastor Mike. because you're looking me in the eye and here we are in the room. We're doing it already." That's not what I'm talking about, attending church.

Attending church is one thing, but it's me looking you in the face and me trying to equip you to do what God has asked you to do. And that is for you to be engaged in thinking, considering how you can stir each other up to love and good deeds. And that means that you've got to move from just attending church to what we call around here connecting with the people at church. We have three words that describe your connection or relationship with a church: attending, connecting and serving.

And some weekends in the sermon occasionally you'll hear about, you know, the importance of being here in person, attending the church, physically getting in your car and driving here and attending the church. And then there are some sermons we have about serving. Everyone needs a ministry post. We preach on passages like First Peter Chapter 5. Everyone should have a ministry as a good steward of God's investment in your life. First Corinthians 12. First Peter 5. You ought to be serving. That's not what this sermon's about.

It's not about attending and it's not about serving. It's about connecting. That's what we're here to talk about. And that is essential, "all the more essential as we see the Day drawing near." And it is drawing near because you're closer today than you were a year ago to meeting your maker face-to-face. And what you need is more of this. We can't neglect it. It is critically important.

Let's start with verse number 23, just to remind us how important it is. It really comes down to what God does with the church for our faith, our commitment, our confession, "the confession of our hope." Let us look at it again. "Hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." Now, the question is are you going to be faithful? Are you going to be faithful to do what God has asked you to do?

Now, I've started with some egregious quotes, and I know that it is, I hope, unsettling for you to think about people saying, "I just don't do church anymore." But there are a lot of you who have heard the argument, perhaps some of you listening, streaming, watching, whatever online and you have the idea that church to you is really not a building, it's not a meeting, it's not a program. Right?

As I've heard people say, and I'm just quoting now directly, they say things like this: "We are the church. It's not a building, it is not a meeting, it's not a program. It's not that stuff in that organized religion thing. I'm spiritual, not religious. I do church every time I run into a Christian at Starbucks, we're kind of doing church because, you know, 'Oh, you're a Christian. Me too, man. Cool. Really? What are you studying about? I read this. Oh, that's awesome.' Hey, going home with my latte, I did church." You didn't do church. Let me remind you, you didn't do church.



And that thing that you had in saying hi to another Christian or even sitting in someone's living room where you sat down and said, "Let's just talk about the fact that we both love God." That is not what this passage is about. And it certainly isn't within the context of what this whole letter is about. And it is not God's will for your life to call your Christian fellowship stopping at that particular level. This goes much deeper than that. It's got to involve what we've just read. But it starts with us seeing the importance of the faith and hope that you have in Christ being aided by God's design and his design is for you to be part of the church, an active participant in the church.

As we call it around here, a highly committed participant in the church. And coming on the weekend, I congratulate you for that. That's a good thing. You ought to be here, but you ought to go beyond that. We've got to get to a high level of commitment, which means moving from attending, which is in some ways, it's a very passive thing because nothing is expected of you except not falling asleep or snoring. Right? And really, that's really all that's required. Other than that, you can sit there, you can daydream, you can play on your phone, you can use our free Internet, you cannot sing any of the songs, and really no one's going to chide you for that because you can get away with all that here. But I can't get away with just passivity if I move from the level of attending to saying, now, I'm going to have to connect to do this stuff. This is going to require more of you. And it all goes back to what God wants to do with that kind of participation in your church. It is essential.

I'd like to start that way, just to think about holding fast to the confession of our hope without wavering and he's going to write this prescription of us meeting together and never neglecting it. I'm going to say this. Number one, you need to revisit or "Reaffirm the Importance of Church." Church. Church. I want to affirm the importance of church. And I guess I'll start at the outer layer. Attending is an important part of that. But if you say, "Well, why isn't it just hanging out with another Christian, playing golf, talking about God or the Bible or streaming some sermons, why is that not church?"

Here's why. Because of the word church. And I don't mean that because of a building. I mean that because of what the word means. Now, church comes through German into English and, you know, it sounds like the German word, but the Greek word in the New Testament, not that we even have to pronounce it, but the word "Ekklesia" in the New Testament. And people can talk about that in terms of the compound components and all that. But what it means, if you look it up, lexically the usage of the word used 114 times in the New Testament, 118 times the New Testament, whatever, it means, here it comes, "assembly" an assembly.

So when Christ said he's going to build his Church and then he describes the Church as meeting in churches, plural, in various places. Right? We know that he's talking about people assembling in person, in groups and meetings. That's why even here, we don't even have the word church. We have meeting together, meeting together and being in the same place. I know that God has designed the church for you and you can't turn your nose up at it and say you don't need it or you don't need this level of it because all of you here are already here. But you cannot turn your nose up at what God is designed to say I'm using this as a tool to



bolster and fuel and safeguard your confession of hope. I can't turn my nose up, because God has said, "I've designed this for you," and the design is assembling.

In the Old Testament there's a word translated into our English text from the Hebrew Old Testament. We translate "throng." It's a word we don't use very often. Throng. They would go and worship in the throng, in the masses. They would come together in groups. Right? And we had the pilgrimage feasts where you had a big throng. And then you had the groups of people who assembled in the synagogues together, they would come together. And in the church we're called together.

Passages like Acts Chapter 11, when Luke is writing about the churches, it's just great. That would be a good chapter just to look at the use of the word ekklesia, the word church there. He talks about the church at Jerusalem and then he talks about the church at Antioch and Paul going through and strengthening the churches throughout Asia Minor. These churches are assemblies of individual Christians in groups of assemblies where God says, "I have set this up with a whole set of instructions in two primary books, First Timothy and Titus." We call these the pastoral epistles. But what they are is the way that God says here's how my assembly ought to work. It ought to have identified, gifted, qualified and educated, trained assembly leaders. They're given words like this: administrating. Right? They are overseeing, they're shepherding and they're teaching. So I'm going to specially, Ephesians 4 says, gift people to do that oversight of the assembly in the thing called the assembly that meets in cities.

So a city is going to have an assembly, they're going to meet in geographic locations and we're going to have assembly leaders. And here's how we're going to structure it. And people say, "I don't need church" or "church is Starbucks, I don't need a pastor and all that." You need a pastor because God set up the church with pastors and ministry leaders, "Diakonos," deacons we transliterate it. And in that structure, guess what there are? Meetings and schedules and programs coming together in buildings and places. In the New Testament it was in the person that had the biggest church before they started building churches. You had these people coming together in the biggest church, or the biggest home they could find, where you had pastors who were duly appointed and gifted and called and designated. God set all that up and he said, here, I'm going to use this in your life to do something.

Matter of fact, as long as we're talking about it let's go there to Ephesians Chapter 4 to look at the importance of the church from God's perspective and how he's going to use the church in your life. Let's start in verse 11, Ephesians Chapter 4 verse 11. You cannot turn your nose up at the church. You cannot see the church as an option. It is necessary. And what is the church? Saying, "Hey," to another Christian at the coffee shop? No, it's you being a part of the assembly, physically coming together in the assembly which you've had a lot of barriers to this last year, have we not? Some people say, "It's risky." Yeah, it's risky. We could all die doing it. OK? A good way to die, obeying God and doing what he asked us to do - to assemble together in church. OK?



Look at the passage, let's start in verse 11. "He gave the apostles and prophets, the evangelists and the shepherds and teachers." Look at that verb "gave." Now glanced back up. Verse 7. Right? He's talking about giving this gift of grace to certain people. And then he talks about the fact that he's given these gifts to men. He's quoting this Old Testament passage in verse 8. So he's giving this endowment of assembly administration to certain people and he's giving those people that he's gifted with that gift of that administrative skill, he's now gifting those to the church that is supposed to function, according to First Timothy and Titus, that have interests in certain segments of the population and how to deal with them, and what about this segment of the church and what to do with the widows and all that.

All of that functioning of a programming assembly is something God says I'm giving this as a gift. God is not giving gifts that go in the sock drawer and you forget about them. The gift that God gives is the Church, the assembly, that you're required to be a part of under the administration of the leaders that he gifts to you. They're your gifts from God, right? And they're given to you that you can have some things happen.

Well what? Here's the purpose clause, verse 12, "To equip the saints," That's you, a Christian, that's what saint means, "for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ." Now think about that. Some say, "I'm being built up by this and I'm saying I don't need it." No, you need it. "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

That sounds like a big job responsibility. It is. And the leaders in the assembly are there saying, that's my job, to try and equip you and coach you and drive you and guide you to be that, because that's what God needs is a full, unwavering confession of your hope all the way to the end, to persevere to the end with a vibrant faith. And God says that's the plan for you. And here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to set up this thing called the assembly - church. I'm going to give you assembly leaders, pastors, and they're going to work at equipping you. Here this sermon that we're about to get into here now is all about now they're going to equip you and direct you and guide you and exhort you and rebuke you and all the things the Bible says they're supposed to do in a one-way conversation. They're going to have you do things like Hebrews Chapter 10 verse 24, and that is to turn your chairs face-to-face. And now you engage in spurring one another on, stirring each other up to the same things that they're trying to do.

So it's not just that I sit here and check out what the pastor's doing. "Did I get fed by the sermon or not?" It's now I'm supposed to be in this cross-pollination of a church now trying to see if I can engage in that in other people's lives as well. If that happens and then we're "no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, craftiness, deceitful, schemings." Do you know what that spells? If you don't have the safeguard of the church. Right? And you think you're a genius and you don't need the church. But the Bible says, here's what you've imperiled yourself and set yourself up for, this kind of, as Paul calls it, a spiritual "shipwreck of your faith." And that's not what we want.



No, we want "speaking the truth in love, growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." And here's it's more than just the preachers, verse 16, "from whom the whole body, being joined and held together by every joint," not a pastor just sending out videos on YouTube, "with which it is equipped." OK, so it's not just the preachers that are equipping. He's not just spurring people on to love and good deeds as he preaches the word. Oh, no, every part's doing it, "when every part is working properly, it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

I prepare sermons, I work, I study, I pray. I bring the product of my fruit to the church in the big assembly. And now one of the things I'm supposed to do, preaching the whole counsel of God, is to remind you that you have a job, which is to consider, to think, how you can stir each other up to love and good deeds, which means that you can't do church only on the weekends. You cannot do church in one meeting where you're sitting passively side-by-side listening to the preacher. I don't care how actively you listen. I don't care how many pages of notes you take. We're not done until you see the whole body with... Let's read it again, verse 16, "the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

The problem with some people saying, "Well, I don't need church." And they'll still say, "Well, I'm still kind of doing church because I still listen to some of my favorite preachers on their podcast." OK, but you're still not engaging in this, which means you cannot dismiss the church and somehow virtually experience it through some digital thing in front of your laptop screen. You have to be engaged in it here and you have to get to another setting where you're engaged with people personally. And that's why we have to move from not only attending to attending and connecting. We'll talk about serving another day, but this is what we're dealing with now.

So the church is essential. It's essential in a lot of ways. And I don't want to overdo the case. But, you know, the Bible says you cannot engage in the ordinances and have the experience that you're supposed to have with the ordinances, unless we are doing it as an assembled church. Look at Paul giving instructions to the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper. Go and note, take your highlighter. How many times he says "when the church comes together," "when you come together," "when the whole church comes together" and then he talks about the Lord's Supper and then he ends with "when you're all together," "when you come together" "when you assemble as a church," those things. With you taking a wafer and some grape juice in front of your computer screen and having what you think is the Lord's Supper is not the Lord's Supper because it's not in the church context.

The one guy I heard interviewed saying, "I don't find the church an efficient use of my time." I was waiting for the lightning to strike him. But when he said that, he went on to say this, "Oh, I engage in the ordinances, I baptize people." And then he said, "I've never myself been baptized, but I baptize them, baptize them in my pool and my jacuzzi." I'm thinking, let's just think this through, OK? Here is the kind of atomization, the kind of autonomy, the kind of independence, the kind of maverick spirit that so many modern Christians have. They do not



want to be part of the organization. They don't want to submit to leaders. They don't want to be a part of something that they're not fully controlling.

The whole home church movement. Right? It's ridiculous on its face because it does not meet the requirements of what the Bible says an assembly is. An assembly of people going beyond your biological family under the leadership and administration of gifted pastors in a place where you're experiencing the ordinances. Or speaking of First Corinthians, when Paul says when you come together on the first day of the week, take up a collection. And he says, I'm going to take part of that collection and you are going to entrust it to me to take to Jerusalem because there are problems in the Jerusalem church and I want to use that here. And so you guys can pool your resources. Let's just think about that. You think you're doing church if you just hang out and I know I'm preaching to the choir because you're here. But those that aren't and more people will hear this digitally than will hear it live and I just won't tell you this. If you think that because you can get fed through something, some electronic means, here's one thing you can't do. You cannot pool your resources like we do here and strategically decide to do things like plant Compass Huntington Beach, Compass Amman Jordan, you know, Compass Boise Idaho, Compass Guatemala City, Compass Tustin, Compass, now in Hill Country. I mean, we could drop six figures of money to get that thing started so that they don't go out as fundraisers. They go out as preachers and ministry leaders with a staff of three full-time right now. And we can buy them the soundboards. We can sign the lease and have the bank credits to be able to do that. We can get them fully functioning so that like the Treasure Valley, Idaho church, we can see it move from just a small group to baptizing hundreds and having near a thousand people in just a couple of years who are being reached and fed with the gospel. We can do that because, why? Because Nathan gets up here and says, hey, we got a gift. And that's what we're called to do. We give, we pool our resources and Paul says look how of the church can come together on the first day of the week and can pool their resources and do things they could never do on their own. Right?

That's the kind of thing that happens when we engage in the thing that God says will be the whole functioning instrument of making me someone who can hold firmly, unwaveringly to the hope of my confession. There are so many things that God does through the church, so many things he's done for the church. He's even defined the church with the name itself of people assembling together. He's given us two books of the Bible to describe how it's supposed to function, about the requirements for its leaders. All those things are in that book and we're supposed to follow it. And the following of that book means that you and I are going to attend a church physically, and it means that we are going to function in that church by turning our chairs face-to-face and joining in with the spirit of the pastoral team to try and get more people in this church to do what the Bible says - to love and good deeds.

Let's take a look at that in verse 24. Back to our text in Hebrews Chapter 10. Hebrews Chapter 10 verse 24 reminds us that we're to "consider how to stir one another up to love and good deeds." If I prepare a sermon and I come and I think about my audience and all that, but it's all driven by scriptural truth and I'm trying to say, OK, I want them to respond rightly to this biblical truth. I've prepared, I've thought about this, right? Hopefully that's evident in the sermons you hear here. You now are told to do the same thing, not that we're going to open



the mic and put you on the platform and turn on the lights and give you a microphone and say, go, let's go for it. Let's take notes. But you are to somehow get in a context where the expectation is that you now have prepared to do what we're doing, which is to stir one another up, to encourage one another.

That's different than the prophetic kinds of words. And I mean that in the small "p" sense, prophetic, in an exhorting and rebuking and admonishing the church. That's the pastor's role. But we've moved now to a place where you have to participate in trying to achieve the same things in a smaller setting. When you come to church, let's put it this way. Number two, let's at least jot it down. We need to "Make the Church More Loving and Godly." And if you say, "Well, that's the preacher's job." It is my job. But it's also your job in a different context, in the context of small group participation, highly committed, thoughtful, considerate, small group participation.

Your congregation, if you will, is going to be a smaller group, 8 to 14 people. That's how we do it around here, where you get your chairs face-to-face and you sit there and you are trying to encourage and stir each other up to be faithful to the end, to fight the good fight of faith, to unwaveringly hold to the confession of our faith, to love, two directions, God more, others more, and to do righteous, good and godly things. That's your job, too.

It's like moving from going to... This is like here... Let's just say if it's a good sermon, it's like Costco, right? If it's a mediocre sermon it's like Target, if it's a bad sermon maybe it's like Wal-Mart. I don't know, pick one. But if I come as a retailer, so to speak, I'm giving you this stuff and I'm hoping you leave going, "Yeah, I got something that's good." Now, I'm saying as you go out with all the goods that you've collected in your own study, in your sermon learning and all that goes on here, now it's like, OK, now we open from weekend to weekend, during the weekdays, we're opening now the swap meet.

A swap meet is you all bring your pickup trucks, you back them in a circle, you take the tailgate down and you bring out your wares and you say, "OK, I'm here now to do this." And some of you said, well, I do a small group. Some of you are feeling like this sermon, "I feel like I'm touching all the bases on this sermon," because you're in some kind of community, you know, neighborhood-based or some ecumenical or cross-pollinating kind of church. You know, everyone comes and whoever confesses Christ. You've got all kinds of Bible study options out there where you can get face-to-face with people, but it's not under the direction of the pastors of a particular church.

And I got a lot of issues with why that is going to eventually... you're going to struggle in that. I can't even talk about when someone should be baptized. I can't talk even about the eschatological calendar, what I expect to happen. I can't even talk about hermeneutics or how to understand the Old Testament passages unless we're under a church that has agreed upon, "Okay. Here are our thoughts on eschatology. Here are our thoughts on ecclesiology. Here are our thoughts on hermeneutics." That has to come from your pastoral team and as First Corinthians 1:10 says, we all then agree within that church that this is the way we're going to function at the swap meet. Right?



Just like if you go to the swap meet now, I don't know if we still have it, but if you went to the Orange County Fairgrounds and went to the swap meet, I mean, hopefully you're not going to find pop. Well, you will probably find pop there. But I meant to say pipe bombs. You know, I hope you don't find pipe bombs over here and some arsenic over there. And here's cocaine being sold over here. People will find that, too, for all I know. But all of that, you'd think, no, no, no, there's a management out there and the management cares as to what's being sold there. See? And that's the problem with these disconnected small groups that you maybe think are checking the box for small group participation.

You need a small group that is under the, and I mean this and I don't think I'm stretching this at all from a biblical perspective, a small group program of some kind that is getting you together and the deference is doctrinally and philosophically to the pastoral team who is responsible to keep watch over the flock. So that you can't just sell anything at the small group. Right? You come and it is a bit of a swap meet and you are now participating to help other people grow to love and good deeds. But it's something that has the management where if there's an issue and someone starts talking nonsense or theological, aberrant or deceitful scheming or some wind of doctrine that's new and you ought to believe this, we can defer to the pastoral team and we can step in and correct that. That needs to happen.

If you're at the swap meet and someone selling a pipe bomb, you should be able to call someone and say, let's stop that from happening. Not just if I can get enough people to say you ought to stop. Hopefully there'll be, you know, they'll stop. No, there needs to be an authoritative direction oversight. That's God's gift to the church. So we have to think that way. It's the difference between going to a restaurant where you think, OK, the cooks are paid, the waiters are paid, you know, the servers, the hostesses, they're all paid. And I'm just going there to experience the meal. And I go away thinking, "Oh, I really like that place. It's worth it." That's how a lot of people view church. And I suppose at the attending level, there's some truth to that. That's how people think. But this is like, OK, now we're going to have a meal at my house and everyone's going to participate. You're going to, you know, cut the carrots for the salad and you're going to go marinate the meat and you're going to go barbecue it and you're going to set the table. This is when we come together. It's like the retailer swap meet comparison. It's the restaurant versus we're going to have a home-cooked meal here and everyone's going to participate.

If you're going to the restaurant, if you're going to Costco and you're not engaged in that next level, I'm saying you can't do what this passage says. Number one, you don't have to sit around and consider how you're going to shape the sermon for the day. Because you don't. I get to do that as the senior preaching pastor and I get up and just I study and I preach it. Right? My fellow elders keep me accountable for what comes out. And there are certainly checks and balances there. But in terms of your considering how to do it today, all you're doing is receiving that as an active listener.

Go to a small group, though, now you're going to talk. Go to a small group, now you're going to contribute. Go to a small group, now you're going to participate in that and you need to



think about it. That's a strong word, by the way, compound word. "Noeo" is the word "to think" preceded by the preposition "Katta," which is "down," literally to "think down on it." It's one of the ways the word is used. And it's like when someone does this like they're thinking of something, that's the picture of the word "consider," to think about it.

It's the same word Jesus used when he said, "Consider the ravens." Right? Consider the birds. "They don't have storehouses." They don't store up. They don't, you know, they don't put things in cupboards. And then he says, "Consider the lilies of the field: they don't toil, they don't spin," they don't make clothes, they don't go shopping, but they look beautiful and the birds are fed. But he says, think about them, consider them. You walk past the birds, you walk past the lilies every day. I want you to stop and think about it.

This passage, same word, you need to stop and look down and think about how I can contribute to somehow help someone love, help someone do good in a group where I'm participating and speaking and talking and interacting. That has to happen. If that's not happening in your Christian life, and I know I'm speaking here to a church that's like most churches where we have a pretty good level, we got a healthy level of small group participation. Right? But we don't have a 100%. And that means that there are probably 30, 35, who knows, maybe 40% of you who are not participating in a church-based small group. And I'm here to tell you as your pastor, you need to do that. That has part of what it means to be a part of a church. God has given the gift of church, and you not only attend it, you connect in it, which means you have to be engaged in this work.

Make the church more loving and godly. Let's look at that in two directions real quick. Loving, obviously, we think about two directions, vertically. How can I go and help? Think about it. I'm thinking about how I can help. Here's just one passage Jesus gave us about loving God. When asked what the greatest commandment is, he said, "Love the Lord, your God." Do you know this passage? "With all your heart, soul, strength and mind." Just think about that. There may be some people who you meet within a small group between Sundays, and they're not real good at loving God in the way that you're good at loving God. Maybe you're good at loving God with your mind and they're real good at loving God with their heart or whatever. You come and say, I have something to contribute. I can help here. I'm at least going to contribute in the conversation and the prayers. I mean, it's going to be something that even my example can help some people in that and they can help me. There's this sharpening of one another.

Loving each other. The New Testament brings us a new level of standard, a benchmark, a measure. Jesus says in John 13, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." And if you stop there, if it were a period, not a comma, you'd think, well, what are you talking about? Old Testament's full of those commands. And that's why John in his epistle in First John says, I know there's, you know, a new commandment that I give to you and it's an old commandment. You've had it from the beginning, but it's a new commandment in him. How is that a new command in him? Because there's a comma there in John 13, where he says, "A new commitment I give to you that love one," comma, "just as I have loved you."



The Old Testament standard, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." So I don't hold grudges. I never look in the mirror and slap myself. I'm pretty kind and magnanimous to me. And so I ought to be that way to other people. But he says now I want you to look at the way you love each other, I want you to love like I love and I'm about to lay down my life for you. John picks up on that after talking about what the new commandment is, he says in First John 3, he says, Now I want you to think about the sacrifice you bring to your brothers. How do you "lay down your life for the brothers?" So here's a whole new standard.

And here's the thing. Even if you're pretty nice and kind and generous, I just wonder if there's anything that you can look at that you can say, "Hey, there are things going on that I've learned about, maybe how someone has sacrificially loved me, how I've sacrificially loved someone else. These discussions in small groups, maybe I can push and move and provoke in a direction where you're doing that more." I mean, you're bringing that to the group. You're bringing that experience of what it means to love in a sacrificial way. And I say it "provoke and stir" because that's what the word is when it says, let us consider how to stir one other up. That's the word like a goad, like it's poking you, it's prodding you. It's going to be a little uncomfortable in small groups. It's why a lot of you don't go because it's uncomfortable.

Not only do I have to speak and you do have to speak, right? You're not preparing a sermon, but you're preparing in your prayer life and you're thinking about now, how can I help. Think about loving. Loving God, loving each other. There's another command Jesus gave on the Sermon on the Mount about love. He said, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In a small group, one of the great things about it is you learn to listen to where other people are, to what they're going through, that you share prayer requests. When you're hearing things and someone's going through a hard time, whether it's a cantankerous family member, extended family member, whether it's a business partner, whether it is a boss, maybe somebody who is suing them, and you feel like, man, they're really being attacked in their life by this person.

I guarantee you, you can stir them to love in this part of the pie, this piece of the loving pie, which is to love my enemies, simply by doing what the next phrase is in Jesus' sermon, which is praying for those who persecute you. You could say to them, "Hey, after we're done here, you know, can we just spend four minutes, three minutes? Can I lead us in prayer for the person you said is doing this to you? Let me pray for your enemy. Let me pray for the person who is persecuting you." And you all of a sudden start praying and you start to pray, not just that they have a great life and I hope that they get a raise and a bonus and hope their skin is clear and, you know, their marriage is great. We pray like we've learned in the Daily Bible Reading this morning, sometimes we pray for our enemies. We want to pray that their evil will stop. I mean, that's the main thing we want to pray for. We want to pray because they're made in the image of God that they might come to repentance.

But when you start to pray as a co-member of a small group with someone else leading him in prayer, then I guarantee you you're going to pray better removed from the situation leading that person to grow in loving the way Jesus taught us. I'm just telling you, your participation is critical. It's never going to happen on Sunday morning. I'm here, just all the stuff that I've



studied, right? I don't know. We're not talking. If we talk, we talk for two minutes out by the donut table. That's all we get. But you in your small group, you get to know where people are at, you know, the struggles they're going through. You should be able to look around and see what's the challenge here? What's the victory here? What's the thanksgiving here? What's the prayer request here? You should know those things in that group of 8 to 14 people. And now you got a chance to help them love better. Love God better, love people better, love their enemies better. All of that is part of what God wants us to do to "hold fast, unwavering to our confession of hope." That's what faith looks like. That's what Christianity is all about.

And then, of course, to be godly, we've got to define these things biblically. What does it mean to do good deeds, deeds that are good according to Scripture and God, the rule giver and judge, not what the world says? The world says, "Live and let live, c'est la vie, everybody do what they want to do. That's real love." That's not love. So you're helping people stand strong in the midst of their society and culture to do what's right. And I guarantee you, if you sit in a small group and you share prayer request, someone says, here's the thing I'm struggling with to do the right thing. You ought to get to that place in your small groups. And then you can say, "I would like to help you with that. Give me your number. I just want to text you this week, I'll keep you accountable for that." You become a strength to them. That great word, "parakaleo." You come in alongside of them and you help them through that hard time.

You become something in their lives that's like a pole, a guide, a knee brace, as I like to say, that holds them up straight when they want to fall to temptation. Or when they do fall, as the Bible says, you restore them with a spirit of gentleness and get them back on track. I mean, that's the kind of thing that has to happen. And it's not going to happen the way it should just by me on the weekends having you attend my preaching. It has to happen when you attend a small group face-to-face.

Verse 25, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some." You know, people will do church when it's convenient or when they're new to it and they think everyone knows more than they do. One of the reasons our pastors talked about having a weekend where we focus on this, I mean, so important was it that we, I mean, made the ultimate decision to not do our Acts study today, but to talk about church involvement, was because we know that in the Fall between here and Christmas, which we're going to blink our eyes and it's going to be Christmas, this is one of the busiest quarters of the year, right? One of the busiest times. And it's easy for you as you get kids back in school and you got things going on over here and you got projects that got to be done by the end of the year, whatever it is, we know it's going to be a challenge for you to prioritize the primacy of the church, which is more than weekend attendance. It has to be involvement and a connection in a small group.

So we know it's hard, a lot of demands. And what we're saying is we want to preach a sermon where we make sure that right now in this season of the year, that you do not back down, you do not pull out. Matter of fact, we want to do just the opposite, it says but instead contrasting, "encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."



So not only in the annual calendar of 12 months, but here's a linear calendar of God moving toward the end and all of that should be a reminder, man, we need the church now more than they needed it a thousand years ago. We need involvement in small groups now more than we've ever needed it before. Number three, I just put it this way, "Do Not Pull Back From Church Now." Do not pull back from church now. And I just got to tell you, there are lots of satanic lies that will be embedded into your mind as to why you should pull back. "Well, because I'm busy. Because work is more demanding. Because my kids are involved in more things. And so, you know, I got so much going on at the weekend. They got so much going on weeknights. I mean, you know, I got to have time for my family." There are lots of things you can get into in your mind.

You can be near retirement age. "Well, I'm going to travel a lot. I'm going to buy a little place out in the desert or up in the mountains and, you know, take more time away. I'm thinking of getting a boat and weekends out, weekdays... Listen, I don't have any problem with you buying a boat. I don't have any problem with you buying your extra house wherever you want. Great, fine. But you better come back to meet together and assemble in the church because the church is something you must do. It's got to be a priority. And then if you can take your little RV out or do whatever you're going to do, make sure you're back by the time your small group meets during the week. OK? That's all I'm telling you, that needs to be a priority. Go take your trips, get back here and engage with your small groups. You have to do that.

Is there ever time to take a break? Of course. Of course. Take a vacation. But this has to be a regular pattern of your life. And for most of us, between now and December, we're just going to get really busy. And all I'm saying is don't neglect the essential just because you got your ice and you got your Spray and you got your almonds, it's not time to forget the important things in your life, like your wallet and the gas in the gas tank. You've got to have church. You got to have Bible, got to have prayer. And today is about church, a full-blown involvement in that. And the Bible here says, I mean, this is not about the time and cycles of the months of the year, this is about the eschatological calendar, which is not cyclical, it's linear. It's linear.

Let me show you that. Go to Second Timothy Chapter 3. When you look at what the Bible says about where we're headed, you need to remember that the Bible is very specific about where things are going. Now I know here's where it's going, ultimately, Christ is going to rule and reign over this earth. "Every knee is going to bow, every tongue is going to confess." Some eschatological systems say, "Well, I think this is going to be a progressive dawning of the new day." A lot of our colonial American preachers thought that, they thought America's establishment would be this, you know, this new world order and the millennial kingdom would be ushered in and all that.

Listen, here's my firm conviction. And not only do I read the headlines and have it confirmed every day, but the conviction that before Christ comes back, it's going to be, I don't know, just to use Jesus' words, "as it was in the days of Noah." And that wasn't good if you don't know your Bible. It was not a good time, morally, spiritually. Things are going to go from bad to worse. Matter of fact, let me give you biblical authority for that, verse 12. Let's start with the problem of Christians trying to live a Christian life. They're going to live it in an increasingly



non-Christian world. Indeed, all, this is Second Timothy Chapter 3 verse 12. "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus," they want to do it the right way, Godly defined by the benchmark of what God says, what Christ says, "they're going to be persecuted." You will be persecuted.

"But it'll get easier as things go on." No. "As the centuries roll on, it'll be easier." No. "While evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." Well, what do we need? Well, we need verse 14. "But as for you," Timothy, Paul says, "continue in what you've learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you've learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings." You've got to do it, do the biblical stuff, love and good deeds, do it. Hold tight to that confession of faith, unwavering. You need that.

So Paul is even demonstrating in his relationship through a letter the kind of thing that I need you to do in person in a small group. And he's saying it's going to get harder, it's going to get worse, "as we see the Day approaching." Look back up at verse 12. "All who desire to live a godly life will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors go from bad to worse." You see that phrase "evil people and impostors?" Those he's already described. Go back up to verse 1, this same passage, Second Timothy Chapter 3 he says, "Understand this, in the last days," this is the linear plan of God eschatologically, "there will come times of difficulty."

Well, they are already difficult in the first century. Timothy was the pastor in Ephesus and it was difficult. But now he says, you're going to get even more difficult as he looks down through this telescope prophetically to the end of time. And we're moving closer to "the Day is approaching." Well, what's it going to look like? Well, "People will be lovers of self." Well, I'm glad that's not happening. "Lovers of money." I don't see any of that in South Orange County. "Proud, arrogant, abusive." Unless you don't have the Internet, I hope you recognize that's everywhere, right? "Disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." Matter of fact, they'll say they love God while they do nothing but perceive and pursue their own pleasure.

Matter of fact, they're saying sometimes they do it in the name of God. They "have an appearance of godliness." Right? They say, "We're spiritual." "But they deny its power." They don't even do what God says. Now, look at these last three words in English. "Avoid such people." Paul clarifies elsewhere, you going to have to leave the world if you're not going to have anything to do with them, but when it comes to you purposefully putting your chairs face-to-face, just like Psalm 1 says, "We're not walking in the counsel, we're not sitting in the seat of scoffers," and we're just not camping out there. We have to go do work. We have to function in a fallen world.

But when we choose to connect with people, we're choosing to put our chairs face-to-face with the people of God to stir them on to love and good deeds. Why? Because this is the forecast. More "love of self, more love of money, more prideful, more arrogant, more abusive, more disobedient, more ungrateful, more unholy." You need to avoid that. And what you need



more of is the connection of people who are committed to the hope of Christ, who are seeking to follow Christ, who want to spur you on in meetings for an hour or two hours to love, biblically defined, and good works, biblically defined.

That you should do and never neglect, and you should be committed to encouraging each other in that way "all the more as you see the Day drawing near." And I tell you right now, we are closer to that day of you meeting your maker, right? A lot of us are going to be laid in a casket and your spirit is going to go stand before your creator or he's going to come back and grab the Church and take us home. Either way, "the Day is drawing near." And when you stand before your creator, you're not going to look back and say, "Man, Pastor Mike came back from vacation, preached this fiery sermon about being in small groups. I really think he went too far, man. He offended me."

Look me up in a hundred years and let's just talk about whether or not I went too far in this message. Let's just talk about that. In a hundred years we'll have a conversation to see if I pushed you into something that really was too far gone. Mike's opinion, right? Mike's opinion. It's not my opinion. This is what we should be doing more of. Matter of fact, we should be doing more and more. I've had people, I've had neighbors write, "You guys do too much at that church." I've had people write and say, "You keep kids out too late on weeknights." Listen, I got plenty of people saying, you know, "You should be more about the family. Give them more time off from church."

Can I just quickly, not that I have any time for this, but let me quickly remind you of Mark 3. Matter of fact, let me take you there real quick, as long as we're protracting this sermon. Mark Chapter 3 verse 20, Mark 3:20. This is Jesus, the "he" is Jesus here, look at the context. 'He,' Jesus, "went home," into his hometown, "and the crowd gathered again." Everywhere he went, man, he's busy with people, disciples. "So that they could not even eat." Man, the message, the messages, the meetings, the programs, man, they didn't even have time to eat. And when his family heard of it, they went out to seize him, "We got to stop this." And they were saying, "I think he's gone too far. Can we get him into a Christian therapist? Can we just get him to slow down a little bit? He needs to care... Do you not love yourself enough, Jesus? Too much. You can't even care for yourself. You're going to burn out, settle down. Too much."

And there are people right now, here's another satanic lie, "I can't involve myself in a small group through some church-based program that they have because I just I need more family time." Here's what your family needs. Your family needs you, if you're a Christian, to be involved in a program where you're in a small group that spurs you on to love and good deeds so you can go back to your home and actually love them and do good deeds there. That means that you have to be involved in the tool that God has ordained, the assembly, which is not just attending, it's connecting, be involved in that so that you can be the husband you're supposed to be, so you can be the wife you're supposed to be, so you can be the student, the child you're supposed to be.

This is what you need, you need a small group. This is what God has ordained for us. And they're trying to say, "Are you out of your mind?" Well, he does some more here in his



hometown, but drop down to verse 31 when he's in the middle of his teaching. His mother and his brothers. You know who his mother was, right? This is not a hard question for Sunday morning. Mary. Right? She looks pretty nice in all the statues, she looks pretty godly. His mother and his brothers came standing outside and they sent to him and called him. Right? Crowds there. It's insulated. Got this thing going on. He's doing more ministry, meeting with more people face-to-face in this house.

And the crowd was sitting around him and they said, "Your mother, you know, Mary and your brothers are outside seeking you." And he said, now underscore this in verse 33. He said, "Mom, I'll be right there." Do you see that? "Sorry, bros. You're right. I should care for myself more. I'm going to get a hobby. I know it's another night out. I shouldn't be out. You're right. I'm coming home. We'll watch some Netflix. Don't worry. Pop some popcorn." He said, "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around at those who sat around him and he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.'" Oh, you said that to Mary? Yeah, I said that to Mary because at this point in Mary's life, she had her priorities backwards. She thinks that Jesus is going too far, too involved, too much, too scheduled out, too many things, too many nights out. And he says, no, "Whoever does a will of God, he is my brother and my sister and my mother." Do you know what the will of God is? For Christians it's to be engaged with the people of God and "all the more as they see the Day drawing near."

Am I saying you get to do everything in the Christian life that you want to do if you're married? No, you can't. If you're a dad. No, you can't. I understand that. First Corinthians 7 says your interests are going to be divided. You have to care for your domestic life. I get that. But if I came and said, I'm going to come in and move in with you and I'm going to do a time inventory and follow you around like your shadow and see if the 168 hours a week that you have, just to see if I could kind of carve time out of your schedule and make sure that we have at least two or three hours for some small group meetings, I bet I could find it. I bet I could find it. I just bet I could find it. I could cut something out that's not as important. And you could still be a great father and you could still be a great student and you could still be a great mom. I guarantee it. If you're too busy for small groups, you are too busy in life. Cut something out, lose one of your hobbies, unsubscribe from Hulu, do something to where you got time to invest a few hours a week, putting your chairs face-to-face with the people of God.

Some complain, "Well, your sermon's false advertising. I read the title, look at the joyful participation in God's assembly. There's no joy in this sermon. This sermon stinks, man, just whipping us." OK, let me fix that. Go to go to First Thessalonians Chapter 2. As I said, 100 years from now you're going to look back and you're not going to think that I'm somehow twisting your arm to do this, and I was trying to get you to do this because of duty, it's about duty, and it's going to be terrible and you'll hate it. It may be hard. It may be difficult. I guarantee you're going to be more forgiving, more patient, more magnanimous. You're going to have to just care more, think more, pray more, care about other people. Listen better. Sure. All that's true.

But the payoff is not just hearing from Christ, "Well done, good and faithful servant." There's pay off here and now. First Thessalonians Chapter 2, look at verse 17. Here's what Paul



thought about, "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time," he's saying whew, thankfully, "in person," I mean, physically, bodily, we weren't there face-to-face but "not in heart," man because I was there in my heart, I was thinking about you. I wished I could have been there, but because we were torn away from you, even that's a strong word because I mean, we should be together. But he said because we weren't, "we endeavored more eagerly with great desire to see you face-to-face."

Let's just look at that phrase again. "We endeavored," here's our purpose, our focus, our goal, "to more eagerly," fueled by this "great desire to see you face-to-face, because we wanted to come to you. I, Paul, again and again," and again I just want to tell you if whatever your excuses about not doing this, I just want you to check to make sure that it's not Satan, because here's what Satan's in the business of doing, keeping you from small groups, keeping you from face to-face-connection. "Satan hindered us." Why? Because I really, verse 19, want to do my duty and say, "Yes, sir, to the Lord." Well, you do want that. I get that. But verse 19 says, "For what is our hope and our joy and our crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?" Yeah, it's you. "For you are glory and our joy."

Here's what I got to say to the people out there who I have met and I know or people that I've read that say, "I don't really find the church an efficient use of my time." I say you are a selfish, prideful, arrogant, misguided person because it ain't about you. Right? It's about you engaging face-to-face because those people should be the investment of your life. And when you have those people investing in your life and you're investing in their life, they become your "joy and your crown." I mean, that is what you're going to rejoice in heaven and all of those people who say, "No to church," guess what? You're not going to have your joy, your crowning, your hope be the guy you met at Starbucks. You can't even remember what his name was when you get to be before Christ. It's going to be the people you sat in their living room, you sat around tables in rooms all over this campus, and you met week in and week out in small group ministry.

There's nothing like a crisis to help us figure out what's essential. Right? A war, a pandemic, bombings. Right? Mandates, regulations. I'll tell you what's essential, church is essential. I'll tell you what's essential. You're getting face-to-face with people in that church, building relationships and thinking about how you can be used in their lives to encourage them to more love and good deeds and they committing to the same. That is essential. And I tell you that not just because it's some kind of duty that will be a drudgery to your Christian life. It's really, really a joy. And I'm telling you, this is why we have this weekend taking a break from Acts. We want you to make sure between now and the end of the year and I hope now and the end of your life, you're involved in a small group. A church-based small group where there's management in the swap meet.

And that's the kind of thing that I need you to take seriously and I'm going to invite you today to stand up with me right now and I'm going to dismiss you 10 minutes early. It's 19 after the hour. We usually end at the bottom of the hour. And I have had them place the donuts and coffee like a carrot on a stick way out in the corner of the courtyard, and I had, this isn't even all of our ministry, but just a representation of the ministries that include in that ministry a



small group component. You saw the tables when you walked in, perhaps, and you thought, "Oh, it's going to be the serving weekend." It is not about serving. We're not asking you to sign up to serve. We're asking you to sign up to connect, because all those ministries out there have as an element in them, a small group component.

So if you're not in a small group, I want you to go out there. And if you're going, "Oh, I'm so glad I can go right to the donut table." Listen, if you're in a small group, do me a favor. If you find the table out there of one of the ministries you're involved in, go and stand by it and if anyone even leans in that direction and looks over there, I want you to go, "Oh, oh, oh, I'm a part of that." Now, there are people behind the table there, probably two or three people representing every ministry out there. But I'd love for you to hang near a table that you're a part of that ministry. If you're sitting there today feeling so good that you're doing this, great. And I'm so glad. But I want you now to take the message of the essential nature of being in small groups and I want you to become an advocate for that. I want you to be the one who helps persuade people this is a joy. This has become a crown in my life. This is a great, great hope. The people who I've gotten to know in this ministry and encourage them to be involved in it. So stand with me. Let me pray, dismiss you. Your kids are held hostage until the bottom of the hour, so you can't even get them. So spend 10 minutes out there, that's all I'm asking. OK?

Let's pray. God, please, I pray that the spirit with which this was all prepped and prepared and really delivered would be the spirit in which it's received. And that is it is a great joy and privilege to be a part of your assembly on this earth. It's more than just attending it. It's about being engaged in it and interactive with it and highly committed to the people in it. And that can't happen with everyone. It's got to happen with a small segment of it, and that's called small groups. And I pray that this church would have the highest percentage possible of participation of the weekend attenders being in a ministry that has a small group component.

So whatever the choices of the people here today, I pray that they would make a commitment, at least between now and the end of the year, to say I'm going to be there and barring some special business trip or barring some sickness, I'm going to be a part of that small group. And I pray that we'd see just the joy multiplied and the crown, that sense of something we revel in, the people, the relationships that we cherish just go through the roof because of this response to this message this morning.

In Jesus name. Amen.