

Text: Various

Title: Lord's Table: The Priority of Church Attendance

Truth: In our hearts, we need to be dedicated to the instrument of God's government in this age—and that is the church.

Date/Location: Sunday February 4, 2024 at FBC

Hymns

579 We Are Your Church

575 The Church's One Foundation

Introduction

A year ago, I spoke in this service on the subject of why in-person church attendance is required. The focus in that message was on in-person attendance versus online viewing. That became a new problem in the last say 20 years, and especially since 2020. Church is not a two-dimensional video experience with audio. It is a three-dimensional visual, audio, and haptic experience with togetherness, worship, offering, and all that we have come to know that meeting as a church family is.

Today's message overlaps that somewhat, but moves beyond to emphasize the important *priority* of church attendance that we should have in our heart.

I have spoken to people before who say they have their church at home or out in nature. By themselves or just with their family. It is doubtful that means much more than "enjoying nature" or "sitting around and relaxing." Having church by yourself at home is not a assembling of Christians for worship, instruction, and fellowship. There is no pastor there; there are no deacons; there are no other Spirit-gifted people. That's like having a party with no one else present. Do you think your boss will pay your salary if you "go to work in nature"?

The church-at-home mindset is a symptom of the radically individualistic bent of our western culture. We are immersed in it so much that we do not even realize it is a thing. There are radically communal cultures as well. Both are errors. We must

subject our individualism to the scrutiny of Scripture to see if that basic premise holds up. It does not.

When we speak of this, we are concerned for two things: the explicit teaching of the New Testament, and the examples we read there. We also keep an eye toward historic church practice in our culture as a data point. It is not determinative, of course, but it is something.

Look at the early church's example of frequency: Acts 2:46, 5:42. Look at the Bible's teaching of manner: Hebrews 10:25.

Prayer is essential for the Christian life and it is exemplified numerous times in the lives of individuals. But corporate prayer is also modeled in the Scripture: In Acts 16:13 we have the example of customary prayer at the riverside—by non-Christian people. Acts 4:31 describes an assembly of praying people. The church prayed in Acts 6:6. Acts 12:12 records many gathered together for prayer. We may be lazy about that because we face few serious difficulties. The church prayed in Acts 13:3. Prayer was made around the appointment of elders (Acts 14:23). Paul prayed with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:36). And so on in Acts 21:5 and 27:29.

I. By Way of Comparison

- A. Do you feel that going to your child's game or match or recital is a priority?
- B. Do you feel that going to a friend's funeral is a priority?
- C. Do you feel that going to work is a priority? How many times per week?
- D. Do you feel that going to the gym is a priority? How many times per week?
- E. How about going to the doctor?
- F. What about church?

II. The Priority of Church Attendance

- A. It seems clear to me that regularly attending the meetings of your church is higher priority than the things just listed. This is because

life consists in more than what you possess or how long you live. Your spirit is more important. If it is not obvious, let us flesh it out a bit. I have observed a tendency for people to assume that going to the doctor, for instance, is more important than church. It is not even a thing that people question. But I'm calling for you to question it. I'm not suggesting you skip stewarding your body! But if you can do *that*, you can steward your spirit just as well. For younger people, they might skip the gym once in a while, but three times a week is minimum. What are the minimums on church?

B. There is no 11th commandment about church attendance or frequency thereof (we thus avoid the charge of legalism). We can put that notion out of our minds entirely. You do not earn God's favor by being with your fellow Christians > X% of all church meetings. We understand that principle in lots of other areas—you are not required to read your Bible > 5/7 days, or pray on average four times every day, in order to earn God's favor.

Yet a person who has been *given* God's favor would have no problem at all voluntarily giving those kinds of offerings to God, and even diligently setting some goals for their own good and to show God gratitude and obedient service.

C. Perhaps you have existed for a long time without a conscious recognition that we do have a Sunday evening worship and Bible instruction service. Or, that we have a Wednesday evening prayer meeting. Like I did when I was growing up. It just did not dawn on me. I think I knew it went on, but it was for those on the "in club." When is the last time you participated in corporate prayer? When is the last time you shared the Lord's Table with your church? If it is a long time, do not make excuses. You go to the store, the doctor, to work, to school, regularly with no qualms and even feel badly if you miss an appointment.

D. Have you ever had your child ask in a serious way, "Why do I have to go to school? Is it just so that parents can get rid of their kids for the day, and so that I will be conditioned to send my kids to school so it is a self-fulfilling, circular kind of thing over the generations?" For a moment you might be like, "Hmmm. How do I convince a 9-year old that school is an important priority?" It is clear that he

should go for the long-term benefit of education, and besides, it is the law!

Similarly, it is obvious that going to church is an important priority. You should go for the long-term benefit of Scriptural education and to participate in worship and to be edified. There is no truancy law in the Bible; however there is a truancy idea in that if you leave off attending for a while, the church should remove you from its membership because you are out of order. Apart from mitigating factors like genuine home-binding illness, regular non-attendance is a sin.

III. The Wrong Idea of Sacrifice

Some of us have an internal struggle about not wanting to make sacrifices of “our” time for the brothers, not realizing first of all that it is not “our” time.

We may have a mindset that feels like I am sacrificing what I want to do in order to do what the church leadership is asking me to do. Sacrifice is a Christian virtue, so if it is the case that going to church is a sacrifice, we should be willing to do it.

But let me hasten to add this critical concept: it is not really a sacrifice to go to church. It is not a sacrifice to miss a football game in order to attend church. It is not a sacrifice to go to bed an hour later because you went to the evening church service. It is not a sacrifice to miss some entertainment to go to prayer meeting. It is not a sacrifice to drive in a heated and air conditioned car with padded seats.

The danger of the age in which we live is real, the pressure is tremendous. We need more of God’s word, more focus on Christ, etc. in order to combat what we face day in and day out.

IV. The Wrong Idea of Changing Behavior

A. To solve a lack of regular attendance, the issue is not just behavior change. Rather, It is heart change. The heart needs repentance. The heart needs to reorient its loves.

- B. We are trying to make disciples, but disciples will naturally attend their church frequently. They will desire to do so, not fight doing so. The fight in your heart is the problem. Focusing on root heart issue is the main issue. Love should be the motivation, not compulsion.
- C. And it is here that we can balance love and rebuke. We each know that the other is in a war against sin. But we know that sometimes that war is only won when you are told straight-up what needs to be done and you do it. We all know that our hearts retain a measure of their depravity and they are capable of the most sick desires. We gently prod one another from this shared experience. But we also say a word of admonition that if we care only minimally or performatively about our church family, then our priorities are messed up.

V. A Bit on Authority

- A. There is a matter of authority here. God has given pastors and teachers to the church to prepare and guide it. These also set practical policy and expectations, like when church meetings are. If we are not sovereignly hindered from coming, we should come, if for no other reason than that we are people under authority!
- B. Back to the individualistic emphasis, we tend to reject *any* sniff of authority from someone else. We are our own authority. But that is not real life. We are all under authority. Or are we *not* under authority in the most important area of our lives? We don't want a pastor telling us what to do?! There has even been a huge battle in Christian circles over whether Christ is Lord of the believer's life. This is far out, man! There is no way this can even be a thing in Biblical Christianity! Christ is Lord of His church.

Concluding Applications

We can serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13) by being together and knowing one another truly.

We know that we will miss some meetings due to various factors— one-time things or events that take us far away and we prudently

weigh them and say that it is worthwhile. But that is the abnormal case, not the normal case.

It is not wise to look around and say, “What about so-and-so?” (2 Cor. 10:12). We are talking about *you* and no one else. In this way, I hope that the application of the message will settle in to YOUR heart and you will consider YOUR ways, not my ways or your neighbor’s ways. Between you and God, you and He know your heart toward God’s church. He is building it. Are you a co-worker in that project, or just going along for the ride?

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