

Church – Hebrews 10

I have a quote for you. I'm not going to tell you who said it yet. And I don't want you to respond until you have thought about it thoroughly. Ready? *"Apart from the church, salvation is impossible."* Read it again. *"Apart from the church, salvation is impossible."* Think about it. What do you think?

So, just so you don't think it was some bonehead that said it, just know that is a quote from Martin Luther who was one of the greatest theologians the world has ever known. And when asked what he meant by that, he said, *"Not that the church provides salvation; God does. But because the "saved" one can't fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from the church."*

The saved one can't fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from the church. What do you think about that statement? Can you be a Christian and not go to church? Do you have to go every Sunday morning and Sunday night and Wednesday evening? How many times a month do you have to go to be called a Christian? Just how involved do you really have to be? Does watching it on video count? Those are some hard but typical questions that people ask so we are going to do our best to answer them this morning and this evening.

I was having coffee the other day with some pastor friends of mine and several of us talked about having rat and mice problems in our church buildings. The first guy said he set out a bunch of sticky traps but evidently they just didn't work. The rats went around them. The second guy said he tried the humane traps and they worked but when he released them, they just came right back. They asked me what I did and I told them my plan had worked great. I just baptized them and made them members of the church and I haven't seen them since. 😊

In a door-to-door survey conducted by Willow Creek Community Church the question was asked: if you don't go to church, why? The five biggest reasons: 1) Boring, 2) Irrelevant, 3) Asking for money all the time, 4) I'm too busy already, 5) I feel awkward at church.

How do you think Jesus would answer those people? Do you think He would beg and plead and try to say some things that would make them feel more comfortable? That wasn't His style, was it? Do you remember what Jesus told three men who wanted to follow Him at the end of **Luke 9**?

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."⁵⁸ Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."⁵⁹ He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."⁶¹ Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."⁶² Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Not exactly begging them to stay, was He? Jesus didn't know that He was supposed to be "seeker-friendly" I guess. So, here's the thing about church that a lot of people don't realize. It's not about you. And I know that crushes some of your big, little egos but that's not my teaching. That is taught all through scripture. Let's start with our main passage this morning that is in Hebrews chapter 10 and we will see some others in a minute.

Hebrews 10:23-25 is written to a struggling church probably a generation after Jesus had lived and died. They were struggling with persecution from the Romans and from the Jews who couldn't understand why they would leave the traditions of their families and follow some guy they thought was still dead. So, some of them had stopped meeting

together and the church was getting smaller which put more pressure on the ones that stayed. So, the author is writing to give them guidance and encouragement. Let's read it.

Hebrews 10:23-25 says, *"Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Let's start from the beginning. *"Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess..."* What is the hope we profess? There is an old hymn that has the lyrics, *"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."* And as we continue in our sermon series on sanctification, we saw last week that our first profession is through baptism. That is usually the first thing we do to show the world that we are followers of Jesus. And then we have one message, one job, one profession to make for the rest of our lives and that is the profession of hope. We have hope! We have hope through Jesus to give a dying, hopeless world. And we hold unwaveringly to it.

In **Acts 20**, Paul says, *"I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."* He knew he had one job. Profess the hope of Jesus.

We profess that hope as a church. We profess it as the local church, Christ Fellowship, and as the global church of Christians all over the world. That is what sets us apart from the world. We have hope and we profess that hope. And the author of Hebrews goes on to tell us how we are to do that. Do we just go around hollering at our friends and neighbors, *"Hey we have hope and you don't. You're going to Hell!"*? of course not. Look at **verse 24** again. *"let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds..."* We get people to listen to our profession of hope by showing love and good deeds. And whether you are in the church building or out of the church building, you are the church.

Have you ever done something nice for a stranger and the first question they ask is, *"What church are you from?"* They assume you are a Christian because you showed love and good deeds. So, the love and good deeds are the process by which we profess our hope. And you can do that within these walls or outside these walls. We show love and good deeds to each other and to the world. But where are you really going to be able to spur each other on? Where do we encourage one another? Where do we pray for one another? Where do we fellowship with each other and hold each other accountable? That is best done and mainly done within these walls. It's one of the main reasons we meet like this.

That's why the author of Hebrews continues on with **verse 25**. *"...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..."* Think about the context of this writing. There was immense pressure on these people to stop going to church and to quit this "silliness" of being a Christian. Family and friends are trying to talk what they thought was sense into these early Christians. It was hard to keep a job. The government was putting pressure on them. Everywhere they turned there was a reason to quit. And when one person quit, it made more pressure for those who stayed and less encouragement for them. In fact, that was discouraging to the ones who stayed.

I did some research – I Googled it – and as of recent data, roughly 65% of U.S. adults identify as Christians. That's a pretty good number. But only about 30% of U.S. adults report attending religious services at least monthly, with 20-25% attending weekly. Attendance has dropped from 42% two decades ago, with 16% of pre-COVID regular attendees no longer attending at all. That's pretty pathetic.

But it goes on to say that these figures vary by source and methodology, with self-reported attendance often higher than actual, as some studies suggest only 12-22% of Americans attend weekly when verified by non-self-reported methods. In other words, when asked, people tend to exaggerate their attendance and it is proven to be less. And it is probably closer to 10% that go weekly.

If you were to Google “why church attendance is dropping” you would get a thousand different opinions. Maybe it is because the church is boring or irrelevant or they ask for money too much, just like that survey said. Or maybe it has to do with our diminished attention spans or changing morals or any number of other things.

But here is my assessment. The reason fewer people go to church these days is because fewer people go to church these days. And before you throw things at me, let me explain. Just like it was for those Hebrew Christians this book is written to, when one person doesn't go to church it makes it harder for the others to go. It's almost imperceptible at first, but for every person who chooses not to go, it makes it a little bit harder for others to choose to go.

There is one less person to encourage, one less person to pray, one less person to share with and fellowship with and worship with and before you know it, the choice to go just gets more and more difficult. *“Well, if that person doesn't think it's important, then why should I?”*

Yes, all those other things factor in. Sometimes the church can be boring or irrelevant or too money-centered. Unfortunately, sometimes the preacher looks like a troll and sounds like a redneck. Sometimes you can get your feelings hurt or your toes stepped on. Sometimes people say things that hurt your feelings. And I really believe the author of Hebrews and Jesus Himself would both say, *“Get over it! It's not about you!”*

I remember years ago we had a lady in the church with, how do you say it – a bit of a belly. She didn't look fat but after having a couple of kids she had a bit of a pooch right there. And another lady who was new to the church came over and asked her the worst question ever! Can you guess? Yes! The woman actually asked her, **“When are you due?”** Can I give you some advice? Please never ever ever ask that question. I don't care. Don't ask a woman that unless you are 100% positive she is pregnant.

But what impressed me was the one lady's response. She laughed as she said she wasn't pregnant and admitted her diet wasn't what it should be or something like that. And she made sure to make the other lady feel a little better – it's hard to recover after that - and she never made a big deal out of it and she continued to be part of the church for many more years. She understood that church isn't about her.

Do you know how encouraging that is? That makes me want to go to church even more. I love being around people that are encouraging. And if you can give me a funny illustration in there to boot, I love you even more! Encouragement is contagious. I think that's a big part of why some people don't go back to church. They weren't encouraged enough. It shouldn't be that way but sometimes it is.

When I say that church isn't about you, it's not my idea. I didn't come up with it. Paul was one of the first when he wrote in **Romans 12:5**, *“so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”* He went on later to say in **1 Corinthians 12**, *“if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”* Then **Galatians 6:2** it says, *“Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”* We are in this together but if you aren't here it makes it a heavier burden for the rest of us.

Later today, if somebody asks you how church was this morning, you are probably going to think about how good the music was. Were they good songs that you like and enjoy singing to? Was the sermon delivered well and on a

topic you care about? Was the A/C set where you were comfortable? Nobody sat in your place, did they? That could ruin your day. Did everybody greet you appropriately?

But what if you thought instead, *“Today I got to help somebody who was struggling”* or *“Today I got to pray for somebody who needed it”* or *“Today I got to compliment somebody’s dress and so it was a good day at Christ Fellowship today”*?

That’s the real test as to how good the worship time was. It’s not what you got out of it but what did you put into it. Did you sincerely pray? Did you sing like you were singing to Jesus? Did you listen? Did you fellowship? Did you give? Did you encourage someone else? Or did you just show up with an empty cup hoping somebody would fill it?

Let’s close by looking one more time at that last verse that we read earlier. *“...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* All the more as you see the Day approaching. What does that mean? Well, the Day can only mean the Rapture when Jesus comes back and all the Christians that are alive are caught up with Him in the clouds. So, when is that going to happen? Today? Tomorrow? I don’t know and nobody else does either but we do know that it could happen at any moment. All the prophecies have been fulfilled that were to be fulfilled before the Rapture and so it could be at any minute. And it is closer than ever before. So, why is it more important that Christians meet together even more in these last days?

I’ll tell you why. Because Satan knows it is the last days as well. He knows what scripture says and he knows he’s running out of time. So, he is ratcheting up the attacks and the distractions and the hurt feelings all that he can before it’s too late. He wants you to think that church is all about you and what you can get out of it. He wants to normalize getting your feelings hurt and just leaving the church. He wants to normalize working on Sunday and taking the kids to ball practice on Sundays. He doesn’t want you to be in an encouraging church when there is a good episode of Gunsmoke on.

I remember a few years ago somebody asked me if we were going to have church on Super Bowl Sunday. And I thought, “Is that really an option?” How do you think Peter would answer that? Or James or Paul or Jesus? How do you think the underground church in Viet Nam or China or Iran would answer that? Satan wants you to consider that to be a normal question. And he does so even more as the Day is approaching. So, make sure you are in church surrounded by your friends and family that want the best for you and will pray for you and encourage you.

How often should you come? How many times a month or week? How involved should you be? Does watching on video count? All those are questions between you and God. But part of the answer will always be, *“...all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

According to the scriptures, that’s what believers do. And if somebody never goes to church, I have a hard time believing they really are believers. Because like Martin Luther said, *“Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.”*

Do you have that relationship with God through His Son Jesus? All you have to do is believe that Jesus died for your sins and paid the price you could never pay. Then allow that belief to change your life like only God’s Spirit can do. Do it right now as the music plays.