

## Why You Need to Be in Church, Part 2: Worship and Spiritual Relationships

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on April 18, 2010

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One Sunday morning mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church. His reply: "I'm not going."

"Why not?" the mother asked.

"I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "(1), they don't like me, and (2), I don't like them."

Mom's reply: "I'll give *you* two good reasons why you *should* go to church. (1) You're 35 years old, and (2) you're the pastor!"

I want you to know that wasn't my experience this morning, but it is a common feeling among people about church, whether young or old. To talk about *loving* the church, as I did last week, sounds strange to the thinking of our day, much less *liking* the church, in our day when people write books celebrating *leaving* the church. Much of this generation is leaving the church. Statistics say 60-80% of teenagers in Bible-teaching churches are already gone, leaving church once they leave home. Some say they're not leaving the faith, just church. Factors are many; weak gospel, teaching, lack of biblical answers to questions, creation / evolution / apologetics.<sup>1</sup>

Some research suggests secular schools aren't to blame as much as what kids are taught or not taught in the home then church. If mom and dad don't love church and live like it's a priority, will the kids? I know growing up in a solid church-loving home doesn't save you but it doesn't help to grow up with parents complaining about church or hypocritically undermining what takes place at church, or seeing parents not engaged in or enjoying worship or fellowship, and kids see all these *other things they love and live for*. It doesn't take an honor student to discern what is most important to mom and dad, and the sobering reality as a parent is that for better or worse, our kids tend to emulate by example. What are we communicating to them about church?

For some families, church takes a backseat to the children's desires or education or opportunities or sports, and it may move farther back than the backseat, to the trailer behind the minivan. Parent's choices or children's choices may communicate church is not really a priority, and we need to consider this and consider the family of Christ and not just our family in structuring our lives and priorities. The home or family can never replace the church, but even good ones can become more centered on us than centered on God and His people.

It was refreshing to read this letter by a dad who loves the church, and writes of his hopes and prayers that his son will always, too:

Dear Tristan,

By the time you read this, it might be hip [or cool] to like church again. Right now it isn't [in the world around us], but luckily for us, you're five [years old], and for you church is just another place with good toys, friends, and lots of space to run. You love church now, and you love it for many of the same reasons we love it. You get to see your friends there every week, and you know they're going to be there, because their parents (and we) have committed to being there. [You sit w/ us in church and Sunday School has for you] Goldfish crackers and juice there, while we get doughnuts and bad coffee, but the idea is the same. Friendships ... relationships.

You're getting to know people whom you'll hopefully know for a long time because you share a bond in Christ.

There may very well be times in your life when you wonder why we're making you go to church. And let me say now that we won't be doing it to make your life more difficult, or because we want to be "right" or "in charge." We'll be doing it because we love church ourselves, we want to honor God by worshipping Him with other believers, and we care about your spiritual growth. And let me also say that when you get to be my age, you'll understand. I understand now why Mimi and Poppy made me go to church all those years, and I'm so glad they did ...

You're not going to like everybody in your church [all the time, naturally, as a sinner among sinners]. But my prayer for you, and for us, is that our shared commitment to Christ will overcome this too, and we'll grow in love and respect for everyone in the congregation. I pray that one day you'll profess your love for a special girl in front of a church full of your friends and those you worship with. I pray that you'll commit, in front of those friends and God, to lead her spiritually, and that your young family will be a vibrant part of the body of Christ ...

Nearly every family in our church has dealt with job losses, cancer, heart disease, marital discord, infertility, the death of a child, or a myriad of other tough circumstances. Through that, I've seen the body of Christ work in wonderful ways. I've seen people give sacrificially with their money and their time. I've been prayed for and prayed with. We've had Scripture show up in our mailbox ...

... I've had the privilege of trying to pray for others through their hard times as well. I've seen great [believers] crippled by disease ... worshipping with them in sickness, as their usefulness in this world wanes, is a privilege ...

Church isn't a magic pill that you take, that punches your ticket for heaven. Nor is it a glorified social/country club you attend to be around people who talk/think/look/act like you do. It's a place to go each week to hear the Word of God spoken, taught, and affirmed. It's a place to sing praises to our God, even if those songs do sometimes feel a bit awkward. It's a place to serve others. It's a place to be challenged. Sometimes you'll feel uncomfortable with those challenges, because sometimes your life will need to change. This has been the case with me [and good for me]

... But for now [my son], enjoy your toys. Enjoy your Sunday School classes, and I'll try to do something with the piles of paper you bring home from them each week. Enjoy your friends, and enjoy the knowledge you're acquiring about ... Christ ... It's only through Christ that I can do even an adequate job as your father.

Love Always, Dad

That letter resonated with me as a dad desiring similar things for my boy and girls. Thankfully at this point in life our kids consider their 2 favorite places church and Costco (hopefully in that order!) I hope they'll always love church as they grow older. We need to not only *be in church*, we need to *want to be in church*, and to *love the church* more, and I pray our loving Lord will help us to love the church that Ephesians 5:25 says He loves w/ His highest love. Last week we considered from James 5, our need for shepherding, care, and prayer in the context of a local church body. Today our study will be *our need for worship and spiritual relationships*, two realities that letter spoke of, and more importantly 2 truths the letter of James spoke of by the inspiration of God to local churches (first God, then one another; upward, then outward).

## 1. Our Need for Worship

James 5:13 (NASB95) *Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises [or “psalms”]*

We need to be careful not to read this verse in our individualized privatized Americanized glasses. Notice the verse begins with “anyone *among you*” - in the context of James 1, this is speaking to churches of Jewish Christians across the area of Palestine and beyond, and how various ones among and within various congregations should handle encountering various trials, beginning with how to have a joy-filled God-centered focus.

When James uses the phrase “*among you*,” he’s speaking to those within a flock, to use the sheep imagery of v. 19: *My brethren, if any **among you** strays from the truth and one turns him back ...*

The point of v. 13 is not that since it’s *possible* to pray by myself and sing by myself, therefore it’s *preferable* to pray or praise by myself, with only myself. Worship, which includes preaching, is best in a church assembly (an iPod can’t duplicate all that God intends in the public hearing of Scripture). Corporate worship, including prayer and praise *and preaching*, has been the means of grace God has used for over 3,000 years, and is commanded in NT. You can’t celebrate communion by definition without community.

We know v.13 isn’t saying you don’t need organized church, since v. 14 is right after it: <sup>14</sup> *Is anyone **among you** sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him ...*

You may watch Charles Stanley on TV or listen to Alistair Begg on the radio or MP3, but when you’re sick or weak, if you try to call or email their church, they’re not going to fly their pastor away from his church in Ohio/Georgia to Sacramento to come to your bed/home to pray over you. I like to listen to Martyn Lloyd-Jones online who preached in London many years, but I have about as much chance of getting him to visit me – and he’s already in heaven! The best ministries and ministers alive would want recorded teaching by them to supplement, never to substitute for a local church body.

When James says to pray in v. 13, we know he doesn’t mean *just by yourself or for yourself* - v. 16 says pray *for one another*, prayer for each other and with each other, as we studied last week.

When the disciples asked Jesus to pray, do you remember how He said to pray even as individuals in a personal private prayer closet?

***Our Father which art in heaven*** (not “My Father,” praying as an individual unmindful of the family of faith around us)

*... Give **us** this day **our** daily bread, and forgive **us our** trespasses as **we** forgive those who trespass against **us**. And lead **us** not into temptation, but deliver **us** from evil ...*

It’s great we can pray when no one else is around, but we need to pray in light of other believers in the church who are around us.

So while v. 13 (and really much of the NT) can have application to an *individual* believer, that's not the same as an *isolated* believer, which the NT never presents as a purposeful or positive ideal. We need to keep in mind that the NT was predominantly *not written to individuals*, but to local churches (to *us, not mainly you*). Timothy / Titus were initial individual recipients of the epistles that bear their names, but even those were intended to be read publicly to all.

The most famous verse in James presupposes public preaching: *Be doers of the Word, and **not hearers only** ...* (1:22). We need to hear the Word of God being proclaimed, and then do it after we have gone away.

Rom 10:17: *So faith comes from hearing, and **hearing by the word** ...*

That's true in salvation and also in sanctification (progressive growth in Christlikeness); faith grows under the preached Word. It's not enough to study the Bible on your own or in a small group study, or to go to Sunday School, you need to hear preaching in a worship service.

<sup>8</sup> *But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, **the word of faith** which we are preaching [v. 14b] ... **And how will they hear without a preacher?***

Public preaching of God's Word is a God-ordained part of worship and to forsake the assembling to hear it is a sin (Heb. 10:25 says). And yet we have so-called Christian writers and movements today that are unintentionally or even intentionally calling for believers to do exactly what Hebrews 10:25 says we must not do. Some emergents say "we don't need to *go to church*, let's just *be the church*." But God's Word doesn't say "be doers *and not hearers*," it's "be doers, not hearers *only*." We need to hear the Word of God preached in worship services *then do it*.

And what many emergents mean by "be the church" has less to do with NT church commands, and more to do with *dialogue* about social causes, justice for the oppressed, fighting poverty and AIDS and any number of humanitarian efforts which may be fine and good for an individual to be involved in, but were never intended in the Bible as a replacement for the gospel or the local church.

Romans 12:1 *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*

This verse illustrates how we can read Scripture through individual lenses while missing its intent *for the church* in seeking what it says *for me*. This is rarely brought out, but notice something about the worship God accepts. Maybe you've read this verse many times as how multiple people present multiple bodies in multiple sacrifices. But notice *sacrifice* is singular, and *bodies* is plural. It's not *your bodies as sacrifices*, but it's as *a living and holy sacrifice*. Plural *you ... brethren ... bodies* – but rest of words are singular.

It's not a bunch of bodies in a bunch of different sacrifices. It's *one sacrifice* made up of many bodies and brethren, *collective worship*, which together pleases God here. In applying Scripture, we are so used to ask means to me that we can miss what God means *for us*!

When James says you should sing praises or psalms, the very word he uses and its OT use has emphasis on community singing, which of course can overflow to bless individuals then and later. But what do we find the OT psalms focusing on, the praise book of believers in Bible times? The very first psalm speaks of “*the congregation / assembly of the righteous* [a recurring focus in the psalms].

Psalm 68:26 is a command: “*praise God in the congregations*” (some versions have “great congregation” – large gatherings). To say “I can worship God in nature, my backyard, my living room with friends” as an excuse to avoid congregational church worship may sound “spiritual,” but it’s actually disobedient to God’s Word.

Ps 149:1 *Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, And His praise in the congregation of the godly ones.*

107:32 *Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people*

35:18 *I will give You thanks in the great assembly; I will praise you among many people.*

[NKJV]

22:22 ... *In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.*

111:1 *Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart, In the company of the upright and in the assembly.*

34:3 *O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt His name together*

It’s a sin not to obey these Scriptures. Hallelujah is a command in Hebrew, appearing about 200x. Almost every single one of those are 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural commands (i.e., “*you all praise LORD*”). It is not calling individuals to praise Yahweh, it’s the assembly, the body, a local congregation - praise your Lord. The biblical emphasis far more on public worship than private. It’s not that psalms aren’t personal or don’t use first person (I, me, my) but even those Psalms often move to calling on all to praise God.

It’s great that we can still worship God when not with our whole church, like Paul and Silas did in jail in the middle of the night, or the Apostle John did on the Lord’s Day in exile on Patmos. But their heart longed to be with the church, and when physically able, they were back. And what encouraged John while isolated from the church was a vision of a massive multitude in worship together.

Corporate worship is a blessing because it gets us off ourselves and our natural tendencies when by ourselves. When we praise God in a congregation with others whose hearts are aflame with love for the Lord, it helps kindle our hearts. When we sing God-centered lyrics as a part of something far bigger than ourselves, to a God far bigger than our problems, we *lose ourselves* in wonder, love, and praise, which is the best place to be. Singing truth to God and to our soul is one time we’re not listening to ourselves (our thinking, emotions, etc.) which is one reason worship can be so refreshing!

An older woman attended Spurgeon’s church regularly, although she was completely deaf, she said “she could not hear a word that was said; but she said it did her good to join in the hymns, and to know that she was worshipping God with the rest of the people.”<sup>2</sup>

Luther: “At home in my own house there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.”<sup>3</sup>

***Which brings us to a 2<sup>nd</sup> need: We Need Spiritual Relationships***

In Romans 12, as Paul turns the corner in Romans to apply all he’s taught the church for 11 chapters of, his application is for the church, and the applications he gives don’t / can’t work for uninvolved attendees.

<sup>5</sup> *so we, who are many, are **one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.** <sup>6</sup> Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them...*

[notice this isn’t legalism: do, do, do to earn grace or a gift; God in His grace has given you gifts to use in the body, and He will give grace to do what may be hard for you to in this chapter. And He will not only give His grace to you, He desires to also give His grace through you to others here]

<sup>10</sup> ***Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor ...***

<sup>13</sup> *contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing **hospitality** ...*

<sup>15</sup> ***Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.***

The church is the platform and launching pad for all those things. We present our bodies together to God in corporate worship (v. 1), and that church context then should stimulate “one anothers” (v.5 and following). I don’t you know if you realize what a grace and means of grace the body of Christ is, and is intended to be? Individualism and isolationism spiritually is not biblical. It breeds selfishness and a critical spirit and it stunts spiritual growth. God in His grace has given us the means of spiritual relationships, especially in the local church, as visible agents of His grace as we see others face-to-face ideally, or can encourage by phone or letter, others can pray for and open up to about our spiritual struggles, and enlist their help in the spiritual battle, as James 5:16 speaks of.

Christ-centered worship should fuel Christ-centered fellowship. As we praise the Lord and grow in our love for the Lord, we should be growing in our love for what He loves, including His church, His people, His bride, His body, which are inseparably joined to Him. When our vertical relationship is right, horizontal ones follow. We need to look upward to our One Lord, then outward to one another. We need to assemble in worship not just for our sakes, but others:

Hebrews 10:24: *let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another ...*

The motivation here for not neglecting, not forsaking the church’s public assembly is *so that you can encourage one another*. I make no apology that each Sunday I encourage you to come back that evening because I know God’s Word can encourage you and the men who are teaching are encouraged by your being there, and someone you talk to afterwards can be encouraged by you (also home studies, women/men’s studies, SS). It can be *discouraging* for a teacher when only a few show up, and I want to encourage you: encourage others. Why not come to a service/study you don’t normally, not because you’re so bad if you don’t but blessed if you do? I can’t keep back from declaring what’s profitable (Acts 20:25).

God in His grace will often encourage you when in church, but the focus here is encouraging *others at church*, and considering how you can stimulate or promote or provoke more love and good deeds in others here and also outside the walls of church. Again I say grace is not just something God gives to you, God also intends to give grace through you to others.

As you turn back to James 5, I want you to read what God is saying, as uncomfortable or unlike American culture it may sound, that all the “one another” commands in the NT are manifestations of a gracious God, who *is full of compassion and is merciful* (v.11)

And if your relationship with the Lord is not right, you need to make it right before you can really apply the next verse in James. If you do not yet love the Lord, confess, repent, call on His mercy. If you do know and love Christ, but are struggling or even sinning against others, this verses is for you. James 5:16 *Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed*

James 5:16 presupposes you have already trusted Christ, and seek help in your growth in Christ. It's not a work like a confessional booth or penance. There's no priest, or even leader in v. 16, it's to one another. Both commands are present tense - habit/norm/pattern for Christians, as part of the health of one another in a local body. This type of transparency and vulnerability may not be natural for all, but all of us should seek spiritual relationships as God's Word says, and the reciprocal mutual pronouns and language indicate this should be normal body life.

#### Practical suggestions for applications

- Be intentional in your interactions with others. Have people over. And when you do, ask them how long they've known the Lord, how they came to know the Lord, what the Lord has been doing in their life lately? Whether they open up to you or not, you can share what the Lord is doing in you.
- Ask your fellow believer how you can pray for them, so you can do 5:16b, and pray for them spiritually (GCBC has prayer sheets on Sunday and email list for urgent requests you can ask to be on, or write requests down from SS, etc.).
- Actually pray for them, and when you see them again, ask how that issue was that you were praying about
- Talk to people after the service and when you do talk to people, why not talk about something you learned from the message or were reminded of, or that impacted you, or something you need to think about more or want to grow in
- Ask your brother or sister what they have been reading lately, or if there's any spiritual books in the past they've read that really impacted them spiritually, or that they'd like to read or re-read together with you, etc.
- Maybe you can initiate gatherings with some friends of the same gender, even simply one or two other individuals who might meet for breakfast or coffee on some scheduled basis to pray for and encourage each other, open up to friends you trust of areas you need help in, and if you don't yet have such a relationship, pray for it, and pursue it
- One way to potentially cultivate spiritual relationships is serving in the church (*\*ministry signups at info table\**)

James doesn't give much specific on confessing sin, but in the context of the rest of Scripture confession of sins to people:

- could be an individual you have offended (Matt. 5:23-24), or sinned against (Luke 17:4). Ask "will you forgive me?" and saying "I forgive you," means I will not hold this sin against you, or keep bringing it up audibly or internally
- confession of sins may include also making wrongs right if needed (like Zaccheus)
- confession publicly can be part of repentance or baptism and/or conversion statement (Matt. 3:6, Acts 19:18)
- confession of sins may be to a trusted and mature spiritual friend for accountability (James 5:16, Gal. 6:2)

Eccl. 4:9-10: *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!*

Don't wait till you fall. Seek spiritual relationships now to help you avoid a fall (v. 19-20).

<sup>16</sup> *Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.* <sup>17</sup> *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.* <sup>18</sup> *Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.*

This is a literal physical historical example from the life of Elijah, but in this context it is to motivate us to pray for blessing from heaven as well for our spiritual issues, if we will pray with the same earnestness and fervency to the same God, mighty change can take place in our spiritually dry world today. If prayer can result in an entire land producing fruit, surely prayer can result in producing fruit in a smaller place like our own lives spiritually.

The God who has power over nature also is working in the lives of those with a new nature within. Notice that v. 17 doesn't appeal to Elijah as a super-saint or someone in a class all by himself, super-human (as extrabiblical Jewish literature had portrayed him), but v. 17 says Elijah was a man with .... "***a nature like ours.***"

The hero was not Elijah, but the God who answers prayers even for people with natures like us! When v. 16 talks about a *righteous* person's prayers being effectual or availing much, all in Christ are righteous, and if our prayers are not hindered by un-confessed sin (Psalm 66:18), God's Almighty power is unleashed in response. It may not always be on our timetable (it may be 3.5 years before the drought is over), and He may respond differently than we ask. This should be of encouragement to you, that it says Elijah was a man with, literally *the same passions / emotions / feelings*. He was a man who was so depressed on one occasion he asked God to take his life. And in His weakness He called on the God of all strength.

2 Chron. 7 <sup>12</sup> *Then the Lord appeared to Solomon at night and said to him, "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice."* <sup>13</sup> ***"If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain ..."*** <sup>14</sup> *and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

The Lord did what He promised here in the lifetime of Elijah, and James 5 uses many of the same words or phrases in the original language: *the name of the Lord, pray, turn, heavens, rain, forgive, sin, heal, land* ... in James 5, there's spiritual application to us.

We don't have land promises about America, or national covenant promises, but the principle of that passage is definitely desperately needed today, for us, our families, our churches, and our nations. If we confess our sins and pray for one another, we may be healed.

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<sup>1</sup> For analysis of this data, see *Already Gone*, by Ken Ham and Brit Beemer.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Nevertheless at Thy Word," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 48, sermon # 2810.

<sup>3</sup> As cited by Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 114.