

Following Jesus Requires His Church

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[0 : 00] So in Genesis 4, we read the story of Cain killing his brother Abel. And for those of us living in the Western world, far removed from that time and place, the story has a bit of a surprise ending.

God doesn't strike Cain down for his sin. He doesn't require an eye for an eye, life for life. Instead, his punishment seems relatively light.

God says, you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. So God banishes Cain from his home, from his family, from his community. Now, most people in his position would probably be relieved.

We think to ourselves, okay, I can handle that. That's not the worst thing that God could have done to me. But that's not how Cain responds. Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is greater than I can bear.

He says, Lord, are you really going to make me leave my home and my family? That's too much. Too severe.

[1 : 17] Again, for those of us living in the modern Western world, we think, Cain, you got off easy. What do you mean your punishment is too great to bear?

Well, culture has changed, obviously. Today, we place a high premium on individualism. Many coming-of-age movies.

They involve a young person who's striking out on their own. You know, they're learning who they really are. And they're coming to embrace what we might call their true identities.

You've seen these movies, right? You've heard these stories. And in most of them, the protagonist is presented as the hero for sometimes rebelling against their family or against their community to become the individual they want to be.

For most of human history, though, individualism of that sort was a foreign concept. Yes, there was plenty of diversity from one community to the next, but society was structured and it functioned as communities, right?

[2 : 34] People did not think of themselves as the hero of the story. They did not think of themselves so much as individuals, not nearly as much as we might. They saw themselves as one part of a larger community.

And that is, at least in part, why Cain reacts the way he does. He's thinking, what am I without my family? I'm like a hand cut off, thrown away from the body.

I'm nothing without this community. By the way, that can be very helpful context as you read through the Bible. Some things make a little more sense when we take off our modern Western glasses.

And see things from that different perspective, that community-minded perspective. Well, in our day, individualism is highly prized, but it comes with consequences, right?

Think about it this way. If everyone is concerned and preoccupied with themselves, how does a community of people even function? Let's say your family is gathered around the table for dinner.

[3 : 41] Now, if your family sees individualism as more important than the community as a whole, then you can forget about passing the potatoes, you know? It will become a survival of the fittest scenario where everyone is grabbing the food they want for themselves before anyone else has a chance to get some.

It's not an exaggeration to say that increasing individualism leads society into chaos.

It's the downfall of a community. Many of our laws are fundamentally based on biblical morality. Consider the latter half of the Ten Commandments. Well, extreme individualism stands in direct opposition to those commandments because those commandments are based on a community-minded selflessness.

You're thinking about what's best for other people, not exclusively what's best for me. So if the entire culture, the entire society becomes too individualistic, the law collapses, morality collapses, the community becomes divided against itself, it cannot stand, and of course we see more and more of that in our day, don't we?

But I've noticed another consequence of this kind of individualism. Extreme individualism has a way of dehumanizing us. It has a way of depersonalizing us, as strange as that sounds.

[5 : 16] Perhaps the most blatant example of this is the transgenderism movement. As people, particularly young people, are encouraged to discover their true self in defiance often of their communities.

They've actually moved beyond exchanging genders at this point. I've watched some of these TikTok videos that people are putting out, and many of them, many of these kids, are struggling to even identify as human.

I guess changing your gender isn't individualistic enough. It isn't original enough. So some very troubled and very confused people have moved on to identify as animals, or mermaids, or dragons, or in some cases imaginary creatures.

Or they just wake up each morning and decide, this is what I am. And tomorrow it may be different. And I watch these videos and I think to myself, this person, look in their eyes, they seem so empty, so lost.

They're like a shell of themselves. And there's a sad bit of irony in all of this self-expression. When I was in school, kids didn't pretend to change their genders.

[6 : 45] That wasn't a thing yet. If they wanted to be truly unique and truly different, you know, they might dress in all black and wear dark makeup. You know, they'd walk around all morose and antisocial.

But the irony was this. They tried to be very hard to be very different from everyone else, but I can remember 10, maybe 15 of them sitting together every day.

You know, walking to class together and having lunch together. They wanted to be different. They wanted to make themselves outcasts from the rest of their classmates, but they didn't want to do it alone.

They were all about unique self-expression, but they were a part of a group of people all expressing the same thing. The thing is, individuality does not have to come at the expense of community.

Now, I'm not suggesting that individuality is necessarily a bad thing. I'm not suggesting that we'd all be better off if we were all exactly the same. But what I am saying is that community is absolutely vital.

[7 : 57] And when we trade community for individuality or self-expression, we lose something we positively need. Better yet, we lose something God created us to have, something He created us for.

Now, if you haven't been here the last few weeks, we are considering what it means to follow Jesus. How do we follow Jesus?

In the first lesson, I said that following Jesus requires faith. We have to trust Him to follow Him. Second, following Jesus requires that we learn from Him.

And this, of course, happens through His Word. We learn from Him through His Word. And this week, we consider another aspect of following Jesus.

Following Jesus requires a commitment to community. And to put a finer point on it, following Jesus requires a commitment to the local church.

[9 : 03] We can't follow Jesus alone. If you will, go with me to Ephesians chapter 2.

Ephesians chapter 2. And I'll begin reading at verse 11. Therefore, remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

And He came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near. For through Him, we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

[11 : 06] In Him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Now, I don't have time to expound upon this entire passage in great detail, but I do want to give a sense of what Paul is addressing here.

As you may know, there was a long-standing division between the Jews and the Gentiles, and this is an issue that we see come up in the New Testament quite often.

It was a source of tension, even in the church, among believers. It was a very difficult thing for the Jews and the Gentiles to come together in unity, both groups.

They carried into the church a lot of cultural and religious baggage, not to mention a lifetime of animosity toward the other side. Obviously, Paul is speaking primarily to the Gentiles here, and he reminds them that they were once separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in this world. In Romans 1, he says they were fools who exchanged the glory of the immortal God for mere images. Images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and other creeping things.

[12 : 34] In other words, they were blatant idolaters. They suppressed the truth of God and they lived very wickedly. So they were cut off from both God and God's covenant people.

In Romans 1, Paul says that God gave them over to their sins. Meanwhile, the people of Israel, they enjoyed the privilege of knowing God and knowing His law.

Romans 3, what advantage has the Jew? What value is circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

They were entrusted with His logion. They were entrusted with His words, His utterances. Now, that's not to say the Jews were without sin, but they were definitely a privileged people as God's covenant people.

So there was a sharp divide between the Jews of Israel and all of the Gentile nations. Now, it's not quite the same thing, but we might compare it to the animosity between the United States and the communist nations during the Cold War.

[13 : 50] You know, we're talking about two very different competing value systems. Two competing worldviews. Both sides hating the other side.

Both sides feeling threatened by the other side to some degree. And the tension is just palpable, you know. It would be an understatement to say that the Jews and Gentiles didn't get along.

That's an understatement. No, the animosity and the resentment between them ran much, much deeper. So all of that's in the background of Ephesians 2.

But now, Paul says to the Gentile believers, verse 13, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

He says, you Gentiles have been reconciled to God by the blood of Christ. To the dismay of many Jews, God's plan of redemption included, and always included, the Gentiles.

[14 : 54] Christ came to save both the Jews and the Gentiles. And when He did, also to the dismay of many Jews, He didn't just reconcile them to God.

He reconciled them to the Jews. Specifically, He reconciled them to Jewish believers in Christ.

Verse 14 again, for Jesus Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two.

So making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. As difficult as the adjustment proved to be in the early church, Christ destroyed that long-standing wall that separated the Jews and the Gentiles.

All of that tension, all of that animosity, all of that hostility, all of those cultural differences, they lose all significance. They don't matter anymore. For them to be united in Christ was to be united to others in Christ.

So, on the one hand, we see that Paul, he acknowledges diversity among the believers in the church, doesn't he? They are not all the same.

[16:29] They have different backgrounds, they have different experiences, to some degree they have different perspectives, yet, on the other hand, Paul anticipates that that diversity, excuse me, will give way to community.

In other words, diversity is moved to the background. Unity of the body, of the entire body, that comes to the forefront. Why?

The short answer is Christ. Christ has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Then in verse 20, he's the cornerstone of the entire church. He's that fixed point upon which the church is built. He's that fixed point with which everything else about us and about the church is aligned.

So, all of the differences between people, they cease to matter when we are eternally united in Christ.

[17:39] Verse 17, And he came and preached peace to you who were far off, that is, the Gentiles, and peace to those who were near, that is, the Jews.

For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints.

You are members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Paul says, Christ has brought all of these different people together from all walks of life.

He has most notably given them access to God the Father through his Spirit, but he's also brought them into unity with one another. They become fellow citizens enjoying all of the privileges and protections of being citizens of a kingdom and they stand together like citizens of the same nation.

[18:58] Perhaps you can remember not that long ago how everybody had a sense of what it means to be an American and we stood together in times of crisis.

In Christ, they also become fellow members of the household of God and you see that the analogy gets more intimate here. They become a family together.

They share life together because we're all adopted into the family of God. Now, I want you to notice something that Paul doesn't say in this passage.

Outside of maybe Hebrews 10, 25, 24 and 25, the Bible never really says it. It never says go to church.

It never says church attendance really, really matters. It never says you belong with the church. Be there on Sunday morning. Again, outside of maybe Hebrews 10, it just never gives you that clear, explicit command to be a part of the local church.

[20:10] Even so, I also want you to notice how Paul and really every other writer of the New Testament talks about the church. There's a reason it doesn't contain many explicit commands and that's because it's always implied.

Always implied. Better yet, it's always assumed. Paul and others, they write as though if you are a believer in Christ, of course you will be a part of the church.

That's not even questioned. Who would debate that? Who would think there would be any other way? Well, today, lots of people, lots of people question it.

In our culture of individualism, people love to say things like, you know, going to church, that doesn't make you a Christian. Well, they are absolutely right.

Going to church does not make someone a Christian. However, if you are a Christian, you will go to church. You will be a part of the church.

[21:14] That's what the New Testament assumes in every place. It assumes that you will, you will want to join the family of God. In Scripture, the idea of an individual Christian is a completely foreign concept.

There's no trace of it. It doesn't exist. Last year, I wrote something about this, and I'm going to read you a portion of it. I said, I shouldn't be surprised to hear a professing Christian claim participation in the local church is optional, but I am.

My childhood is partly to blame. Church attendance was non-negotiable in my parents' house.

Unless the roads were impassable or someone was deathly ill, I knew where we'd be every Sunday morning.

More to the point, I can't understand how anyone could read the Bible and miss the imperative in question. Most of the New Testament is written to or about small assemblies of Christian disciples living and worshiping together, i.e. churches.

The command in Hebrews 10.25 is explicit. Many biblical references to the body of Christ imply individuals cannot function alone.

[22 : 35] When is the last time you've seen a finger thrive or even survive independent from a hand? As it happens, my parents were right. Church is non-negotiable.

Christ, the head of the church, has not offered us a take it or leave it proposition. We are not ordering salvation at a drive-thru where Jesus asks, would you like church membership with that? The pattern and teachings of Scripture are clear. When the good shepherd finds and rescues a lost lamb, he doesn't pat its head and say, I'll be with the rest of the flock if you need it.

No, he carries that lamb back to the sheepfold where it can receive the protection and provision it needs. If a sinner shows little interest in belonging to the church, is he or she truly saved?

While it may be theoretically possible, the Bible never gives us any reason to make that assumption. Every example in Scripture is to the contrary. When people were saved, they immediately joined themselves to the church.

[23 : 39] Consider, for instance, the 3,000 souls converted on the same day in the book of Acts. Though most did not live in Jerusalem, they refused to leave the first and only Christian church.

Instead of returning home, the text says, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers, and awe came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had needed. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who believed to be saved. Notice the last line of that passage. As the Lord continued saving sinners, He simultaneously added them to the church.

He added them to the number of people who physically and frequently met together for teaching, fellowship, eating, praying, sharing, supporting, and praising God.

[24 : 54] No one waited until heaven to join their brothers and sisters in Christ. Why would they? Why would they refuse to do here what they hoped to do in heaven for all eternity?

Perhaps that is why John, the Apostle John, makes love to the brothers a part of his threefold test for salvation. Near the end of his first epistle, John says, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know you have eternal life.

According to the last living Apostle, assurance of one's salvation requires positive answers to three simple questions. First, do you love the Lord Jesus Christ?

Everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. Second, do you love his word? Whoever keeps his commandment abides in God and God in him. Third, do you love his church?

We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. If we can sincerely affirm all three, we can know that we have each other life.

[26 : 08] Doubts need not apply. As Jonathan Neiman writes in his book, Church Membership, once you choose Christ, you must choose his people. It's a package deal. Choose the Father and the Son, and you have to choose the whole family, which you do through a local church.

The Bible doesn't allow us to pick one without the other. If we trust Christ for our eternal redemption, why wouldn't we trust the wisdom he has revealed through his commandments?

And if we trust his wisdom, we will not neglect to meet together as he commands. Traveling to heaven alone is a dangerous, if not impossible, feat.

Every true Christian needs the church. Better yet, every true Christian will feel his or her need for the church. Furthermore, he or she will discover that this small yet faithful step of obedience leads to significantly greater assurance and a whole host of other blessings.

So to summarize all of that, our active participation in the church isn't really optional. It's not as though we can say, you know, I believe, I've been saved, but the church, it's not really for me.

[27 : 29] Well, we must tell that to Christ, whom we claim to follow. He is the head of this body. He saved us to join this body. He carries his sheep back to the sheepfold where they can be with his

other sheep.

Now, we can spend a lot of time going through the New Testament to show that despite the lack of many explicit commands to be a part of the church, the Lord both invites and he does command us to be a part of the church.

We can't fulfill many of the New Testament's commandments apart from being active in the church. In fact, this is why the Lord saves us.

He saves us in part to be joined to the church now and for all eternity. But it's the now we really want to focus on today.

We need the church now. If we want to follow Jesus, we must be a part of the church. We must be an active part of the church. We must be heavily invested in the church.

[28 : 38] Romans 12 verses 4 and 5 say, For as in one body we have many members. And the members do not all have the same function. So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.

Now notice again that Paul acknowledges our diversity in the church. Even in the church we're not all the same. We have different personalities, we have different gifts.

But those differences are not used to divide and separate. as maybe they once could have. Instead, they're used for the well-being of the entire church.

Each member actively uses, we might say, what makes them distinct to benefit the entire body. Now obviously we have to be careful because we can very easily let our differences cause problems.

They could cause divisions. It takes humility toward one another. It takes a lot of thankfulness to God. But this goes back to what I was saying earlier. We need to think a little less like a 21st century American.

[29 : 53] Self cannot be our priority. It cannot be our priority. The community as a whole needs to be our priority. The Lord in his glory needs to be our priority.

we need to think in terms of what's best for the body, not what's best for me. And you know, if the body, this community of believers, is our focus, if this community is our priority, the potential for division decreases dramatically.

We won't be nearly as prone to rebuild those walls that Christ has torn down. But I'll tell you, I think the most important thing we can do as we participate in the Bible is each one of us keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

The one we follow, right? He is what binds us together in the first place. He is the one who brought us together. We share our lives with one another because we share a life with Him.

We love one another because we love Him and He loves us. We sacrifice for one another because He sacrificed for us.

[31 : 18] You know, it's really hard to stop caring about one another. When Christ, especially Christ on the cross, is always in the forefront of our minds, Christ, if that's what we're constantly seeing, first and foremost, I mean, we are humbled every time we look at that cross, aren't we?

Now, if we have to peer around that cross every time we look at one another, the last thing we will feel inclined to do is hate our brothers and sisters.

believers. No, we'll be reminded just how much Christ loves them and who are we to love and bless. us. So, we should approach the church always thinking, what can I do for the body?

We don't ask, what can I do for myself? No, we ask, what can I do for the body? And obviously, if everyone thinks this way, the entire body will be abundantly edified.

Now, here in Ephesians 2, Paul says, the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

[32 : 46] In his book, Following Jesus, Andrew Randall offers what I think is a helpful exercise. He says, to imagine that you know God plans to show up at church on Sunday.

You know that he will be here. And Randall asks, what would you do to get there? What would you give up to be there?

How would you prepare yourself for that moment? And then he reminds us that God will be there. His Spirit will be present.

He will speak to us through his word. We may not see him with our natural eyes, but he will be present. Now, how does that change your approach to Sunday worship?

When we meet together as a church for worship, we are stepping into God's presence. And specifically, we're stepping into his presence together. We are praising God together.

[33 : 48] We are confessing our sins together. We are receiving assurance of forgiveness together. We are expressing our dependence on God together through our prayers.

We are growing together into a holy temple in the Lord. And together, we are a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

That's waiting stuff. So if nothing else, that should cause us to take church very seriously. To care about it very deeply.

You know, this is not a mere social club. That's how the world sees it. A very strange social club to look down on. But it's not a social club. You know, I'm a member of the Rotary Club at Elm Park.

We have a meeting every single week. Now, the club exists to serve the community in a variety of ways, which is a good thing. So all of the members, we have a shared commitment and purpose.

[34 : 50] But there's nothing really substantial binding us together. In fact, I have learned along the way that some of us share. We have radically different roles.

So I may go to the meetings and I may participate in some of the services and so on, but I'm not really sharing my life with these members. You know, if they kicked me out of the club tomorrow, I don't think my feelings would be hurt.

And I don't think they miss me that much. The church is very different. Very different. As Paul says here in Ephesians, we're more like a family than a social club.

We'll do anything and everything for one another. At least that's how it should be. I like that passage that I read from Acts chapter 2 because it shows the church operating like a family.

They're sharing everything with one another. Their time, day after day, their devotion is a crazy devotion to God. They're even sharing their resources, just selling everything they have and helping those who have needs.

[35 : 58] And I strongly believe we need to think about the church in this way. The church is not merely a social gathering for two or three hours a week. If that's how we see church, we're doing it all along.

The church is the family of God and the eternal family of God at that. When we think about our participation in the church, we need to think about our participation on Sunday morning as well as Monday morning and Tuesday afternoon and every other time of the week.

We're always a part of this family. We are the family of God and we will be together forever. Kent Hughes puts it rather succinctly when he says there are no churchless disciples.

John Wesley said the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion. Martin Luther adds to gather with God's people in united adoration of the Father is as necessary to the Christian life as prayer.

Here's one more from Charles Spurgeon. There is surely no grace in us if we do not feel for the church of God and take a lasting interest in its welfare. God's people in the church.

[37 : 12] Now to be clear, we're not really talking about the church as an institution. We're talking about a community of believers. We're talking about the welfare, the growth, and the edification of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christ. Listen to what Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 4. Ephesians chapter 5.

in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. So notice first of all that God calls us into the body.

He doesn't merely call us into Christianity. He calls us into the church. Second, Paul says we need humility and gentleness and patience.

Why? Because we're not going in alone. You don't need those things if all you have to deal with is yourself. Because we've joined ourselves to other sinners in this community of believers, we need these things.

[38 : 38] We're working and we're living very closely with one another. So obviously challenges can arise and patience and these things are necessary. Third, he says we're striving for unity.

Now do you see the assumption that Paul makes when he talks about the church? Each and every time he assumes believers will be together. And fourth, he says God has given each member of the body a measure of grace.

We all have God's intended purpose in his body. He's looking ahead. Paul says, and he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints to the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the

knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is to have, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

And there we see that this seemingly mundane thing we call church is anything but. God is very intentionally putting his people together.

[40 : 24] And Paul shows us that it is for our own good, each of us. We desperately need one another. We need one another to grow. We need one another to keep ourselves from deception.

We need one another to grow up into Christ. So everything from baptisms to the Lord's supper to our prayers to worship to fellowship to serving.

We need one another. By God's good design, we need one another. And let me add one more thing.

As we see both in scripture and throughout church history, the church doesn't exist for its own sake. Again, we're not some walled-off club that's exclusively, that, let me think of how to phrase it, that exists for its own sake.

Let me go back to that. The church is God's instrument for carrying out his purpose and mission in the world. Have you ever noticed how Luke begins the book of Acts?

[41 : 31] He says, in the first book of Theopolis, I'm referring to his account of the gospel, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.

He says, I've shown you what Jesus began to do. Now let me show you what he still did. Okay?

There's just one problem. Well, Jesus ascends into heaven just a few verses later.

He's gone. So, how can the book of Acts be all about what Jesus is still doing in his work? Well, what Jesus is doing, to this day, he is doing through his church.

So, to summarize everything, if we want to follow Jesus, we must be an active part of his church.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your wisdom in bringing your children together.

[42 : 37] God, we thank you for what the local church provides us, for the graces that are given to us through this body. And I pray that each one of us will have a renewed commitment to one another.

That we will follow you by looking at your instructions and fulfilling those commands that you have given us to be a part of the church, to serve one another, to help one another, to encourage one another.

Help us to see that when we are not actively involved in the lives of these members, that we are a discouragement today. And that when we are actively involved, we are an encouragement.

And ultimately, Lord, we are striving to be built up in unity, into Christ, that we might ultimately glorify you and fulfill the purpose and mission you have for us in this world.

Lord, use us, Lord. Help us. In Christ's name. Amen. Lord, we're dismissed.