

# Does It, Though?

Morning.

If you've got a bible, you can go ahead and turn with me to [Hebrews 10](#). We're gonna be there in a bit. We're kicking off a new series this morning that I'm excited about. But before we get there, I just wanted to offer a quick word of welcome. This is generally the Sunday that we have a good many college students join us—or *re-join* us—here on Sundays. ~~Any college students here this morning?~~ We are so glad to have you around, or back around. As I think we say every year, Knoxville is a little bit less like Knoxville when y'all are gone for the summer. Traffic downtown is better, but we miss you.

We are blessed to have somewhere around 100-150 college students who make up a pretty large contingent in our church, so we kind of feel like a different *church* when y'all are gone. The University of Tennessee is a big part of why we *started* our church here in Knoxville, and has always been a key part of our DNA as a church. [I personally was shaped in huge ways and ultimately decided to pursue working in ministry while I was in college through a church like this one, and that's a big part of why I wanted to help plant a church near a college campus.](#) So all that to say, if you're a student who is back after being gone for the summer, or if you're here just checking things out for the first time, we're pumped that you're here. And please, let us know if we can answer any questions or do anything for you.

And really, you're joining us on a good Sunday, for *two* reasons. One, today marks our five year *birthday* as a church. We've been doing this thing since August of 2017. Which is crazy to me—doesn't feel like it's been that long at all. But throw a couple COVID years in there and here we are. So we're doing a little celebrating this morning, as you might have seen from the shenanigans out in the lobby. We'll also do cupcakes on the way out—because people love to celebrate with cupcakes! But today is our five year birthday as a church, which means it's a great Sunday to be here. Because even if you didn't like anything *else*, you at least can have a cupcake.

But the *other* reason it's a good Sunday to join us is what I mentioned earlier. We are kicking off a new series, and it is all *about church*. It's called [Church Matters](#). We're going to be talking a lot about what the church *is*, why it's *important*, and then about a lot of the specific things that the church *does* when it is gathered together. Now maybe that seems a little *flat* to you. Maybe you're thinking why not do a series about sex, or relationships, or how to be an awesome person? Or a series based on one of the new Beyonce songs or something. It seems like any of that would be more exciting than a

series about *church*. And while all of those certainly would've been interesting (some more than others), we thought a series about why church matters is even more timely and necessary.

And here's why. **Lately, I find that more and more people are asking *why*– or even *if*–they should be a part of a church.** People that *don't* follow Jesus, of course, have *always* asked that question. This thing we do, especially here on Sundays, can be a weird thing for people who didn't grow up doing it. But more and more, it seems that even self-proclaimed *Christians* are asking the question: ***why do I need church?*** And it seems like an increasing number of people are concluding that they *don't*.

And I think people arrive at that conclusion for a variety of different reasons:

- For some people, their take is just “why not find it online?” For a while now, and especially since COVID started, you can find world-class sermons and brilliantly-produced worship music online. You can even find full-length church services online. Cameras panning back and forth and everything. I can watch all of that without even leaving my couch. So why on Earth would I go to the effort to put on *pants*, leave my house, and go to one in *person*?
- Other people just don't see the *point* of attending a church. They don't find it *relevant*. Maybe they were a part of a church before, and it mostly just felt like they were giving up an hour or so of their weekend for something that didn't add much value to their life. People will say things like “I'm spiritual, but not *religious*.” “I'm a fan of Jesus, just not of organized religion.”
- Other people have witnessed too much *hypocrisy* from the church to want to be a part of it. Tune into the news or social media, and it doesn't take long to be bombarded with story after story of church people and church leaders not being who they claim to be.
- And then for others still, there is church *hurt* involved: something went down in the past that especially soured their view of church, and they're very hesitant to give it another shot.

But for one reason or another, many people just aren't too keen on taking time out of their week to be connected with a church. So **before we can do a series talking about *why church matters*, we probably first need to answer the question, *does it?* Does church actually *matter*?** Is there value, in the 21st century, to doing things like showing up weekly (or more often than that) to be *physically present* with other followers of Jesus?

And even if you're someone who's already *convinced* that there *is* value in it: if I were you, I wouldn't just breeze past the question. I think even those of us that find

*tremendous* value in church could still use reminders of *how* and *why* it's valuable. If for no *other* reason, so that we can *articulate* it to others who don't think that way. If we're going to be able to convince our non-Christian neighbors and coworkers and classmates that church is a worthwhile endeavor, it sure would help if we could explain *why* that's the case. But I think it's important at an *individual* level too. **Nearly all the studies out there show that regular church attendance and involvement took a major hit during COVID.** And, barring any quarantine guidelines obviously, **I'd be willing to bet that the reason many people stopped doing church had at least *something* to do with them not fully understanding *why* they were doing it in the first place.**

It's kind of like this. My drive from my house to here every day for work is about fifteen minutes. And it's a relatively easy trip—just a few turns, and I'm here. And I have been making the drive, 5-6 times a week for quite a while. So because of all that, there are times where I remember getting in my car at home, and I remember pulling into the parking lot—and I remember *nothing* else about the drive. Ever have that experience? I'll arrive and realize I zoned out the whole drive. And I'll have this thought, like “did I cause any accidents!? Did I run any red lights, because I sure don't remember stopping at them.” I've had people tell me they rode beside me, waving, trying to get my attention and I never saw them, caught me picking my nose and everything. The drive is something that I do so often, that I sometimes just go into autopilot mode. Not like real Tesla autopilot, I drive an '05 F150, but it's more or less the same.

Okay, I think it's really *easy*, especially if you've been around church for some time, to go into *autopilot* mode when it comes to church. To just go through the motions, week after week, without fully reflecting on *why* what you're doing actually *matters*. And my concern is that if we don't ever think about *why* it matters, it's only a matter of time until we *functionally* decide that it *doesn't*. Not that we'd necessarily say *outright* that church doesn't matter, but our actions speak pretty loudly. **And all it takes is the right combination of circumstances. Life gets busy. School or work picks up a little. You have a kid. It's summer and the lake or Dollywood starts calling our name. You start dating someone who would honestly prefer long weekend trips. And then all of a sudden we start thinking, *why do I feel the need to go to this thing?* And so **part of what I want us to do in this series is see if we can take the car *off* of autopilot for a bit, and ask the question *why?* *Why* do we do some of the things that we do, especially here on **Sunday?** In this series, we want to talk about *why*, and *how*, *church matters*.****

And *today* I'd like to do that, largely, from the book of Hebrews. So take a look with me in your bibles at **Hebrews 10**, starting in v. 23. Here's what it says:

[23] Let us **hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.**

So *Hebrews*, if you're newer to the bible, is a really interesting book. It's interesting in part because there's some *mystery* surrounding it: we don't know exactly who wrote it, and we don't know a lot of the *specifics* about the type of situation they were writing it *into*. But there's at least one thing we *do* know for certain. **A recurring theme in the book is encouraging followers of Jesus to persevere in their faith.** In other words, to *stick with* following Jesus. The author of *Hebrews* seems particularly concerned with the audience not just making a one-time *decision* to follow Jesus, but in them holding *to* that decision to the very end. In fact, some *version* of that idea comes up in almost every *chapter* of the book.

And it's no different here in chapter 10. The author starts out by calling followers of Jesus to "hold unswervingly" to the "*hope they profess.*" Now, that "hope," in context, is the understanding that Jesus has done everything that needed to be done to give people access to God. By going to the cross and rising from the grave, Jesus has established a relationship with anyone and everyone who *trusts* in that reality. He's done all the work on their behalf. And the author of *Hebrews* wants followers of Jesus not just to *know* that, but to *hold* onto it. To *cling* to it—to *lean* on it—in the good times and the bad. That's at the very *core* of what it means to follow Jesus.

And *next, we read about one specific way that we are to do that.* And this is where we'll spend most of our time this morning. Verse 24:

[24] **And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, [25] not (and notice this part) 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.**

Apparently, an indispensable part of *persevering* in following Jesus is what *Hebrews* calls "spurring one another on." In other words, having relationships with *other* followers of Jesus, where we are encouraged *and* we actively encourage others to continue following Jesus well. According to the author of *Hebrews*, that is *non-negotiable* for each of us who considers ourselves followers of Jesus. And that means we shouldn't "*give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.*" **Apparently, some people in the ancient world had also cooled a bit on the idea of getting together with other followers of Jesus.** They didn't see the *value* in it, and therefore weren't making a regular effort to *do* it. But the author of *Hebrews* makes it clear that it's a bad idea to

think about it that way. He says that **if you want to persevere in following Jesus, evidently, you're going to need the church.**

So let's break down *why* that is, exactly. *Why* we need the church, I think, comes down to at least three things we need to define: **what the church is, what it does,** and **whose it is.** First up...

## What it is

**Church, to use the words of Hebrews 10, is the practice of “meeting together” with other followers of Jesus. That's what church is.** So it's here that we need to make an important clarification. **If you've been around church very long, you've probably heard someone say that *this* is not the church. A church is not a *service*, it's not an *event*, and it's *certainly* not a *building*. We are the church. You and I. *Followers of Jesus*. Sometimes I hear people put it like this: church isn't a *place*—it's a *people*. And all of that is important to realize: *we are* the church. But sometimes in saying that we do miss one *key* detail: biblically, **we are the church...when we are gathered together.** It's more accurate to say that the church is a people...*gathered* in a place.<sup>1</sup>**

Here's why I say that. The word for church used most often in the New Testament is the word *ekklesia* (ek-klay-see'-ah). It *literally* means an “assembly” or a “gathering.” As in, a gathering of multiple people into one place. **Which—side note—is why we call what happens here on Sunday “the Gathering.”** We don't call it that because we want it to sound cultish, although it does sound that way to some people. We call it that because we're trying to use *biblical* language for what we're doing. **The church *is* the church when it is gathered together.** Now there's a lot of *freedom* as to what *format* our gathering together *takes*. The church is the church when we're gathered in a bigger setting like this. **And** the church is the church when we're gathered in a smaller setting, like a LifeGroup. **But the word *church* refers to the practice of *gathering together*.**

Which means that *really*, the idea of “online church” is a bit of an oxymoron. I'm not *mad* at the idea—we put our *services* online, and plenty of other places do too. That's not a bad thing to do, necessarily—it's just not *church*. It's just not what the word *means*. **Saying “church *online*” is a little bit like saying “*eating* online.”** You can *find* places to eat online. You can *order* food online, to eat in *person*. You can look at pictures and videos of *other* people *eating* online (which is super specific, and kind of weird, but it's a thing nonetheless). You can do any and all of that online. But you can't *eat* online. It's just not what the word means. Same way with church. You can *find* a church online. You can *interact* with church *things* online. You can even *watch other* people gather as the church

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church*, p. 48

online. But *church* can't *happen* online. It just isn't what the word means. **Church, by its very definition, is physically gathering together with other followers of Jesus. It's something designed to be embodied.**

And when it's *not* embodied, I think something really *dangerous* can happen as a result. We make something *individual* that was intended to be *communal*. We make something *consumeristic* that was meant to be *reciprocal*. **Church isn't something you watch. It's something you do, something you participate in.** Hebrews 10 says we need to be physically present together so *that* we can "encourage one another," and "spur one another on towards love and good deeds." Now, can you do those things without physically being together? *Sure*, to an extent. You can (and should) text encouragement to people, praise God for technology. You can (and should) spur other people on to doing good things, even when you aren't physically present *with* them. But at the same time, there are limits to those settings.

**There's just something about being physically present with people that is so much different and better than connecting electronically.** And I think we inherently *know* this. *After the past two and a half years, is anybody just itching to add one more Zoom meeting to their schedule? No? Or the next time a friend asks you to go out to eat with you, try responding by saying, "actually, how about we each go get takeout, go back to our own places, and FaceTime each other to talk while we eat?!"* And then just watch the confusion wash over your friend's face. See, **technology is a great stand-in for those times we can't be physically present with one another. But it was never designed to become a replacement for it.**

And there's something here I want to help you see in regards to church. At some point, the act of participating in it *teaches* us something about its importance. So when it comes to here on Sunday mornings, if you are regularly prioritizing this hour and a half block of time, committing to be here far more often than not—just doing that is *communicating* something to you about its importance. You're helping yourself realize that times like these are important throughout your life, even *outside* of Sundays.

But it also works the other way. If you *can't* be bothered to make Sunday mornings a priority, that is *also* training you to believe something about it. If it's too much work or too inconvenient to block out an hour and a half on a Sunday morning, I've got to *question* whether or not you're going to have what it takes to follow Jesus alongside others over the long haul. Because following Jesus requires a good bit more effort and sacrifice than just giving up an hour and a half on a weekend. Relationships with other followers of Jesus take so much more effort and sacrifice than a couple hours a week, especially if

those couple hours only happen if it doesn't feel like it's getting in the way of other stuff you want to do. The practice of doing this *teaches* us something about its importance.

Church matters because of *what it is*: **being physically present, in one place, with other people who follow Jesus.** There's something that happens in this setting that can't really happen any other way. There's something about looking around a room like this and seeing people you know are going *through* it, still lifting their hands in worship to Jesus, that lifts your Spirit in a way that a worship music video on YouTube *can't*. There's something about sitting next to a person who is doing the difficult work of becoming more like Jesus that just sitting on your couch and listening to a sermon on discipleship can't do. There's something about looking across the room and seeing someone crying out to the Lord through their tears and being able to go and pray over them that putting in your airpods while you're folding laundry just can't do. There is tremendous value in *gathering, with other people*, as the church. That's *one* reason it matters. It *also* matters because of...

## What it does

So remember back with me to the *intent* of the book of Hebrews. The author is writing to help early Christians persevere in following Jesus. Or to put it differently, to help them *not give up*. To help those who *started* their lives following Jesus, *finish* their lives still following him. The author evidently doesn't think that's a given. He believes it takes *intentionality* and *effort* to get there. Here's the way he puts it back in **chapter 3** of the book:

**See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.**<sup>2</sup>

So according to Hebrews, it is possible for a person to *identify* as a follower of Jesus, and then still *turn away* completely from *following* Jesus at some point along the way. That's a scary idea if you think about it: you can think of yourself as a Christian right now, and still not *be* one at the end of your life. But he doesn't just *leave* us there with that dire warning. He says that the way to *avoid* that happening—to avoid “hardening your heart”—is to “...**encourage one another** daily.” It's by regularly surrounding yourself with other followers of Jesus who can remind you of what's true and what's not. Such that you are able to *persevere*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 3:12-13

To put it another way, **the local church is a substantial, *necessary* line of defense against sin taking a hold of your heart and leading you away from Jesus.** And Hebrews is saying that when you *neglect* that line of defense, it pretty much never goes well for you in the end. And I've got to tell you: in the several years I've helped lead people, and after talking to other pastors that I know, this has held true in almost every situation. Just about 100% of the time, the people who stick with the local church in some form or fashion, persevere in following Jesus. And **the people who *bail on the church eventually end up bailing on Jesus.*** I say "almost" every situation because it is possible to be around a church your whole life and still not be known by the people around you, but that honestly comes down to a personal choice to keep people at arm's length.

And if you think about it critically, it makes sense. Throughout the Scriptures, Jesus identifies so *closely* with his people. In 1 John, it tells us that if a person can't bear to love and be around other followers of Jesus, there's actually no way that person can love God.<sup>3</sup> After his resurrection, Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him, Peter says yes, and Jesus says "okay—then feed my sheep."<sup>4</sup> *Care for my people.* In Acts, when Saul is persecuting the Church, Jesus shows up and asks him, "why are you persecuting *me*?" Do you see how Jesus talks about his church? Do you see how closely and intimately he *identifies* with them? They're actually a package deal. So **we can try to construct a cement wall between the two if we want. But it won't work. And if we bail on one, it's only a matter of time before we bail on both.**

Being a part of a church *solidifies*, it *calcifies* our faith in Jesus. It makes it *last*. So if we want to stick *with* Jesus, we're gonna want to figure out a way to put up with his people. Because **despite all of the church's *imperfections*, it's one of the best lines of defense for not growing cold to the love and presence of Jesus in our lives.** It may be very imperfect, but it's *his*. Which leads us to the final reason church matters. Because of...

## Whose it is

**At the end of the day, church matters because of *who* the Church belongs to.** Titus chapter 2 tells that Jesus "gave *himself*...to *purify for himself* a people that *are his very own*."<sup>5</sup> **The Church, with all of its failures and all of its flaws, *belongs to Jesus.*** He made certain of it, by going to the cross and giving his very life *for* it. So listen: **I've got**

---

<sup>3</sup> See 1 John 4:20-21

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>5</sup> Titus 2:13-14

**no problem calling out the failures and flaws of the Church.** No reason to sweep those under the rug. *Jesus* was fine calling that stuff out.<sup>6</sup>

And if you've been around long, you know *we* have no problem doing that here either. We're not here to pretend the Church is this rosy, perfect, utopia of a place. The church has failed plenty of times, and in plenty of ways. *This* church has failed plenty of times, in plenty of ways. In fact, that's kind of the whole reason that Jesus had to come and die—to *do something* about that sin and failure. According to Hebrews, he did that so that those sins and those failures don't become a permanent *barrier* to our relationship with him.

So we shouldn't feel the need to *conceal* any of those failures. We can call them for what they are. *But* listen: we do all of that as *insiders*, not *outsiders*. **Standing off on your own and critiquing something from a distance takes very little maturity to do. In fact, some of the most immature people I know are the best at critiquing things. What takes maturity is being a part of something imperfect, and doing the hard, necessary work of helping it move toward what it needs to be.** Is the Church full of hypocrites? *Absolutely.* And in a way, that's good—because it means it's got room for you and me *in* it. So let's hop in, repent of *our own* hypocrisy along the way, and it'll be a little bit better as a result.

**Jesus has all kinds of understanding and patience for those who struggle to be a part of the Church. But he's got no place for people who arrogantly disregard the Church.** Whether that's functionally or ideologically. People who say “yeah—I know Jesus died for it, but I don't need it. I'm good, actually.” Jesus went *all in* on the Church. *All in.* And he did that knowing it would fail him, hurt him, *grieve* him, misrepresent him. So what does it say about *us* if we're quick to *bail* on the Church? If we're eager to reject the thing that Jesus gave everything for? In the bible, the word for *that* is *arrogance*. And I'll tell you: the longer you choose to stand at a distance and critique *other* people, the more arrogant *you'll become* as a result.

So what I'd advise instead is being willing to get your hands *dirty*. Entering *into* a community with humility and understanding, such that you can actually help it become what Jesus made it to be, over time. And here's what I think you'll find if you do that. You'll find that the Holy Spirit will actually use that to make *you* who he made *you* to be. The mystery of God's design for us is that we actually *can't* become who he made us to be without participation in the church.

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Matthew 23 and Revelation 2-3

I want to read you a quote on all of this by a pastor in Iowa named Lillian Daniel. She wrote a piece for the Huffington Post about the problems with the whole “spiritual-but-not-religious” mindset. And I want you to know that I actually left out the most snarky parts of the quote. That’s important to me that you know that because what I’m about to read is still *pretty* snarky, even by my standards. But just remember: I took *out* the *most* snarky parts. You’re welcome:

*Here we come to the crux of the problem that the spiritual-but-not-religious people have with church. If we could just kick out all the human beings, we might be able to meet their high standards. If we could just kick out all the sinners, we might have a shot at following Jesus. Being privately spiritual but not religious **just doesn’t interest me.** There is nothing challenging about having **deep thoughts all by oneself.** What is interesting is doing this work in **community**, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, **disagree** with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.<sup>7</sup>*

Again, that’s the *less* snarky part. If you want the whole quote, talk to me later. But do you see what she’s saying? There are parts of who God made us to be that we just can’t *become* all by ourselves. *We need people who irritate us to help us grow in patience. We need people who challenge us to help us grow in humility. We need people who correct us to help us grow in our understanding. We need people who disagree with us to help us grow in having a charitable spirit. We need difficult people who can help us grow in getting over ourselves.* And for *all* of that to happen with any *success*, we don’t just need those people to occupy a chat feature online or a text that we can leave unread until we feel like answering it. We need to see them—and we need to *have* to see them—week in, and week out. In other words, we need to be physically present with them, on a regular basis.

So feel free to bail on church, if you’re so inclined. But just know that in doing that, you are bailing on one of the most important mechanisms God has put in place for your growth and maturity. So if you bail on it, don’t be surprised when you feel stuck, or dry, or confused at your lack of progress in following Jesus. It could be that you’ve actually locked yourself out of that happening, because you’ve locked yourself out of the church. At the end of the day, this is *his church*. And he made it, in many ways, *for you*. And it’s amazing what he can do in *your* life, *through* it. The church *belongs* to Jesus, for his purposes. That’s why it matters.

---

<sup>7</sup> The link to this article is [here](#), which then became a full book available [here](#).

So let me just land here. My only real *hesitancy* about giving this teaching is the possibility that someone could walk in here who really *wants* to plug into the Church, and would feel attacked or discouraged by something we've said this morning. So let me be clear: if you *long* to be a part of church—if you *long* to have meaningful relationships with other followers of Jesus—and you just struggle because of fears or past experiences or both: I want you to know this is a safe place for you to be. If you stick around, you'll find out that quite a few of us have stories like that too.

Just recently, one of our pastors grabbed coffee with a guy who, when he came around our church, was just about *done* with church altogether. He had been on staff at a church before, had a really rough experience there, and just didn't see much use in continuing to be a part of any of it. But the reason he was meeting with one of our pastors was to tell him that after being around our church for a couple years, he had changed his mind about all of that. He had, in some ways, had his faith *restored* in the institution of church, and because of that, was taking a job on staff at another church here in town.

Now, I don't tell you that story to try and say that we're awesome. I can assure you, most days, we fall quite short of awesome. And I don't tell you that to say we won't ever let you down. That's not a promise I can make. I simply tell you that as an example of how other people have found this a safe, productive, helpful place to be when they were in a season of doubt and hesitancies towards church. We receive our deepest hurt in relationships, to be sure. But we also receive our greatest *healing* in relationships. Our conviction is that the church isn't a museum for saints, it's a hospital for sinners. So if you're willing to admit that you're flawed, and you're okay with us admitting that we're flawed too: I think we've got a really good foundation to build on. So let's get after it, together.

Let me pray for us all.

