

Church is Not Optional: Part 1

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- [0 : 00] I want to begin by praying of all the shootings we have endured in our nation now.
- Was it 19 or 20 children being, 19 children being killed and just week after week, right? And I just was informed just a few minutes ago that six young people were shot down in downtown in our city last night.
- They're still investigating what that was all about. Six. We don't know how many have died. We just know that they were shot.
- What's going on? What's going on? Let's pray. Father, in the name of Jesus, Lord, our hearts are broken for several weeks now.
- Shooting after shooting. Children. Children being targeted and killed, murdered. Because somebody's upset.
- [1 : 20] Angry. And even in our own city last night, six young people. Gunned down.
- We don't know the details. They really don't matter in one sense. We want to know because we want to see if we can prevent such things. But they're hurting.
- And many are dead now. And their families are hurting. Whether they were shot in a grocery store or targeted because they were black. Or whether they were targeted because they were Asian.
- Or whether they were targeted because they were Latino. Or whether they were targeted because they just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Lord, have mercy.
- Our nation is arguing about gun control and assault weapons and things of that nature. And Lord, I'm sure there's a place for all of that. And we don't even know.
- [2 : 21] We all have our own opinion about that. And we all think we know the right thing to do. But Lord, one thing is for sure. Lord, we need your help. We need your help in knowing how to deal with our anger and our problems.
- And young men knowing how to be young men and not to be real men. And not think that violence is the way of showing their manhood.
- Lord, then there's some, Lord, who are maybe even mentally ill who are getting weapons in this country. And that shouldn't be happening, I think, Lord. Oh, God.
- Issues are deep. They're not easy. But the easy thing is it needs to stop. We need your help as churches, as your people.
- Show us how we can support our law enforcement. But not just them. Protect them. Use them to get to the bottom of the criminals. But Lord, we need to reach them before they become criminals.
- [3 : 30] We need to reach them before they become violent men and women. And, oh, God, show us how more and more to be effective with talking to our neighbors about Jesus.
- To our young people in schools about Jesus somehow, Lord. Bless our youth leaders who are in the middle of some of this, I'm sure. Watch out for the young men associated with our church who may even be friends with some of these kids who were shot last night.

Lord, protect these young men whom we know and we care about and we are seeking to encourage in a better path your path. Please keep them from such. Keep them away from that crowd, Lord.

Have mercy, Lord. Please, please have mercy. Comfort those families who have lost loved ones. Please comfort. Send your people. Send your people. Send the message of the good news.

Even in the midst of darkness, let the light shine. Have mercy on this nation. We need the fire to fall in our churches. Let the fire fall, Father.

[4 : 40] Oh, let the fire fall. Bring revival to us. So once again, we can be used by you to affect our communities. And, Father, while we're waiting for that fire to fall, help us to pray, but help us to be useful.

Help us not to wait to say, oh, you moved me. Help us, Lord, to get involved in any way we can, to be salt and light in any way we can.

Bless your word now. May it go forth with your power and grant your unworthy servant grace to preach your word. For Jesus' sake and the good of your people, we ask.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Wow. Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 47, talks about what happens when that fire falls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

[5 : 47] 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 need. 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 were being saved. That is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

Thank you again, praise team, for that wonderful music you led us in worship. Thank you.

Thank you. Jesus is Lord. He is king. He is president. He is Lord in this kingdom.

[7 : 23] And then he puts such people together and they live in a community that is different from any other community they may be a part of. And for the last six years, this community has been attacked in so many different ways in this country and probably around the world.

We've been attacked. Our community has been attacked, pulled apart all around our country. Because of issues happening in our culture.

The community of the faith has been stretched, pulled apart. We must fight for the fellowship that Jesus died to give us.

We must fight for it. And to do that, we need, oh, we need a fresh outpouring of God's spirit.

We need the fire to fall, as we sang this morning. We need the fire to fall upon us to once again remind us to prioritize the fellowship of the saints.

[8 : 45] Are you ready to fight? Do you think the fellowship is even worth fighting for?

Remember, we are looking at what the spirit produces in those who are in Christ's kingdom. He produces a particular kind of devotion.

Verse 42. Sir Chris Ferguson, in his book, Devoted to the Church, defines this word devoted as meaning glued, to be glued, or even addicted.

And speaking of verse 42, he writes, This is, if only we could see it, a triple addiction. Apostles teaching. Fellow Christians.

And the worship of God. That delivers us from all other addictions. A triple addiction that delivers us from all other addictions.

[9 : 51] It is, therefore, a blessed addiction indeed. So what does it mean, therefore, to be addicted to the fellowship? Can I just ask you, is that even a word you would use?

Addicted to the fellowship. When God saved me many years ago now, I'll never forget. That is, I think that described me. Man, and all of us, three of us got saved together.

My two best friends, we all basically got saved together. And we could not get enough of the fellowship of the saints. We had to be with God's people.

Maybe you felt that way at one point. But maybe you don't feel so much like that anymore. Let's talk about that a little bit.

First of all, I want you to notice something. Fellowship goes much deeper than socializing. To be clear, the word fellowship means common sharing.

[10 : 58] Sharing in something or sharing with. It involves participation. You're not sitting on the sidelines.

You're involved. It involves unity. In biblical fellowship, we share the common life of Jesus in his kingdom. Let me give you a picture.

Picture two circles. Picture a small circle inside of a big circle. If you would. That's easy to do, right? The big circle we're going to call socializing.

Socializing is the sharing of human and earthly life. How's the weather, buddy? Work going good? Freeman? Did y'all catch the game?

How about those cowboys? Oh, only two of you got that one, though. Okay, I got you. It's okay. Man, we've been having good weather. Did you know that this weekend for the holiday, the weather's going to be great?

[12 : 05] How you doing? Fine. Pretty good. How about you? All right. I heard your daughter got a scholarship. Congratulations. Wow. Woo. You're going to see Top Gun, too?

I feel the need. The need for speed, baby. I'm going. I'm going. If I have to wear a mask, I'll be there. What do you think about President Biden's speech?

Yeah, let's talk about that. What are we going to do about the gun violence in our country? And even in our city?

There's nothing wrong with any of these kinds of conversations as we socialize. The problem is when we call that Christian fellowship.

How can that be Christian fellowship when the world that knows not Christ engages in such all the time?

[13 : 05] Shouldn't Christian fellowship be more? If I could listen in on the conversations that take place in this sanctuary right after worship, how much it would only be what I just listed?

What takes place when you go into Rudy's room? What about the greeting time just now? Was it socializing?

Or was it fellowship? Remember, therefore, the big circle is socializing and it's good. But it is meant to lead to the smaller, more intimate circle of true Christian fellowship.

Here's the problem. We go home from church or the church picnics or other church events having engaged in the big circle alone.

And call it the smaller circle. Theologian J.I. Packer in his book, God's Words, has some sobering words for us.

- [14 : 15] He says, the fact that we share social activities with other Christians does not of itself imply that we have fellowship with them. It is an abuse of Christian language.
- And it is a dangerous abuse. It makes for self-deception. It fools us into thinking that we are thriving on fellowship when all the time our souls may be starving for lack of it.
- How many times have I met Christians in every church I've ever pastored or been on staff in, and I've met Christians say, I don't feel connected here.
- I don't feel like I'm apart. And every single time, I guarantee you, it's because they are not experiencing true Christian fellowship.
- I'm not blaming them per se. I'm just saying they're not experiencing it. This is what fellowship is not, right?
- [15 : 25] It's not just socializing. However, true Christian fellowship is the sharing of the life of Christ in word and deed between believers.
- It's the sharing of the kingdom spiritual life. Look at the scene again. We just read it. We're going to read it every Sunday. We're preaching on this passage.
- Look at that. Do you feel what's going on? Can you feel that passage? 42 to 47. Can you feel what's happening there in that fellowship? I mean, the apostles' teaching about who Jesus is, the apostles' doctrine, right?
- They devoted to him. About who Jesus is and what he has done guides and animates this group of believers. They're full of Jesus. So much so that his presence, his love, and his power are being revealed in that fellowship.
- He's on their mind. He's on their lips as they experience wonderful community.
- [16 : 43] An associate of mine, Thabiti Anabwile, pastors in D.C. now, his book, The Life of God and the Soul of the Church, writes, Spiritual fellowship is the life of God and the soul of man.
- And, experienced personally by believing the truth, shared relationally in the church, and go back to our passage, leading to joy and holiness.
- Ah, Thabiti, I've got to shake your head next time I see you. This life of God, the presence of Christ in our souls, because the gospel has been heard and believed by us.
- He takes up residence in this presence of Jesus in all those he has called to follow him, creates this community, this reality, this fellowship.
- You see, we're not meant to walk alone, nor to be in superficial relationships with other believers.
- [17 : 52] Just socializing. No one knows you, and you like it like that. And you don't know anybody else. And sometimes we like that too.
- But this sharing, to be truly Christian, has to be intimate. These people really got to know each other.
- They went from house to house. That's one way you get to know people. You get it now, you go to the home. You're in your home, and you're in my home. And we're not coming. Listen, I tell people all the time, people will invite me over, and they say, well, okay, we got to get the house together.
- I say, I'm not coming to see your house. If I want to see your house, I'll pull up outside and go, oh, there's your house. What's inside the house is you.
- I'm coming to see you. I've been in houses and apartments that would make you shudder, okay, over the years. I came to see them.
- [18 : 58] Who will you come to see? When people invite you over to their home, saints of God, are you there to see them, or are you checking out their stuff?

Not that you want to, I'm not saying you're a thief. I'm not saying that, so please don't go there. I'm just saying, you're just checking out their stuff. And they sit right there in front of you. That's not Christian fellowship.

We come to see each other. Shoot, I'll meet you on the moon if you can get me there. I'll meet you in the park. I've met people in different places.

You have too, because when you love each other, when the fellowship is real, you don't care where you meet. You're coming to see each other. They got to know each other as they lived the Christian life together.

If I asked you, do you know Samuel L. Jackson? I heard he's from Chattanooga. Is that right? Did I hear that right? You would likely say yes. He's a great actor.

[20 : 07] But in saying yes, you would not mean that you know him personally or intimately. Anybody know him? He is from Chattanooga, so you know.

Just checking. You don't know him intimately. You don't get invited to his birthday parties. You've never been to his home for dinner. You don't know his favorite color.

You don't know him. Devotion to the fellowship involves allowing fellow believers to know you and pursuing relationships with them. In this way, you are known even as you know.

And this, my family, is the gift of the gospel of Jesus. By faith in Jesus, we are given a new family. So let me express an, not the only, but an important key, therefore, in Christian fellowship, because this is something that trips us up.

It can be hard to let people into our lives. Thank you for saying that. Thank you. Because it's true, isn't it?

[21 : 19] I know, I've, I experienced it. You ever been betrayed by someone? You ever had, you ever let people in and they, they, they, they, they, they, they let, they leak, they leak the intel. But let me help you.

I hope this will be helpful. Think of the most godly Christian person you know. Just get that person in your mind. The most godly Christian person you know.

Someone maybe you've had a, someone maybe you, they're so godly, you have a hard time believing they sinned. You can't imagine them ever being unsaved, you know.

Think of somebody like that. Intimate Christian fellowship hinges on the fact, listen, that each of us is deeply flawed and scarred in our hearts.

Each of us is deeply flawed and scarred in our hearts. Therefore, we are all very sinful and need a savior every day.

[22 : 35] No matter how good we look on the outside, there is emotional and intellectual grime inside of each one of us.

Including the most godly person you know. If you could read their mind, you would know exactly what I'm talking about.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And that is true even after you got saved.

You still sin and fall short of the glory of God in and of yourself. And our only hope is in the sovereign, saving, unearned, undeserved favor, that's grace, of Jesus the Christ.

Each of us is just that bad and just that loved. How can we keep from singing his praise?

[23 : 53] When you've been loved by Jesus in spite of you, and he keeps loving you every day in spite of you, you can't help but sing his praise.

So there's no reason to feel less than any other believer. There's no reason to believe that no one understands your sin or that your sin is worse than everyone else's.

Your difference is, of course. But it all comes down to one thing. The wages of sin is death. Whether you are a big sinner or a little sinner.

We're all in the same sinking boat without Jesus. Notice Peter's message.

Context. Again, context. Notice what he says to these people before they got saved. Verse 38. He says, repent and be baptized. Every one of you. Every one of you.

[25 : 04] Every one of you. In the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Verse 40. With many other words, he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, listen, save yourselves from this crooked generation.

That's who he preached to. That's who now becomes devoted to the fellowship. It's people like you and me who were in a crooked generation and we're crooked in ourselves.

And Jesus is going to spend the rest of your life and my life making us less crooked. Praise God. You don't have to hide.

Even though you believe your confidence has been broken somewhere else, maybe, maybe even here. You need to hold on to the fact, first of all, that God does not hold your sin against you any longer if you are in Jesus.

If Jesus is your Savior, no matter what you have done, I don't care what people say, no matter what you have done, God does not hold your sin against you. Past, present, and future.

[26 : 21] He will never kick you out of the family. He will always receive you as you come to him in faith and repentance. He will always throw his arms open.

Oh, prodigal, there will always be room in the house for you, not as a servant, but as a son and as a daughter, as someone who is welcomed by God.

Listen, you have to believe this. Because you can't fellowship with the saints unless you understand we are all there with you.

All of us. And when we forget where we've come, when we forget that we are redeemed sinners, when we forget that we are sinners saved by grace, when we forget that, that's when we are in the most trouble, most danger, because now we're self-righteous, looking down on folk, and we're no good to nobody.

Don't fear people. We are all just as messed up, whether we know it or not. That doesn't mean you gush out every sin or detail of your life.

[27 : 35] And when you meet someone, hey, brother, let me tell you. No, no, no, no. Whoa, kibosabi, whoa. Wisdom.

Calm, easy. But it does mean you find intimate relationships within the fellowship. And you seek them out.

And don't let fear keep you from this great gift of God. It is a gift to you. The fellowship is a gift. Now, therefore, notice in this passage that fellowship is specific.

We're not a devoted. We are devoted or addicted to the fellowship. The articles are very important throughout this verse.

I'm not trying to be too technical, but that's true. Today, we often talk about having fellowship with other believers in a way that sometimes makes the church seem unnecessary.

[28 : 43] Some people who consider themselves Christians do say they don't need to attend church, especially since we have streaming worship services now. Family, we must fight the temptation to allow streaming worship service to become our norm.

It was never meant to be that way. Wrong answer. I know they didn't have the technology for that here in our passage.

I know that. But this is the foundation that we must stand upon. This is what it means to have close personal fellowship. It means face-to-face.

This passage says, It's totally wrong and unbiblical to think that somehow streaming takes the place of face-to-face intimate fellowship.

Luke didn't say they were devoted to fellowship. It's the fellowship. He's referring to a more particular and a more formal type of fellowship that we call church.

[30 : 01] The fellowship. We'll talk more about that a little bit later, but just keep that in mind. The church is not you by yourself or your family or merely you with a few folk just like you and your small group who love the same songs, who vote the same way, who are in the same station in life.

A lot of times the same ethnic group having Bible study and eating chicken. And when those groups really get ingrown, they usually spend time complaining about the church, how messed up the church is.

Dangerous place. This is how the world thinks of fellowship. Just hanging out. The fellowship is the church, and in the church, listen, saints, there are people not like you.

There are people who might on occasion disagree with you and maybe strongly, but not in an ungodly way, just strongly disagree with you. There are people who might make you feel uncomfortable in these pews.

I didn't say unsafe. I said uncomfortable. And by the way, a lot of words are being used. We talk about being unsafe, and we talk about triggering, and there's a lot of words, a lot of things we're saying, and what it comes down to is people don't agree with us, and now we feel unsafe.

[31 : 46] Now, there is unsafe, for real. Okay? You hear me? There is abuse, for real. There is trauma, for real. But it's not because people just don't agree with you.

And in our culture right now, we are seeing this happen more and more, even within churches. That's why I mentioned it, where people, if they don't agree with someone, they feel abused or traumatized or whatever because people don't agree with them.

I think that could be an abuse of language and keeps us from real fellowship, saints. The church is full of people who don't agree with you all the time.

There are people here who will never vote the way you do. There are people here who prefer different types of songs.

Some people only want to sing hymns, and they don't like these spiritual songs. And some people only want to sing spiritual songs, and they don't like hymns. There will be a difference of ethnicity and social economic class in your church prayerfully.

[32 : 59] And let's be honest, there will be people in fellowship who's not only sinned against the Lord, but may even sin against you personally.

There are people in the fellowship who are dealing with different sins than you are. And there are people in the fellowship who haven't found Jesus yet.

Point, the fellowship is messy. And it will be until Jesus comes. Yet you are called and equipped by the Spirit of Jesus who gave his life for the fellowship in order that you might be devoted to her in all of her glorious dysfunctions.

The fellowship is not a social club or a fraternity or a nonprofit charity. The fellowship, listen to the words of the Bible. The fellowship is the body of Christ, the family of God, the army of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and more.

And Jesus isn't done with her yet. She's his bride. And she messed up, but she's his bride. And he's working on her.

[34 : 26] And he's not going to give up on her. And we don't have the right to give up on her either. Last point before we close. Devotion, therefore, to the fellowship causes us to deal with conflict rightly because we have the Spirit of Christ.

Listen, let me tell you about this church we're talking about, the church in Jerusalem. Oh, man. Listen, there's no such thing as a conflict-free church.

Most, if not all, of the New Testament epistles, their letters, deal with conflict in the church. The church of Corinth being maybe the worst of the bunch.

Jesus, go back and read, I preached through this one time, go back and read it. Jesus' letters to the churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3 deal with conflict in the churches.

Here's the point, thanks. Stop looking for a conflict-free church and look for one seeking to biblically follow Christ and his kingdom and be devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

[35 : 45] Look for that as the mark of the church. If you're looking for a church that has this social gathering and fellowship all together, please don't join it because you will mess it up if it's that perfect.

Remember this church in Jerusalem. Let me just show you. They had a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. Maybe you've heard of them. Wonderful couple. And just in chapter 5, if you're going to turn there and look at it for yourself, this couple were trying to mimic another guy, a guy by the name of Barnabas who sold some property and gave the proceeds to the church.

They saw how people loved Barnabas. Woo, he was such a great guy. Woo, he's a real Christian man. They liked it so much. They said, let's go do the same thing. Amen. That's fun.

Mimicking good stuff. But they messed up because when they sold their property, they didn't give all the money to the church. They said, but they told them they did. They didn't have, listen, they didn't have to give anything.

They didn't have to give any money at all. If they didn't want to, it's okay. Okay. But they wanted, but they, but they pretended to be like Barnabas. And when, and when Peter questioned the husband, Ananias, and then his wife later, they both lied and they both dropped dead immediately.

[37 : 10] Boom, hit the floor. That's called church discipline, by the way. Really? But yeah. In chapter six, we have a culture clash in the fellowship.

Two groups of Jewish widows were at odds. The Hellenists, meaning they were partial to Greek culture, and the Hebrew widows, which means they were more partial to Hebrew culture.

It was a, it wasn't an ethnic class, it was a culture clash. The church was supposed to care for both groups of widows, but the Hellenists were being neglected in their daily food distribution.

How could this happen, you say? Because they're all widows, they're all poor. Why aren't, how could they miss them? Hmm. I surmise, those dispensing the food prioritize the Hebrew widows.

Maybe they were Hebrew themselves, and they didn't appreciate these Jewish people who liked Greek culture, because that was a Gentile culture. Well, whatever it was, there was a division.

[38 : 25] It was favorite, listen, favoritism in the church. Then notice what happens after these, both these issues, notice what happens after both these issues are known.

When Ananias and Sapphira were disciplined, the church split and found another church, right? Right? People left, went to find another church. No, Acts 5.11 says this, and great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

They reverence for God. Church discipline led them to realize we don't play with holiness before God.

We don't play the hypocrite before God. that's what it spoke to him. What happened with the widows? Acts chapter 6, verse 3. Therefore, brothers, pick out, the apostles speaking, now the pastors speaking, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty to care for the widows.

We have what we call the first deacons. The problem was promptly brought to church leaders not months or years later after gossip and factions had formed and the leaders got to work.

[39 : 45] Some problems in the fellowship are easy to fix when the leadership knows. Some take more time because they're deeply ingrained in the life of the body, but either way, the leaders should be made aware in giving the chance to get to work and the people help working together.

Leaders are responsible. The fellowship, the people are responsible. We pull together to handle our problems.

I'm reminded Ephesians 4, 1 to 3 and I'm going to end here. Paul said it so wonderfully. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.

He's talking about the fellowship. He's talking about the church. And around this country, especially for the last six years, in the last two, it ramped up even more.

We're not seeing this. Family, we need the Spirit of God to pour out upon us again in fresh fire so that we begin to love once again the fellowship and fight for it the way Jesus calls us to fight for it with humility, with gentleness, with transparency, recognizing that we're all sinners saved by grace and that there is no church without conflict and issues and it doesn't exist, has never, I want to tell you, has never existed and will not exist until he who is perfect comes and makes us all perfect in our fellowship and our reality.

[41 : 58] I long for that day. Don't you long for that day? But until that day comes, I trust Jesus and I love you. And you may hurt me.

On occasion, I may hurt you too. But the love is real. And we need to be, we need to humble ourselves before one another and admit, I'm the man.

I screw up. And we got to stop this not talking to each other and hiding behind doors. We've got to come, Matthew 18 is real. We've got to come to each other because the fellowship of Jesus is worthy of your discomfort and my discomfort.

The fellowship of Jesus is worthy of my humility. humility. Otherwise, why are we here?

Why are we here? We're just another charity, non-profit charity organization. And I don't know about you, but that ain't church.

[43 : 06] That's not the fellowship. Let's pray. Father, in Jesus' name, help us. help us. Oh, make sin the fire.

Send the fire and set us aflame with love for Christ and love each other. Help us to fight for the fellowship. Help us to be real with each other. Help us to forgive each other.

Help us to confess our sins to one another. Oh, Lord, keep us from fear. Keep us from fear. fear. The world lives in fear, but not the people of God.

Don't let us live in fear and anxiety, being around each other. Help us to love the way Jesus calls us.

Fill us with your love so that we can love right. In Christ's name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.