

Do I need to go to church to be a Christian?

Okay everyone let me grab your attention again and we're going to ask our big question of the week, which is, "Do I need to go to church to be a Christian?" And the first thing I want to say tonight, is that going to church, meeting up with God's people - which is what I mean by going to church. I don't mean a building. I mean going to meet with God's people - isn't what makes you a Christian. That's the first thing I want to say. Just because you happen to go to meet with God's people doesn't mean that you are a Christian.

Now, how can I explain this? Well, this is when you need to use your imagination yet again. I've used all sorts of sporting illustrations in the past, but now I need you to imagine that we're in America and it's a big baseball game. So you're all in the stands, and I'm up, okay? There we go. So I've got my bat. I'm not even sure if this is the right way to hold it or not. But I'm there and the whole match hinges on me, on these final 3 balls. So the first one gets bowled to me and I miss. Well, it's okay, I've got another two. Next one, well, I don't get it. I leave it.

There's one ball still to come. The whole match hinges on this. Are you in suspense? Are you tense? This is it! And it comes to me and there I go. I whack it. And it goes, it sails, and I start running. And I run really, really quickly. There, I'm running and running, and I slide in just before someone throws a ball to try and get me out, but I'm in and I celebrate. I'm cheering and all of you are so happy for me, because I've made the home run and it's joyful and everyone is up, out of their seat, and then the referee speaks up, over the tannoy and, he says, "No. You're out."

And we think, "What? How? He's got round. Surely he's got round all the way. It was a great hit. He's managed to run all the way round". The referee goes, "No, he's out". And you think, "Why?" And the referee goes, "Because he missed first base. He ran straight to second, third, fourth, but he missed first base".

Well, of course! Of course I'm out! Because the way you play baseball - after you've managed to hit the little thing - is that you've got to go first, second, third, home. You've got to do that. You can't just go to second, because if you go to second, you're out. Doesn't work.

Now that is an illustration just to help you understand, becoming a Christian. Second base is joining God's people. It is belonging to a local church. First base is committing personally to Jesus. Now there are some people who miss out first base. There are some people that like meeting with God's people. It might be that the country that they've been born in means that they just attend church, or it might be that they just like God's people and they attend and it's all very warm and friendly, but you see what's happened? They've missed first base. They just meet with God's people. And what we've got to understand first of all is that we must go to first base. We must personally surrender to Jesus. That what it means to become a Christian.

But then the question is, "Given that I have got here, what next? Do I need to go to church to be a Christian?" Well, the first thing that I would want you to get in your head, it is not so much that you need to go to church to be a Christian, it is that you get to go to church. It's not a really bad thing.

It's not like you get this great contract and then you look down at the small print, and there's something in the small print, and you go, "Ah, I knew it was too good to be true. There it is. I told you! It's there in the small print!" It's not like that. It's not that you understand more about Jesus, and you think, "Wow, this is amazing! Free forgiveness, intimate fellowship with the God who created me, eternal life -wow!" And then you think, "Ah! Small print. Look at that! I've got to go to church" No. It's not like that. It is to be seen as a privilege and a joy to meet with God's people, which is what the church is.

Now, why is that? Well, to help us understand the present meeting with God's people, let me just remind you of what God's future plans are. What God the Father is doing, is he is gathering a global family who all love the Lord Jesus Christ, from all the countries around the world, from all

the cultures, from all the colours of skin, and they're all following Jesus Christ. And he is preparing a day when they will all gather together in a wonderful new world. Now we've seen some of that before. There's a future day when Jesus will return and it will be glorious. We'll have physical resurrection bodies and it will be glorious. We'll have physical resurrection bodies. We'll live forever. We'll be in the company of our great creator, but also in the company of this global family, a great multitude that we can't count.

But what about now? How are we to wait for that future great gathering when we praise Jesus for what he has done? Well, God gives us the privilege of meeting now with some of that family in local places around the world. That is what a church is: it is a small group of people who are gathering together. And that is a joy and privilege. Because, what is it? It is a small taste of the future, right now. And that is supposed to be for our joy and delight.

So as we gather together with other people who've been rescued by Jesus, as we sing the praises of God the Father, as we thank him for what Jesus has done, as we pray to him, as we hear from his word – all that is supposed to be a delight and a joy! It is a small taste of the future.

Now, not simply is it that we get to go to church, but tonight we've also got to hear the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because what has He said to us tonight? He has said, "Love each other". Now, it is a command from Jesus. It is not simply, Jesus says, "Now, here is my suggestion." It's not, "Here is my opinion." It is, "Here is my command. Love each other". We've already seen that becoming a Christian is yes always personal but never to be individualistic. We have corporate responsibilities to each other. We are to love each other. And one of the ways that we love each other is by gathering together to meet each other.

Now think about this; even the meeting itself is supposed to be an encouragement, because what is love all about? Well, love, you look to the interests of the other person. You want them to be looked after. And what is our greatest need? Well, our greatest need is spiritual, our spiritual health! That we keep on growing to be more like Jesus, that we keep on going in the Christian life, that we make it day by day, that we keep on trusting in Jesus. And one of the ways that God has given his people to make sure that happens is as they gather together on a regular basis. It is one of the ways that we love each other. And just think about that! When you gather together, what a spur that is, what an encouragement that is to keep on going in the Christian life.

And then think about what can happen when we do meet with each other. We can teach each other, we can pray for each other, we can hug each other, we can do all those things to keep us going. We can practically look out for each other and keep us going. It is one of the ways God has given us to love each other. So becoming a Christian, going to church is not simply for my benefit, it is also for the benefit for other people. It is one of those ways that we serve each other.

Now what about the person that says, "Well, I just don't have time for this. You know, life is busy! Maybe once every 5 weeks, once every 6, I don't know, but I can't - this regular commitment to God's people, I just don't have time for that". What do you say to such a person? I would love to say to such a person, "Can I tell you - you don't have time for everything. Everybody's got a limited number of hours in the day. We cannot do everything that we want to do. But what happens is that when time is short, you discover what really matters to you. And becoming a Christian changes our priorities and one of the biggest priorities we should have is looking out, caring for our brothers and sisters.

So Jesus is saying, "Make sure you go to first base. Make sure you become a Christian, don't go to second base." But as you come to Jesus, see that it is, yes, personal, but never individualistic. And see it as a privilege that we've got responsibilities to love each other until we gather around the great throne in heaven.

Well, why don't you have a talk about that around your tables, I think some big things to discuss, so why don't you have a chat for a few minutes.

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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