



## Love the Church Even When It's Hard—Fighting Disillusionment

David Sunday

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It takes work to love the church, but we need to think about what it cost Jesus to love His bride.

From heaven He came and sought her  
To be His holy bride;  
With His own blood He bought her,  
And for her life He died.

[The Church's One Foundation by Samuel Stone & Samuel Wesley]

John says this in 1 John 3:16: *“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.”* Pastor Chad Ashby says, “If we expect our churches to feel like family without any effort, we have misunderstood the gospel... It took a fight to bring the family of God together and it may take a struggle to keep it intact. After all, the church is a society of saved sinners.”

I want us to consider the cost this morning. It won't always be easy to love the church, but it's always worth it. The gospel compels us to love the church even when it's hard. That's the main claim of the message this morning. We see this message in Hebrews 10:19-25. Worship God with me as we hear His holy Word:

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Amen. The book of Hebrews is a sermon. We have here an apostolic preacher exhorting God's people. These were Jewish believers who had come to place their faith in Messiah Jesus, and

now they are tempted to turn away and go back to their old ways. They're seeing the cost of being disciples of Jesus. This Preacher is pleading with them to hold fast to Christ and not withdraw from the church.

This is a summary section. He's summing up what he has said in the last several chapters, making a transition to what he's about to say. Here is a diagram that shows the structure of this section of Hebrews:

Since we have... (indicative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus (verse 19)</li> <li>• a great priest over the house of God (verse 21)</li> </ul>
Let us... (imperative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (verse 22)</li> <li>• hold fast the confession of our hope (verse 23)</li> <li>• consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (verse 24)</li> </ul>

There are two indicative statements. An indicative is a description of what God has done for us in Christ. Then there are three imperative commands. An imperative calls us to live in response to God's transforming grace in Jesus.

As you read through your New Testament, you're going to discover that what God calls us to do (imperatives) always flows out of what God has done for us (indicatives). Our obedience that God calls us to is always empowered by the grace of God that He has already shown us. So we see the indicatives in verses 19 through 21. They begin with the words: "Since we have..." Then the imperatives are in verses 22-25, each of which begins with the words: "Let us..."

What has God done for us in Christ? The first indicative in verses 19 and 20 is that through His sacrificial suffering on the cross, He opened up access for us into the Most Holy Place. His blood washes away our sin. We're not defiled anymore, so there's nothing that can exclude us from drawing near to God. His death opens up a new and living route into God's presence. We can come to God now. The first indicative is that because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross, we can draw near to Him.

The second indicative is in verse 21. Because Jesus lives forever as our great High Priest, representing us in the presence of God, we can be assured that we are always welcome in God's presence. As long as Jesus is alive, we will always be able to come near to God. We sing, "Now for me He stands before the Father's throne; He shows His wounded hands and names me as His own."

These are the two indicatives: He suffered on the cross to open up access and He lives forever as our great High Priest. We can know we're always welcome.

Then we're called to respond to these wonderful truths in three ways:

- The first imperative is in verse 22: draw near to God. We are in constant need of grace and mercy, so Christ has made the way open to us.
- The second imperative is in verse 23: hold on to your confession of hope without wavering, because God is faithful to keep His promises.
- The third imperative, and the one we're going to focus on this morning, is this: consider one another.

Think carefully about one another. Don't just go on auto pilot when you come to church. Always be thinking about the body, always considering it, so that you will know how to encourage one another in particular ways to love and good deeds (10:23). In order to do that, you've got to be careful not to do something else: don't give up meeting together (10:25). It's a bad habit that some people fall into. Don't let that happen.

Those are the three imperatives—draw near, which is calling us to faith; hold fast, which is calling us to hope; and consider one another, which is calling us to love. We have this triad in 1 Corinthians 13:13: "Faith, hope and love. These three remain." We should respond to God's free grace that He's lavished on us in Christ with faith that continually draws near, hope that does not waver and love that is active, engaged, intent to encourage one another until Christ returns.

The author goes on to warn us in verse 25 that there's going to be a temptation that all of us are going to face—to neglect gathering with the church. It creeps in subtly and the more you do it, the easier it is to stay away. Your heart gets cold, you drift, then you stop thinking about your brothers and sisters. You stop considering how you can be an encouragement to them and you stop provoking people to love and good deeds. That will result in an absence of encouragement in the church and an absence of joy in your own hearts.

I love how Martin Luther expressed it: "At home in my house, there's no warmth or vigor in me. But in church, when the multitude is gathered together, the fire is kindled in my heart—and it breaks its way through." I've had that experience. God breaks through with fresh fire and passion when we gather together as His people. But if we neglect the gathering, there will be no stirring, no encouragement and no fire breaking through.

When that happens, it's tragic. It's tragic, because it will make you more and more vulnerable to drifting away from Christ. It's tragic because it reveals a lack of love for His people. And it's tragic because it reveals you're losing an appreciation for the work Jesus has done on the

cross. You're forgetting the indicatives at the beginning—what He has done so that we together can draw near.

We're going to focus on this exhortation in verses 24 and 25: *“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* We're going to look at two applications this morning, two ways to apply this passage. We need to make gathering with the church on the Lord's Day a non-negotiable, top priority commitment. But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy.

So let's look at two big areas of application. The rest of this message is going to be application.

### **1. There are inadequate, sometimes selfish reasons, over which we should never withdraw from a church.**

There are lots of inadequate and sometimes selfish reasons, but we should never let them cause us to withdraw from a church. Now, I get it. Church can be frustrating. Sometimes we're going to be deeply disappointed with things like church splits, church cliques, competition with other churches, churches caring more about their image than sharing Christ's mercy and justice. Other problems might be about poor financial decisions, too much debt, overlooking widow or orphans or single Christians, favoritism toward those who are wealthy or influential, or those who are married with kids. The list can go on and on.

These faults are frustrating and sometimes painful. But someone wisely said, “Church is messy, flawed, disappointing and at times, deeply hurtful, largely because people are messy, flawed, disappointing and at times, deeply hurtful.” Part of maturity involves realizing, “I contribute to the messy sausage making. I am part of the problem.” Can you say that out loud? “I am part of the problem.” Amen?

So the first thing we have to check when we're feeling disappointed or disillusioned with the church is our own hearts. When we are withdrawing from the church, either physically withdrawing or withdrawing through our affections, it is very often a sign of drifting in our own hearts. It's not always that, but often it is. One universal characteristic of drifting is that you don't realize you're drifting until you're a long way from where you thought you were heading. The book of Hebrews has a lot to say about drifting away from Christ and His gospel. One of the most important insights about drifting is that we cannot recognize it in ourselves without the help of other people. So let's look at a couple passages.

The first is a warning against drifting, beginning in Hebrews 2:1: *“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable...”* that’s the message of the old covenant through Moses, *“...and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape...”* we who are in the new covenant, *“...if we neglect such a great salvation?”* We’ve got to pay careful attention, he says, to what we’ve heard.

You know what it’s like to be rowing upstream in a boat and you see a piece of bark or a leaf just kind of drift by. It doesn’t take any effort to drift. All you need to do is do nothing. The minute we go into neutral in the Christian life, we start drifting. We should never think, “I’m just going to stay here for a while.” We’re either pressing forward or we’re drifting backwards—and that’s dangerous. The remedy for drifting is to pay much closer attention to what we’ve heard. How do we do that?

The book of Hebrews consistently says we don’t do that all alone. We do that by gathering together with other believers who will be actively considering how to provoke us to love and good deeds, who will be encouraging us with the Word so that we will not drift, but instead press on as the Day of Christ draws near. You’re going to drift without the body. That’s true for every single one of us. The perseverance of the saints—the pressing forward to glory—is a community project. Look at Hebrews 3:12-13 (NIV): *“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.”*

Drifting away from the church is often an indication that we’re drifting from the gospel, but we don’t always see it that way, do we? Sometimes we just feel bored with our church. We feel like, “I’ve heard it all, seen it all.” You look around and it seems like no one’s changing, everything’s stagnant. You start to get restless. There’s discontentment and dissatisfaction with the music, the preaching, the programs, what the church is not able to offer. There’s disappointment when your own expectations are not being met. There’s disillusionment over people you put on a pedestal, then they’ve proven to be merely human—like you.

There’s burn out, because maybe you were trying to do too much and now you’ve lost energy to do anything at all. There can be relational conflict where people are like sandpaper rubbing against you, but you don’t want to have your rough edges rubbed off, do you? You don’t like sandpaper up against you. You start looking around and thinking, “Surely there’s another church nearby that’s doing better than this.” And maybe there is. Probably there is. But if you

went there, you'd discover there are people there who are feeling the same things, so some of them are coming here. That's how it happens.

So let me speak from my own experience. Twenty-eight years ago, in November, Kate and I arrived at a church on Gary Avenue called Keeneyville Bible Church. We were still engaged as a couple. When we got there, as I recall, there were very few people our age. It was a church that came from a different theological background than I had been raised in, but it was one that I very much wanted to be a part of, plus we loved the pastor and his wife. We were being nourished through the preaching and finding ministry opportunities we could get involved with. More than that, there were people who were willing to invest in us and help us grow.

But we didn't have a lot of friends our age for a while. We had to learn to be friends with people who were older than us—some of them much older than us—and people who were younger than us. We didn't always feel like we fit in. Sometimes we felt lonely in those early years, but we learned to understand other people and grow in the process. That church eventually changed its name to Grace Community Bible Church, then eventually they planted another congregation in Elgin. Eventually that church merged with Fox Valley Bible Church to form New Covenant Bible Church where we are today.

Kate and I have only been members of two churches our whole married life: Grace and New Covenant. We love our church dearly, but I need you to understand that this church is not my dream church. I love our church, but it's not the church of my dreams. The church of my dreams would have a little bit more of this, a little bit less of that. It would be perfect in every way, you understand, if I could just manufacture the church of my dreams. But most of you wouldn't like the church of my dreams, because the church of my dreams wouldn't look like the church of your dreams.

So what do we do? I'm not trying to create the church of my dreams, because Jesus didn't die to create the church of my dreams. Whenever we come into the church and say, "This church exists to meet my dreams, my vision," then we start destroying the community. Listen to this wisdom from Jon Bloom; I think he's echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life Together in this quote:

Jesus did not design the church to be a place where our dreams come true. Actually, it's where many of our dreams are disappointed and die. And this is more of a grace to us than we likely realize, because our dreams are often much more selfish than we discern... Our personal preferences easily become tyrants to everyone else, because everyone else fails to meet them.



What if you read the passage that's going to be preached on at church ahead of time and said, "Lord, would you please work this into me?" and then got ready after church to maybe have a conversation with someone about the Word?

Maybe you could say something like this: "I was so encouraged by this that I heard," or, "I never knew that," or, "I was convicted by verse whatever," or "I still don't understand this." You might say to them, "I am determined to apply this truth in my life—would you pray for me about this, and then how may I pray for you?" What if we actually were intentional about those kinds of conversations? Yesterday we had a disciple-making seminar with our Australian friends, and they brought us this wonderful card: "How to love your church on Sunday." It had many of these suggestions on it.

What if you stuck it out in the church through those dry times, and instead of chasing the church of your dreams, what if you determined to love the one you're with and to flourish there? So many of the reasons we're tempted to withdraw from the church are inadequate. Some of them are selfish and we need to fight against that in our hearts.

But is there ever a time to leave a church? That's the second thread of application this morning.

## **2. There are legitimate reasons to withdraw from a local church, but we must never withdraw from the church of Jesus Christ.**

When is the best time to leave a church? The best time to leave a church is before you join. I read someone who put it like this: "If you're fastening your seatbelt on an airplane and getting ready, then the captain comes on and says, 'Soon we will be taxiing to the runway for our flight to Minneapolis,' but you thought you were heading to Miami, that's the time to get off the plane."

We need to do the same thing when we're looking at a church. We need to ask, "What are the vision and values of this church? What is their doctrinal commitment? What are the people like? What's the leadership like." Examine all of that before you join, because it's really not helpful to join a church with a personal agenda to change that church or what that church believes. Just like it's helpful not to marry a person thinking, "Oh, after a year or two with me, she's going to be the bride of my dreams. I'm going to change her into the type of person I want her to be."

Then after you've joined a church, there are some good reasons you might need to leave and moving to another state is one of them. I actually would encourage you when you do move, don't keep your membership here. Join another church there. As you prepare to move, be looking and asking God to show you where there is a good community that you can be a part of to grow yourself

and to help build up that church. That should be a key factor that you're thinking and praying about as you move.

We just had a family move here from Singapore. They had been preparing for months ahead of time, looking online at churches in the Fox Valley to decide which church they would be a part of when they arrived. They were able to dive very quickly into New Covenant because they had prayed and done that research.

Mission could also be a good reason to leave. Maybe even within your own neighborhood, you're discovering that God is doing a new work. If there's a church close by and you're driving 40 minutes to get here, but you could walk ten minutes to get there, that might be a good reason to say, "I'm going to join here, so I can serve the mission of God right here in my own neighborhood with my own community."

Church planting might be another reason to leave. There are lots of rural communities in the United States that need new church plants. There are lots of people groups in our country that are unreached by a gospel-proclaiming church, so we need a lot of new church plants for them. We want to be part of that as a church. That could be a good reason to move.

Remember this statement in our church covenant:

We will, when we move from this place, unite as soon as possible with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

If God is calling you somewhere else, be prayerful, seek wisdom, communicate with your leaders who watch over your souls, be charitable about it, be decisive—not divisive about it.

The last thing I want to address is when the church has hurt you. This can be a painful subject. When I started this series at the beginning of September, one of our elderly members—who's been a part of this church from the beginning and who's been a part of the church probably for 70 years—said to me, "Everything you're saying about the church, all the beautiful things you're saying, I have experienced. I've experienced so much good from the church. It pains me to know there are people who have been hurt by the church."

I would imagine if I took a show of hands, asking how many of you have experienced more good from the church than pain, most of your hands would go up. We've experienced lots of good from the church. But there's also pain and hardship. I hope you've heard the name Rachael Denhollander. She's the courageous woman who testified against Larry Nassar, the former Michigan State University and USA gymnastics doctor who committed horrendous acts of sexual

assault against more than 300 women and girls. She gave a powerful, articulate witness to the character of God in that trial—to God's justice, mercy and truth.

She asked her abuser a simple, searching question: "How much is a little girl worth?" She's become an outspoken advocate for sexual abuse victims within the church. I want you to hear something she said last year to over a thousand pastors. This was the night before the Southern Baptist Convention had their annual gathering. The Louisville paper reports what she said like this:

"By and large, the survivor community loves the church. They love Jesus. They love the gospel. I have found my greatest refuge and hope with the gospel. And our desire is to see the church do this better, so that it becomes the refuge it was intended to be. You need to understand the perspective that survivors come from. You need to feel the grief and the betrayal and the harm and the hurt they have felt. I think it is very telling that I've heard hundreds, literally hundreds, of sermons directed on the quiet and submissive sphere that a woman should have. I have heard not one on how to value a woman's voice. I have heard not one on the issue of sexual assault. Do it better, brothers."

Before she finished speaking, the applause had already started, and a line—mostly of women—formed to meet her and hug her and thank her, to tell her their stories and that they too had been abused within the church.

We used to think this is just a problem within the Roman Catholic church. But recent years have shown, oh no, it's a problem in our kind of churches—a big problem.

Then there's spiritual abuse. This week, CCEF (Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation) had an article about spiritual abuse in Christian homes and churches. It told the story of Beth, whose husband used Scripture as a weapon to control his wife:

When her counselor asked her how her husband, Joel, prays for her, she shared the most recent example. "Last week, he prayed Matthew 6:24 over me: *'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.'* He asked God to help me not be so selfish and greedy, and that Jesus would save me from serving the wrong master. He pled with God to watch over me, because I cannot be trusted."

Through her tears, she continued, "He prayed that my inability to control myself means that I do not serve God, so God would be right to cast me out of His Kingdom. He pled with God to grant him the ability to tolerate what God barely can." After more conversation, the

counselor says, “I learned this was how Beth’s husband, an elder at this church, responded to her when she overspent on groceries for a family of nine by six dollars.”

What view of God’s heart do you think that gives Beth? This just two examples of many painful types of experiences people have in the church, when the very truths God designs to set us free are manipulated, twisted and abused to dehumanize people and to keep them in bondage.

It’s not just women who suffer. This include you who have been manipulated spiritually; you who have been made to feel shame because you’ve confessed a sin or a temptation. Instead of praying for you, people have gossiped about you. If you’ve been physically abused in any way, I am sorry for the way the church has harmed you. I want you to know that one of my greatest burdens as a leader in the church is knowing that by virtue of my position, I can do harm without even realizing it.

Just an insensitive remark from the pulpit can hurt someone in a way I have no idea. Trying to counsel someone beyond the scope of my ability. Giving advice when all that was needed was empathy and love. Not being aware of someone’s need or not responding in a timely and helpful fashion. Or some type of ill-informed decision that ends up affecting people in a negative way. There are all kinds of ways we can go wrong and cause harm without intending it.

We have policies in place in our church, including child protection policies, to try to prevent these horrible things from happening. Every member of our staff and volunteer team has to submit to a voluntary background check. We want to be accountable. But as much as we try, I know we can’t prevent sin from doing damage in Christ’s church. If you’re someone who feels damaged by Christ’s church, here’s what I hope the Holy Spirit will enable you to believe.

The body of Christ is not your enemy.  
Your enemy is sin and Satan.  
People fail.  
Satan ravages.  
But Jesus never fails.  
Jesus rescues.

Jesus defends, advocates and stands by His people when we are being persecuted and harmed. Just remember what He said to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), when Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the church. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Because, friends, whoever touches you, touches Him. Whoever touches you, touches the apple of His eye. Jesus will defend and Jesus will judge those who do harm to His people if they do not repent.

If you've been hurt, there are people here who want to pray with you. There are pastors who this week would be glad to meet with you and pray with you. Counselors Karen and Frank would be delighted to sit down with you, listen to your story and try to help you. If they can't, they will point you to someone who can.

Friends, don't let the sin that still tarnishes God's church  
keep you from the abundant grace that beautifies Christ's church.

There is more grace here through Jesus' presence. He has grace and goodness that He wants to pour out in your life through His church.

So don't give up meeting together. Look beyond the broken body of Christ to the One Who is her Head. Realize that if He's committed to making His bride radiant, then you're going to want to be a part of that grand unveiling when she is revealed to be without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless before Him. Love the church when it's hard, because Jesus does.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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