

Engaging in Christian Community

1 Thessalonians 3:1-10

We are taking a couple weeks to talk about regrouping and refocusing as a church because what we do is so important. Last week we talked about how important it is to work together to spread the gospel in our community so that Christ is glorified, people are saved from judgment, and so that we experience a reward of great joy at Christ's return. We can spread the gospel on our own, but we do it a lot better when we have the support of Christian community.

Today I want to talk about how important it is for us to come together as a church for regular worship, fellowship, prayer, and Bible study. These are the things we do at our regular weekly gatherings like worship services, small groups, Recharge, and Discovery Land. These regular gatherings are vitally important, and as we regroup and refocus as a church, we need to make them a high priority in our lives.

I think most of us look at these things as something we enjoy, an opportunity to worship and connect with friends, to be challenged by the preaching and teaching. It's something we feel we should do and want to do. But it's also something that takes up precious time on the schedule and we've got a lot of other things going on as well. Between work schedules, family activities, athletic events, projects that need attention, and some time to just relax, life gets really full, really fast.

COVID gave us kind of a schedule reset when we were forced to stay at home and a lot of the normal stuff got cancelled. We got out of our busy routines and habits and schedules were open for the first time in years for some people. But as restrictions have eased and activities have resumed, our schedules are filling up fast once again. Routines are being re-established. We are figuring out once again how we're going to spend the time we've been given. And the questions we have to answer are: What are we going to fill our schedules with? Will there be time for regularly attending church, small group, Recharge, and Discovery Land? Why should these be a priority in our lives?

So this morning I want to look at some big reasons they are so important. We are going to go back to the book of 1 Thessalonians. In the first two chapters we saw

why it was so important to work together to spread the gospel, now this week we are going to look at chapter 3 where Paul gives 3 reasons for why it's so important for Christians to make regular gatherings with other Christians a priority.

Paul and his team were originally in Thessalonica for just a few months, teaching the gospel and establishing a brand new church when they got torn away because of dangerous persecution. They had to flee or they may have lost their lives. So they were separated from that new group of believers prematurely and at the end of chapter 2 Paul talked about how hard that was for them and how badly they wanted to get back to them. Now in chapter 3 he writes about why he wanted to get back. He gives three reasons that go right along with the reasons you and I need to regularly come together for worship, fellowship, Bible Study and prayer.

The first reason is in the first 4 verses.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4.

Therefore when we could bear it no longer [being separated from you], we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

The first reason it is critically important for us to keep coming together regularly is that we are going to face afflictions in this life, and afflictions have a way of tearing us away from the faith. Paul was very worried that would happen to the new Thessalonian believers. In their case, they were facing direct persecution. They were suffering for their decision to follow Christ and there was a lot of pressure to just go back to their old religion and way of life.

We may face some persecution too, but chances are our common afflictions are different right now. Disease is a big one. Chronic pain or terminal illness. "Why doesn't God step in and heal me?" "Why do unbelievers have good health while I suffer with diabetes, or cancer, or some other disease?" Unmet expectations are another. We end up in a job we hate or a marriage that falls apart. Our hopes and dreams are crushed and we face a lot of disappointment. Accidents are another.

Car crashes that bring long-term injuries or the death of a loved one. Something happens to your house or your job and you face an ongoing financial crisis.

Hardships and affliction make their way into our lives and can take our faith on a roller coaster ride. It feels like if God is good and wants to bless us, and if we're faithful and obedient to him he should protect us or rescue us from such things. So when we go through them and they don't go away they are a major test of our faith. What's going to happen to you if you go through them alone? What's going to happen if you don't have the support of Christian friends, or regular times of prayer, worship, and Bible study in Christian community? You face a much greater likelihood of falling away from the faith in bitterness and resentment and turning to alcohol, Netflix, or some other distraction that will only make things worse.

Every one of us needs the solid ground of regular involvement in the church family in order to stand firm through the waves of affliction that this life is sure to bring. What kind of foundation do you have in your life? I would suggest that all of us need at least weekly engagement in Christian community and more would be better. Going to church every once in a while isn't enough to get you through the tough times.

So the reality of life's afflictions is the first reason we need to prioritize our engagement in Christian community. The second is in verse 5.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:5.

For this reason [since we knew you were suffering affliction], when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

We don't live in a world whose only spiritual influence is from God and the Holy Spirit. We live in a world that is heavily influenced by a spiritual enemy who wants to drive us away from God. Paul realized that the Thessalonians not only faced afflictions, they also faced a tempter who wanted to destroy the work of the gospel in their lives. He knew Satan would tempt them to give up and go back to their former ways of life that were easier but would lead to destruction.

There are evil spiritual beings that know who we are and want to see us fail. In Christ, demons have no authority over us, but they know our weaknesses and

how to make lies sound like the truth so that we will be deceived and turn away from Christ. They hate us and want us to fall.

1 Peter 5:8 says: *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* You know how a lion is successful in killing its prey? It waits in hiding and watches for weakness and vulnerability. It waits for its prey to wander off and be separated from the herd. Then, when the time is right, they slip in and attack. The animal is helpless and they kill and eat it.

Peter says that Satan does the same thing. He’s like a lion seeking someone to devour. He’s waiting for you to struggle and distance yourself from the support of Christian community and then he attacks. Sometimes those attacks are whispers and lies that get into our thinking. Sometimes they’re an all-out onslaught. I’ve seen both, and if a person isn’t plugged into the protection of regular Christian community, they get destroyed.

Several years ago I was out bow hunting in December. I hadn’t harvested a deer yet, so I was eager and ready to shoot if given the opportunity. I was hunting over a corn pile and there was snow on the ground, so it was a perfect set up. I caught movement and saw a deer making its way toward me and I was excited. But then another deer came into view, and another, and another. Eventually I watched as 9 deer made their way straight for me, and the last one was a gigantic doe that would provide a lot of meat.

The deer came right to me and stood feeding in easy bow range. You would think it was the perfect situation. But those deer were as safe as could be. I couldn’t move a muscle. There were 18 eyes wandering around and looking for signs of danger. If I so much as started to lift my bow I would have been spotted and the whole herd would bolt out of there. So they ate the corn for several minutes and left, unharmed and unscathed. They weren’t really in danger, even though I was lurking 20 yards away.

Satan’s attacks and temptations are a lot less effective when you’re surrounded by brothers and sisters in your church family. When you’re regularly engaged in worship and building friendships, and praying and studying Scripture together. How protected are you? Hebrews 3:12-14 says: *“Take care, brothers, lest there be*

in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”

Our enemy is the second reason we need to make regular involvement in the life of the church a priority in our lives. The third is in the next few verses.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

It was a big relief to hear that the Thessalonian believers had not fallen away because of affliction or the temptations of the enemy, but that still wasn't enough for Paul. He wanted to get back to them just as much as ever so that he could supply what was lacking in their faith. Their training as disciples was incomplete. Paul had only been with them for a few months when he was torn away and there was a lot more they needed to learn. So Paul wanted to get back to them to fill up what was lacking in their faith.

The third reason we need to get together on a regular basis is because we need to be filled up with what is lacking in our faith. There are things you and I still need to learn about what it means to be disciples of Christ, and there are things others need to know that you or I can help them learn. Growing as a disciple of Christ is a long-term process. We all start out as spiritual infants who know very little and it takes years, even a lifetime to grow into maturity. I guarantee that every single one of us has room to grow. None of us has arrived at a place of spiritual maturity that we don't need anything more.

I was at a coffee shop a few years ago and I overheard a young man make a comment to someone about his church – that he really didn't need them

anymore because there really wasn't anything more he could learn from them. May God keep us from having that kind of attitude. I suppose a church may fail and not have much to offer, but we never get to the point where we don't have more to learn.

And one thing I've observed about more mature believers – you don't learn best by just going to church and listening to sermons. That may give you more knowledge, but that doesn't equal maturity. For those of us who are further along in biblical knowledge, we're going to learn best by getting involved in the fruitful work of spiritual mentoring and teaching others. So please don't ever think you don't have room to grow – we ALL have room to grow and the primary way we grow is by being plugged in and active in Christian community.

So I implore you this morning as one who has been entrusted with your spiritual care, to make involvement in regular church ministries a priority in your life and your family. Put these things on your schedule and plan other things around them rather than fitting them in if you have any time left. We all need the benefits and blessings of engaging in Christian community. We all face afflictions of various kinds that will pull us away from the Lord. We all have an enemy who tempts us and wants to destroy. And we all have room to grow in the process of spiritual maturity.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ 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."

Let's regroup and refocus as a church family. Let's recommit to Sunday morning worship, Small Groups, Recharge and Discovery Land. Let's do so for our own good and for the good of others.