

Service Outside the Box

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10-12-08

Introduction.

- A. As we've studied before on many occasions, there are a number of passages in Scripture that define the nature and work of the church. The Bible teaches us that God expects us to assemble, that there are a number of things we are supposed to do in the assembly, and that there are certain things that the church is permitted to do with its financial resources. One of the things that sets us apart from the denominational world is that we actually pay attention to those passages and do what we can to carry them out, and that's what we should do.
- B. However, in our focus on these things, we have too often turned our assembly into something that God never meant for it to be: the focus of our spiritual lives. Many Christians believe that what it means to be a Christian is to go to church three times a week. We think that if we come here, go through the Scripturally approved acts of worship, go home, and avoid egregious sin throughout the week, we're doing all that God wants.
- C. Friends, that conception of Christianity bears little resemblance to what the Bible says about imitating Christ. Yes, Jesus worshiped according to God's will. Yes, Jesus avoided sin. But what really defined the character of Jesus was the way that He spent His whole life, not just Sabbaths in the synagogue, actively seeking ways to serve God and serve others. If we don't do that, we really don't have much of a claim to discipleship at all.
- D. In short, friends, if we believe that the assembly is the point of Christianity, it's like believing that the launch pad is the point of the Space Shuttle. We need the assembly, but our spiritual journeys must begin here, not end here. With this in mind, let's look at some passages that emphasize the importance of the rest of our spiritual lives as well as some things each one of us can do. Let's look at service outside the box.

I. Problems with the Box.

- A. Before we move on to what we can do, though, we need to spend some time considering problems with the box, reasons why an assembly-centric view of Christianity isn't a good thing. The first problem with it is that **IT EMPHASIZES THE PREACHER**. Now, this might seem a weird problem for a preacher to bring up, but it's true. Simply by nature of what the preacher does in the assembly, he's in the public eye all the time. He's the one who delivers the sermons and teaches the Bible classes, so if all we care about is the assembly, he looks like the most important Christian. Once that idea takes hold, the church inevitably begins to shift toward a denominational pastor system, where the preacher does all the work and all the Bible study.
- B. Friends, that's not at all what God intends for the church. Consider, for instance, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:17-18. The divine design is not one multi-talented guy doing everything; it's a whole congregation of people with different gifts, working together to carry out God's will. We are interdependent, not independent, so no one man is capable of doing everything God wants. And yet, if we allow the pattern of the assembly to lead us to focus on the preacher, that one-man band is exactly the doomed pattern we end up with.
- C. Similarly, focus on the assembly is problematic because **IT DEVALUES WOMEN**. This is exactly the opposite problem from the problem of the preacher. As we know, the Scripture does not allow women to take a leading role in the assembly. Even the work that they do during services, like teaching children's Bible classes, is carried out when other Christians aren't watching. On that basis, many people in the world would accuse us of treating women like second-class citizens, and if all we care about is the assembly, they have a point.
- D. Of course, the Bible doesn't devalue women at all. We see this in passages like Galatians 3:28. Yes, women do have a different role. Yes, they're not supposed to be as visible in the assembly as men. However, that doesn't make the women of this congregation any less valuable or the work that they do any less important. We need to make sure, friends, that we regard the work of the women with the same respect with which we regard the work of the men, and the easiest way to do that is get rid of our assembly-centric mindset.
- E. Yet another difficulty with putting the assembly first is that **IT OVERLOOKS NEEDS**. Just think, friends, about the different levels of organization and attention that we devote to things that happen inside these walls, versus things that happen outside of them. It's very obvious if we spend five minutes looking at the back bulletin board. On that board, there's a duty roster for the worship services, a teaching matrix for the Bible classes, and a schedule for Lord's Supper preparation. We are very careful to make sure that all of the ongoing needs in the assembly are regularly met, and it is good that we are so attentive.
- F. However, there just isn't the same level of attentiveness to needs outside the assembly. On those bulletin boards, I didn't see a single sign-up sheet for work outside the assembly, and there rarely ever is. Friends, there are ongoing needs outside of the assembly too. The problem is that we tend to meet those needs haphazardly, and only as individuals feel moved to meet them. How many of us would feel comfortable with taking down the Lord's Supper sign-up sheet and saying, "Well, somebody will do it if they feel like it"? And yet, that's often where we are with needs outside the assembly. This has a nasty tendency to lead us into the condemnation of James 2:15-16. There are things we should be doing, and we aren't doing them.

- G. The biggest problem, though, with being assembly-only Christians is that **IT DISTORTS GOD'S WILL**. We like lists. We have five steps to salvation, five acts of worship, three ways to read the Bible, and so on. If we're not careful, we can easily fall prey to the illusion that if we have checked off all the items on our lists, which can all be done in the assembly, then we're going to heaven. Sadly, that's just not what the Bible says. Consider, for instance, the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:34-40. On the day of judgment, the righteous aren't going to be admitted into heaven just because they went through the right acts of worship. They're going to receive the inheritance because of the Christlike lives they led OUTSIDE of the assembly. Jesus is going to look at their constant pattern of caring for other Christians, and that's why He's going to reward them. I don't think the Matthew 25 list is meant to be exhaustive, either, but it does a whole lot to tell us what kind of people we need to be. We need to be out there on the front lines on a daily basis, doing what we can to love.

II. What to Do About It.

- A. Once we recognize that there's a problem with treating the assembly as the most important part of our spiritual activity, we have to figure out what to do about it. In this, the first step is to **RENEW OUR MINDS**. Paul describes the importance of this to the Christian in Romans 12:2. As this passage makes clear, doing always begins with thinking. We need to get our minds in order before we get our lives in order. In our particular circumstance, here's what this means. It means that each one of us needs to get it out of our heads that we can fulfill our spiritual obligations by showing up here once a week and then not sinning the rest of the time. That's just not true. Instead, we need to understand that being a Christian means becoming servants just like Christ was a servant. It means that we need to put our faith into constant, consistent action.
- B. Second, this means that we need to **UNDERSTAND OUR GIFTS**. Peter instructs us to do this in 1 Peter 4:10. We were talking about this passage a month ago in the high-school class, and one of the girls burst out, "But I don't have any gifts!" That wasn't true for her, of course, and it's not true for any Christian. There is not a single useless person anywhere in this congregation. Every one of us has something we can do, some way that we can be useful to God. We might not know what it is yet, but it's there, and it's up to us to find it. Many of us have some idea what our gifts are; some of us don't. If we don't, we need to listen to ourselves. We need to think about what we enjoy doing and what we're good at, and then figure out how we can put that to work for God. If that doesn't help, it's up to us to try different things and see what clicks. This process of self-discovery may be lengthy and at times even frustrating, but only by doing this can we please God.
- C. Third, we need to **BE DOERS, NOT HEARERS**. This, of course, comes from James' famous advice in James 1:22. It does us no good at all to hear this lesson, give mental assent to what is said, and then go our way and do nothing. It does very little more good to hear this lesson, agree, start doing something, but then go back to the way we were two weeks later. We need to start working for the Lord, and continue until the end.
- D. To help us with this, the elders here have decided to establish six **SERVICE GROUPS** to provide a framework in which we can serve. Each Sunday morning for the next six weeks, I'm going to be spotlighting one of these groups, and after I finish with each group, I'll put up a sign-up sheet so that we can join it. The first group is the **ENCOURAGEMENT** group, headed by John Hamon, and its job is to contact in some way each Christian who misses a Sunday and let them know that we missed them. The second group is the **WELCOME** group. Its leader is Jeff Andrews, and its task is to greet visitors to our assembly and send them cards. The third group is the **YOUNG PEOPLE** group, led by Josh Collier, and its members will be committed to providing both spiritual and non-spiritual activities for our young folks, so they have opportunity to associate with other godly people. Fourth, we have the **COMPASSION** group, which will be Joe Bunch's responsibility, and it will be tasked with visiting and caring for our sick and shut-ins. The fifth group will be the **PRAYER** group, headed by James Hensley, and this group's job will be to pray at length on a regular basis for the church, its members, and its work. Sixth and finally, we will have a **WORK** group, headed by Matt Sterba, which will be responsible for periodically helping our elderly and infirm members out with home maintenance beyond their abilities. This is just a thumbnail sketch of these groups; if you have any question about them, talk to the man responsible.
- E. Now, I would imagine that this provokes a cynical response in at least some of you, and to be honest, I understand that completely. Several of the churches with which I've worshiped tried a group system, and every time, that group ended up being about as useful as a chest freezer on the South Pole. I'm sure many of you have had similar experiences. So let's ask, "**WHAT MAKES THESE GROUPS DIFFERENT?**"
- F. I'd answer that in two main ways. First of all, these groups are different because they're **VOLUNTARY**. Nobody is going to make anybody in this congregation do anything that they don't want to. Nobody's going to stick you in a group and say, "It's your job to write cards to sick people." It's going to be up to each one of us to find the place where we want to serve. We get to choose what we want to do, not somebody else.
- G. Second, these groups are different because they are **MEANINGFUL**. All the other groups I've ever seen were built on the pattern of, "Let's get together with random people, eat a random meal, and have a random Bible study." They were groups for the sake of the group. Not so with these. Instead, as we'll see in the coming weeks, each group will fulfill an important Scriptural goal. We'll have to work, but it will be meaningful work.

Conclusion. If you want to work for the Lord but aren't right with Him now, first you need to change that.