

Why Should I Come Back?

M. W. Bassford, 5-2-10

Let me begin this morning by saying how thankful and appreciative I am for those of you who received invitations to this special service and chose to be here this morning. For all of you, that required a change in your established habits; for many of you, it required courage, courage to trust us by coming here despite your fears.

I think it's only fair for us to repay that trust by putting all of our cards on the table. You deserve to know what we want and what we hope to accomplish. Our motivation starts with 2 Corinthians 5:20. We're not going to wag our fingers at you or look down our noses at you. We want to plead with you, to implore you to come back to Jesus.

Second, we owe you an apology, not on someone else's behalf, but on our own. In the church leadership and in the church generally, we've failed to love you as we should and to reach out to you as we should. We're sorry for that, and it's going to change. From this point on, we're committed to doing everything we can to help you.

We're aware that this reconciliation process may take a long time and a lot of work. If you want to come forward at the end of this sermon, that would be wonderful, but if you're not ready for that yet, and you're only up for coming back to services next Sunday morning, we'd be delighted with that too. We all have issues to work through, and if you're willing to work on your spiritual problems and struggle to be a better disciple of Jesus, then you will always have a place here. We will be patient with you and work with you, just as God is patient with and works with us.

Ultimately, though, this isn't about us. It's about God, and He too desires more than anything else to be reconciled with you. James tells us in James 4 that if we draw near to the Lord, He will draw near to us. Reconciliation is totally up to you. Let's look at why you should reach out to God. Let's answer the question, "Why should I come back?"

Your Life

First, you should return to God because of the way it will transform your life. Let's look at three reasons why. First, your life will be transformed because you will be forgiven of your sins. David describes the greatness of this benefit in Psalm 32:1-2. There are countless spiritual blessings available in Christ, but this is one of the most important. The guilt of our sins is a terrible thing. When we sin, we know that we have done wrong. We know that we have committed evil against others, and that we have violated the will of God. It's a huge burden that we carry with us everywhere we go, and we make it heavier with each additional sin. It makes our lives miserable here, and we know that it will condemn us in the hereafter. We may put this burden out of our minds at times, but we can never escape it for long.

What a blessing, then, for this intolerable weight to be lifted by the grace of Jesus! What joy to be renewed by the power of His forgiveness and His love! Freedom is one of the values that our country holds most dear, and there is no greater freedom than freedom from sin. You can have that freedom right now if you repent and return.

However, reconciliation doesn't merely bring forgiveness. It also brings meaning. Jesus explains in Matthew 6:19-21. Jesus here specifically focuses on material wealth, but this principle applies to anything we might dedicate our lives to on earth. If we live for money, when we die, someone else will get it all. If we live for our families, they may disappoint us while we're still alive, but sooner or later, all of them will pass on too. If we live for fame and recognition, no matter how high we rise, sooner or later, we will be forgotten. No matter what we spend our earthly lives on, we can be certain of one thing: sooner or later, all of our work, all of our passion, will dwindle to nothing and be meaningless.

There's one exception to the rule, and one exception only: the things that we give to the Lord, those things will endure. Even the most humble disciple is precious in the sight of God. He knows how many hairs are on each one of our heads, and even if no one else notices the service we give Him, He notices. Even if no one else remembers us, He will always remember. Even if we see no earthly reward for living for Him, He will reward us in heaven. Finding meaning in this life is impossible, but if we live for the life to come, our lives will have eternal significance.

Third, reconciliation with God will also bring peace to our lives. Jesus promises this in John 16:33. Peace is a very abstract idea. It can't be seen or touched or tasted, but there are few things more precious than it is, and, sadly, few things more rare. Most Americans today are fundamentally not at peace. They are not at peace with themselves. They are not at peace with their lives. They feel empty inside, and they try to fill that emptiness with all kinds of different things. Some believe that if they buy enough stuff, that will make them content. Others turn to the pleasures of the flesh, or to drugs and alcohol. Still others think that they can find peace through the human wisdom of the therapist.

Ultimately, every single one of these attempts is doomed to failure, and they're doomed because the hole in our hearts can only be filled by God. Without Him, the world is a turbulent, frightening place where we don't matter, a place that will eventually crush us. With Him, we can sail on through the worst storms that life has to offer. With Him, we need fear nothing, because we can be assured that He will shelter us in the hollow of His hand. The peace available through Him is so deep and profound that Paul says it surpasses understanding, and life is unlivable without it.

The Church.

That's the first block of reasons why you should come back. The second block, though, is a little different. It focuses on the church here, and the way that it will bless you. First, the church will bless you because it will love you. Paul describes this attribute in the Thessalonian church in 1 Thessalonians 4:9. I'm certain that if Paul were here today, he would say the same thing about the Joliet church. As you might know, I'm not from this area originally. I'm sure I could find somewhere else to preach, my wife and I don't have any blood family here, and we certainly aren't staying in the Chicago area for the climate! The truth is, we're here because of the people. We're here because even though I've been a member at half a dozen congregations and been familiar with many more, I've never seen a church where the love of Christ was more apparent. The members here have embraced us, and I'm confident they will do the same for you.

Now, that's all very vague, so let me give you some concrete examples. Paul gives us a benchmark for measuring love in Romans 12:15. I am certain that this is a church that will rejoice with you when you rejoice, and weep with you when you weep, because that's what the brethren here have done for me. Let's start with the weeping. About a year and a half ago, my wife and I had our first child. Her name was Macy. She was stillborn. Even now, I don't enjoy thinking about that terrible time, but one of the brightest memories I have from then is the memory of the way that the church came together for us. We had dozens of visitors before we even left the hospital, the women here spent months checking on my wife and making sure she was OK, and people brought enough food by that we literally didn't have to cook for the next three or four months. Without the support of our Christian family, I don't know how we'd have made it.

In better times, this is also a church that will rejoice with you when you rejoice. I saw plenty of this during the recent birth of my daughter Zoë. One incident in particular stands out. Several of the sisters here had come to the hospital with us on the day she was to be born, because they were just as excited and nervous as we were. My mother-in-law had come up from Texas so that she could also be there, and because of circumstances, the nursing staff let me wheel Zoë near the entrance to the birth ward so that my mother-in-law could come in a little ways and see her. The other Christians there weren't allowed to come in at first, so they lined up on the threshold, stood on tiptoe, and craned their necks just so they could see the baby in the crib. That's the kind of love that we share in as a church here.

As important as that love is, we aren't here just to be there for one another. The Lord has work that He wants every church to carry out, and this church is committed to that work. The attitude here is well described by Paul in Philippians 1:27. This is yet another one of the things that makes us different. Many churches don't know why they exist. They meet because that's what they've always done, but they don't have a purpose or a goal. We do. Nor is that goal anything frivolous. We aren't involved in political action or saving the environment. Our objective is to find every good and honest heart in the Joliet area and persuade them to become disciples, and by the grace of God, that's exactly what we're going to do. This is not an easy work, but it is a worthy work, and it is a joyful work. If you join with us, you will have your share in that work too, and, at the end of your life, you can look back and say you did something that mattered.

Finally, this church will bless you because of the elders we have here. Many churches struggle beneath the weight of elders who are mediocre or downright bad, but here, God has blessed us with leaders who understand their work. Peter defines this work in 1 Peter 5:2-3. Simply because I'm the preacher here, I work more closely with Joe and John than just about anyone. They often invite me into their meetings for whatever thoughts I might have to offer. Without a doubt, their biggest concern is the souls of the Christians here. They are the kind of shepherds that Peter describes. They're not interested in running anybody off. They're not concerned about forcing their opinions down anyone's throats. I've never seen them behave unbecomingly toward anyone here. Instead, they're dedicated to helping the rest of us get to heaven. These men are the kind of elders every church should have, and they'd be delighted to help you too.

God.

Now, all of that about the church is wonderful and true, but it's not the most important thing. All of that about your life was true too, but it's not the most important thing either. The most important thing, the reason why I implore you—why I beg you—to come back is because God loves you. There are many parables of Jesus recorded in the gospels, but perhaps the greatest parable of all is the parable of the prodigal son, and what it tells us about God's love for us, even when we abandon Him. Look with me at Luke 15:17-24. By this point, the prodigal son has already left his father. He has already squandered his inheritance, and has sunk to the most wretched poverty imaginable.

Now that he's out of other options, he decides he's going to come back. He thinks he's only worthy of being a servant in his father's house. His father thinks differently. He rushes to his son and embraces him, even though the boy probably still looks and smells like the pigpen he left behind. He immediately issues the orders for a huge party, all because of this starving wretch who has returned home. Why? Because his son was lost, and now has been found.

If you've left your heavenly Father behind, this is the way He feels about you. Every day that has passed, God has wanted nothing more than for you to return to Him. Your sin has hurt Him, no doubt, but all will be forgiven if you come back, and if you do, if you allow Him to embrace you, then all of the angels in heaven will rejoice.