

Finding God with His People

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In my life, I've had a lot of conversations about God with all kinds of people, and one of the lines that I've heard most often is, "I'm spiritual, not religious." As far as I can tell, when someone says this, they mean that they believe in God and try to be a good person, but they don't go to church. It could be that they're turned off by what they perceive as the hypocrisy of organized religion, it could be that they're just too lazy to go. Regardless, they don't assemble.

Clearly, people who live this self-described "spiritual" lifestyle are happy with where they are. However, that misses the point. Whether we're happy with our way of life doesn't matter a whole lot. What does matter is whether God is happy with it. We can spend every day of our lives on earth bubbling over with joy, but if our decisions make God angry, we will have eternity to regret our error. The only wise way to live is for Him first and for ourselves second.

Thankfully, we don't have to guess about whether a particular lifestyle pleases God or not. As we saw last week, He has told us what is good in His inspired word, and if we follow that word, we can be sure that He will be delighted with us. In fact, the Bible tells us what to do in every area of our lives that is important to God. This is no less true of the question of organized religion than it is of any other spiritual question. We can use the Scripture to determine if God is happy with a spiritual lone-ranger lifestyle apart from other Christians, or if God instead expects us to associate with other righteous people, both in formal worship services and in our friendships outside of the assembly.

This is an important question, and how the word answers it will have a profound impact on the way that we spend our time. Let's answer it this morning. Let's look at the Bible's take on finding God with His people.

Who Are God's People?

If we want to study this subject, we must begin by figuring out who God's people are in the first place. After all, the world is full of those who claim to be Christians, and some of those who make that claim are just as wicked as they can be. We must use the Scripture to determine who the genuine disciples of Christ really are.

The first distinguishing mark of God's people is that they have been **BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST**. Paul describes this process in Galatians 3:27. Spiritually speaking, there are two kingdoms, and every soul belongs to one of those two kingdoms. The first is the kingdom of darkness, and it is ruled over by Satan. The second is the kingdom of light, and it is ruled over by Christ. When we obey the gospel, when we are baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, we are baptized into Christ. As Colossians 1 describes it, God takes us out of the dominion of darkness and transfers us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. That is the only way for a repentant sinner to join God's people.

This means that unless we have been immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, we are not part of God's people. Likewise, if an entire church claims to be part of God's people, but they neither teach nor practice baptism for the forgiveness of sins, no one in that church belongs to God's people either. It doesn't matter if they seem really nice. It doesn't matter if they have really moving assemblies. Unless they have been baptized into Christ, they are not part of the kingdom of Christ, God does not recognize them as His own, and their religious exercises are doomed to fail. The only way for us to worship God in spirit and in truth is if we first have obeyed the truth and been baptized.

However, that's not the only distinctive feature of God's people. God's people are also **FAITHFUL TO GOD'S PATTERN**. Paul points out the significance of this pattern in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17. Just like the early Christians in Corinth, we too are to imitate the example of Paul and obey his teaching. Paul didn't have one gospel for the Corinthians and another for the Romans. Instead, everywhere he went, he taught the same thing to every church. Nor was this teaching his own idea. He tells us a little earlier on, in 1 Corinthians 2, that the Holy Spirit taught him what to say, down to the very words he used. Paul was not unique in this. In fact, the teaching of every inspired apostle and prophet contributed to this pattern, and in the New Testament, we have the complete pattern preserved for us.

As we saw last week, that pattern is God's standard, and if we want to know whether a church pleases God, we must evaluate that church according to the standard. Does the church actually follow the Bible? Do they hear the word when it teaches that they must reject musical instruments, or do they do whatever they please in their worship services? Do they follow the Lord's rules for spending the Lord's money, or do they spend it according to their own desires? Unless a church is dedicated to obeying God in everything, they might as well be obeying Him in nothing.

How Should We Interact?

Now that we've defined who God's people are, we can reasonably ask how we should interact with them. First, we must **ASSEMBLE WITH THEM**. This is famously commanded in Hebrews 10:24-25. Here, the Hebrews writer clearly instructs us not to forsake the assembly. In other words, every time God's people are gathered together, it's our responsibility to be there with them. Sometimes, this isn't possible. If a man must work on a Sunday to provide for his

family, God understands that. Likewise, if we're too sick to get out of the house, God doesn't demand that we call an ambulance to get to church. However, whenever we have opportunity, we need to come together with our brethren in Christ to worship. It is impossible for us to be pleasing to God if we reject the church of His people.

Likewise, we must **SPEND TIME WITH THEM**, even outside of the formal assembly. Look at Paul's command in Romans 12:10. We are to have a warm, brotherly love for one another, and this kindly affection is to lead us to prefer one another in honor. This is something that we must do in two main ways. First, we must look to honor one another more than we honor ourselves. Second, though, we must prefer the company of one another. We must spend our time with other Christians, and we must regard those other Christians as our closest friends. I've never understood it when I see some brother in Christ who comes to church, but does all his socializing with people in the world. That just doesn't make sense to me. As Christians, we have more in common with one another than we can possibly have with anyone else, even our non-Christian family members. Our friendships should reflect that common bond.

What Do We Get Out of It?

All right, so we know who God's people are, and we know that God expects us to assemble and associate with them. What do we get out of that assembly and association, that is, other than avoiding hell by so doing? How does fellowship with God's people benefit us? First, we gain **ENCOURAGEMENT**. This happens first in the assembly. We see a first-century example of this in Acts 15:30-31. Here, we see the church in Antioch getting a letter from the apostles in the Jerusalem church. They read it together as a church, and they rejoice in its encouragement. This is very similar to the way our assemblies operate today. The New Testament is filled with letters from the apostles, and when we read them together, they encourage us. During those times of assembly, we are reminded of what it means to be a Christian, of what God expects from us, and of how we need to live our lives. With that encouragement, we gain the spiritual strength we need to overcome the trials and temptations of the world. Without it, we are spiritual dead meat.

However, when we associate with God's people outside of the assembly, they encourage us there too. Let's consider Paul's logic in this area in 2 Timothy 2:22. To put this another way, Timothy was to avoid temptation by associating with good people. This makes a huge amount of sense. Let me put it like this. In this church, I would consider Josh Collier to be one of my friends. We've had a lot of fun hanging out ever since I've been here. Now, what do you think would happen if I went up to Josh after services and said, "Josh, I feel like getting drunk. How about you and me go out drinking Friday night?" I'll tell you what would happen. He would look at me like I had sprouted horns! There's no way he'd go drinking with me, and if he thought I was serious, he would do everything he could to talk me out of it. In short, Josh is a good man, and he's not going to encourage or assist me in doing evil.

When we surround ourselves with Christian friends, that's what happens across the board. They will help us to be righteous, and they will keep us from sin. People in the world won't do that. When I was in law school, 95 percent of my fellow law students drank like fish. What would have happened if I'd gone up to one of those guys and asked him to go drinking with me? They'd have taken me up on it in a heartbeat. As 1 Corinthians 15 tells us, evil companions corrupt good morals. If we surround ourselves with the wicked, they will lead us to be wicked. On the other hand, though, when we surround ourselves with God's people, at least the non-hypocritical kind, they'll help us to be good.

Second, if we seek out God's people, we will gain **GOD'S PRESENCE** in our lives. Along these lines, let's consider the promise that Jesus makes in Matthew 18:19-20. At first glance, this doesn't make a whole lot of sense. The Scripture teaches us that God is everywhere and hears everything, so what does it mean that when there are two Christians gathered together, that Jesus is with them and hears their prayers? The difference here is one of emphasis. We can never escape God's attention, but when we are together with a brother or sister in Christ, He starts paying particularly close attention. God always hears the prayers of His children, but when several of those children are praying together for something, He starts listening especially intently. Do we want that special kind of closeness with God in our lives? Do we want to bring our prayers before Him in a way that will make Him most likely to say yes? Those are both things that we can only find when we come together with other Christians. That could be in the assembly, with dozens or hundreds of fellow disciples, or it could be a time when we're praying quietly with a buddy. Regardless, God is always there.

Finally, when we associate with the people of God, we gain **A FORETASTE OF HEAVEN**. Look at what Paul says about his reward in 2 Timothy 4:8. Paul knows that on the day of judgment, God is going to give him his crown and admit him into eternal life in heaven. However, Paul's not the only one. Instead, everyone who has truly loved the appearing of the Lord is going to gain that same reward. In other words, heaven is going to be filled with other Christians, and the times on earth that are going to be most like heaven are when we are together with our brothers in Christ. Friends, if we don't enjoy coming together with God's people, if we don't rejoice in the knowledge that God is gathered with us, why do we want to go to heaven at all? Going to heaven if we don't like Christians is like going skydiving if we don't like heights. It just doesn't make sense. On the other hand, if we want to gain an appreciation for the delights that heaven will hold, one of the very best ways to do that is to associate with God's people on earth.