

The Church's Ministry

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[0 : 00] If you would turn with me to 1 Peter 2.1 Remember last week? Well, Taylor hit it again. We're heading into a building fund,!

But first, I'm going to begin with a story about one of my former employers, Walmart. It's an article entitled, My Initiation at Store 5476. The columnist writes, just after 9 a.m. on a rainy December morning, the employees of Walmart Store 5476 gathered in the electronics department and arranged themselves in a circle.

The 24-hour supercenter was still sleepy, with only a few customers steering carts slowly through the aisles of Christmas ornaments, Q-tips, and boxes of toasted strudel. Suddenly, the soft electric hum of the store was pierced by the sound of nearly 40 workers shouting in unison, Good morning, Vicki! Their eyes were on an assistant manager, Vicki Smith, as they clapped their hands twice, stomped their feet twice, pumped their fists twice, like Arsenio Hall, and topped it off with a woo-hoo!

[1 : 46] So began a 10-minute meeting that takes place three times a day at the beginning of every shift, not only in this Walmart, but at every other Walmart in the nation.

That's 4,200 stores, 12,600 meetings a day. For a moment, it seemed like any other company's strategy meeting, Ms. Smith and her co-workers discussed the top categories of the day, like electronics and food, and they cited products they wanted to push, so that when you passed by them, you thought, I've got to have that.

You know, they know what to do, including winter staples like rock salt and heaters. But then a few employees began offering words of appreciation, not to a deity, but to one another.

For the small miracles, like shelving more than 5,000 cases of merchandise overnight, it quickly became clear that these are not the sort of meetings where a participant can zone out.

These are Walmart meetings, two-part Matillaristic and one-part Kumbaya. The lady says, I, you know, I wrote this article and appealed to come and visit because I wanted to see how firsthand the world's or the nation's largest retailer moves 5.5 billion cases of merchandise last year and each year and how it fills its shelf throughout the day.

[3 : 13] And these meetings helped her understand why. She goes on and talks about one manager warms up with calisthenics, leads the whole group in the warrior one pose. And she continues, Walmart's rituals may seem like corporate Kool-Aid, spirit of the best, cultists at worst, but they enable the company to organize hundreds of workers around a single goal, operating a store more than three times the size of the White House.

Finally, they conclude the meeting by everyone saying, give me a W, give me an A, give me an L, give me a squiggly, and then celebrate together.

Now, as we gather this morning, we're not going to unite in a secret cheer. And you're relieved. Nor are we going to throw on our team t-shirts, nor will we do calisthenics, though a few people in here would like to show you the war where you're won if you don't know it.

We don't gather to become company men and company women. Nor do we gather to check off a box or just to do what we've always done on Sundays. We gather as a church to do what the church is called to do.

Which begs the question, what is the church? What is the purpose of the church? When it comes to the Christian life, the church's importance is often more assumed than it is understood.

[4 : 39] It's so often overlooked. We assume it's important like flossing, which no one does, green vegetables, and eight hours of sleep. We just assume church is important because people say it is.

But rarely do we ask the question, what is the church? What is the purpose of the church? Is it a building? Praise the Lord, it's not because we wouldn't be a church.

Is it a business? Is the church a business? Is it a meeting? Is a church just a group of people who love God?

I mean, can we have church anytime we're together with a group of people worshiping God or something like that? Is that what a church is? Is church just a word for all people everywhere who follow Christ?

Such that it really doesn't matter what we do with our time, attention, energy, and money as long as we're part of that all people everywhere who follow Christ church. Or is the church meant to be something more?

[5 : 39] Something more up close and personal? Something requiring our individual commitment and sacrifice? What is a church? What is the purpose of the church? Why is it important?

One of the goals of this building fund is to help us understand that. This morning, and again in two weeks, we're going to spend time on just six verses in 1 Peter.

One author says about this passage, and we have this for you, this passage includes what may be the most insightful and encouraging portrayal of the identity and purpose of the people of God anywhere in the New Testament.

It's a pretty lavish phrase. And so, let us consider these words. Apostle Peter writes, As you come to Him, that is Jesus Christ, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves are like living stones being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it says in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame. So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

[7 : 10] They stumble because they disobeyed the Word as they were destined to do. Verse 9, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What an incredible passage for us to study in a word where we're going is don't give yourself for an earthly building, but give your life to build up the people of God.

Don't give yourself for an earthly building, but give your life. Is that overstated? We'll see. Give your life for the people of God, to build up the people of God. And first point, the church is a people established by Christ.

The church is a people established by Christ. This letter is 1 Peter. So it is written by the Apostle Peter. You know him, the same Peter that's so beloved for his boldness, bluntness, and impulsiveness, even if he does suffer from a bad case of foot-in-the-mouth syndrome.

[8 : 26] Rome. Didn't get that, but he sticks his foot in his mouth a lot. It's the same Peter, you remember, who misstepped in Antioch last week. Well, not last week. A long time ago.

But we studied it last week, and now he's in Rome at the end of his life in AD 62 or so, about the same time that Mark wrote his gospel based on Peter's eyewitness account.

And he's writing to encourage Christians throughout modern-day Turkey that are suffering persecution because of following Jesus Christ. We've studied that very, very much, but they were being burned at the stake and fed to lions and all sorts of really bad things.

And so not surprisingly, Peter opens this letter calling them to rejoice even through trials and the testing of their faith. But now in chapter 2, he turns to who they are.

He turns to their identity, their purpose, and who they are in Christ. Look in verse 4. He says, As you come to Him, Jesus Christ, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious.

[9 : 33] There's a lot of things going on in this passage. But let's just think about two. As you come to Him, you come to a living stone.

Now, a stone. Now, we have like some Christian lingo in the back of our heads, but what does He mean? What's He talking about? A stone.

And the rest of the passage, or the rest of the verse, helps us understand, as you come to Him, a stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious. Who's He talking about?

And then it gets clearer with those. He follows verse 5 with two important New Testament references about the, or Old Testament references about the coming Messiah. Isaiah 28, 16, I'm laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone.

Psalms 118, 22, one of the most common Old Testament prophecies about Jesus Christ that's referenced, one of the most common ones, the stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone.

[10:33] And so it's very clear now, Peter is talking about Jesus Christ. As you come to Him, you come to a stone. But this stone is alive.

Ever seen one of those? You know, I mean, this, this, you know, this stone is alive. But first, I think it's very striking that Peter calls Jesus a stone.

Jesus nicknamed Peter the rock or the stone. And yet now He calls Jesus a stone. He calls Him a cornerstone, though He was rejected and cast out.

He'd become the cornerstone. Now you've probably seen a cornerstone and church buildings all over, all over the place. They'll have a marker stone or a cornerstone, you know, maybe with the year, a Bible verse or something like that.

And, and, and usually, you know, usually it's kind of symbolic of the first stone of the building, but it's not really that, you know, it's kind of added later and up higher. So it's not really a cornerstone.

[11:34] But the idea is that when building with bricks and stone and mortar, it's imperative that the first stone be straight and level and placed carefully.

I remember doing some cabinets in my house. It's imperative that that first cabinet that's going to, you know, do the countertop is, is level.

Otherwise, marbles are going to roll down your countertop. You don't want that to happen, presumably, if you were going to lay a marble there. And so the same way, the cornerstone is laid so that the whole building is plumb, that it's straight and square.

If it's not straight, the whole building will not be. Peter's saying Jesus is the cornerstone laid down for all generations so that the people of God are straight and square.

The point is not merely that Jesus is the first stone, but that he holds the whole house straight and square. And Ephesians 2 continues this idea and it references Jesus as the cornerstone and then goes on to say that in whom the whole structure is being built up into a dwelling place for God being joined together and grows into a temple.

[12:52] So Peter's telling us something, that Jesus is the cornerstone and foundation of the church. But as we said, this stone is alive.

So it's unlike any other cornerstone because it's alive. Now, fascinatingly, Peter has already referenced our living hope. We're born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We're born again by the living word of God that's brought us to life in chapter 123. But now he references a living stone. Now, living stone is an odd word picture, isn't it?

It's an oxymoron, which just means bringing together two things that don't exist together like jumbo shrimp or old news or winter wildcats.

That's right, because we took them down last night. Stones are lifeless. Old Testament saints built their altars out of stone because they knew they wouldn't move.

[13:55] But this stone is alive. Though he was rejected and killed by men, though they rolled a stone over the mouth of his grave, three days later, the stone was rolled away and he arose. Jesus Christ is alive.

But also, as the living stone, Jesus gives life to the whole house. The tying together of all this is so fascinating.

It's not just after something that's plumb and square. It's after something that is filled with life. That's what Peter's reminding us of. He actually says, when you come to him, all who come to him, what's that phrase?

As you come to him, coming to him, it means more than approaching him, like you might come over or something like that. It means to follow him, believe in him, trust in him. And, verses 6-8 make very clear, many reject him.

Many are offended by him. Many stumble at him. But to all who come to him, he gives him life. To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born of blood, not born nor of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of

God.

[15:05] What Peter is describing in that little oxymoron, is the miracle of conversion. When we receive the gift of faith, place our trust in Jesus Christ, the main thing going on in our lives is not a realization.

The main thing going on in our lives is not a conviction. The main thing going on in Gavin's life is not coming to some understanding, not even making a decision. The main thing going on is that the Spirit has made him new.

I love it, because what he's getting at is the fulfillment of so many different prophecies that Jesus comes to put a new heart and a new spirit within us that calls us to fear his name. And he's coming to help us see that Christianity is not maintenance.

It's not about human beings keeping things straight and square. It's about the miracle of God to bring dead sinners to life. I mean, that's what I offer you. I offer you Jesus Christ.

If you run into him, if you stumble on this stone, you'll be born again. So fall on him alone.

[16:06] That's what it says as he continues, as you come to him, you yourselves are like living stones. Get this.

The same spiritual life that fills Jesus Christ, that same spiritual life causes dead sinners to become living stones and united forever to Jesus.

I haven't thought about this until right now. Ezekiel 36 and 11 talk about taking out our stony heart and giving us a heart of flesh.

I wonder if that was behind that living stone image as well. Something that just could not be brought to life by human will or exertion, but by God, it can.

Now this is an old guy, but he talks about this. It's very fascinating. He says, in a word, R.L.

Dabney, there is truly a sap.

[17:17] He's trying to get the words together for this. Hey, what did he say? A cement, for our purposes, a mortar that unites the two, Christ and believers.

That is a thing, not merely an influence, a divine, living, and almighty person, the Holy Ghost. You're alive because his spirit has united you to Jesus Christ.

So that's some of what's going on behind that. I told you there's a lot of stuff there. If Jesus is the stone that's chosen and precious, perhaps the most important thing of living stones to do is to treat this one as chosen and precious as well.

Perhaps the most important call of the church is to regard and prize and treasure Jesus Christ above everything else. He's rejected by so many.

The sight of God and the sight of those who follow him, he should be precious. You know, one primary way we declare and proclaim the preciousness of Jesus Christ is by never settling for a gospel plus community.

[18:33] That's a term that I got from a book I read. I want to read you this quote. He says, in this gospel, in the gospel plus community, nearly every relationship is founded on the gospel plus something else.

Sam and Joe are both Christians, but the real reason they're friends is that they're both singles in their 40s and share passion to combat illiteracy and work as doctors. In gospel plus community, church leaders enthusiastically use similarity to build community.

But as a whole, this community says little about the power of the gospel. Listen, when Christians unite around something other than the gospel, they create a community that would likely exist even if God didn't.

living stones are united around the living stone.

So a gospel plus community is when churches unite around Jesus and something else. So something else could be race, social status, family, life stage, single, divorced, widowed, whatever, married, political party, way of schooling.

[19:39] It's so common for churches to be built around similarities because it's easy. It works.

You get people to plug in, just do a lot of stuff that everybody likes. But there's a problem. It's not a community united around the gospel any longer. And when our neighbors see another community united around the gospel and something else, they will not be amazed.

that is not what happened in the first church. Seminars for different seasons of life and all these type things.

No one's amazed that a church united around similarities. But in this world so divided, a church that unites and gathers people around Jesus of different backgrounds, different social statuses, different families, different life stages, different political parties is staggering.

So let's not be a church that prizes Jesus in name. Let's be a church that refuses to settle for a community built on anything else, anything other than the gospel.

[20 : 49] Point two, the church is a people united together in Christ. The church is a people united together in Jesus Christ. And that seems obvious, but it's helpful to recover the obvious.

And so, in verse four, so verse four, and then verse five, he kind of, Peter continues his sentence and unpacks what it means to be a living stone, what it means to come to life in Jesus Christ. Look in verse five, as you come to him, well, that's not verse five, you yourselves are like living stones being built up as a spiritual house. So we're just going to take this next clause, being built up as a spiritual house.

So Jesus is a living stone and so too are we. And this image of living stones is very vivid. We've already covered the stone aspect, but the living, I mean, we've already covered the living aspect, but the stone aspect is vital as well.

Stones aren't cut to sit alone. No one buys a pallet of bricks to scatter around the yard. Stones are cut, are cut and prepared to be arranged and aligned into a building and these living stones, this amazing thing that happens when we come to Christ, we burst into this living stone and we're a stone because we're meant to be a part of a house.

[22 : 08] All believers are being built together into the church that beneath this metaphor is a staggeringly profound reality. God is building a new temple, not a building, but a spiritual house.

Jesus died and rose and he promised to establish a new temple in himself. Remember John 2. He said, but this new temple as we see now is a spiritual house. It is his body.

It is his household. It is his family. It is the community that God is building. Search the scriptures for community and you will find little, but search the scriptures for the church and you will find the most breathtaking picture and community imaginable.

So Peter says, this community will be a spiritual house, the new temple of God. Now you remember the Old Testament that God dwelt with his people in the Old Testament with a cloud by day, pillar of fire by night, and then he dwelt with them through the tabernacle, this kind of tent-like thing that they could travel and move wherever they went because Moses said, we're not going unless you go, so we're going to set up and you're going to lead us and then they had the temple, the temple, they had a second temple, they were kicked out of the first temple, but now Jesus, or now Peter says, the way God dwells in this new people is much more brilliant, much more marvelous, much more amazing.

God chooses and calls each believer one by one. God fills them with the Spirit, gathers each of them into a spiritual house. This house is not a house with a certain zip code.

[23 : 36] This house is not a building with a physical address. This house is a people called from darkness into light, a Spirit-filled community of believers, the temple of God.

Just as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, there'll come a day when you don't worship God on this mountain nor that mountain. My people worship me in spirit and in truth. 2 Corinthians 6, 16, for we, we are the temple.

What are you talking about? Temples are made of bricks and mortar. We're the temple of the living God because God said, I'll make my dwelling among them, walk among them, and I'll be their God, and they shall be my people.

Everything's plural. The new temple where God dwells, uniquely dwells is the church. Doug Wilson says, if that's true, the function of a church building is not, therefore, to be the church, but rather to house the church.

Strictly speaking, the sign out front should not read, theoretically and hopefully, or, you know, that's what we're praying for, Trinity Grace Church, as though that were the name of the building, rather, to speak more precisely, we should say, Trinity Grace Church meets here.

[24 : 59] I don't know if you want to put that on the name or out there on the sign, but you get the point. The church is where God dwells now. There's no altar here.

There's no place we sojourn to. There's no turning and praying towards a certain location. like Jerusalem or something like that because God dwells with a people.

It's where God has decided to work out His saving purposes in the most profound and powerful way. It's where God unites us together with other believers in a profound way, and it's where we find the community we were built for.

Now, right now, as you know, community is in vogue. Everybody's talking about community. Everybody's talking about we want community grocery stores, community gardens, community restaurants, community soccer leagues, community neighborhoods.

We just got to attach that to everything. You know, nice little adjective. The reason is not just because we want to shop local and stick it to the man. Walmart, you know, messed our world up.

[26 : 09] The reason is because we're hardwired to long for community. One of the most sobering illustrations of realizing this hardwired longing is from the book *Into the Wild*, John Krakauer.

It chronicles the true story of Christopher McCandless. I don't know if you ever heard that story. It's an incredible book. I haven't read it in a long time, so this is not my rubber stamp of approval.

I have no clue what's in there. It chronicles his life. He graduates college, graduates from Georgia Tech, actually. Donates all of his money away to, I guess, non-profits and things like that.

He heads out west to live on his own, to live off the land in a way like our culture encourages us. He follows his heart and follows his own path. Eventually ditches his car and hitchhikes.

He makes numerous stops. This is where you should not watch the movie because he stops at a nudist camp. And you don't want that for family entertainment.

[27 : 13] It's not going to pass the test. He eventually makes his way to Alaska and he lives off the land way out. Things go well for a while, but life becomes hard.

Mother Earth is wild and hard. It becomes harsh. During this time, he comes to a dawning illustration. He's reading a number of books and had a journal and this is what Krakauer went back and did.

He's reading Dr. Zhvago and talking about, you know, one section he starred, we believe this is days before his death. He said, oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dull of human life, to take refuge in nature.

So you kind of see that's what he was doing. He was going to take refuge in nature. Then several pages later, he had a star and then he wrote in the margin.

And so it turns out that only a life similar to those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life. Listen. And an unshared happiness is not happiness.

[28 : 31] And this was most vexing of all. He said, happiness is only real when shared. Here he is, out here, all alone, in this old, broken down school bus saying, happiness is only real when shared.

It's tempting to regard this, this is what Krakauer notes, it's tempting to regard this note, this note in the margin and it's further evidence that McCandless' long, lonely journey had changed him.

Maybe that he intended to come back to life and come back to normal human society, not normal human society, but to be a member of human society, to have friends and things like that, but we'll never know. Three days, two days later, as he finished the book, he wrote, extremely weak, all caps, fault of pot, seed, much trouble, just to stand up, starving, great jeopardy.

The book goes on, he seeks to return, but he can't, he could not cross back over the stream, or the river that he came across, so he's stuck, he grows more and more anxious, hoping for help from others. Eventually, he's forced to eat roots and plants as he runs out of food, he confuses the roots, becomes sick, he eats something that's poisonous and he dies.

I know it's sobering to use that as an illustration, but it's so sobering, his solitary journey delivered him to the realization of his hardwired need for others.

[29 : 58] We're the same way. You don't have to move into the wild to devote your life for a solitary journey. and what God's placed in you, he's placed eternity in your heart.

Ecclesiastes 3.20, and this longing to know him will not be satisfied in a spouse or parents or sibling or friends, this longing will only be satisfied ultimately in finding your place in the people of God.

If you're a Christian, you're a living stone and you're called to be a part of a spiritual house. Now some say, what's this spiritual house?

Isn't that the universal church? Isn't that all Christians everywhere? And yes, of course, it is.

Church, in the ultimate sense, is all Christians everywhere who are being built up into a spiritual house in Jesus Christ.

But this also refers to specific local churches like ours. The image of a stone makes little sense to believers if it does not also include involvement and commitment in specific local churches.

[31 : 09] Some people read a passage like this and go so far and say, I'm a part of the church, so I don't need to be a part of a church. And I would beg to differ, humbly beg to differ. An unchurched Christian, according to the New Testament, is a fish out of water.

It's not even a question, it's not even a category. Again and again, New Testament people are born again, find their place in specific local churches. Charles Spurgeon says very helpfully, some Christians try to go to heaven alone in solitude, but believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone.

Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect that they love to get together. If anything that cake said last week is we love to get together, you know, we love to eat too, but we love to get together.

Sheep go in flocks and so do God's people. So don't be a bear or a lion. It's not going to help you. Find your place among a specific people of God. The one thing Jesus built in his life is the church.

[32 : 28] If Jesus loves church, so too should you. So is it at the center of your life? Is the church near the center of your understanding and your practice of Christianity?

Now I'm not saying do you wear a Trinity Grace t-shirt? That's not what that question means. Not wanting you to toe the party line or something silly like that. Do you build your life around your need for others?

How does the church factor in when you lose a job? When you're grieving? When you're contemplating a move? When you need counsel? Are you Christopher McCandless 2.0?

Are you Peter? The Great Commission is not a call to make disciples. The Great Commission is a call to plant churches because only among the people of God do we find the unity in all that we need to grow.

Now, I know I'm a pastor of a specific local church. I really don't in one sense, I mean obviously if you're coming I want you to be a part of this church.

[33 : 33] I believe in what God's doing here. But way more significantly than that I want you to plug into a specific local church. So if it's not this one, I will talk to you and recommend four or five other churches in town that I could happily put my family into.

I have no problem with that. Because I believe this with all my heart. It's what changed me. John Calvin said the church is a gymnasium where we're called to work out our faith and that's the only, I mean that's my story.

I mean it might not be that impressive but that's the only thing I learned, I mean that's how I grew as a Christian. And so I want to encourage you that way. Thirdly, the church is a people committed to offering spiritual sacrifices through Christ.

The church is a people committed to offering spiritual sacrifices through Christ. Now, Peter, he changes metaphors in this verse. Right in the middle of verse five, Peter suddenly shifts from describing the church as a spiritual house to describing the church as a spiritual priesthood.

You see that. You shall build up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. as living stones in a spiritual house, so too you're also priest in that house.

[34 : 47] Now that truth comes straight from Ezekiel 19 when God said what he would do with his people. He said, yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians. I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my treasure of possession among all peoples for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

As priests of the spiritual house, we offer spiritual sacrifices. Now, so if you're a Christian, you are a priest. Let's find your robe.

You know, you're called to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus. You're a priest. One of the most important takeaways from the Reformation was the priesthood of all believers.

The idea is you don't need to confess your sins to me or any other man. There's only one mediator between you and Jesus Christ.

I mean, between you and God is Jesus Christ. And you are your own priest. So go to him. And you're called to offer as a priest now spiritual sacrifices.

[35 : 56] Now, spiritual here does not mean immaterial or invisible. It's not talking about like a sacrifice we offer in our hearts, you know. You know, sometimes we send along somebody says something, our thoughts are with you.

Well, that just does it. You know, I mean, thanks so much. Sorry, that's probably well-meaning, but that's very cynical. But, but, you know, I need something.

I think God wants something more than your thoughts. Your warm well wishes. Spiritual means that we no longer offer bulls and goats.

That's what spiritual means. We no longer offer bulls and goats. We no longer offer animals. Jesus Christ offered himself on the tree and his sacrifice was accepted for all time. So there's no more animals to be offered, but the sacrifice are no less real and no less costly.

So what does it mean to be a priest? And I got to move on this a little bit, but, but we, we offer the sacrifice of our hearts. This is not the well-wishingness of our hearts.

[37 : 03] Psalm 51 says, sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Oh God, you will not despise. Robert Layton says, the heart given to God makes his eyes, ear, tongue, hands, and everything else holy as God's spiritual property.

The, the, the book of Proverbs, the father says, direct your heart into the way of God. Why?

Because everything, the abundance of your heart, your mouth speaks. The heart is a wellspring of life.

And so, so you're offering your heart, but really you're offering your life. This is my sacrifice. I give you my life. You bought it and I give it back to you. We offer also the sacrifice of prayer.

Now don't you just love the book of Revelation? Even though it is totally mind-boggling what's going on, but one of the things, mentioned two times in there, are golden bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints.

So, no longer is God satisfied with the, the burning, the incense of bulls and goats. What, what he's satisfied with, what he's pleased with, what honors him and makes his heart glad is the prayers of his people.

[38 : 15] The offering up of their petitions and their brokenness to him. Psalm 141 says, let my prayer be counted as incense before you, the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

We offer him the sacrifice of prayer, but we also offer him the sacrifice of praise. God does not save a people who will go on rejoicing and celebrating in other things more than him.

He wants our praise. We offer him, and I'm moving now, but we're offering our spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12, 7, to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Who gives a gift to himself? I mean, I know a lot of us do. I do. So, we can go and raise our hands, all right, and be honest here. Who finds joy, though, in singing to himself or cooking for himself or helping himself?

The real joy of the Christian life is bending your life out to help others. Christian life is meant to be that, like this incredible race to serve and help, and that's why we're so blessed by Paul and Fran and things like that.

[39 : 30] I mean, we're blessed by the food, but more than that, we're blessed by a gift that's offered up. We offer up the sacrifice of fellowship and the people of God.

There's a, there's living stones that are built together, bound together, that there's this, there's a common life where we weep and we weep with one another. We rejoice with one another.

We pray for one another. We forgive one another. We encourage one another. That's some of what's going on when Gavin gets up here and tells his testimony. He's saying, keep going, man. That's, the gospel's real and it transforms here and right now.

So, isn't that easy? How could that be a sacrifice? It's a sacrifice because we change our schedules to where we're this committed to this group of people. Tim Keller recently answered the question, what discourages you most about this next generation?

He says, you are the generation most afraid of real community because it inevitably limits your freedoms and choices. Get over your fear. So, if you want to live always looking over the fence and the real community, then don't let it limit you.

[40 : 39] But if you're willing to die, unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. It'll change your life.

Get over your fear. We offer the sacrifice of generosity. 2 Corinthians 8 says, but as you excel in everything in faith, speech, knowledge, and all earnestness and in our love for you, see that you excel in this act of grace too.

He's talking about generosity. 2 Corinthians 8 just talks very casually and yet very wonderfully about giving. Giving is wonderful.

Part of the Christian life, it's an act of grace. It's something we do in a planned way. He talks about in 2 Corinthians 8 and in a spontaneous way as the Lord leads. Interesting enough, the New Testament has no problem saying that the church is a people and an institution.

Now, sometimes we can have a problem with that, but it's an institution in the sense that when the disciples were born again in Jerusalem, they came and brought what they had on the first day to administrate and care for the people.

[41 : 49] so there was an enrollment set up for the widows almost immediately so they could be daily distribution. And that's somewhat, you know, it becomes an institution when it begins to take on some of these things in order to accomplish the purposes for which God has in mind.

It's good at this point to remind us to beware of imaginary sacrifices. sometimes we excuse ourselves from sacrificing for others because we conclude that we don't have the time, the opportunity, the money, or whatever to sacrifice.

This is especially the case with generosity. Beware of deceiving yourself by saying God knows my heart and if I had money I'd give it. God doesn't evaluate your generosity by what you would imagine you would do with it if you had more money but instead by what you're doing with what you have right now.

Actually, what you're doing with the amount you have is the same that you will do with the imaginary amount you have in your mind. Luke 16, he was faithful in very little but will also be faithful in much. He was unfaithful with very little but will also be unfaithful with much. David Garland says those who are disinclined to be generous when they are poor are not likely to suddenly become generous when they are rich.

[43 : 22] Beware of comforting yourself with imaginary generosity, imaginary sacrifice. And I don't say that. We are doing an offering in a couple weeks but that's not my motive.

You guys are killing it. Have blessed this church with your offerings and your sacrifices. the money is just the tip of the iceberg. What it does show is your heart.

But God wants us to be sold out in this way. This people that we give our lives to. So what is the church?

It's a people established by God united together in Christ and committed to offering spiritual sacrifices through Him. don't give yourself for an earthly building.

If we get a building one day it would be totally great. But the challenge to stick on the mission will be much harder in my opinion.

[44 : 27] But give yourself to build up the people of God. Let me conclude with the preacher Charles Spurgeon who says give yourself to the church. you that are members of the church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not.

If I had never joined a church until I found one that was perfect I would never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it if I found a perfect one I should have spoiled it for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it.

Still imperfect as it is he says it is the dearest place on earth to us. Give yourself to the church to maintain her.

Nothing in the world is dearer to God's heart than his church. Therefore being his let us also belong to it that by our prayers our gifts and our labors we may support and strengthen it.

If those who are Christ refrained they're just rolling stones even for a generation from numbering themselves with his people there would be no visible church no ordinances maintained and I fear very little preaching of the gospel.

[45 : 49] Let us pray. Father in heaven we offer ourselves to you you have sought us and found us you have delivered us and welcomed us you have written our names in heaven and on the palms of your hands and our desire our longing is to live for you and live for the people you died to save.

oh God would you shore up this little church thank you for all the grace that is so abundantly evident would you help us to run with all our hearts for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus our Lord that we might be found in you not having a righteousness of our own that comes from the law but the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus God and until you call us together may we not be like bears and wolves that run alone that we be like sheep who travel together one little loud motley happy crew here in McMinn County set marching on arm in arm heart in heart to glory would you do it for your praise and for your honor in Jesus name amen you've been listening to a message given by

Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com BIS