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**Series: People in Community**  
**Message: Real People, Real Place, Real Church**

**Transcribed Message**  
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**Matthew 18, Acts 2**

One of the most frequently asked questions going around the church today is when will everyone return to church? This question is being asked. It is being examined. It is being studied. It is being surveyed. When can we get back to normal? Whatever that normal might be. The answer according to a recent article and survey that I came across a couple weeks ago said never. Everybody is not going to come back and we are never going to get back to what we thought of was the normal. There's going to be a new and different normal. In this particular survey, it said 20 to 30% of people who were attending before the pandemic are not going to come back. On average, every church is going to lose about 20 to 30% of people who were previously attending.

They put these non-returners into a number of different categories. I'm just going to share with you what the survey revealed. There was the first category called the decreasing attenders. The decreasing attenders. They were already in a pattern of missing Sundays. Then when the pandemic hit, they obviously weren't able to come at all. Those in this category are going to be some of those that are not ever going to come back because they were already on a downward cycle of attendance. The second category was the disconnected attender. Those who found themselves only engaged or involved in the life of the church on a Sunday morning during the worship time are a part of a group that are less likely to come back and connect again. The third category was the "church is just another activity" attender. In any given week, there are all kinds of things competing for a person's attention and time, and the church is just one of those things on that list. On the top of that list, it said in many cases there are children's sports activities or getting away for the weekend, and those things are likely going to cause many in this category to never come back. The fourth category is the constant critic attender. These are the ones who are even though they're not attending still are likely complaining even though they haven't returned to in-person services. I am supposed to

miss those people still. We are supposed to miss them. Then, the last category is the category I made up and this category is "I enjoy church in my pajamas and so I am going to stay home for the rest of my time".

There isn't any doubt that this pandemic has changed what we experience as church. It has changed everything and there's again a new normal that we're settling into. Even though the digital church was growing before the pandemic hit, nobody could have said at the beginning of 2020 that churches large and small all across the land and all across our world would be turning the livestream so that they could connect and stay connected with their members and with their attenders. It was already a phenomenon that was increased multiple times over.

This morning as we wrap up our little fall break series called People in Community, I want to ask you a couple of questions. I want us to consider this morning the idea or this question of can online or digital church really be church? Is it possible to do digital church and be church? Is it possible to stay home watch a church service and be benefiting in the same way as those people who are physically gathering and doing church? As I think of that question, there is a number of answers that are possible. Somebody might just say no, it's not. If you're doing virtual church, digital church, you're not going to experience church as God intended. Somebody else is going to say not so fast. Yes, I think they can. Given the circumstances we're in, this is kind of a plan B. It may not be ideal but yes, they can experience church in a very similar way. And then somebody is going to say yes. Virtual church is just as much the church as is the gathered church. Even before the pandemic hit as I said, churches were streaming, were providing virtual services. They were encouraging people to join their church via the Internet, become a part of our church by livestreaming and connecting to us in that way, become a part of our community through this virtual experience. Go to our virtual lobby and meet some other people and become a part of our church and connect that way.

I'm as thankful as anybody for technology. I'm glad we are able in these months to livestream to our church family and others that aren't able to physically be here and do what we're doing this morning. But I also do not think that we are ever going to

replace what God intends for us to experience in a physical gathering by doing a virtual church.

This morning here's what I want to have us look at together. The gathered, assembled, congregated church. The gathered, assembled, congregated church is the kingdom of heaven made visible for all to see. If we look back at the last two studies that we've done in this People in Community, you remember in the first one we talked about the fact that the church is central to God's purposes in the world. The church is central to everything that God is doing in His continuing plan to reach this world for Christ. If you believe that is in fact what the Bible teaches, that in my mind is a game changer. This is the foundation upon which everything else is built. The idea that the church is the chosen instrument that God is going to use to fulfill the central purpose that He has for the world and I believe that is in fact the case.

Secondly, we said last week God intends for this desire that we all have, this need that we all have to belong and to be a part of something, to be met within the local church and the gathering of God's people. So with those two things in mind, before we continue in the outline I want to say just a couple things. The first thing I want to mention to you is what we're going to look at this morning in my mind just flows out of those first two lessons. God is using the church and the church is the central focus of His purpose in our world. Then just this desire and need that we all have to belong and be a part. and so from that it seems to me it just simply flows out that when we think in terms of this gathered, assembled, congregated group of people. They're really becoming the visible outpost if you will for the kingdom of heaven.

With that in mind I want to say this: if you're sheltering at home and you're sheltering at home because you're at risk, we want you to stay there. We want you to do whatever the doctor tells you to do. We want you to observe all the protocols that you're supposed to because we want you to be safe and we hope that you'll be able to come back at some time in the very near future. I say that because some of the things that I'm going to say today I want those of you that are sheltering at home and are watching by way of livestream to not take some of these things personally. I'm going to say some things that perhaps if you didn't understand that, you might think I'm making some kind of a personal comment about your lack of attendance and I'm not. I understand that

some people are at risk and some people do need to stay home. but if you're going to Walmart, and you're going to Target, and you're going to Lowes, and you're going to Home Depot, and you're going to work, and you're eating out, and you're going and doing everything else but you're still not going to church, then I do want you to take it personally. I do want you to hear what I think the Bible says about this whole matter of what the church is to be about and who we are as the people of God.

Let's look at this matter then of God's kingdom being made visible. I want you to think of what we're doing this morning in that very regard. We are the kingdom of God being made visible to the world. That is God's intent I believe for the church. Let's ask this question: what makes a church a church? What is it that makes a church a church? If you turn to tradition, I'm going to read four different answers to that question from four different denominations. What makes a church a church? These all from historic confessions. The Lutheran confession: "A church is a congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered." Anglicans say: "A congregation of faithful saints in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly ministered." Presbyterians say: "Those who profess true religion according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed." Baptists say: "The church is a company of visible saints called and separated from the world by the Word and Spirit to the visible profession of faith, being baptized and joined to the Lord and each other in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances."

If you look at those four statements out of historic confessions of these different groups, one of the commonalities is they all either say or they imply that there's a gathering. There's a coming together. There's something happening in what they're defining as a church by people coming together. That's important because that's been the historic position of the Orthodox Church for all of the years. There's a coming together. There is a time of worship and interaction of the Word being read and taught, prayers being offered, ordinances being observed, baptisms, the Lord's supper, and all of the rest. There is a sharing of life that is assumed in each of those definitions.

The dynamic is kind of like we would think of the dynamic of the team. What makes a team a team? They have to do things together. They have to come together.

For a team to legitimately be understood as a team, they come together. They play a game. They participate together in that. If they never are together, if they're never doing anything together, if they're not practicing together or meeting together, if they are never playing the game together, they're not by definition a team. Even when we think in terms of things happening in our culture, like a sports team, it is easy to understand that one of the requirements is that they come together, there's an assembling, there's a congregating, there's a gathering that happens.

Some of us are avid sports fans and we have a team that we support. Sometimes when we talk about our team we talk about as if we're on the team. We talk about what we did in that game and what we could have done better. Why didn't we do that? We act like we're a part of the team, but the fact is we never played the game with that team. We've never been to a practice. In many cases, we probably have never been to their facility. We never sat in one meeting and all the other things the teams do. While we are vicariously saying we're part of that team, we know in our mind that we're not on that team. But when we think of the church as a church, one of the things that we have historically understood is that a church is a gathered group of people, a congregated group of people. They have assembled together to do what they believe it is that God has called them to do.

I want to now ask that question not of historic confessions of faith, but I want to ask that question of the Word of God. I want to have us look at what does the Bible say about this matter of the church being a church. Before I read the text, I want to make a clarification and give a distinction of how it is that the Bible speaks of the church because the Bible generally looks at the church in two ways. If you look at the illustration, there is in the one circle what is called the universal church, or if we think of it in terms of visibility, it is the invisible church. The invisible church is the church as God sees it. God alone knows the hearts of people. Sometimes when the Bible uses this word "church", it is talking about the church as God sees it. We use that language to talk about the invisible church, the universal church, believers from Pentecost all the way to present, those who are still here alive, those who are in heaven. It is believers who have put their faith and trust in Christ. You're part of this invisible church, this universal church.

The other way to speak of the church in the Bible is of course to speak of a visible church. The visible church is how we see it. If you drive around Yukon this morning there's like 40 visible churches that are likely congregating like we are. They're visible churches so that as we drive down the road we look over there and we see Covenant Community Church. We see churches in our community that we visually can see. Here's the interesting thing. You can be part of one of the circles and not part of the other. For instance, you can be part of the invisible church. You can be part of the universal church, have put your faith and trust in Christ. God looks at you and He sees you as one of His children but for whatever reason you don't ever take part in the visible church. You don't take part in the local church. It's also possible to be a part of a local church, a part of the visible church, and yet not be a part of the invisible church. So right there in the middle you have those that are a part of both. That's where we want to be. We want to be in both of those circles. We want as God sees us to see the righteousness of His Son in us due to the fact that we have been saved and we put our trust in Christ and we've embraced this gospel. We also want to be a part of a visible local church where we understand that the purpose of God for our world is going to be realized through the local church.

With that in mind let's look at Acts chapter 2. I'm going to read acts chapter 2 and I want you just again to listen and then I want to step into what I think these passages tell us about this answer to the question what does the Bible say a church is. Acts 2:42. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

I look at that reading of this beginning of the visible church on the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts and I see that the very first thing that we have to say about what the Bible says about the church is that the church is made up of people. The

church is people. That is a very common expression. The church is people. I've said it. You've said it. We often say it in the context of wanting to be clear that the church isn't just a building. Sometimes our language reveals more about our theology than we realize. Very often we talk about the church as being a building. There is nothing wrong with that as long as in our theology we understand that it's a lot more than that. When we talk about the fact that the church is people, we're making a distinction against saying it's just a physical piece of property. Did you go to church today? Hey, let's meet up at church today. Generally, when we make those kind of statements we're talking about a physical location where the church actually meets together. So we have that understanding and I suppose all of us have seen in a news report a church that's been hit by a natural disaster. Probably down in Lake Charles that hurricane. A tornado comes through Oklahoma. A fire burns down the church building. Very often there will be a news reporter standing by a pastor or church member and they almost always say we're going to be fine because the church isn't a building. The church is people.

That is true but it is true only to a certain extent because I want you to see secondly the church is a gathered people. A gathered people in a place. That is part of the New Testament understanding of what a church is. The church isn't less than people but it is more than people. There's more that we have to understand about the church than just being people. To be a church, people have to gather. To be a church, people have to assemble. To be a church, people have to congregate. The word in the New Testament for the word "church" is the word *eklesia*. *Eklesia*. You actually see in almost every instance in our New Testament it is translated with the word "church". It simply is the idea of assembly. In classical Greek language, this word was just used of an assembly of people. It didn't matter what they were assembling for. It wasn't spiritual in nature in those instances, it was just an assembly. It was just congregating. It was just a coming together of people. But they came together in a physical place. They gathered together at a certain spot. A church without any gathering place, that is one that never assembles, is not a New Testament church. To be a New Testament church there has to be a gathering together in a place where God's people physically come together to fulfill what God has called us to do.

The other passage I want to read that I think underscores is Matthew 18. In Matthew 18, this context has to do with church discipline. We're not going to step into this passage based on a study of church discipline this morning. We've done that in the past, but this morning I want you just to see with me some principles about the church drawn out of this setting that Jesus describes. Verse 15: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses." That is taken out of Deuteronomy 19. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them." Here's I want you to see.

In that Acts passage and now in Matthew 18, I want to draw three principles out of this Matthew 18 passage in particular about what the New Testament has in mind when it talks about a church. We've already said it's people. We've already said it's more than that. It's people who gather. It's people who congregate. It is people who assemble. To be a New Testament church, to be on the team, you have to be a part of that gathering and a part of that assembly. Having said that, we understand the current circumstance that we're in, so that's not a judgment against anybody who is not able to come now. Nor is it a judgment against anybody who is physically not able to come at all. We're not talking about those circumstances. We're talking about the vast majority who have the ability, the freedom, and opportunity to gather.

Three things in these verses jump out at me. The first one is the common denominator is Jesus. The common denominator is Jesus. That was true in Acts 2 and that description of the church and it is true here in Matthew 18. Every church is giving a visible witness to the risen Christ. Every church is an outpost of the kingdom of heaven. Every church is to be making Jesus visible. Every time we gather, if someone were to come here and they've never been a part of our gathering at Covenant, the one thing



they should leave understanding and having been thoroughly immersed in is the fact that this is a group of people who know and love Jesus. It's a part of our language. It is a part of our songs. It is a part of our worship. It is the very nature of the gospel. When we come together, the unifying factor is always Christ. It's always the gospel. I'll just tell you that one of my regular prayers on a Sunday morning before we gather here, I'll look out my window and I'll just stand there and I'll pray Father, everybody who drives up this driveway today, everybody who walks through the doors of this building, let them encounter Christ. Let them be welcomed by people who love You. Let them experience the presence of the Spirit of God. Let them be brought to an understanding of the gospel of Your grace because that's why we're here. We are an outpost. we are making visible the gospel of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ our Lord. Every time we gather, this is a public declaration that we're Christ followers. We make no apology for that. We worship and we bow before King Jesus every time we're together. That's the whole purpose of our being here to acknowledge His Lordship and His sovereignty over our lives.

That's what He says in that 19<sup>th</sup> verse: "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything." What are some of the things that you suppose He wants us to be agreeing about? I can assure you that Jesus meant that when the church assembles it agrees about who He is. It agrees about the glorious gospel that He came to provide. We, by the very nature of who we are, agree to that. When you join Covenant Community Church, the last step you take is you share your story of being in agreement with that gospel. That's what He's talking about here. We agree and our confession is that Jesus is God from God. He is light from light. He is the true God from true God. Begotten but not made. The Nicene creed. When we come together, our Jesus is not the Jesus of the Mormon church. When we come together, our Jesus is not the Jesus of the Jehovah Witness that knocks on your door. Our Jesus is not the Jesus of the Muslim faith and tradition. They all have a different Jesus that the Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus of the New Testament and the Jesus that we have agreed on. So the common denominator here first of all is that there is an understanding of who Jesus is.

Be clear. This two or three that Jesus references here, where two or three are gathered. That's not two or three of your friends at Starbucks having a coffee and

sharing prayer requests. That is not a small group that is gathered somewhere of two or three. There are applications to that truth, but that's not what He is talking about. He's talking about the gathered, assembled body of believers. They're dealing with stuff here that is highly important. He has in view that this is a gathering of the church and His promise is whether it's just a few or whether it's a few thousand, Jesus is to be the center of it all.

Notice secondly, when we come together God is here. When we come together God is here. That's the point of verse 20. "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them." We understand in our doctrine of God that God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. Everywhere we are, we're in the presence of God. We're not making a distinction that when we're here God is not over there. Wherever we are, we are in God's presence. But here's I think the point that we need to understand. when we come together as the assembled, congregated, gathering of the people of God, I believe Jesus is saying there is the presence of God here in this place with us in a way that we don't experience when we're by ourselves when we're in another setting. I agree with Tim Keller when he said something unique happens in corporate worship. Part of the uniqueness of what happens is God meets with as His people in a special way. Don Whitney said something similar: "There are some graces and blessings that God gives only in meeting together with other believers." You want to hold onto that because that is going to be very important as we go on through the end of our outline here in a little bit.

The last thing I want you to see is what we are doing is of eternal importance. What we're doing is of eternal importance. In this context again, it's church discipline. There isn't anything that a church does, there isn't anything that pastors and elders do, there isn't anything that the assembled body does that is more weighty, more difficult, more challenging than stepping into what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 and exercising church discipline. You're dealing with matters of eternal significance in the lives of people. It goes beyond just that understanding though, because it also speaks to the fact that however unimpressed the world might be with our gathering this morning, and I assure you they are not impressed with us at all. What they think we're doing here is of no value to them. They're not impressed by what happens in this place

or any other place like it on any given Sunday morning. They have little value in what we do. But what I want you to understand is what Jesus the sovereign Lord of the universe says – that what happens here when we as His people assemble, gather, congregate together is of extreme importance to Him. In fact, it is so important that He says that He authorizes us to speak and act in His name. Now that is important. The Lord of the universe says I empower you and I gift to you as the assembled people of God the ability to speak and act in My name.

I put that together in these features of what I think is described in the New Testament about the church. It sounds to me like this: A New Testament church is an assembly, a gathering, a congregating of professing believers in Jesus Christ. Remember, we're professing believers. I can't see in your heart. You can't see in my heart. I can make a profession. You can make a profession. It's only in that invisible church, the universal church, that God sees our heart and knows that we've embraced the gospel of His grace. For a local church what we say is we are a gathered, assembled, congregated group of professing believers in Jesus Christ who have been baptized. That is the first requirement of the Christ follower. Be baptized. So we are baptized and organized to do the will of God. As you read your New Testament and the epistles in particular, it's clear that the Holy Spirit is passing on to His people different ways that He wants them to be organized with regard to the structure and function of the local church.

Now let's take the rest of our time and we'll move quickly. Why do you need to gather as part of the church? Why do you need to gather? Why isn't it enough to sit at home, watch live stream, and have your pancakes and coffee right there in front of you? You know the convenience. You did it for months. Why isn't that church too? Again, my disclaimer like at the beginning if you just tuned in, I'm not talking about those of you that need to stay home and are at physical risk of all that is happening in our world. I'm talking about those of us who are fully able and capable of being in an assembly together.

The first three of these are going to sound familiar if you were here last week but I'm going to say them again because they're just that important. Why is it that we need to gather? First of all, because you need the support and encouragement of Christian

fellowship. Hebrews 10:25. Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the manner and the habit of some, but so much the more as you see the day approaching. The day is on us, my friends. The day is on us. The Christian life was not designed to be lived in isolation. It was not designed to be lived alone. It was not designed to be lived by doing virtual church. The New Testament church is an assembled, congregated, gathering group of people. By the very design that God intends for us to fulfill, which is to come together and to be an encouragement to each other, to be engaged in each other's lives. Every one of us can engage in the ministry of attendance. We can engage in the ministry of attendance. If you ever wonder what is my ministry with Covenant, start off by the ministry of attendance. If you give yourself to the ministry of attendance, you'll figure out which are other ministries are for you too. But the basic ministry is that of attendance. The writer of Hebrews says don't neglect this. The writer of Hebrews says don't adopt the position that nobody knows who you are, that you hurry in at the very beginning and then you hurry out at the end. I think he is speaking against that. Don't stay home. Come and be a part of this ministry of encouragement. There has to be something at work here. For the Holy Spirit to actually write to us and say I want to encourage you to attend because there is going to be a tendency not to do that. I want to encourage you to be known because there's a tendency not to want that to happen. I want to encourage you to encourage others when you are together because your tendency is going to not want to.

Jot down Hebrews chapter 3. When you look at Hebrews chapter 3 beginning about verse 12 one of the things that the writer of Hebrews says there is this matter of coming together is important so that we don't get caught up in the deceitfulness of sin and have hardness of heart. Do you know when you need to be in church the most? When you don't feel like being here. Do you know when you need to read your Bible the most? When you don't feel like reading your Bible the most. Do you know when you need to pray the most? When you don't feel like praying. That is the whole point of what he is saying here. He's saying there's going to be that temptation and it's going to be strong and we all know that it exists.

Secondly, we need to come together and we need to be the church assembled because your spiritual life or your spiritual gifts are intended by God to be used as part

of the body life, a part of church. Gifts are primarily given not to you individually to use for your own benefit. There is benefit in the using of your gifts for you, but they are primarily given for the benefit of the body. That is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that to speak in tongues is wonderful, but if nobody understands what you're saying what benefit is it to the body? I'd far rather prophecy, Paul says. I'd far rather teach the Word of God so that it could be heard and understood. So that's the same thing he is saying here. We build each other up. We complement each other.

Thirdly, the gathered church is where we share in baptism and the Lord's supper. We talked about all of these last week. This matter of sharing in the body life of the Lord's supper and communion. We did that virtually for those months that we weren't able to be together. We have yet to do a baptism. But these rites of baptism and the Lord's are not given to individuals to exercise individually. They're given to the corporate assembled body of believers to encourage us as we see it realized that God is at work among us.

Two weeks ago I got an opportunity to be a part of a survey. They were surveying pastors in the Covid. So I took 15 minutes and answered a whole slew of questions about all kinds of things – attendance, finances, meetings. One of the questions had to do with the ordinances of the Lord's supper and baptism. They asked the question has your church continued even if you're doing virtual services to do the Lord's supper? And I said yes, we had. I remember that first Sunday in March when I stood down here. I was all by myself and nobody was here. All of you were home. You had your juice and your bread and we shared together in a very unusual way. Then the survey asked are you doing virtual baptism online. And I wondered what are we talking about when we talk about virtual baptism. Are we going to the hot tub or the swimming pool? Are we somehow zooming to other people that we've been baptized? I said no, we're not doing that and we're not going to. Why? Because those ordinances were in a unique situation that we were in for those months and I think that was acceptable. Some churches chose not to do that at all. Some churches simply said if we can't be together we're not going to involve ourselves in these ordinances. But I surely think that the idea of baptism is a public testimony that I'm a Christ follower. You don't do that at home in your swimming pool with you and your family and two other people. You do that in an

opportunity to express to the body of Christ that you've stepped into eternal life through your trust and faith in Christ alone.

Number four, because you can't understand the New Testament properly unless you belong to the church. The vast number of New Testament epistles are written to churches. They're not written to individuals. That might be the case of Philemon but even in that one book there was clearly an impact on that whole local gathering of people. You can't privatize the New Testament message just to you. Is the Holy Spirit going to speak through that Word to you personally? Of course, He is. But the application of those truths are often the gathered, assembled, congregated body of Christ that has come together. It's not about you. It's not about me. It's about us as the body.

Number five. Because God's basic unit is the church, not the individual. That follows that point I just made. Last week we talked about the community that God intends for us to step into from Genesis to Revelation. It is that we belong to each other, and that's a part of what He intends for us to be doing – to be following Christ together, to be committed to these things together. Think of all the one another statements in the New Testament. As you look at that list of one another statements – love one another, welcome one another, care, agree, bear. There are like 20 other ones. There's a whole page of things that we're to do as we engage with each other. Can you do some of those virtually? Yes, you can. Can you do them the way the Holy Spirit intended for those to be realized? I don't think you can. There's a lot of them that I don't think you can even do virtually. You have to be together as the people of God.

Number six. Because without the church you're evading a basic call to discipleship. What do I mean by that? We're to be making disciples who make disciples. There isn't any solo flight to Christianity. That becomes attractive to us at different times. It is that we have been called to count the cost, to step into each other's lives, to serve each other. All of this requires that we be together. Part of discipleship is simply by definition sharing life together. Ephesians 4. When Paul talks about the exercise of the body building itself up into love and being strengthened with the Word of God, he is clearly talking about God's people being together as God's people.

Number seven. Because submitting to leadership is integral to the New Testament. Submitting to leadership is integral to the New Testament. That's what Hebrews 13:17 says. They are given the responsibility and charge to guard your soul. That is what elders and pastors are charged with doing. You submit to their leadership. The writer of Hebrews starts off to submit to those who are in authority over you. They have been charged with this responsibility. I understand sometimes spiritual leadership is abusive and toxic and ungodly. It needs to be spoken to and if it's not responsive, then you obviously have to make choices that are difficult. But God's intent whatever area of our life we are in – whether it's with government, the church, the home – there is an order and a submission to authority.

Lastly, because listening and watching online is no substitute for belonging and attending a local church. Life is simply meant to be shared together. There is to be an accountability to each other. The call that God has placed on our life is one that we share together because this gathered, assembled, congregated group of believers is a visible picture of the kingdom of heaven on earth. We are an outpost that gathers weekly. The high point of our week is right now when we come together as Christ followers. We worship our King and we bow before Him and we swear to Him again our allegiance and our devotion and our obedience. There's no substitute for what God wants to do in and through us in that setting.

So what do we take away? My friends, church is not just what happens up front on the platform. We're not here just to watch. We're not here to just see a show and be entertained. We're not here just to enjoy and like the songs, or to be kept awake for at least half of the service. If church is just what happens on the platform, then honestly staying home, livestreaming, joining some virtual group probably doesn't make that much difference. But, if when we assemble and we come together and we congregate as the people of God, and God has promised that He is going to be with us in this place, and He is going to be working in us and through us, then I don't see how you can miss. I don't see how this can't be the place that you want to be more than any other place on any given Sunday because this is the time and this is the place when the people of God come together and declare their allegiance to King Jesus.

If you say to me that sounds good but I'm not feeling it, then I say this: what are you doing by way of preparation for any given Sunday morning? What do you do to get ready for today? The least that we can do is we can pray. God, I am asking You that tomorrow morning You meet with us as the people of God in a way that just shows to us Your power and Your glory and Your greatness. Prepare my heart because You're going to have people that You want me to interact with and people You want me to encourage. You're going to have somebody there to do that for me because I need it right now. Then you come with a sense of expectation and it will happen.

Let's pray. Father God, thank You for the glory of the gospel. This gospel that says to us stop trying to earn God's merit and favor and simply accept and receive and believe that what Jesus has done is enough. Nothing can be added to it. Father, when we believe that, when we step into that truth, when Your Spirit opens our eyes and helps us to understand that You welcome us into this body that You call the body of Christ, this group of believers who now have the gift of eternal life that they will enjoy with You forever. Father God, I pray that in these closing moments before this morning is over that You will bring that understanding to many who hear my voice this morning for Your glory, for the advancement of Your kingdom, for the glory of the grace of God at work in our lives. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.