

**I believe in God, Why do I need Church?  
Hebrews 10:19-25, James 2:14-26**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I meet a lot of people in my line of work, and because I'm a pastor I'm always looking for opportunities when I meet people to share the good news about Jesus - and his Body, His church.

So inevitably, I will ask them "are you connected to any particular church" - and I get a variety of responses back.

Some people will say *"Well...I worship God in my own way on Sunday mornings... usually out on the golf course"*

Or *"Yes I am connected, but I won't be going anymore because I've decided to take Sundays for myself and get out to the mountains, besides, I really feel closer to God out there."*

Or *"Well I was for a while, but I'm so busy during the week and my husband is often away on business on weekends, and it's so much work to fight the kids to get ready and go*

*to church on Sunday morning – but you don't have to go to church to believe in God! - God doesn't really care about church attendance... right?"*

Well brothers and sisters, whether or not God cares about church attendance... all you need to do is look around on a Sunday morning and you can see that the majority of Canadians certainly don't.

There was a survey back in 2008 which discovered that while.... 72% of Canadians **believed** in God and, 64% believed the Bible is God's word and, 62% believe in forgiveness through Christ and, 45% say they pray daily, and while 41% say they have made a commitment to Christ... Only 20-25% of Canadians believed weekly church attendance was important!

Now I'm not a sociologist but I'm betting that those percentages haven't increased over the last ten years.

So, according to these stats and figures, and the kinds of things we hear people say.... it seems that the majority of Canadians have not found a convincing answer to the question *"I believe in God, so why do I need the church?"*

Canadians are a nation of believers... but not belongers.

Maybe you have experienced this and wrestle with it as well – you believe in God, you believe in Jesus, you read the bible and pray but belonging to a church... well...

Or maybe you have a coworker, a neighbor, a friend or family member who is still waiting to hear a convincing answer to why they should commit to "organized religion."

We believe in God...so why do we need church!

Well friends let us turn to our scripture passages for today and look at what God says to us in them – so that we begin grow in understanding and conviction about "believing in God" and how that also means "belonging to God."

Because that in connection between "believing and belonging" our relationship with Jesus moves from being vague and abstract to real and concrete.

And what we experience in belonging, helps us understand what we are truly believing, and we will be better equipped to respond to co-workers, friends and neighbors, or family members who remain uncommitted to "Church"

But most of all friends - it helps each of us become part of a group where people who believe - want to belong.

The Holy Spirit works through this to turn us into a group of people who want to gather together, to be together as often as possible.

We are transformed from individualistic private persons who occasionally attend worship – into a group of believers who share life together and experience it as something wonderful.

So what's standing in the way of this...what prevents us from being together in this way as a Church community?

Well friends, one of the major obstacles is not understanding how believing in God and belonging to God are connected.

Now we might think making this connection has to do with what sort of "products" the church can offer to people who believe in God.

That if we offer products and services that appeal people who believe in God they will come and join us.

So If we build what they need, they will come... and if they're not coming we should tweak it to what they want.

And while the church does have a lot to offer... and we need to ensure that our ministries are meeting actual needs, we need to remember that we live in a consumer

society – and brothers and sister... "**consuming**" is not the same as "**belonging.**"

Consumers shop around, consumers are hesitant because a better deal may come along elsewhere, and consumers believe the customer is always right.

It's important to know that consuming what the church offers is not the same as belonging to God. Are you a church consumer – or are you a church believer?

Brothers and sisters if we want to understand the connection between believing and belonging we need to look at the statement people make: "*I believe in God*"

So if we believe in God, and apparently 72% of us do to some degree, then that means two things –

First, we feel like we have some sort of relationship with God, and second we have some reason to believe this relationship exists – that its not just in our heads.

So here's where we need to do what Hebrews 10:24 says – we have to think about how we can “spur” each other on towards love and good deeds...

And brothers and sisters getting “spurred” does not feel nice – it hurts, it stings. And that is how it feels for us when someone questions and scrutinizes our reasons for believing we have some sort of relationship with God.

That's what James 2 does - this scripture passage calls into question our statement that we “believe in God.”

It calls into question our confidence that we have some sort of relationship with God by pointing out that the evidence of such a claim is manifested in your actions – especially in your actions towards others – and if they aren't there your claim is false.

You see what you believe can't really stay private. If your beliefs are alive and well inside you they will evidence themselves in your actions and relationships with others.

In other words what you really believe about church, about worship, about community will show up in your actions towards it.

And the “spurring on” continues as James tells us that belief isn't enough! Now that really smarts, because that's the assumption behind the first part of the question we're looking at – “I believe in God – isn't that enough?... What do you mean I need church as well???”

But James says “even the devil **believes** in God...” (vs.19)

So friends, if we say we believe in God, if we believe we have some sort of relationship with Him, if we have faith in Him - then this must result in actions which prove it.

Now in James' day people were saying they had a relationship with God through Jesus, they were Christians. And they were gathering with other Christians for worship and prayer - but they weren't taking care of the poor and needy. So James has to call them on it in this scripture.

Now in our day we have the reverse situation.

We have a lot of people who are say at the very least they believe God, Jesus and the bible and I've discovered they are happy to help take care of the poor and needy – but they couldn't be bothered to come and gather together with other believers – to belong to a Church.

It's the reverse situation - but what James originally said still applies: Faith without deeds is dead!

Obviously it's hypocritical to be part of the church and neglect the poor...

But it's also hypocritical to do charity and neglect to belong to the church – both are evidence of a faith that is dead.

And a dead faith doesn't guarantee that we have a saving relationship with God – even though we might sincerely believe that we do.

You see - the action of helping those who are in need, of extending grace and mercy to those who might not deserve it... that reflects an awareness of how God deals with us as sinful people.

And if you have been given forgiveness from God through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ – you are naturally going to want to pass that on to others out of gratitude.

However if you engage in charity and help those in need – but you refuse to **belong** to the church - *a group of people whose core identity is a bunch of sinners who've received God's forgiveness in Christ...*

Then what you are actually stating you believe, by your actions, is that you are not a sinner and you do not need Christ's grace and forgiveness and you trust that your own good deeds will be sufficient enough to make up for whatever you've done wrong.

So, we may believe in God – but friends that is not enough! It's our actions which confirm the specifics of what we believe about who we are before God and how it is possible for us to have a relationship with Him.

So we need Church... because if we believe in God's son Jesus Christ then we belong amongst those who have received His grace and mercy... and continue to need his grace and mercy. We are part of His Body!

Brothers and Sisters, if the church is anything at all... It is a gathering of people who are characterized by admitting and experience the need for forgiveness from their sins in Jesus Christ - this is their common bond together.

If you have truly experienced God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ then you will be drawn to the church like a moth to the flame.

Because you'll want, you'll need, to be with others who have also experienced this life changing encounter with

the savior so you can share, encourage, and simply be with your fellow Christians – and because it is as a gathered group that we encounter God's presence in Jesus Christ

Jesus said – *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”* (Matt 18:20) in other words Jesus is about groups, even small groups – but groups nonetheless. Jesus had a group of disciples – not individual apprentices.

Even the very nature of God is communal, He is three in one. One God - but three persons in tri-unity.

That's not to say God doesn't approach us as individuals – but even in scripture when God met people on their own, Abraham, Moses, David, Paul... it was always with an end towards dealing with a group, his people – his church.

Friends, true and living faith in Jesus Christ, as apposed to simple “believing in God” will manifest itself in a desire to belong to Christ's body and discover how we fit in the church – as a hand or a foot or a mouth, or even as the

butt☺ So If we believe – then we need to belong – that’s why we need the church.

But sometimes our experience of belonging to the church can be more like a moth drawn to a bug zapper. We’ve got close and something happened and we got hurt.

I’m certain that all of us know someone who no longer goes to church because they’ve been hurt

As I was researching for this message I came across a Christian site that had asked people to answer the question of why they don’t go to church...

427 people and counting had poured out their stories of disappointment, disillusionment, anger and hurt.

Over and over people wrote about how they had been judged, slandered and accused, how the church was more interested in their money than asking why they hadn’t come out recently, how church leaders were abusive with

their power and afraid to allow people to ask hard questions because they didn’t have any answers.

A lady I knew back in Toronto told me that she stopped going to church when she was a little girl because her Sunday school teacher had ridiculed her for not completing her homework and refused to give her the reward which kids who finished the work received. She hasn’t been back since.

Friends it may have been a careless remark, an intentional jab or a more serious form of abuse that took place – but the result is that many people have walked away from the church because they have been hurt.

And I when I hear this friends, as I sat there and read through all those stories on that web-site... it stirs something deep in my spirit and I realize this is why I am a pastor... because I believe that Church should be...can be different from what those people experienced.

Christians ought not to do those sorts of things to each other – it is not who we are supposed to be.

And yet brothers and sisters – and I in no way mean to trivialize the hurt people have experienced, or excuse any wrongdoing by Christians - we must never forget that the church in its essence is a collection of forgiven sinners who are all works in progress.

Friends we need the church because belonging to it is part how God moves us closer towards the day when He will make us perfect and completely remove the sin and evil from our hearts altogether.

God starts by forgiving a bunch of us- and then he gathers us all together in a local church – sort of like putting together the cast of a reality TV show, and the result is often the same.

All of our differences, preferences and faults, character flaws, selfish tendencies, and rebellion are going to

eventually flare up and get up in each others faces and we'll react to one another and it's not always going to be pretty.

But without being stuck in this arrangement called the Church - we'd be able to go on believing that we're basically pretty good people who do good things and there nothing is really seriously and deeply wrong with us.

But that's an illusion friends, it's just not true.

But being together like this... stuck together in the Church reveals to each of us just how deep sin has affected us, and how great our need for Christ's forgiveness is.

It's why Jesus said *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Mark 2:17)

Friends, I always remind myself that I am a leader in the church; I am a minister not because I've studied and have



an MDiv, not because I manage to keep it all together...

But because I have learned how deep my sin goes and I have lots of practice going to Christ for forgiveness – and that is what I teach and model for others to do.

The church is by its nature a gathering that is founded on forgiveness and it is a community where forgiveness continues to take place and reconciliation characterizes it and that makes it something unique in this world.

This makes it different from a school, from a community association, from a service club, from a political organization, from a business...

So - belonging to the Church, gathering together frequently, is acting in a way that lives out our faith – it is a walking the talk that we are sinners in need of a savior.

And that unifies us; it overcomes our differences and disagreements.

I remember going into a leaders meeting once where controversy threatened to turn things ugly, but a handful of leaders decided beforehand to begin the meeting with a prayer of confession – admitting that we were sinners...

And after that prayer – the conflict deescalated and we were able to have a civil and productive meeting, and some people who do a lot of meetings in the business world went away from that experience commenting that they'd never seen anything like that before...

We can never forget that we are a community of forgiven sinners... and those of us who are leaders in this community must be the first ones to admit it and model what it means to seek Christ's forgiveness.

If not, we will not be able to overcome and move past the "church politics" and "gossip" which inevitably happens between us and causes so many to question "why" they need Church.

And... anyone who has forgotten that they are a sinner in need of Christ's forgiveness will no longer "connect" with a community whose essence is defined by this.

They will gradually become estranged from their fellow Christians, find excuses to do other things instead of being involved in church maybe only showing up on Christmas and Easter, and eventually drift they away....

And one day you might hear them say something like "Sure I believe in God, but why do I need church?"

Because the Church nurtures and supports what God is doing in our life, it verifies the authenticity of our faith, and it give us a context to be reminded us of who we really are... both negatively and positively!

Just a bunch of forgiven sinners saved by Christ's sacrifice, by His love and grace who will one day be made perfect – and spend the rest of eternity with our fellow Church members!

And the church is always has room for one more sinner, even one who has rejected us and walked away from us...

Maybe that's you this morning and somehow you ended up here in spite of not believing you need church... maybe it is someone you know....

So brothers and sisters we're going to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us admit our need for belonging to the church, to help those whom we know who struggle with this so that we make that connection between believing and belonging.

May Jesus Christ use you to help someone understand why they need His Church.

Let's pray!