

**I believe in God, Why do I need Church?
James 2:14-26, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

“Do you attend church somewhere?” I asked him.
“Well...” he said “I worship God in my own way on Sunday mornings... usually out on the golf course”

“You won’t see me around much on Sundays anymore because I need to take time for myself and get out to the mountains” she said to me “besides, I really feel closer to God out there.”

“Pastor, I’m so busy during the week and my husband is often away on business on weekends, it’s just too much to get the kids ready and go to church – but God doesn’t really care about church attendance right?”

Well friends whether God cares or not, as you can tell from these sentiments I’ve related to you, the majority of Canadians certainly don’t.

The survey data from back in 2008 shows 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! And only 37% believed that monthly church attendance was important.

Now I’m not a sociologist but I’m betting that those percentages haven’t increased in the past three 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 in, but not belongers.

And in the four years I’ve been active in this community I’ve come across many people who believe in God... even people who will speak to me about being born again and

having faith in Christ... but they feel no compulsion or need to belong.

And even in our church community I've come across people who talk a good talk about what they believe... but it will be months before I see them again at church, and you'd never find them participating in a small group.

You see friends, somehow, someday; someone has been handing out misinformation about the connection between believing in God and belonging to God.

And the only remedy for this is to go back to the scriptures to find out the truth of how believing and belonging are related.

This will help us clarify and articulate our own understanding of why we need church, because friends, along the way there will be times when we wonder why we do need it...

and it will also help us feel more prepared to respond to the family members, friends and neighbors we know who believe in God but feel they don't need church.

Now this morning I could try to sell you the church, I could give you five convincing, compelling and persuasive reasons why you need the church and hope that it will make the church more desirable to you.

But friends, while the church has a lot that it can offer... and we certainly should do things which will make it more attractive; it's easy to get sidetracked in trying to meet everyone's needs and wants and pretty soon we've forgotten to keep the main thing the main thing.

And so the church becomes a community centre, a soup kitchen, an art gallery, a charitable organization, instead of the church.

Not to mention that in our consumer society people tend to shop around for things... and if they find something else

which does a better job of meeting their particular need than what the church does, they'll go there instead.

So instead, I want to appeal to the sentiment which people are expressing in that first part of the question – “I believe in God!”

You see friends, if we believe in God, and apparently around 72% of us do to some degree, then that means two things, first we consider ourselves to have some sort of relationship with God, and second we have faith to do so.

And I think that means that people really do care about God and their faith, but they've never had the opportunity or someone who could help them fully understand these things.

And more often than not, in our attempts to make help people and children believe, we've simplified the faith to the point where it's become simplistic.

Let me give you an example... we tell people that they can have a “personal relationship with God, with Jesus” but if we don't explain that correctly...then what people hear and believe is that their relationship with God, with Jesus, is personal in the sense of private. That it's nobody's business but their own- so why do they need church?

That's why the passage that we read in James 2 this morning is such a challenging passage – because it essentially says that faith can't stay private, if it is alive and well inside you it will evidence itself in what you do.

Additionally it warns us that simply “believing” in God doesn't mean you have a living faith – as James says “hey even the devil believes in God...”

So friends, if we say we believe in God, if we believe we have some sort of relationship with Him, and faith in Him then it has to result in actions that prove it.

And I think that we care enough to want to know what sorts of actions prove this.

Now in James' day people were saying they were Christians, and they were gathering with other believers for worship and prayer, but they weren't taking care of the poor and needy. So James has to call them on it.

And friends, in our day we have people who are saying they are Christians, who are happy to take care of the poor and needy but couldn't be bothered to come gather together with other believers... so what James says still applies

Faith without deeds is dead – you can't be part of the church and neglect the poor, nor can you do charity and neglect to belong to the church.

So what we need to consider is that by neglecting to belong to the church we are subconsciously stating that our faith is really in ourselves and in our ability to be self-sufficient persons who do good things like charity, and we think that our relationship with God is based on this.

So, we believe in God but why do we need church?
Because if we truly want to have a relationship with God

then we need to face the fact that we've not been faithful and loyal to God and we need to be forgiven for this and only Christ can guarantee that forgiveness.

And friends, as the apostle Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12 - the church is the body of Christ, so absenting ourselves from it says we don't believe that we really need Christ and his forgiveness.

You see if the church is anything at all - it is a gathering of people who have experienced being forgiven for their sins by Jesus Christ, and they share this as a common bond together.

Listen to how Hebrews 10:19-25 describes it...

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith

brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.* ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,* ²⁵ *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

If you have truly experienced God's forgiveness from 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 around 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 group that we enter into God's presence – the most Holy Place.

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 disciples – not an apprentice.

God is three in one – one God but three persons.

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 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 😊

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 were hurt by a fellow Christian.

A friend of ours back in Toronto once told my wife 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 that the other kids received. She hasn't been back since.

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

Now without meaning to trivialize the hurt people have felt in these situations, I want to remind us that we can never forget that the church in its essence is a collection of forgiven sinners – a collection of saints.

Ironic isn't it that we expect the church to be a group of Saints in the sense of people who are perfect, and yet the word actually means – people who are being made holy, but are not yet perfect.

Because this is the process which God uses to move us towards the day when He will remove sin and evil from our hearts. He gathers us all together in the church – kind of like how they do the casting for a reality TV show.

The church is an odd group of people – who have been stuck together - all we have in common is the fact that we've been forgiven.

So all of our differences, preferences and faults, character flaws, selfish tendencies, and rebellion are going to get all up in each others faces and we'll react to one another and it's not always going to be pretty.

But without this arrangement we'd be able to go on believing that we're basically pretty good people who do good things and nothing is really wrong with us.

But that's an illusion friends, being together like this... in the church reveals to 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 together better than others...

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 in belonging to the church we are acting in a way that lives our out 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 Session meeting once where controversy threatened to turn things ugly, but a handful of elders 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” which inevitably happens between us.

And a person 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 it’s the place where our belief in God is nurtured and comes to life, it’s where the authenticity of our faith is verified, and it’s the community who reminds us of who we really are...

Just a forgiven sinner saved by Christ’s sacrifice, by His love and grace

And the church is always eager to welcome more sinners, Even those who have rejected them and walked away from them...

So friends, if we believe in God...then we belong to His church. Amen.