

September 15, 2024 - Back to Church Sunday – “Love And Good Deeds” Hebrews 10:24-25

“You are each a masterpiece of God, crafted for good works.”

“Being a part of the church means that I am a part of God’s good work in the world.”

"Good morning! Today, we are joining congregations all over our nation to take part in **National Back to Church Sunday, an initiative to reach out and invite our friends and neighbors to experience what church is all about.** First, I'd like to thank you for joining us this morning. We understand that for some of you, this might be your first time in a church ever, or perhaps it's been a while since you last attended. You might have certain expectations or feel a bit anxious about what today will be like. I want to put your mind at ease: we are a church that welcomes all, and we are absolutely thrilled to have you here."

Our purpose is not to judge, lecture, or ask you for money. We are here to welcome you with open arms, introduce you to Jesus, and share the hope and love that His church brings to the world. We want you to feel at home, knowing that you are accepted just as you are. Whether you're just curious, seeking answers, or looking for a community, you belong here. You are not just a guest but a part of our family.

For centuries, God has used groups of people who have followed Him and dedicated themselves to being part of His Kingdom in order to reach out in service to the world. The church has played a significant role in society and contributed to some of the most amazing developments the world has ever seen - from education to healthcare, from food banks to homeless shelters. The church has been at the forefront of human rights activism and social justice initiatives. This commitment to service is what inspires us, and we hope it will inspire you, too.

Once, a fourteenth-century Italian stained-glass artist was asked to create a large portrait for a cathedral in Chartres, France. Despite the beauty of all the pieces he had laid out, a small, clear piece about the size of a fingernail was left unused. Even on the day of the window’s completion, the tiny piece of clear glass remained on the ground.

The entire city gathered to witness the unveiling of a brilliant and beautiful stained-glass portrait. The artist stood in front of the crowd, made his speech, and dramatically pulled down the cloth cover. The crowd gasped at the beauty of the colorful window glowing in the sunlight. After a few seconds, however, the crowd grew silent, feeling that something was missing, that the portrait was unfinished. The great artist then walked over to where a little clear piece of glass lay, picked it up, and placed it in the portrait, right in the center of Jesus' eye. As the sun hit that little piece, it gave off a dazzling sparkle. The first thing they saw was that sparkle in Jesus' eye. **As small as that piece of glass was, it was very important to the portrait.**

Each of us is a small glass piece of God’s beautiful work in the world. We may think we are insignificant, but in God’s eyes, we are important. That's why I'm glad you are here. For Christ's sake, we all have the opportunity to make the world a better place. When we are pieced together **like a mosaic**, we will see amazing things happen.

Why should we encourage people to come to church? The primary reason is that we are part of God's family and community of faith. I believe that individuals come to church and commit their lives to Christ, not for earthly benefits. For example, when people start a new job, they are often interested in the salary and benefits. However, in this case, there is no salary and there are no benefits. It's a lifelong commitment, and while God will reward you here accordingly, the ultimate reward comes in eternal life!

According to Hebrews 10:24-25, I would say the number one reason is the *community*. **We need each other.** I would argue that it is impossible to live the Christian life without the support of brothers and sisters in Christ. That is precisely why God did not make us into lone ranger Christians, struggling on our own, listening to tapes of sermons and watching religious programs, and reading our Bibles and praying at home by ourselves. Instead, when God saved us, he said, "Look, I've done some work on your soul. But when you're born, you're born into a family, and when you accepted Christ, you're born into your second family – the church"

Following Christ wholeheartedly is not easy. We can expect difficulties and trials, and many of us will be tempted to give up. Living a Christian life is tough. We often disappoint others, God, and ourselves. It's easy to be a Christian on a Sunday, but what about day-to-day obedience? What about when we catch ourselves bad-mouthing people or entertaining impure thoughts? Like the early Jewish Christians, we might become discouraged and give up. This is where the command in verses 24 and 25 comes in: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

The writer emphasizes the importance of coming together for encouragement and support. Holding firmly to our beliefs requires the support of fellow Christians. We need each other as brothers and sisters in faith. The main purpose of the church is not just to hear sermons and sing but to gather for worship, support one another, and carry out good deeds to positively impact the world around us. Have you learned the value of being in need? At times, we tell ourselves that we have to be in control and that we can't admit our own needs. Yet, those times when we need assistance from others are often the times we become the most human. **The very time we feel like isolating ourselves from people is the time we need to be with people the most.**

It has been well-documented that thousands of Americans are leaving the church, and church attendance is dwindling and declining. According to the Barna Institute's study, the reasons for this trend include busyness, disbelief, hypocrisy, and politics. For some people, the church is seen as boring and lacking excitement. Many who were once committed are no longer interested, and some do not carry Jesus beyond the sanctuary.

Let's take inspiration from the early Christians, who attended church because of Jesus and then lived out his teachings among their neighbors. Their patient love changed the world. Today, I urge you to reconsider Jesus and God's love for saving the world. Remember your first love for God and **recognize the importance of your presence in the mosaic of life.** Come to Jesus, who is a way-maker, a destiny-changer, a great healer inside out, and who can offer you solutions for life's challenges.