

The Glorious Church

by Ralph Sexton

Ralph Sexton's sermon emphasizes the vital role of the local church as a community of believers dedicated to spiritual growth, moral instruction, and compassion in a troubled world.

Duration: 26:08

Scripture: Matthew 18:17, Acts 7:37-38, Ephesians 5:25, Ephesians 5:27

Topics: "Church Refuge", "Gods Word"

Description

In this sermon, the pastor emphasizes the importance of relying on the written, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. He highlights that the Word of God is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical tool that cleanses and transforms individuals. The pastor acknowledges that the world is filled with problems and challenges, but the church serves as a refuge and a place of hope. He emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ as the solution to all difficulties and encourages the congregation to trust in Him. The sermon also mentions the potential threat of the bird flu pandemic and relates it to the need for a church in the wilderness, where people can find comfort and salvation.

Transcript

Acts chapter 7, verse number 37. Acts 7, 37. This is that, Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me.

Him shall ye hear. Verse 38 reads, This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spoke to him in the Mount Sinai. And with our fathers who received the lively oracles to give unto us.

We realize today that there is a great mystery in the Word of God about the relationship of God Almighty, the Lord Jesus Christ, the blessed Holy Spirit, and the local church. I do not understand many things about God's mystery relationship. The more I study and the more I try to seek His face, the more I realize how little I know about this powerful element, the local church.

But God's plan and purpose apparently was that in every community around the world, there would be a local church. It doesn't matter what continent. It doesn't matter how big the city or how small the village.

God had a plan that in every community there would be a group of believers that would meet together, Bible believers, and they would follow the commandments and the tenets of the Scriptures and they would be living epistles to their day and to their generation. I was intrigued by the phrase that I read to you out of

the book of Acts about the church in the wilderness. Because today we dedicate a local church.

We set aside a piece of real estate. There's absolutely nothing holy about this building. There's not a holy chair and a holy piece of carpet and a holy light bulb.

The church is the believer. The church is the people. That is the church.

The building is but a tool. And we must understand that anything that is alive is growing and changing. And if we're alive in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we should be maturing as Bible believers and we should be changing to be like Him.

The Bible teaches that we are to be conformed to His image. It's God's plan that there would be salt in Asheville, North Carolina. There would be light.

Thankfully, we are a blessed community and we are not the only local church. We have many sister churches all across the city and the county and the state. It's not like this in every community in America.

It's not like this in every state in America. But in the South, in the Bible Belt, we are blessed. And many times I feel like we have a greater responsibility in the South in particular because we have more knowledge about the presence and the power of God than many communities.

My grandfather loved the Lord. My father loved the Lord. My children loved the Lord.

My grandchildren loved the Lord. A heritage. And many of you have been blessed with multiple generations of growing up in a local church and understanding the things of God and the responsibilities that we have that once a week we gather in a building on Sunday to make some sense and purpose out of life.

Why are we here and what is our assignment? In every community today that has a Bible believer, they will be meeting to study the Word of God. They will be singing hymns of praise. And if you look at passages like Matthew chapter 18 and verse 17, you'll see that the church was the instrument, the source of order and instruction for morals and values.

If we remove the church and its light and salt, then we produce a society with no morals and no values and ultimately no conscience, no caring and no compassion. In Ephesians chapter 5, if you want to turn with me to the book of Ephesians chapter 5, notice what the Word of God says in verse 25. Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church.

And then don't you love that phrase, and gave himself for it. If you read on into verse 26, it says that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word. That he might sanctify what? That he might sanctify the church.

And that he might cleanse it. Cleanse what? The church. And that he might, how is he going to perform that cleansing and that sanctifying? By the washing of water, an illustration of scrubbing and getting the dirt out and the soil out.

And how is he going to scrub the church, wash the church? How is that going to be happening? It's going to be by the written, inerrant, infallible Word of God. It's the living Word that cleanses me and changes me and helps me with my daily life. It is the practical part of going to church.

I meet here on Sunday and I receive instruction, I receive help, I receive comfort, I receive into my heart the very desires to go on and serve in this life because I've been washed by the Word of the Lord. We need to understand today that many of the churches and religions in America are in a transition. We've got to understand that God has given us a great and sober responsibility.

That even though we might be using the latest technology, maybe our program is today live around the world on broadband, live streaming video, yes we're on television, yes we're on a radio network, and yes we have great ability and technology even in our worship hour and our services, but that does not change the heritage that God has given to us as a church, that we are attached to the Word of God. And that with all of our heart and all of our faith, we should determine today that by the help and grace of God, we will stand with the very faith of our fathers that God is to this day. And that we would determine there will be another generation that will rise up and call Him holy and say, by the help of God, I will serve the Lord with my heart and with my faith.

And that our children will hear moms and dads and grandmothers and grandfathers say, there is a reason to get out of bed in the morning, there is a reason to go to work, there is a reason to be a responsible citizen in this community, is because God called us to be salt and light to this day and to this generation. A concern that I have is that we need to get to the point of understanding when we realize that a crowd is not necessarily a church, that we understand that people in large numbers does not make a church, but we need to see an intense group of people that are devoted and are determined that they're going to serve God and be true to the faith of their fathers. And they're going to be investing their life in others.

It's not the number that we need, it's the work and the heart that we need. It's not filling the auditorium we're after, it's filling the heart with the presence and the power of God that we're after. And we ought to make that a vow today, to understand church is just not a crowd.

We need to know it's a relationship with the Lord God Almighty. I talked to you in that opening scripture out of the book of Acts about a church in the wilderness and I thought early this morning as I was up praying for you and our services and all that would participate, I thought about Hurricane Stan and the devastation that was taking place in Central America, Mexico being devastated with floods, Guatemala, they said one fishing village, one report said 200 in the village, another report said 800 in the village, but said with the torrential rains that the whole village just slid off the mountain and every soul in the village died. Mayan Indians perished there in Guatemala.

A whole community disappeared a few hours ago. Hundreds dead in Central America. 190,000 square miles of our own nation devastated with back-to-back storms of unbelievable proportion.

Hundreds have died and lost their lives. Thousands of people today have no place to call home. And I'm not talking about a third world country.

I'm talking about the United States of America. I'm talking about citizens in Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama that are still living in tents today, still have no electricity, will still open a can of cold food and that will be their meal. And we're sitting on a padded pew in a beautiful air-conditioned building and the building next door is stacked to the ceiling with food and cakes and pastries and we're going to have a celebration, but not all of America will be in at our table today.

I thought about that church in the wilderness. I thought about Central America. I thought about our Gulf Coast.

I thought about the relationship while we're here enjoying it. We have young men and women in Iraq in the military that are literally giving their lives every single day that another group of people can have religious freedom and freedom of heart and freedom of spirit, that they can have a life for their children. Those men and women of courage and commitment.

I think one of our own is home today from the Marine Corps. Where is Lorena? Where are you? Raise your hand. Stand up, would you? There she is from the Marine Corps.

We're glad you're home. Honoring those that have served. I thought about that church in the wilderness.

I thought about North Korea and its nuclear threat. I thought about Iran and its bold threats. I thought about the acclamations that have been made, the statements that have been coming out the last 48 hours from Al-Qaeda.

The threat of New York City and 19 bombers that they say are available for the subway system there where 4 million people ride the subways every single day. I thought about the avian bird flu that has already stricken several Pacific Rim nations. But now, all of a sudden, they're saying that we're on the threat of a pandemic.

Not an epidemic, but a worldwide epidemic. You see, in the last seven days, there's been an outbreak of bird flu in Indonesia. A four-year-old boy has been diagnosed.

In Turkey, yesterday, 1,800 birds died with the bird flu. Romania, they've isolated and quarantined three villages because of the duck population has bird flu. Our own CDC in Atlanta said that when, they didn't say if, they said when the bird flu comes to the United States, it says that we will lose between 200,000 and 2 million of our citizens.

They will die with the power of this flu. They say it will equate itself with the great flu pandemic of 1918. They say that worldwide we could see 200 million people die.

I thought about a church in the wilderness. You say, well, pastor, what are you talking about? I'm telling you this is a very troubled old world. I'm telling you there are problems around the globe, but I don't have to go around the world to find problems.

I can go right out the door of this building. I can look inside this building and there's heartache and there's trouble and there's problems and there's death and there's dying and there's sorrow. There's broken homes and broken lives and broken dreams.

What's the hope? The only hope you have is a church in the wilderness. A place where you can call home. A place of refuge from the storm.

A place where your children can find out when there seems to be no hope and no way out, you've got a God that can invade that hopeless situation. When you can look down that long, dusty road and have no hope and no help, you can see a miracle coming up the road because it is the Lamb of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, our Kinsman Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, the very present help in the time of storm, the shelter in the midst of this chaos, the One that provides the rock, an anchor, a place of refuge. Are you not grateful for God's mysterious relationship? The church.

Ephesians 5, 27. This is a powerful scripture. He said that He might present it, what? The church to Himself.

A glorious church. Not having a spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. What kind of church? A glorious church.

Not having a spot. God said, I want to work with you as individual Bible believers and I want you to have a place to come together and study the Word and know the Word and to train your children and have help for your marriage and your hope for the future and the way we'll do that is we come together at church and while we're there, we'll work on not having a spot on the church. What is that spot? A spot of ego.

A spot of pride. A spot of bitterness. A spot of envy.

A spot of anger. A spot of criticism. A spot of cynicism.

A spot of blame. A spot of a grudge. All of those things that mar the life of anyone that's supposed to be walking like Christ.

I ought to go to church and say, God, You get my garment ready to meet You. Take out the spots. That the wrinkles will be removed.

The wrinkle of relationships. The wrinkle of not being right with God. The wrinkle in our marriages.

The wrinkles that we have in our relationship with our children, our friends. God said, I want to heal your home, your family. I want to take the past and put it under my marvelous power of forgiveness and let you start afresh and anew.

Church is the only place you can start over. Church is the only place that will give you hope in a hopeless situation. It's the love of God and the forgiving power of the Lord Jesus Christ that makes the church so special.

What matters in this world but God and each other? The things in life that matter, we quickly discover, are not even things at all. That's what we find out. In France, the vineyards of France, they have a different concept in raising the grapes than they do the vineyards of California.

In California, they're big on irrigation. They have all kinds of irrigation systems through the vineyards there in California. And therefore, if it's not raining every day or every other day, they irrigate the vines.

But in France, they have a different concept, the vendors there. They have a different philosophy. They found out that if they irrigated, that the root system of the vine stayed on the surface.

But if they don't irrigate, that the vine keeps putting down a root, a taproot, and it keeps going deeper and deeper and deeper until it hits groundwater. And then there may be a time when the vines will not be as productive. You could have an off-season during a drought, but you will not have a vine dying because of the drought, because it has grown to the groundwater and has a taproot.

And what we're asking God to do for all of us is when we go to church, we're in a dry and a barren land. And God, I know that I cannot survive on my own, but I'm going to step out on Your promises. And I don't have an irrigation to go with me to work or to school or the university.

I can't go to the office. I can't go into the courthouse and have someone hold my hand. But I do have a taproot that goes down deep, goes down deeper than my emotions or my feelings or my friends or my family.

A taproot of knowing, peace of mind, heart assurance, that the taproot of my soul is wrapped around the spring water of life itself, the eternal surging artisan well of the presence and power of God, where I know that my heart has been established and my comings and goings are established in the Word of God and in the fellowship of God. Therefore, I can go forth to serve in the church and not with a pat on the back or my name in the bulletin many times behind the scenes because I belong to the King and my taproot is wrapped around the rock of ages. I'm in love with Jesus.

Someone asked me the other day, they were mystified, they said, how in the world, what is your program? What do you do at Trinity? You have so many volunteers, thousands of hours every week. How do you get people so motivated? What system do you teach? And I said, it's very, very simple. I said, we have a small handbook called the Inerrant, Infallible Word of God and we found out that when we fall in love with Him that we do love Him so much that if we spent every single day doing something for Him, we could never repay Him for what He's done for us.

I said, we do not have merit badges. We do not have brownie points. You don't have to work or volunteer, pray so many hours to go to heaven.

I said, we just found a bunch of old bad people that were messed up in sin, drugs and alcohol out in the world, had no hope and had no future and introduced them to the loving, changing power of the Lord Jesus Christ and all things passed away, all things became new and they wanted to be a part of a new way of living and loving. They determined they wanted to invest their lives in letting other people know it's more than attending a church. It's more than sitting on a pew.

It's a way to live. And we have fun. We're so messed up, we really enjoy this.

We have been psychologically damaged by the fact that it's just fun. I can't get over the fact that all the things I used to do and all the things I used to say and all the time I used to stay in the office that a loving God would say, you know what, Ralph? I'll forgive you. You forgive yourself.

Make your life count. The power of the church. Not only do we have our responsibility as a church, but in verse 27 it also says, or any such thing.

It says that he might present himself a glorious church, not having a spot or a wrinkle. And have you noticed that next catchphrase, or any such thing? That it should be holy without blemish. You see, we have the cause of our church, our purpose for existence.

We have the commitment of our church, our past and our present. We have the continuance of our church, our future. And then we have the compassion of our church, the souls of men.

The Bible talks about a no man. Brother Wendell cares for my soul. How could we sit here and not care for the souls? Brother Mark Logan just got back from Africa.

Brother Wendell just got back from Egypt. We have members of our church literally around the globe today. The sun never goes down on the ministries of this local church.

Because somewhere in Honduras today, someone needs to know that someone cares for their soul. That someone cares in Haiti today. That someone cares in Israel today.

It doesn't matter where they live. Someone cares. And that they're standing there declaring with the Word of God, Tina, whosoever will may come.

We're just sinners saved by grace. How could we be handlers of the truth of God's Word? But see, what happened is our example, our elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible says that he looked down and he saw the multitude, Chris, and he was moved to compassion. Something ought to touch our heart, Tom, when we see all those people hurting.

It ought to move us to compassion. But notice the phrasing in verse 32. This is a great mystery.

But I speak concerning Christ and the church. What is that great mystery? I don't understand all that mystery. But I do know this much.

That Jesus loves you and He loves me. And there's a great mystery there. We have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

He has determined today that we can have a beginning afresh and anew in Him. And He established the local church. Look what the Bible says in 2 Chronicles 7. They had a building dedication back in the Old Testament.

Chapter 7 talks about that building dedication. Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices. And the glory of the Lord filled the house.

And the priest could not enter into the house of the Lord because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house. And when the children of Israel saw how the fire came down and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement and worshiped and praised the Lord and said, For He is good, for His mercy endureth forever. If we ought to leave out of this building saying one thing, we ought to say, For the Lord, He is good.

Look around you and see what He hath provided. And His mercies endure forever.

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