

Why #ChurchIsEssential

Hebrews 3:12–14

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Introduction

Church is essential. That is a phrase that we have grown accustomed to hearing in this latest season of quarantine, and lawsuits, and political warfare. It's a statement that, just a year ago, would have seemed entirely superfluous—patently obvious, not only to the Christian, but even to anyone remotely familiar with the sanctity of religious liberty in America. Of course church is essential in a country that was literally founded on the idea that men and women ought to be free to worship God without intrusion from the government! Of course church is essential when it's commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ that His followers gather on the first day of the week to praise His name, to celebrate His Gospel, to edify and to equip His people, to serve one another in love.

But back in March, when the governing authorities instituted lockdowns of much of society, they had to make allowances for certain businesses and services to remain open and accessible, lest the solution to the Coronavirus be worse than the virus itself. Grocery stores and supermarkets needed to remain open, so that people could have access to food. Hospitals needed to remain open, obviously, so people could have access to healthcare. Restaurants still needed to allow drive-thru and delivery and carry-out options, so that local economies wouldn't be totally destroyed by the bankruptcy of its businesses. These services were deemed essential, and so they could remain open even in the midst of a pandemic. And while our government was at it, they decided that marijuana dispensaries, strip clubs, and abortion clinics were also essential. The Coronavirus was bad, they told us, but not *so* bad as to demand that society cease for a moment from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

But church services—these were on the list of non-essential services. And of course, you all know, the rest is history. After more than four months of being absent, Pastor John and the elders of Grace Church decided that we needed to meet—even in defiance of the governing of authorities—precisely because church *is* essential. The meaning of the term “church” is *assembly—ekklesia*, the assembly of those called out from the world and into the fellowship of the redeemed. A non-assembling assembly is a contradiction in terms. And so, by the grace of God, and much to the chagrin of our governing officials, here we are as the people of God gathered in the name of Jesus Christ to bring glory and honor to Him.

But I think amidst all the commotion—all of the lawsuits, and health department visits, and fines, and media interviews—we can lose sight of precisely *why* church is essential. It's important for

us to stand up against those who would wear away at religious freedom; as the people of God in a free society, I believe it's our responsibility, to the extent that we're able, to steward the gifts of liberty afforded to us by the common grace of God, and pass those down to our children—to the next generation of the church in this nation.

But more than that—in fact, much more than that, perhaps infinitely more than that—church is essential because it is a means of God's grace to us. We draw life and strength and spiritual power through the Holy Spirit, by gathering to worship the Lord Jesus in obedience to His command. It is in the fellowship of the church that we expose ourselves to the regular, skillful preaching of the Word of God—bringing the searching light of the Word of our Lord to bear on our lives, and having it convict us of our sin, show us our need for salvation, having it magnify the beauty of Jesus in all His sovereign power to save, feeding our faith in Him, and illuminating to us the way of holiness whereby we might walk in obedience to Him. It's in the fellowship of the church that we magnify the worth of Christ in corporate worship, in a way that's unique and stands out since we do so as the full, gathered assembly in this place. It's in the fellowship of the church that we partake in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which act as visible pictures of the Gospel, pressing the truths of Scripture afresh upon our consciences, and comforting us in the grace of Christ. It's in the fellowship of the church that we minister to one another and build one another up as we use the gifts Christ has given us. And it's in the fellowship of the church that we lovingly confront one another and help one another deal with sin. Yes, indeed, dear friends, church is essential.

And it's that last thing I mentioned—helping one another deal with sin in our lives—that I want to highlight this morning. Church is essential because fellowship in the body of Christ is a key means by which the Holy Spirit sanctifies the people of God. It is a key means by which the body of Christ is progressively purified, by which sin is increasingly put to death in the saints, by which you and I are preserved in our faith, and safeguarded against the dangers of unbelief, apostasy, and judgment.

And to focus on that this morning, we're going to turn to the Book of Hebrews, and chapter 3, and verses 12 to 14. As you're turning there, let me give a brief introduction to the context of the Book of Hebrews. The letter to the Hebrews was written to Hebrew Christians—to people of Jewish descent who had made a profession of faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. And these Jewish Christians were facing persecution from the Roman Empire on account of their Christianity. And as a result, many of these believers were being tempted to abandon their association with Christianity and to return to Judaism. Whether they were losing confidence in the Gospel, or whether they just figured they might be able to hide from persecution by focusing on their Jewishness rather than their Christianity for a while, there was this tentativeness about their commitment to Christ.

And so the Book of Hebrews was written to call this congregation to see the insufficiency of Judaism to provide the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness before God that they needed; to abandon whatever doubts they had in the Gospel; and to come all the way to Christ in genuine, persevering faith. The letter is called a “word of exhortation” in chapter 13 verse 22, which was a way of describing what we would think of today as a sermon. And throughout the Book, you can tell it is a word of exhortation, because over and over again you hear these repeated exhortations that the professing believers not fall away and to come all the way to Christ: “You can’t be half in and half out! You can’t straddle the fence! Don’t turn back to Judaism, when the substance of all that Judaism pointed you to has arrived in Christ! Don’t fall away, back into a religious system of works-righteousness that cannot save you!” He’ll say in chapter 7 verse 19 that “the law made nothing perfect,” and in chapter 10 verse 11, that the Old Testament sacrifices “can never take away sins.”

The law can only show us the standard of righteousness, but it can’t give us the power to obey. And therefore, what the law does is it discovers to us our sin, and then points us to the only One who has obeyed the law, who has performed righteousness perfectly, and calls us to trust in His obedience, in His works, not at all in our own. And that One is the Lord Jesus Christ. “The whole point of the law is to get you to Jesus Christ! And now here you are, tempted to leave Jesus Christ to go back to the law!”

And it’s in that context that we come to our text this morning, to Hebrews chapter 3, verses 12 to 14. Follow along with me as I read. He says, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.”

And we see **three key components** of this text present themselves before us: there is the **peril** to be avoided, the **perseverance** to be pursued, and the **plan** for perseverance. And at the end of it, I believe we’ll see why church is essential.

I. The Peril to Be Avoided

First, **the peril to be avoided**. We see it both in verse 12 and verse 13. The author speaks of being “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,” and “falling away from the living God.”

This concept of “falling away from the living God” is a definition of the term *apostasy*. Some of you will have heard that word before. Apostasy means, literally, to fall away. And it’s the idea of somebody who is outwardly Christian—someone who professes faith in Christ, someone whose manner of life gives a reasonable indication that he believes in Jesus—who then, sometime later

on in his life, is hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and falls away from the living God. Renounces his faith in the Gospel. Rejects the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this apostasy is an ever-present **peril**—an ever-present threat, an ever-present danger—to the church of God. I wonder if, as you walked into Grace Church this morning, you thought to yourself that you were in danger. That you were in danger not only from crossing the street and making sure you didn't get hit by a car; a danger not only from the threat of catching the coronavirus; a danger not only from authorities seeking legal action against us: but the danger of the deceitfulness of sin that hardens the heart of a professing Christian imperceptibly, moment by moment wearing away at the enamel of faith.

Apostasy is *the* most serious, severe, terrifying, and heart-breaking reality that the people of God ever have to grapple with: that someone who is amongst the fellowship of the Lord's people, who is a member of the church, who professes with his mouth to love and trust in Christ, who seems engaged in the battle against sin, who feels guilty about sin and purposes to fight sin in his life, someone who reads his Bible and prays and even evangelizes—even tells other people about how to be saved—such a one can suddenly, seemingly without warning, totally renounce his faith in Christ, and fall away from the living God.

Now, if you're listening carefully, you're saying, "Wait a minute! Are you saying it's possible to lose my salvation?" No. I'm not saying that. In John 6:39, Jesus says, "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." Jesus takes it as a personal responsibility, as the Shepherd of the Sheep, to, once the Father has given those sheep to Him, to lose *none* of them. And so it would be a blight on the character of the Shepherd if He were to lose any one sheep. He says, "I lose *nothing*."

In John 10:27–29, He says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give *eternal* life to them,"—not *temporary* life! Not a kind of life that has an expiration date! "I give *eternal* life to them, and they will *never* perish; and *no one* will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one* is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." You can't get them from the Son; you can't get them from the Father! Both of them are entirely invested in holding on to these sheep!

Some people say, "Well, sure, no one can *snatch* Christians out of the Father's hand or out of the Son's hand. But certain sheep can *jump* out of His hand. Nothing external to us can take us away, but we ourselves can decide we're not following Jesus anymore." Have you heard that? It's nonsense! We are not greater than the Father. We are not greater than the Son. We cannot loosen the iron grip of God's love. "O love that *will not* let me go!" It's as Paul says in Romans 8:38–39 that "neither death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, *nor any other created thing*, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in

Christ Jesus our Lord.” He covers the gamut of human experience: nothing can separate us! And after he lists everything he can possibly think of that cannot separate us from Christ, he says, “nor any other created thing.” And so to the person who says, “Well, we can’t be *snatched* out, but we can *jump* out,” I ask you: Are you a created thing? Are you created? Well then, you’re on the list of the things that can’t separate us from Christ! Even you cannot separate yourself from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, just as you couldn’t earn for yourself the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

So you say, “Ok, well if I can’t lose my salvation, how can you warn us against apostasy? Isn’t that an empty, hollow warning? If I’m a Christian and I can’t lose my salvation—if I can’t fall away—why are you warning me? Why is the author of Hebrews warning the Hebrew Christians not to fall away from the living God?” And the answer is that those who do fall away were never genuinely saved to begin with. That’s the answer that Scripture gives. 1 John 2:19 says, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”

Here were people who were within the fellowship, within the visible church, who “were not *of* us.” You say, “What do you mean not *of* us?! I joined! I was baptized in the tank at the evening service! I can show you my baptism certificate! I can show you the date of my Right Hand of Fellowship ceremony! I can show you my name on the membership rolls! I get the offering envelopes! What do you mean, ‘I’m not *of* you?’” Well, because, what it means to be *of* the people of God has very little to do with where your name appears on a list, or what rituals you’ve performed. It has everything to do with whether you know Christ. It has everything to do with whether Christ is genuinely dwelling in your hearts through faith, whether the Holy Spirit is dwelling in you, leading you to put to death the deeds of the body. One of the definitions of being “*of* us,” John says, is remaining *with* us.

And there are people among us—people in this room—in whom there is, at this very moment, as our text says, “an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” You may not fall away tomorrow. Your drift from the truth may be ever so slight. It may be imperceptible to you. But if you’re outside of Christ this morning, however much you superficially associate yourself with the people of God, your heart is in the process of falling away. Church members! Bible readers! Compassionate servants! Even evangelists—who are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and eventually renounce faith in the Son of God, and prove themselves to never have been believers in the first place.

And sometimes that slide is long. Sometimes, it’s calling yourself a Christian for years longer than you’re living like one. Sometimes it’s continuing to profess faith in Jesus, even while your life, outwardly, and your life inwardly, as you quiet your soul and get honest with yourself, does not match that profession. You start to tolerate things that the Scriptures tell you a Christian

doesn't tolerate. You start to become entertained by the sins Christ died for, things the Scripture tells you a Christian is repulsed by. You start to leave off the spiritual disciplines—disinterest in Bible reading, bored with prayer, inconsistent in church attendance. And then all of a sudden you start asking yourself, "Is it really right to tell two consenting adults that they ought not to be with one another, if they love one another?" "Is it really right to tell a woman that she can't do what she wills with her own body?" "Does Jesus really care what I do in my bedroom?" "But doesn't God just want me to be happy?!" And you go through each checkpoint on this long slide, even while calling yourself a Christian. And the end of it is that you fall away from the living God.

You need to get honest with yourself. What sin has wormed its way into your life, so that you're being hardened by its deceitfulness? so that you're starting to doubt what you know to be true, so you can convince yourself you really *can* live the way your flesh tells you you want to live? that you don't need to be *so* engaged in this painful battle against sin, that requires discipline, that starves you of the immediate gratification of the false-pleasures of sin (even though it promises you the eternal pleasures of fellowship with Christ)?

And so you see, it's not that genuine Christians lose their salvation. It's that some people associate with the people of God, but are *not* the people of God. That's why in 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul calls those inside the church to: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!" If being a Christian meant nothing more than *saying*, "I believe in Jesus"—if everyone was a Christian who *says* he is—why would Paul ever say, "Test yourselves! Examine yourselves!" "What do you mean, 'Examine myself'? I signed the card! I prayed the prayer! I got baptized! I go to church every Sunday! I vote conservative!" Because it's possible to make an outward profession of faith, and yet be self-deceived—and still be unregenerate and outside of Christ.

And we know that from that terrifying passage, Matthew 7:21–23, where Jesus says, "Not everyone who *says* to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter." Christianity is not merely a matter of what you say with your mouth. It's a matter of whether what you say with your mouth is genuinely believed in your heart, which then transforms into action in your life. In fact, Jesus says, verse 22, "Many will say to Me on that day." Note: "*Many* will say to Me on that great day of judgment, when they come to stand before the Judge of the earth to give an account for their lives"—they'll say, "Lord, Lord"—they know to call Jesus Lord—"Did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" "Didn't we belong to the church? Didn't we exercise spiritual gifts? Didn't we serve You in ministry? Didn't we do it all in Your name—not for our glory but for Yours?" "And then I will declare to them," Jesus says, "I never knew you." Imagine hearing that from Jesus. You go to that day, and you see Him. And you say, "Jesus, it's me! We've walked together for years, for decades. I know

You!” And Jesus says, “Funny, I don’t know *you*.” “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

“Not everyone who *says*, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who *does* the will of My Father.” And what is the will of His Father? That you believe truly and enduringly upon the One whom He’s sent! That you follow after Christ, and demonstrate the genuineness of your faith by a life of obedience. You’re not *saved* by that life; your life does not *earn* that salvation; *faith alone* is the instrument by which you lay hold of the works of the One who earned salvation. But a changed life is the evidence that that faith *has* laid hold of Christ, and that He is now in you, transforming you, molding you, shaping you, subduing the lusts of your heart, and conforming you into His own image day by day.

The parable of the soils teaches us the same principle. Turn to Matthew 13. In this parable, Jesus compares the many different responses to the Gospel to seed sown on a path, on rocky soil, on thorny soil, and on fertile soil. The same seed falls on four soils, and only one of them produces a fruitful crop. In Matthew 13:20–22, Jesus says: “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy.” “I believe! I’m saved! I love Jesus! I hate sin! I don’t want my life of sin anymore! Jesus died for me!” “Yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary. And when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”

There have been those among us who have been the rocky soil, who have been the thorny soil—people who have superficially received the Word of God immediately with joy. But along comes affliction, or persecution, or the cares of the world, or the glories of riches, and this once promising plant withers in the heat of the sun. Affliction: “You mean to tell me that I’m a Christian, that I go to church, that I read my Bible, that I obey Jesus, and I still get cancer?! What kind of God is that?” Persecution: “You mean I could actually get fined, or even arrested, for coming to church?” The cares of the world: “I don’t know about how fanatical I need to be with this Christianity stuff. I mean my family, my friends—they won’t even speak to me anymore!”

And so they go out *from* us—they abandon the community of the only true Gospel. And they prove that they were never really *of* us—that they never had any firm root of salvation to begin with. This is the **peril** that threatens each one of us.

II. The Perseverance to Be Pursued

And so there is the peril to be avoided. We also see in this text, number two, the **perseverance to be pursued**. Look at verse 14: “We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the

beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” We must not fall away from the living God, but we must hold fast until the end. The author is saying that we must persevere in faith. We cannot content ourselves with having made a profession of faith in the past. We must *go on* believing, day after day, until the day that our faith becomes sight.

In 1 Corinthians 15:2, Paul calls us to **pursue this perseverance** when he says: “You are saved, *if you hold fast* the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.” Failing to hold fast the word of the Gospel that Paul had preached to them would mean that they had believed in vain—in emptiness, in a way that reveals that their “faith” was not true faith at all.

James chapter 2 speaks about the same thing: that there is such a thing as *demon* faith. James 2:19: He says, “You believe that God is one.” Good! God *is* one. You know who else believes that God is one? Demons believe that God is one! You know who has great theology? Satan has amazing theology, because he’s been able to study God and His works since the very creation of the world! So, you can believe true things *about* Jesus, you can believe true things *about* salvation and the afterlife and spirituality, and your faith can be *demon* faith. It can be *dead* faith, James goes on to say, because “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:26). It’s not that you’re saved *by* the works; it’s that the *faith* by which you *are* saved *works*. Or, as the Reformers put it, we are saved *by faith alone*, but not by a faith that *is* alone. The London Baptist Confession of 1689 put it this way: “Faith that receives and rests on Christ and his righteousness is the only instrument of justification. Yet it is not alone in the person justified, but it is always accompanied with all other saving graces. It is not a dead faith, but works through love.”

And so, Colossians 1:22 says, “He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—” And wouldn’t it be glorious if that was the end of the sentence! Listen to that! Bask in that, believer! “He has now reconciled you, in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.” Amen! Praise God for the work of Christ! And then there’s an ‘if’! Verse 23: “...*if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast*, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard.”

And then back to our text, Hebrews 3:14: “For we have become partakers of Christ...” Praise God! We have a share in Jesus! in the Son of God! in the Champion of salvation! in the perfect Israelite! in the obeyer and fulfiller of the law! *If*. “We have become partakers of Christ *if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.*” There is a **perseverance to be pursued**. We must persevere in faith.

Now, some of you are saying, “That just sounds an awful lot like you’re telling me my salvation depends on my perseverance. Are you saying that Jesus saves me, but I’ve got to keep myself saved?” Good question. No. I am not saying that. Look at the text. The text does not say, “If we

hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, we *will become* partakers of Christ.” It doesn’t say that. It says, “If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, we *have become* partakers of Christ.” You see the difference the verb tense makes. “If A is true of you, B *will have been* true of you. If A happens now, it means that B happened some time in the past.” Listen carefully: our perseverance in faith until the end doesn’t *win* us salvation; it confirms and evidences that *prior to* our perseverance we have truly been granted salvation. Enduring to the end is the evidence that the faith we had was real, and not phony. Because true, saving faith perseveres. Phony, spurious faith dwindles away.

And so, no, our perseverance does not save us. But we will not be saved *without* persevering. Enduring, persevering faith in the true Gospel of Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. And those who become enamored with false teaching, those who become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (“I just can’t let go of my pet sin, even for Christ!”), those who entertain notions of abandoning the Gospel, they are in danger of committing apostasy, of falling away from the living God. And none of them were planning on falling away! No one says, “Yeah, I think I’ll be a Christian for 7 or 8 years, and then I’ll renounce Christ.” No one thinks it’s going to be them. Not even Judas! “Surely, it is not I, Lord!”

And as I said, apostasy is a heart-breaking reality, because the consequences are so severe. The writer of Hebrews goes on to speak about the sin of apostasy in chapter 10 verse 26. He says, “If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” If you leave Christ, who is the only sacrifice for sins, there’s no sacrifice left! There only remains, verse 27, “a terrifying expectation of judgment and ‘the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.’” That is severe language. If you don’t like fire and brimstone preaching, you don’t like the Bible. Verse 28 speaks of “severe punishment.” Verse 31 says, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Rejection of God, rejection of Christ, rejection of the Gospel, rejection of the life lived in a manner worthy of the Gospel—in full knowledge of and exposure to the truth—can only mean a terrifying expectation of judgment.

III. The Plan for Perseverance

We could wish that the church would never experience this—that we would never go through the grief and the sadness and the pain of having one whom we’ve regarded as a brother or sister in Christ deny Christ, and lay themselves open to such a terrifying expectation of judgment. But in the inscrutable wisdom of God, that’s not to be so. We do experience this. We do witness apostasy. Some of you, as I’ve been speaking, have already been thinking of someone who has fallen prey to the seduction of sin or of false doctrine and has turned away from Christ. A son or daughter, a mother or father, a husband or wife, a dear friend. You know this pain. This sense of grief, and mourning, and loss.

And if there was something you knew you could have done to prevent that, I'd bet that every last one of you who is a genuine follower of Christ would be willing to do whatever it would take—short of sin—to prevent it! Even if it were inconvenient! Even if it were difficult! Even if it disrupted your schedule! Even if it made you look foolish! You'd do it.

Friends, there is a peril to be avoided. The world, the flesh, and the devil himself are in constant pursuit of the affection and the fidelity of you, and of your brothers and sisters in Christ! And that means there is a perseverance to be pursued. We must hold fast to the end! But that brings us to our **third point** for this morning. And that is **the plan for perseverance**. Look at Hebrews 3:12. He says, "I don't want you falling away from the living God." "So what do I do, author of Hebrews?" He says, "*Take care* brethren." See to it! Watch out! Be concerned with! Be preoccupied with! Set your minds on! "*Take care* that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." Ok, but how do I do that? What's at least one way that I can "take care"? Verse 13: "But *encourage one another* day after day...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!"

And here's the key point for the morning. Everything else I've said this morning was introduction to get to this. The **peril** of apostasy is ever-present. We must persevere. And one of the primary means by which we are safeguarded from apostasy is the ministry of one another *to* one another in the fellowship of the faith! "Encourage *one another*." The word "encourage" is *parakaleō*—to come alongside another and speak encouragement.

"Dear brother, isn't our Father a *kind* God? How vast and how free is His love toward sinners!"

"Dear sister, isn't our Savior full of grace? How far He condescends—from the throne of heaven, to the cross of Calvary—to rescue us from our deserved punishment!"

"Brother, isn't the fellowship and the consolation of the Spirit sweet? What a comfort He is to us even in our brokenheartedness!"

"Oh how much more enjoyable is the fellowship with Christ in the Scriptures, and on the path of obedience, than the passing pleasures of sin!"

"Press on! Don't turn back! Our reward is nearer to us now than it's ever been! Here we have no lasting city—nothing that could ever truly and enduringly satisfy the longings of our souls! Oh, but Christ does satisfy! Don't forsake your faithfulness to Him! Press on!"

"Don't go after that! Don't carry and coddle that sin! Christ is more enjoyable! Heaven brings a sweeter rest!"

Oh, dear brothers and sisters, how we need to hear that from one another! How we need to hear the glories of the character and the deeds of our God celebrated in front of us by our fellow believers! How it deadens our hearts to the allure of sin, and deepens our thirst for the Fountain of Living Waters! And the key point is: my heart doesn't get there naturally! My heart is in a constant battle with the temptations of sin! And when my flesh gets the upper hand, I need *you* to snap me out of it! I need you to *encourage* me, day after day, so that I won't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

But the word *parakaleō* doesn't only have the connotation of encouragement. In many contexts in the New Testament, it can also mean "exhort," or "admonish." *Exhort* one another! Get in each other's face!

"Hey brother, get back in line! Stop fooling with this stuff! It's too long already, that you've cherished that sin and not made war against it!"

"It's too long that you've taken fire into your bosom while expecting not to be burned!"

"It's too long that you've cherished that false doctrine—that novel take on the Trinity, or on the hypostatic union of Christ, or on Christ's saving work on the cross! The whole of church history has stood in darkness, but you're convinced you've got it figured out! And you're dancing on the brink of hell."

And this text says that the way that you and I are saved from *that*, is when others of you and I come alongside one another and say, "Get in line!" "Brother, what are you doing? I can see it. Others can see it. What are you waiting for? Why are you messing around with this fruitless sin that doesn't satisfy? this doctrine that doesn't give glory and honor to Jesus?"

You see, Grace Church, *you* are God's **plan to preserve** your brothers and sisters. You are His appointed means to make sure the person next to you doesn't fall away from the living God, and isn't hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. And let me tell you something: that is *the* calling of your life. Whether you're a pastor, a professor, a missionary, or none of those things by a mile—the ministry that you have been called to as a *Christian* is to see that that doesn't happen to the Christians around you.

This is what it means to be in fellowship. Fellowship is not coffee and a donut. Fellowship is not, "Hey, how are the kids? Where'd you go on vacation?" Fellowship is, "How are you *doing*? Really. What's your Bible reading like? Are you having satisfying, enjoyable communion with Christ each day in the Scriptures? What sin are you battling? What is the Spirit working within you to put off? so that I can pray for that battle with sin and ask you about it next week, so that I

can make sure that if I see it emerging in your life I can hold you accountable for it and help you put it to death.”

Hebrews 10:26–31—we read it before—outlines the consequences of apostasy: that terrifying expectation of judgment, that furious fire. But what comes immediately before all that, in verses 24 and 25? “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but *encouraging* one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” How do we avoid that terrifying expectation of judgment? What is God’s **plan for perseverance**, so we never come to that furious fire? Not forsaking the assembly, but encouraging one another!

Friends, *this* is why “church is essential”! It’s not so that we can stick it to Newsom. It’s not so that we can keep our parking lots. It’s not so that we can defend our Constitutional rights. Church is essential because apostasy is real.

You may think that “real church” is listening to the sermon, and so you can “attend online” via the live stream. And of course, you *can* hear the sermon from your living room. Praise God for that technology that brings the Word to the sick, and the infirm, and across the planet! And of course, without the skillful teaching of the Word of God—the accurate handling of the Scriptures—there is no real church. But listen: there are a lot of people who can listen to sermons and go straight to their destruction, because they don’t have somebody in their life saying, “Did *you* get that? Did *you* hear that? Are *you* making application there? Can you help *me* make application there?” The Puritan Thomas Watson said, “The devil does not care how many sermon pills you take, so long as they do not work upon your conscience.”

We need the fellowship of the body of Christ. And I mean genuine fellowship. I don’t mean shallow, casual, “Hi-Bye” *acquaintance* relationships. I mean fellowship! The watchful eye of a brother or a sister who feels so invested in our spiritual well-being that they, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11, burn with a fierce, godly jealousy when they see us enticed by sin! who are willing to have difficult conversations and be thought foolish or judgmental, for the sake of safeguarding our sincere and pure devotion to Christ! That doesn’t happen in virtual church. Those kinds of relationships are forged in the furnace of the life of the congregation—the gathered assembly, face to face, Bible to Bible, laboring in prayer, participating in the ordinary means of grace, day after day after day.

Encourage one another. Exhort one another. Labor with one another in battling sin. Who do you go to when you need help killing sin in your life? There ought to be at least one person outside your family who you can call at any time of the day or night and say, “I need you to speak truth to me! I need to you show me the loveliness of Christ! I need you to remind me of the heinousness of sin! I need you to celebrate grace with me! Speak to me of the Gospel, by which

Christ my Substitute stands in my place and bears all my punishment on the cross, so that I can go free! so that even though I ought to be condemned and discarded, I can be forgiven, and accepted, and welcomed into the family of God! Remind me that if that's my identity—if that's who I am—then it is absolutely ridiculous for me to go on trifling with sin! that I ought to consider myself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:11)! How can I who died to sin still live in it (Rom 6:2)? I have been raised with Christ to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4)! And walk with Him I must." We need each other, Grace Church.

And oh, how ridiculous would it be if we fought all this time for the right to *meet* as the church on Sundays, and then we failed to *live* as the church day by day, week by week? What does it all mean if we can gather together in the same room, and we're just a show? if this gathering is not the context out of which we foster genuine, biblical fellowship that strengthens one another against the deceitfulness of sin? That's why you need to be in a fellowship group first hour. That's why you need to be in a Bible study during the week. That's why you need to meet with one another in your homes. Relationships are about you killing sin so sin won't kill you! And you need your brothers' and sisters' help for that. And God provides the church for that.

Conclusion

That's why "Church is Essential." *That's* why our Pastor has fought as hard and as valiantly as he has for us to keep gathering together. Not so that you can have a nifty hashtag on Twitter. But so that, in obedience to Christ, we would have a context in which we pursue relationships with one another—even outside the gathered assembly—so that we can encourage one another. So that we can exhort one another. So that "there be not in any one of you an evil unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." So that none of you will "be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." So that you would treasure Christ, hate sin, put sin to death, follow Jesus, and live in a way that He is worthy of.