

## INTRODUCTION

I saw a funny post about: what if we took the excuses people give for not going to church, and applied them to other important things in life, like taking a shower? Then you'd have a list like this: "top 10 reasons not to shower."

1. I don't have time
2. I was forced to shower as a child
3. People who make shampoo are only after your money
4. I only shower on special occasions like Christmas and Easter
5. People who shower are hypocrites—they think they're cleaner than everyone else
6. There are so many different kinds of soap, I can't decide which one is best.
7. I used to shower, but it got boring
8. None of my friends shower
9. The bathroom is always too warm or too cold
10. I'll start showering when I get older and dirtier.

How important is church to you? Is it at least as important as taking a shower? And *why* is the church important to you? What are you looking to get out of it?

If church is minimally important to us, or if the reasons we go are misguided, then we miss out on what God intended the church for. Many people who struggle spiritually, it's because they have misunderstandings about what the church is.

Whenever people leave AZ, one thing I really hope we instilled in them before they go is: how important the church is. To go "up and out" can't be done without the church.

Before we get into it, let's define terms. "Church" is not a building, it's the people, the community of believers. And then there's the universal church (all people of God in the world) and the local church (the specific local community of believers we belong to).

Matthew 16:18-19 is a crucial statement to understand if you plan on being in a church in the future. It's about universal church, so we'll talk about what it's saying about that. And then we'll end with what it means for our involvement with the local church.

Main point is just this: The church has to be a top priority in our lives. The passage makes three cases for that.

### I. THE CHURCH IS PERMANENT

If we're going to make something a priority, we want to know it's going to be worth it. If we're considering a new job, we want to know it's going to be stable and we won't be out in 6 months.

What about the Church? How stable is it? I can't guarantee how long *this* church will be around, but how stable is the universal Church? How reliable? How legitimate?

**A. Christ is permanent**

It's permanent. And that's because Christ is permanent. He says he is the rock it's built on. This is one of my favorite identities of Christ, because everything around us is so unstable.

1. Who he is is a rock. Colossians 1:15: He was before time. Stands outside of time, not affected by time. He is unchangeable.
2. What he did is a rock. Hebrews 10:12: He sat down after his work on the cross! Because he was done! He made full and final payment for sin, so his work is unchangeable.

Always bank on this. You can build your whole life on these two truths: He never changes. And he sat down.

His heart for you is exactly the same in every circumstance in your life. Our identity as a child of God is always the same no matter how we're doing spiritually.

**B. Church is unstoppable**

The Church is built on this rock. And that's why it has endured everything in its history.

*Max Lucado: From the start the movement was doomed. It began with just 120 men. Most were illiterate and poor. Blue-collar workers, far too ignorant to stage an uprising that could make any difference. They were inexperienced and uncultured. Their nation was oppressed. Their people were weary. Their government was corrupt. Their religion was shallow. Their strategy was disastrous. No headquarters, no research...plans were made by the seat of their pants.*

*On top of all this, their cause was impractical. It was far too extreme and absurd. It demanded too much too soon. It lacked any tact. It was too impatient with traditions. It called for a reversal of social classes. It gave too much leverage to women and minority groups. The movement was doomed to failure.*

*But it didn't fail. Not only did it not fail, but it has far surpassed all movements in the world's history. Within thirty years the message of Jesus Christ had entered every port, city, and courtyard of the world. It should have failed but it succeeded.*

*And it still succeeds. It can't be stopped. Our culture is too secular – no matter. Materialism blankets the country - still the movement will continue. The church might bicker and fight, the people might grow crusty with traditions - but the movement will march on. Nothing will ever stop it. Because it's not a movement of man. It is the movement of God. That is precisely why what should have failed will never fail.*

**C. Application**

1. Many of us are seeking purpose. We want to get behind something, to have a cause. There's only one that's worth investing in because only one will never fail. If you've committed to the church, you are a part of something that will never die and has eternal ramifications.
2. In light of this, how important should the church be? How much of a priority is it? How much should we be investing in it? How much should it occupy our prayers?

Compare it to something that's *not* permanent: marriage. Jesus tells us, in heaven, there's no marriage. Why? Because marriage is a pointer to Christ's relationship with the Church. In heaven, that relationship is fulfilled and complete, so we don't need marriage anymore. In fact none of us will even want it because we'll have Christ.

Yet, how important is marriage to us? I had friends in college who in class would be writing down who they'd invite to their wedding, what their colors would be, when they didn't even have boyfriends yet.

We don't have to say the Church is *more* important than marriage, but if we're understanding Jesus' words here, it is just as. Which is a really radical notion now. Almost no one thinks like that – our culture idolizes family and work. Church is always 3<sup>rd</sup> if even that.

It is one of the few things we have that's permanent. It deserves pride of place.

## II. THE CHURCH IS PRECIOUS

### A. MY church

Jesus also says: "it's MY Church." That alone tells us so much.

For one, he's the one that started it. He uses this word "church" here before there was even a church. Remember, these are all Jews he's talking to. There aren't even any Christians yet.

Church can sometimes seem like a bunch of traditions people made up. Let's not miss this: Christ started the Church. It's not a religious invention. It's HIS. And what does he say about it?

1. Ephesians 5:25 – church is the bride of Christ
2. 1 Cor 12:12-26 – church is his body
3. Matthew 12:48 – church is his family

### B. How precious is it?

If we were to ask: “How precious is the Church to you?” We would probably answer based on what we’re getting out of it. How much we feel like we’re growing. How many friends we have there.

But look at it through Christ’s eyes. He says: “*That’s MY bride. That’s MY body. That’s MY family.*”

- Like a man adores his bride – He adores his church
- Like we take care of our bodies – He takes care of his
- Like we’re devoted to our families – He’s devoted to his

### C. Changing the conversation

And that has to change our attitude towards the *local* church we belong to.

I remember playing in a basketball tournament long ago. My wife was there watching me. And one guy on my team who didn’t know her started asking: “Who’s girl is that?” Then someone told him she was my wife and he immediately repented. He kept telling me he didn’t mean any disrespect.

Churches that are struggling, Jesus says “that’s MY church.” When we bad-mouth churches, Jesus says “that’s MY church.” Even churches that are in sin, Jesus says “that’s MY church.”

Church has problems for sure. But it’s precious not because of *what* it is, but *whose* it is.

### D. Church pains

I want to address those who may have been hurt by the church in the past. I’m not excusing what a church may have done to you. And I apologize on its behalf. Things like that should never happen. We’ve had some leave the church here too because of gossip and such. I can’t think of many things that are more offensive to God than that. Some of the strongest condemnations in Scripture are to those who cause divisions in the church and those who cause others to sin.

But this verse speaks to those pains also.

1. It tells us: we can grieve and hurt, knowing that Jesus also grieves and hurts. It’s HIS church! He’s not happy with its sin. He can’t wait for the day when His church is pure.
2. It also tells us: we can forgive. “I will build my church.” Who’s in the church? YOU! When you’re faced with betrayal and hurt, remember that people may bring you down, but God is building you. Even through bad situations, He wants to redeem you by helping you to forgive, to repent, to grow.
3. And it also tells us: we can keep believing in the church. Whether we stick with it or go to another one, he says “I will build my church.” The church is a work in progress, just like us. But He will keep purifying His church because it’s his.

To me, church issues don't make the church less precious, but more. Because in all of the mess, Jesus displays his forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. And those are things the world needs to see. Christ can shine even brighter through pain.

### III. THE CHURCH IS POWERFUL

#### A. Authority to hold the keys

1. Verse 19 says: the church has keys. That basically means *the gospel*. The gospel is the key to entering the Kingdom.
2. And the church has the authority to use that key! Binding and loosing = including and excluding people in the Kingdom. That's some kind of major authority Jesus is giving to the Church here.

To be clear: NOBODY has authority to forgive sin and grant entrance except Christ. No church, no leader. Some Catholics think priests can. No. Nobody.

3. The authority Church has is to *hold* the keys! Church doesn't own the gospel, but it HAS the gospel. So what Jesus is saying is: as the Church preaches the gospel, it does so with His authority.
  - He is with them as they preach it
  - He gives power as they preach it
  - And He carries out His salvation plans through the church

Did you know you have His authority with you when you share the gospel? You hold the keys! Be faithful with those keys.

#### B. Authority to shepherd the flock

But there's another authority church has. Matthew 18:18 repeats this phrase, but in the context of disciplining someone in the church.

Jesus gives the church authority also to govern/shepherd God's people. That means the church is the hands of God to disciple, nurture, discipline, and send His people. Our vision of wanting to go up and out is going to be executed through the church.

#### C. Final victory

1. God has a plan to defeat sin and death. This plan is being played out on the stage of human history. This plan will end in victory at the return of Christ.

It's both at the cosmic level, but also at the personal level. Christ will have the victory in me, too. He will defeat my sin. He will fully redeem me.

2. Book of Revelation paints a picture of this final victory. Revelation 5:8: What's there at the final victory? The elders (which represents the Church).
3. The Church is how God will do EVERYTHING. In history and in our lives.
  - Every promise to you is under the umbrella of the promises to the Church (there are really no individual promises).
  - Every spiritual blessing is through the Church or for the Church and its mission
  - Those who say: "I want to grow. I need healing. I need direction." Then you need the church.
  - We say: "All I need is Jesus. Jesus is my lifeline." 100% true. But he works *through* your church. It is God's ordained means for working and completing your salvation.

So now, let's ask again: how important is the church to us? How important should it be?

#### IV. APPLICATIONS

##### A. Be in the church

###### 1. Be a believer

First make sure you're in the universal Church – a true believer. Gates of hell will not prevail against the church, but they can prevail against you, if you're not part of the universal Church.

Whether you're new to Christianity or been going to church a long time: Make sure God considers you part of His true Church. Take the key of the gospel offered to you. Every moment we're alive is a sign of God's grace and patience. But His patience won't last forever.

Don't assume you can just figure it out later. Don't take tomorrow for granted. Right now, the offer is extended: you can be in His church. His bride, His body, His family.

###### 2. Be involved

And if you are a part of the Church, then be *in* the church! Now we're talking local church. The gates of hell may not prevail against you, but they can still affect you. The more we're disconnected from the church, the more susceptible we are to Satan's influence.

When I watch Planet Earth with my kids, there are these scenes where a predator is hunting, and who does he always go after? The one that's straying from the herd.

Church is God's provision for your fight. I know some find more community outside the church. We should be with non-Christians, we're called to be. They can be your mission field, but cannot be your *community*.

At the minimum, Sundays should be a given and non-negotiable for Christians. It's the one time that most of God's means of grace (word, prayer, body, communion) all come together. It's critical for continued, sustained growth.

## B. Love the church

1. Some say they love Jesus but not the church. Understandable, but impossible! Jesus and his church are inseparable. If you love Jesus, his glory, the Kingdom, you cannot *not* love the church. It's His.
2. The church is not always loveable, but since when does Jesus give that condition: "Love only when it's easy."

When I was a kid, get in trouble, mom would say: "*I don't like you right now...but I love you.*" We have to learn to say that about our church!

I confess that I have said many critical things about churches and pastors. You may have too. We have to repent. We have been hurt by churches, but in what ways have WE hurt churches? Gossiping, excluding, complaining. Let us love the church of Jesus Christ.

## C. Commit to the church

1. I'd like to challenge our involvement with the church. If we have properly understood Matthew 16 then it's plain that Christians are called not just to attend but to *commit* to their local church – relationally, financially, in their time/energy.
2. Membership (Movement Partnership) is critical because it's a sign of commitment. Why do we need to go through that if we're already regularly coming? Some people have asked me that. What's wrong with splitting time between different churches?

Because you can't love without committing. You cannot tell your spouse, I love you, but I'm going to keep dating other people.

Do you love his church? Then we need to stop dating around and settle down. I tell you, no church has everything. You'll always find something that doesn't sit right with you. But maybe the reason you're having trouble finding a church is because you haven't committed to one.

And also, we as the church cannot fulfill our call to disciple you if you're not committed. We have to know you here. We have to know what's going on with you. We have to know how to pray for you.

Whether it's membership here or somewhere else, please commit. Belong to one church and give your all to that church.

---

## CONCLUSION

[Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLFEvHWD\\_NE&t=228s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLFEvHWD_NE&t=228s)]

More than the message of the song, the whole scene pictures the church. They weren't just singing the song, they really believed it. It's powerful when people when believe so passionately in a message and unite over it. Sound familiar?

Lyrics of the first verse:

*I am not a stranger to the dark*

*Hide away, they say*

*'Cause we don't want your broken parts*

*I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars*

*Run away, they say*

*No one'll love you as you are*

*But I won't let them break me down to dust*

*I know that there's a place for us*

*For we are glorious*

That's the church. Broken parts put together by the blood of Christ. Fallen, yet *glorious* because of the one shining through us.

What do you believe about the church? Is it broken and damaged? Yes. But is it precious and powerful? Yes.

Let us love His church. Let us be His church.