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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**September 19, 2021**

**What is Church?**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *We just thank you, Lord, for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for your word which is the ultimate gift that we have to unpack this morning. And I just again pray that you would give all the grace, strength, insight and wisdom and the presence of your Holy Spirit so that we might unpack it in a way that has permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well fall is the start of something new, it's a new season. As you all know it's a brand new school year; it's also a new church year. And this year we're coming off of, as you well know, a very long, protracted battle with COVID that took a lot of the normal rhythms of church and just kind of stood them on their head. And so this morning we want to formally hit the restart button by going back to the basics to describe exactly what a church is supposed to be so that by restating the target we can more effectively hit it.

Now the Bible is our source and it's our authority for everything concerning the church and so we look to it to establish what the

church is supposed to be. There we find right at the very beginning in the book of Acts a great working definition of what God's idea of a church is supposed to be. Jesus had just ascended into heaven, Peter has given his famous Pentecostal sermon in which three thousand are convicted by God's Holy Spirit, they're saved, they're baptized and they're entered into the very first church. God then goes on to describe what that first church was all about in Acts 2:41-42. It says: *So those who received his word -- that's Peter's word, the sermon that he preached -- so those who received Peter's word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* You see that simple sentence describes four qualities that define what a church needs to be devoted to: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

Now the first order of business in this list is teaching. *"They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching."* And there's no teaching more important than the gospel itself, and the gospel proclaims that every one of us was lost, absolutely every one of us was on our way to hell itself when God became a man, came down to this planet and lived among us, lived out his life perfectly for 33 years and then he went to the cross to offer up his life as a substitute for our lives of sin so that when we by faith place our

trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we, too, can appropriate his righteousness as our own and stand before God perfect and worthy of heaven. That's what the Bible teaches. And one thing that you may notice about evangelical churches is the premium that they place on the Bible. I mean our services, you can tell they're structured around prayer, around singing, around worship all in preparation for hearing the Bible expounded. You see what is unique about preaching, is that its authority comes solely and completely from the Bible. I mean I've got all kinds of opinions on all kinds of topics but it's not my opinion that matters. God's rule, God's law, God's commands, and God's wisdom is what matters. And to the extent that our preaching stems from that authority found only in scripture, it will have power, authority and the Holy Spirit giving it life. To the extent that it comes from my own authority, it will be ultimately useless.

One of the blessings of the Internet is that you now have the ability to access topnotch biblical teaching from literally the best of the best and you can get it any time in almost any place but that has potentially weakened the local church as well. I mean why not simply access the very best instead of listening to my local church's teaching that may come short, sometimes woefully short of that standard. I mean the idea behind many large churches today is to have a topnotch preacher supply a video feed to a half

dozen campuses who might have less capable teaching from an in-person pastor, therefore everyone gets an excellent message. But there's a problem there. See the goal of an individual church is not teaching alone. A huge part of what a church is is the gathering together of actual physical bodies in one place to listen, to hear, and to respond to the teaching of God's word and the power in that does not come from the preacher, it comes from God's Holy Spirit. There's no question that there are many, many people who are more skillful at the task of delivering biblical excellence than our leadership, but they also don't know you like we know you. They don't know who's just suffered the loss of a loved one, who's struggling to get healthy, whose child is wandering; but in a functioning healthy local church, the leadership knows. And for better or worse in a church of our size everyone has the ability to know everyone else. And so does God's Holy Spirit who basically teaches us in a specific way to address our local needs.

The apostles' teaching gives us our marching orders as to how God would use each local body to change the world for the better mentally, physically, and spiritually and they're all different. And a large part of the shepherding that we do is feeding this flock not from personal opinion or from poll-driven statistics but from God's word. And that also includes Sunday school. I just

want you to think for a minute of what kind of situation we find ourselves in. Our Sunday school has 45 minutes a week to try to counter the effect of literally hundreds of hours of world-centered programming that you and your kids get every single day that the media is shoving at us at lightning speed every minute of every day. Kevin DeYoung made this observation. He said this, he said: "It is worth remembering David Well's famous definition: Worldliness is whatever makes righteousness look strange and sin look normal." Let me just repeat that. "Worldliness is whatever makes righteousness look strange and sin look normal. Here's the reality facing every Christian in the West: the money, power, and prestige of the mainstream media, big time sports, big business, big tech, and almost all the institutions of education and entertainment are invested in making sin look normal. Make no mistake: no matter how good your church, no matter how strong your family, no matter how gospel-centered your Christian school or home school, if your children and grandchildren are even remotely engaged with contemporary culture (and they are), they are being taught by a thousand memes and messages every week to pay homage to the rainbow flag." It's absolutely critical that Sunday school becomes an important part of your church experience. I mean the way it's set up right now, kids can go downstairs at 9:30 and mom and dad can stay upstairs and participate in an outstanding class that Dave Cassell has for adults.

Now second on this list is the word "fellowship." It says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Now the actual Greek word for fellowship here is the word "koinonia," you probably heard before, and it means a great deal more than simply saying, "Hi, how ya' doing." Webster's dictionary defines "koinonia" this way, it says: "Intimate spiritual communion and participative sharing in a common religious commitment and spiritual community." What that's saying is that fellowship involves intimate spiritual communion. I mean it's seeking to know and be known on a far deeper level than any other social interaction you may have beside your family, and sometimes even more so. Listen to what Jesus once said in *Luke 14*. He said: *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* Jesus wasn't advocating hatred of family, he was speaking hyperbolically about the importance of the kingdom of God versus anything else. The church is a community of people who recognize that Jesus Christ is the most important partner you will ever have in your life. Jesus said, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* So church is supposed to be a place that helps you discover that reality because as a body we're all seeking the same thing, to grow in our ability to glorify God and enjoy him

forever, and that takes on a community flavor when everybody in the community shares the same goal. And the church's singular goal is to grow its members in holiness, in the ability to know God and serve him. That's why fellowship is so much more than just, "Hi, how's it going?" Here being small in size is actually a blessing. I mean if you walk into a small church, I've got news for you, you're going to get noticed. That's just the nature of the beast. I think it was Mark Dever who said that "the local church has the ability to verify or falsify your claims to be a healthy Christian." Because it's a lot harder to be anonymous in a small church and that's a good thing. See, fellowship involves the people around you knowing you enough to know when things are not going well, knowing you enough to know when you're struggling, to ask hard questions to seek to know you beyond simply asking, "How's it going?" That's the point of fellowship. I mean all of us are united not by our politics, not by our demographics, our race or social status but instead by something that cuts across all of those things and that's our relationship with Jesus Christ. All of us have a vested interest in growing that connection in each of us, and all of us have the ability to grow each other in that very thing simply by caring for one another.

You know, something happens in the church, the body itself feels it corporately. I mean that's exactly what happens when tragedy

strikes a church member. And I'm talking about the big "C." If they're the members of the worldwide community of Christians we pray, we seek to help, we find out ways that we can be of assistance, but if they're members of our church, everything gets stepped up a notch because they're part of us. They're part of who we are. We literally feel that connection. And what the church was designed to represent is a genuinely diverse community who finds that Jesus Christ connects each of us with more strength than any other social force might drive us apart.

Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman have this observation about what God is doing through church fellowship and why it is truly beautiful. This is what they say. They say: "Think of church as something like waves rolling over rocks. The waves are the church. You and other church members are the rocks. Day after day, year after year, the waves flow without ceasing. They rush over each rock and jostle the rocks against one another. From month to month, you probably won't notice much difference. But over years, even decades, you'll observe the change. As the waves crash and the rocks tumble over one another, their rough edges become smooth. They take on a polished glint in the sun. No two rocks emerge from the process with the same size or shape. But in its own way, each becomes beautiful."



Well, thirdly is the breaking of bread. It says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* And you know communion is something that is absolutely focused on two very important things: It's focused on community and it's focused on worship. Each month as we prepare for communion, we repeat this scripture in *1 Corinthians 11:28*. It says: *Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.* So part of this examination that we engage in every Lord's supper is focused on, as the scripture says, discerning the body. What does that mean? It means understanding that the gathered assembly of people united in Christ is so important to Christ that he literally died for it. *Ephesians 5:25* says: *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* I mean just think of it, the church has really only two sacred ordinances: One is baptism and the other is communion, and yet both of them can only function within the context of an assembled body of believers. We need that gathering. You don't baptize at home. You don't usually do communion at home. Both of them are designed to

emphasize the importance of community and as you're already familiar with communion, adds meditating on what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, examining ourselves, asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas where he's convicting us of sin, confessing those sins, and then taking part in the elements.

And finally there's the fourth item, that item is prayer. Once again it says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* You know, one thing I'm sure you've heard me say over and over and over again is that we are in a proxy war between two great powers: the kingdom of light and kingdom of darkness. And we read in Revelation 12 that there was this great war in heaven and that Satan lost and that he was summarily thrown out of heaven and he landed with a thunk right here on earth where he's proceeded to wreak havoc ever since he arrived. God has told us in no uncertain terms that we are at war spiritually and that we *do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* Folks, a huge part of that wrestling involves the mystery of prayer. Perhaps the simplest and shortest way of understanding prayer is that it's God's way of involving his image bearers in the process of how he rules this earth. I've made the analogy often

that prayer is like an electric circuit. It starts first with God as the power source, as the author and producer of all things including our very desires to pray. Those also come from God. *Philippians 2:13* says: *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* So prayer starts in the mind of God and it moves via his Holy Spirit into our minds and that gives us the opportunity to give voice to those prayers that he's initiated and then from our voice it goes back to God for an answer. We are the switches that connect heaven to earth. And all the while our prayers are being shaped and molded by God's Holy Spirit who knows how badly we fail at this task. He knows we don't do it right. He knows how easily we are distracted, how quickly we get into a fog and our mind wanders as we pray but it's so important to God that we participate that he sends his Holy Spirit to work with us, to work with our prayers. Listen to what he says in *Romans 8*. He says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* What it's saying is that God moves mountains to involve us in ruling his world. I mean as I've often said when God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move the mountain. The very first thing he does is he starts moving people to start praying that the

mountain would be moved and then in response to those prayers he moves the mountain. You say well, why in the world would you go through those extra steps? Why involve that much extra work? And my answer would be so the universe could see our fingerprints on the very process that God uses to rule a world filled with his image bearers who will one day rule the universe with him. I mean a huge part of the function of the church is corporate prayer. You can pray at home and of course I hope you do, it's an important part of every believer's life but there's something uniquely important about the body of Christ getting together for prayer. Our God is omnipotent, he's omniscient, he's omnipresent. Do you think our prayers are going to accomplish anything that he sets out to do, he needs our information, he needs our input? No. And yet he's the one who tells us *the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective*. And how powerful and effective God alone knows, but I know for certain it is far more than you and I ever think or feel.

Now the leadership of our church meets once a month to pray through the entire list of folks who attend Grace Fellowship. Each family, each individual gets brought before God's throne as we seek to ask for grace and growth for them and insight and wisdom for us in leading them. That's where we are with these four things. And so teaching and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer, that's

the bare bones outline of what God expects from a local body, from the local body that meets at 25 Sullivan Avenue in Port Jervis, New York, North America, earth.

So you might say, okay, how do I fit into all this? You talk about the leadership. What's my place in all of this? Well I don't know if you know but every single person in the body has been given unique spiritual gift designed specifically to build up that local body. *1 Corinthians 12:7* says: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* We're going to be spending some time in that the next couple of months just growing our understanding of that. But understand, every one of us according to God is a living stone uniquely fitted into God's living temple known as his church. *1 Peter 2:5* says: *You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

Charles Spurgeon once said over a century ago, he said there's two different types of living stones or bricks. He said there are those that know that they function as God would have them when they join with the other bricks to build up God's spiritual house, while there were others that he called "rolling stone bricks" who feel they can do just fine on their own. This is what Spurgeon asked.

He said: "What is the brick made for? It's made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that it's just as good a brick while it's kicking about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of a house. Actually, it's a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling stone Christians, I don't believe that you're answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live and you are much to blame for the injury you do." Well we as a church are blessed with people who want to be those bricks, who want to have a role in building a spiritual house. And so our prayer is that this COVID pause is actually permanent and that it's something that we can just put in the rearview mirror because we want to start building. Let's pray.

*Father, I just again, I bring before you our body, this local body that meets at 25 Sullivan Avenue in Port Jervis, and I just pray this morning, Lord, our goal, our desire is to hit the reset button, to hit the restart button. I just pray that you would give us the wisdom and the grace to do just that, that this would mark the beginning of a brand new era for this church. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*