

Forsake Not The Gathering! By Pastor Jeff Wickwire

Hebrews 10:23-25, Ephesians 4:4,16; Matthew 18:20, Proverbs 27:17, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Luke 11:33,

August 2, 2020

Bible Verse

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV)

²³Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

²⁵not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

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Note

This is our last on-line only Sunday—next Sunday we will re-gather as a church body! It's been a long time since we've met, so I want to bring a word of exhortation.

First, Let's talk about the value of meeting together as a church: The Greek word for church is "ecclesia," which means "assembly." So even the word "church" is about gathering together! Gathering is a mark of what a church is, It is central to church life, It is what a church does. We could say that gathering together is the oxygen a church body breathes.

Paul said of the body of Christ:

Bible Verse

Ephesians 4:4,16 (NIV)

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

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Note

But how can “each part” help the other parts if we don’t meet! So we should all want to meet! Thank God for online services, they have been a tremendous help. But unless you simply can’t make it to church for whatever reason, online is not the same as: meeting together, seeing the smiles, sharing your struggles, praying for one another, and worshiping together in the beauty of holiness!
Jesus promised His presence when we come together as a church:

Bible Verse

Matthew 18:20 (NIV)

²⁰For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

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Note

We read in our text out of Hebrews that church gatherings are the place where we encourage and spur each other on to love and good deeds.
Church gatherings are where:

Bible Verse

Proverbs 27:17 (NIV)

¹⁷As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

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Note

Even Ecclesiastes talks about the value of being with others to gather fresh strength:

Bible Verse

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NIV)

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor:

¹⁰If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

¹²Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

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Note

It's an incredible privilege to be able to come together as God's people, both to encourage and sharpen one another, and also to worship the Lord and enjoy His presence together.

We have a freedom in Texas that, as I speak, the church in several other states still doesn't have, and I'm not so sure it's all about Covid. For instance, in California the latest edict from Governor Newsom bans, not just church services, but as of July 13, ALL indoor services are banned in 30 counties—even IN-HOME Bible studies and fellowship! One CA County has restricted churches from streaming worship, singing, and the playing of wind instruments in online church services unless the worship originates from individual residences.

Does that sound like Covid protection, or more like an infringement on religious liberty? Don't sing? Don't play a flute? In an open letter to the President, several congressman have claimed that "many state and local government leaders are violating religious freedom." The overreach of some of these governors and mayors cannot be ignored.

In CA, Pastor John MacArthur's multi-thousand member church, along with his elders, have sensed more going on than simply wanting to curb the spread of Covid. They've decided to defy Governor Newsom's edict, stating "We cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship." He went on to add that his congregation is "protesting lies and deception for the sake of the truth." They apparently feel that other motives are at play. Along with MacArthur, churchgoers across the country are reasserting their fundamental, constitutional rights—rights that too many political leaders have forgotten or denied. I have to be honest—There is something about this Covid crisis that has always bothered me. I know that its real, and I would never diminish the pain and loss many have experienced. But there is a double standard out there that makes me question if there's more happening than meets the eye. I wonder if the

enemy has gotten his foot in the door and is using the Covid crisis to marginalize God's church! It's a fact that many churches are being treated differently than other similar gatherings.

I received a humorous text this week that said: CHURCH NOTICE! Since 500 people can safely be in Home Depot...This week's services will be held in the plumbing department. Bring your Bible!"

We smile, but haven't you wondered why abortion clinics can remain open to do their dirty work, but churches that bring life and hope are closed? Why protesters can march by the thousands in the streets with complete freedom but church people still can't worship even in small groups in many cities and states? The Covid restrictions are not "one size fits all,"—in many places they are discriminatory and that should bother you.

Let's remember that religious liberty is so important it is enshrined in our Constitution's First Amendment. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech.....or the right of the people peaceably to assemble." But even though it's in our constitution, this freedom is not ultimately given to us by men, it is a liberty gifted to us straight from our Creator.

I understand that some of you don't feel comfortable regathering for various reasons—but I also want others of us to be wary of, as the passage in Hebrews said, getting in the habit of not attending when we could. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together...as the habit of some is." I share these things that have been on my heart to encourage you to not take the liberty we have to gather for granted. As they say, "You never really know what you had till you lose it." As I speak, millions of Christians around the world would give anything for the freedom to openly gather for church. Christians in China have been forced underground by persecution—Their churches have been seized and boarded up, some even burned down by the government. In Muslim countries there's no such thing as being able to gather as a Christian church—believers meet in secret at risk of their lives.

I'm so thankful that in America we have been uniquely gifted in our constitution with freedom to assemble! I believe it's time to stand up and reclaim the joy and privilege of gathering together as God's people. God forbid that we should allow this time of "social distancing" to steal from our hearts the habit and joy of meeting, and the incredible spiritual benefits it brings! Or that we would easily give up our incredible freedom to gather to those who really don't want us meeting—people who don't like the church, Christianity, or the truth we stand for. Remember, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus said,

Bible Verse

Luke 11:33 (NIV)

³³“No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light.

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Note

I hope this message has blessed and encouraged you.