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The church is not an institution for perfect people. It is a sanctuary for sinners saved by grace, a nursery for God's sweet children to be nurtured and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep, the home for Christ's family. The church is the dearest place on earth.

[End of audio]

Okay, here we go. If you have your Bibles, let's grab them. Ephesians, chapter 2 is where we're going to be camped out in our time together today. We're beginning a new series, which will end up being our summer series, and we've called that series *The Dearest Place* series. It's a series about the church: what the church is, and from there, really, the relationship of the church to God, and therefore, our relationship with one another as part of the church in that relationship with God, and then what the mission of the church is, and then, ultimately, how we seek to accomplish that.

Now I feel like I have two hurdles I have to get past in order for us to actually dig around into the idea of the church being the dearest place, so let me throw out the two obstacles for you in the hopes that we can deconstruct at least some of it so we can move forward. For many of us, the first obstacle is the idea of the church and the phrase *dearest place* are separated by a chasm of frustrating experiences, so for some of us, we have been involved with the church, we've been involved *in* a church, and it has been far from the dearest place for us. In fact, it has been a bit of a nightmare.

We've been a part of churches that have split. We have been a part of congregations that have been judgmental and leadership that has been harsh. We have been in churches where we have been disappointed repeatedly on repeat, and on and on I could go, so there are many of you in this place who would bristle at the idea of us talking about the church under the confines of it being the dearest place.

Now we pull that phrase, *the dearest place*, from a quote by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. I don't know if you know who that is. It doesn't really matter. He pastored the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London and was preaching to a congregation of over 10,000 before there were microphones. In fact, true story: At his Pastors' College, if you were going to be a preacher, they would measure your chest, and if your chest

wasn't big enough, you weren't going to be a preacher, so I don't know what I'd be doing right now, all right?

I mean, I'd be in administration or something, but I wouldn't be preaching, because my little bird chest would not have gotten me on the scale. They would have said, "Yes, you can preach to seven people in a living room. That's what you get to do," right? So the confines of that quote are as follows, and I hope this will help you understand a bit.

"Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it.

Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us... All who have first given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord's people. How else is there to be a Church on the earth? If it is right for anyone to refrain from membership in the Church, it is right for everyone, and then the testimony for God would be lost to the world!"

So the phrase *the dearest place* or *the dearest place on earth* is actually being pulled from a confession that we are an imperfect people, so it should be no surprise to you that you have been disappointed in the church. There are a lot of sinners involved in the church. Now there are legitimate hurts here, legitimate sorrows here...not just disappointments, but pain points, and for those things, I'm sorry.

I'm not trying to set The Village up as a place that's not going to disappoint you. In fact, we will, and if we haven't yet, just give us a bit more time. We'll get there with you all right? Just give us a few more months, just another quarter... We'll disappoint you. We'll let you down. I still have about 35 minutes of preaching here. It's not too late even in that. So in the end, the dearest place on earth is nestled in Spurgeon's confession that the church is an imperfect place, and yet one that is still dear to the believer in Christ. So that's the first hurdle. Let's not pretend the church is perfect. She's not, all right?

The second hurdle is some of you are in a spot in life where, maybe, marriage is difficult, or you just found out you were sick, or your kids lost control, or you lost your job, and money is disappearing, or you're wrestling with some anxiety or depression or fear, and you're like, "Are you serious? You're going to preach for six weeks on the church? Man, give me something more pragmatic, Pastor! Do a series on marriage. That would be awesome. Talk about sex. We love it when you talk about sex. Do the sex series. How about money, Pastor? I love to hear about how I can increase my financial portfolio. Just give me *something*, man. Give me how to get out of this. Give me how I can make life better."

Well, hear me. The church has *everything* to do with those things. Do you know where God most tangibly meets you? With his body, his people. Anyone who has ever fallen on a difficult time and has been plugged into the people of God knows this to be true. Like if you're a member of a solid, Bible-believing/Christ-exalting church, and you get sick, watch what happens.

They're going to be in your hospital room. They're going to be bringing meals to your house. They're going to be driving your kids to school. They're going to be mowing your lawn because that's what the church does, and you know what's happening in that moment? God is saying, "I've got you. I'm here for you." Your marriage is a wreck, and I'm talking about the kind of wreck where that's becoming public, not the wreck where it's kind of you and your pride going, "I've got this," where your house burns to the ground.

I mean where you enter into the people of God and go, "This ain't working! It's not working!" Watch how quickly you'll find accountability. You'll find encouragement. You'll find those rallying around your enflamed marriage. If you lose your job, watch how the people of God rally around you in support. Get caught up in some addictions, and watch the accountability from the body gather around you.

See, God makes himself most tangibly known through his Holy Spirit, through the lives of his people, walking with his people. Are you tracking? So regardless of how you've come in here, regardless of what the pain points in your life are, the church has *everything* to do with that, so don't come in thinking, "What I need is pragmatism." What you need is *not* pragmatism.

Pragmatism, unfortunately, can chain a brother worse than anything else, so if you're wrestling with depression and I give you eight ways out of depression, and you do those eight things and don't get free, aren't you even more jammed up than you were before you heard that message? Aren't you even *more* depressed now? So a sermon on how to be free from depression actually *creates* depression.

You don't always need pragmatism. You need to see God for who he is and gather with God's people for what they are, imperfect as they are, and let Jesus do what Jesus does. Now that brings us to, "What does Jesus do?" Now all I want to do in our time together today is answer the question, "What is the church?" I want to do it as simply as possible, so for that, let's look in Ephesians, chapter 2. We're going to pick it up in verse 17.

Now we're going to read this out loud together, and you're going to make me proud of you, okay? Denton, Dallas, I'm talking to you too. I won't be able to hear, but I will get a report, and I'll preach angrily next weekend, so you're going to read it also, okay? All we're going to do... Don't go overzealous and read the whole book of Ephesians here. We're going to read verses 17-19. Then we're going to stop, all right? So let's read this together. Ready? Let's go.

**"And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God..."**

I'm proud of you. We're going to get better at that, but that was a pretty good first go. Now here's what is happening. Here's what we see in this text: Jesus is creating something from nothing. *He* in verse 17 is Jesus, and Jesus preaches peace to those who are near, and he preaches peace to those who are far. Now here's how the church at Ephesus would have heard that. There were those who had been given by God the Abrahamic covenant, had been given the Davidic covenant, and had understood a Messiah was coming.

Those were the Jews, and they were (in this text) those who were religiously working out, trying to get to God. Yet what becomes clear in this text is religious activity separate from relationship is hostility toward God that requires someone to enter in and reconcile that hostility, and so what Jesus does is he, in the gospel, preaches peace to those who are caught up in religious activity that lacks relationship with God, and he saves people from their religious activity that has not linked them to God in relationship, so he saves those who are near.

So if I could unpack that in our context... Some of you were saved being near. What I mean is mom and dad woke up on Sunday morning, and they put you into clothes, and then they drove you up to church, and then on top of that, you were going to youth group. You were going to RAs and GAs. You went to AWANA. I mean, you went to church looking like Patton, you know, with all of your "Bible Memorization" and "New Testament Scholar" and "Hebrew Expert," you know?

You were a little 4-year-old general in the Bible, and somewhere in the middle of all of that, Jesus legitimately captured your soul, and you fell in love with him. You fell in love with him in the midst of a thousand activities. Jesus rescues, speaks peace to those who are near. Then some of you were near-ish, and what I mean by that is Mama and Daddy did that, but there wasn't really any understanding of relationship, grace, and forgiveness.

So you got all caught up in all of those activities, and they began to feel dry, and you began to feel the weight of not measuring up, because that kid could smoke you in Bible drill, so you knew God loved that kid, but man, you didn't even score. I mean, you were still looking for the one that he had found, and he had moved on to the next one, so you began to feel the weight of religious activity sans relationship, so you bailed.

You were never going to measure up, never going to be good enough. "I kept trying to be good and kept falling short. Forget this," and you bailed. Then, somewhere along the way, Jesus loved you enough to let

you get to the end of that, and he rescued you from trying to be good all the time. Isn't that a random rescue? "I'm exhausted, trying to be good." Jesus says, "Then come here."

So he saves those who are near. He speaks peace. Then he speaks peace to those who are far, because some of us in this room don't relate to any of that, all right? Mama and Daddy didn't get us up. In fact, Mommy or Daddy may or may not have even been there, and if they were, maybe they were passed out on the couch, and it would be best for everyone's safety if they'd not wake up.

Some of us have no patches, all right? Some of us had no medals. Some of us, even now, are like, "Thank God that page number is up there!" Then we went wayward in different ways. Maybe we got caught up in addictions. We just became our own god, and all we knew about Jesus was we had this default position in our heart that his people were judgmental, and there was no way he would love us, so, "Forget him. I'll do what I want to do."

We've operated that way, and yet somewhere in the middle of all of that, Jesus showed up, spoke peace into that hostility, and rescued you. So what God has done in this text is... Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, he has taken those who are near and those who are far, and he makes them a people, and here's how he describes that people.

They were aliens and strangers, so what this means is they did not possess the rite of citizenship. Now that probably doesn't weigh heavy on us because of where we live. If we had a bit more experience in the world, it would weigh much more heavily on us. Let me give you an example. We live in such a safe part of the world that it doesn't even register to us that the rest of the world is very, very dangerous.

So in example, regardless of what your issue is, you dial 911, and you get help. Now they're there in a range of time periods, but you're going to get help. It doesn't matter what it is. "Brother is sick!" Sirens sound. "Somebody is trying to break into my house!"

"I locked my keys in the car!"

"The house is on fire!"

*Boom!* They're there. If you live in this area, they all show up. All right, I locked my keys in the car. The helicopter SWAT team rolled up. I was like, "Are you guys bored down there? I didn't need the fire engine! My keys are in my car, all right? I can't find my cat. This is overkill." (I don't have a cat.) Now in the end, you and I breathe this air. If something goes wrong, there will always be help.

That's not how people who were not citizens, but who were sojourners, were treated in the first century. In fact, if you know your Bible well, there was a moment where a mob grabbed hold of Paul, and they drug him in, and they were going to beat him until he said, "I'm a Roman citizen," and they were like, "Oh!" and then once he was a Roman citizen, "Back up! He gets a trial! You stone this guy and the Romans will kill every one of us! He's a Roman citizen. He is protected. He is provided for. There is a way a citizen must be handled that a sojourner, an alien, and a stranger doesn't have to be handled."

What the Bible just said is you and I were sojourners. We were aliens. We were strangers, and Christ, speaking peace from far and near, brought us together as his people, and then not only that. He goes on to call us not only a part of this new kingdom he has created, but he also says not only are we fellow citizens with the saints, but we are members of the household of God. Now I love that because that means in the church, I'm not visiting; I'm home.

My experience with the people of God continues to grow, continues to flourish, and continues to be refined, and this is not a place I'm visiting. This is not a place where God finally just walks up and is like, "Yo, man. You've been staying with us for... Ben Franklin... I don't know if you know who that is. He's one of my creations. He said houseguests were like fish. After three days, it starts to stink, and you have been here a long time, Matt, so you're going to have to roll out, man. You're going to have to go find a new place to live."

That's not what happens. He says, I'm of the *household* of God. I have special access. I'm not *visiting*, I'm *home*. So point number one on what the church is... Let me say it to you this way. You have to get this in your gut, in your heart, and in your head. *The church is not a place; it's a people*. What God is doing is people placed, not *place* placed, all right?

Let me try to say it this way. There is no Mecca for us. Are you tracking with me? Now if you want to head over to the Holy Land, I think that would be amazing. I mean, to see the Sea of Galilee and be like, "Man, Jesus walked right here on this beach," to head to the Mount of Olives and be like, "This is where he'd pray..." I mean, I just think that would be cool, but here. Listen to me.

You will find the presence and power of God no more present there than you'll find it in this gathering, because God's dwelling place, the church, is a people, not a place. These are *buildings!* There's nothing special about them. They're just buildings. In fact, this one in particular used to be a grocery store. Let's do it. Who used to shop here? Anybody? Look at this. I mean, how spiritually deep is this when you used to get toiletries here, all right?

So we could take all of us...Denton, Dallas, Fort Worth...and we could head out to a field somewhere, and you know what we'd be? The church! We could all come over to my house. We're not going to fit, but there we would be the church. We could come to your house, and we'd be the church. God is not building a place; he's building a people.

In Revelation, the New Jerusalem is the bride of Christ. It's the church. I wish I had some help in here! So God has formed us from near and from far. It's one of my favorite parts of The Village. There's no consistent background. We are a strange mix of people. We really are. I mean, at every celebration service, it's highlighted.

"I grew up going to church my whole life. I just didn't understand and never had my heart really opened up. I'd been trying to be good. I kept falling short. I gave up hope. Jesus rescued me."

"I got caught up in cocaine with my ex-boyfriend, but that led me to a slew of decisions. I am a single mother of two children from two different fathers, and Jesus reached me in my addiction."

That's near and far in the same place...here.

"I'm a former stripper."

"I'm a former embezzler."

"I'm a former drug dealer."

"I'm a former alcoholic."

On and on I could go. This is what God has done from near and far. He has created a people. So the church is all of those everywhere, across all of time, who have trusted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for their salvation. That's what the church is, but for the sake of this series, we're going to pull it out of the universal church, and we're going to go down to the local church, because God has not saved all of these people from near and far and made them individuals out in the world, but rather, he begins to gather them in local congregations for a specific purpose.

Let me read you one of those purposes. In Ephesians 3:10, it says, **"...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."** In other places of the Bible, you'll see the church is meant to be salt and light to the world, so what God has done is... God is saving from near and far. He's creating a people, and what's going to

happen in that people is they're going to display the manifold wisdom of God to the heavenlies, and they're going to be salt and light to the world around them.

This is what God is doing, and he sets out to build his people...not a place, but a people...in a specific way, and that's what we're going to see in the rest of this text, so let's just read the rest of it now, starting in verse 20 and to the end of the chapter. Are you guys ready? Make me proud. Let's go.

**"...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."**

Now here's how God is building together his people. The foundation of that people who are being built together is the apostles and the prophets, the same foundation of the apostles and the prophets. Now to put my professor hat on, *the apostles and the prophets*... When that phrase is used, it's in reference to the two highest offices in the New Testament church, but what the apostles and prophets did was proclaim to the people of God the Word of God.

So the *Apostles* (big "A" apostles) means those who saw Jesus and walked with Jesus...guys like Peter and John. So the Apostle Peter... That's a big "A" in that he walked with Jesus, not a little "a" apostle later in life who kind of sat over a group of pastors, but big "A" Peter. His first sermon (that doesn't sound right, does it?) at Pentecost is preaching the Word of God from the book of Joel. He's laying out the Word of God to the people of God.

See, the foundation of how God builds up this people he has created from near and far to reveal his manifold wisdom to the heavenlies and to be salt and light to the world around us is to give us the Word of God, that we might build upon that, that we might be shaped by that, that we might, in glad submission, come under that and celebrate that.

Here's what I need you to hear me say. No man, and no church, and I don't have any real authority except the Word of God. Now here's what I do know. I can entertain. Man, I can tell some jokes, and I know... It's a personality type, right? I've been doing that since I came out of the womb, all right? I came out with a joke, so in the end, I know I can entertain you, but I have no authority upon which to stand except the Word of God, and no one else does either.

It's why this morning we're tied to a text. It's why what I'm doing here is going, "Hey, look at this! Hey, look what *God* says! Hey, look at how *God* says this works! Hey, look at how God wants to communicate to us!" I

don't have any authority here. Can I make you giggle and motivate you? Yeah. You know how long that's going to last? Until the parking lot.

You're going to get all jammed up in there. It's going to take you longer to get out. You're going to lose your mind, and all of that motivation of, "Be better," is going to evaporate in a couple of seconds, but if the Word of God takes root in your soul, now we're moving, so the Word of God has been given to shape the people of God so in obedience to the Word of God, we begin to reveal the manifold wisdom of God and become the salt and light of the world, all right?

But that's not the only piece. In fact, there's a *huge* piece that goes with it. In fact, it can get confusing if you do word studies, because not only are the apostles and prophets the foundation, but Christ himself is the foundation, being the very Word himself. I know that's mind-blowing. You know, "**...the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...**" Christ *is* the Word, but we have the Word.

I mean, we don't have time for today's sake, but the place where we're built is not only with the foundation of the apostles and prophets, which is the Word of God, but Jesus as the Cornerstone who holds it all together. Let me try to unpack this. No aspiration other than knowing, savoring, and seeing Jesus Christ will ever hold the church together, so if we had an initiative that was good and right...

Say we had some justice initiative, or we had some social initiative, or we really wanted to pour our lives into a certain function or action, that might be good and right, but only Christ as the Cornerstone holds all things together. Without Christ as the Cornerstone, the rest of the pieces will simply fall to the ground, and they'll never be one. Now why is this true?

Because in Christ, we can experience the transforming grace of God, and that and that alone enables us to walk with one another in a way that is distinctively Christian and, therefore, reveals the manifold wisdom of God and also simultaneously empowers obedience and anchors us in difficult days. Let me start to unpack these things, okay? Christ as the Cornerstone is about experience in the grace of God, not just intellectually knowing about it, not just kind of being able to define it, but experientially walking in God's grace.

Here's what I mean by that. When the grace of God enables you to see and understand your hostility toward God, and in a pool of snot and tears, you make a confession to God about your shortcomings, and he responds by renaming you, that's *transformative*. So when you say, "I'm an addict!" and he says, "No, you're my son," that does something to you.

When you say, "I'm an adulterer!" and he says, "No, you're my beloved..." When you're expecting to be spanked, and you're hugged by the God of the universe, here's how that works on cornerstone stuff. When you experience grace, you can extend it. If you haven't experienced grace, you're not going to extend it, because you're going to want justice over grace, so think of how...

If you have a kid with you, hold their ears. Think of how *crappy* of a church member you would be if, in reality, you can't extend anybody grace. You always want justice for every little mistake because you haven't experienced grace yourself, so without experiential grace among the covenant community of faith, all the stones fall to the ground because we can't be gracious to one another.

We can't be quick to forgive one another, and hear what forgiveness means. Forgiveness means there's a legitimate offense we forgive. Now how are we able to do that? We're able to do that because we've experienced legitimate forgiveness. See, Christ as the Cornerstone means we've experienced things we're then able to extend to others because we've been the recipients of them.

Then, once that kind of love is lavished upon us, that empowers obedience, because in that moment, I'll no longer question that God is for me, and therefore, his commands are leading me to what will be the fullness of life and joy. I don't know about how you work. A lot of the commands of God are really easy for me, and a lot of them are not easy. Are we all about there?

There are some commands I'm like, "No problem," about, like breathing. I don't even have to just walk in it. I don't have to think about it. There's no wrestle. There's no difficulty. It's just like, "I've got it." Then there are times when I'm just like, "Uh, Lord, are you sure? I just want to lay this before you. It's 2013 or whatever it is, and I'm just saying I don't know this is going to work here," and it's harder to be difficult in those areas.

When I can remember that on that day, God said, "You're mine," then in my remembrance, I go, "Okay. I'm in. If this is what you have for me, I'm walking this way." Also, in the dark night of the soul, those experiences of grace become a real anchor for our souls. On Wednesday night, we had our elder-led prayer, and I sat right over here on the front row.

When it came time to pray, a 20-something single woman came up to me, grabbed my hand, and let me know she had just been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and they were beginning to build out her treatment protocol. I got to pray with her and encourage her, and then she went back and sat down. Then, about three or four minutes later, a guy in his 30s with a brand new baby and young children, who has just recently started coming to the church, mainly because they like the music...which was hurtful that he would even say that to me, but...

Then, in the end, he had a brain tumor they found a little less than a year ago, did the surgery, did the radiation... (I mean, I know that process like the back of my hand. I have gone through five rounds of the Temodar now.) A recent MRI showed the tumor was back and was growing. So I got to get my hands on him and pray over him, and then he went and sat down.

Then, seconds later, this woman (I have to be really careful here) in her late 50s or early 60s...that's my guess...came and just kind of slid in and just, through her tears and snot, said, "They found bone cancer in me this week, and it's not looking good," so I got to pray with her, and then she went back and sat down. Then we continued to just worship the Lord, sing to the Lord, and pray, and then I turned around, and all of them, hands to the sky, were worshipping and praising God.

Now that looks ridiculous! "This all-knowing, all-powerful, can-do-anything-he-wills God has allowed me to get cancer, to suffer, to agonize, and to be banged up and beat up, and so I'm going to worship him." You know what drives that? Jesus is the Cornerstone, that experience of grace where you grow in confidence that he's for you.

Carl Brower, who runs Little Village for us, our preschool minister... His daughter, Katherine, is battling cancer right now. The prognosis is great. She has a neutrophil issue right now, which means she's in the hospital because her white count is too low, but Carl, when he found out Katherine had cancer, tweeted out... I don't know if you're on Twitter, but he tweeted out, "God is good. Our daughter has cancer. Those statements do not contradict each other."

Now if you haven't experienced the grace of God, that sounds insane! "Isn't God good?" Look at this! That sounds crazy! In fact, if I weren't a Christian, I would be hostile to that. That would make me want to *hurt* you. "You fool!" But if you've experienced grace, how could you doubt his goodness? Because you laid the worst of you out there, and he renamed you.

It was while you were at your worst that Christ died for you. That's our celebration. It wasn't me on my good day who God loved. God, on my worst day, that day I'd be most ashamed of, that day I most regret, those events I wish I could go back in time and change... It's in that mess that Christ shows up and goes, "You're my beloved. You're mine. I have purchased you by my blood."

That's our celebration. That's why in these moments obedience is enabled, and the dark night of the soul finds an anchor in the goodness of God. *That's* how he shapes us. Then I love this next part. It becomes so important, and for those of you who have felt banged up by the church, my prayer, earnestly, is this will help you. If you write in your Bible or highlight in your device, that little phrase there, *joined together*, becomes imperative for you to get and know.

So I would underline it, circle it, star it, or whatever you do in your device. Mark it or file it into Evernote, but that little *joined together* is important, and here's why: We are all over the map in this room, and let me try to explain that. There are some of us in this place who are very mature in our faith. We've been following Jesus Christ for an extended period of time.

We have grown in our knowledge of the Word of God. We have grown in our ability to extend grace. We have grown in our ability to walk peaceably with all men. We have grown in our understanding of the goodness and grace of God. We have grown in those things, and we walk well in those things. Then there are some of us... Man, we're just what the Bible calls infants in the faith.

We don't know a lot of the Bible at all. We're trying to extend grace, but this is a new idea to us. We still kind of struggle with giving people the benefit of the doubt, right? We're a bit raw, and here's what the Bible says: Jesus, by the Word of God and by being the Cornerstone, creates an environment where the big mature stones can nestle up to those smaller stones, and he builds together a people on that, which is amazing, but it also explains some of the hiccups a local church will have, because if you have a bunch of babies, you have a mess.

Somebody had better give me a "Glory!" on that one. If you have a bunch of kids, you have a mess. You put too many 3-year-olds in a room together without enough adults, and you have the Western hemisphere on fire, right? So the church will always be a place that has those who are mature and those who are maturing but are currently immature, but they are just as much a part of the church.

Now think about it. When you have a baby, they bring nothing to the table, but they're still part of the family, right? I mean, nobody has rules on when they finally get to be a part of the family. "When you can contribute, that's when you're part of the family. When you bring something to the table..." I've never had a father tell me when I ask him, "Hey, how's that new son of yours?"

"Golly, I hate that thing!"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, Matt, I want to be straight with you, bro, and I know what the Bible says, but listen. This thing cries all the time. It messes itself. It's bleeding our bank account dry. It's bringing nothing to the table, so here's what my girl and I have decided: When that little thing can contribute anything to our family dynamic, we're going to give it a name, and then from there, we've created a tier structure of when he gives what, we will move him along in how he belongs to our family."

If you tried to tell me that, I would risk my ministry by punching you in the head. That's crazy! We don't think that way! Now let's be straight. Can babies be exhausting? Yes. Do you have to clean up? Yes. Do they require a lot of attention? Yes. I mean, think about it. They can't even digest on their own, right? You have to sit there for like an hour and half, patting them on the back. "Give it up, kid! Come on! You try!" right? They can't even do that!

So if you carry this parallel over, they can't even process the Word of God in a way that's always helpful. They require a lot of attention, but the Bible says Jesus, the Master Builder, fixes us together, and here's where it forms a spectacular loop. Now newborns, by the time they're 5, are not acting like newborns anymore. They're acting like 5-year-olds, right?

So there's an always-essential increase in the life of a healthy church, and what I mean by that is babies don't stay babies. They grow. If they don't grow, something is broken. Either the Word of God is not being proclaimed or the cornerstone of Christ's grace is not being made much of, but where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, and where the cornerstone of Jesus' grace and forgiveness is celebrated, infants should begin to grow.

Now here's what happens. As infants begin to grow, the manifold wisdom of God is being made more and more visible to the heavenlies, and there is more salt and more light that creates more babies, so at any given time, someone looking from the outside into the church should think the church is a bit immature and hypocritical, and at any given time, there are little dramas in any congregation because there are babies who should be present, but they should be celebrated, not resented.

Unfortunately, what ends up happening in parenting as well as in the church is we want our babies to act like they're not babies, and we shirk the responsibility of what it means to parent them into maturity, so in the church, we just want to run with mature people, and we want people to get it, and we're harsh and lack patience with those who don't grow to where we are now, even though it has taken us a decade to get to where we are now. We want that baby to be where we are now.

"You need meat, bro! Why are you reading that? You need meat! Why are you acting like that?" Because it's an infant. I mean, you're not shoving a T-bone into your infant's mouth. "I'm telling you, you're going to love this one day, all right?" That's not how it works, so we patiently and graciously walk with one another. This also means you're going to be disappointed at times because you were hoping someone was more mature than they were, and the only way your immaturity gets exposed is as you walk with others closely and iron sharpens iron.

It's funny to me that people love that verse. "What's your favorite proverb?"

"Oh, iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another!"

Have you ever seen iron being sharpened? I mean, you take a stone, and you slash it on there, or you take fire and a hammer, right? It's not a pleasant process at all, but it's how we're sharpened by what? By sparks happening. That means your immaturity is most often revealed as you interact with the people of God, so prepare yourself for sparks. Prepare your heart to be gracious to others, and prepare (multiple times in your journey) to be found out that you're not as mature as you thought you were. It's going to happen.

Be quick to extend grace to those who harm you and forgiveness to those who harmed you in the local gathering of the saints, because there are babies present, and there are a lot of babies who can shave. Spiritual babies can be 50 or 60 years old. Spiritual babies...hear me...can have a church background that goes back two decades or three decades.

Spiritual maturity has little to do with length of time doing religiously rote things that don't stir affection or build relationship with Christ. Now this is what we're laboring for and laboring toward. One of the primary ways this breaks down is when there is a lack of seriousness about this or a lack of seriousness about sin in and among the people of God, so when people approach membership as some kind of secondary... "Well, I want to love Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean I need the church..."

I'm telling you, you are standing in contradiction to the Word of God if you're saying, "What God wants of me is simply for me to love him," because what he has called you to is to love one another. In fact, repeatedly in the Scriptures, it says, "One another... One another... One another..." How and why? Because he will care for you in that place, and because it's in that place that we reveal the manifold wisdom of God to the world, to the heavenlies, and we become salt and light.

So to go but not belong is sinful. Are you tracking with me? It is of no value to you, and God help us in this culture. I mean, we're about as noncommittal as you can imagine. I mean, we are just full on noncommittal. Just, "Well, you know, we don't want to get *too* deep," and yet what the Bible says is, "No, no, no. I've created you. I'm building you up. This is how I build, and I don't have some one little stone over there. No. I build you together. You're different sizes and different shapes, and I'm going to fit you together into something spectacular," so this is what we've been called to.

This is what the church is. Now I want to kind of flesh this out just in closing. My belief (I could be off here; we'll find out) is many of us kind of avoid getting deep with people because we've been wounded by people, so we have to kind of protect ourselves, so that protection looks like being connected. That's what makes it crazy. We're going to protect our hearts by having the appearance of belonging without belonging, so we know everyone, but no one. Are you tracking with me?

"I'm going to protect my heart, but I'm going to show up on the weekends. I'm going to know a couple of people's names. I'm going to, maybe, go to a home group once or twice, but I'll probably move on to another one after that. I'm going to give myself a little, but not fully." I think what really causes that barrier is many of us have held on to some hurt, some resentment, some bitterness, and some unforgiveness, and I'm telling you...if we could just step even away from the church piece and just talk your heart and your life...the root of bitterness destroys not just you, but those around you.

Cynicism harms not just you, but those around you. In fact, one of the scariest things I learned about growing older is there is collateral damage for my sinfulness. When I was just an idiot 15-year-old, the collateral damage was the sorrow of my parents, but as a husband and father now, if I let cynicism take root in my heart, if I let that kind of... I can see everything that's wrong and can't identify anything that's right.

If I let *that* take root in me, the ability to always see weaknesses and never celebrate strengths... If I let that grow, the Bible says that destroys me and those around me, and those around me are who I love most. So here's my appeal to you just in closing today. This is what the church is, but we have no shot at this if ultimately, you're not willing to let go of some bitterness and some resentment that resides in your heart.

I'm not trying to say you aren't wounded. I'm not trying to say you weren't done wrong. In fact, my experiences with churches lead me to actually believe you more than I would believe other places. You probably were. You probably *were* consistently disappointed. You probably *have* been wounded. You probably *have* seen things that didn't make sense, that seemed wrong to you, that seemed heavy-handed and unloving, seemed judgmental and wrong.

Here's what I'm saying: The only people you're hurting right now in not letting go and giving that over to the Lord is you and those closest to you. You think those people who wounded you right now are just like, "Oh my gosh! I don't know what I'm going to do! They're out there, and I hurt them, and they're frustrated and angry, and I'm not moving on"? You're not even in their head! You're in *yours*, robbing yourself of life and vitality.

So here's what I want to do just to land the plane today. I want to pray, and then I want to give you some time, and here's what I want to give you time for. If you have some resentment and unforgiveness... And maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the church. Maybe it's just bitterness and resentment. Let me give you a test. I've already given this, but I want to give it more explicitly.

If what you see best is what's wrong with things, then that's a sure sign of bitterness and resentment in the soul. If you're an expert on the weaknesses of things, and you think that's your gift to help places get

better, I'm telling you something is wrong with your heart. If you find it difficult to celebrate wins and celebrate good things, I'm telling you, you have a root in you that's not healthy, so let's lay those things down.

I have found that roots get uprooted best not when we just, in our heads, go, "I don't want to carry that anymore," but when we verbally lay those out to someone else, so if you've come with someone, it might be a good idea to just turn to them and go, "Hey, man, listen. This is a place of unforgiveness I've held on to. This is a place of bitterness I've held on to. This is a place of unforgiveness I've really kind of latched my claws into and refused to give up."

For those of you who, maybe, don't know anyone or don't want to tell the person you're with, we'll have some of our pastors standing up here, so I'm going to make it awkward. We're not all going to stand and make it easy for you to make your way up because God needs to do this work in you. It doesn't need to be me appealing, but you gladly getting out from under that weight for the first time, so we're going to put some men and women up here who could hear from you, pray with you, and encourage you, even if your hurt came from this place.

Then from there, our worship pastors are going to lead out in a song we wrote for this series, called "The Dearest Place," and then we'll end in Communion and celebration, but let me pray. While I pray, there will be pastors who come up, and don't wait long. If you argue with yourself in your seat about whether or not you want to lay these things down, I promise you, you won't. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for my brothers and sisters, for these men and women, and for calling us to you. You called us from near. You called us from far, and you're making one people out of us. Thank you for the mature and the immature. Might you give us a great deal of patience with one another. I thank you that you are our Cornerstone, Jesus, that in you all things hold together, and without you as the Cornerstone, nothing will hold together. Increase our graciousness toward one another. Increase our ability to forgive one another quickly.

I pray there would be many who have walked into these rooms under the burden of bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, and anger, that for the first time, today, Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they would let go, would confess that and walk in the freedom of trusting you to be gracious to those who repent and to judge rightly and justly those who do not. Help us, Father. It's through your beautiful name I pray, amen.