

Serving

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning I want to talk about something that Adrian mentioned earlier, something that's vital to church life. And I want us to spend pretty much the time of the sermon meditating over it and thinking of it.

And that is the concept of membership in a church. What does it mean to be a member of a church? And it's worth spending a whole sermon considering that. Why do we at St. Mark's encourage people to become members?

I wonder if you've ever thought of that. And it's an important question. As I say, it's worth spending the time thinking about because not only might you be considering becoming a member of this church if you've been coming on a regular basis for a while, but I think that even people who are already members of a church can often tend to misunderstand what that means, what it actually means to be a member of a church body, especially when you consider how the word is used in our world today, the word membership.

How do we use it in everyday life? Well, think of membership in a sports club, for example. If you're a member of a sports club, what does that mean? Well, it means that you pay your annual subs and then you get to use the facilities and the services of the club as you need them.

That's what we understand membership of a club to mean. The problem is today, I think, people often see church membership the same way as membership in a sports club. You know what I mean? You pay your monthly fees, your giving in the bag or by EFT, so you can benefit from the facilities and the services of the church.

[1 : 31] That's often, sadly, how people view church membership. You know, you just use the facilities as and when you need to. So, you know, who cares if you come to church every second or third Sunday if that's all you need?

Why is Nick always on my case about coming to church regularly? What's that about? Well, the reason that I'm always on your case about coming to church regularly is that being part of a church is nothing like being part of a sports club.

And it's vital for us to understand that this morning. It's vital for us to understand what it means to actually be part of a church. If we're going to be changed, if we're going to have changed hearts and live the lives that God calls us to, we need to change our thinking about church.

As Paul puts it in verse 2, you must be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Do you see that in the second verse? You must change how you think about many things in life.

And this morning, I think God is challenging us to change how we think about church and what it means to be part of a church. And so, I want us to see three areas that this passage challenges us to do exactly that, to change our thinking about what it means to come here, what it means to be part of this body.

[2 : 43] And the very first step, in fact, to being a member of a church is, in fact, changing how we think about ourselves. That's how Paul starts.

Not to think of ourselves too highly. That's his first major point that he makes here. Look at verse 3. It'll be up on the screen behind me. For by the grace given to me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment according or in accordance with the faith that God has distributed to each of you.

Okay. So, what does it mean to think of ourselves in accordance with the faith that God has distributed to each of us? It's a strange phrase. Well, you see, if you're a Christian this morning, if you're a Christian, you must never forget that your faith is something that God has given you as a gift.

You didn't decide, one morning wake up and decide, well, what am I going to believe today? Let's think. I'll believe in Jesus, that he's real and that he's my king. No. You know, God gives us that faith as a gift.

He implants it in our lives. And it might take a while to sprout as you come to church and it slowly starts to grow and it builds through trials and as you come to church and hear God's word.

[4 : 06] But it's still a gift from God. That's something we must understand. Another thing we must understand about what Paul is saying here when he says, in accordance with the faith, God has distributed to each of you. It's not talking about different levels of faith.

It's often misunderstood that, you know, people have, you've got stronger faith than I do. No, he's talking about the faith that's expressed, say, in the Apostles' Creed. That's our faith in Christ.

It's not different levels of faith. It's the faith that all Christians have equally. It's what makes us Christians. That's the faith that God has distributed to each of us if we are Christians.

And that faith, if you truly believe the gospel, that determines how you go about life. In fact, in the Bible, over and over again, we can tell who's got genuine faith by looking at their lives.

And we're encouraged to do that. We're encouraged to look at our own lives, to examine ourselves, to see whether we are truly in the faith. Whether we're not just saying it and coming to church to tick a box. Whether it's real or not is determined by how we live.

[5 : 07] Because if we have a real faith, if God has given us that faith, it changes everything. It determines how we relate to other people. It determines how we live. It determines what we live for.

It determines what we value. It determines the first thing we think about when we wake up in the morning. Not least of all, as we read here, it determines how you think about yourself. In that you won't anymore think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Why? Well, think about it. Because if you believe the gospel, what does that mean? What does that tell you about yourself? What does the gospel tell you about yourself? Well, it tells you that you're a sinner.

First of all, that you're a sinner in desperate need of salvation. Because you face God's judgment for your sin. You're powerless to do anything about that yourself.

You need a savior. You can't save yourself. That's the first thing the gospel tells you about yourself. It's humbling, isn't it? But the gospel also tells you that Jesus has done something.

[6 : 08] Even though you couldn't do anything, Jesus has done something. He died to take your sins on himself and change you from the inside out when you put your trust in that. And through faith in him, the gospel tells you you've become part of God's eternal family.

And you're called to live as a member of that family. Now that, in a nutshell, is what your faith tells you. What the gospel tells you. And it tells you that you need that family to help you to live for God.

So that's a summary. You're a sinner. You need salvation. Jesus came to save you. And he brings you into his family. And that's a family you need. That's what the gospel tells you about yourself.

So you see how the gospel changes how we think about, therefore, being part of a church. It tells us that being part of a church is not being part of a club. It's being part of a family.

A family. With the responsibilities that come with a family. You have certain responsibilities in your biological family, right? Which will last probably until you die or all of them die off, whichever comes first.

[7 : 18] But how much more do you have responsibilities to your eternal family which will last forever? It's a family. That's how the Bible talks about the church. And the gospel challenges us to think that way.

But you see how the gospel also challenges us to think about ourselves. It challenges us to realize that we're not independent beings. Like the world says we are.

You know, the world says you determine your own fate. You're the master of your destiny. The master of your fate. I watched that movie *Invictus*. You know the movie about Morgan Freeman, I think it is?

Plays Nelson Mandela and Matt Damon plays Francois Pena of the rugby thing. It's a nice movie that records kind of the 1995 World Cup but it's based on a poem called *Invictus* which is there's a line in *Invictus* it says you are the master of your destiny.

You are the captain of your soul. Nice words but it's absolute rubbish. You're not. That's what the gospel tells you. You're not the captain of your soul. You're not the master of your destiny.

[8 : 20] God is. So the gospel challenges us to think about ourselves differently. That's the first step to realizing what it means to be part of a church.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. Now once you've got that the second is in turn to realize that you don't belong to yourself anymore.

Now this is a big one. It's a shocker really. But look what Paul says next verse 4. For just as each of us has one body with many members and those members do not all have the same function so in Christ we though many form one body and each member belongs to all the others.

Now I'm going to say that again because that is this is just a typical example of one of those phrases that our subconscious skips over as we're reading the Bible because we don't really want to think about the implications of that.

Each member belongs to all the others. Belongs to all the others. Now this is definitely an area that we need renewed thinking isn't it? Because it tells us if you're a Christian you don't belong to yourself anymore.

[9 : 30] But the world every day is teaching you the opposite. The world every day is saying of course you belong to yourself. Your time is yours to do it as you please as you see fit.

Your money is yours. You've earned it. Use it for fun. Your skills are yours. Use them for your benefit. That's what the world is telling you. But what does the gospel say? The gospel says you don't belong to yourself and you never did.

God made you. God redeemed you. You belong to him to do with as he pleases. And do you know what he did when you became a Christian? If you're a Christian this morning you know what God did?

The moment you became a Christian he wrapped you up and he gave you as a gift to his church. Have you ever considered yourself in that way? As a present for your church that God gave your church?

And that means that your time, your money, your skills don't belong to you for your benefit. They belong to the person next to you for their benefit.

[10 : 33] Just as their skills and time and resources belong to you for your benefit. Alright? It's quite a change in thinking isn't it? And the reason you come to church therefore is not primarily for what you can get out of it but it's for what you can give.

That is what it really means to be a member of God's family. You don't belong to yourself anymore. That's exactly what the Bible is saying. It's not me saying that. This is your creator telling you.

But irrespective of that we don't like this idea do we? It's one of the things we skip over. It's one of the things we don't think about. It goes against everything that our culture is telling us and it goes against every fiber of our sinful being.

And that is the primary reason I think that churches don't function the way they should. Because we fail to grasp that we don't belong to ourselves anymore.

Imagine, just imagine for a second that we all got that and we all grasped that and we all started living according to that imagine we all rocked up at church with the mindset what can I give of myself today? How can I encourage my brothers and sisters?

[11 : 46] How can I serve them? Let me look out for opportunities from the moment I step in the door to serve and to encourage and to give. Imagine, how amazing would Sundays be if we all came to church with that mindset?

It would be amazing. You would have 80 odd people who are just desiring to serve you and you would be thinking not of yourself but of others.

I mean it would be heaven. In fact, that is exactly what heaven is going to be. Heaven, what Jesus came to earth to die, to open the way up for us to enter into in eternity.

Heaven is a new world with none of the problems of this current world. Why? Because it will be populated by a huge family of people where everyone is thinking of everyone else's needs and wants first before their own so that everybody's needs are met but nobody's thinking about themselves.

Don't you want to be part of a society like that? Don't you? How amazing would that be? Well, if you want to, you don't have to wait.

[12 : 51] In fact, you shouldn't wait. That society starts here in the local church. And it starts by realizing that you don't belong to yourself anymore and that you come here to give and not to get.

When we start realizing that, when more and more of us start realizing that, church will be amazing. You'll just put everything aside so that you can come to church. It'll be a little taste of heaven.

That's what we want this growing family of Christ's disciples to be as we live out the gospel. This is what it means to live out the gospel. But it's not easy. It's hard. But it's so worth it. Now, maybe though, you're thinking, well, I don't have anything to give.

I'd love to. I'd love to have some kind of skills or whatever, but I don't have anything to give. I don't know what to give. Well, if you're a Christian, you're wrong. Because the third way you need renewed thinking about yourself is to realize you have a gift that God has given you to use.

That's the next thing we see in this passage. I'll read from verse 4 again. Follow with me. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function.

[14 : 02] So in Christ, we though many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us.

If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach. If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously.

If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. So here Paul describes the church as he does elsewhere in scripture as well, as a body.

This is one of the most common descriptions, metaphors for the church that is used in the New Testament. And he says if you consider a body, a body has many members, different parts of the body that make up the whole, hands, eyes, nose, feet, whatever.

And each different member has a role to play. And it's only when every member is performing its role that the body can function properly, right?

[15 : 03] Make sense? You get the point? Get the illustration? For example, think about the simple act of something I do on a regular basis, taking a sip of coffee from a coffee mug, all right?

Now, think about that act. You're just taking a sip of what members of your body are involved in succeeding in that act. Well, firstly, your nose needs to confirm that the coffee is decent enough to drink.

Then your eyes need to record the location of the mug. In fact, the particular angle that your irises are focusing on the mug tells your brain exactly how far away it is so that your hand then can grab it.

Your eyes will send that information to your brain which processes it, sends it to your muscles in your hand. And then your hand will move to the mug to grip it with the fingers. Your skin determines whether the mug is not too hot.

And then your hand works out the weight of the mug as it lifts it at just the right force. And then as it gets there, your mouth's job is to play its role and open up so that the liquid can go in.

[16 : 04] Your tongue needs to catch the liquid. Your taste buds need then to send signals to your brain confirming that it is indeed good coffee. Your throat then has to swallow it and send it to your stomach to process the nutrients and send the caffeine into your blood system to give you a boost for the day so you can get through your morning emails.

But you see, that's, do you see the point? Just in a simple act of taking a sip of coffee, so many members of your body are involved and they're all necessary and vital to play their role in order for you to succeed in getting that coffee.

in the same way, in the same way, says Paul, the church has different members. That's what being a member means, you and I are part of a bigger body. And just like a physical body, we have different roles to play so that the church can function.

And all of these roles are important and necessary. So first, they're important. They're important. It's interesting how Paul starts his list of examples of such roles.

Just have a look at it again. He says, if your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve.

[17 : 15] And then he carries on. But just take these two gifts as an example, prophesying and serving. Now, back in the day, before the Bible was complete like we have it today, the early church had prophets, people who spoke revelations directly from God to fill the gaps in what was missing in their Bibles because it wasn't completed yet.

They only had like maybe a few letters in the Old Testament. Or these prophets were given revelations from God to speak God's will directly into these churches' situations.

And the prophets were seen, of course, as super important people in the church. You know, when the prophet walked in, everybody wanted to shake his hand. Everybody wanted to give him red carpet treatment.

He's an important guy. On the other side of the spectrum, of course, you had the church servants, the ones who served tea afterwards, the ones who folded the notices or whatever they did back then.

They probably didn't have papyrus notices. But, you know, the people who just did the seemingly mundane jobs, and they didn't consider themselves important, not nearly as important as the prophet, but they're wrong, says Paul.

[18 : 25] And he does it by deliberately, notice he deliberately lists these two gifts together, two gifts from completely different sides of what we would consider important, and yet he lists them together as if to say no one is more important than the other.

Why is that? Because they are both equally necessary for the whole body to function. You see his point? Let me put it this way. What do you think life would be like without your little toes?

How important could your little toes possibly be? I mean, they're ugly little appendages that seem like an afterthought, aren't they? Little toes. But I wonder if you realize how important your little toes are to keep your foot balanced at the right angle to carry the weight of your body.

They're much more vital than they seem. I mean, you probably haven't spared a thought for your little toe in the last 24 hours, have you? And yet it's a vital part of your body. Now, don't take offense to this, but you as a Christian might be a little toe in the church.

You know what I mean? You don't think your role is that important. You don't think your role in this church is even noticed. Well, let me tell you, it might not be noticed, but I'll assure you it's vitally important because it's part of the body.

[19 : 43] And without that part, the body wouldn't be able to function properly. And it's the part that God has called you and equipped you to be.

It's important. But secondly, we see it's necessary. It's necessary. If you're a Christian, the Bible says God has given you at least one gift.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians, to each a manifestation of the Spirit has been given. To each. You have at least one gift which you didn't have before you became a Christian. And that gift is given for the purpose of serving your church to help you to play your role.

And now, if you haven't yet, God wants you to find out what that gift is. It's there. But you need to actually explore and find out what it is. Now, we'll spend some time in our Bible studies discussing what those gifts are.

We'll go through them, look at them in more detail. Paul's list here isn't exhaustive. There's more gifts than he lists here. And we'll talk about what it means and how to find out what your gift is.

[20 : 45] But I want you to notice that Paul's burden in this passage is to tell us that whatever the gift is that you find that you have, you need to use it. See, verse 7, if it is serving, then serve.

If it is teaching, then teach. If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. And obviously he's saying this because we don't naturally use the gifts God has given us.

We need the apostle to kind of give us a kick in the pants and spur us into action and say, listen, you have a gift, find out what it is and start using it. And we don't because either we think we don't have them, which is wrong, or we forget why God gave them to us, to use for the good of the church.

One of the problems in the Corinthian church, if you read the letter to the Corinthians, is that these Corinthians were discovering all their gifts, but then they were using them for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the body. And so Paul has to write basically these two letters to correct them.

But you see, the problem with most churches, including this one, is that it's a body where only half the members are actually functioning. Imagine that example of sipping a cup of coffee.

[21 : 54] But imagine only half the body parts involved decided to do their role, the other half decided not to. Maybe your eyes decide that it doesn't really need to judge the distance to the mug and tell your hand and then you kind of grasp around for it, but you just can't reach it.

And even if you do, you go take a sip, but let's say your mouth refuses to open just as you take the sip. I mean, you wouldn't really be able to successfully drink a cup of coffee if only half the members involved decided to do their role.

It wouldn't work. But that's what happens in the church, you see. So many people in the church neglect to use their gifts to fulfill their role, and that's why we can't function and grow as we should.

And so Paul says each of us needs to identify and use those gifts. Now the primary way we do that at St. Mark's is through the process of membership.

That's why the process is put into place in our church. And that's why it's called membership. It's helping you to be an active member of the body.

[23 : 01] In membership classes, you'll learn what it means to be part of a body, and you'll learn to identify your gifts, and you'll be equipped and given opportunities to use them.

And we have a membership class starting in a few weeks. And I know that many people have been approached for membership by myself or Sylvia, to the point that you kind of see us coming and you turn the other way and get busy with something else.

But now I kind of understand that. It's a big commitment, and I'm not going to lie. Membership in a church is a big commitment. I hope you've seen that from this passage. But it's my job this morning to tell you that you need to change your thinking.

You need to renew your mind about who you are and what it means to belong to God's family on earth, and who your time and your resources and gifts really belong to.

Because they don't belong to yourself. That is, if you are part of God's family. If you are a Christian. But now I've been speaking to Christians primarily because that's who Paul is writing to.

[24 : 04] But I don't assume that everyone here is a Christian. Maybe you've been coming here for a while. Maybe you're still considering and thinking about these things. But I've got to say, if you're not yet, if you're not part of God's family, if you haven't given your life to Jesus yet, if you haven't taken that step, you're missing out on the greatest life ever.

I promise you. Yes, you need to give up your independence. But that's a small price to pay for being part of an amazing eternal family where you will live one day in an eternal home where you will love and serve your brother and sister and they will love and serve you all the while while you love and enjoy God forever in eternal bliss, enjoying all the pleasures that he's ever wanted you to enjoy.

Now that is deep down what you're longing for, to be there, to live in that community. And God sent his son to bring you into that family. But you need to take that step in.

You need to identify what is stopping you from doing that. What is stopping you from making that commitment? What is stopping you from entering into that family? Jesus said, what good is it to gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul?

You could have every single thing you wanted on earth. You could be the richest person living in a mansion, in a cruising yacht, you know, going to the Bahamas.

[25 : 31] You could be, you could have everything you ever wanted and yet that would be nothing, nothing, nothing compared to being a member of God's family for eternity. Don't let those things and the pursuit of those things stop you from accepting Christ, from coming to him.

You need to take that step. And if you don't know how, then I've got a booklet I'd love to give you to find out how. It's free of charge, no questions asked. Just come to me, I can give it to you afterwards. But I guess I want to say in closing, if you have done that, if you have taken that step, if you have entered into God's family, I now encourage you to stand up and be counted.

To give yourself as a member of this local church family as we prepare for eternity together. Will you do that? Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we're bowled over when we think of the blessing that you have sent in your son who came to die for us, to bring you into your eternal family.

We're reminded that even the greatest pleasures on this life are just fading shadows, just foreshadows of what's to come in eternal bliss in your family.

[26 : 45] Lord, help us to live now as members of that family. Help us to meet the responsibilities of being part of that family. Lord, we thank you for the gifts that you've given us to do that.

I pray for everyone here, Lord, that if they are in you, if they are in your family, you would help them to discover what their gifts are and equip them to use those gifts.

And then I pray for those who are maybe still exploring, who are not yet sure where they stand with you. Lord, reveal yourself to them in a special way, even today, as they go home as they think about these things.

Show them that you are real, that you are their Lord, and that you want them to enter your family. Draw them in, Lord. And would you, in all of this, be glorified on earth and in heaven, in Jesus' name.

Amen.