

What to Expect from Church!

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

It would be strange to walk into a shoe store and ask, “Could I have a burger, medium well, with cheese, ketchup and mustard? The clerk would look at you as if you have a lobster crawling out of your ear. It’s a shoe store. You expect to buy shoes, not burgers. And it would equally strange to walk into McDonald’s and request a size 10 1/2 brown Florsheim dress shoes. You expect to buy burgers at McDonald’s, not shoes. And there are places where you can get both like our local Shopko where you can buy food and shoes.

What do people expect from church? Is church a shoe store that sells shoes only? Is church a restaurant where you go to eat? We have an answer to that question in our text. Church is place where we should expect to get what is good for us and what is best for us.

I. The good of Christian care and love.

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

Sometimes I just don’t get it. Why do people want to pick on Christians? Yes, some don’t practice what they preach. Yes, some use Christianity as an excuse to do bad things. But if you have a people who actually take the Bible seriously, why persecute them? They do so much good, and not just for themselves.

I am hard pressed right now to think of a hospital that wasn’t started by Christians. In Mankato you have Immanuel St. Joseph’s, a merger of a Catholic and a Lutheran hospital. Hospitals are good things. My family would be half its size without hospitals. It was the Christians who first dared to teach young girls how to read and write in the Roman empire. It was Christian missionaries who developed alphabets for most of the nations of the world. God wants us to pay our taxes without cheating and with a humble and glad heart. He wants us to submit to the governing authorities, to obey harsh bosses, to be humble and place the other person’s needs above our own. So, why pick on them? If you would release the Christians to do what the Bible says, everyone will benefit.

We have just another example of the kindness and goodness Christians can do for one another in our text. In a day that did not have social security or insurance, welfare or food shelves, Christians saw a need and in love they provided help. In the book of Acts we see the believers selling off a piece of their property—land or a house—and lay the money at the Apostles feet. One thing they used the money for was to distribute food for widows. Granted, many widows had family who took care of them, but many did not. The Romans weren’t going to do anything about it, so the Christians did. But it wasn’t perfect. Some of the widows, for whatever reason, were neglected in the distribution of food.

I have said before that we could write a letter to the Social Security Department with a list of widows from our congregation and tell them to stop sending them checks. We can take care of them. Now, I will not do that. God is using our Government as one way to keep his promise to take care of people, and even though you and I can find many faults in how they do it, we don’t mind paying into it because God uses it for good. But you get my point. The best people to help are the immediate family. But a close second is the family of God. Government or no government, we are moved by Christ to love others.

I think of Geraldine Mutch at the end of the alley. She’s had a tough time of it. For years LaDonna Thompson visited her. When God called LaDonna home to heaven, her daughter, Carrie did the same thing. Our secretary had been going over there to help as well as several other members. Isn’t that what God wants us to do?

But like the Apostles, we are not perfect. There are other members who could use a visit or two, or help taking the garbage out, or to have a listening ear. Maybe they don’t say anything or we didn’t know, or maybe we get so fixated on our own problems we don’t notice. But there is no excuse. Maybe we need more, organized efforts here at church like in Jerusalem when they picked seven men to make sure all the widows were fed. Or maybe we just need to get our heads and hearts and eyes and ears out of our own lives and actually pay attention to our neighbors. We built a bigger narthex so people can stand around and visit. Use it for that reason, and not just with the same people each Sunday. Like LaDonna, Carrie and others, notice and help. You are God’s answer to many prayers.

II. The better of sharing God’s Word.

Loving and caring for each other is a good thing. But there is something which is better.

“So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

The Apostles saw a problem. A good thing could prevent them from doing a better thing. Limited in time and ability, they saw they couldn't do both, feed the widows and preach the Word of God. To do the one, they would have to neglect, or as it says in the Greek, leave behind the other.

Sometimes good things can make us leave behind better things. I can imagine a father who is very serious about providing for his family, so he works hard, even overtime so he can give them a home, food, maybe even a little for college. That is a good thing. But has he left anything behind? What if he is working 60 plus hours a week so he hardly sees the family he cares so much about? What if his kids don't really know him? This dad left behind one to achieve the other.

Not that you can't have it both ways. You can. A dad can provide and be there. But the Apostles understood something. Called to preach and teach and pray, they would have to leave that behind in order serve food. They saw a priority in preaching, but they also couldn't ignore or neglect the widows. Now there was a solution, call someone else to do the one so they can do the other.

But why is preaching and teaching so important? Maybe you heard of the old phrase: give a man a meal, you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Well the same applies to God's Word. Give someone a meal, you feed him for a day. Give him God's Word, you feed him for eternity.

I am always intrigued by the feeding of the five thousand. Miraculously, with only two fish and five loaves of bread, Jesus fed a meal to about 2/3rds the size of St. Peter. The people hung around and followed Jesus the next day looking for more. This time, however, he had another meal, himself as the Bread of Life. They needed to recognize him as more than a cook, but as their Savior from sin and death. Imagine if Jesus granted their request. Imagine he fed them lunch every day, even breakfast and dinner, too. They would still die, not from starvation, but from sin. No, they needed to listen to Jesus as their Savior. Sadly, they left because they did not want that. That's how Jesus answered the devil's temptation in the wilderness. Man does not live on bread alone, but on what? Every word of God.

We need to hear God's Word more than anything else. In it, God speaks to us. He is honest. He points out that there is something terribly wrong. He calls it sin, sometimes debt, sometimes iniquity, but it is all the same. Mankind and God are separated by the fact we are not holy while he is, and it shows. Take lying. We may not lie all the time, maybe we do, but the fact it is there is a warning of something wrong. It is like the day they flushed the water lines near our house. You poured a glass of water and it was yellowish brown. Something is wrong. Want more proof? The wages of sin is death.

But God is honest. He doesn't want us to be separated from him and so he sent his son Jesus to do the impossible. He did not lie, nor was he selfish, arrogant, greedy, or any other sin because as true God he is holy and lived a holy life. Then he offered up that sinless life as payment for our sins. I remember a book I read a while back, "The Witness of Combines." In it a farmer had died right before harvest. His widow and small boys had no way of harvesting the crops, paying the bills and surviving. Then one day they saw combine after combine coming down the road. The neighbors all showed up and did something this family could not do, harvest. Friends, this is what the Lord does. He does something we can't do. He saves us and promises that though death may come, we will awaken from it and live in his house forever.

So, what do we do? Thankfully we can do both. We don't have to throw out the good for the better. This means we can all watch out and take care of each other. Maybe we can organize it at church, or maybe we can do it spontaneously. Let's get our heads take note of others and what they need. In other words, let's be the body that Christ has made us to be where each member helps the other. Let's do the good things.

But let's not leave behind the better, sharing God's Word. Expect it. Demand it. If you come to speak to a pastor, don't leave until he shares the message of sin and grace with you. If you are getting married, ask that Christ remains the center of worship and the marriage. If there is a funeral, insist that the message of the cross and resurrection dominates for the comfort of all. Take advantage of our Bible classes, fellowship opportunities, Sunday School day school. And there is another small lesson here, how the Apostles involved the members as equals and all worked together so the good and best could be done. That's what to expect from your church. Amen.