

What would you say to someone who says that church is a waste of time?
August 27, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we have another great question to consider, a question that comes to us from real life experience. Here's the question:

"When I asked a friend to come to 'Bring a friend to church' day, he said 'Church is a waste of time.' I wasn't sure how to respond. What would you say to someone who says that church is a waste of time?"

That's a great question and I'm sure the person who asked it is not the only one who has heard that before. And admittedly, there was a time when it would have been me saying that church was a waste of time, so this week has been a neat opportunity for me to think about what I would have said to myself years ago to show that church is not in fact a waste of time.

What I want to do today is give you three answers to that question and then think about how you might respond the next time you hear someone say that church is a waste of time.

So, what would you say to someone who says that church is a waste of time?

The first thing that I would say is that 'Church is not a waste of time because it gives us a chance to think about eternity.' 'Church is not a waste of time because it gives us a chance to think about eternity.'

Stop and think for a minute: how many other opportunities do you have throughout the week to think about eternity? How many other organizations or communities encourage you to think about life beyond this one?

I suspect that church is pretty much the only one. There are lots of organizations that help us to think about what we're doing with this life, but church is pretty much the only one that helps us to think about the next.

And that's important, because the Bible tells us that there IS a next life to consider. There IS an eternity for us to think about.

Take John 5 for example. John 5:28, Jesus says:

28 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice
29 and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Our culture doesn't like to think about this, but the reality is that unless Jesus comes first, we will all die and then rise again to give account for what we did with our lives. And Jesus tells us in these verses that those who have done good will live forever and those who have done evil will be condemned forever. That's something that we need to think about. Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to think about that reality.

Now, if you're reading that REALLY closely, you might say: 'Oh, well, I don't need the church for that. As long as I 'do good,' I will live forever.' Verse 29, Jesus says 'those who have done good will rise to live.' As long as I do good then it doesn't really matter if I go to church, right?

Well, just four verses earlier, Jesus tells us what that 'good' looks like:

24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

There is no amount of 'good' that can earn us eternal life; when we act as though God's not there we are creating a rift that no mere human can repair. But, John 3:16, God loved us so much that He gave His one and only Son to die to forgive our sin and repair that rift so that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

Believing in Jesus means that we will rise to eternal life. And the good we do in the body that verse 29 is not talking about good deeds that we do on our own; the good we do in the body that verse 29 is talking about is the good we do in response to the free gift of salvation that God gives us when we believe. 'Doing good' begins when we believe in Jesus and carries on from there.

So put those verses together and Jesus is saying:

28 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice
29 and come out--those who have [believed in Me and] done good [in response] will rise to live, and those who have done evil [those who have ignored Me, who have just done their own thing] will rise to be condemned."

'Church is not a waste of time because it gives us a chance to think about eternity.' It gives us a chance to hear the reality of eternity, to hear how our choices affect our eternal well-being and to hear how Jesus opened the way for us to return to God by grace through faith. The Church is the only place where you'll hear that, and for that reason alone, it is not a waste of time.

Now I know that a common response that a person will have to that is 'what if it's not true?' It's just not worth my time to think about eternity because the only way we know about eternity is through the Bible and it might not be real and so 'I just don't think it's not worth my time.'

If somebody said that to me, I would say 'are you sure?' Are you so sure you'd stake your eternal well-being on it?

There's this idea out there called Pascal's wager – a concept that has its roots in Blaise Pascal's philosophy – and it had a big impact in my coming to faith.

It goes something like this: if you say 'there's no such thing as eternity' and I say 'there is such a thing as eternity,' only one of us can be right. Either we are going to live forever or we're not.

If you're right and I'm wrong, then I've wasted my life as a Christian. I'll just cease to exist and what I did in this life will have no meaning. But will I have really wasted my life? Because I will have lived with the peace of trusting in a good God and belonging to a loving community that really cares for me and doing my best to love and serve others with kindness and goodness and respect. If there is no eternity, that's not a bad way to have lived.

But what if I'm right and you're wrong, that there IS an eternity and what we do in this life has a bearing on the next? Then I'll have lived that life and gone on to eternal glory; you are going to rise to eternal condemnation.

Are you so sure that you're right that you're willing to risk eternal suffering?

Church is not a waste of time because it gives us the chance to think about these things, to contemplate eternity and to hear how Jesus sets us free to live forever.

Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to think about eternity.

Now that's not the only thing that church has going for it. Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to grow in our relationship with God. Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to grow in our relationship with God.

And practically speaking, this is no small thing. Five years ago, the Pew Research Group did a study on why people do and don't go to church and the number one reason that people go to church is to grow closer to God. More than 81% of people who responded said that growing closer to God was the number one most important reason to go to church.¹

And that itself is a very biblical idea. There is nothing that you can do with your life that is more important than knowing God and growing in relationship with Him.

Paul very famously says in Philippians 3:8: 8 I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things (Phi 3:8 NIV).

To think about what that means, let's look a little more closely at Philippians 3, starting at verse 4. (Turn there). Starting at Philippians 3:4, Paul says:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: (ie., if anybody thinks they're better than Paul, more morally worthy than the apostle Paul and more capable of proving themselves worthy of eternal life apart from God, they're wrong. And Paul lists off his credentials, the things that makes him MOST worthy of being 'good enough' in and of himself...)

5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; (he's like the poster boy for moral worthiness)...
6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

'I have all these things going for me, good and virtuous things,' he says and yet, verse 7:

7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the *surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, for whose sake I have lost all things. [ie. there is NOTHING more important than knowing Jesus. In fact, he says,] I consider them rubbish [trash, useless junk that's not worth keeping], that I may gain Christ

9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

There is nothing more important in life than knowing God and the church is the primary way that we come to know God and grow in relationship with Him.

Now, that being said, I realize that there are other important ways to grow in your relationship with God – prayer and personal Bible study, keeping your eyes open and sensing His work in Creation – but I remember reading an article that made a really important point.

Back when we were getting back into the swing of things after COVID, there were a lot of people encouraging others to get back to church, and one person online made this point:

“Sure, you can hear great teaching in a variety of ways. But listening online is different than listening in the service.

I don’t know about you, but when I listen at home I have a long to-do list. A child that loves attention. A phone that rings. Floors to sweep. Laundry to fold. Neighbors’ dogs barking. I almost never absorb the message in the same way as I do when physically present on Sunday.

When I’m in the service, I have uninterrupted time. Time to focus on what God is teaching me and reflect on how He wants me to grow. My child is being cared for, my phone is on silent, and there are no chores waiting for me.

I can focus. I can engage my heart and mind.”ⁱⁱ

I don’t know about you but I can totally identify with that. At home, it always feels like there’s something else to do, but when I gather together with the rest of the church, God goes front and centre in my heart.

Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to grow in relationship with God.

So, church is not a waste of time because it helps us to think about eternity and it helps us to grow in relationship with God.

Finally, church is not a waste of time because it allows us to build up and be built up by a community of equally committed believers.

When I first came to faith, I had this idea that I could be a lone-wolf Christian, just me and Jesus making our way through the world, but the reality is that I needed other believers to refine me in my walk with Jesus. I needed people to step in and say ‘whoa, hold on there Graham; I’m not sure you’re applying that verse correctly’ or ‘here Graham, I can see you’re struggling; let me help you bear that burden.’

I will never forget people who took time out of their day to listen to me, to pray with me, people who gave me a place to stay when I needed it (especially in France), lent me their car for the day, invested in me as a person. Those things all happened within the context of the church. Those fellow believers built me up.

And then little by little, I began to give back. I began to realize that I wasn’t just at church ‘to be fed’ but to feed others too, to build into them, to pray with them, to listen to them, to give them a safe space to be when they needed it.

The church is not a waste of time because it helps us to be built up by and to build up a community of equally committed believers.

When we believe in Jesus, He doesn't just redeem us as individuals; He brings us into His very own family so that we can care for one another accordingly. He brings us into community with one another so that we can refine each other as we walk with Him together.

That's exactly what the book of Hebrews wants us to do – Hebrews 10:22 says:

22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

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

I recognize that being a Christian out in the world can be difficult. It can be hard to hold to our convictions when everyone around us is throwing them out the window and looking at us like weirdos stuck in the 1600's. But God knows that. And that's exactly why He made us to be together in the Church. So that we can draw near to Him together. So that we can be fully assured in our faith. So that we can hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, backing each other up in belief when our beliefs run counter to our culture's beliefs.

And it's not just what we believe, it's what we do. Hebrews 10 continues:

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

25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Church is not just for you or for me; church is for us, where we gather together, encourage one another and spur each other on to love and good deeds. You could be a Christian at home by yourself, but you're never going to benefit from the mutual encouragement that God intended for us when He made us His children and brought us together as the family of God.

Church is not a waste of time because it helps us to build up and by built by the community of faith.

So, is church a waste of time? Well, I would say no, because it helps us to think about eternity, it helps us to grow in relationship with God and it helps us to build up and built by up by other followers of Jesus.

In fact, I would probably go so far as to say that not only is church *not* a waste of time, participating in church is probably the most important investment of time that you'll ever make. *Participating* in church is probably the most important investment of time that you'll ever make.

Now before we close, I want to make two other observations, real quick, because I think they'll help you in real life the next time someone says this to you.

First (and this was actually my first thought when I heard this question), if someone's experience with church has been a church that does NOT help them to think about eternity, does NOT help them to think of God as a real, honest-to-goodness person who is at work in their lives and does NOT exist as a

community for mutual building up, then church IS a waste of time. We've all been to boring churches, where God is more an idea than a reality, where church is all about ME, not us, where it exists to be a religious social club, rather than a community of iron sharpening iron. Those churches *are* a waste of time.

What I would say to someone who has experienced church like that is 'that's not the way it's supposed to be.' Church should help you to wrestle with spiritual and eternal realities. Church should draw you deeper into a relationship with the God who is good and just and REAL! Church should be about helping each other grow, not looking down your nose to judge each other or to gate-keep who is and is not welcome. Church is not a waste of time when it helps you to grow in relationship with the eternal God in a community of equally committed believers.

So if somebody is coming from a dead church and saying 'church is a waste of time,' say 'Give us a chance at Langford. We won't waste your time.'

And second, this is the most pointed of all, assuming you're talking about a life giving church like ours, I would say 'What have you got to do that's more important than church?' Right? If church wastes your time, what are you doing with the time that you save not going to church? Is it more important than thinking about eternity, knowing God better and growing in community? What's so important to you that you would neglect your spiritual and eternal well-being in relationship with a God who loves you and invites you to invest in a community that loves you just as much? What's more important than thinking about eternity, knowing God better and growing in community?

Let me conclude with this. If someone says to you 'church is a waste of time,' well, first off, good for you for having that conversation with them in the first place. That's great that you can have that talk.

Secondly, hopefully I've given you some ideas to say that will help you as you have that talk. But really, I don't think cold calculus and clever facts will win people over to church; I think they need to experience the love of God through you. So when somebody says 'I don't want to come to church' (which is really what they're saying when they say 'church is a waste of time') be gracious with them and invite them to give us a chance. God does miraculous things and if we're being intentional about being a place where we talk about eternity, know God better and grow in community, we'll be exactly the kind of place where God works.

BENEDICTION

22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

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

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

(Hebrews 10:22-24 NIV).

ⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/>

ⁱⁱ Sarah Piercy, "What you never know you miss by skipping Sunday morning," <https://careynieuwhof.com/what-you-never-know-you-miss-by-skipping-sunday-morning/#>