

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

PRAYER FOCUS: FIVE STEPS TO A HEALTHIER CHURCH

Romans 12:1-18

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INTRODUCTION: Our church has embarked upon a six-week prayer focus. This week, we are asking you to pray for the health of Tusculum Hills Baptist Church.

There is much talk in the world today about health. We read articles and listen to television programs about our physical and mental health. We visit the gym, talk to counselors, search out nutritional supplements, and sometimes follow our doctor's orders so that we can feel better, look better, and live longer. However, most of us rarely think about our spiritual health or the health of our church.

What is a church? What does the word even mean? The first use of the word occurred in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus said, "*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" The original Greek word was *ekklésia* (ek-klay-see'-ah) and meant "to call out from", but the English word "church" actually comes from the Greek word *Kyriakos* (*kyrios*), which means "belonging to the Lord." Put together, we can see that the Christian church is a body of people who have been called out for the purpose of belonging to the Lord.

Make no mistake, the church is not a club. It's not an organization or an institution. The Bible defines the church as a body of believers. The church, then, is a living, breathing entity, and it is composed of more than just those who sit in the pews of Tusculum Hills. It is composed of all Christians everywhere. Because of this, the health of the church is not an arbitrary measurement of attendance or giving, and it is not something that is determined by the efforts of the pastors, teachers, or deacons. The health of the church is a result of the spiritual health of the Christians who make up the body. In other words, the healthiness of our church is in great part up to you. Today, we are going to look at 5 steps to a healthier church.

1. Live in submission to Christ.
2. Change the way you think.
3. Use your gifts for God's glory.
4. Love, honor, and live in peace.
5. Practice joy, patience, and prayer.

1-LIVE IN SUBMISSION TO CHRIST

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

EXPLANATION: When we think of worship, most of us think of what we do in church. We think of the songs we sing and the prayers we utter. You may even consider listening to the sermon an act of worship, and it very well can be. However, this verse explains that worship extends well beyond what takes place in this sanctuary or building. We are to live our lives as an offering to the Lord. The word-for-word rendering from the Greek translation says that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice because it is a reasonable service. In other words, living in submission to Christ is the least we can do when he has done so much for us. When we live God-glorifying lives, we come into this place with a more worshipful spirit because we have been worshipping Christ all week. The first step to a healthier church is to

1. Live in submission to Christ.

2-CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:2-3

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. ³ For by the grace given 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, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

EXPLANATION: We cannot live in submission to Christ if we do not change the way we think. We are born sinners, and as such, we are born self-centered.

ILLUSTRATION: As babies and infants, our selfishness is first related to survival. Of course, an infant cries when he is hungry. He must. He is dependent on that cry to get what he needs. It does not matter if his cries interrupt mom and dad's sleep or a night out. However, it does not take long for that little one to grow into an independent child who demands his own way simply because he wants what he wants. We are the same. Because of our sinful human nature, we are hard-wired to fall into the patterns of this world. We look out for number one. We fight for what is ours and to claim what we do not have. Paul tells us here that if we want to discover God's will for our lives, we have to change the way we think. Then he gives one specific example - how we think about ourselves.

APPLICATION: We often fall into one extreme or another when it comes to how we think about ourselves. On one end, we have those who think too much of themselves, who are arrogant and look down their noses at everyone else. On the other hand, we have those who wallow in self-degradation. Neither attitude is healthy. Paul says that we should not think any more of ourselves than we ought. It is implied that we should also not think any less of ourselves. Our identity should be rooted in Christ and who he says we are.

1. Live in submission to Christ.
2. Change the way you think.

3-USE YOUR GIFTS FOR GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:4-8

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ 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; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ 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.

EXPLANATION: Just like every part of your body has a purpose, every member of the body of Christ does as well. God has given you a gift, maybe many gifts.

While some of those gifts may be beneficial in other ways—such as earning an income or taking care of your family—the primary reason for your gift is to use it for the growth of the church.

ILLUSTRATION: A church had an annual servants’ banquet to recognize, honor, and thank all the people who taught and served in various ministries. One senior lady was despondent. In her younger days, she taught Sunday School, rocked babies in the nursery, and cooked for the potlucks. Near her 80s and in the final years of life, she was no longer able to perform those acts of ministry. She called her pastor and asked if she could come to the banquet anyway, to enjoy the fellowship. The pastor wisely said “yes,” but he did even more than that. He affirmed what Mrs. Elsie was doing. “Mrs. Elsie,” he asked, “do you pray for our church?” “Oh, yes, I do. I pray for you and the children and the teachers and the missionaries,” she answered. “Well,” he said, “I would say you definitely need to come to the servants’ banquet because prayer is the greatest service of all.”

APPLICATION: Every believer has a gift. There are no exceptions. God has given you something that you can do to benefit the church. God wants you to get up and do it.

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2. Change the way you think.
3. Use your gifts for God’s glory.

4-LOVE, HONOR AND LIVE IN PEACE

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:9-18

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

ILLUSTRATION: I'm glad we have these scriptures to remind us how Christians are to live. It's been a little over a year since I went off the deep end over hearing that a visitor to our church took a seat and was asked to move. A couple I know recently visited a church in another state and were told the same thing. I guess it could happen anywhere, but I must say – someone who asks someone to move to another seat, that person has forgotten what the purpose of the church is.

This week, I was in a conference with several who pastor churches. A man who pastors in East Tennessee said at his former church, after he had been there for several months, he noticed two men who did not talk and sat as far away from each other as possible. He asked another person if there was something going on. Many years earlier, one of the men had cut down a tree, and there was a dispute about whose property it was. Apparently, there were no clear property lines and neither called a surveyor, so they just stayed angry with each other the rest of their lives.

You know, when that kind of attitude enters a church, it's like a cloud that hovers.

APPLICATION: When a doctor performs a check-up on a patient, he or she may take a person's blood pressure, listen to the person's heart, look at a person's throat, and do a pulse reading. If you want to take the pulse of the church, consider the way its congregation treats one another—both in the church building and outside of it. Paul outlines a number of specifics here, beginning of course with love and honor.

It's easy *to talk about* loving and honoring one another. It's harder *to do* sometimes. For example:

- Do you appreciate Terry when he chooses Sunday morning songs that you do not know?
- Do you try your best to sing or cross your arms and complain? In one church I served, there was a woman who would put her fingers in her ears if there was a song she did not like.
- Do you love and honor each other when there is a disagreement and hope for a peaceful resolution?

Paul gets even more specific. He says that we need to share and practice hospitality. The term hospitality denotes how we treat strangers and usually involves opening our home to others.

- When was the last time you opened your home to someone?

- When was the last time you invited someone over for a meal?
- How do you treat guests who come into our church? I did have one man tell me this church was overly friendly. What a compliment! He's not here with us. I guess he went to a less friendly church.

But Paul does not stop there. He gets even more personal. He says that we should bless our persecutors. While we do not typically experience persecution in the United States, we all know people who do not like us very much or who are not very kind.

- How do you treat the people who are not nice to you?
- How do you treat people who look and think differently than you?

The church is not a place to worship in private. Our faith is not one of isolation. Paul reminds us that our job is to do life with others.

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5-PRACTICE JOY, PATIENCE AND PRAYER

Look at verse 12 with me again.

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer...

EXPLANATION: Church health is a result of the individual spiritual health of each of us who make up the body of Christ.

ILLUSTRATION: You know as well as I do that it does not take a great injury to make a person miserable. Have you ever stubbed your toe? You walk into a wall and turn the corner too close and hit that little pinky toe just right. Oh, it hurts! You jump around for a minute, find a seat, and massage it. Maybe you yanked the nail off, and it's bleeding. It can make walking miserable for days. And it's only a pinky toe! I have a friend who scratched her cornea. Unfortunately, the fastest way for an eye to heal is to allow nature to take its course. While the injury was short-lived, the pain was excruciating. She said it was right up there with childbearing. Yet, it was

not a gouge or a hole. It was only a scratch on one of her eyes, and she still had another eye that was perfectly fine.

APPLICATION: If any one part of the body is injured or misaligned, it hurts the rest of the body. If any one part of the body does not work the way it is supposed to, the rest of the body suffers. It is the same with your spiritual health. You are one person in the pews of Tusculum Hills, but if you are miserable instead of joyful, you contribute to the misery of this church. You are one person in the body of believers, but your impatience will feed the impatience of the entire congregation. You are one person in this family, but if you are not faithful in prayer, then you are failing your brothers and sisters in Christ. In the same way, if you are joyful, your joy will be contagious. If you are patient, then your patience will be reproduced. And if you are prayerful, God will answer, and you will inspire others to pray.

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CONCLUSION: This week as we pray for the health of Tusculum Hills Baptist Church and the body of Christ as a whole, let us also pray for our own spiritual health. Let us do even more than that. Let us examine ourselves, like a doctor performing a physical exam.

Ask God to show you areas where you need to get stronger. Ask him to forgive you for where you have failed and to help you get better. We serve the Great Physician, and I guarantee that he will fill that prescription. The altar is open if you want to come forward today.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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