Preparing to Build Our Homes

First in a May 2018 series called “Building Homes with Jesus”

# Scripture: Matthew 11:16-30

# Key thought: If our hearts are right, we can build our homes through Jesus.

# Intro:

We live in an era when the effect of Christian faith upon our lives is downplayed. But that should not be. Our faith helps us in so many ways. It provides context for our marriages. It helps us to be happier people. Active Christian faith helps us live better and longer. What we do on Sunday’s is not about practicing a religion, though I suppose people would say we are doing that. Rather, it is about learning how to live better and happier lives according to God’s design.

More than 40 studies comprising some 125,000 participants have indicated that those with strong religious beliefs live longer. One six-year study of elderly North Carolina residents, predominantly Protestant, reported that those who prayed or read religious material daily had a much better chance of staying healthy. https://www.focusonthefamily.com/lifechallenges/life-transitions/aging/a-spiritual-rx-for-a-healthy-mind-and-body

# Jesus can help our families if:

Jesus wants to help us grow strong as individuals, in our friendships and especially as families. God created the family unit in the Garden of Eden by creating Adam and Eve. He blessed the new family (Gen. 1:28) and pronounced his approval of what he had made saying that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Millennia later, Jesus cited the creation model when he was questioned by the Pharisees about divorce. God has a vested interest in such marriages and desires their success.

But he has even broader plans than that. One of the great purposes of God in our redemption is to teach us how to love other people. Jesus said loving others was the second greatest commandment. When we learn to follow Jesus’ example of love and the NT teachings about love, all our relationships benefit—relationships between generations, relationships at work, and relationship between friends as well.

Teaching us to love other people is one of the key ways that Jesus delivers on his promise to give us “life more abundantly (John 10:10).”

But there are some prerequisites. There are some things that are needed for us to do to facilitate the training that Jesus wants to give us. There are preparations that help us to receive the training that God has for us.

## Our habits allow it

### Good Habits needed

First of all, Jesus can help our relationships and help us build our family strong if our habits allow it. We send children to school because we know that without repeated exposure to the basic truths that are involved in education, they will not be able to handle the complexities of modern life. In our professions, we take time for continuing education of various sorts, because we know that unless we do, we will fall behind and be unable to keep up with the innovations in our field.

Brain research tells us that we are constantly forming new connections, but our brain uses them according to the things that we concentrate on, not according to the things that we would like it to use them for. For example, if a teenager spends all his time in video games, then his brain is learning to use all his new brainpower to help him be a better videogame player. This might not be the ideal use of his brain. When adults, spend all their time watching television, all their new neurons go into appreciating TV actors and learning to criticize movies. This might not be the ideal use of their new brainpower either. Are you with me?

The point is that if we expect Jesus to help us with our families, with our ability to love other people, with our people skills in general, then we need to focus some significant time and energy on learning from Jesus.

### Church attendance down

But research into church attendance in New England particularly tells us that exactly the opposite is happening. We really didn’t need research to tell us that because we can look around at churches in our own experience and figure it out.

Did you know that the New England states have the lowest percentage of people who report going to church weekly of any region in the nation? A Feb. 2015 article cites the percentage of people reporting weekly church attendance for CT as 25%. Believe it or not that’s actually the second highest in New England. Rhode Island is 28%. However, the professor who was commenting on it said that people report their attendance as higher than it actually is. He said that if that percentage of people actually went to church in CT every week, all the churches would have about 300 people in them. (<http://www.courant.com/data-desk/hc-church-attendance-rates-low-in-new-england-20150219-htmlstory.html>). In addition, people’s idea of what regular attendance looks like is getting less rigid. When I was growing up, in a rural area, research says an average Sunday school teacher missed only a couple Sundays a year. Now researchers tell us that the average Sunday school teacher is away about 13 times a year for one reason or another. Our lives have gotten much busier and there is so much more competition for our Sunday morning than there used to be.

Here’s another interesting statistic from our area. According to George Barna’s report, Springfield Mass area is number five in his list of top de-churched cities in America – that is places where people reported some previous attendance or attachment to a church but they have not been to church in six months (not counting funerals and weddings). Forty-three percent of Springfield area people reported this scenario in their lives.

(<https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>)

Last Week DS Alpher Sylvester reported to us that United Methodists in CT have suffered a dramatic decline 25-60% in all categories – attendance, membership, baptisms, and confirmations over the last 10 years.

My point is this. The less exposure we have to the things of God, in the house of God, well that’s that much less time that Jesus has to transform our minds and our hearts into his ways. And it’s not like the culture around us is neutral. While we are living our lives we are always being formed in some way by the influences around us. The question is this: Which influences are we giving the most of our attention and concentration, whether by intention or default? If the world around us is getting the most attention and focus, it will be what forms us.

### Bible reading helps too

Bible reading is another way that we form our minds into the ways of God. Around the year 2000 there were some research that indicated that Americans were doing more Bible reading on their own. Whether that has continued as a trend, I do not know. I certainly hope so. One thing is certain, we have no excuse. Bible reading is something that we can do on our own time. In our day, it is more convenient than ever. As you know I encourage everybody to have YouVersion on their phone. In this way you can read the Bible anyplace you are, anytime you have a spare minute or two. You can choose a plan for reading and share with friends. You can choose a plan on a subject that meets a particular need in your life right now. The App will provide you with a verse for each day. It will give you reminders if you want them. You can create Scripture memes and share them with friends. The app is a super convenient way to make sure that you are being exposed to the word of God regularly.

Home Bible studies and other small group Bible studies are another very popular way in our country to be exposed regularly to the Word of God. Even a church our size needs more Bible study leaders than we currently have. Currently we have two small group Bible studies and one online study. But all of them are dependent upon JoAnne and me. Each of these are what I call dedicated Bible studies, that is Bible study is the single focus of the group. Another very popular way to have a good church small group is to meet around a common interest other than Bible study and then have a short devotional Bible and prayer section as a part of the meeting. One of the most popular small groups at my last church was a quilting group. Another was a men’s Monday night football group. They did a Bible study lesson before the game and then watched the first half together at someone’s house who had a big screen TV. My wife and I were not a part of either group.

Please do not hear this as a plea for all of us to return to the early 20th century when people came to church three times a week. We cannot go back in time. But we can use the options that we have today to increase our Bible focus and give us Bible inspiration and study and exposure to the Word of God.

Certainly, we still need to prioritize assembling together on Sunday whenever we can. In addition, we can find other ways to grow as disciples too. For example, I like to be inspired by Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir videos on our smart TV on YouTube. JoAnne listens to teaching messages on her computer. I have started using the YouVersion APP myself to supplement my regular Bible reading and find focused reading plans. What is working for you?

My point is this: Jesus can help us build our relationship well both in our families and outside if our habits allow him to mold our minds and hearts.

## Our attitudes support it

The second prerequisite that we need, a second essential preparation is a good attitude of mind. In our study of the Gospel of John one of the sad things that has become evident is that Jesus’ teaching and Jesus’ presence served as a judgment. Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into the world” (John 9:39). What he meant was that as he went about doing good and teaching the people, some would understand and receive him positively and others would react negatively against him. As we studied we saw repeated that which way people reacted to Jesus was pre-determined by their own attitudes and mindsets.

In Corinthians Paul uses the analogy of a perfume. He wrote that when we live as Christians, to many people our witness for Christ, our show of love, our testimony of faith is like a pleasing scent, a pleasant and attractive smell. But to other people our testimony is a stench. Don’t we see that happening today?

The difference is attitude. The Pharisees to whom Jesus frequently spoke in John’s Gospel usually understood when he was talking about them. It was not a lack of understanding that was the problem. They understood when he claimed to be God too. That is why they tried to stone him and eventually crucified him. The problem was their attitude that refused to accept the truth. Their conclusion was predetermined by their attitude.

I remember one man who was secretly living a hypocritical life. He came to talk to me later after the truth had come out and his life was unraveling. I remember him sadly telling me how he had previously sat in church and he would duck his head and turn away in his mind whenever the truth got too close for comfort. He was attending church. Physically he was in the right place. He understood the words. But his mind was closed; his attitude was not right. He paid the price for his closed attitude.

There are some people who attend church, but they are so much in the habit of criticizing that it is very hard for them to actually take in what is being taught. They come with the attitude of a “consumer” not with an attitude of disciple. It’s like they dictate their critique for a local church consumer digest on the way home in the car. They’re looking for entertainment, something to please their ears or their eyes. And they are not of a mindset to receive something that challenges their soul and urges them to move out of their comfort zone and into a new adventure with Jesus. Their attitude isn’t right. God can’t help us if our mind are closed.

I was reading a devotional on the Focus on the Family website. Here’s a quote that shows the attitude of openness to God’s Spirit that we need.

Sometimes in the midst of the ordinary joys and [worries of each day](https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/marriage-challenges/change-stress-and-crises/growing-stronger-through-stress-in-marriage), we forget just how extraordinary God's creation truly is — and that our spouse is a part of that creation. God's Spirit is still "hovering" among us today — transforming, filling and renewing us as we [journey through life together](https://www.focusonthefamily.com/content-source/articles/2017/09/25/17/26/faith-conversation-gods-creative-work). It's good, then, to give thanks for God's awesome and ongoing creative work in each of us and in our marriage relationship. https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/gods-design-for-marriage/faith-conversation-gods-creative-work

People have all kinds of reasons for being in church. People have all kinds of reasons for claiming to be a Christian. But if you really want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, your attitude has to be one of eager discovery and swift obedience. Jesus’ famous Beatitudes in Matthew 5 are sometimes called the Be Happy Attitudes. One of them is

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

At the end of that same sermon he tells us that those who put what they hear from him into practice are truly building their lives upon the Rock.

## Our hearts are open to Jesus

This leads us to the third preparation we need if we are to receive help from God for our homes and relationships. We need to open our own hearts to Jesus. This goes one step further than being occasionally willing to listen. This means becoming a regular follower of Jesus. We can’t just call our self a Christian; being a Christian only really works when the Holy Spirit is on the inside of us. Until we open the door as John described it in Revelation 3:20 we are lacking a key enabling dynamic.

In our Bible study series, as we have followed the outline of the Gospel of John we can see clearly how Jesus planned for us to have the Holy Spirit in us. In chapter three Jesus spoke bluntly to Nicodemus. “You must be born again.” Now Nicodemus was like many of us – a good man – in fact, a very good man. In addition, he was knowledgeable of his faith as well, something many people are not today. But the biggest way that I think that Nicodemus was like us was that he sought to understand Jesus on his own. Like Nicodemus, we also like to do what I would call religious self-help. We learn a few things, we adopt a couple new practices, and we are very proud of ourselves. But Jesus warns us in John 3 that what we really need is the Spirit moving in us, something that we cannot see or completely understand and predict.

“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” John 3:5-8

Then in John 4, Jesus explained to the woman at the well that when we have the Holy Spirit in us, we will have an ever-new source of spiritual refreshment. A new life-giving motivating Spirit from God will be alive in us. The Holy Spirit will help to teach us and renew our lives in purpose and direction. The Spirit will provide correction when needed and give new ideas too. Think of the Spirit as a divine coach.

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” John 4:13-14

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. John 16:13

So, it’s up to us to open our hearts to Jesus; to “receive him.” That is the hospitality metaphor used by the Apostle John in the beginning of his Gospel. Pick your own way of describing it, but be sure it happens in your life.

The steps are very simple

1. Acknowledge that you need Jesus’ help. This includes acknowledging that you have sinned against God’s ways and need to change.
2. Believe that Jesus has died and risen again for you. He wants to send his Spirit into your life to help you. You don’t need to understand everything. None of us does. You only need to reach out to Jesus and believe he can help because of who he is and what he as done.
3. Decide to follow. Jesus’ invitation to the disciples was simple. “Follow me.”

Then God does the rest.

1. He forgives us of our sins, taking way our burden.
2. He sends his Holy Spirit into our lives to be our enabler and instructor and encourager.
3. He gives us eternal life. Jesus said, “He who believes has eternal life” (Jn 6:47).

# Conclusion

3 responses;

1. Some of us need to commit ourselves to do as the Book of Hebrews says, “Fix our thoughts on Jesus.” We need to find some more ways to allow God’s ways to mold us rather than the culture around us.
2. Maybe there is someone here today who has had a closed mind. You need for God to help you but you now realize you have been blocking Him by your attitude. This morning you are opening your mind to his truth and his way.
3. Maybe there is someone here for whom this is your time to hear Jesus saying to you, “Follow me.” You realize that it is time to do even more than listen. It is time to say yes to Jesus. It is time to invite him into your life so he can put his life-giving Spirit in you. Let me review those three simple steps.
   1. Acknowledge that you need Jesus’ help. This includes acknowledging that you have sinned against God’s ways and need to change.
   2. Believe that Jesus has died and risen again for you. He wants to send his Spirit into your life to help you.
   3. Decide to follow. Ask Jesus to be your Savior.