

## GOD'S CHARGE TO THE CHURCH EPHESIANS 2:19-22

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Several weeks ago now Pastor James came to me with an interesting request. He wants CC Christian School to adopt a mascot. He thinks it'll bolster school spirit. It'll give our students something to rally around.

*And I agree. It's a good idea...* Of course, that set off a debate over what we should adopt as our mascot.

We quickly eliminated **Bulldogs** and **Yellow Jackets** for obvious reasons. *Why anger half our families?*

Then there were the obvious choices...

We could go with "**Lions**" - Jesus is called "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah." Or "**Eagles**" - Isaiah promises, "Those who wait on the LORD... shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary..."

The only problem is that 95% of Christian Schools are either *the Lions* or *the Eagles*. We wanted something a little more unique we could call our own.

My suggestion was **“Bees”** - *the CCCS Bees* - and why *“Bees”* you ask? I was thinking of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The **Beatitudes**... *“blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... blessed are the pure in heart...”* The Christian life is not so much about action, as it is attitude. It’s not about *what we do*, but *what we be*.

The Pharisees trumpeted **“Do, do, do”** - but Jesus said, **“Be, be, be.”** Thus, the **“Bees.”** By the way, Frank Sinatra sang, **“Do be, do be, do.”** That’s another story.

Yet it’s hard to turn a **“Bee”** into an inspiring mascot.

There’s nothing really outstanding about a bee - *and besides it’s too close to that other stinging insect.*

So... Here’s what I think has won! I believe we’re calling ourselves the **“Bears.”** *The CCCS Bears.* And again, you might ask *why Bears? Well, it too is biblical.*

We’re suppose to *bear* fruit, and *bear* witness, and *bear* one another’s burdens, and even *bear* with each other... Thus, it seems that **“Bears”** is a good mascot!

Besides, *Bears* makes for a really cool T-shirt! (slide)

I bring all this up because in our text today Paul rallies the Church by listing for us several inspiring *mascots*. Here’s how to think of the Church at-large...

The Church is a **nation** of fellow citizens.

Paul calls the Church the **household** of God.

We’re a **building** with a very strong foundation.

And the Church is a **temple** - God’s dwelling place.

When you think of the Church you should picture its mascots - a nation, a household, a building, a temple.

Yet sadly, this brings up our first problem... Few folks today think about the Church at all. It's either a non-factor in their outlook, or low on their list of importance.

In a 2013 Barna survey 1000 American adults were asked, "What do you think about going to church?"

30% said attending church wasn't important at all.

40% were ambivalent. They could take it or leave it.

Only 30% said church attendance was significant.

Of those who downplayed the importance of church 40% commented, "I find God elsewhere." Another 35% complained that church wasn't "personally relevant."

I thought it was shocking that among the younger population 20% said that "God is missing" from church.

And of those who claimed to have experienced some spiritual growth in the past year, when asked, "What made your faith grow?" The church didn't even make the Top Ten. *People today are losing interest in church.*

And we could point to all kinds of reasons why...

Certainly, the church itself has at times shoots itself in the foot and undermines it's standing. Scandal and hypocrisy - out-dated methods and a disconnect from the culture - have all turned people off to the church.

But there're other reasons as well... *many of which are no fault of our own...* We live in a saturated society where the devil has distracted us from what's ultimately important... *Stores are open... sports are scheduled... sometimes work morphs into seven-days-a-week...*

*“For my kid to play Select we'll have to miss Church...” “Sundays are the only days for lessons...” “We bought this timeshare and we need to use it...”*

Here's what I hear most, *“Sunday is my only day for Me!”* Once upon a time, Sunday was **“the Lord's day.”**

Actually, I suppose all the distractions the devil employs to keep us away from Church is a blessing in disguise. It means **if you come, you really want to be here!** You made a deliberate choice. It's a priority.

I think our relationship with each other, the Church, is like all the other relationships in our lives - there is a tendency to take for granted what's most important.

This happens in **marriage**. Husbands and wives ignore each other... It happens in **families**. Parents and kids become strangers... And it happens in our relationship with **Church**. We fail to value the spiritual connection we have until it's been neglected for a time.

When life squeezes in on us. When demands and pressures hem us in and we need to free up some time it always seems that *the spiritual* is first to get trimmed.

It reminds me of the pastor who spent an hour in prayer each morning. Once, during a very busy season of life he was asked if he'd cut back on his prayer time.

He said, **“No, I'm now so busy I need to pray more.”**

It's when we don't have time to make the spiritual investment - that's when we need it most. God wants us to view our Church commitment as an anchor in the storm. It needs to be upped on our priority list from *a luxury* to *a non-negotiable*. *Don't undervalue Church.*

Today is the first Sunday of a New Year, and I'm being honest when I say it, the best advice I can give you is this... **make Church more important, not less.**

That's certainly the implication of this morning's text.

Paul mentions *our mascots* to rally the troops - to inspire us - to revive our love and loyalty to the Church.

Remember, Ephesians 2 starts with a rags to riches story. Don't you love it when someone unexpected strikes it rich!... The poor prospector hits the mother load, and can now afford to buy a small country...

Or a Cajun family of rednecks make a perfect duck call that evolves into a multimillion dollar enterprise - *a Duck Dynasty*. That's why everybody loves the Robertsons - the good ole boys became superstars.

And this is what's happened to me and you. If you're in Christ, spiritually speaking, you've gone from rags to riches - *without the beard*. From death to life, from sin to saved, from wrath to blessing, from lust to loved...

And we've been saved by grace! We did nothing to earn God's acceptance. It's His free gift. It's love that's on the house. *We received it when we believed it!*

And through His blood Jesus has not only reconciled us to God, but He's reconciled man to his fellow man.

The sharpest, most hostile, most bigoted divisions among men - *and no two groups have ever been farther apart than Jew and Gentile* - Jesus abolished on the cross. It's a commonality that now overshadows all our differences. All men become one at the cross.

In verse 13 Paul says that those farthest from God have now been brought near by His blood. No man or group is any closer to God than another, for the only reason any of us have access to God is Jesus Christ!

At the foot of Calvary's cross you'll find level ground.

All men come to God the same way. No one has an advantage. We're all equally guilty, and in need of a Savior. The only line of demarcation that remains to separate us, is whether or not we trust in Christ.

In verse 15 Paul explains that at the cross we've become "**one new man.**" No longer Jew or Gentile, black or white, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, Bulldog or Yellow Jacket, boxers or briefs - *we're all one in Christ!*

The early church referred to *Christians* as "**a third race.**" No longer Jew or Gentile, now something new.

This is how we need to see ourselves and each other. If I understand what Jesus has accomplished, when I look at you I no longer focus on the color of your skin, or the clothes that you wear - I see passed...

As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:16, “From now on, we regard no one according to the flesh... If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

So here we are “one new man,” “a third race,” we’re all “insiders.” Elsewhere we’re called “the Church” - the word denotes a group that was “called out of the pack.”

From the mass of humanity God has chosen you and me and all Christians and made us into something different than we once were. In Christ God has created a new people group. He “calls us out” - “the Church.”

What the United Nations has failed to do... what envoys and ambassadors have failed to do... what global peace-keeping organizations have failed to do...

Jesus has done in His Church! He’s made us one.

The US spends \$7.7 billion on the United Nations to bring us together. *We should just give it to the Church!*

But what describes this new group?

What characterizes us? *Do we have a mascot?* How about a nation, a household, a building, a temple!

Paul writes in verse 19, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens...”

In the OT God’s plan recognized one nation, Israel. *Jews alone* carried passports from God’s Kingdom.

The remainder of mankind, regardless of nationality, were considered “*strangers and foreigners.*” When it came to God and His blessings we were illegal aliens.

Yet the Jews failed to appreciate their special status.

And when God sent prophets to warn them, God’s servants were rejected. God eventually sent His only Son, but they killed Jesus to steal His inheritance.

In Matthew 21 Jesus predicted this in a parable, and ended it with a dire warning for the Jews, but a promise for us, “*The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*” *And we are that nation!* God has given His Kingdom to us in Christ.

Christians now get to live under God’s rule. This is what Paul means when he calls us “*fellow citizens.*” We’re now super-naturalized citizens of His kingdom.

I love 1 Peter 2:9, it speaks of the Church, “*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people.*” We have God’s Spirit and nature within us. We’re a new breed of human.

A creature that’s never before walked this planet.

America is also a nation of foreigners. All of us are either immigrants or we descended from immigrants.

The Statue of Liberty was erected in NY harbor to welcome the flood of strangers from Europe who came to our country in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A plaque on the statue reads, “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send those, the*



homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” This was the promise of welcome and liberty and a new start made by America.

*And she had many takers!* Immigrants poured onto our shores excited about the possibilities of citizenship in a new country - *Not only it's benefits, but eager to accept its responsibilities* - honored to wave the flag!

And these same words should also be engraved on the doors of every church. “Give me you tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free... send those, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me...”

If you desire freedom - and peace - a new start - a place to call home - then welcome to Christ's Church.

The Church constitutes God's Kingdom on Earth.

What a *privilege* it is to belong - to wave the flag - to enjoy God's freedom and blessing... yet with that privilege comes a *responsibility* we should embrace.

What if the millions of Irish and Italians and British and Germans who came to America - failed to take part? They stayed insulated and isolated - reaping the benefits of democracy, but refusing to participate?

If that had occurred our country wouldn't be the super power it is today. Thankfully, the immigrants from Europe worked hard, and paid taxes, and voted, and ran for office, and served in the military. They took their newfound citizenship seriously - so *should we*.

And likewise in the Church! We've been welcomed to a New World. We wave a new flag. We enjoy blessings we did nothing to deserve. We've been greeted and brought near to God through the grace that's in Christ.

We're now citizens - but citizenship carries with it responsibility. We enjoy the benefits of the Church, but do we *serve its members*, and *fund its mission*, and *lead when asked*, and *fight its battles* when necessary?

Pollster George Barna has his finger on the pulse of current trends in the church world. He writes this...

“Surprisingly, a majority of American adults - about three out of five - claim that they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their lives today... (Yet) loyalty to the Church, as an institution in which we have a personal investment and which we care about, is dropping... Membership in Christian churches is waning... Willingness to assume leadership roles in the congregation is declining...

In other words, the average adult thinks that belonging to a church is good for others but represents unnecessary bondage and baggage for himself.”

Most *Christians* today view church as optional.

I've quoted this statistic before, “A US News survey revealed that 80% of Americans believe it's possible to be a good Christian without attending a local church.”

For many folks Christianity is no longer about membership and participation in a community of believers - it's about personal help and enhancement.

As the US News article put it, “It's spirituality turned inward” - rather than citizenship in a holy **nation**.

John Wesley once said, “**The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.**” To be part of Christ is to be part of His body! We’re saved out of the world - into the Church.

But Paul gives us another metaphor to describe life in the Church. Verse 19 calls us, “**fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...**”

Notice, we’re a **household**. And this makes it so much more personal. I love my country, but far greater is my allegiance to my family! In Christ, you and I, have been made “*members of the household of God.*”

It’s always great to come home! No matter where you go, or how wonderful your visit, it’s always good to get back home. Home is where you relax, and spread out, and have space. On the road you live out of a suitcase, but at home you can stretch and have room.

And these are some of the joys of living in God’s household. You’re loved. You’re accepted. It’s grace!

God allows you room to grow. You can unpack your baggage and deal with your issues. He welcomes your problems. Unroll them, and He’ll help you sort it out.

I was privileged to grow up in a wonderful family. Our house was full of love, and laughter, and lots of fun...

But there were specific things that made it great...

First, there was **an atmosphere of acceptance**. We could always be ourselves, and not be judged.

In the world the pressure is always on. We're under a microscope. We're being measured, and evaluated, and tested and tried. Fall short and you risk being rejected. *But the opposite was true in our home.*

Our house was a place to let your hair down. Relax the string - be yourself (*even if you should be better.*)

And this is what Church should be - a place of love and acceptance. A refuge from the storms of criticism.

At Church we're no longer surrounded by clients and colleagues. It's where brothers and sisters meet. It's been said, "Every seat in the church should be a love seat." If that's not our experience, then let's make it so!

A second thing that made our family successful was **we defended each other.** My brother and I had some vicious fights. We made the Octagon look tame.

But let someone else lay a hand on my kid brother and he'd answer to me. We looked out for each other.

I'll never forget a baseball game when a dad from the other team got too involved, and picked a fight with me. I was just 13. He accused me of running over the catcher, which was his son. I was innocent. Besides a grown man has no business picking a fight with a kid.

My dad was on the other field watching my brother. When he heard what happened he came looking for the other dad. Later Dad said he was glad he never found him, but he was willing to take up for his son.

And this is what you find in a healthy church! People look out for each other. They don't let the devil pick on a brother or sister without coming to their defense!

A family is protection. The one place I always felt safe was at home. The same should be true of church.

And the third thing that made for a good family was **the unconditional love** we practiced. No matter how much I embarrassed mom and dad they still loved me.

I know at times I brought shame to the family name, but it never got me kicked out of the fam. *Disciplined? Yes! Punished? At times. But abandoned? Never.*

And this should also be true of **"the household of God."** Have you ever conducted business, and someone said, *"I can't believe that guy is a Christian!"*

Have you ever brought embarrassment on the Church? *Perhaps I've embarrassed you. "I brought a friend today and he went and told that terrible joke!"*

It happens. But Church is *a house of forgiveness!*

I don't expect you to approve of all I do, and I doubt I'll agree with everything you do - we may even bug and embarrass each other - but please, *still love me...*

The world around us knows nothing of grace.

Author Philip Yancey coins a term, **"un-grace."**

Folks love only the lovable... Give only when there's the expectation of mutual benefit... Serve only when someone might serve them... We show love only when it's warranted by the recipient... It's all about **un-grace.**

Where will the world learn about *God's grace*? Love that can't be earned. Love that's unconditional? Love that's flows from God's heart... *only from the Church!*

The Church is God's *household*, and it's also God's **building**. Paul depicts the construction, "Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together..."

If we were choosing mascots for the Church this would be my favorite! The Church as a *nation* - as a *household* - as a *temple* is clean, and sweet, and nice.

But this is a different sort of analogy. The Church is a building. We're a construction site - a work zone.

When God comes to Church He wears a carpenter's belt. He rolls up his shirt-sleeves. It's sweaty. It's messy.

God is building on a foundation that's already been poured. It's strong, and stable, and solid. We're told in 1 Corinthians 3:11, "No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Jesus is the slab on which the structure rises.

The footings are the prophets and apostles - holy men moved by the Holy Spirit to bring us God's Word.

*The living Word* and *the written Word* form the superstructure on which the whole building stands...

But that makes you and me *the 2x4s, and the drywall, and sheetrock mud, and shingles, and siding.*

The Church is not a pre-fab. We're stick built.

It's one board at a time. That requires extra effort on the part of the Contractor. *The Holy Spirit saws, trims, nails, squeezes, sands, files, fits, and finishes...*

Church isn't *boring* when you realize you're the *board*. The Holy Spirit sizes us up, and cuts us to plan, then fastens us to one another. *We become a building!*

When you and I can't get along that's not a problem for God. He uses the friction to trim off our rough edges, humble us, and teach us to submit and serve.

*How else do mavericks learn to be team players?*

Often when church gets messy, and feelings get hurt, and people rub us the wrong way - we take the easy way out - we bail. We escape the carpenter's touch. No wonder we stay stunted and never mature.

There is no question Christians can accomplish more together than we could ever accomplish apart. But some of us never hang around long enough to find out.

When the hurdles come we move on, rather than stick it out. It's easier to do our own thing, and miss out on the lessons learned from the rigors of relationship.

I've heard it said, **"It's easy to lose interest in a church in which you have nothing invested."**

Over the years I've noticed there're three types of church members... **pickers, kickers, and stickers.**

Some folks are always evaluating and never make a commitment. They're the **pickers**... Other people join a church; then buck its direction and constantly complain. They're the **kickers**... But some believers sign up for better or worse. They stay for the long haul. They're the **stickers**... and they reap the best rewards.

The Church is a *nation*, a *household*, a *building*, and finally verse 21 tells us, “**The whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.**” We're also God's **temple!**

God has always had a headquarters on Earth!

When the nation Israel was born God dwelt in a tent built by Moses - *the Tabernacle*. Later, God made His home in Solomon's *Temple*. But then when Christ was born the glory of God came to dwell in human flesh...

It was John who put it, (1:14), “**The Word became flesh and dwelt (or literally *tabernacled*) among us...**”

But when the risen Lord Jesus ascended back to heaven, God chose a fourth and final Temple - His last outpost on Earth. He chose *us* - *the Church!* We now are “**a holy temple**” - a dwelling for the Spirit of God.

On the one hand, the Bible says that each of us individually is a temple. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. But in another sense, the Church as a whole, our fellowship together, constitutes a temple!

God's Spirit dwells among us. He acts as we act. He loves as we love. He breathes life into our interactions.



Today, the Church is God's headquarters on Earth!

We're His habitation! His dwelling place. To get in on what God is up to in the world; hang out in the Church.

In God's plan, the Church is where the action is!

In the OT the Temple served two purposes. It was for **witness** and **worship**. It spoke of God's glory, and it occupied God's praise. When men wanted to come to God or interact with God they journeyed to the Temple.

And this needs to be the reputation of every Church. A search for God should lead a person to the Church.

Our love for each other. The caring, the protection should draw men to explore the reason for such grace.

Every church should be *a curiosity in its community*.

Here's what I can't get over... the Church is referred to as God's "*dwelling place*." It's true you can go out into the woods, or by the lake, and behold the glory and wonders of God. All the world is God's domain.

But there's something special about the Church. *God camps out in His Church! It's home to Him*. It's where He builds a fire and warms His hands - in the Church, among the praises of His people, in fellowship with us.

I love Psalm 22:3 it's a picture of the OT Temple. It tells us God inhabits the praises of His people, Israel.

*He's enthroned in our praises.*

When sacrifices were offered on the altar in the temple the aroma rose to heaven as a sweet-smell to God... Likewise God relishes our worship and praise!

This Christmas I got so much joy sitting in the middle of my grandkids - helping them open their presents...

*Well, God sits down among His kids in the Church!*

People today have no problem believing that God is in Christ, but they have a harder time seeing that Christ is in His Church. *That shouldn't be!* Let's pray that God's presence in this place becomes so thick you can cut it with a knife. That our love makes God evident.

I've heard it said, "A church should make it easy for men to find God, and difficult for them to forget Him."

When Franklin Roosevelt was president, he frequently attended a church in Washington DC.

One weekend the pastor got a call from a reporter asking if the President planned attend that Sunday.

I love the pastor's reply, "That, I cannot promise. But we expect God to be here, and we figure that will be incentive enough for a reasonably large attendance."

And God's power and presence should be our expectation when we gather together as His Church.

Let me close with the story of a pastor who moved to a small town in the midwest to take over a traditional church. This church had seen its better days. There was no momentum. The people were apathetic. They were ready to quit. No one cared anymore. It was sad.

But the pastor had one final idea. He put an ad in the local newspaper one Saturday. It was an obituary. He announced the church was dead, and he invited everyone the next day to the funeral of their church.

Of course, the ad stirred up quite a bit of curiosity.

When the people arrived that Sunday they noticed an open casket in the altar. The pastor delivered the eulogy, then asked the folks to file by and pay their last respects. But as the mourners peered into the casket their faces turned red with embarrassment. The pastor had placed a mirror in the coffin and propped it so that everyone who looked in, saw themselves staring back.

Here's the point, all morning I've been talking about the Church as if it were a thing separate from you and me. *But not so!* **You** are the Church. **I** am the Church.

Whether the Church *thrives* or *dives* is up to us.

Years ago now, a young lady came to our church.

She had many struggles, and CC was there for her in a big way. We had the privilege of providing some really significant help. But I'll never forget the day she came to me and announced, "Pastor Sandy, I've received long enough. I'm ready to start giving back!"

Here was a person who understood Church.

I've heard it said, "The Church is like a blood bank."

Sometimes we go to give blood. Sometimes we go for a transfusion. Over time both are necessary. But everyone can't keep taking, if someone doesn't give.

Here's a question, **If everyone at CC showed your level of commitment what kind of church would we be?**

**How serious will we take God's charge to the Church?** We're citizens of a new nation... We're family in God's household... We're the building God is constructing with His own hands... And we're His dwelling place, where folks can come and find God...

The adage is true, "The world at its worst, needs the church at its best." In this New Year, let's not just focus on ourselves. Let's be the best Church we can be!