

PREPARING FOR CHURCH - pastoral counsels

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Meeting with the living God should never be a casual endeavor. To come face to face with the almighty King of the innumerable galaxies and to bow at the feet of the Lord of glory should cause every worshiper to stop and pause, ponder and prepare, be humble and grateful. This essay provides some very simple pastoral counsels to prepare for church.

1. Get good sleep.

Quite simply, don't arrive tired. Get enough rest the night before so that you're alert, ready, and able to focus. As it has been so aptly said: Sunday morning always begins Saturday evening. What you do the day and night before corporate worship will greatly affect how ready and prepared you are to meet with the Lord. So, go to bed early. Sleep well. Arise early enough so that you don't roll out of bed rushing to church only to realize you forgot to brush your hair or bring your Bible. Plan ahead. Be willing to say no to some activities on Saturday to maximize Sunday.

2. Meditate on the text.

In a sense, you get out of corporate worship what you put into it. If you prepare for an important lecture by studying the lectured topic beforehand, you'll be better equipped to interact with the presentation. So it is spiritually, the more you read, pray through, and ponder the text that will be preached, the better prepared you'll be to interact with, understand, and soak it deep into your soul. This can be done privately on Sunday mornings as you arise early and read the text and pray through it. You can read through the hymns that will be sung and the corporate Scripture reading that will be read. These all will serve to enhance how engaged you are during worship and how well your heart focuses on Christ and His Word.

3. Pray with intentionality.

It should come as no surprise to believers that the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers ask believers to pray for them (cf. Hebrews 13:18). *The* most powerful ministry individuals can have in the life and culture of the local church is to be diligent, believing, incessant, and importunate prayer warriors. So, Christian, rise early on Sunday morning with prayer in your heart and prayer on your lips. Praise God for who He is. Pray through the text. Pray for the preaching and the preacher. Pray for the hearers -- *by name*. Pray for the nonbelievers, the children, the visitors, the people living in ongoing, hidden sin. Pray for the elderly. Pray for the struggling. Pray for the hurting. Pray for the doubting. Pray for the nursery folks who care for the little ones. Pray for the youth times of studying the Word. Pray for the musicians. Pray for God's mighty power. Pray for conversions. Pray for a majestic encounter with God.

4. Arrive on time.

It may shock folks to learn of the sheer numbers of people who arrive late to church. Very few arrive late to a sporting event or to a music concert. Hardly anyone arrives late to a business meeting or to a departing flight. How much more ought the children of God swiftly and happily arrive *on time* to meet with God together with God's people! Far from being a stern rebuke, this

is a call for joy -- a call to arrive on time to enhance your time with God, with His people, and the time of worship. Consider what it would take for you to intentionally leave your home with enough time that you arrived at church *20 minutes* early! 20 minutes, you say? Yes! Imagine how you could shake hands with folks, greet folks, pray with folks, even *read* the text to be preached with folks, pray with the pastor and/or elders, encourage the nursery workers, and *still* be in your pew/chair with plenty of time to quiet your heart, pray to God, still your soul, and fill your mind with Christ. Try to arrive *before* church starts. And be seated & ready *before* service begins.

5. Plan to greet.

Countless people come and go from churches today saying that they just don't feel 'plugged in.' Whether they are old, young, mature in the Lord or fairly new in Christ, it sadly is common to hear folks say that no one reaches out to them and that they don't feel wanted, or involved, or useful, or cared for. I wonder what would happen to local churches if the people of God would altogether determine to *initiate* conversations and the greetings of new folks. Regardless of whether people reach out to them or how many people seek them out, what a great benefit it would be for all believers to intentionally reach out to others -- not just to those sitting near them and those whom it's easy to greet each week, but new folks, visitors, those sitting alone, the children, the teenagers, the millennials, those who just look a bit 'different'. Be intentional and be initiating. And do it with joy, with tenderness, with sincerity. And see how God will work.

6. Warm the oven.

Imagine your heart is an oven. Imagine putting some yeast in the oven without the oven being warmed -- it will take a while for the oven to warm and then for the bread to bake. However, if the oven is already warmed hot and then the bread is placed in it, it will cook much faster. Imagine if the oven of our hearts was already warmed by the time we arrived to church. Imagine if we were already ready, and eagerly prepared, and happily worshipping *when we arrive* at church and how this might improve and gladden our corporate times of worship with the Lord and with the body of Christ. Just try it. Try meditating on the songs that will be sung that upcoming Sunday (ask your pastor or music leader to help you if you don't know them ahead of time). Observe how much of a blessing it'll be when you sing it with the corporate flock on Sundays. Read and study the text to be preached at home before arriving at church. You'll be amazed at how focused and engaged you are throughout the whole sermon. Pray for the flock *by name* and when you see them, you can encourage them, ask them specifically how you can pray, and bless their souls as you tell them that you interceded for them. The point? Prepare *ahead* of time to meet with the living God.