

## **Sitting Outside the Church**

**Psalm 34:1-8; Mark 10:46-52**

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Here are the top ten reasons people in this country attend church services. This is from a Pew Research Center study that was released back in August. These are people who indicated that church attendance is “very important” to them.

Reason number ten: To please their spouse. Okay, they’re just being honest here. According to the study, sixteen percent of you are here to please your spouse. And it’s more likely to be the husband trying to please his wife. And you’ve indicated that it is “very important” to keep your wife happy. You know what they say: “if momma ain’t happy, nobody’s happy.”

Reason number nine: To meet people or socialize. We call that *koinonia* or fellowship.

Reason number eight: They feel obligated to go. Okay, we all feel that way sometimes, don’t we? We feel the same way about going to work sometimes or to social commitments and other events.

Number seven: To continue their family’s religious traditions.

Number six: To be part of a faith community.

Number five: They find the sermons to be valuable. Who knew!

Number four: For comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. How many of you have received a prayer shawl? Or a casserole delivered to your house? Or an encouraging card or phone call?

Number three: To become a better person.

Number two: So their children will have a moral foundation.

Number one: To become closer to God. Eighty-one percent of you are here because you want to become closer to God. That is my hope and prayer for all of us.

I found equally instructive, if not more so, the reasons people don't attend church. Here are three of the top reasons:

They don't feel welcome.

They haven't found a house of worship they like.

Here's the number one reason people gave for not attending church: They practice their faith in "other ways." It's not that they don't have a faith. They just practice it in other ways. Thirty-one percent gave that answer.

I suspect "They don't feel welcome" and "They haven't found a house of worship they like" are probably connected. They haven't found a house of worship they like because they don't feel welcome when they attend. It's not that they don't want to be here. It's not that they don't have spiritual practices. They don't feel welcome, so they practice their faith elsewhere.

Here's how a CNN writer summarizes the findings of this Pew study:

*This study suggests that there is an under-served group of believers who seem like they'd actually like to go to religious services -- if only someone could help get them there and welcome them when they arrive. (Daniel Burke, August 9, 2018)*

Is it possible that a large number of people are sitting outside the church? They're open to coming in. They embrace faith. But they haven't found a comfortable way to get in.

I think we see the perfect example in our text from Mark 10. His name was Bartimaeus, known affectionately now as blind Bartimaeus. His blindness forced him into the margins of their society. The text describes Bartimaeus as a beggar. He had few other options in his day. He sat beside the road, Mark says, likely a main road into the city of Jericho, and begged from the passersby. He probably received just enough handouts for

subsistence. And he had probably learned through the years to ignore their ugly comments. You see, here's how they thought back in his day. If someone was blind, it meant that God was punishing that person because of his or her sins. So when the people saw blind Bartimaeus begging on the side of the road, they connected the dots. Sure, they tossed a few coins his way, and some surely tossed a few crude remark also: "What did you do, mister? Hey, blind man, what did you do to deserve to be blind?"

The text does not indicate how Bartimaeus became blind. We do know that he had vision at an earlier time in life because he asked Jesus to let him see *again*. Perhaps it was some kind of accident.

Mark says that Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was one of the passersby. He must have overheard people talking. "He heals people and feeds them," someone may have said. "Yes," another may have said, "I've heard the same thing. He even makes the lame to walk and the blind to see."

Mark says that Bartimaeus began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The language here is strong. He didn't just "say" this. The grammar of the Greek text suggests that he "shouted."

But the people got in his way. He was sitting on the outside wanting to be on the inside, but the people got in his way. Mark even says that "many" of those people "sternly ordered" him to be quiet. If Bartimaeus used strong language to get Jesus' attention, the ones who wanted to silence Bartimaeus used equally strong language.

But Bartimaeus would not be deterred. Mark says that he shouted even louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This time Jesus heard and responded. "Call him here," Jesus said. Notice Bartimaeus' actions. First, Mark says that he threw off his cloak. Then he sprang to his feet and ran to Jesus. I can see this in my mind as all one rapid motion. He throws off the cloak as he jumps to his feet and eagerly rushes to the sound of Jesus' voice.

When Bartimaeus stood before Jesus, the tone of the encounter softened. No more shouting. No more jumping and rushing. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked.

Bartimaeus, who had been sitting outside, said what any blind man would have said, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus didn’t touch him. He didn’t use saliva to make a paste to put on his eyes, like he did on another occasion. He said simply, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

Notice what happened next. This is important. Mark says that Bartimaeus “immediately” received his vision. But notice this. Bartimaeus didn’t “go.” Mark says that he stayed with Jesus and “followed him on the way.” He went from sitting on the outside to standing on the inside.

What must we do to encourage those sitting on the outside of the church to stand with us on the inside? Let me offer two suggestions. Based on what they’ve told us. First, we must extend unconditional welcome. We must be a place where everyone is welcome: rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, liberal and conservative. I don’t care who you are. I don’t care where you’ve been or what you’ve done. This is a place where you are welcome. Come in, stand with us, and together we will be a witness to the goodness of God.

Second, we must offer people meaningful ways to practice their faith. Are you concerned about race relations? We are too, and we’ve partnered with an African American church to learn from one another and practice healthy race relations. Help us. Are you concerned about the animosity toward immigrants arriving in our country and city? We are too, so we welcome them here, teach them English, and help them become established in our country. Help us. Are you concerned about affordable housing in Huntsville? We have a team working two days a week rehabbing affordable housing. Help us.

I’ll tell you what I see in that Pew Research Center study. I see some good news. With all the bad news about the “nones” and “dones,” the growing number who check “none” when asked their religious preference and say they are “done” with organized religion, here is evidence that there are many people sitting on the outside of the church who are open to coming in. What they want is really quite simple: to be welcome and to have a meaningful way to practice their faith. May our inclusive, discovering fellowship be just that.

## Closing Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for the model we have in Jesus, who welcomed all. Help us to do likewise. Amen.