

Introduction to Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 January 2026

Preacher: James Tang

[0:00] Happy New Year, everyone. Good morning. Excited, excited as we gather. I know it always feels chaotic when you show up here, especially between 11 and 1110 when everyone shows up. It reminds me a little bit of just, can you imagine in the early church when it first started and just the Lord added to their number daily and just the chaos that it would have been just putting 3,000 people into the same space.

It would have often felt a little bit chaotic, but I feel as though the people, on the most part, my guess is that they would have known why they were coming. And that's what we're trying to constantly remind ourselves. Why are we even here? Why are we bothering to come here to church on this Sunday morning when the weather outside is glorious? We could be doing so many other things. Why are we choosing to all cramp out into a small room to hear from this book? Why? That's the question that I wanted to actually spend the next few weeks to talk to us about because I realized we've been doing this little experiment for three years now. And a lot of you have joined us recently and you haven't heard this, heard me talk about what church really is before. And I realized before we even move into the vision, I first need to tell you a little bit about the burden because every vision is birthed out of a burden. It's birthed out of a, what do, what did I see? What did Christina see in terms of what we experienced here? And we just come up to the seven year mark now of being in Hong Kong. And so what are we going to actually do here?

We're going to talk a little bit about just the burden that was on our hearts. If you've been around us for a long time, then you will have heard this before. As I was preparing this sermon, I felt as though actually, this is pretty much just the greatest hits of all the things I talk about. So if you are here and you're like, oh my goodness, James, I've been with you for a good few years now, then I'm sorry. You will have heard this many times before. But someone once told me, if you want someone to remember anything, you have to at least say it seven times. Seven times. That's a lot. So we're going to try and do this. So today will be about the burden and what really we've learned, what I've learned being in Hong Kong.

And then we'll move into the next few weeks and talk about what church really is and what we're really hoping for it to be. But before all of that, even as Aaron was praying, I was like, I need prayer and I need to submit myself and we need to submit ourselves to the word of God here. So I'm going to invite Julian at the birthday boy to come up to do the scripture reading for us. Can we give him a round of applause?

We had a great celebration with this man yesterday and he's going to administer to us through the word. As is our usual posture. I invite everyone to stand as we read the word of the Lord.

[2:38] Today's reading is from chapter two, the acts of the apostles, verse 42, the fellowship of the believers. And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And all came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day, those who were being saved. This is the word of the Lord. Praise be to God. Thank you, Julian. Please take a seat. Thank you.

All right. A few disclaimers before I jump into what I'm about to say. Having been here for seven years and just filled with joy, filled with lots of things that we've we've been able to learn.

[3:52] I'm about to share some of them that maybe I would feel are unique to my experience here in Hong Kong, that growing up in England, I did not get to see that much. And so but I want to say a few things before I share those things, just in case that you thought this was just going to be James ranting about church.

This is not what this is. OK, this is not me venting and ranting, complaining about all the things that I've seen and all the churches and all the problems. That is not what this is. I have a growing, deep, deep love for the church in Hong Kong about what the Lord is doing here.

And these are just some of the things that I've observed and have actually been foreign to me and Christina as we've come into this city here. And so I wanted to say that. And it is a combination of the things that we actually I've shared a lot over these last few years.

The other thing is I will share what I've observed and then I will also share what we're trying to do. But when I say that, I emphasize on the word trying, that I'm not here showing you a problem and then presenting to you the perfect solution that we've come up with.

But this experiment will continue to be an experiment, continue to be one of trial and error, continue to be one where some people will be disappointed often. And I was told a quote a few years ago that leadership is welcoming people on this suboptimal journey where there are limited resources, limited time.

[5:11] And everyone's going to be disappointed in some way. But can we disappoint you at a rate that you can absorb? Or rather, can you join us on this journey and go, OK, what is the Lord actually doing here?

What does he actually why is he actually put you here? What's the purpose of that? So that's what I'm doing. There is going to be no shade that is going to be thrown to other people. There is only one way to the Father and that is Jesus Christ.

But there are many ways to worship Jesus. There are many ways to there's many songs to sing. There are many kinds of songs that we can sing. There are many ways that we can turn the seats and do the seating. There are so many ways. So for me, as I sit here, go, OK, Lord, what is it that you have for us in this next chapter?

I approach it with a with a with a sense of reverence and awe and humility going, I will make mistakes. That's something that we talked about yesterday, just knowing that there are needs out there that we will not be able to fulfill.

But that's not necessarily the only reason why we gather. We gather here to worship God. Can we, in the best way possible for this flock, point you to Jesus? I think that's it. If you spend any time with us, my prayer is that you come in and then you leave and you just you have that hunger for Jesus more.

[6:19] You look like him more. You think like him more. That's the only prayer that we have here. So this is just another context. We have some friends visiting from the UK just to give me a blast from the past and reminded me that actually my context and Christina's and Joe's actually growing up in England and Francis as well.

It's a very different context. OK, we went to a Chinese church in England and the Chinese churches in England gather as Chinese people, not basically on any theological kind of convictions, basically because we're Chinese.

That's it. And we want to stick together. And Chinese churches, what do they do the best at? Food, food. And so you gather around food, you gather around because there's nothing else to do in England.

So then you go to church. And so you go to the same church with your same friends for years and you see each other every week because there's really nothing else to do. And so it doesn't really matter whether the worship is good or not. Usually, mostly, it's not really that good.

It doesn't really matter whether the sermons are good or not. Usually, again, it's challenging. But we just gather because that's the only thing to do. And then we come to Hong Kong. Oh, my goodness. I was so excited when I first got to Hong Kong.

[7:32] One of my jobs when I first got here was to go and explore the different churches just to learn, just to see. And I was like, wow. These worship teams, they sing in tune. They play in time. There's smoke machines. I thought only white people could do that kind of stuff.

Chinese people could, too. This is like a show. This is a show. This is really good. But wait, people don't really talk to each other.

Oh, wait. The service is finished and they leave. And I was like, oh. And then no one's actually spoken to me. How interesting. When you walk into a church in England, everyone will know that you are new because it's been the same group that grew up together.

Now, you can, it is possible for you to attend a church. Here's the thing. I think you could do this at this church, too. So I'm not throwing any kind of darts here. It is very possible for you to come and attend this gathering service and not speak to a single person for a whole year and have no one know you.

Can you nod your head if you agree? Has anyone tried that? That can happen here. But in Hong Kong, there's so many churches. There's multiple churches. There's 1,300 churches in Hong Kong. [8:49] OK. And at every MTR stop, there's a different church. And I was talking to friends yesterday. Actually, this church here, I think we're very blessed in the sense that I think we probably gather in the most convenient building in the whole of Hong Kong.

That is my guess. Why? Because Almaty is probably the most well-connected station. And if you look at Amorti station and all the exits, and trust me, I know them all, A, B, C, D, E, F, A is probably the most convenient one.

The one that you don't need to really walk outside anywhere. The biggest McDonald's. The busiest McDonald's in the world is underneath us. That's how much the Lord loves me. So it's really good. It's really, I'm really glad that you find this church convenient.

But here's the flip side of that convenience is that this is the easiest place for you to show up just to kind of tick the box and then for you to continue with your day. So what am I talking about when I talk about churches is that, hey, if you're here and you're serious about wanting to follow Jesus, then what is it that we need to do as a family, as a community to get around you together?

That's my hope. But before I even talk into the scripture that Julian read, and I promise you, if you're here for the first time, then I promise you, usually we start with scripture, we go through scripture and we end with scripture. Today, I'm going to share a few observations that just what I've learned about church in Hong Kong.

[10:03] And then we will finish with what scripture is showing us about what the answer to church is. OK, so if you are someone who's like expository Bible every minute of the whole sermon, usually we do try to.

OK, but this one we're going to do slightly different. So do come back next week and hopefully we'll have something more for you. OK, so the first thing I have learned about Hong Kongers and I'm talking about you. So before you look at the person next to you, oh, maybe you should do that. Just turn to the person next to you and go, he's talking about you today. He's talking about you. This is not about me. I'm not holding, taking responsibility for this. So this is the first thing that I found. Remember my context. I grew up in a place where the friends that you have, you did not choose. They were of the same race, bullied in the same way. And so they gathered together and because their parents dragged them to the same place and there's nowhere else to go.

OK, there are people who are nodding. You know this. You know this is truth. So but you come here and it's different. You come here and there's so many different options to choose. But here's the thing that I found over the last seven years that I've learned is that people do want community.

[11:05] But they don't want commitment. They do want community, but they don't want commitment. Why? The biggest thing with Hong Kong probably is the issue of busyness. My goodness.

How we can fit so many things into a day. And I've told you guys this before. I used to do two things. I used to work in Admatti with the church and also be in Jordan for Young Life. I kid you not, six minutes.

I can run from the Young Life office to the MTR station, jump on the MTR and get to church. Six minutes. I don't know how I did it. There were a couple of old ladies I had to push across the platform. But it worked.

And I could fit 11 meetings into a day. Busyness. Whereas in the UK, I mean, 11 meetings a week would be impressive. Busyness. Are you too busy?

I'm deeply impacted by an article that was written by a Wall Street journalist in 2012 called Laura Vanderkam. And the title of the article is, are you as busy as you think? Isn't that the first thing that we say to each other?

[12:03] Hey, Julian, how are you doing? Actually, no, maybe not you. Hey, Flo, how are you doing? Good, good, busy. That's always what we say. Right? And that's always what we're thinking.

And the truth is we are busy. We do fit a lot of things in.

But the article talked about, actually, are you truly as busy as you think? Or are you actually simply just saying it? So when you say, oh, I would have loved to do this. I would have loved to been in this community. I would have loved to gone to this worship.

I would have loved to serve there and do this. And maybe serve at St. Barnabas this weekend. But sadly, I'm too busy. And she reframes the way I approached how I even used that term.

And she said, instead of using the four words, I am too busy. Why don't you change it and use a different word, which is, it's not a priority. Just try it. I would love to read the Bible, but I'm too busy. Why don't instead you say, I would love to read the Bible, but it's not a priority. See how it makes you feel. Because the truth is, that's what we're really saying.

[13:00] The word priority entered into the English dictionary in the 14th century as such, just priority, singular. In the 19th century, we started to see records of it changing.

And it became priorities. It became plural in the 19th century. Isn't it interesting? But that word itself doesn't really make sense if we truly think about it, because there should really be only one priority. But the moment we start flooding our schedules with all these different things, suddenly we say we are too busy, when actually what we're really saying is that it is not a priority. People want community, but they can't really commit.

People want community, but they prefer convenience. Again, a friend that actually also lived in the UK and so knew the lifestyle there, which is basically, and if you're from North, you know, you spend time in North America, you probably know the same thing, which is my mom lives in LA. If you want to travel anywhere, how long does it take to travel? One hour. Anywhere you go is going to be at least one hour, because that's just, it's baked into your schedule, is that where you have to go. In Hong Kong, that's not the case. Six minutes, I can cross the harbor.

[14:05] But there's a friend in England who we used to laugh at Hong Kongers and say, oh, you know, these guys, they can't even cross the harbor. It's so hard. Hong Kong Island people just don't want to go to Kowloon.

It's just too inconvenient. Sonny's just nodding with just resentment and bitterness. But you live in the mountains, that's like a whole other thing. And recently I spoke to him and he worships at a different place.

He's like, yeah, I've got a small group that I really want to go to, but I can't. And I'm, okay, if I say the place, then it might shame him. I live in Repos Bay, but there's small groups in Central. It's just too far.

I was like, bro, too far? It's like 15 minutes max. And then, of course, he was like, yeah, I guess. But there's something about the way we approach, or even when we talk about communities, I would love to have community.

I really would. I would love to do life with people. I would love to invest time with people. But could they meet at my house? Could they cook dinner for me? Could they come on, actually, no, Wednesday's bad, because I've got tennis.

[15:13] Maybe Thursday. We want community, but we also want convenience. And actually, that's not going to work. We want community, but we also want to stay very comfortable.

When we say comfortable, we're talking about spending time with people that sometimes make us uncomfortable. We were talking about this as a group of leaders yesterday. When we talk about doing small groups, we're not just talking about friendship groups.

We're not just talking about doing life together. That is not what we're talking about. Okay, that already sounds good, because the bar is so low. Because so often, people who believe in Jesus and go to church, they literally just attend a service, and then they leave.

Because they've just watched the show, and then they move on. But what we're saying here is that, actually, not only should we just do life together, but we should also then actually help each other grow deeper in the word.

And 90s sitcom reference here, but I was like, actually, Monica, Chandler, Ross, Rachel, Phoebe, Joey, they did life together. But that's not a life group. That's not a small group.

[16:18] They just hung out at a coffee shop together. That's doing life together. But what we're trying to say is, when you do a group, it's not just with people that you get along with, not just with people who you share hobbies with, but it's people who share the same love for Jesus with, who may be different, who actually, in the outside world, you probably wouldn't spend any time together,

but because of Christ, you do want to spend time together.

That's the difference. But sadly, we want to stay within our comfort zones, talking to people who understand us. We want community, but we also prefer comfort.

And of course, add that to the fact that in Hong Kong, there is a whole transience that happens. Every two, three years, people move. And that makes it, of course, extra hard. And we were talking yesterday. Actually, in Hong Kong, if you meet someone once a month, you're practically best friends.

Right? That's a lot of commitment. To meet someone once a month, to be good friends with people. Oh, I've known this guy for so long. We're so close. How often do you meet? Twice a year. Right? Genuinely.

Whereas, in other parts of the world that are less busy, actually, that's pathetic. I mean, twice a year. You add that to the fact that when we meet, often we don't actually go into the deeper issues, the personal issues.

[17:31] I had a pleasure of meeting Gab's brother and Kim as well. And it was really fun just talking to her for the first time. And she just went straight in. She's like, I'm an introvert.

I don't really like talking and kind of do small talk. I wanted to dive straight in to talk about it. I was like, that is so refreshing. Because we can spend our whole lives, our whole friendship doing small talk. And actually, I don't really know you.

I just know what football team you like. I just know what work you do. I know how much you hate your boss. And that's about it. But to go deeper. It's that same thing that I keep saying. Can we be people who go, hey, tell me more?

Wait, you just said that. You just said you had a bad week. Well, tell me more. Why is that week bad? Can we be people who are actually genuinely committed to caring for each other and even just showing curiosity? Because I think we're so busy, sometimes we don't even really care what other people are thinking.

And so we end up in this place where we say we do want community, but we really can't have, we don't have the commitment to actually get to the community that we want. So then we say, well, why don't we just stay at home and watch YouTube church and just watch an online service?

[18:34] And here's the problem with that. There's nothing necessarily wrong with watching sermons online. But why would you want to do it apart from the body of Christ? Why would you want to do it on your own?

Sanctification. Jonathan Lee said, man, says this sanctification is a community project. God means to change us through each other, through one another. Sanctification is a community project.

And I'll talk a little bit more later about why we need people. Second is we want to be known, but we don't want to be vulnerable. We want to be known, but we don't want to be vulnerable.

And I've shared this quite a few times this last few weeks. It's the one that Queenie shared with me by Tim Keller, that our greatest desire is to be known and loved, right?

But to be loved but not known is simply just superficial. To be known but not loved is our greatest fear. That they would find out about us and then decide, actually, I don't love you.

[19:30] I don't want to love you. But to be fully known and truly loved, that's what we are craving the most. That's what you want the most. That is the love that God can give us. That is the love that this community, when you gather, when we gather is saying, hey, I'm going to find out a bit more about you.

And I'm going to find out how quirky you are. And I'm going to find out the kind of music that you listen to. But all those things, even though they're different to me, I'm going to love you more because of those things. Every time I find out more about what you're worried about, your selfishness and all these kind of things, it's going to cause me to love you more.

That's the kind of community that we're hoping for. But we're afraid of that. We're afraid that people will find out enough about us that they will then be put off and they will then ignore us and then use busyness as an excuse. We want to be known, but we are not willing to be vulnerable.

And social media is probably the biggest problem here when it comes to that. Because we go online and we see everyone doing all these incredible things. And yet we compare that to our own lives because no one really puts their lowlights online.

They only put the best parts online. So you see only their best parts, but you can see all your parts. And so then you feel, well, I can't let them see my low parts because that will be shameful.

[20:40] When the truth is they have them too. And that's why they keep putting only their highlights. And that's where social media is. We have to be super, super careful. In terms of what we present online.

And we know this. And I've been there when you see something nice. You're like, I want to post this. I want to share this. Well, then my encouragement to you is, well, do share it. It's nice to see the highlights of your life. But actually, if we're to do life together, it will be also really nice to see the low parts.

Also nice to see the hard parts. Share about what you're going through. Can we be those kinds of people that are willing to be vulnerable? And you find out actually once you open up and once you take that first step.

Honestly, I've been with friendship groups that have known each other for years, for their whole lives. And they don't know each other that well. But when we sit together and talk and I start sharing about some of the struggles that I have, some of the problems that I'm facing.

Actually, you realize, oh, there's really not that much to be scared of because you realize everyone's in the same boat. Everyone's struggling through the same things. Everyone's having a problem in their marriage with their kids, with their work.

[21:40] And you realize, oh, actually, this is a safe space to do it. Can we, as a church, be that kind of safe space so we can be known and loved and be willing to be vulnerable?

Henry Nouwen says this, community is a place where the person you least want to live with always lives. In community, we are called to confess our brokenness, forgive each other, and celebrate the gift of life together.

We were going through Ephesians 4 yesterday as a group of leaders. And Paul just keeps talking about it. If you're going to be together, you have to be humble. You have to be gentle. You have to bear with one another. You have to just love one another. He's like, just look, just bear with one another.

Be patient with one another. Why? Because people are weird. My wife thinks I'm weird. And about many things. Matthew's just nodding. Your wife's just, well, she's carrying you in your marriage. But, you know, Matthew can't survive on his own. He's in our life group, by the way. So we talk a lot about this. But don't you realize that we are all weird? But the moment, the thing is, we walk into a church and we're expecting cool people who understand us, who we can vibe with and do life with together and be fun and happy and all the happily ever after together.

[22:49] And then you start seeing some of their quiriness. Start seeing some of their weird traits that come out. The thing that music does to Gabs and Julian. And then they start dancing in this really disturbing way.

And I'm like, wow. I love these men. But they are so weird. I think it was only a recent revelation for me that actually when I walk into a church, how about I just expect and accept that everyone is a sinner?

That everyone is broken. That everyone is flawed and are going to say stupid things. Are going to do stupid things. And the call is to love despite all of those things.

Isn't that what church is supposed to be? Some other people say to us, I do like Christianity. I do like, I am a follower of Christ.

But I don't really go to church. I don't like the church. I've been hurt by hypocrisy. I've been hurt by people who say one thing and do another thing. So therefore, and actually, or just my church is just the demographic doesn't fit me.

[23:56] It's just the sermons aren't good. The worship isn't good. And so I don't really go. And so actually, no, I've grown a certain distaste for the church now. Here's the problem.

Let me just ask you the question. Is it possible for you to come and say to me, James, I quite like you as a human being. I'd like to spend some time with you, but I just hate Christina.

I just really don't like Christina. So I like you, James. I want us to hang out. But Christina, can she not come? Is that possible?

The answer is no. And yet with Jesus, we do just that. We say, Jesus, we like you. We believe in you. But we actually don't like your bride. We don't like your church.

The church is broken with people who have let us down, who have disappointed us. And so we would rather not. We would like to just be with you, Jesus. And I think Jesus is saying, I'm so sorry. You cannot do that. The church is my bride. Every time you see a flaw in the church, it should draw

you closer to the church because it should be like, Jesus loves you so much and died for you.

[25:05] I am called to do the same. We should be the ones running towards the flaws, towards the people who have problems, as opposed to, oh, that group's weird. I'm leaving. Can you see?

Can you see what we've done? Can you see what we've reduced church to? And then we say, well, I do want to be closest to God. Well, when was the last time you went to church? Well, maybe a few months ago. Well, how can you expect to get closer to God, to the head, without getting anywhere near the body?

That doesn't work either. And we don't think about it often at that level. We think, well, maybe we can get by with the sermon. We'll read a book. No, no, the only way you get close to God is to get close to his body, with all its imperfections, with all its flaws.

That's how we do it. So that's the problem. We want to know God, but we can't find the time, or we just simply don't want to approach his body. And that's where we end up in this place where let's try and do it alone. But again, it comes back to that same thing.

Sanctification is a community project. You cannot do it alone. Even the great apostle Paul needed people around him. What makes you think, what makes me think that I can do it on my own?

[26:11] Every time I talk to someone who's like, I really want to read the Bible, but I'm struggling to read it. I'm like, well, great, let's do it together. It doesn't take long. We can read something together every day. It takes five minutes. Let's just start there.

We need people around us who are willing to do that with us. Say, oh, you're struggling? That's okay. We need people around us to be able to do that. We want to know him more, but we just can't because it's really hard and it's really boring and we don't have time.

Well, here's a challenge that I will propose to you. You say you don't have enough time for community and time for church. Why don't you do this? Why don't you do a little experiment with yourself? The amount of time that you spend on Netflix equal that with the time you be with church people.

How about we spend time with people just as much as we watch TV shows? And you may be like, James, do you know how hard that is? Do you know how many hours of Netflix I watch?

That would be impossible. It was a challenge that I showed to myself when I was in my early 20s where I would play on this console that none of you will remember called the Dreamcast. Anyone remember the Dreamcast?

[27:21] Kayla remembers. Thank you, Ken. Thank you. Then, of course, I graduated onto the PS3, played FIFA a lot. And then I really felt, man, I don't have time. I don't really have appetite to even read the Bible because I'm in the middle of my season and Arsenal are about to win in this fantasy world.

Or maybe this year. And so then I challenged myself, okay, okay. I do want to read the Bible. I do want to pray. I just find it hard and I prioritize other things.

It's not that I don't have time. It's just that it's not a priority. Why don't I do this? If I play FIFA for two hours, I'm allowed to do that with no guilt, but let me commit to reading the Bible for two hours. Let me equal it at least.

That's the challenge I set myself in my early 20s. And it was amazing. You should just have seen my FIFA consumption drop straight down. Ended up playing 25 minutes instead.

That's it. I'm done. Try it. You're like, oh, well, praying is hard. Okay, well, why don't you do this? The amount of time you spend on IG, use that time to pray.

[28:25] Like, what, James, do you know how many hours I spend on IG? That'll be a lot of praying. Well, exactly. Well, why don't you just cut the IG down to five minutes and you pray for five minutes? That's okay too. It's the same thing that Thomas Merton says.

It's the very desire to please God is what pleases God. It's not you have to tick this box. Can you just imagine? It's the father just wants you to be with him. So any attempts that you have for 60 seconds or for 60 minutes or whatever it is, he just wants you to be trying.

I'm filled with joy every time my kids are trying something, right? I've said before that my children, my daughter especially, who likes to draw, she will never ever draw me a picture that I do not like. Never. I will have no idea what she's drawn, but it doesn't matter. I love it. Because that's the heart of God. That's the heart of a father. He simply wants us to try.

And we do want to. We just sometimes struggle with this. And it comes down to this thing again. I think some of us need to unlearn what it means to be a Christian. Because we think when it

becomes, we become a Christian, basically we are committing to following this rigid set of rules so that we are complying with a God that is holy up there, giving us commandments that we need to follow.

[29:37] Even the 10 commandments, there has to be a moment where we realize, wait, he's not here about to talk about compliance. He's here for connection with me. Those commandments are there, built, so that I can have a connection with him.

He's not here just for the rules that I can follow. He's actually here for a relationship with me. It's connection over compliance. It's relationship over rules. The moment you get that, that is when the light bulb switches on and goes, wait, I don't have to do this.

But I would like to. I would want to. Or I would want to want to. Honestly, that's where I'm mostly at sometimes. I want to read the word, but I don't really.

But I want to want to. And honestly, I think the Lord is so gracious and so compassionate that even that pleases him. Would we be willing to try that?

And the other thing is, if you can't do it on your own, if you want to be on fire with God, and this is something that I actually do. And Julian, when he was praying with us in the pre-service prayer, he had this picture of a burning fire, logs piled on top of each other, keeping the fire going.

[30:42] In my moments of dryness, what I do is I find people who are on fire. When I find people who are on fire and all I need to do is spend a little bit of time with them and then I catch that fire again.

Just a log on its own, trying to burn, won't last very long. But if you just get yourself with people, that's why we do the groups. Hebrews 10 says this, don't stop meeting one another.

Keep encouraging each other until the day draws near. Stir each other up in love and good works.

Do it together because you won't be able to do it on your own. It is a community project.

Find the people who are on fire. And finally, we do want closeness with God, but there's one thing that we have to lay at the door before we have that closeness with Him is we want closeness, but often we want to retain control.

It is terrifying when you get close to this holy God because when you get close to this holy God, He will tell you to do things that you don't actually really want to do. So I think that's sometimes the reason why we stop at the door because we're like, you know what, I want to get close to you, but I'm actually afraid of what that means when I get there because I'm actually living knowing that I'm not doing the thing that you want me to.

[31:57] And so we hold Him back. But one of the things about when we get close to God is that we do have to surrender control. When we get close to Him is that, okay, well, genuinely, you have to take the wheel.

I will go wherever you call me to go. I will stay even when I want to leave. What that is is just a surrender of control. If we want that closeness with God, we must surrender.

There is no way about it. He cannot let you continue to be the driver of your own life. He's either Lord of all or not at all. That's the challenge.

So often we say, Jesus, come into my house. Come into the living room. We will hang out together. Maybe we'll even sit at the table together to eat. But that room, you cannot go into. That room, you cannot go into.

My career, you cannot touch that. We step into this issue of syncretism, which is we basically combine two beliefs together. We have a belief that Jesus is Lord, that everything on this world will fade away, that is not as important as what we are about to receive.

[33:03] We hold on to that, that Jesus is the one who died for us and loves us and rose again for us. But on the other side, we hold this, actually, we want to continue to pursue the worldly values of luxury, of comfort, of pleasure.

And so then you mix the two together, it becomes this kind of syncretized kind of faith where it's kind of like, actually, I love Jesus and He will provide me with the work and the lifestyle that I want. The moment something happens and it always happens, we will always have loved ones that we lose, we will always have things that don't go our way. The moment that happens, it tests our faith. And we're like, well, Jesus, are you really real?

Well, Jesus is like, well, of course I'm real, but you've merged two opposing beliefs together. You've made, you've thought that I'm most interested in your comfort and your luxury in this side of eternity when I'm most interested in your eternal communion with me in heaven.

It doesn't mean I don't care about what you have in this life, but you've got to put it in the right order. Look at it from Jesus' vantage point and that's why He allows suffering.

[34:08] Every time we suffer is an opportunity for Him to come to us and go, hey, look to me. Can you see what I see? But often we say in this baby stage, which is, Jesus, you're here just to provide for me for the things that I want.

Not the things that I need, but just the things that I want. And the moment I've got them, I actually discard you. And that's one of the greatest ironies of life in Hong Kong is that we walk with so many people and we pray with people, especially as they graduate and go through university and then we're praying, what are we praying for?

Pray that I get this job. And then the moment they get the job, that job becomes the thing that pulls them away from God. Right? How often does that happen? Think about the job that you're in right now and how you prayed for God to give you that job.

And fast forward two, three months, you're like, yeah, but I'm really struggling with just spending time with Him, with prayer, with studying, with serving. Why? Because of your job. Well, that doesn't make sense. Why would God give you something that will pull you away from Him?

We need to recalibrate our beliefs of what we're actually thinking God provides for us here, what He cares about the most. When we surrender control, what we realize is that actually what we get isn't just a lame kind of life, but it's actually freedom.

[35:25] We think we're free when we're away from Him, but we're actually not. We are slaves to the things that have taken over our lives. That's why God says, worship me, worship only me, not because He's a self-centered God, but because He's saying, all the other things that you worship will corrupt you, they will consume you.

We've all been there when we've turned a good thing into God and that thing consumes us. But God says, worship me. Why? Because I'm the only, not only will I not corrupt you, not only will I not consume you, I will complete you.

If you worship me with your job, you will see the true satisfaction that comes with what I created you to do. If you worship me with your relationships and with your family, you will see the true contentment that comes when you and your household both all trust in me.

But these idols that we build up, these counterfeit gods that we have in this world, and they're all good things. But for us Chinese people who have grown up with maybe these Chinese values often passed down, not from Jesus, but from Confucius, we have to ask ourselves, are we following Confucius' teachings or are we actually surrendering and submitting to the Lord of all, Jesus Christ? There's a difference. And often I think we merge the two and then we wonder, actually, we don't really look any different to those outside. So anyway, that's my little bit of sharing.

[36:47] So the question really then is, then what? If those are the problems, if we really want community but we struggle with commitment, if we say we want to spend time with God but we actually don't put Him as a priority, when we want to be known but yet we aren't willing to be vulnerable, then what do we do?

What is the solution that Scripture offers us? What is the example that we see in Scripture where people are added to a group filled with awe and wonder? Where is that? That is in the book of Acts chapter 2 and this is where I want to quickly show you that actually Acts chapter 2 shows us a description of what a community, when they catch the vision, when they are set alight on what they actually do.

Acts 2, Dallas Willis says this, Acts 2, the passage that Julian read at the beginning, Acts 2 presents a picture of their discipling community. They weren't just listening to teaching, they were applying it in shared life, in economic reality, in worship and in meals.

Spiritual formation happened at home and also in the temple courts. They grew together. If you ask me, what is church about? It's we have to be making disciples. It is not about building a church service.

It is not about running more and more programs. It is are we making disciples of Jesus? By you being here, are you looking and following Jesus more and more every day? That is it.

[38:04] That is all that we're looking for here. Why do I have such a big conviction about church? Why do I have this big conviction about you need to be together? Because Jesus said two things. He said, if you forget everything else, He says, love God and love people.

That's it. And my conviction is that you cannot do either of those things without people around you. The greatest commandment, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, to love your neighbor as yourself.

And then what does He say? The Great Commission, make disciples of all nations. So those things all require other human beings to be in your orbit. All of those things you cannot do in isolation. You must have other people around you. That's why we gather. Because if we're going to follow God's commandment, if we're going to follow His Great Commission, we must have people around us. And you see exactly here, that is what Acts 2 is doing here.

And so when we gather, what could possibly gather this group of people together who are willing to surrender their worldly ambitions, who are willing to be vulnerable to one another, who are willing to go out of their way to spend time with someone else when we would rather be at home just watching their favorite Netflix show?

[39:13] What is that? What is required to even have that kind of commitment what is it? It's not the speaker. I guarantee you, it is not the speaker. You may like a speaker and their sermons once or twice and then they start to say the same thing again and then you start to kind of be, well, he said that before.

It's not even the worship because you can get worship anywhere. It's not actually the location. It's not the convenience. The only things that really matter I can see are hidden here in Acts chapter 2 and I want to quickly show you before I finish.

The first thing is it needs the people of God to be hungry. You look at that passage. If you're just following along in the Bible, there's Acts chapter 2 verse 42 to 47. You see these people, they are filled with awe and wonder.

They are glad and generous. No one is in need and that whole community, the whole staple of that community is joy and generosity and you're like, I want to be part of that. How do I get to be part of that?

How do I create that kind of community? Well, I'm saying here, actually, you cannot create it by yourself but Acts shows us how it actually came to be. The first thing is the people of God need to be hungry for Him.

[40:14] That's the main thing. That's the first thing. If you rewind back into Acts chapter 1, Jesus flies into heaven. He says, I'll be back and then He says, but I'll be with you till the end of the age. And then He says, wait, wait in Jerusalem.

So suddenly, He flies off and a group of us here, we're just sat here, about 500, so there's a little bit more, we're just like, well, now He's gone, what do we do? Well, He said, go back to Jerusalem. Well, He didn't say what to do when you go back to Jerusalem.

So they all went back to Jerusalem. Some probably went home but then there was a group that was like, no, it cannot be just to go back home and then to do our own thing. It must not be that.

There must be something more. So they got together in an upper room and they prayed and they spent time praying. Do you know how long they prayed for? Does anyone know? Any guesses? 10 days. 10 days, a room of 100 and something people in a room praying. They saw something that they couldn't see. They met a person who they cannot forget and so instead of going home to continue with the latest TV show, they went and they prayed for 10 days.

[41:19] Can you imagine by the ninth day, you're like, hmm, is this a waste of time? Was I imagining things? But the commitment continued to drive them and what happens after the 10th day? The Holy Spirit comes down.

The people, if we want to be a spirit-filled community, we need to be a people of God who are hungry for Him. Anyone who studies any of the spiritual revivals that have happened over the years, what is the one thing that they say?

God comes where He's wanted. God comes to those who actually are hungry, hungry for Him. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.

But in Hong Kong, we don't get hungry because we eat five meals a day. We have snacks and drinks and bubble teas and so we're never hungry. That's why fasting is important because when you're fasting, you're reminded of the feeling of hunger and then you point that feeling of hunger towards Him.

So the first thing that you need is the people of God being hungry. The second thing that you need, of course, is the Spirit of God. We can do everything that we try to do here. We can stand up for the Word.

[42:22] We can do volleyball afterwards. We can do lunch afterwards. We can do all these small groups. None of it will work if the Holy Spirit isn't here. So you need the Holy Spirit of God to come down on His people, pour out on all flesh and that's how we are united because otherwise, I can't really think of a reason why I would like to hang out with Trevor outside of church because we are very different people but it's because of the Spirit of God, because of our love for Jesus, that's what unites us.

So that's what causes us to spend time together because otherwise, it's just a worldly friendship. And so you need the people of God to be hungry, you need the Spirit of God to move and then you need the Word of God to be preached.

And what is the Word of God? Peter preaches the sermon of his life, probably his first sermon actually. After Pentecost happens, there's a lot of confusion and chaos and what does he do? He stands up and he says, guys, let me explain to you what is happening here.

This Jesus whom you crucified, was then raised up and then he's coming back. What does he do? He presents what they call the kerygma, which is the gospel, which is the life and death and the resurrection of Jesus and what he actually did.

We would do well to focus everything that we do on what Jesus did and who Jesus is and how he is still here right now. It cannot be about us, it has to be about him.

[43:41] So the gospel has to be preached. The gospel has to be applied into every sphere and every aspect of our lives. The people of God have to be hungry, the spirit of God has to fall on people and then the word of God has to be opened up.

If you're sat in a friendship group of fellow believers, maybe you should ask that question. What's going to distinguish us between just a worldly group of friends and a group that actually commits to following Jesus?

Well, open up the word together. Play board games together by all means but then spend time to pray together. Be that brave soul that says, hey, before we leave, can I pray for you?

Can we be those kinds of people that just operate in a different way to those in the world? If we can and then we gather, then the Lord will continue to bless us not with more people but with joy, with generosity and you see the interesting thing that happens here is when that gospel is preached, what are the people?

They are cut to the heart. Acts chapter 2 verse 37. They're just sitting there going, we crucified him. It was my sin that was on the cross. But then I'm filled with hope because not only was it my sin that he took but now it's his life that he's giving to me so that I can have this abundant life that I can live.

[45:01] And we can all sit here and go, I know there's so many things that Jesus died for me and now that I am freed from and when I'm freed from it, I am filled with reverence and awe for him.

And when we are a people who are filled with reverence and awe, we are filled with the joy that comes with that and then that spurs us on into being just generous. And that's why you see in Acts 2 that there is no one in need.

You see later, human nature takes over. Greed comes in. But when people of God are hungry for him, when the spirit of God falls on a group of people and when the word of God is preached, you see praise explode amongst the people.

And not only that, not only are the people within glad and happy and generous and rejoicing, the people outside and they have favour amongst all people.

Isn't that fun? That people would look from the outside in and go, wow, this community is so filled with joy. If you're here for the first time, I pray that you'll meet people who you look and go, wow, they're filled with joy.

[46:04] They're not as self-centred as those outside. But not out of pride, but out of humility, out of reverence and awe for him. Can we be that kind of church?

Can we reverse the ways of this world? That's why Romans 12 says, let's not conform to the patterns of this world. And it is so hard in Hong Kong because there are so many things of this world that are right in your face.

Because even though we need people, it's people that often drag us down, distract us, pull us away from the Lord. But can you imagine if there really was a group of people that were hungry for God individually, coming together, praying, and the Spirit of God falls on them, and they open up the Word and highly just are dependent on this book.

Can you imagine the impact and the effect on each person in this room? That's the prayer. That we would not just be believers or observers or consumers, but that we would be followers, lovers of the Lord.

Packer says this, the marks of the Spirit's ministry were joy, generosity, and praise. This is the authentic climate of a Spirit-filled community. And then Keller adds, their joy and unity were so striking, they had the favor of all people.

[47:24] authentic community is, at its core, evangelistic. Can we be a group of people that is just so attractive to those outside?

Because we know this world is in a dark place and it needs light. What's uncomfortable for us is that Jesus looks at us and goes, you are going to be the light. You are going to be my light.

And you won't survive and do it on your own, but you need people around you. that is church. That is the ecclesia, the assembly, the gathering of God's people.

And I pray that we would be a people who are hungry for Him, who are filled with His Spirit, reliant on His Word. And then He can take us wherever He wants us to go.

We're going to move into a time of communion and then a final response song now. I want to invite you. I've said a lot, but I feel as though there might be one thing, and this is where you now have to talk to God, talk to the Holy Spirit in case, what's the one thing you want me to retain from this?

[48:38] How do you want me to respond? What's the one thing that really stands out to me, Holy Spirit, what are you impressing onto my heart? Before we take the elements, I invite you just to spend a moment of reflection. And the question might be super simple.

It might simply be, Jesus, what are you saying to me? Jesus, what are you saying to me? I invite you to ask that question of yourself and then we'll take the bread and the wine.

so God, we pray, come and fill us.

Come and fill us here today. Disrupt our lives, point us towards you, Father.

That as we go from here today, that our lives would be glorifying to you in all that we do. That our hearts wouldn't be to glorify ourselves, but in all that we say and think and do, Father, that it would be to glorify you.

[50:05] and praise you with all that you have given us. In your name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.