Where Two or More Are Gathered In My Name
Matthew 18:20 (NKJV)

Please open your Bibles to tonight's scripture text in Matthew chapter eighteen. And let's read verse 20.

Matthew 18:20 (NKJV)

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

PRAYER

Introduction

Illustration: I will always hold my home Church back in Indiana very near and dear to my heart. It was in the New Brunswick Church of Christ that the foundations of my Christian faith were laid. It was in that Church I was baptized. It was in that Church that I was ordained into the Christian ministry.

When I was growing up it was not unusual to have 350 - 400 people in Church each Lord's Day. During my dad's thirteen and a half year ministry in that Church we had over 800 additions through baptism or transfer. It was the most vibrant, most thriving, most growing Independent Christian Church in several counties.

My mom and step-father are still members in my home Church. And recently my mom told me on the phone that on “a good Sunday” they will have 75-100 in attendance. When they think back to the days when New Brunswick Church of Christ was thriving and see what has become of her now, they are greatly discouraged!
Like you, I find it very, very discouraging to look out here on Sunday morning, and Sunday evening and see more empty places than full.

Many of these empty spaces were once occupied by dear relatives and friends who have gone on to be with the LORD.

Some of these empty spaces were once occupied by individuals who were members here for awhile then transferred their membership to other Churches.

And many of these empty spaces were once occupied by individuals and families who have “defected” from the faith altogether, and never darken the doors of a Church building anywhere.

Satan loves empty pews! Satan uses “empty pews” to discourage and dampen the spirit of the Church.

Although it is of little or no comfort or consolation, we are not alone! This is a common concern that I hear almost everywhere I go. Preachers and Church members alike are greatly discouraged with the declining numbers they are seeing in their Churches. Sadly, “growing Churches” are becoming a “rare breed” especially here in eastern North Carolina.

Week after week, preachers labor for many hours to prepare Gospel messages that will be preached to more empty pews than full ones. Sunday school teachers study lessons that will be taught to mostly empty Sunday School classrooms. In fact, Sunday School is dying in many Churches; and so are Sunday night services, and so are Wednesday night Bible Studies. And sadly, it seems as though many in our Churches don’t care!
When I get invited to preach a revival meeting in a Church, it is not uncommon at all for the preacher of that Church to forewarn me *NOT TO EXPECT A VERY BIG TURNOUT* as though “apologizing” for the poor attendance ahead of time. And more often than not that turns out to be the case.

*If sheer numbers are the measuring stick of a Church's success then most Churches are abysmal failures.*

Could it be we are focusing on the wrong thing? Could it be that what we use to measure the success of a Church is not what the LORD uses to measure a Church's success at all?

As we think about this matter of “numbers” this evening there are several truths I would like to share with you.

**TRUTH #1:** The Lord **PROMISES To Be** **PRESENT** Even When Only A Few Are Present

I want you to pay very close attention to what Jesus says here in Matthew 18:20,

Matthew 18:20 (NKJV)

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Notice Jesus does NOT say, “*For where two or three hundred are gathered together in My name......*” Nor does He say, “*For where two or three thousand are gathered together in My name......*”

He says, “*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.*”
Now, we need to understand that in the context of this passage, Jesus is referring to “two or three gathering together to pray.”

v. 19 “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

If two or three of you ladies come here to pray about a certain matter, or if you get together in one of your homes, the LORD promises to be there with you.

If two or three of you guys get together to pray about a certain matter at Bojangles or sitting together on the tailgate of a pick up truck, the LORD promises to be there with you.

If the elders and I come together in the prayer room to pray for this congregation, the LORD promises to be there with us.

So in context, when Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” …..He is speaking about small prayer meetings of two or three people.

Could this same promise apply to worship services where people come together to pray and worship the LORD? I personally believe so.

When we worship, do we not come together in the Name of the Lord? Of course we do! In fact, if when we worship we DON'T come together in the Name of the LORD, we are here for the wrong reason and we are just wasting our time!

So when we get discouraged because our numbers are few, we can take great comfort in knowing that the LORD will keep His promise to be in our midst when we gather together in His Name.
Now this brings up an interesting question. And that is “How is the LORD present among us?” Well, we know it is not in a physical sense. By that I mean, we don't see Jesus walk through our doors in a physical body and come in here and take a seat beside any of us on a pew, do we?

(A) Jesus makes His presence among us is through the HOLY SPIRIT.

1 Corinthians 3:16 (NKJV) Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

Whenever two or three of us come together in the name of the LORD, not only is the LORD with us, the LORD is in us! His Holy Spirit lives within us, therefore He is in our midst.

(B) Jesus also makes His presence among us is through the WORD of GOD.

The Bible is not like any other book. The Bible doesn't contain the words of man, it contains the eternal word of God. Jesus says in Matthew 24:35 “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” Hebrews 4:12a tells us, “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword....”

GOD’S WORD is alive! It is always breathing out truth! It is always working on minds, and hearts, and spirits. When we come together and open the word of God and hear the word of God proclaimed, the LORD is in our midst, even if only two or three of us have come together in His name.
TRUTH #2: The New Testament Warns Us of A GREAT FALLING AWAY

Though it deeply saddens us to see the dwindling numbers in many of our Churches, it should not surprise us. We are warned in the New Testament that before Christ comes again there will be a great falling away from the faith.

(A) Jesus warns us of this “great falling away”.

Matthew 24:4,5 (NKJV) And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.

Matthew 24:11 (NKJV) Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

Matthew 24:24 (NKJV) For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

(B) The apostle Paul also warns us of this “great falling away”.

II Thessalonians 2:1-3 (NKJV)

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,

II Timothy 4:3,4 (NKJV) For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.
The sad truth is that many people these days are doing one of two things. They are either abandoning the Church altogether; or they are defecting from solid Bible preaching and teaching Churches and going to Churches that are preaching “the health and wealth gospel” or “gospel of prosperity.” where their “itching ears can hear what they want to hear” .....a “watered-down.....sugar-coated message” that demands little or no commitment or change in lifestyle.

When we were growing up the Church was at “the center of our lives.” Most of our activities back then revolved around the Church. And when Sunday came, there was no arguing or debating about whether or not to go to Church, you were in the Lord’s House on the Lord's Day because that is where the Lord commands us to be!

But the truth is, the Church has become less and less relevant in the lives of many Americans who profess to be Christians. In 2005 the median attendance in American Churches was 129. By 2010, just five years later, the median attendance in American Churches had dropped to 105. And just last year, in 2017, the median attendance in American Churches had dropped down to 80. That means that over half of the Churches in America now average 80 or less in attendance for Sunday morning worship. If this trend continues at this rate, by 2025 (that’s just six years from now) the median attendance of American Churches will be between 30-40.

Just as Jesus prophesied and just as the apostle Paul prophesied, the hearts of men in these days prior to the Lord’s return are growing colder towards spiritual matters and growing fonder of the world.

Before his death, Dr. Adrian Rogers wrote about his concerns regarding apostasy in our American Churches....

“We can see it happening in America. We are reaping the bitter fruit of liberalism and the “social gospel” in pulpit and pew. Some churches are little more than country clubs with a steeple on top, where their rolls are padded with moral worldlings who’ve never been born again. There is no repentance, no faith, no evangelism, no victory and no salvation. Churches with 100-year histories, beautiful pipe organs, and a cross on every pew have abandoned the clear teaching of Scripture.”
Now here is our third and final truth......

**TRUTH #3: Large NUMBERS Don't Always Mean Greater FAITHFULNESS**

The gospels teach us that Jesus often drew huge crowds of people during His earthly ministry. Sometimes when Jesus preached there would be as many as **10,000 to 15,000 or more people in attendance for those worship services.** But rather than meeting in large, beautiful Church buildings, they met on the grassy slopes along the Sea of Galilee.

But Jesus was never impressed by the huge crowds that showed up to hear Him preach and teach; because He knew the hearts of men. He knew that most of them were “curiosity seekers” or “miracle seekers” rather than true followers. In fact, in **John 6** we read that there came a point in Jesus’ ministry when His demands for discipleship were greater than most of the people were willing to commit that “many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.” LARGE NUMBERS DON'T ALWAYS MEAN GREATER FAITHFULNESS!

And of course we remember when Jesus made His “Triumphant Entry” into Jerusalem that Sunday morning, there were hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people lining both sides of the road shouting praises to Jesus and laying down their garments and palm branches on the road. But just five days later, that same crowd of people would be in the angry mob shouting **“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”** LARGE NUMBERS DON'T ALWAYS MEAN GREATER FAITHFULNESS!

We must remember that when the LORD looks at His Church He isn’t looking at the size of the attendance......or the size of the building......or the size of the budget......or the size of the programs the Church offers.... HE IS LOOKING AT THE SIZE OF THE HEART! He is looking for true faithfulness in the hearts of His people.
As we bring this message to a close let me just say this. I think all of us would agree that it would thrill our hearts to see each and every pew filled each time we come together to worship in this place.

* We must never give up and never grow discouraged in trying to reach those who are outside of Christ.

* We must continue to pray for our lost loved ones and friends by name each and every day.

* We must show the love of Jesus Christ to those who are lost and literally love them into the Kingdom of God.

* And we must be diligent in inviting others to Church and be willing to go get them and bring them if necessary.

And in the meantime, if 40-50 of us come together in the Name of Jesus to worship here.......or 20-30 of us.......or even just two or three of us.....let us not be discouraged, but let us take heart that the LORD has promised to be here in our midst!