

STORY: Long ago a member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth, away from the fire and all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination. As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and lifeless. Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

- I. We were not made to be alone. We were made for family.
 - A. Hebrews: Jesus is exceedingly superior over everything and everyone. The only right response is to PUT our faith in Him and STAY FAITHFUL to Him.
 1. In Chapter 10: one of the main ways we stay faithful to Jesus is by staying faithful to gathering with each other.
 2. At times we must endure the trial of standing alone faithfully, like Daniel and his friends; Elijah, Jeremiah, other prophets, Paul, JESUS!
 3. While **faithfulness to God may, at times, be experienced alone, it is produced together.**
 4. Character, faith, and resolve to stay faithful to Jesus are incubated and matured together in the family of the Church.
 - B. Let's look now to Hebrews 10:19-25
 1. Passage = ALL ONE SENTENCE. It should be looked at not as a collection of unconnected thoughts but rather in many ways the culmination of the whole point of the book.
 2. "Here's what you must believe and because you BELIEVE these things, here's what you must DO."
 - C. Verses 19 & 20 are the foundational theology undergirding the commands about to be given.
 1. *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places ...* (Hebrews 10:19a)
 - a. Both the tabernacle (the mobile temple the Jews had in the wilderness) and the Temple in Jerusalem had two compartments.
 - 1) The Holy Place: Only priests could enter after ceremonial washings

- 2) The “Holy of Holies” or “Most Holy Place”: a throne room for King Yahweh
 - a) Separated from the Holy Place by a 4” thick curtain
 - b) Ark of the Covenant was kept as a throne/footstool for God
 - c) The High Priest alone could enter this space once a year to offer a blood sacrifice for the sin of Israel. Any other entry into this place would result in death.
- . b. But the writer of Hebrews has now said that the people who are in the family of God have confidence, not only to enter the Holy Place but the Holy of Holies!
 - 1) He’s not speaking of the literal temple on Earth but rather God’s actual throne room in Heaven – the one that the tabernacle and temple were modeled after.
 - 2) How in the world would any sinful person enter that place confidently? Keep reading:
2. by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, (Hebrews 19b-20)
 - a. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the fact that when Jesus died, the 4” thick curtain separating the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom.
 - b. JESUS, now instead of a curtain, was the entry point to the presence of God.
 - c. The book of Hebrews summed up: Jesus is superior so stay faithful to Him.
 - d. Jesus, by His sacrificial death opened the way into the very family and presence of God. So together, we have a “shared space” to be unified together on the foundation of Jesus. Jesus has made us one, not only with God but also with each other!
 - e. Proximity to God brings proximity to each other.
 - f. After laying this bedrock foundation we have three statements on BELIEF and ACTION. In our Bibles, each combo is indicated by the phrase “Let us”
- II. The First “Let us ...”
 - A. and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us** draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:21-22)
 - B. *Because of what Jesus did, here’s what we believe **and therefore** do:
 1. **Believe: Jesus’ sacrifice is all-sufficient, able to remove the barrier between people and God** (and between people and other people!)
 2. **Do: Daily pursue intimacy with God, in full assurance of His complete acceptance of you.**
 - a. Paul Ellingworth: “The access to God which believers have through Christ is no less close than that which Christ Himself has attained”¹
 - b. So because of Jesus’ perfection as our “high priest” we are invited to draw near to God Himself! No animal sacrifices, no washings, no ceremony. Just Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice for us. This can be done alone or with others.

¹ Ellingworth, Paul. 1993. [*The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#). New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

3. But I would ask this: “How are you going to grow in your trust in Jesus’ all-sufficient sacrifice for you and daily pursue intimacy with God without the consistent encouragement of other brothers and sisters in Christ?”
 - a. *And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* (Ecclesiastes 4:12)
 - b. We need each other to be reminded that because of Jesus, we have been made worthy to draw near to God. This drawing near to God doesn’t only benefit us, it benefits the watching world around us.
 4. When we draw near to God together in worship, we, the Church, are the visible proof that God forgives sinners and accepts them into His presence.
- III. The Second “Let us ...”
- A. **Let us** hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering [not sinlessness, this refers to a faith that perseveres], for He Who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23)
 - B. Because of this, here’s what we believe and do:
 1. **Believe: Jesus is absolutely trustworthy.**
 2. **Do: Hold fast to the Gospel (good news) of Jesus.**
 - a. The “confession”² refers to the faith, to the doctrine the believers have acknowledged as the truth.³ This faith MUST be held on to.
 - b. When Jesus returns, He will deliver those who trust Him and judge those who don’t.⁴
 - C. We must be together to keep each other believing. Saving faith is persevering faith. A person who professes faith in Jesus but “falls away” may not have ever truly placed their faith in Jesus. Likely just lip service.
 1. Jesus talked about this sad reality in His parable of the sower (Matthew 13): Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.
 2. Holding fast to the Gospel can be done when you’re standing alone, but faith was designed to be at its peak in a family of faith.
 3. Some of us struggle to pursue the things of God, struggle to pray, struggle to obey the commands of Jesus. These things are hard enough to do when we ARE consistent in our gathering, but I wonder if some of our struggle is because we are often that lone ember that only occasionally is next to the others. No wonder we grow cold in our zeal for God.
 4. Gallup Poll from March 2024, on religious attendance⁵: Protestant Christians, when asked how often they attended (every week, almost every, once/month, seldom, never)
 - a. Every week + almost every week attendance: 44%
 - b. Once a month + Seldom + Never: 56%

² Ibid.

³ Schreiner, Thomas R. 2021. *Hebrews*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>

- c. More than half of our professing “embers” are regularly outside of the fire.
2. Gathering with the church is NOT the whole picture of Christian health alone. There are several other things that contribute to this. That said, the author of Hebrews does put some significant weight on the need of Christians to consistently gather for the sake of faith, holding fast, growing, and enduring to the end.

IV. The Third “Let us ...”

- A. And **let us** consider how to stir up [compel, spur on] one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day [the day of Jesus’ return] drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- B. Because of this, this is what we believe and do:
 1. **Believe: Jesus is returning.** Notice the author’s focus on the day of Jesus’ return. We don’t know when Jesus will return but every day is a day closer! How important it is that we stay faithful to Jesus and His mission. How difficult it would be to walk that road alone. How impossible it would be to function as a family without significant time spent in each other’s physical presence.
 2. **Do: Consistently meet together** to encourage (stir up, build up) each other in love and good works **in order to endure to the end.**
 - a. In the day this was written, the most likely reason that Christians would have abandoned their meeting together was “discrimination and persecution.”⁶
 - b. Certainly, in places around the world this is still a very real fear for Christians but here, I don’t think this is the main reason that people are inconsistent in their gathering with the church. Convenience or priority are probably bigger reasons in our culture.
 - c. In their book, “The Great Dechurching”, authors Graham and Davis note that the top reason given for stopping church attendance was “moving.” “I moved and just never got back to church.” The second reason was “Inconvenience.”⁷
- C. Many things that are necessary for our own good can at times feel “inconvenient”, but we must remember: **the gathering is NOT just for our own good.**
 1. It’s NOT just about you and what you receive. God DOES want to give to you when we gather but there’s more. You are needed. Your gifts, your encouragement, and your presence have been given to you by God to STEWARD for the sake of His family. **Your absence = others’ loss. Your presence = others’ benefit**
 2. Please do understand though that there are legitimate reasons why people can’t physically be present – health, life situation, etc. Don’t let guilt overtake you if this is your situation but the normative command for Christians is not only to gather but gather consistently.
 3. In v. 24, the author of Hebrews clues us in to aspects of life in Christ that rely on us gathering. He says that we are to stir each other up to 1. Love and 2. Good works.

⁶ Schreiner, Thomas R. 2021. [Hebrews](#). Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁷ <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2024/01/24/the-great-dechurching-why-so-many-americans-are-leaving-their-church#>

- a. Love: when we gather together, we are able to personally know and love each other. Love stirs up love. When I am sacrificially loved, despite all of my faults, my heart is stirred up to love others in the family of God and also those who are not yet in the family of God.
 - b. Good works: the testimony of God's work in others, the preaching of the Word and the corporate worship of our great God stirs up desire and pursuit of good works of service both in the family of the Church and outside. When we come together, we contend for each other's ministry in the family of God and in the world. (We don't just come and sit or come to ONLY be encouraged). We gather to love each other and also to build each other up, to be prepared for our assignments when we scatter.
4. Specifics: Here's a list of the things we see in Scripture that the Church does to accomplish "building up" when we gather. This is not just about Sunday worship services. This happens one on one, or in groups of three or more over coffee, in home groups, in peer ministries and, yes, in worship services.
- a. Loving, praising, focusing on, and surrendering to God together: aka worship!
 - b. Communion
 - c. Baptism
 - d. Prayer together
 - e. Discipleship
 - f. Singing together
 - g. Generosity to God and others
 - h. Reading and teaching of Scripture
 - i. Discerning God's will together
 - j. Working against division and toward unity together
 - k. Correction of wrong doctrine and/or behavior
 - l. Confession and repentance with each other
 - m. Encouraging each other (ensuring faithfulness and perseverance to the end)
 - n. Building up and expression of spiritual gifts for service in the church and ministry in the world
 - o. Reinforcing the Gospel to the saved and proclaiming the Gospel to the lost
 - p. Knowing and meeting each other's needs
 - q. Bearing each other's burdens
 - r. Rejoicing in each other's joy
 - s. *Very few, maybe none, of these things can be rightly done apart from coming together!
5. The things we do as we gather that can't be done when we're apart:
- a. Boasting in God, testimony (public praise)
 - b. Face to face encouragement, building up
 - c. Accountability/Correction
 - d. Corporate prayer
 - e. Preaching of the Word
 - f. Using your spiritual gifts for the benefit of others

- g. Needs being known and met
- 6. What happens when we DON'T gather?
 - a. Love for God and each other grows cold.
 - b. Our understanding and faith in Jesus' Gospel grows cold.
 - c. Encouragement and accountability to the mission of disciple making grows cold
 - d. Trust grows cold ... suspicion and cynicism creep in.
 - e. We sink into caring only for ourselves and lose the muscle memory for caring for the needs of others and allowing others to meet our needs.
- 7. **As the world grows increasingly polarized we need to become increasingly UNIFIED, not just in theory but in actual consistent physical presence with each other.**

V. Wrap Up

- A. Talk about why we do One Big Services, physically all in the same place at the same time.
- B. COMMUNION: In every account of Jesus instituting communion, the commands He gives to eat the bread and drink to cup are plural (to "you all" not just "you"). Even this very practice we are about to do has, built into it, the idea of togetherness – of family. Certainly, it isn't at all wrong to take communion on your own before the Lord but the intent that is very clear in Scripture is that the Church should regularly come together and remember Jesus TOGETHER. We remember that His body was sacrificed and His blood was poured out as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.
 - 1. Today as we take this, let's do something a little different. If you're comfortable, as we eat the bread, before you do, turn to someone near you and remind them, "Jesus did this for you."
 - 2. And as we drink the cup, let's all declare together, "Jesus, we do this in remembrance of You."
- C. Invite Matt Soderlund up to tell us some of the ways we can be connected to each other.