

The Importance of Meeting Together – Hebrews 10:25

As you have almost certainly heard many times over the last two weeks, we are in an unprecedented time, both as the Church and society at large. Christian churches everywhere have been doing their best to navigate this crisis, seeking to find a Christ-exalting balance between our earthly and heavenly citizenships. A couple verses that have likely come to the minds of many, including my own, is Hebrews 10:24-25, specifically the part that tells us to not neglect meeting together.

Obviously, those seem like consequential verses for this season. After all, does this mean we as a church are being disobedient to Scripture by canceling our gatherings? If not, how are we fulfilling the call of these verses? Both are important questions, which I hope to answer this morning. So, let me pray for us, and then we will look at Hebrews together.

First, I want to look at the general progression of Hebrews, in which the author is concerned about showing Jesus as greater than what has come before him. He first shows that Jesus is greater than prophets and even angels, because He is the more excellent Word of God. Then, he shows that Jesus is greater than Moses who led Israel through the wilderness, because He leads people to ultimate rest. Next, he shows that Jesus is greater than the priesthood for two reasons: 1) He is perfect and so does not need to offer sacrifices for Himself, and 2) He is eternal and so “always lives to make intercession” for those who are His. Finally, the author shows that Jesus is greater than animal sacrifices, because, again, He is perfect and therefore is offered once as a perfectly satisfying sacrifice, and His sacrifice was offered in the true Holy Place of heaven itself, instead of the shadow of that holy place found in the earthly temple. So, to summarize: Jesus is the ultimate Word of God, the ultimate rest of God, the ultimate mediator between man and God, and the ultimate sacrifice to God for sin.

It is this last reality that chapter 10 is dealing with: Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice to God. And this brings us to the immediate context of the verses we’re going to look at this morning. In 10:19 there is a shift from explanation to application; the explaining the realities I just mentioned to discussing how we ought to live in light of those realities. Let’s read Hebrews 10:19-25.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, 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 heart sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up 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 drawing near.”

In these verses, the author is reflecting on both the reality of the Jesus as the perfect sacrifice from the immediate context, but also the realities he’s been explaining for the entire book of Hebrews leading up to this point. He says these realities should result in a few responses: 1) we should draw near, 2) we should hold fast, and 3) we should stir up one another to love and good works. We draw near, because we have been “sprinkled clean” with the blood of Jesus and are therefore invited into loving relationship with God. We hold fast to our confession, because God has promised us salvation and he is faithful. We stir up one another to love and good works, because what other response is there to the

God who gave his Son as the perfect Word, the perfect rest, the perfect Priest, and the perfect Sacrifice, other than to emulate His love and good works with all we have? And how does the author say this stirring up will occur? By meeting together. As I mentioned earlier, the call to not neglect meeting together has been on some people's hearts in this current season when we're foregoing our gatherings. So, let's consider this call at more length.

First, I want to point out the phrase "as is the habit of some". It's important not to divorce this phrase from the call to meet together, because it shows that the call is in response to something going on in the church. By inference, the author has heard of or is aware of certain people who are making it a habit to neglect the gathering of the saints. And so, the author is specifically wanting to guard against others in the church following their example. In other words, the call to not neglect meeting together has a target audience, and it is therefore, a qualified statement.

This makes sense, because I'm pretty sure everyone accepts that there are times when not meeting with fellow believers is acceptable. As an extreme example, Christians in comas have no way of meeting with the saints. Obviously, I am exaggerating to make the point. Other examples would include shut-ins, those who are physically unable to come to a church gathering. And missionaries serving in countries where Christianity is illegal or at least stigmatized so that there is either not a church gathering, or it would draw unwanted attention for them to participate in the local Christian gatherings. All this is to point out, this call is about more than just the physical gathering. It is about fellowship. Or relationship.

We see this further in the word that gets translated "neglect" here by the ESV. In other versions it gets translated "forsake", which I think captures the feel the author is going for better. Because it is the same word used when Jesus, while on the cross, cries out, "My God, my God why have you *forsaken* me?" It is also the same word Paul uses in 2 Timothy 4:10 to describe a fellow coworker Demas' abandonment of him out of love of the world. And the author of Hebrews will use it a second time in chapter 13 verse 5, when he quotes God's promise to Joshua that he would never leave him nor *forsake* him. A promise he then claims applies to Christians.

We can see that this "neglect" or "forsaking" has a strong personal connotation. It connotes personal relationship, and therefore, relational betrayal. So, while the physical gathering for worship and instruction is in view here, the deeper issue is the relational neglect of fellow brothers and sisters that habitual absence from the gathering demonstrates. Put simply, it is a call to church unity that supersedes personal interests.

This makes sense with what comes later in Hebrews 10. Toward the end of this chapter in verses 32-34 the author contrasts the neglect of verse 25 with its opposite, when he recalls days in which these believers joyfully endured hardship and persecution together, rather than break fellowship. All this to say, the call to not neglect meeting together is about more than just a physical meeting, it's a warning about distancing oneself from the Christian community, both physically and relationally, whether on account of laziness, the undervaluing of Christian community, or wanting to avoid persecution of some kind. So, that's the first point, the call to not neglect meeting together is more relational than spatial.

We can see this in the second thing I want to point out in these verses. Which is that the negative call to not neglect meeting is in service to the positive call to stir up one another to love and good works, and to encourage each other. The author realizes that Christians need each other. The

world, our flesh, and the enemy militate against the calls of Hebrews chapter 10. The enemy does not want you to think you can draw near to God, rather he wants to use our flesh to remind us of how unworthy we are to enter the holy place of God's presence. Similarly, the enemy does not want you to have hope that Jesus is going to consummate the new creation that he inaugurated at his resurrection, rather he wants to use the world to convince you that things are in fact hopeless. Finally, he does not want you to engage in love and good works, because those come from and bear witness to the realities that we are loved by God and have an unshakeable hope for the future.

The defense against the enemy's schemes in these things is Christians stirring each other up. Reminding each other that Christ's sacrifice has made us clean and opened the way into God's presence. Reminding each other of our hope because Jesus said, "It is finished." Though the fighting goes on, the enemy is ultimately defeated. And a third defense against the enemy is to provoke each other to follow Jesus in his love and good works to the glory of the Father. This stirring up is an aggressive form of encouragement. The word actually connotes contention, and is translated "provoke" in some versions. It is only used one other time in the New Testament. And that is to describe the "sharp disagreement" that split up the missionary dream team of Paul and Barnabas. For the original readers of this letter there was only one way to participate in this stirring up, and that was physically meeting together.

And so, the call to not neglect meeting together was a means to the end of ensuring the believers were active in these necessary forms of encouragement. Therefore, the primary call of these verses is to stir up or aggressively encourage fellow Christians to love and good works. And this brings us to the situation we are facing today: not gathering on account of the Coronavirus response.

I want to first make absolutely clear that I believe physically meeting with other Christians is uniquely effective when it comes to stirring each other up and finding encouragement. It was the only means for the Christians of the first century, and I am convinced it is still the primary means for Christians today. I can also assure you, this new way of doing things will not become habit. I can confidently speak for the leaders of EBC that we are looking forward to the day we can meet together again. As a note, if you are not grieving the loss of our physical gatherings, I would suggest that is cause for concern, and this warning of Hebrews 10:25 is perhaps directed at you.

That said, unlike the early Church, we live in an age in which God has graciously provided ways for us to fulfill this call without being physically together. Because of this, we still can and should carry out the primary call of Hebrews 10:25 at this time. We are walking through a time in which there is a heightened need for the love of Jesus displayed in the good works of His people. And so, there is a heightened need for us to stir each other up to that love and those good works. Let me give you a few examples of what that may look like.

First, as odd as it sounds and often feels, staying home and honoring social distancing is a witness to Christ's love, and a practical expression of that love. Humble submission to the advice of governing authorities according to Romans 13:1 undermines the false belief that is held by some that Christianity is bad for society. As champions of the sanctity of life, protecting those vulnerable to this virus by inconveniencing ourselves for a time is a fulfillment of Philippians 2:3-4 to view others as more significant than ourselves and to consider the needs along with our own.

Second, now is the time for us as Christians to strive to fulfill the call of 1 Peter 2:12 to conduct ourselves so honorably that no one can bring any accusations against us. Quite frankly, the church

should be at the forefront of things like making masks for health care providers to help the dwindling supply. As a church we hope to be involved in such a ministry, although at this time the masks kits provided by Salem Health to make clinical-grade masks have all been claimed, which is a praise to God. We should also be at the forefront of caring for those who are at higher risk by delivering groceries or helping them navigate their healthcare. See your bulletin for information on those ministries.

Third, make no mistake that this crisis will come to an end, and we will have much to rebuild. So, I would encourage you to be using this time now to prepare yourself for what is to come, because the church should be on the frontlines of the rebuilding effort, both in individual lives and in our communities. We should be ready to be generous with our money, our time, our homes, and whatever else is needed to display the love of God to those around us, first to our fellow brothers and sisters in the church, and then to the community around us.

We need to be stirring each other up to such love and good works as these. And there are ways you can be involved in that stirring up. You can participate in our Wednesday night prayer meetings either by attending via the Zoom app, or by requesting the prayer list for your personal prayer time. If you need help figuring out how to do that, contact our office. Another way, as someone in this week's prayer meeting mentioned, is to realize your phone works two ways, it receives calls as you're probably aware, but it also makes them. Most people would love a call from a brother or sister during this time. And then just be creative and take initiative. Don't wait for someone to fill the need you see. If you see a lack, that may be God calling you to do something about it. The church is not divided between ministers and those to whom they minister. We all are ministers, that is servants, to each other, and we all need to be ministered to by others.

By way of testimony, I personally have been stirred up in this time. I was stirred up to tears by a Tim Challies article Brett Davison posted to the Reformation Pratum website documenting the worship of Christians across the world last Sunday. Physical gatherings were widely canceled, but that didn't stop the saints of the Church from being united together in their love and worship of Jesus. As Jesus told the woman at the well, worship is no longer defined by here or there, but by spirit and truth, and neither of those things are quarantined. I've been stirred up by stories of our missionaries who are praying that the people in their countries would not just wait out the lockdown watching Netflix, but would be pushed to see their need for Jesus and then find the hope, life, and salvation that's in Him. I've been stirred up watching the leadership of EBC work diligently to make sure no one is falling through the cracks during this time. I've been stirred up to see people spontaneously initiating ministries aimed at serving those who are at greatest risk, like some of those I just mentioned. I've been stirred up by the numerous Christians I've heard from who are viewing this time as an opportunity for the Gospel to go out, people to be drawn in, and Jesus to be glorified.

And so, I close with this. There are a lot of ways to respond to and walk through the situation our world is currently experiencing. And it is no exaggeration to say what is needed more than anything is Jesus. Many people are feeling hopeless as they never have felt before; they need to know the ultimate Word of hope sent from the Father in the person of Christ. Many are feeling their need for salvation; they need to know the ultimate Savior who leads to the ultimate rest for their souls. Many, in their isolation, are feeling the weight of their inadequacy and fallenness; they need to know the ultimate Priest who can intercede for them before God. Many are languishing in loneliness; they need to know

the ultimate Sacrifice has opened the way into the holy place of loving relationship with the Father himself.

I started by saying that we were living in an unprecedented time, and in one sense that's true, but in another, nothing essential has changed; Jesus is still the savior everyone needs. And if you'll permit me, Jesus told Martha that she was anxious and troubled about many things, but only one thing was necessary. We too could be anxious and troubled about many things right now. So, let us not be distracted by those things but let us stir up one another to love and good works. That by our love and good works we might point the needy to Jesus, the only thing that's necessary in this time or any other.