

**8/9/20 Why Community Groups? To know Christ and make Him known.
Hebrews 10:23-25**

Welcome...

Not too long ago Paula and I visited her sister and brother in law in Ben Lomond, CA. Their house is surrounded by redwood trees and my brother in law began to explain that California redwood trees are the tallest and oldest trees in the world. They stand hundreds of feet high and some of them are said to be over 2,500 years old. As a result, you would think that redwoods have tremendous root systems reaching deep down into the earth. But compared to other trees, redwoods do not have many roots and they do not go very deep. Yet the redwoods have stood for centuries, because their roots are intertwined and interwoven with each other. When one redwood tree gets sick the other trees supplies the needed nutrients for the sick tree to recover. When the winds blow, the redwoods stand, because they are linked and locked to each other, holding one another up.

That is the way Christians stand against the storms of life that assault our faith in Jesus Christ: We hold each other up. But this kind of support and strength and growth does not happen automatically in the church, and our text today tells us what we must do for the glory of God and the good of each other so that we not only stand but we grow in Christ.

We can read about it in Hebrews 10:22-25...

Growth in God's truth, wisdom, and Christlike character does not happen in isolation, nor does it happen primarily in classes and instruction, nor does spiritual growth and change simply happen through large worship gatherings. As we saw in our study of the book of Mark, Jesus did not just preach nor did He simply have a classroom relationship between Him and His students, nor did His students relate this way with one another. Instead, Jesus created a community with His disciples, a community of learning and practice in which there was plenty of time to work out truth in discussion, dialogue, and application.

Most often spiritual growth happens through deep relationships and in communities where the implications of the gospel are worked out from the head, to the heart and to the hands. It is in the context of small groups, like our Community Groups, where friendships are formed and spiritual truths are discussed and prayerfully applied in ways no other setting or venue can afford.

Our Community Group ministry will start again next month. In the midst Covid-19 each Community Group host and leader is thinking of ways that will be safe to meet – whether outdoors or indoors, Community Groups meet in homes of church members to encourage one another, pray for another and stir and challenge one another to live out our faith. Our community group ministry is so important that we are going to spend today and the next three Sundays looking at what the Bible says about our identity and purpose as Christians.

In our text today in Hebrews 10: the writer will help us to understand our mission is a community project. Our mission is to know Christ and make Him known, and we need each other to persevere in fulfilling our purpose.

We will see this laid out in three different facets in Hebrews chapter 10: Our provision, our mission and our vision.

I. Our Provision

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a group of at-risk Jewish Christians who were tempted to turn away from Christ because of severe persecution. The anonymous author of Hebrews wrote this letter to challenge them to persevere in their faith. He does this by emphasizing one word: the word is BETTER. He wants them to know

that what they have in the Lord Jesus Christ is better than what they had in the religious system of Judaism. In His person Jesus is better than the angels, Moses, and Joshua; and in His performance Jesus provides a better priesthood, covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice.

In Hebrews 10:19-23, the writer summarizes the argument he has been making since chapter three; the Lord Jesus Himself is our great High Priest and perfect atoning sacrifice, who has established for us a new and living way to God through His own blood.

Verses 19-23...

We saw in Mark 16:38 that when Jesus died on the cross the veil in the temple was torn in two. The veil of the temple was a massive woven curtain that permanently separated the Holy of Holies from the outer sanctuary. For nearly fifteen hundred years, only the high priest had been allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and only for a brief time once a year on the Day of Atonement. At that time, he sprinkled blood on the mercy seat, atop the ark of the covenant, to signify that the required sacrifice had to be made to atone for their sins.

The curtain that blocked the Holy of Holies served as a continual reminder of the sinner's separation from God's holy presence. No animal sacrifice ever tore that curtain open. But on Friday afternoon of the passion week of Christ, at the very time the priests in the temple were sacrificing lambs for Passover, Jesus the Lamb of God cried out "It is finished!" and died on the cross and the temple veil was torn in two. The barrier to God had been permanently removed. Access to God's presence was now open through the completed work of Christ.

If you approach God through Christ you not only can come into God's presence, but you can come with confidence.

How much confidence? Verse 23...

Your faith and hope are never in vain, because they are in a God who is faithful to His promises. God will do His part and you by faith must also do your part.

As you worship and pray, God's answers may seem to be a long time in coming, and our waiting may be uncomfortable or even painful. But He will always do just as He has said He will do. Verse 23 provides reason we can hold fast to our hope without wavering, because "He who promised is faithful."

That is our provision. Which leads to our mission.

II. Our Mission

Verses 24-25...

Why is it so important to be connected with other believers? Verses 24-25 teach that you need to commit yourself to some local assembly of believers, so that you can submit to the accountability and responsibility that will help you to persevere in faith. Then verses 26-27 issues a warning about apostasy: "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries."

This warning about apostasy does not mean that it is possible to lose your salvation. God's preserving grace ensures that every true believer is eternally secure, which means that true believers will not apostatize or fall away from Christ. They will endure until the end. But the perseverance of the saints is not only tied to the preservation of the saints. It is also tied to the partnership of the saints.

Our character, convictions and conduct are mainly shaped by our primary spiritual community — the people with whom we share meals with, we converse with, and counsel, and study and pray with. Think about all the “one another” passages of the Bible and how they relate to this aspect of Christian community. The Greek word “one another” means “mutually, reciprocally.” It occurs 100 times in the New Testament. Approximately 59 of those occurrences are specific commands teaching us how (and how not) to relate to one another. For example,

Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)

Build up one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Be likeminded towards one another (Romans 15:5)

Admonish one another (Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16)

Greet one another (Romans 16:16)

Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Obedience to the “one another” commands is imperative. It forms the basis for all true Christian community, and has a direct impact on our witness to the world. Jesus said in John 13:34-35, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus says the key to fruitful and effective mission and witness in the world is the quality of our community. It is natural to think of “community” as a category separate from outreach and evangelism, or from training and discipleship, or from prayer and worship. But community itself is one of the most effective ways we do outreach and discipleship.

I saw it first hand when I was flying in the Navy. I met consistently with a group of men for Bible study and we also had BBQ dinners together. We started inviting nonChristians to join us for our meals. The guy that lived next to me came and he saw the sincere love we had for Christ, for one another and for him. And in time, after getting to know us and hearing the gospel, Pete Thompson became a believer and began to live for Christ.

So, Hebrews 10:24 commands us to consider one another. The verb “consider” means to perceive clearly, understand fully, or consider closely. It is the same word used in Hebrews 3:1, which says: “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.” You must set your mind on the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ if your faith is to be strong, stable, and secure.

But Hebrews 10:24 teaches us that Christians should also set their minds on one another. And the present, active verb “consider” denotes continual or repeated action. Literally, the reading is, “And let us constantly consider one another...” Just as we are to always be thinking about Jesus, we also are to always be thinking about one another.

The important point to get from this term is that Christian community is – primarily, essentially, and ultimately – an internal reality. Fundamentally, our fellowship is not geographic, social, organizational, institutional, or programmatic. It is an internal disposition of care, concern, and compassion for one another that results in words, decisions, and actions that express the love of Jesus Christ. It is a purposeful commitment to jointly know Christ and make Him known.

Now, for 20 years we have had our Cornerstone mission statement inside our bulletin statement. Can you quote it to me? It says: “We exist to glorify God and bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, disciple them to spiritual maturity, equip them for ministry, and help them serve with a passion for the glory of God.”

I may be the only one who can quote it verbatim from memory. That's a problem. So, the Cornerstone elders recently prayerfully decided to change our mission statement to be more clear and concise. Here is our new mission statement: To know Christ and Make Him Known. Say it with me... To know Christ and Make Him Known

Our new mission statement: "To know Christ and make Him known" actually encompasses all that our previous mission statement included. Evangelism means making Christ known so the other come to know Christ, discipleship mean knowing Christ and making Him Known through transformed lives, service in ministry means making Christ known through sacrificial acts of giving time and talents.

1 John 3:14 says, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death." True Christian love will not only lead you to attend and participate in Sunday corporate worship, it will also lead you to prayerfully consider the needs, growth, and concerns of your brothers and sisters in Christ even when you are not physically together.

Some may say, "Well, I read Christian books, listen to podcasts and watch sermons online. Doesn't that count?" Listen carefully, please do not misunderstand me. Those things can be helpful supplements to what you receive by being a participating member of a local church. However, if you are able to leave your home, you must make sure that supplements do not become substitutes for corporate worship and purposeful fellowship and ministry. Proverbs 18:1 says, "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own; he breaks out against all sound judgment." 1 Corinthians 10:24 says, "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." And Philippians 2:4 says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others."

After commanding us to consider one another, verse 24 tells us why we should do this: "to stimulate or stir up or provoke or spur one another to love and good works." The church is to be marked by love and good works. However, love and good works are not automatic parts of church life. Every Christian is called to love and good works. But you cannot fulfill this calling on your own. You need others to "stir up" love and good works in and through you. The KJV uses the term "provoke." The NASB uses the word "stimulate." The NIV uses the word "spur." These different terms translate a Greek term from which we get our English term "PAROXYSM." It refers to a sudden outbreak of sickness, symptoms, or spasms. Usually, this term has a negative connotation, meaning something like "irritation" or "exasperation." In fact, the only other time it is used in the New Testament, it is used negatively. Explaining Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey, Acts 15:39 records, "And there arose a sharp disagreement (paroxysmos), so that they separated from each other."

But while Luke says that paroxysmos caused Paul and Barnabas to separate from one another, our text says that paroxysmos ought to bring Christians together. Yet the negative connotations of the term should not be dismissed here. If need be, we should provoke and irritate one another to love and good works. Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." You do not sharpen iron by simply speaking nice to the piece of iron, or hugging it, caressing it, or pampering it. You sharpen iron by getting another piece of iron and rubbing it the wrong way.

Likewise, your true friends are not the people who always simply agree with you, cosign your agenda, and stay out of your way. Your best friends are the ones who make you better, who know you and speak the truth to you in love. That involves times when friends put a supportive arm around your shoulder and times when they put a scolding finger in your face. You need both the comfort of tender love and the confrontation of tough love. You need to be with brothers and sisters in Christ who love you and think enough of you to stir you up to love and good works.

The command to stimulate, spur, stir and provoke one another to know Christ and make Him known will not simply happen if you take the approach that “I just want to be comfortable.”

You need to remember the Christian life is not a spectator sport it is a full participation faith for the glory of God and the benefit of your teammates. If you practice a spiritual discipline solely for personal benefit, you pervert the discipline and rob yourself of its true benefit. Football has been described as 22 men on a field in desperate need of rest, being watched by 22,000 people in the stands in desperate need of exercise. The sad fact is that most churches operate just like that.

But corporate worship is not a spectator sport where you simply show up, receive the ministry of others, give an offering, greet a few acquaintances and friends, and then go home. Corporate worship is three-dimensional. First, God blesses us. Second, we bless God in our worship. But it doesn't stop there. The third dimension is explained in our text, we also bless one another by saying and doing those things that stir up love and good works. How do you do that? You participate in a Community Group that meets at a designated time to enjoy some food and fellowship, to celebrate events happening in the lives of the members, to discuss the sermon, to pray and keep each other accountable.

Christ has made the provision, God has provided the mission, now let's look at our vision.

III. Our Vision

Our Vision is that you understand and live out your identity in Christ. You are now a child of God (family) sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a (missionary) to serve our King (servant) in fulfilling His mission to be disciples who make disciples. Three words that help you understand your identity in Christ: Family, missionary, servant. We will cover each of those in the next three weeks.

In order to help you, the elders ask that you do three things:

1. Come and worship on Sunday
2. Join a Community Group
3. Become a member and serve with your time and talents

Why would we prayerfully ask you to prayerfully commit to those three things?

Notice verse 25...

The word “forsaking” is emphatic and intensive, meaning to totally abandon or to utterly forsake. This term is used in Mark 15:34, where Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Paul used it in 2 Corinthians 4:9, where he describes himself as “persecuted, but not forsaken.” It is also used in Hebrews 13:5, in the promise of God that says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” And the writer uses it in our text to tell us that we are not to forsake, abandon, or vacate the gathering together of the church.

This call to weekly Sunday worship attendance and participation in a smaller Community Group may sound legalistic, pedantic, and impractical. But such a commitment is warranted in light of verse 25b: “as is the habit of some.” Some people had already started missing the meetings. And the word “habit” tells us that their habitual absence had become customary. Remember why some people were missing the meetings. They were facing persecution because of their faith in Christ. Their lives were on the lines every time they met together.

But the Scripture still said to them, do not neglect to meet together. Now I know some may not be able to be here during COVID-19 and may choose to watch online and we respect you.

But here is a general principle regarding participation in the life of the church – whether Sunday mornings or Community Groups: If you are absent, and others do not know where you are, but they are not surprised by your absence, then that’s a problem.

If you can miss church without being missed at church, something is missing. And if you can miss church without missing church, something is missing in your own heart.

Notice verse 25 again: “not neglecting to meet to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” Note that the contrast is not between showing up and not showing up. It is between not neglecting the meeting and encouraging one another. Verse 25 calls for more than just your presence in the meetings of the church. It calls for your participation. It is not just for your benefit it is to be a blessing to others.

While some would say the church meets too much, God says that we need to assemble even more than we do, so that we might encourage one another. Hebrews 3:12-13 says, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Hebrews 3:13 is the scariest verse in the Bible to me. The biggest danger is self-deception. We need someone else to exhort us, challenge us, and pray for us because sometimes we do not see our spiritual state clearly.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that as we see the Day of the Lord’s return drawing near, we need to meet together as much as possible to exhort, encourage, and admonish one another to remain faithful and to be salt and light in this dark world.

Which brings us back to the Scripture that opened our service today, Matthew 5:13-16, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Salt creates thirst, a thirst to know why you are different. Salt also means these people serve as a preservative against the evils of society. If salt fails to be salty, it has lost its purpose for existence and should be discarded.

A light is meant to shine and give direction. A concealed lamp, placed under a bowl would be useless. Light-radiating people live so that others see their good deeds and give praise not to them but to their Father in heaven.

Our Provision is Jesus Christ. He is faithful to continue the good work He has begun in you.

Our Mission is to Know Christ and Make Him Known.

Our Vision is that you understand and live out your identity in Christ. If you know Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are now a child of God (family) sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a (missionary) to serve our King (servant) in fulfilling His mission to be disciples who make disciples. Three words that help you understand your identity in Christ: Family, missionary, servant. We will cover each of those in the next three weeks.

Let’s pray...