

“Life in Paradise”
Hebrews 10:19-25
February 25, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the one another commands of the New Testament, we come today to this command to “stir up one another to love and good works.” The assumption implicit in this command is that there is great potential for good in our relationships with one another. God has put within the church a capacity for us to help one another even with this greatest command to love. This verb “stir up” can carry a negative meaning, in the sense of provoking someone to anger. We sometimes say of a troubled marriage, “They know how to push one another’s buttons.” But it is used here in a positive sense. Within each one of us is the breathtaking capacity to help others along in their journey toward reaching their full potential as God’s image bearers.

As mentioned before, we are studying these one another commands in preparation for our new adult Sunday School format that will begin on April 7. It is our desire that these Sunday School communities be age-integrated. One benefit of this is that members can stir up one another to love and good deeds across age differences. For example, one of the big needs in the American church today is to reverse the trend of our young people leaving the church. One effective strategy to help in this is for older adults other than the parents of a child or youth to take an interest in that younger person. An age-integrated community will provide a natural opportunity for an older adult to come alongside the parents and take an interest in their children, praying for them, occasionally attending an extra-curricular event, and just getting to know them. This will be an opportunity to stir up one another in life-giving ways.

You will notice that our passage reasons in a way that is common in the Bible, from a statement of fact to a command that follows from that fact. We often do the same. “The forecast is calling for rain today (statement of fact), so make sure you carry your umbrella (command).” Or “It’s late, go to bed.” The statement of fact in our text is in uniquely Old Testament terms, and summarizes much of what has been taught in the previous chapters of Hebrews. The language takes us back to the main storyline of the Bible, a story that begins in the paradise of Eden.

I. Paradise Re-Opened – v. 19-21

The author mentions two realities that allow us to be able to enter **“the holy places.”** The two are a sacrifice and a priest. Since this language is

designed to connect and resonate with a first century devoted Jew, and since none of us could be described as such, we need to review the four main words and concepts of these two verses. Let's start with the holy place and the curtain. This is language from the tabernacle and later temple. The "holy place" is referring to what is called "The Holy of Holies." It is the place where God actually dwelled with his people. The curtain referred to here was the one that served as a barrier to entry. In the Old Testament, no one was allowed to enter this holy place, upon pain of death. The only exception was the high priest on one day of the year, a day referred to as the "Day of Atonement."

In order that we might feel the full impact of these two verses, we need to recognize that this language is the reversal of Genesis 3:24. The garden of Eden was the paradise where Adam and Eve lived in the presence of God. But after their rebellion from God's rule and reign, God "drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." The holy of holies in the tabernacle had images evocative of a garden, and the curtain that walled off this space had an image of cherubim on it. These cherubim weren't the plump baby angels with wings that we sometimes see in TV commercials. Rather, they were terrifying creatures of war. The message of Hebrews 10:19-21 is that the way back to paradise has been reopened through Jesus. It has taken thousands of years since paradise was lost, but now it has been regained.

There are two other Old Testament images in these verses, that of sacrifice and a priest. Verses 19-20 speak of the sacrifice of Jesus. It is by "the blood of Jesus" that the new way back to paradise has been opened. It is called the "new way" in contrast to the old way through the Old Testament Day of Atonement rituals. All the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to the ultimate blood sacrifice of Jesus. When Jesus was crucified, the Gospels report that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom. The author of Hebrews says that this curtain refers to the flesh of Jesus. Jesus was torn that we might enter God's presence.

Verse 21 then adds that we also have a priest, a reference once again to Jesus. Old Testament priests were the ones who navigated the intricacies of the sacrifices, offering the blood of the sacrifice for the benefit of the people. Jesus is the sacrifice, and he is the one presenting the benefits of the sacrifice before the God of all holiness. Since God is both the one offering the sacrifice and the one receiving the sacrifice, we can have complete confidence in its effectiveness. That's why the author says "**we have confidence**" (v. 19). This confidence comes from knowing that we come to God with the sacrifice he has said is sufficient rather than the sacrifice of our own creation.

Imagine walking into a bank to make a deposit with a stack of Monopoly money. No amount of sincerity on your part would be able to convince the teller

to accept that cash. No amount of earnest pleading would be sufficient, no matter how eloquently you might make your case. That is the way it is with any sacrifice we might think to bring before God. Many want to offer a sacrifice of their own good works to God. That's Monopoly money. Only one sacrifice will do, and it's the one God provides. Back to our analogy of making a deposit at the bank. If you had taken \$1000 in cash out of that same bank one week prior to this deposit, and now are returning that same cash, you could have confidence that it would be received because it's only what they had earlier provided. This is the confidence we can have, and it becomes the basis of the command to stir up one another to love and good works. Let's look at that next.

II. Paradise Enjoyed – v. 22-25

Now that the facts have been stated concerning what has been accomplished on our behalf by the sacrifice of Jesus, the author moves to the commands that flow from this. There are three commands, all indicated by the language "Let us..." First, we are to draw near. We are back in the garden of paradise, and instead of running away from God and hiding, which Adam and Eve did following their sin, we are to draw near to him. This drawing near refers to prayer and worship, both public and private.

As we draw near to God, we are to be marked by three qualities. The first one is truth. Draw near **"with a true heart."** Many church-goers suffer under the false idea that we should put on our happy face when we come to church. The idea seems to be that we need to help God out by pretending that following him makes us happy and together all the time. That's like going to the dermatologist and only allowing her to look at the unblemished sections of your skin. Someone has said, "Every church family is perfect until the children's Sunday School teacher asks for prayer requests." That's the person we are to bring to church and bring before God.

We can bring that true person to God because we are convinced of the next two things. There is full assurance for all who come to God through the blood of Jesus. This is an assurance of the love and acceptance of God for us. Further, the blood of Jesus offers full cleansing from a guilty conscience. We draw near **"with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."** The language harkens back to Old Testament ritual practices in which blood was sprinkled in various ways and other ritual practices for the cleansing of the body. The idea is that sin defiles us on the inside (the conscience) and the outside (the body). But where sin defiles, the blood of Jesus makes us clean. It cleanses you from sins no one knows about except you and God, sins which trouble you in your quiet moments. It cleanses you also from sins that are evident to others.

The second command is to **“hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”** Hope speaks of our good future. When things are challenging, which is inevitable in this fallen world, we are to remember that our future is a good one. This is so because of one thing—the faithful promise of God. So don’t give way to despair.

All of this prepares us for this command to stir up one another to love and good deeds. Everything that has been said so far is necessary if we are to obey this command. That is the case because it is only the confidence that comes by the blood of Christ and the assurance of our forgiveness that allows us to set aside our inevitable self-focus. The effort to stir up and encourage others has the obvious requirement that we deal with our innate self-centeredness, a tendency that prevents us from seeing things from the perspective of others. There’s an old story about a man by a river. A woman standing on the opposite shore shouts to him: “How do I get to the other side of the river?” The man shouts back: “You *are* on the other side of the river!” Commands like the one we are considering now require us to be more like the pianist accompanying a soloist. The accompanist must give up leading and instead follow the lead of the soloist. We can serve others because the God of the universe has served us through Christ.

Take note of the word “consider.” We must give some thought to how to stir up one another to love and good works. The author doesn’t give us a formula for this because people are different, and what might motivate one person will not motivate another. A cookie-cutter approach won’t work. There are times when we will need to rebuke someone, while there are other times when we will need to back off. There are times for patience and times to pursue, a time to ask questions and a time to make statements. Prayerful thought is needed to know which path to pursue in helping others.

Though there is great variety in how we might stir up one another, there are also some universal constants. Three are mentioned, beginning with presence. The author speaks of presence through a negative command, **“not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.”** All of these one another commands have in common one thing, and that is others. Isolation from others has always been a temptation, but it is perhaps a much stronger temptation now than previously. The word “neglect” suggests that if we just let things take their natural course, isolation will be the result. There is a difference between neglecting association with other people and making an overt decision to abandon such association. We neglect things that we find a bit challenging and difficult, but which we know we need to do. So we will often acknowledge that we need to file those taxes, de-clutter our house, get the oil changed in the car, or any number of other necessary tasks that require some effort. But then we promise ourselves that we are going to do it tomorrow or next week. Next week comes, and we make another promise that we will do it

the following week. This soon becomes a habit. According to research done for the book *The Great Dechurching*, forty million Americans have stopped going to church in the past 25 years, a trend that has accelerated during the Covid years. Many promise themselves that they are going to go back to church at some point, but that point repeatedly gets pushed into the future. The importance of presence is easily overlooked. Though more than presence is required if we are to motivate others for good, there is no ability to do so without presence.

An attitude of encouragement is also needed. There is some level of encouragement in merely being present, but encouragement goes beyond presence. It takes the time to notice the gifts of another and affirms those gifts. Encouragement makes an investment in someone's life that communicates, "I care." Encouragement is curious about people and asks questions. Open-ended questions are particularly encouraging to others because they provide a chance for people to explore the mysteries of their own lives. "What has become clearer to you as you have aged?" "What have you often found most difficult about the Covid years?" "Tell me about something you enjoy and why you enjoy it?"

The final words of verse 25 speak to the importance and urgency of being present with others for the purpose of encouragement. We are to do this **"all the more as you see the Day drawing near."** The "Day" is the Day of Judgment. Can God use our lives to help prepare people for that day? Apparently so.

CONCLUSION:

The paradise of Eden was lost by the first Adam but restored by the second Adam, Jesus. Through his sacrificial death, the door to paradise has been reopened. And we go there with others. So let us stir up one another and go together.

Discussion Questions
Hebrews 10:19-25

1. Tell about a time you have been encouraged by someone else. What was encouraging about that time?
2. Our text invites us to “consider” how to stir up others to love and good works. This word suggests that thought needs to be given to stirring up others, and that implies that not everyone is the same. For those of you who have children, describe how your children are differently motivated and how that helps inform how you might stir them up.
3. Why does the author of Hebrews couch these commands in the finished work of Christ (v. 19-21). How does the gospel help us to stir up others?
4. The command is given not to neglect meeting together, which suggests the importance of presence. What are some obstacles to presence that you have encountered?
5. Verse 25, in bringing up the matter of Judgment Day, suggests some urgency to this whole area of stirring up others. Yet, patience is also often needed. How do we balance these two factors of urgency and patience?
6. How can you know which people God wants you to invest in with this work of encouraging others?