

Gather, Grow, Give, Go | Gathered All The More

Sunday, August 10, 2014

Hebrews 10:19-25

Introduction

- New Series: Gather, Grow, Give, Go
- Thrust: What is it that makes a member of Christ the Rock?
- People ask all the time what they must do to join.
 - At one time, we simply asked people to come forward at the end of each service and repeat a covenant statement we got from the scriptures.
 - At one time, we conducted 8-weeks of membership classes.
 - Then it was six weeks, then four, and then, most recently, one.
 - We've also asked prospective members to sign a membership agreement in which we outlined what we expected of them as members.
- But after three decades of these various practices, we've come to find that regardless of how rigid or loose the qualifications of our membership process are, they have had little or no bearing on the qualitative faithfulness of our members.
- The common denominator of faithful members is faithfulness. Commitment. Integrity.
- So over the next four weeks, we are going to talk through what it looks like to be a member of this church. This series will be eminently helpful for those of you who are kicking the tires. And this series will likewise be helpful for those of you who are in the passengers seat with your seat belts firmly fastened. As you take in the teaching over the next four weeks, ask yourself if you are being faithful to your commitment to this church.

What Do We Mean By "Membership?"

- What makes us more than a loose affiliation of Christians?
- Why is it necessary for us to be a part of a local church? Isn't it enough that when we come to Christ that we, spiritually, become a part of Christ's body?
- Some might even object, "I don't read anything about church membership, per se, in the Bible."

- That's correct. But this argument would have been pointless in the early church. After all, if we lived in the city of Philippi or the island of Crete and didn't like the direction the church was going, it's not like we could've left and gone to the church down the street. There was no other church down the street!
- And this is one reason why membership *is* so important these days. After all, it's because it *is*, in fact, so easy to eject when the going gets tough that we need to determine that we will root down and commit to walking with a spiritual family through thick and thin. Now that church may be CTR or it may be another local church. Just root down somewhere!
- Just keep in mind that the visible, imperfect, messy, beautiful local church is more than merely the context in which we practice the Christian faith. The church *is* the point of the Christian faith! Jesus' whole purpose was to raise up the church (Mathew 16:18). And it's the church that will inhabit the new creation following Jesus' Second Coming. It's the family in which we have leaders to guide us and brothers and sisters to comfort us and remind us of who we are. It's the specific family with which we ally ourselves together in a specific way to reach a specific city or town. It's the community that should aim to be the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God by alleviating suffering and injustice and unbelief as we interact with the surrounding society.
- In order to pull off what I just described, it takes more than intermittent attendance. It requires that we must root ourselves in the rhythms of a community of believers...which necessarily begins with our gatherings. And by gatherings, I mean our Sunday service and our Missional Communities.
 1. So the path into our community is through faithful participation in our Sunday gatherings.
 2. But also, the way we maintain our distinctive camaraderie as "Christ the Rock" is through faithful participation in our Sunday gatherings.

Threats to the Gathering

It wasn't too long ago when attendance could be taken for granted. Cultural norms dictated that people who were members of churches went to church each Sunday. But times have changed. Here are a few threats to our Sunday gathering (not exhaustive):

1. Inconsistent Life Rhythms: Yes, there are many people who have to work on Sundays or work all night, which makes a morning gathering difficult to attend. But many of us simply work too hard these days. We go so hard and have so many irons in the fire, and are so **emotionally spent** that, by the time Sunday rolls around, we can't get ourselves out of bed. The only way to address this is by learning to say enough is enough, getting sufficient sleep during the week, learning to put a limit on our personal calendars, and cultivating healthy rhythms of work, play, and rest with our families.
2. Irregular Attendance: We'll see, by the end of today's message (hopefully), how important it is to frequently gather with our brothers and sisters. But, just a little food-for-thought: I have observed a disturbing trend over the years. There are certainly exceptions to this, but they are rare. **When someone is inconsistent in their attendance, that person is almost always out-of-step with the heart of the church.** (I can't tell you how many times a person has been irregularly absent, and though they are here some, that person usually has no idea what's happening in the church.) This leads to despondency. We tell ourselves things like, "I'll just listen to the podcast," but we don't - because, we're out of step with the community. "Out of sight, out of mind..."
3. Idealization of Worship Form: There are many, these days, who struggle with the impersonal form of the western church, especially the Sunday gathering. This often leads to indifference and indifference always issues in diminishing participation. Always. Let me be clear, this *is* an important conversation to have. But this conversation must not be the thing that dictates whether or not we will enthusiastically participate in our church. There's a lot about the Western church I'm not crazy about. But regardless of the form of our

gatherings, the *only* thing that holds any person back from sincere, heartfelt participation and worship on a Sunday morning is us, ourselves. A worshiping heart can thrive in any form, be it a laid-back house church or high church Anglicanism. Again, I'm not saying that form isn't important. It's just not as important as we make it out to be much of the time.

4. Integrity-Deficit: As I said earlier, membership is fundamentally grounded in a person's integrity. When we join a church, I challenge you to follow Jesus' command to "let your 'Yes' be 'Yes.'"¹ Gather with your church. Serve your church. Be enthusiastic about your church.

Context of the Letter to the Hebrews

- There is a particular book of the Bible that directly addresses some of the same problems that I listed above. The book of Hebrews was written by a person who was greatly concerned about some Jewish Christians getting out-of-step with their church. As a matter of fact, in Hebrews 10:25, he tells his readers (many scholars say in **sermonic form**, similar to the way I'm preaching to you today) not to neglect meeting together, "as is the habit of some."
- What would cause these believers to renege on their faith? Maybe we can see why a few verses later. Look at 10:32-36: "32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."
- Look also at Hebrews 13:3: "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body."
- It's no wonder why the writer of Hebrews is so urgently concerned that these people might abandon the faith, falling back into Judaism. And this is why the book of

¹ Mathew 5:37. NKJV.

Hebrews hinges on five distinct warning passages in which he urges perseverance in the faith.

- And it's no wonder why the writer spends his time comparing the immeasurable glory of Christ to Moses, the law, the temple, sacrifices, and so on, proving that Jesus is superior to all these things.
- At the end of the day, the writer of Hebrews is begging these people to not make a life-altering decision in which they target personal comfort. Instead, he wants them to remain a people driven by principle and truth. This is the context of Hebrews 10. Live for truth and the hope of the age to come, not present comfort. How do we do this?

Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

- *10:1: The law doesn't perfect since sacrifices have to be offered annually;*
- *10:4: The blood of bulls and goats doesn't remove sin;*
- *10:5-7: Jesus came to do God's will, fulfilling the law*
- *10:10: We are cleansed by Jesus' blood;*
- *10:15: The Spirit guides us in living righteously*

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

- We can approach God, but why?
- To overcome sin and the forces in our lives that cause our loyalty to Jesus to buckle.
- Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

22 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.

- At this point, we are encouraged to do three things: 1) draw near to God, 2) which helps us to hold fast to our confession of hope (verse 23), 3) considering how to stir

up love and good works (verse 24). This is the practical out working of holding g fast to God.

- But before he moves onto the second and third exhortation, he gives four qualifications for the first one. But better than saying qualifications, it might be more helpful to say that the writer of Hebrews really, really wants us to experience God's strengthening grace and he lays out for us the heart attitude that we should have so we can access this grace. So to draw near to the Lord requires that we:
 - Have a true heart: "No pretense of devotion which is not true."²
 - Come with full assurance: We are to never doubt that God loves us who trust in Jesus. We can never take ourselves out of the game like so many of us do when we are struggling. We dismiss ourselves to the bench to punish ourselves because of our unworthy behavior. And though our behavior, at times, may be unworthy, Jesus' blood has cleansed us. Get back in the game! Engage! It's when we're struggling the most that we need God's grace! Seek him! He won't reject you!
 - Our hearts must be sprinkled clean: Exodus 29:21 talks about Aaron and his sons being anointed as the High Priest and priests of Israel. Blood was sprinkled upon them, though there is no mention of their "evil consciences" being cleansed. Jesus is our high priest and we are priests unto God - a kingdom of priests.³ And his blood is far superior to bulls and goats because it cleanses us before God once and for all. We don't have to let a guilty conscience keep us from God's presence.
 - Bodies washed with pure water: This could be a word about water baptism, which probably immediately causes us to react incredulously. "How does baptism help firm up my faith?" So we could spiritualize it by turning to a scripture like Ephesians 5:26 that speaks of being washed by the water of God's word. I suspect both may be true, though the writer probably had water baptism in mind. We mustn't view water baptism through a watered down (pun intended) lens. Baptism isn't "just the next step after we get saved."

² Guthrie, Donald. Hebrews. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. 213.

³ 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6.

Baptism is the act of fully identifying ourselves with Christ, taking on his identity. It is to say that in the same way Christ died to sin, so do I. In the same way that Christ was raised in newness of life, vindicated by God the Father, so am I. And in the same way Christ was given a new, resurrected, incorruptible body, so will I one day after Jesus' glorious return. It is to say that Christ's identity is my identity.

- It's with these four heart positions that we draw near: a true heart, full assurance, sprinkled hearts, baptized bodies.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

- Why do we draw near? So that we can receive mercy and grace in order to:
 - hold fast to Jesus through the trials of this age;
 - to overcome the propensity to sin when we suffer;
 - And to set our hopes not on this world, but the age to come.
- But we all know that we can't do this alone. We're the kinds of people that can't maintain a new diet for more than three days! So we become consumers of grace! And Jesus who is faithful supplies to us the grace to be faithful! His faithfulness empowers our faithfulness!

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

- This brings us to the third exhortation: to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. When we pray that God would give us mercy and strength, how does he generally do it? By being rooted in the rhythms of a gospel-centered church.
- One commentator said that the word "consider" means "**concentrated thought!**"⁴ We should concentrate our thoughts on how to provoke our brothers and sisters to **love and good works**. (Note: these good works aren't merely unconnected, random deeds. They speak a lifestyle, or life-pattern, of walking in ever increasing good deeds, blessing others.)

⁴ Guthrie, Donald. Hebrews. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. 215.

- And this brings us to our main point today: God constructed the body of Christ in such a way that we need each other in order to cultivate a lifestyle of growing love and good works. That we need more than a good prayer life and some will power. We need community.
- Love won't just happen. (We all know that, right?) Neither will good works just happen by virtue of being Christians. **Love and good works need provocation from people who, with concentrated thought, creatively provoke us to live this way.**
- I had a professor who called this phenomenon “**divinely-anointed limitations.**” No single Christian is so mature or anointed that he or she can fully execute the Christian life without a deep attachment to the church.

25 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.

- This brings us to the final verse. Apparently, some of these people began to peel away from their church and what raised a red flag was their intermittent attendance at church gatherings.
- Though this verse is somewhat ambiguous, which leaves open the door for just about any kind of church meeting, the Greek word used in this verse is the same one used for **Synagogue, which “suggests some official assembly.”**⁵
 - An implication is not to just hang out with other Christians;
 - An implication is not to watch religious programming on TV;
 - An implication is not to have a strong prayer life and read the bible.
- **The gathering of believers is the stirring process, the writer is saying.** And that could include what we do on Sundays, our missional communities, and so on.
- Then, as the writer considers the fact that as time progresses, there will be a day of judgment, he says that we should all be mindful of this day. And because we are mindful of this day - a day representing how serious God is about living in righteousness, we are to respond with a certain attitude. He says, “and all the more.” In other words, we should encourage each other all the more. This refers to an

⁵ Ibid. 216.

attitude and intensity associated with how we encourage one another. But if we are serious about ramping up the intensity of our encouragement so that our brothers and sisters are deeply moved to love and good works, it's obvious that our encouragement will have to be more and more frequent. **So we gather all the more.**

- In short, we need to be together often.
- So the question isn't, "How often should I gather with my church?" The question is, "Why wouldn't you?!"