

Sermon 29: Hebrews 10:19-25: Persecution Survival Kit

OUTLINE

Let us draw near in faith
Let us hold fast in hope
Let us stir one another in love

INTRODUCTION

There are two types of motivation in the Christian life, the carrot and the stick. Today as we enter the section of Hebrews that has done with doctrine and moves to doing; moves from creed to conduct, we come first to the carrot in v19-25; and the stick in 10:26-31. Before the author launches into the warnings about what a dangerous thing it is to abandon the truth after having come to know it—the stick. He first quickly summarizes the work of Christ for us, and encourages us to three important activities. The portion before us is very important because after several chapters of doctrinal explanation in the face of terrible persecutions, and you finally come to the point of telling people how to live in light of these truths, what do we need to do in light of such profound truth? What would you say? Each of the three things stated here have already been stated, but here we have a concentrated action plan for what to do when we face life and death issues like this church. As you look down you will see that the author uses the words ‘let us’ three times; v22,23,24. These alert us to the important actions we must be taking during difficult times. We should draw near to God; hold fast to our confession; and stir one another up. You will notice that the triumvirate of faith, hope and love are present, we are to draw near in faith; hold fast in faith; and stir up in love.

Before we look more deeply into these three points, let appreciate how the author recaps the last few chapters as the grounds for our actions, v19-21, ‘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.’ You will notice the two big ideas related to Jesus as our sacrifice; and Jesus as our priest are the grounds for our actions. Because Jesus as our greater sacrifice has opened the way to God by His blood; and because Jesus as the greater High priest is presiding on our behalf..., this is a very dense summary of the last few chapters and these are the reasons why we should do the following three things. I won’t rehearse the relevance of these things except to emphasize that because of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished, this is the way that we must now live. So let’s go to our first point.

Let us draw near in faith

V22, ‘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.’ Please appreciate that in all these exhortations, the plural us is used. This is not for the select few, the leaders, the strong, but something that all believers must do. Firstly, we are to draw near. In light of the teaching on how the tabernacle keeps us far off and away from God’s direct presence this is underscoring the new ability that we have because Jesus has opened the way into God’s presence by His death. Because of the perfection of His sacrifice and payment for our sins, the curtain that keeps a sinner washed in His blood from God’s presence has

been torn. There is now access through Christ into the presence of God. Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden but we are restored. This word 'draw near' is one word in the Greek and is used several times in Hebrews in very important ways. In 10:1 we are told that the law could not perfect those who 'draw near'. In 12:18 we have not 'come'/drawn near to Sinai which cannot be touched, but we have drawn near/come to Mount Zion, 12:22. So being able to draw near speaks of the new access we have in Christ. But we do not merely draw near, we draw near for a purpose, to pray. 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.'

The author is reminding the readers that they have an open welcome into the presence of God. God as our Father; God as our portion; God as an everpresent help in times of need; God as willing to give. And importantly, one who hears us when we pray, because of the blood of Jesus that has opened the way; and because of the priesthood of Christ that is continually even now interceding for us, Heb. 7:25, 'Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.' Difficult times will come; but they are appointed by our Father. Difficult times will come but His grace is sufficient and available to those who ask. All the barriers to gaining and hearing with God are gone; the failure in our prayer lives is not because God is far off, unwilling, or unable, it is because we do not draw near to Him. So draw near.

With true hearts. True/sincere indicates that the only appropriate response to give to the one who has given so much to us is to give our hearts truly and completely to God. Imagine a bridegroom who goes to the lengths that Christ has gone for us, only for His bride to harbor secret fantasies and love for another. Imagine this bride faking her love making only a pretense of loyalty while hoping to love another. We must approach God wholeheartedly, without reserve. These readers were vacillating between Judaism and Jesus, the author is exhorting them to give their whole hearts truly to God. You cannot serve two masters, we should pray the prayer of Ps. 86:11, 'unite my heart to fear your name.' No double-mindedness.

With full assurance of faith because our hearts have been cleansed. True faith, when it sees the truth and believes it given the one it is believing in, and the great things this one has done for us, full assurance is inevitable. A lack of assurance is because we are not seeing clearly. But knowing that Jesus has made the way open by His sacrifice and stands even now as High priest, knowing this, have no doubts—draw near. The author then speaks about cleansed hearts and purified bodies. These are of course the terms of the language of the new covenant from Ezek. 36. We have cleansed consciences because sin has been so well dealt with. Many see a reference to water baptism here as an outward sign of this inward cleansing, this is possible. The sign of baptism speaks about various aspects of our salvation. It is a sign of our union with Christ in His death and resurrection; it is a sign of receiving the Spirit; it is a sign of our being added to the body; and of course it is a picture of washing, like a bath cleansing our bodies we are cleansed of sin.

Because sin has been dealt with run to God not from Him, you have access and a warm welcome with Him to gain all the help you need in your difficult times.

Let us hold fast in hope

V23, 'Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.' This is the third time that the call to hold fast has been made, 3:6; 3:14. Both those other mentions are in the context of calling for holding fast until the end. Those other instances are more stick than carrot, there the warning is that they will be saved if they endure to the end. Here is the other side of the coin. Here we are being encouraged to hold fast because God is not a liar.

Notice firstly, that we are called to hold fast our confession. In other words we are to hold onto the truths that we originally confessed when we believed. These Jews would have confessed that Jesus is the Messiah; that His death is the only sufficient payment for sin; and no doubt that He died and rose again. Perseverance in the faith means persevering in the truth of the faith we confessed. To give up on these truths, to change what we believe about the Trinity; or the deity of Christ; or deny His resurrection, even if we do not stop coming to church, this is to not hold fast to our confession.

The author of Hebrews focuses our attention on those aspects of our confession that focus on our hope. Christ's resurrection has opened a new and living way into God's presence and is a guarantee of our own resurrection one day. Because He lives we will live also; He is the firstfruits of a resurrection harvest of which we are a part. Because Jesus has taken our judgement day on the cross, and there is no more wrath towards our sins, our part in the new creation is guaranteed. Paul puts it well in Romans 5:9-10, 'Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.' We should be assured that God will save us on judgement day because we have been justified by His blood. And added to that, if God was willing to give His Son to save His enemies, which is more valuable to God His Son or the new creation? If God is willing to give His Son for His enemies, how much more will He give His children the new creation.

The author points us to God's character as a promise keeper. God is faithful, He is not a liar. If He promises that no one can snatch you out of His hand; that He will lose none; that all His sheep will be raised up on the last day, then do not call God a liar by doubting your salvation. Let this certainty feed into your strength to hold fast. You have every assurance that you will go to heaven, so focus on this and let it give you the determination to push through your present difficulties.

Let us stir one another in love

V24-25, 'And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.' There are four main ideas in these verses, firstly, the call to consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, think of this as the duty of consideration; secondly, to not neglect to meet together, think of this as the duty of meeting; thirdly, to encourage one another, the duty of encouraging one another; and all this as we heed the times, the duty of living in light of the times.

‘And let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works.’ Appreciate with me the life or death issues that serve as the background and why this is what we are called to. These Christians were on the edge, they were toying with abandoning their faith for a more comfortable socially acceptable existence. What is the remedy to people in danger like this? You are the remedy? You are God’s instrument of encouragement and the one who will aid in strengthening them and keeping them from stepping over the edge. This is a call to turn your mind to the problem of the other Christian who is tempted with falling away, with making them your problem and how you are going to stir them up to love and good works.

The word ‘stir’ here is a strong word we could translate as provoke. We are called to provoke one another to love and good works. These two things, love and good works, are probably a hendiadys, in other words, they mutually inform each other. In other words, provoke one another to love which does good works. The love that we are being asked to stir in one another is not mere sentiment but a love that acts in concrete ways producing good works. It is more than mere sentiment. In many ways this is a perfect summary of true religion, a heart of love towards God which proves itself in a life of good works. Let’s just stop and feel the weight of this responsibility and our inability to do it. Your brother or sister is tottering on the edge and toying with the idea of leaving Christ, and you are called to think deeply about how you are going to provoke them, spur them, stir them up to a love for God that inevitably produces good works. So let’s do that, let us consider how we can do such a thing. How do we do it?

Let’s concretize this for ourselves. A young unmarried Christian woman is being flirted with at work. A young unbelieving man is showing interest, and there are no other believing men in her age group who are showing interest, she is thinking about giving up her Christianity to start a relationship. How do we provoke her to a love for God that produces good works? A Christian teenager is sick of being bullied and marginalized and cruelly taunted for not drinking, swearing, going to all the parties and joining in the ribbing at school. They are lonely and fed up and want to stop being a Christian just to make their life easier, how do we provoke them to a love for God that produces holiness?

V25 gives us two key things we need to do, ‘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.’ Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some. What are we being told is the thing that will help stir up the love that will save us from going over the edge? Meeting together! Some have already turned their backs on Christ, why, they gave up the habit of meeting together. So let me ask you, should you go to church? Why get together, what is it when we get together that pulls us back from the edge? To answer this we would have to look at the early church and what they did when they met. Acts 2:42, ‘And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.’

The means of grace is what God uses to minister to us. Here is how I see it as a pastor. You the sheep come in to church on a Sunday morning. Some are weak, some are sick, some have wandered and injured themselves, some have indigestion from eating wrong food, some are anxious, some have picked up parasites, some have been ravaged and attacked, some are close to death, some are new lambs, we may have some goats amongst us, and even the odd wolf in sheep’s clothing. And God has appointed our meeting together to suit a blessing

to each one. Through the means of grace, the Spirit through the word meets every need. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the powers of the age to come, the same power that rose Jesus from the dead is present to turn goats into sheep, to grant joy inexpressible and full of glory, to protect our hearts with peace, to conform us to Christ, to ignite love towards God within our hearts, to comfort, restore, heal, etc.

And what truth does the Spirit use in every part of the service to do all of these things within us? It is the word of the gospel. If you look down at v22-23 you will see how the author of this letter reminds his readers of gospel truths to stir their hearts to loyal love, '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. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.' Firstly, come into God's presence with full assurance because of the sufficiency of Christ's work for us. We are clean in the sight of God, all sin has been removed, let this fill your heart up with assurance and drive you into God's presence as a welcome and loved child. You are not an alien, you are not a stranger, He has made you worthy, and at such a cost. Secondly, consider the God who made promises to you. He is faithful, He is no liar, He will be with you, He will not forsake you. Come together to be reminded of this when we hear the invitation in the call to worship or sing it in our songs, when we hear it in the readings, when the sermon explains it more deeply to us, when we see it visibly in baptisms and the Lord's Supper, and even hear it in the promises of the benedictions. The whole letter to the Hebrews is a meditation on the gospel to make hearts that feel tempted to wander to see the sufficiency of Christ and stir us up to love.

Let's stop and feel two important truths. Firstly, your love for God is what you need stirred up as a protection against defecting. Secondly, your coming together with the church is seen by the Bible as the main way in which we do this. We all have a part to play in one another's hearts being stirred up to love.

Now some will want to try and spell out the time commitment involved in not neglecting the meetings of the church. How many prayer meetings, how many bible studies, how many services, I am not going to put a number on these things. What I am going to say is this, there is a goal articulated here, a goal of doing as much as is needed to lift a faltering brother or sister, a goal to meet together so that our hearts are kept full of love towards God, a goal to have access and relationships with one another that we are able to be a constant source of support. You tell me how much is required.

V25 gives us another way in the church saves our lives, 'but encouraging one another.' Yes we must meet together and do church and get all the benefits that it offers, but there is more. There is the responsibility to have personal connections, to have friendships and communication that is free and open enough that real conversations about one another's struggles are the content, not just work or hobbies or politics, and the other stuff we fill our conversations with. The encouragement here is not the positive self-esteem stuff that our western culture thinks of. Here are people whose livelihoods are at stake, if they carry on being Christians their parents will disown them, their engagements will be cancelled, their spouses might leave them, their jobs will come to an end, that apprenticeship they haven't finished yet will be cancelled, their whole family and social circles will shun them, their children's friends will be removed from them, there may even be physical threats along with the social ostracism. Who plays a

pivotal role when the pressure is on like this? You do! You are the provision of God for their weakness. You are the community and the arm of flesh that He gives to lean on. The question we have to ask is, are we fulfilling this role, and when we go through trials do we avail ourselves of this provision?

Casual attachment, shallow engagement, low levels of commitment, the church as an optional extra, the church as a burden not a necessity. These cannot be given this instruction.

We have a fourth aspect to these verses, 'and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.' What does the author of Hebrews mean by this? Well, when the Day of Christ draws nearer, will things get worse or better, will satan be more active against the church or less, will there be less trials and temptations or more? In every instance things will be getting worse. So then our attachment to the church should it be greater or lesser? We will have to consider how to stir one another up to a greater extent, we will have to not neglect meeting together to a greater extent, and we will have to encourage one another to a greater extent. On top of that, those who do not endure to the end will be judged. The day of the Lord has a sobering effect as we consider those who fall away. The reality of this world as we know it coming to an end and the great realities of the promises of the gospel finally arriving. These should define our present concerns and priorities as we prepare not only ourselves but others to live in light of that day.

So lets conclude. Because Jesus sacrifice has opened our way to God; and His present priesthood secures all of our needs, draw near to God in faith with full assurance; hold fast your confession because your hope is secure; and let us ponder how to provoke one another on in love and good works.