

Christ and His Community

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 0 0] All right, our scripture reading today comes from Hebrews chapter 10, verses 19 to 25. David, one of our ministers here, is going to come and read for us.

Let's hear and read God's Word as we find it in Hebrews 10, reading from verse 19 to 25. If you're following one of the larger Bibles, it's page 1007. Let's hear God's Word.

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 hearts 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. This is God's Word.

All right, well, if you're visiting today, I come up here not so I can take the position of power over anyone, but only because I'm too short for the balcony of people to see when I preach, so that's the main reason. So we finished a series on James last week, and next week, as I mentioned, we'll start looking at the road to Emmaus for four Sundays. And so we're going to take one look today at Hebrews 10 on this New Members Sunday, and it is a monumental declaration of the foundation of Christian community, that passage that David read for us. And the claim of the passage is that the blood of Jesus Christ creates a unique community. So let's explore it three ways. Number one, the uniqueness of the Christian community. Number two, the foundation of that community. And then finally, we'll look at the practices of the Christian community. So first, the uniqueness. It is well known to all of us in this room that we live in an age where the sociologists and the journalists and the public health officials say it's the age of loneliness. And we, in the UK, in 2018, established a position in the government, the UK Minister of Loneliness, and something corresponding to that has happened in the States and other places.

You can be surrounded by people in this room even, and feel alone, of course. And loneliness is a form of relational suffering. You can be surrounded by people and feel alone, because to really get at the problem of loneliness, the only solution is to know that you are known by somebody deeply and loved, no matter what. And so you can be around all sorts of people in life and still feel alone.

[3 : 1 6] Jesus Christ, in the New Testament, offers community, a unique community. But that community is not primarily built on what you would expect. So the solution to loneliness, the answer that the Bible gives of community is not just being surrounded by people in a church community. It's something deeper than that. It's something thicker than that. And to get at it, you've got to see, you've got to know a little bit about the backdrop that leads into this passage. And the backdrop, before Hebrews 10 comes Hebrews 9, right? Hebrews 7, 8, 9, 10, all the way up to chapter 10, verse 18, and then we read verses 19 to 25. And in that section, it's summarizing basically the whole Old Testament, and giving you language like covenant, tabernacle, sacrifice, priest, lamb, veil, blood, the holy place, even the word Melchizedek. So all these Old Testament concepts that are the author is wrapping up into one narrative. And what we just read is the culmination point. Chapter 10, verse 19 says, therefore. So we just read this big climactic point where the whole Old Testament story is being wrapped up into one main idea, and that's what we find in 19 to 25. And to get at that main point, there's an assumption from 7 to 10, and it's found, if you have a Bible, you can see this if you back up to chapter 10, verse 4. There's a line like this, it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

So that's a summary statement that says the whole Old Testament sacrificial system could not ultimately accomplish the one thing we need most, and that's the removal of sin. And so here's the

assumption, the assumption of Hebrews 7 to 10, the assumption of the whole Old Testament, the assumption of New Testament Christianity, and it's incredibly anti-modern. And it's something like this, that my actions, my choices, my desires that stand against the Lord deserve the forfeiture of my life.

And the sacrificial system was in place to really preach that and to tell humanity that. And so the rituals of the sacrificial system, the bringing of the animals, the curtain that you read about all through Hebrews 7 to 10, was preaching that our sins do indeed, our rebellion against God do indeed deserve the forfeiture of our life. And that's really what the veil is. So if you know anything about the Old Testament and the Levitical system, that's the summary in the background of the passage we read. And you'll maybe remember that there are multiple curtains in the temple and the tabernacle.

And each of those curtains is effectively saying to you, you cannot draw, you cannot come all the way in to the presence of God. And that's exactly what we have. If you have a Bible, you'll see this again back in chapter 10, verse 1. At the very end, it says that the sacrifices offered every year could not make perfect those who draw near. And so the Old Testament story is really this, that we were made by God to be worshipers living in God's presence. And the entire temple system was preaching to you, preaching to us, is the fact that because of our sins, we're unable to draw near. We can't go all the way in. We can't get past the veiled curtain. And so that leaves us with the terror of distance from God.

And it really is a terror. You might remember that in the Old Testament, in Hebrews 7 to 10 talks about this. There was only one man, one time a year, who could go all the way in. And that was the chief priest on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. But if you remember, how did he go in? He went in with a rope tied around his waist. He went in scared to death. He went in afraid. He went in afraid that he wasn't going to come out alive. And when you come to this passage, if you look at our passage that we read in chapter 10, verse 19, he says, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter. And you see, this is the moment, the culmination point that says, because of the blood of Jesus, everything that the Old Testament was all about has found its solution in the fact that because of Him, you can now go all the way in. You can enter, you can draw near, you can come into God's presence.

[7 : 40] And so in the Old Testament, worshipers could not come all the way in. And in our sins, we cannot come all the way in. And the great damage that is, the terror that is, why that's so awful for us is that every single one of us today were made to enter all the way into God's presence.

We were made to have our deepest longings fulfilled with Him and in Him, close to Him, and close to one another, looking at Him together. And if you come today and you find that your longings are not fulfilled in this life, you've got emptiness, you've got things you've chased but haven't satisfied, I want to say to you what the Bible says. And you may not agree with it yet, but I want to give it to you anyway. And what the Bible says is this, that all of your deepest longings, all the holes that you find in your heart, they ultimately cannot be filled without entering all the way into the presence of God. That's where the fulfillment of all of our longings are found. And so because of our sin, we were banned. In the temple, you may remember from the book of Exodus, when the temple instructions, the tabernacle instructions were given, one of the things that was required is to embroider cherubs, cherubim, on the temple curtains. So the curtains weren't blank, they weren't empty, they had stitching of these angelic beings with swords on them. Why?

Because the temple was there to remind us, it was just to be a shadow of the Garden of Eden itself. And in the Garden of Eden, remember when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they were kicked out, and cherubs were put at the gate with swords. They couldn't come back in. And so on the temple curtain, you had cherubs embroidered to remind you, you were made by God to be in the Garden of God with God, and yet you don't have access, you can't draw near. And so there's the terror of distance.

And Moses, even the one man in the Old Testament invited to come so close, even he could not see the face of God fully. Even he could not come all the way in. Now, the turn, verse 21 and 22. You see what's happening here in the passage we read? The language all across Hebrews has been saying, you cannot draw near. You cannot draw near. And then you come down to verse 21 and 22.

Therefore, since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance. And he's saying, the uniqueness of Christianity and Christian community is that

because of the blood of Jesus, you can enter all the way into God's presence. And that means that Christian community and the value of it and the value to treat loneliness and so many other issues is not just that there is a place to come and see people. The real idea of Christian community is that you can, with others shoulder to shoulder, draw near as worshipers into God's presence.

[10:28] What is real Christian community? It's actually being in communion with God together. That's the heartbeat of Christian community. And so here all throughout this passage, I mean, you can scan your eyes across it and look for the pronouns. You know, the pronouns aren't now you individually can draw near.

It's we draw near. Let us come together. Let us draw near. Let us, the one another language is all over the passage. And really what this text is saying is because the entire Old Testament was fulfilled by the blood of Jesus Christ, now you can have a community where you with one another draw near to God side by side. Remember what Jesus said in John 14, 6, he said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And very famous passage, of course. What did he mean? That's temple language. I am the way. You can't get behind the curtain without me. I am the way of access. I am the way that you can get behind that holy veil. Now that means when we struggle with the ache in this life of being surrounded by people even, but yet feeling alone, the truth is that the root of the problem of loneliness is not ultimately found in not being known and loved by people, though that is so important.

God made us for that. Absolutely. But the real root, the ultimate foundation is separation from God. We were made before anything else to be known and loved by God, known intimately and loved anyway, and therefore then in a community finding knowledge and love of other people within the knowledge and love of God. And so the real root is a spiritual problem. It's separation from the living God.

And I was at a gathering of church leaders recently, and it was very Presbyterian, if you know what that means, and very Reformed. Sorry to use that word, but very Reformed. It was the kind of place where everybody in the room wants to quote John Calvin to each other and things like that. And in that meeting, we were singing hymns, we were singing psalms, and I was a few rows back from a guy, and I just noticed something every time we would sing something very odd, I thought. And he was breaking all protocol, especially in Scottish Presbyterian culture. And we were singing, and during the song, he would turn around and look, I mean, and I mean, connect with people eye to eye across the room. And he did it to me.

[12:57] He looked at me, and he stared at me, and he's singing at me. And I realized what he was doing with his body language. He was saying, do you believe this with me? Do you hear this?

And that is really just Hebrews 10, 19 to 25. Incredibly awkward, right? Incredibly awkward. But Hebrews 10, 19 to 25 is just saying, because of the blood of Jesus, because you have a great high priest, you can draw near to the presence of God together with one another. And so I expect in a moment when we sing the final hymn that many of you will turn and awkwardly stare into your neighbor's eyes until they acknowledge it and say, I'm with you. I believe this as well. But one day we will. So even if we can't get past that in our culture today, one day we will. One day we will do that, because that is what drawing near into the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, this passage is ultimately all about, that we do it together, not merely as Western individuals, but as a deep and abiding community. And friends, that's membership. That's church membership. That's the ultimate membership. All right, secondly, the foundation, the bedrock. Now, I've already given the answer to this, but I want to give you one more thing that the text points us to in Hebrews 10 specifically. What makes a church member a church member? And it's all found, let's go back to that little word in verse 19, therefore. You'll see after that in verse 19, a couple times the word since, since we have confidence to enter the holy place. And then a little later on in verse 21, since we have a great high priest, then let us draw near. Because of that, let us draw near. Now, those are little conjunctions. You would be tempted to say prepositions, but I looked it up.

They're conjunctions. Therefore, since. And those are tiny words, but they have such power. In seminary, you go and they tell you in Bible interpretation class, always ask, what is the therefore, therefore? And 1 to 18 has been telling us what it's all there for. Because of 1 to 18, therefore, we can draw near. And we've said it, because of the blood of Jesus, we can draw near.

Because he is the way we can come together as worshipers into God's presence. But I want to highlight one more aspect of that that's all throughout chapter 7 to 10 that culminates in this

moment. And if you look back at chapter 10, verse 1, if you have a Bible, it says, for since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come, instead of the true form of these realities, it can never ultimately work. It can never forgive sins. So at the beginning of this chapter, it says that the whole Old Testament law, the sacrificial system was a shadow. But the therefore, in verse 18, 19, is saying Jesus Christ is the reality of that shadow. Because the whole Old Testament was a shadow cast towards something of substance, Christ has come as the substance.

If you imagine standing in London in the financial district, and you look up at the tallest skyscrapers in the city there, and you're standing in the street, you don't look at the building, but instead you look at the shadow that's being cast on a sunny day down the center street, and you see this massive shadow. It's only when you turn around can you see what the substance is, the real thing. And this Hebrews 7 to 10 says that the whole sacrificial system was a shadow, a foreshadow, and that you've got to turn around to see Jesus Christ as the real thing, the substance, the once-for-all sacrifice, that in His body broken, His blood shed, you have the ultimate point of all of human history, that all of history was culminating to that one point where the cross took place. The cross is the centerpiece of history, the moment that makes sense of the whole Old Testament, and the very thing that creates the possibility of drawing near to God and having real community for all of your days. The cross, it means everything. That's the real heartbeat of this passage. It's the bedrock, the foundation of all Christian community.

[17:10] C.S. Lewis in 1944 gave an address to the graduates at King's College London called The Inner Ring, a very famous essay published in a couple books of his. And what is The Inner Ring? The Inner Ring is a community within a community. So we all exist in multiple communities, church communities, work communities, school communities, university communities. We could number countless communities.

We're all involved in. And then we all know that in all of those communities, inner rings form, circles within the circle. So an inner ring is a group of people where maybe you're in the boardroom and you're having a meeting in your business, and the boss just picks two people at the end of the meeting and says, you two come and see me in my office. And what you know is that those are the two people the boss actually prizes the most, actually wants to hear from in solving a problem. That's an inner ring. And there are inner rings that exist in all sorts of communities. I see it so much in my kids.

They're at different stages of now trying to enter the inner ring of their little communities. And it's something you really have to work with. But it's a problem with adults as well, very much. And what happens is when you are standing on the fringe of that community, you want in so much, you start to dress like the community dresses, you start to speak like the community speaks, you start to take on the behaviors and the practices that the inner ring you so want to be a part of takes on. And then if you are one of the lucky ones that finally gets in, you make it just as hard for the people on the outside to get in because you had to go through that experience. And that's the truth of inner rings. Now, C.S. Lewis is very careful to say that there are some inner rings that are very healthy, like deep friendship. But most rings that we create in this fallen world are because of competition, because of envy, because of our pride, because of our need to be seen as better than others, because of stubbornness. You can think of, and snobbery, you can think of a no better example than all of Jane Austen's novels and how much she has contempt for the Victorian attitude of the social elites who want to create inner ring after inner ring after inner ring after inner ring and exclude everybody else. I saw this so much in my time in academia, where academia at its best is a pursuit of the truth. But the truth is in academia that there is a moral, and it goes like this, publish or perish. And if you are not regularly pumping out articles and books, you will never get on the inside. You will never get a job. You will never get to the scholarly elite. It's the inner ring. And so sometimes the truth is in peril because you've got to publish, publish or perish, and that's an inner ring. We do this. Every one of these inner rings that we create, these communities, have curtains, veils. They're little temples. And to get behind the veil, you've got to perform. You've got to show your metal. You've got to do what the community expects of you to do and really show that you're worth it.

And only then would you think, I'm known and loved. And of course, for most of us, we never get in to so many of these. And so we feel a weight of shame. And I see this working out in different ways in my own kids' lives. You feel the weight of shame. You never got in. This passage, Hebrews 7 to 10, is effectively telling you, there's a truth in it. There's a desire there that's right. You were made

for an inner ring. You were made to draw all the way in by a great high priest into the living presence of God with people who know and love you. And that all these inner rings we create in this world are just relative little tiny shadows mixed with so much sin when you look at the real ring, the real circle, the real veil that has to be torn. This is exactly what you were made for, to enter the garden of God with the people of God in the presence of God. And it's only when you can know that you're known and loved by God despite your performance. You see, every inner ring that we try to get into says, do this, perform this way, show your mettle. There's only one, and it's lasting, boy, is it lasting, that says you can come in by the power of another. You can come in by the substitutionary blood of another. You don't have to prove it. You can come in by faith. And it's in that community where you draw all the way into the presence of God that you will be accepted and you will never be forgotten.

[21 : 49] And that's the community of the invisible church made visible, the ecclesia, the gathering, God's people made by faith, forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Lewis James' famous hymn that you probably, if you're young in this room, probably only ever listened to because the algorithm popped up a Gaither video on your YouTube channel. There's power in the blood. There is power in the blood.

There's wonder-working power in the blood. And what is that power? Verse 19, you have confidence and access to go all the way into God's presence. And you can do it with one another, knowing that you have a community that will never leave you. So let me finish with this. This passage then, in verses 22 to 25, gives us practices how to live this out today until that moment where we together go all the way in behind the curtain, when Jesus comes to us and brings the garden temple to us, when we one day will indeed be willing to turn around during hymns and look at one another.

That day is coming. But until then, what are the practices that we've got to live out? And so let me just briefly give them to you. There's four or five here. I'll just highlight them. And the first, the heading comes to us in verse 25, very famous verse that many of us will have come to before. And it says, do not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some. And so in this life, one of the commands we have to practice this community, this everlasting community is not to neglect to meet together. You're here today. You're not neglecting to meet together, but it simply is true that all the stats bear this out, that even the most avid attender of church and the assembly of God, the ecclesia here, the most avid attender attends on average less and less and less every couple of years. So there is a command here, don't neglect church on Sunday.

Absolutely. And you could not fulfill all the commands that are involved in that little verbal command. Do not neglect to meet together by just attending church on Sunday. So it also means more than that. There's something, there's something so true there. You got to be here. You got to come to church. And also there's something more than that. And it's found in the word itself. The word meet together is the verbal form of the noun epi synagogue, the word synagogue, the Jewish gathering, the place of worship. Epi synagogue is just the word congregation. And so when it says, do not neglect to meet together, it says congregate together. This is telling us we are a congregation, not an aggregation. And so you could come here every week and assemble, but live as an aggregation, not a congregation. By treating church, and of course we know that this can happen so easily in our hearts, like coming to a TED talk and getting the petrol station of a good or bad, maybe boring, sometimes, sometimes not, talk from a pulpit, and then sort of feeling emotionally refilled, and then going back out and living separate lives. But that would be to live as an aggregation, not a congregation. And this word is be a congregation. And so we're given a few practices here, and they're all found in the let us, verse 22, 23, 24, three let us, let us draw near. We've looked at that one.

[25 : 14] And then just after that, you'll see in verse 23, let us hold fast the confession. Let us hold fast the confession. Here's how you can live out the community. Here's how you can be a congregation at an aggregation. Let us hold fast the confession. That hold fast is the Greek word katecheo, where we get the word catechism from. So this is saying, let us catechize one another.

That's why we do catechism with the kids. But it's saying to adults as well, go from here beyond just the moments in church where you're all sitting facing the pulpit and catechize one another.

And what does that mean? Well, it could mean that after the service, you walk up to a friend in the room during tea and coffee and you say, question 20, who is the redeemer? And you say, did you, come on, memorize it? Did you memorize it? That's a good thing to do, actually. Catechism is

wonderful.

They've been doing it since the second century. That's why we do it here. But to catechize one another really just means talking about God. So I'll ask you, do you talk about God with Christians? Do you have conversations about Jesus and your faith? That's what the let us hold fast the confession really means. It's catechize one another. Notice back in verse 19, he says, brothers and sisters, let us. He's talking to the Christians, the local church. Secondly, he says, let us, verse 24, consider. So that word consider is a really, it's a bit of an unusual word to choose for the author here in the Greek text. It means more than reflect or just think about, it's got a real intensity to it. So it says something like, consider with intensity, think, really think about over time how to stir one another up in love and good works, encourage one another. I think it's something like this. I had a deacon that I knew in the previous church I was a part of, and some of our deacons have very much done this in St. C's in my time here. But I just remember the story, a deacon who would come to me, he came to me on several occasions, this was regular for him, but he came to me once and he would say, you know, I've been thinking, how do we start a garden service, a lawn service for the homebound in our church? Now this is in Mississippi where you're always losing to the grass, always. And he said, you know, the yards are just covered, the lawns are covered, and how do we do this? And so he worked it out and he figured it out and he gathered guys and he started regularly cutting, mowing the lawns. And this same guy came to me a while later and he said, you know, I have this idea, how could we, what if we chose a street nearby the church and we just went and started taking care of all the gardens? And we just simply said, look, this is for free and we just want you to know we're from the church down the street. We love you. We'd love to hang out anytime. And so this deacon was come and doing, let us consider, kate, kata, not kate, kate, it's a different word than that, kate, kate, no A. He was considering, he was deeply thinking, he was saying, how do we, how do we do this together? And maybe in a city group, you can say to somebody that lives in your area, I've noticed a need. How can, it's deep consideration. How could we love encourage, how could we stir up one another to love and good works in this area? Thirdly, let us consider how to stir one another up. Now we just mentioned that, but I want to highlight the word stir one another up because it's another unusual choice. And it's a word that actually has this connotation of irritate. So it says, how do we irritate one another to love and good works?

[28 : 52] And that's maybe what I'm doing to you now. I'm saying, you know, have you, are you talking to anybody in the church about your faith? Are you talking to anybody about God? Are you saying to your neighbor that lives down the street from you, that's a believer, how could we have a dinner with our neighbor that we've never met before? Are you stirring one another up and irritating one another to love and good works? And so when I come and irritate you or somebody else irritates you, you can just say, the Bible tells me so I'm supposed to do this, right? You're being asked to irritate, to really keep coming at it and keep thinking about how to get one another to love, to do love and good works together. And then lastly, and this is implied in verse 25, let us not neglect to meet together.

Let us instead encourage one another. That's a famous word. Sometimes English book titles will have the title of that Greek word, perakaleo, to come alongside one another. It really is the word for counseling. So this has the connotation of actually considering people who might have real need in the congregation and saying, how can I encourage them counseling, meeting their needs physically, materially, spiritually, emotionally. That's really the heartbeat of the word. Let us come and encourage one another. And he says this, why? Because the day is drawing near. And we'll conclude with this.

He's saying, don't be an aggregation, be a congregation because the day is drawing near. The day where you will draw all the way in, draw near to God behind the curtain, that day is coming. And so be a witness unto that day now in this life, because it won't be long. It won't be long till we enter all the way in. We see Jesus Christ, we see God, and we do so side by side, shoulder to shoulder together in the holy temple that he brings down. He's saying, the day is coming. So today, witness to that reality by being a living congregation. We've got to meet up with one another. We've got to know one another. We've got to irritate one another to help each other get to love and good works. Jesus Christ, by the power of his blood, has created a way for you to go all the way in to the very thing you were made for, the presence of God, to be known, to be loved, and to do it together. And that's a congregation. That's what we are. That's what membership really is. Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would make us a congregation. We ask, Lord, that you would help us to love one

another, to stir up one another, to love in good works, even to irritate one another to love in good works. And we recognize, Lord, our imperfections in this, our lack, our longing to be individuals, our longing to be so attached to our screens that we don't know each other well. And so I'm so thankful before you, Lord, that there are so many people in this room now that do love one another so well and do congregate so well and do irritate one another toward love and good works so well. So I thank you, Lord, for the health of that at St. Columbus. But we know we're not perfect. We know that we can always tend to aggregate instead of congregate. So we ask, Lord, that even now in tea and coffee, you would help us to long to know one another and to do it as worshipers of our living God. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.