

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

Individualism

September 3rd, 2023

Hebrews 10:24-25

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews 10.

We are approaching the end of our summer series in which we have been identifying the subtle yet sinful thought patterns that permeate our culture and that threaten to creep into the church.

Our target for this morning is individualism.

I recognize that “individualism” is a big topic, but I want to specifically home in on our culture’s all-consuming emphasis on *self*. I come from a generation that first interacted with the wider outside world through a *Myspace* account. We bought our *i-pods* and *i-phones* where we could escape from the world with our *i-buds* in. We are the *i-gen*. We spend our free time posting pictures of ourselves and checking to see how many people interacted with our latest tweet. We have been taught that the world is waiting for us to “tell *our* truth”. Me. Me. Me.

And, inevitably, that *me* focus – that individualism – creeps into the church. That’s a frightening reality. The church is supposed to provide us with a little foretaste of heaven, but when the church is filled with 150 people asking, “What’s in it for *me*?” it becomes instead a little foretaste of hell.

Our passage for today teaches us that this gathering – the coming together of believers – is about *more* than me. Our passage this morning reminds us that one of the glorious effects of the gospel is that it changes our thinking from *me* to *we*.

We're going to be focusing on Hebrews 10:24-25. Look there with me. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is an utterly other-centered text. This is a call to each and every one of us to take our eyes off of ourselves and our needs and to seek out ways to build up the people around us.

Let's stop and reflect on that for a moment. Have you ever spent time with a person who lives this out? Honestly. Think for a moment. Is there anyone in your life who spends time actively thinking about how to build you up and to help you grow? If you were able to think of someone, what a special gift they are! Amen?

And yet, this passage seems to suggest that we should each have a congregation FULL of people like that! This call is not a call to one or two spiritually elite people who have it all together. This is a call to believers everywhere – a call to the church – to be *other focused* – to build one another up to love and good works.

Can I dream for just a moment? Can you imagine with me what it might look like if we saw even a 10% improvement in this in our little church? What would it look like for us to become a church where, from the youngest to the oldest, we all took our eyes off of ourselves and sought to build each other up? I want to see it. I want to be a part of it. To that end, let's look to this passage and ask the question:

How Can We Become A Church That Stirs Up One Another To Love And Good Works?

I see four lessons for us in this passage. First, if we want to become this kind of church, then:

1. We need to be transformed by the gospel

In order to see this, we need to zoom out from these two verses to see how they fit into the argument that the author to the Hebrews is making.

So, let's zoom all the way out and look at this book as a whole. You can summarize the entire book of Hebrews with the phrase "Jesus is better." The author to the Hebrews has been explaining that Jesus is a better mediator than Moses, and that Jesus is a better high priest than Aaron, and that Jesus is a better meeting place with God than the temple, and that Jesus offers a better rest than the Sabbath, and that Jesus is a better sacrifice than the sacrificial system. The whole book of Hebrews is a celebration of the gospel – the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus to secure our salvation and to restore us to who we were made to be!

That's the big picture, but let's zoom in now on the paragraph that our verses are found in. If you look back at verse 19 the author to the Hebrews summarizes the gospel and then he turns the corner to three appropriate responses to this amazing gospel message. Our passage for this morning is the third response, but I want you to see all three. Let's read from verses 19-22 where we will find the first response:

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, 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. (Hebrews 10:22 ESV)

So, there's our first response to this gospel message: **Let us draw near!** Jesus has cleansed us from our sin! He has opened the door for us to have access to our heavenly Father. So, in light of that, why would we waste another second standing at a distance?! We don't need to hide from God anymore! We don't need to fear His presence! If you have confessed your sin and placed your trust in Jesus, then COME CLOSE and experience the Father's love for you. RECEIVE this gift! That's the first response to this amazing gospel!

We find the second response in verse 23. Look there with me:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23 ESV)

So, there's our second response to this gospel message: **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope**. In other words, let us wrap our hearts and minds around the good news of the gospel and let us resolve never to let go! The world will call us naïve. The devil will tell us that we're still in our sin. Doubts will arise. It will seem too good to be true. But Jesus *really and truly has* made a way for lost sinners like you and me to come home! Jesus *really did* live the life we could not live. He *really did* die the death that we owed. He *really did* rise again on the third day. He *really did* ascend to heaven. He *really does* sit at the Father's right hand. And we *really are* cleansed from our sin and raised to a new life in Christ! The good news is true! RECEIVE that and hold fast!

Those first two responses make an awful lot of sense, but the third response is a bit surprising. He concludes this list with our passage for this morning where he writes:

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. (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

So, this command is the third response to the gospel! Do you see that? **Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.**

What a fascinating and neglected response to the gospel it is! The first two responses remind me of *what's in it for me*, and so they intuitively feel *right*. I hear the command, "In light of all that Jesus has accomplished, let us draw near to God" and I think, "Absolutely! I'm going to draw near. Hallelujah!" Likewise, I hear the second command, "In light of all that Jesus has accomplished, let us hold fast" and I think, "Amen! I'm holding on to every Word you say! I believe! Thank you for this GIFT!"

I'm receiving all of that! But then the third command hits me: "In light of all that Jesus has accomplished, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" and my "amen" trails off a little bit. "Wait a minute," I wonder, "what do their lives have to do with me?" We

don't intuitively look at the cross and come away thinking about how to build up the family of God.

And yet, according to the author to the Hebrews, we should. When he looks at the cross – when he looks at all that Jesus has accomplished for us – he sees this response as just as fitting and just as natural as drawing near and holding fast. Why is that?

He sees the *other-centered* emphasis of the gospel. He sees the God who condescended to come down below the angels so that he could lift us up to the heavenly places with him. He sees the high priest who was willing to become the sacrifice for the sake of his people. And seeing all of that he reminds us that – OF COURSE – we ought to now give careful thought to how *we* now can *build up* the people around us! OF COURSE we should be gripped by the reality that life is about more than me! OF COURSE we should be a people who serve, and love, and minister to those around us! OF COURSE!

He sees that.

Do we see that? It's important that we do. Everything else that I will say this morning flows out of this gospel foundation. It is only when we see and understand the cross that we have any power to live any of this out. It is only as we understand the gospel that we will become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works. That's the first lesson.

Second, if we want to become a church like this, then:

2. We need to be more intentional

Look again at verse 24:

And **let us consider** how to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24 ESV)

“Let us consider.” He is calling us here to give careful thought to how we might do this better. In a sense, we’re obeying this command in our sermon this morning! We’re stopping, and we’re giving our attention to how we might better live this out. One commentator observes that:

loving one another will not just happen. It needs to be worked at, even provoked, in the same way as good works.¹

Let me ask you: When is the last time that you sat down and gave real, careful thought to how you might spur on one of your brothers or sisters in Christ?

The individualism in us is going to bristle at this thought experiment. “Mind your own business! Don’t be a meddler! You’ve got enough problems – you don’t need to go meddling with the problems of the next guy.” Isn’t that often the narrative that creeps up in our minds?

But that’s the *opposite* of what we see commended in this passage.

And let us consider **how to stir up one another** to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24 ESV)

That expression of “stirring up” one another is actually a pretty soft rendering of the Greek. One commentator observes:

The word rendered “spur” [or “stir up”] is actually a noun, *paroxysmos*, which usually has a meaning like “irritation” or “exasperation.” It is most unusual to have it used in a good sense, and the choice of the unusual word makes the exhortation more striking.²

Let us consider how to *irritate* – how to *exasperate* – how to *agitate* one another to love and good works. Think about how you can be the rock in the shoe of the person who is walking off the path. That’s what this passage is calling for.

So again, I ask, when is the last time that you thought about this?

¹ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews (TNTC)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 217.

² Leon Morris, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Hebrews - Revelation)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 12, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 105. Brackets added.

What would it look like for you to begin to grow in this?

Think for a moment about a believer in your life that is struggling right now. Maybe they're running from God. Maybe they've stopped coming to church. Maybe they keep talking about wanting to read their Bible, or to pray, or to attend a small group, or to serve, but they can never make traction. Maybe they're slipping into a ditch of legalism, or a ditch of rebellion. Can you think of someone in any of those categories? Well, what would it look like for you to "stir them up"? Could you volunteer to drive them to church each Sunday? Could you start a reading plan together? Could you send them a Bible verse each day to encourage them in their season of despair? Could you commit to pray for them once a week?

Let us consider.

In view of the cross – in view of the God who entered into our mess to bring us home – let us each go home and consider how we might stir up one of the people in our lives who is struggling. If we're going to become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works, then we need to be more intentional.

Next, if we want to become a church like this, then:

3. We need to be together

The author to the Hebrews states the obvious in verse 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** (Hebrews 10:24-25a ESV)

Obviously, if we want to have any sort of positive effect on one another, then we need to be together. But what does "meet together" refer to? Is that limited to a church service? Or could that include smaller, informal gatherings? One commentator helpfully notes:

It may purposefully be left ambiguous so as to include other gatherings of a more informal kind, but the Greek word (*episynagoge*) suggests some official assembly.³

So, this “meeting together” can be accomplished in other ways – in small groups, and fellowship in our homes, and prayer groups – but the gathering that the author most likely expected us to envision was the formal gathering of the church.

Something special happens when the church comes together in corporate worship that doesn’t happen when we gather for a picnic. As we worship together, and pray together, and study together, and celebrate a baptism together, and partake of the Lord’s Supper together, God blesses that gathering in a special way.

And the author to the Hebrews is reminding us that we will never become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works if we neglect this gathering.

Now, obviously there are going to be legitimate reasons why you may not be able to gather on any given week. You’re going to get sick. You’re going to go away on a vacation. The world might get shut down on quarantine. Those things are going to happen from time to time. I’m not going to impose a legalistic number of “acceptable absences” to try to fence you in because fences are completely ineffective when a person’s heart is longing to get outside. If you don’t think this gathering matters as much as your favorite pass time then you’ll jump whatever legalistic fence anyone tries to build.

The author to the Hebrews doesn’t erect a fence. He simply points to the cross, and then points to the church, and then reminds each and every one of us that this gathering together is more important than any of us realize.

This gathering really matters. Your presence here with your brothers and sisters really matters.

Can I tell you something? I have heard so many times some iteration of, “Oh, I know I haven’t been at church for a month, but I’m still doing okay. I’m reading my Bible, and I’m listening to

³ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews (TNTC)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 218.

great sermons in my headphones while I do my daily walk. I'm receiving *more than enough*, and I'll be back to church soon."

But that thinking is an overflow of the individualistic air that we breathe. If this gathering was only about *receiving* then, by all means, there are easier ways to receive more and better! But this gathering *isn't* just about what you receive.

It's also about what you give.

Your presence matters. Your relationships matter. Your encouragement matters. The example that you set, and the love that you model, and the worship that you exude matters. We are healthier, and stronger, and better able to stir up one another to love and good works when you are here.

And, on the flip side, when you are not here, we feel it.

I want to challenge you to prayerfully consider what this passage is teaching.

Is it possible that you have not been thinking about the effect that your absence has on the body of Christ? Is it possible that you are underselling just how much you matter to what God is doing in this congregation? Is it possible that you have been neglecting to meet together? If we want to become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works, then we need to be together.

Fourth, and finally, if we want to become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works, then:

4. We need to take seriously the coming judgement

We see this in verse 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. (Hebrews 10:25 ESV)

That expression "the Day" refers to the Day of the Lord – the time when the dead will be raised up from their graves and every person who has ever lived will stand before the judgement seat of

God. If we forget that this day is coming – if we forget that Jesus told us that he would return at a time when we least expect him– then we will adopt a careless, apathetic approach to life.

I have fallen into that trap, and I suspect that I’m not the only one. It is easy – living as we do in the lap of luxury surrounded by toys and hobbies and distractions – to forget that this world is passing away and that only what we do for Christ will last. It’s easy to make peace with sin. It’s easy to buy the lie that I can have the best that the world has to offer *and* the best that Jesus has to offer. But look at the very next verse in our passage:

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,²⁷ **but a fearful expectation of judgment**, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27 ESV)

Let me put this whole argument together now. The author to the Hebrews is telling us that Jesus has died in our place so that sinners like you and me can receive forgiveness for our sins and can have access to our holy God! Therefore, we should think carefully and intentionally about how we can provoke one another to grow in this walk with Jesus! We should show up, and we should press in, because the day is soon coming when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord! And, on that day, some of the people who thought that they were “in” will discover that they were “out.” The people who worshipped Jesus with their mouths but worshipped the world with their lives will face a fearful judgement. Some of those people just might be sitting in this room!

“Well, what is the solution pastor? How can we guard ourselves and our families against this self-deception – this falling away?” The answer is sitting next to you and in front of you and behind you! Or at least, according to this passage, they’re supposed to be! This ought to be a place where you are literally *surrounded* by people who are committed to doing everything humanly possible to help you to be ready for that day of judgement.

Do you believe that? Are your kids learning that from the example that you’re setting? Do they see the beauty of the church? Do they see her value? Her preserving power? As one pastor explains:

We cannot endure in isolation.⁴

⁴ R. Albert Mohler Jr. et al. eds., *Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), 158.

We need each other. As we saw a few weeks ago, God made each of us *strategically deficient*. It is not good for man to be alone. We were designed to do this life together.

This isn't simply a call to show up. This is a call to adopt a whole new way of thinking. This is a call to leave behind the old familiar mantra "What's in it for me?" and to ask instead "How can I help my friends in their walk with Jesus?" I'll come out and say it: I need help. I need friends like this. I need a church like this. And so do you. And so do our kids. And so do our neighbors. So, by the grace of God, let's put that individualism behind us and let's become a church that stirs up one another to love and good works.

To that end, let's pray together.