

The Purpose of Small Groups: Hebrews 10:24-25
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This morning I want to talk about the purpose of small groups. Why do we have small groups at this church? Why are they so important? What kinds of things should happen in these gatherings? The passage that I want to look at is Hebrews 10:19-25, because verses 24-25 give us a great picture of what should be going on in small groups. This is why we have small groups—so that we can foster this kind of mutual edification within the body.

In the verses there are three exhortations. Three times we read, “Let us . . .” do something. In verse 22, “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” In verse 23, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” And in verse 24, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” I want to take these one at a time: draw near (verses 19-22), hold fast (verse 23), consider one another (verses 24-25). And we’ll spend most of our time on that last one and apply it to small groups.

Draw Near (verses 19-22)

But let’s begin with verses 19-22 and this amazing invitation and exhortation to “draw near.” The writer of Hebrews uses this word in other places as well, and it’s clear that he’s talking about drawing near *to God*.

"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."
 (Hebrews 4:16, ESV)

"And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6, ESV)

I want to make the point, if you don’t realize it already, that drawing near to God is the most glorious thing that can happen to a person. Whether you acknowledge it or not, the only thing that can satisfy the deepest cravings and longings of your heart is to be in the presence of God. So don’t hear this command in Hebrews 10:22 (“let us draw near”) as a mere duty, as a chore, as something boring or unpleasant. God rewards those who seek Him. He rewards us with the pleasure of being near Him. He, Himself, is the reward. He’s the treasure.

And if you are wandering through life dissatisfied, restless, angry, unhappy, empty, then please hear the call of the Gospel to draw near to God. Come to Him. Find your satisfaction in Him. Find rest in Him. Find peace in Him. Find happiness in Him.

Find your ultimate fulfillment in Him. The wonder of it all is that this is even possible.

Verses 19-21 show us what had to happen in order to make this possible. Drawing near to God is not something we can take for granted. Because on our own we cannot stand in the presence of God. He is holy, and we are sinners. And our sin stands a great wall between us and God. Our sin separates us from God.

But look at what has happened (verses 19-20): “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.” In order to understand this we need to remember some things about the Old Testament holy places and the Old Testament priests. Under the old covenant, the high priest would enter the holy places at specified times. In Hebrews 9 some of this is recounted. It mentions the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, and says in verse 6 and following, “the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.” In this way the people were reminded regularly of their sin and their need for atonement. There had to be blood. There had to be death. Sin is that serious. And the blood of those bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4), but the blood was a pointer to the ultimate sacrifice—Jesus Christ. This is what we’re seeing in verses 19-20. It’s by *His* blood that we have confidence to enter the holy places. This is the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through the curtain—that curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the curtain that was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died. And in verse 21 Jesus is the great priest over the house of God. Jesus Christ is the great priest, who made the ultimate blood sacrifice, and it’s because of Him that we can confidently enter the holy places.

It’s only through Him that we can draw near to God. Jesus, Himself, said in John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He is our only hope. Those who are not trusting in Jesus remain separated from God, far from God, condemned by God. But those who are united to Christ by faith can draw near. We can draw near to the most glorious, exciting, satisfying, beautiful Being in the universe. We can be drawn into the infinite enjoyment of our Triune God, and we will spend eternity in His glorious presence.

Let me say to you, if you are not walking with the Lord, please turn from your foolish ways. Turn from the world. Turn from the fleeting pleasures of this life and draw near to God. I pray that God will open your eyes to see the path of destruction

that you are on and to see the pleasures of drawing near to Him. You can't draw near to Him in your sin. You can't enter His presence unless your sins are covered. And it's only by the blood of Jesus that you can be cleansed. We must come to Jesus in faith, as verse 22 points to, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." And we can come with this kind of assurance because we are sprinkled clean, we are washed with pure water. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, died in the place of unrighteous sinners like me and you, in order to cover our sin and clothe us in His righteousness. 1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." This is how we can draw near to God, because the righteous died for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

That is the first exhortation in Hebrews 10:19-25. It is this wonderful invitation to draw near, with the reminder that it's only possible because of the blood of Jesus.

Hold Fast (verse 23)

The second exhortation is found in verse 23, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

This is a command to persevere, and specifically to persevere in hope. The word for "hold fast" is found two other times in Hebrews. In 3:6, "but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope." And in 3:14, "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." We must hold fast, and true believers *will* hold fast. By God's grace, we will keep hoping in Him.

How does this happen? It can happen because there is great reason to hope in God. The second half of the verse says, "for he who promised is faithful." We serve a faithful God. We serve a God who keeps all of His promises. And therefore, we have great reason to hope in Him. When we are lacking hope, it's not because of anything in God. It's not as though God is unfaithful to His promises and therefore we lose hope. No, the problem is in us. The problem is that we don't rivet our attention on the trustworthiness of God. As Hebrews 12 says, we need to look to Jesus, "the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Our sinful nature is constantly drawing our gaze toward the things of the world, which is such a barren and depressing landscape. We must lift up our eyes to behold the glory and the majesty of God Almighty. This is something we each need to

strive for in our own lives. We need to fight the fight of faith on a daily basis, spending time in God's Word and in prayer. Searching for hope. Meditating on our great hope. Pleading with God to help us see more and more reasons for hope. We must each pursue this in our personal lives. But we are not able, and God did not design us in such a way, that we can do this by ourselves. And this leads us to the third exhortation in the passage, which is so applicable to small group ministry.

Consider One Another (verses 24-25)

We are to draw near to God. We are to hold fast the confession of our hope. And next we're given an exhortation that reveals God's intention for the community of believers. And this is why small groups exist at Grace Church, in order to live out this command. The command in verse 24 is, "consider one another." The translation says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." It's difficult to bring out in an English translation the fact that "one another" is the direct object of "consider." A more literal, but awkward, translation would be, "And let us consider one another unto the stirring up of love and good works." This word consider means to consider closely. It's not just noticing one another. It's studying one another. The writer of Hebrews uses this word in 3:1, "consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession." We are to give close attention to Jesus. Consider Him closely. Study Him. And now we're instructed to consider one another.

Do you do this? Do you take the time to think about other people? Do you consider your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you pray for them? Do you think about evidences of grace in their lives, areas of weakness, joys, struggles, triumphs, temptations? This is how we should consider one another. We need to know each other. We need to share life together. And since there's only a certain amount of time in each day and in each week, it's not possible to have this kind of relationship with every Christian you know. Therefore we need to be intentional about meeting together in smaller groups in order to do this.

We need to be spending regular time with a group of believers where this kind of considering can happen—a group that's small enough to foster these kinds of relationships. A place where we can come together and study God's Word and apply it to our lives, and then also have some focused time in prayer for one another, when the men go off and share with one another and pray together, and the women do the same. There are many issues that we face in the fight of faith that are easier to share and only appropriate to share in a group of the same gender. And that's why I think it's important for the men and women to separate for those

prayer times, and also why the women's small group and the men's small group are such great opportunities to build deeper relationships with others.

To be clear, let me just say that small groups are by no means the only place for this to happen. I hope that you have many edifying relationships outside of your small group. I'm not saying that considering one another can only happen in our small group ministry. What I'm trying to communicate is the necessity of this kind of life-on-life fellowship, considering one another, meeting together, encouraging each other. That's why our small groups exist. And if these things aren't happening in your life, then you need to join one of these small groups where you can begin to build these relationships.

The verse goes on to show us the purpose of considering one another. The command is: consider one another. And as we consider one another, as we spend time with each other and learn more about one another, our responsibility as fellow believers is to stir up one another to love and good works. We need to study one another with the intention of stirring up love, stirring up good works. This is done in a general way in the preaching and teaching of the church, but it is also done so powerfully in personal relationships where a dialogue can happen and specific encouragement can be given. Where we can hold one another accountable, and probe into the deep issues of life. We need to study one another, and ask questions, and pray, and offer counsel.

God doesn't intend for us to live the Christian life in isolation. He doesn't want you to close yourself up by yourself and try to fight the fight of faith on your own. He has given us this amazing means of grace called Christian fellowship, and what I want you to see this morning is how desperately you need this. Each and every one of us, if left to ourselves, would shrivel up and die spiritually. Our love would become cold. Our good works would fade. There would be no passion for the Lord, no delight in Him. The things of God would become less and less appealing, and the things of the world would become more and more appealing. That's why we need to stir up one another to love and good works. As we're commanded in Hebrews 3:13, we must "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin is deceitful. It lies to us. And we need the insight and honesty and boldness of our brothers and sisters in Christ to exhort us continually. We need people who love us enough and love the truth enough to tell us, "I'm concerned about the decisions you've been making. I'm concerned that you are compromising in this area of your life. I'm concerned by your lack of passion for the Lord. Don't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!" We need

people in our lives who are attentive enough to notice these things, and are committed enough to ask the hard questions and say the hard things.

To do this, we have to meet together, which is what our text goes on to say in verse 25, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.” It certainly is the habit of some, both then and now, to neglect meeting together with other believers. And that is a very scary position to be in. It leaves a person susceptible to sin and to Satan. Therefore one of the key ways that we can stir up one another to love and good works is simply by making sure we don’t neglect meeting together. If you notice that someone has been missing from corporate worship, has been missing from small group, don’t ignore that! Go after that person. Let them know that they have been missed. Warn them of the danger they are in if they neglect meeting together with other believers.

Verse 25 concludes in an interesting way. We are given these instructions to consider one another and stir up one another to love and good works, not to neglect meeting together, but to encourage one another. And then it says, “and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The Day is the final Day of Judgment that will happen at the end of the age when Christ returns. And as we see that Day drawing near, which every generation of Christians must see—we must always be looking with anticipation to that great Day—we will see the importance of meeting together. We will realize the impossibility of making it on our own. As we see the increasing evil on the earth, we will want to be meeting together more and more. In Matthew 24, where Jesus’ disciples ask Him, “what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?” Jesus responds, “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:4-14) So as we see these things approaching, as we see the immanence of Christ’s return, we must see all the more how important it is for us to meet together for encouragement and

edification, so that our love will not grow cold, so that we will not be led astray.

Let me close with 2 comments about the “one another” emphasis in Hebrews 10. First of all, I was thinking of one of the passages we looked at last week. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Something we see in those verses is that the pastors and teachers don’t do all the work of the ministry. The leaders in the church equip the saints (all of us) for the work of ministry. And I think the “one another” emphasis in Hebrews 10 is a great example of how this happens. It says, “consider how to stir up one another . . . encourage one another.” It doesn’t say, Meet together so that your pastors and teachers can encourage you and stir you up to love and good works. That should happen, of course. But there’s a “one another” component of the Christian community that is essential for the growth of the body.

You don’t have to be a pastor to do the work of the ministry. If the body of believers just relies on the pastors to do these things, then these things won’t happen nearly enough. If you see an issue in someone’s life—a matter of sin that needs to be addressed, or any kind of spiritual need or physical need—pray about how God might use *you* to minister to that person. Pray about how *you* can speak the truth in love to that person, how you can counsel and be a friend for that person in the midst of a difficult time, how you can provide for a physical need. We all need to be involved in the work of the ministry.

Finally, I want to say that ministering to one another in these ways, and being ministered to, requires that we put away pride and humble ourselves before our brothers and sisters. There’s a humility that is needed even to show up at a small group. And there’s a very dangerous pride that’s involved if we don’t show up. If we avoid meeting together, as is the habit of some, then we are basically saying, “I’m spiritual enough and mature enough to live the Christian life on my own. I don’t need any of you.” How arrogant that is, when we think that way. We desperately need one another.

We need to be humble to open up with others and let them examine our lives. We need to be humble to receive correction. Pride will drive us apart and weaken us in isolation, but humility will bring us together and allow us to strengthen and encourage each other. I acknowledge, it is not easy to be vulnerable and to let others see you for who you really are. But, by God’s grace, we will see how desperately we need to do this. And then we will also experience the amazing blessings that come from it.

My hope for you this morning is that you will desire the kind of Christian fellowship that we've learned about in Hebrews 10. My hope is that we will all be more intentional in considering one another, and stirring up one another to love and good works, and meeting together to encourage one another. And it's my fervent prayer that the small groups of this church will foster these very things, and that every one of us will be involved.

You'll see in the worship folder a list of small groups. Please, if you're not already committed to one of these groups, call one of these leaders and plan to get plugged in.