

Hebrews 10:19-25
Church covenant: meeting together

I wouldn't dare mention Christmas this early in the year. But I wonder if I can get away with mentioning New Year. And specifically, New Year's Resolutions. It is a rather jokey topic, isn't it? We call them "resolutions", but does anyone really expect that you are likely to be keeping any that you make, a month later, perhaps even only a week later? It seems to me that "resolution" isn't really the right word at all. Even "intention" is a bit stronger than it actually implies, for most people.

So I think there are ways that we maybe *want* to be, that perhaps we feel we *should* be ... ways even that we do even manage to maintain briefly: 10,000 steps per day, cutting out red meat ... but the burger or the evening on the settee watching *The Apprentice* (or both) just seem too tempting. We slowly slump back into our bad habits.

And I want to suggest to you that it can be very similar with our spiritual lives and spiritual understanding, too. Here, we *love* the word "grace". We're loosely affiliated to the group of churches that call themselves "Grace Baptist". It almost feels like I'm overdoing it by how many times I put this verse

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

on screen. But then I wonder if you *can* overdo the grace of God. A couple of verses later on it says,

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

(John 1:16)

But I still think that grace is one of the hardest things to really grasp and understand – and to keep hold of. There are times we can just about, we feel, *get it*. It is like that perfect moment on a holiday, with the sun and shade and sea and breeze and temperature just right – and the kids not screaming at each other. If you're even luckier, you capture that moment with a well-timed photograph. But the moment passes. The kids start niggling again. Or *you* do. Or it just starts to rain, or the sun finally sets. And then it is back to more normal life.

And if you're a believer in Jesus, even if you came to Christ decades back – perhaps *especially* if you came to Christ decades back – the danger is for us to sink back into *religion* instead of faith. What maybe starts as enthusiasm becomes an established habit ... and then a routine ... and then (drop the "a") *just* routine ... and then, it is possible, an empty habit. It can even become – play on words intended – an *act* of worship.

It becomes a matter of simply keeping various rules – or insisting that others do. *That* somehow substitutes in our thinking for real spirituality and faith. And therefore no wonder that nowadays many people are happy to be described as "spiritual", but they'd take it as an insult if you called them "religious". Come to think of it, isn't that actually a helpful distinction? A useful insight, that we can actually agree with an unbeliever on? Do *you* want to be merely a *religious* person, ticking all the external boxes, but with a dry and dusty heart slowly mouldering away inside you?

And one of the verses in today's passage is one that is so often quoted in what can so easily become a legalistic way. The *reason* for why is so often omitted. It is just used to berate people about how important it is to go to church – even if you have no real idea what to do when you get there. Haven't you heard it used that way, if you're honest?

... not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, ...

(Hebrews 10:25)

And you can sometimes almost hear the self-righteous tone, the kind of almost sneer as “as is the habit of *some*” is quoted. Fingers metaphorically pointing around at all these fellowships that *scandalously* no longer have a Sunday evening service.

But do you know what are the most significant parts of that quotation on screen? It's the

Highlight ellipses

Those show there's something missing, before and after, in that quote. So today we are going to make sure we get this properly in context. And that is the only way we are ever likely to really understand *why* we must not neglect to meet together. And that is the only way we are ever really likely to effectively commit or re-commit together by means of that Church Covenant we'll be introducing next year.

That's why this sermon now, by the way, the third one in the series. We've already looked at the first two promises:

We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church; exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

And here's the third, that you can see we're starting on today.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

In the context, in that covenant, that is not a stand-alone promise. It goes along with others. It is an obvious consequence of others. And it logically leads on to others – such as not just mixing with people, but *praying* for (and perhaps even *with*) them.

So let's get back to Hebrews 10, and put this “not forsaking” comment back in its context, like a plant that needs its roots returning to a flower bed and its native soil. I just need to show you a bit of the structure of this chapter, so that we can get the proper force – and the proper understanding and application – out of this one verse. The passage start with a “therefore”, though ...

Therefore, brothers, ...

(Hebrews 10:19)

So that's going to be a good clue as to where we look first. Backwards a bit.

The book of Hebrews again, just like last week. And remember that single word to sum it up? *Better*. Jesus Christ is better than every individual element of the Jewish religion, and better than the whole Jewish religion combined. The writer has been applying that thinking to various aspects of the OT for 9 chapters now, with applications to their readers as they go. But we're now coming to the start of the end of the letter, where the applications and exhortations come thick and fast. I think our "therefore" here most likely looks back over the whole book so far, in one way or another, and is saying "on account of *all of this*".

So we'll pick up the conclusion of the first part of the book at the start of chapter 10.

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, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

(Hebrews 10:1)

All that stuff that seemed to occupy so much of the OT ... that didn't actually work! Those sacrifices, that temple, all of that system, were just like models, rather than the real thing.

Like kiddies' toys, something like that, do you think? We've had the grandchildren down recently, and the living room floor disappears underneath toy train tracks. And Reuben will hold the engine and haul it around the tracks, carriages and trucks attached behind by magnets. He might even make train noises. In his imagination, those are engines and carriages and tracks. But we know they're just pieces of wood. There is no steam or diesel or electrical power in them, really. They might look ever so accurate, but they're no more the real thing than the picture of Jenny in my wallet is actually my wife.

But Jesus is the real deal – far and above better than those preliminary mock-ups of the OT. Look at the contrasts here in some verses later in the chapter:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ...

(Hebrews 10:11-12)

Job *done*! Or, to use Jesus' own words:

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

(John 19:30)

That's why we can revel in grace here. There is nothing that you or I need to do *before* we come to Christ, in order to make ourselves acceptable to God. There is nothing that you or I need to do *after* we have come to Christ, in order to *keep* ourselves acceptable to God. Just let the full force of this hit you between the eyes, and keep it as a promise to steady and balance your soul:

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

(Hebrews 10:14)

And *now* we come to the *therefore* at the start of our passage:

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, ...

(Hebrews 10:19-20)

Because Jesus is better than all the OT provisions, because salvation is *sorted*, folks, have

Confidence

Now that's an interesting word, and forgive me if I pause on it for a moment. I think it might be helpful to think around its nuances briefly.

First, there's the obvious, meaning that we just normally give to it in English. Something that doesn't trouble you, something that you feel you can take in your stride.

Imagine you have been invited to a big do. It could have been me, over 40 years ago, invited for the first time to spend Christmas with Jenny's family, most of whom were at that stage just names to me at best. Or maybe think of a big civic or church do, where you're not sure exactly what is going to happen, and don't know most of the people there from Adam.

What gives you *confidence* in that kind of situation? It has having someone who has told you they will meet you and be at your side the whole time. It is like that famous reassurance given to Joshua, being commissioned to take over from Moses:

“Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”

(Joshua 1:5)

And is it not wonderful that we have an even bigger assurance than that? You and I can stand before the almighty and holy God, if you have put your faith in Jesus. You and I are invited into his presence. The Lord Jesus Christ has invited you there. The Lord Jesus Christ has given his life in order to provide us with legitimate access to the throne room of the universe. And the Lord Jesus Christ will be there to escort you in. Doesn't *that* give you confidence, as this passage says?

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, ...

(Hebrews 10:19-20)

But there is another nuance to this word, which might be relevant.

Openness

If you look particularly in John's Gospel, it is on numerous occasions translated as “openly”. I think I can see that as being relevant to the first readership of Hebrews. If they were Christians with a Jewish background, tempted to keep quiet about their faith because

of increasing opposition from their society or persecution by the authorities, isn't doing things *openly* a big issue?

The first few times I went to Redruth Baptist Church as a kid, I didn't want my parents to know where I was going, so I invented a story about going to play snooker with a kid from up the road. But there came a time when, if I was going to follow Jesus, I had to be *open* about my new faith – or, at least, at that stage, my going to that strange *Baptist* place down the road.

That's a reason why baptism, in anything except perhaps the extremest circumstances, should be something public, and it should precede church membership. How can you be sufficiently convinced that someone is really a follower of Jesus Christ, and as a church announce that you think that is so, by baptising them, if they refuse to submit to Jesus' own basic definition of discipleship?

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

(Matthew 28:19-20)

So there's a natural link between those two nuances of the word, isn't there? If you're *confident* about something, you're more likely to do it *openly*. It's possible to do something openly when you *don't* have total confidence. Maybe that is also part of what faith is about. That could be something that Jesus spoke a specific blessing about:

Jesus said to [Thomas], “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

(John 20:29)

And maybe that's why Hebrews 10, talking about this kind of confidence, follows up with chapter 11, with all those examples of people walking openly by faith *even when* they saw things far less clearly than we do nowadays.

But there is a final nuance to the word

Boldness

Something like a mixture of the previous two, possibly. Open confidence, which can lead you to do things that seem jaw-droppingly hazardous.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ...

(Hebrews 10:19)

Folks, isn't that really verging into *boldness*, too? Remember another description of this Almighty God from the same book?

... let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

(Hebrews 12:28-29)

You would be absolutely crazy to approach this God other than through Jesus! But that is exactly what chapter 10 says we can do, for this is not the mindless boldness that is just dressed-up stupidity. This boldness is justified, because it is based not on our subjective feelings, but on objective reality. We do not simply have confidence. Read on.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence ... and [since we have] a great priest over the house of God, ...

(Hebrews 10:19-21)

We have *also* a great priest, that anchor into objective spiritual reality: Jesus. And because of these

Two reasons

we have

Three applications

Let me put the whole passage up, so you can see how it works:

... 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.

(Hebrews 10:22-25)

But we'll quickly run through to the last of these. Here's the first application, the first *in that case, let us ...*

... 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)

Since we are invited to attend the courtroom of heaven – we don't just consider ourselves invited, but, even more importantly, we have an actual invitation signed by the Lord himself – then *let us attend*. Be sure. Let that confidence which we have in theory, in principle, be lived out in actuality.

The “pure water” mentioned there, I'm not totally sure of, but my initial guess would be a reference to baptism. It's important enough to mention – and it seems to imply here that anyone claiming to be a disciple of Jesus *will* have been baptised – but it's not enough just by itself. It's just an outward sign – and something that can be just part of old dead religion, rather than living faith.

So we've got the living, inward faith side of things too. The *evil conscience* has been tackled. It could be a falseness of confidence that makes you doubt your salvation – and that's why I will so often put up on screen here that wonderful assurance of grace:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

Do not let your evil conscience doubt the willingness of God to forgive your sins *completely* and eternally, because of Jesus.

But the falseness of confidence could, by contrast, make you *presume upon* your salvation. It could deceive you into thinking that your mere external religious performance is what brings you close to God. Wear the right clothes. Say the right words. Smile the right smile. In which case, read the adjoining verses in 1 John 1.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

(1 John 1:8,10)

Do not let your evil conscience presume that God will forgive your sins on account of anyone or anything other than Jesus Christ.

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

(Hebrews 10:23)

Another encouragement to just keep going, to not back off, to not wobble. Remember who is calling you. Remember that this God is wholly trustworthy and dependable.

And now finally, the third *let us*. And this follows up with a bit more explanation, with first a negative and then a positive application.

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.

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

Those previous two *let us* lines were things that you could do collectively or individually, but this is something that is fairly and squarely referring to the collective side of things. Look, it's got that ***one another*** word there. This is something that does not make sense to consider if you think you can be a lone Christian.

Now I'm not going to labour this first section too greatly, because, curiously enough, we covered exactly this same passage right back at the beginning of the year, and I hope you remember a bit of it from then. But just look at the force of the next section, the one that I started off today by saying can so often be just used as a club to bash people into church attendance on Sundays. Look at it in context. It's simply saying that you can't do the first bit if you don't do the second bit.

How are you ever going to "stir up one another to love and good works" if you don't have contact with those "one another" people? The fact that *some* people are dropping out of active contact - "as is the habit of some" - isn't a sufficient reason for *your* doing it too.

Just notice how quickly we sink to the legalistic approach, though! We think so quickly *Sunday meetings* (plural?) here, I suspect – and possibly a church midweek meeting of some kind – but I'm sure that this passage isn't talking simply about mere *attendance* at official church meetings. But it's entirely possible to be present at a meeting like this and contribute *nothing* towards those *one-another* commands.

Folks, can I ask whether you come here on Sundays, or midweek, with some intentionality of doing good to someone else, in the name of Jesus? Do you go home and think to yourself or complain to someone else, *well, I didn't get a lot out of that!* In which case, doesn't that show that you have come along with a very false perspective of what to expect? It's *not* about what we get. Or, at least, it's as much about how we can *be* a blessing as about how we can be blessed.

So, folks, dare I ask ... what are your plans and intentions towards your fellow believers here? How are you hoping to “stir them up to love and good works”? Does that feature on your radar? Does it feature at all, if you're not on some rota responsibility for the day?

And do you think that it finishes the moment you leave the building? To be fair, the word that is used here does have a particular nuance of “official meetings”. Part of the Greek word is the root “synagogue”. So it says that those people reading it needed to meet together on those occasions, if they're going to be able to “stir up one another”. There might not even have been many other possibilities in their day, for some of the believers.

But certainly nowadays you can argue that we also have decent postal services – e-mail as well as snail-mail! Mobile phone technology means we can be a whole lot more in contact than ever before. I think it's amazing that nowadays Jenny and I can see our grandchildren, live, from hundreds of miles across the Tamar, courtesy of Whatsapp. But for real heart to heart, for real opening up, I still don't think there is anything that comes that close to actual personal time, face to face, with someone else.

And for some things, the “official church meeting” is almost the opposite of that. It can be the time when you feel you need to put on a false smile, when really you need someone to just listen quietly as you bawl your eyes out.

Folks, we can so easily reduce this verse to outward religious observance, and totally overlook what it is really getting at. We looked at “encouragement” last week – so I'm not going to repeat that, other than to say it is a word which can mean everything from comfort to challenge – but with the nuance, usually, of *from alongside*.

So here's the question that this verse should call us to address, when we read out that line from the church covenant early next year. When it talks about “not neglecting to meet together”, will we consciously include *the Bible's* stated purpose for our meeting together? Not simply to tick the attendance box. But to

stir one another up to love and good works

by

encouraging (as required, comforting and/or challenging) *one another*

And I like where the church covenant wording takes us on to, as well, even if it's not included in this verse in Hebrews.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

We might actually get the intentionality right, and still miss out on fulfilling our duty to one another. We might think it's about our desire to be a blessing, which would be good. We might even speak precisely the right words – or listen the right listen – and that would be good, undoubtedly. But we could forget that this is not simply *our* work.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

(1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

And so the covenant reminds us, rightly, not just to come with the intention to be a blessing to one another, but to give God his rightful and necessary place in the process. We consciously purpose for one another to grow in grace. We *pray for* one another to grow in grace. But our loving heavenly Father is the one will give that growth.

Pray with verse on screen again