

## Hebrews 3:7-19 “Brotherly love”

I remember reading fairly recently about a missionary working in a rather different culture – probably somewhere in Africa. Obviously, as well as a different culture they have different weather, and different animals and plants. So this missionary was really feeling quite pleased that in a few days time, he would enjoy the first ever home-grown oranges he had ever managed to cultivate. His single tree was about ready to harvest.

Only when he thought the time was right, and he went to collect the fruit and to savour the fresh-from-the-tree overflowing-with-flavour fruit, they had *gone*. He quickly worked out that the culprits were his next door neighbours, who had just walked by, seen the fruit, and *pilfered* it. He was, you could perhaps say, just toning it down a bit, *incensed* by this theft.

But that is just thinking like a Brit in a foreign culture, where it is not just that different plants and animals grow and thrive. In that African culture, they do things differently. Unlike in the UK, taking fruit from your neighbours' gardens is just accepted as normal and legitimate. It is probably equivalent to me at this time of year stopping if Jenny and I are out on a walk, because I'm picking wild-growing blackberries *again*. Here, hedgerows are fine, but next door's garden *isn't*. We just don't do it that way.

And one more thing that we just *don't* tend to do here is to become too involved in one another's lives. It just isn't really the British way to meddle in someone else's business. “It's not my place”, we would say. We live in a culture that is really very individualistic, nowadays, people feeling that they have certain rights – and even someone else's *needs* may have to come second to that. You wouldn't even *think* about entering their garden and walking off with their prize lettuce.

So what we're looking at today is going to push some of us quite some distance from our comfort zones. We might like to think of our “Englishman's homes as our castles”. I confess I do often arrive home on a Sunday evening, crash out on the settee, and feel quite like hoisting the drawbridge until Tuesday morning.

But it really won't do. God has not set up his church to work that way. The NT is full of those awkward two words in English, one word in Greek, *one another*. I'm sure I heard someone say there are about 50 occasions it's used in that way, pretty much one to work on every week of the year. And we've probably got one of the biggest and most intrusive of them in the verse we'll be focusing on in today's passage, too:

***But exhort one another every day, ...***

(Hebrews 3:13)

When we see what the word that is translated there as “exhort” is getting at, and follow it with “every day”, it will be obvious that we're talking about something that, in *our* society, especially, is going to be decidedly counter-cultural. Folks, perhaps I need to flag up a warning before we start properly: we're looking today at something far more outrageous than simply taking our neighbours' prize vegetables. Instead, it's the kind of thing that has been characteristic of authentic Gospel ministry right from the start:

***So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.***

(1 Thessalonians 2:8)

The question is whether, *because we are disciples of Jesus Christ*, we are prepared to share *ourselves* more. To be open. To be honest. Even to be willing to make ourselves vulnerable. To be able – as we got onto last week – to speak gracious truth to one another, for Jesus' sake:

***... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way ... into Christ, ...***  
(Ephesians 4:15)

It will mean daring to speak, and daring to listen. But it is not just something we are told we must do. In Hebrews we're also told *why we need to* do this. Just as last week, we're going to zoom on one or two particular verses in the passage, but we'll need to take a moment to make sure that we are understanding this properly in context.

But just before we dive in, can I also remind you why we are doing this series through until the end of November. You can catch up, if you haven't seen it yet or just can't remember it, on what I wrote in this month's magazine about that "Church Covenant" that we'll be inviting you to participate in. We started last week with the first of the commitments that we'll be endeavouring to make:

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

The second commitment is a whole lot longer, and although I've summarised it based on the first few words, at the top of your notes sheets, I think the direction it pushes is much more along the lines of that Bible passage we've read from Hebrews. Here's the wording for you, in full. It spells out one particular aspect of how "brotherly love" should manifest itself:

*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 it also specifies that this watching one another, is something that must be done out of *love* – "affectionate care". And it *must* be done out of love, putting the emphasis on the other word, if we are to be *faithful* in our exercise of loving one another as members of the family of God. If we do not do this ... we let one another down!

So quickly, let's get back to not just the couple of verses in Hebrews, but the chapter they come from. And the first verse chapter 3, even though it obviously continues a line of argument – there is a "therefore" there – is actually quite good as a summary of the book as a whole:

***Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, ...***

(Hebrews 3:1)

You can summarise the whole book in a single word: *better*. Jesus is *better* than all the best of the OT. So *consider Jesus*, focus on Jesus,

**... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**

(Hebrews 12:2)

**Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.**

(Hebrews 12:3)

Back in chapter 3, Moses might have been great in his time. Aaron might have been a superb high priest in his time. The OT sacrificial system had its place, in its time. But there is a *new* covenant coming, and ...

**In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.**

(Hebrews 8:13)

Why is it obsolete? Because something – *someone* – better is on the scene. *Jesus*. So – back to chapter 3.

**Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house.**

(Hebrews 3:1-2)

Just as Moses, yes ... but *better than* Moses. Greater than even Moses!

**Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son.**

(Hebrews 3:5-6)

God's house? The temple? Only figuratively. The writer says that it's *people*, not architecture. But notice the proviso that he adds at the end of this sentence:

**And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.**

(Hebrews 3:6)

And that proviso is really important in understanding this book as a whole. There are several passages in the book that really trouble some Christians. The question is often voiced, *Can I lose my salvation?* - and passages like these can seem to suggest that it's all down to us to keep ourselves going. If we run out of spiritual puff, then *tough!* ... to just put it mildly.

But I think there is a slightly different spin to put on passages like this, when you remember the context of the book as a whole. If you remember that this was most likely written to people with a Jewish background – hence the title, *Hebrews* – who had become disciples of Jesus ... but it was a time when it was becoming more and more uncomfortable to be known as a Christian. All so very tempting. So very understandable. Why not slip back to your Jewish roots, and just play down the name of Jesus a bit? Why invite hostility from the State? Why risk persecution, if here's a safe way to avoid it? Become, to all intents and purposes, Jews again. Doesn't it just make sense?

But no, this letter will be arguing, it *doesn't* make sense. Can a chick return to the egg and pull the bits of shell together for shelter? It won't be long after this letter is written that the Jewish temple will be destroyed by Roman armies. There will soon be *no* nest to return to. The eggshell will not just have been shattered, but scattered to the four winds!

So for two reasons, hiding back in Judaism would be a false response. First, it *doesn't* make sense; any safety there is only apparent, and it won't last.

And second, it is a lack of faith. It is a mark – see the word here – of *unbelief*. The writer is trying to encourage those believers to really believe, to be true to themselves:

***But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.***

(Hebrews 10:39)

But those testing circumstances will show up who is really a person of faith in Christ, and who isn't, that's for sure. Back to chapter 3. And add the now obvious *therefore*.

***And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, ..."***

(Hebrews 3:6-7)

Today, when all of this pressure is ramping up around you, *today*, when you are being reminded about Jesus Christ again, by this letter being read out as you meet together ... learn from those examples in that Jewish history you're so familiar with. Remember that when the people of Israel left Egypt, with that amazing triumph, the Egyptian forces racing to re-capture them lost in the Red Sea ... remember how those people also lost their way!

How come? Because they failed to continue believing in the God who had worked amazing miracles to save them, not generations back, not decades back, but recently in their own memories and experiences. But they forgot. They ceased to believe. So ... when you are reminded ... when God gives you another chance, *today* ... don't forget *again*. Don't be like those people that the OT tells you about. Don't make *their* mistake.

***Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years."***

(Hebrews 3:7-9)

A whole lost generation. Not just the 40 years, but that whole generation of *people*, lost, dying in the wilderness instead of experiencing the privileges of that land of promise. Because of *unbelief*.

***So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.***

(Hebrews 3:19)

So, obviously, look out! Take care!

***Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.***

(Hebrews 3:12)

But look, here is the further application of this. Not just – perhaps not even *primarily* – watch out for yourselves. I wonder if the primary thrust here is far less individualistic. It is, watch out for *one another*. We are to guard *one another's* backs against the hostilities of a world which is no longer our home.

And we're told here *how* to watch each other's backs, too. See that word “but”. Implication: to *stop* you from falling away from the living God, do this instead. Instead of seeing nothing, doing nothing – perhaps just whispering behind your net curtains about what's going on “out there” in other people's lives – make *this* your practice today. This *is* your business, if we are

***Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another.***

(Ephesians 4:25)

***But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.***

(Hebrews 3:13)

First big question if we're going to do this, of course, is that initial word.

**So what does “exhort” mean?**

And actually, it means a great deal of things. It is a very wide-ranging word. It can mean comfort, and it can mean challenge. We had some of that breadth, deliberately, in the verses on our screen as we prayed earlier. There's times when it's plain from context that it's being used in the more “stir you up” sense:

***When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ...***

(Acts 11:23)

Paul's instructions to Timothy sound like something even more insistent:

***preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.***

(2 Timothy 4:2)

... though you do also have to remember the “complete patience” that follows, so even if this is some pretty serious stuff, it isn't talking about actually haranguing people. Sometimes it will be more about persuading people – bringing them to see spiritual sense. See the reason Paul gives here: “by the mercies of God” - *considering* these things, *in the light of* these things:

***I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.***

(Romans 12:1)

And sometimes it has what we would regard as something a whole lot more pleasant. It really is a word behind both sides of that more general command the Paul gives:

***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.***

(Romans 12:15)

There are times, and people, and situations, when something more akin to a kick up the pants is needed. And there are times when what is needed is a shoulder to cry on.

***For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;***

(Ecclesiastes 3:1,4)

And so the same “exhort” word is actually the one that Paul uses in a much softer sense, too:

***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.***

(2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Do you think it's possible that we split into two groups on this one? Some of us seem quite happy to do the more confrontational stuff. A rebuke or a warning comes easily from their lips. Others of us find that really difficult to do – but a hug comes naturally. And probably it's good that we have people who are different in that way, or we'd either have a very barky kind of church or a very touchy-feely-huggy kind of church ... whereas *both* are needed at times.

And if you or I are close enough to someone to know some of their real needs, then it could be that *you or I*, despite our natural inclinations, need to do what comes less naturally to us – whether that's to speak gently or to speak sternly. But that is the ministry of “exhortation” that that person needs at that moment, and *you* (or *I*) are the one on the spot to deliver it.

**Seriously?? Every day??**

It could be that this sounds like pretty extreme stuff, speaking *that* personally ... so there is maybe an assumption that this will be a quite rare occurrence. And yet that isn't the impression that Hebrews gives us, is it?

***But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,”...***

(Hebrews 3:13)

Of course we could overdo this. This isn't a charter for Christian nosiness, people going around and forever dropping trite little comments on everyone in sight, like mummy bird back to the nest and having to drop a squirming caterpillar into every gaping mouth. I'm not at all thinking about that level of shallowness. In fact, it really *can't* be done swiftly and shallowly at all. “Exhortation” like this will be something that takes time. Nobody is going to be encouraged to do anything by a passing snappy kind of comment or a perfunctory hug. Soul work takes *time*.

So what is this saying here? I think it implies that we must be ready for this “whenever”. It must not be something rare and exotic, like politicians were supposed to go around and cuddle babies in the street ... and you could tell it was time for an election, because they never normally showed the slightest interest in hugging noisy brats and smiling sweetly.

Folks, I don't know what you think about church outings. I hope that you enjoy them when they happen. But hear me carefully when I say what I'm going to say. I'm not complaining, and I'm not fishing for compliments. It's just that for me, a church outing like Country Skittles is also work. It is time with people. And while it's good to just hang out, it is also for me a question of, *now that I'm here, who should I try to spend some time with?* The same with coffee after the service. Instead of just chatting with the usual suspects, who might need some time *today*? I have to approach those situations with *intentionality*. It might be lovely to just gravitate towards the people I feel more relaxed with, and have more in common with, and who are easier to relate to. And if I do that ... if we do that ... people – *needy* people – will slip through the net.

So what does that mean for all of us? I'm not saying that *you all* need to approach church social events with the same kind of intentionality that is necessary of the church leadership. The *elders* of a church have that responsibility in a particular way. Hebrews again, and not said of every believer:

***Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.***

(Hebrews 13:17)

But that doesn't mean that everyone else is to do nothing. It's the *same letter* that addresses believers more generally

***But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,”...***

(Hebrews 3:13)

That means that if you are a believer in Christ, and have committed yourself to not “the church” in the sense of an organisation, but the *people* who are the church, then we need to *know* each other, if we are going to be able to watch out for one another. In one way, it is so much easier that we are a smaller church, because there is the reasonable possibility that *everyone* can get to know *everyone else* to some decent extent. If the church had something like 100 members instead of the couple of dozen, it's a different ball game.

But I think it means we should set ourselves the objective of being on more than just “I recognise that face from across the room”. You want to belong – if you're serious about this Church Covenant, you're *saying* you commit yourself to belonging – then I'd suggest you use our church Who's Who list to ensure you make some time to get to know *everyone* there at some basic level. You can probably have some kind of more-than-just-about-the-weather conversation with just about everyone there every year. Some people, of course, you'll get to know a lot more deeply. But how on earth are we ever going to “exhort one another” - whether challenge or comfort – if we don't really know where each other is in their lives, what makes them tick, what concerns they have and what joys they have?

And yet ... And yet I do not want to make you feel that every conversation you have must be about something serious and “spiritual”. Some people can talk profound faith stuff routinely, but not everyone can. I suspect, in this church with a fair share of more introverted people, not so many are going to find it easy to just open up at the drop of a hat.

So do not be ashamed of talking about the weather or the garden or the Rugby World Cup when you talk. In fact, talk about whatever it is that gets you to feel you know that person ... so that when it comes to that needing to “exhort” them, it comes out of a relationship that is already established, rather than feeling like a spiritual mugging.

And finally, what should we be watching out for each other *for*? Our verse from Hebrews 3 tells us that, as well. What is the intended outcome of this “exhortation”, this challenge or comfort? Let's read it again.

***But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.***

(Hebrews 3:13)

Two words that I want to spotlight, quickly. First,

### **hardened**

It means toughened, but in a bad sense. In my earlier lab days, we sometimes would use rubber tubing to attach a bunsen burner to the gas tap, or a condenser to the water tap. Best to get those the right way around! So there were typically cupboards around with bits of pre-used rubber tubing, but there was a temptation to always get fresh new stuff, because those old bits of rubber tubing used to become *hardened*. Less flexible. Even liable to split, in severe cases.

That's the picture this word should conjure up for us today. It's actually the root word that medics use for the tubing inside our bodies. Blood vessels can fur up, we say – like water pipes in hard water areas – and the technical term is “sclerotic”. That's the Greek word that is used here.

So the warning is that we can become spiritually sclerotic, unable to do what we are designed to do, constricted, inflexible, unresponsive. It's got to be similar in meaning to a word that can apply to our consciences:

***... liars whose consciences are seared, ...***

(1 Timothy 4:2)

No longer sensitive in the ways that they should be. Do you sometimes notice someone moving a bit awkwardly, and you think that they could perhaps do with some physiotherapy – if not a hip or knee replacement – to get that mobility or balance back again? Well, do you sometimes notice in someone a spiritual equivalent of that limp or wobble? Maybe it's that they always go very quiet when a particular topic is mentioned. Do you stop and think, *what's going on there*?

Are they maybe feeling guilty about something they have done, and need to know the assurance of God's pardon? Do they need someone to encourage them to look again to Jesus Christ, and his promise of grace and forgiveness? Is their conscience, in this



case, not so much hardened as over-sensitive, convicting them falsely for sins that have already been confessed and forgiven?

Do they need someone to remind them that ...

***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)

Or perhaps someone is now rather unusually strident in their defence of something questionable. Is their conscience perhaps not troubling them enough? Could they need *you* to be that conscience, like a splint on a limb that has been broken and needs to re-knit itself together in proper shape again? Is it down to *you* to do what our final hymn will remind us of – and our Church Covenant will call us to accept and even welcome:

*Tell me that old, old story / When you have cause to fear  
That this world's empty glory / Is costing me to dear*

Folks, will you watch *my* back, because *I* need this? Will you accept people watching *your* backs, too, for those times when *you* need it?

Because this world does not box fair. The Queensbury Rules book has been thrown away. Expect punches below the belt, and from any angle you weren't expecting. No matter how well prepared you think you are, sin has a few sneaky tricks up its sleeve. Everyone will be deceived at times. Nobody is going to see every attack coming their way. We need other eyes, watching our backs, protecting our weak spots, scanning those obscure angles out of our own line of sight where an attack might come unexpectedly.

Folks, remember the ***deceitfulness*** of sin. And while we are given the Word of God and the Holy Spirit of God to grant us understanding and discernment, we are given one more protection for our souls: the *people* of God.

Folks, will we commit to growing in this area of collective grace together?

***Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.***

(Hebrews 3:12-13)

Are we ready to speak gracious truth to one another, in the strong but gentle spirit of Jesus Christ, to *exhort one another ... that none of US may be ...?*

People of God, let's lower those drawbridges of our Englishman's castles, and come out into warm refreshing clear air of fellowship between the disciples of Jesus Christ, as we walk in his footsteps as he always intended, *together*.

(Convert words on screen into prayer)