

Worship and Small Groups

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

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Hebrews 10:19-25

Sometimes it's hard to get out of bed and go to church on Sunday morning, isn't it? Did anyone have trouble with that today? You may have heard about the wife who woke up one Sunday and shook her husband and said "Honey, it's time to get up and go to church." He said "I don't want to go!" She said "You need to go to church today." The husband said. I don't want to go to church, and I'll give you two reasons: (1) I don't like them, and (2) They don't like me! The other day I was walking down the hall and I heard some people talking about me." The wife said "You are going to go, and I'll give you two reasons: (1) You're 50 years old, and (2) You're the Pastor.

Sometimes it's hard! But it's not just pastors that struggle with going to church. One time there was a preacher, who was preaching on the Lord's army and how important it is to be disciplined and gather for church. As he was shaking hands after the service, he saw someone who only ever came to church on Christmas and Easter that happened to be there that day. The preacher pulled the guy aside and said "Brother, are you the Lord's army?" The guy said "Absolutely I am, pastor." He said "Then how come I only ever see you at church on Christmas and Easter?" The man said "I'm in the secret service!"

Now I don't know which of those jokes is worse, but they raise an issue today and that is the issue of the gathering of the church. Going to church! Why should we gather? Why should we assemble? Why should we go to Sunday worship and to Small Group in the week? Why should we go to church?

It's a worthwhile question. Because this activity of going to church is a significant expenditure of our time. There are lots of other things we could be doing right now. The church asks a lot! Maybe some of you weren't raised in church. You used to feel pretty good if you went to church on Christmas and Easter. You come to Perry Creek and you're like "What? Church every week and Small Group? What is this? A cult?" Maybe some of you are wondering if there actually is a secret service in the Lord's army! It's a worthwhile question, because this is costly! It's also a worthwhile question, because many American Christians are choosing NOT to go to church. Or certainly not to go very often. Church attendance is down over the last 20 years across the board. That's not surprising. I think we all kind of knew that. But over the last few years, a more disturbing trend has taken place. Committed Christians, Christians who are clear about their faith and belong to a church, are attending church less than they used to. Decades ago the unstated standard was core members were in Church every Sunday except vacation, sort of 50 out of 52 Sundays a year. 15 years ago the standard had changed three out of four Sundays. Now some Churches consider you faithful if you're there two out of four Sundays.

Now before I go any further let me acknowledge a couple of things. First of all, let me acknowledge that Perry Creek is a little better than the average and that today, of all days, I am preaching to the choir! I mean for crying out loud, it's Labor Day weekend! If you're here today

you should get a gold star, not a sermon on the evils of missing church! I acknowledge that. I'm just preaching this so that you guys can talk about the other people who aren't here today. Just kidding, but I want to acknowledge your faithfulness.

I also want to acknowledge that there are lots of reasons that people miss church. For one thing, we're busy! It's harder to find time for anything these days! It's also true that we also live in a Post-Christian culture in America. Sunday is no longer sacred in our culture. Our jobs, schools and sports are going to schedule more and more things that conflict with church. I get that! Let's face it. You can watch church on TV or the internet.

So why should we gather? It's a worthwhile question. Well today, I want us to look at a passage that speaks to that very issue. Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 10:19-25.

Actually, today we are continuing in our series called "All-in" where we are looking at our Discipleship Pathway here at Perry Creek. Last week we defined what it means to be a disciple. We said discipleship means (1) Choosing to become a disciple, and (2) Living as a disciple with your heart, head, and hands, and then (3) We said it means to make disciples. Then secondly, we introduced you this which is our Discipleship Pathway. We noted that there are four stations in our pathway: Worship, Service, Small Group and Starting Point. We said all the ingredients of discipleship are found in our Pathway. We said people could start at our church anywhere on our pathway . But the goal is for you to participate fully, to be involved in worship in Small Group, to be serving somewhere and in Starting Point, if you need it. So we introduced our Discipleship Pathway last week. Today I want to talk about the two parts of that pathway that relate to gathering: Sunday Worship, which is what we are doing right now, and Small Groups.

To do that, I want us to look at this passage that talks about the importance of gathering. It's from the book of Hebrews, which is a letter that was written to Jewish Christians who were facing opposition to their faith. As they dealt with this opposition, some of them were discouraged, some were choosing NOT to gather together and some were even losing their faith. So the writer gives them a little pep-talk, encouraging them to continue in their faith and to continue the practice of regularly gathering together in large groups and small as Christians.

Today as we look at this passage here's what we are going to do:

1. Walk through this passage and see what it has to say about gathering.
2. Ask three questions that relate to gathering and to our Discipleship Pathway.

So let's read Hebrews 10:19-25. In the first several chapters, the writer has spoken about how that through his death, Jesus has opened a new, living way for us to approach God and be accepted by him. He talked about how Jesus is our High Priest, who is always there in God's presence to intercede for us. Now he concludes with a passage that tells us how we should live in light of that. So let's read Hebrews 10:19-25:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we

have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

- Hebrews 10:19-25

Let's start today by seeing what this passage says about this issue of gathering and church attendance. I don't know about you, but when I first read these verses, like so many passages from the letters of the New Testament, they just seemed like a jungle of historical references I didn't understand and commands that were just thrown on top of each other. The whole thing seemed pretty confusing. Did you experience that? That's how I felt when I first read it. But if we look at the passage closely, it actually all fits together to make a simple point: You can boil these six verses down to one sentence and the sentence is this: On the basis of what Christ has done, we can live confidently as disciples if we continue to gather.

I could probably boil that down further to just say "If you want to live fully as a Christian, you have to go to church!" That's really the point! But there's a little more depth to the way the passage says it. So let me just walk you through that sentence one phrase at a time. I think you'll see what the writer is saying about why we need to gather together. The first is:

On the Basis of What Christ Has Done

Everything the writer is going to tell us we should do, everything, is based on what Jesus has already done for them: Look at:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
- Hebrews 10:19-21

He's going to go on to tell his readers what to do. But everything the writer says is based on what Jesus has already done for us. Jesus has given us a completely new and amazing relationship with God.

There's a lot of Old Testament temple imagery here that might be new to us, but what the writer says is beautiful. See in the Old Testament you had to approach God in just the right way. You didn't just go before God and say whatever you wanted. You didn't just act any way you wanted to act and say "Well, that's just me, He can deal with it." In the Old Testament, you had to approach God on his terms to really be in his presence. You had to be the right ethnicity (Jewish). You had to be in the right place (only in the Jerusalem Temple and not just in the temple, but in the Most Holy Place). You had to be in the right spiritual state, purified by sacrifice.

To actually approach God was a special, solemn, terrifying privilege. There were probably a million or more Jews around during Jesus' time. There were 18,000 priests and Levites in Jerusalem. Do you know how many got to go into God's presence? One. One Priest (the High Priest). One time. On one day of the year. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would make a sacrifice of a bull and goat, and then he would take some of the blood of that sacrifice and go from the court of the temple to a place called the Holy Place. Then he would move past this giant curtain, sixty feet tall by sixty feet wide and the thickness of a hand. It's been calculated that that curtain weighed four to six tons. Once the High Priest passed that curtain, he was in what was called "the Holy of Holies" or "Most Holy Place." And there, one day of the year, he would sprinkle the blood of those sacrifices on "the Mercy seat." He was in the actual presence of God, and God would forgive his people.

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That's what it meant to be in God's presence in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament when people were exposed to God's presence, scary things happened. Job put his hand over his mouth. Moses glowed so brightly that the Israelites asked him to wear a veil. Isaiah said "Woe is me, I am undone." Even the angels in God's presence cover their faces and say "Holy, Holy, Holy!" That's what it means to be in God's presence.

But when Jesus died, he opened a new way. The gospels tell us that at the moment of Jesus' death that massive curtain that separated man from God's presence was torn in two from top to bottom. That signified that you and I, gentiles though we are sinners though we are, are invited into the Holy of Holies God's presence based on what Jesus did. So there's no more fear and no more shame. Yes, there's reverence. Yes, there's respect, but we now have confidence! The writer uses a beautiful Greek word to describe that confidence. It means "access," but it means more than that. It means candor. It means openness. The word is *παρρησια* (*perresia*) and it was originally used to describe Democracy. The idea was that when you had a King you had to be very careful how you approached him. You had to be very careful what you said. Remember Esther? Remember how if the King didn't hold out his scepter to you you would be killed? Well when the Greeks invented democracy, one of the chief ideas was that you had *παρρησια* (*perresia*) / confidence. You had access to go to the government and to openly, honestly, candidly speak your mind.

The writer to the Hebrews is saying that's the kind of relationship that we have with God because of Christ. We have access. We have confidence, because Jesus gave us the right to enter. When his body was torn, that dividing curtain was torn with it, and we were invited into God's presence with a High Priest that always lives to make intercession for us so that we are at peace we are on good terms with God.

We celebrate that in the Lord's Table today. Listen, no matter what you've done, no matter who you are, no matter your shortcomings and screwups, no matter the struggles in your life, Through Jesus you can come to God. You can come directly into his presence with no fear, and you can bring yourself to a loving Father, warts and all. It's all through Jesus, all because of what he did when he died for you.

So the first thing we have to understand here is that this is all on the basis of what Christ has done. He has opened the way for us. So (1) On the basis of what Christ has done, and (2) We can live confidently as Disciples. That's the way I would sum up the next few verses of this passage. Look at what the writer says in verses 22-24 because Christ has become our High Priest and opened this way for us into God's presence. Look at what he says:

let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.
- Hebrews 10:22-24

So based on what Christ has done, the writer tells his readers to do these things. Now, at first that may sound like an overwhelming flood of commands and phrases, but it's actually not that complicated. It's probably easier to see in the original language, the Greek, because in Greek, commands are spelled differently than normal verbs. In this passage, there are actually only three commands, one per verse. These commands all revolve around the three central Christian virtues.

So in verse 22, the writer tells his readers draw near in faith. Look at the verse 22. Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

He's saying based on what we believe and have been taught about who Christ is and what he's done for us. Let us draw near to God. Draw near in faith, believing that our heart, our inside, has been made new, believing that our bodies, our outside, our deeds have been forgiven our faith should grow. So (1) Draw near in faith. In verse 23 he tells us:

Hold Fast to Hope

Look at verse 23. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful. Just as we exercise faith for the present, we exercise hope for the future. We have hope. The writer says “Hold fast. Hold unswervingly!” The idea is no flinching, no letting go, no wandering from the path.

We have hope. No matter where we are, no matter what is going on with our jobs or our bodies or our finances, we have hope. The Hebrews were facing persecution. They were being mistreated and having their property confiscated. They were going to face a lot more, but the writer reminds them that, as believers, they still have hope. So (1) Draw near in faith, and (2) Hold fast to hope. Lastly, the writer tells us:

Spur One Another Toward Love

I love this one look at what the writer says:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

- Hebrews 10:24

I love this verse, because it's a bit of an oxymoron, like "seriously funny or Microsoft Works." That is definitely an oxymoron. The writer is saying let us think about how to provoke or irritate or spur one another on to love. We don't normally think of provoking someone to love! When I think of "provoke," I think of siblings, brothers and sisters. Now my big sister is here visiting with us from Italy today, and I have to say that none of this ever went on in our family, because I was the little brother. Have you ever seen a little brother or sister try to provoke their sibling? They repeat everything. They say "Stop repeating me. Stop repeating me." It's stop touching me! I'm not. I'm touching your shirt! They have a million ways to do it, because they spend half their waking hours thinking about how to provoke their brother or sister. Well, the writer is saying that we should do that to each other. We should spend a lot of time scheming to figure out how we can provoke one another to love and good works! We are to spur one another toward love.

So that's his instruction: (1) Draw near in faith, (2) Hold fast to hope, and (3) Spur one another toward love. What is the writer saying? Well notice, like I said a minute ago, that these are the three Christian virtues. They are found all over the New Testament. Many of us know them from 1 Corinthians 13:

Now remain these three" and what are they? Faith, Hope, and Love.

- 1 Corinthians 13

What the writer is describing here is basic Christianity, basic discipleship. What he's saying is this: On the basis of what Christ has done, we can live confidently as disciples. But he's not finished yet. There's one more piece of the puzzle that the writer wants to give them. It's a part of the puzzle that is absolutely necessary. You can't fully have what the writer is describing here without this last piece.

Because think about it: Christ has already died and provided access to the Father. The Hebrews already know that they should live in Faith, Hope, and Love. That's basic Christianity. But sometimes it doesn't happen, and it never happens on its own. There's one more piece of the puzzle that they have to have. He's going to give them the means, the method, the process by which they will draw near to God in Faith, hold fast to Hope and provoke one another to love. The means is in verse 25. Look at what he says:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

- Hebrews 10:25

The writer is giving us a very clear message. If we want to live confidently as Christians, if we want to be fully developed disciples, if we want to be people who grow in Faith toward God and offer Hope to a hopeless world, if we want to be people who provoke one another to love, we have to gather with other Christians on a regular basis. The tense of the verb implies that this is a repeated thing.

It's obvious that when we gather would be the time that we would learn to provoke one another to love. It's kind of hard to provoke someone if you're by yourself. That's like as they say the sound of one hand clapping. So it's obvious that we have to gather to grow in love.

I would submit to you that we have to gather to learn how to hope in all circumstances as we rub elbows with others who have gone through tough times. We grow in Faith as we gather and learn about what Christ has done for us and approach him at the Table. Listen, Faith, Hope and Love are team sports. You don't get these on your own. You get them when we gather.

You have to understand that the Hebrews were experiencing persecution, for their faith gathering could be dangerous for them marking them off as Christians. But gathering, assembling, going to church was so important that he tells them to do it anyway.

So often we can think of Church like it's an obligation, like it's a necessary evil if we are going to be a Christian. But do you have any idea how precious this is? Do you have any idea what Christians in some parts of the world would give if they could just gather openly? Just sing the songs of God openly? Just celebrate the Lord's Table openly? I'm told that there are about 20,000 Christians in Muslim countries who gather secretly on the internet to listen to the teaching of Scripture and break the bread of the table. Do you know what they would give to gather in a public school and break bread and sing the songs of Jesus with a PA system? They would give a great deal, because this is precious. It's one of the main ways that Faith, Hope, and Love are developed.

So when we put this passage all together, here's what the writer is saying: On the basis of what Christ has done, we can live confidently as disciples if we continue to gather. It's important that we gather.

We need to gather now. With our remaining time, let me ask three questions that will help us understand how to put gathering into practice on our pathway, three questions about gathering. The first is this:

1. Which gathering?

When I say we need to gather, which gathering am I talking about? Because if you look at our Discipleship Pathway, there are two. There's Sunday Worship, and there are Small Groups. Both of those are times when we regularly gather, one on Sunday here at the School and one in

people's homes during the week. So which one do you need for your discipleship? Does anyone know what I'm going to say?

Both. You need both. I know it's a big commitment, but you really need both, because they do different things. The big gathering, what we're doing here today, defines us as a community. The big gathering is higher on expertise. Chances are whoever is up here teaching or preaching on a Sunday morning has had theological training. As they teach, you're going to learn something about how to interpret Scripture in context. My goal is never just to teach you what to think. My goal is to teach you how to think biblically for yourself. The theology from up here, the doctrine, should be orthodox. It should be well thought out and fit together. The expertise is higher. This is where we draw the lines of who we are and aren't.

The big gathering is also where we celebrate our identity together. This is where we really celebrate our victories as a church! It's where we become visible to the community. This is where we celebrate the ordinances, the Lord's table and baptism. So the big gathering is high on expertise, and it's what defines us as a community. You need that for your discipleship!

But we also need the small gathering. The small gathering may not have as much expertise. Chances are your Small Group leader isn't a seminary grad. It's not as big of a celebration. But the Small Group goes much deeper on application. This is where we plug truth into our lives. The Small Group is where we work out the details of how we live as Christians. The communication in Small Group is two way, so we can ask our deepest questions and wrestle with our problems and cheer each other on. The Small Group is where we learn to have real Christian community, valuing the perspectives of those who are different from us as we interact with them.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been meeting with several people from one of our Small Group's. These are very different people, from different generations, different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different giftings. I love what I'm hearing. One at a time, they have said in their own way "When this Small Group first formed, I didn't know how it would go. We're so different, but we have come value each other. We have come to treasure each other's perspectives. We really care about each other. Some of them have said "I've never experienced anything like this." We need that. We need the encouragement of doing life together.

So which gathering am I saying we need? Both! The second question is this:

2. How do these become entry points for our Discipleship Pathway?

You may remember that last week, when we looked at our Discipleship Pathway, we said that each of these stations - Worship, Service, Small Group, and Starting Point - need to be entry point capable. In other words, each one needs to be a place where a new guest could come and start out at our church. So how do we make that happen?

Let's start with Sunday Morning. Many people will start their experience of our church here. So let me just take a minute to say something I don't say enough and that is "Thank You" to our First Impressions Team. Thank you so much. Think about what a first-time guest to our church goes through. When they pull in, they need to figure out where to park and how to find the entrance. They need to know how to take that long, long walk from the door to the information table to this room without getting lost! All the stuff we don't even see any more they are seeing for the first time. They are figuring out in those first few moments is this a place for people like me? Am I really welcome here? Am I a person here? Where's the bathroom! And on top of that, we don't know what they are going through in their life that made them come to church.

So what you guys do to make our guests feel welcome is so important. Thanks for putting up the signage. Thanks to the guys in the parking lot, to the door greeters, to the Star Greeters who take visitors from place to place. Thanks to you guys that hang out at the Information Table and to the people who work the children's check-in and to the service coordinators. Thank you!

Congregation, thank you for making our guests feel welcome. Every time you lovingly engage a guest with genuine curiosity about who they are and how you can help them follow Jesus, you contribute to their discipleship. Whether they know Jesus or not, you move them one step closer to being the disciple God wants them to be.

Now Small Group's are a little more complicated as an entry point. Because Small Group's are where you work out the details and complexity of your lives, they need to be safe places for you to share gut-level struggles that aren't for everybody and that sometimes means confidentiality. So the thought of someone new rocking up to your Small Group just as you are sharing your deepest, darkest struggle may seem a little weird and you may want to close your group off and just say "us four and no more." I get that I know why you might feel that way, but let me just say this: Everybody needs that. Everybody needs a place where they can experience real, loving non-judgmental community. The reason you want to preserve that is that it's so important in your life.

Everybody needs real community. So as a group, it's important that we think about inviting people in. It's important that you think about the right time and place to do that. This may not be the right time, but it needs to be a priority. Some Small Group's keep an empty chair in their meetings to remind them that there are other people who need to experience Christ-centered community.

So we want to think about our Small Group's as an entry point. We are going to need some new groups soon. We don't want to split groups, but we're looking at our Small Group's and we're going to need some space. So we may be tapping some of you on the shoulder, asking you to be a pioneer, and start a group.

So that's a little about how we make these entry points on our Discipleship Pathway. Now last question:

3. What should we do?

What should we do as a result of this passage and this message? The answer is simple: just gather, and encourage others in our church to gather. Take this sermon as a word about the importance of gathering. And always, be asking “What’s the next step for me? What’s the next step for my friends?” Do we need to invite them to join us in worship? Do we need to join a Small Group? Make gathering, both in Worship and in your Small Groups, a priority. It’s important. It’s precious. Because when we gather not only will you develop faith, hope and love in yourself, but you’ll develop it in others.