

Drawing near - Part 2

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Date: 07 February 2010

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- [0 : 00] Well, we come to the second part of our sermon that we began this morning. And just to briefly recap, for the benefit of all, but perhaps particularly if there are those who weren't able to be here this morning.
- This morning we identified a threefold exhortation found in Hebrews chapter 10 and verses 19 to 25.
- And we described this threefold exhortation in the following way. We are invited, exhorted to draw near to God, to draw near to God's truth, and to draw near to God's people.
- And this morning we were able to consider the first of these to draw near to God. We noticed the new and living way that has been opened.
- And we discovered that Jesus is this new and living way. And He is this new and living way on the basis of what He has done, His death in our place, His blood shed for us, and also on the basis of who He is.
- [1 : 20] He is, as the passage indicates, a great high priest over the house of God. And He is that now, presently and always.
- We also noticed this morning in considering the exhortation that we are to draw near to God, not only the way, but also the manner in which we are to draw near to God.
- We are to draw near, cleansed by Him. We are to draw near confidently, because our confidence rests in what He has done and not in ourselves.
- But we are to draw near also coherently. There is to be between the inward reality of a cleansed heart, the outward reality of a clean body, of a holy life.
- And in that manner, we are to draw near to God. And then finally, we made the simple but important point that we do actually have to draw near.
- [2 : 24] We noticed how tragic it would be that the way be opened up so wonderfully by Jesus, and that we experience that cleansing of our soul by Jesus, and yet not make use of the way that has been opened up for us.
- Well, this evening we want to continue, and we continue considering the following two elements of the exhortation, to draw near to God's truth and to draw near to God's people.
- Now, this is something I've probably repeated on more than one occasion, and forgive me if it's unnecessary repetition, but I do want to stress that though, perhaps dramatically or linguistically, we can distinguish between the three exhortations.
- We can identify them in the text and lay them out one by one. It is, I think, valid and necessary to consider them as a threefold exhortation, and that we cannot in any meaningful way respond to one and not to another.
- The three necessarily go together. Indeed, we might say that they are, in a sense, mutually interdependent.
- [3 : 53] They feed each other mutually, and hopefully as we consider the two that we want to consider this evening, that will become very apparent.

But maybe just to illustrate that, we can simply pose some questions. Is it conceivable, for example, that we could draw near to God while not drawing near to His Word?

Can we imagine that being possible? Surely not. Could we sincerely draw near to God's Word and not, as a consequence, draw near to God?

Again, I think we can only answer in the negative. Can we draw near to God in isolation from His people and drawing near to them? Perhaps some have considered that that is possible, and perhaps indeed live their lives thinking that that is possible.

But again, I think in the light of God's Word, we have to respond that no, we cannot, in a right manner, and as God has intended, draw near to Him in isolation from His people and drawing near to His people.

[5 : 07] Well, let's consider then the second element, if you wish, of this threefold exhortation, and that is that we draw near to God's Word. And we are making this point, or identifying this exhortation, in verse 23 of Hebrews chapter 10.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. Now, in fairness, we have to begin by establishing if this is indeed what the writer is actually saying.

If you are giving thought to what is being said, you could legitimately ask, well, where do you get from what it says in verse 23 to your description that here we have an exhortation to draw near to God's Word?

They seem to be saying different things, or what is said in verse 23 doesn't immediately seem to be suggesting that. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.

This verse is also and can also be translated in a similar way. The English Standard Version translates it in this fashion.

[6 : 23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. And the language that we have here in verse 23 is a language that refers to the need for God's people, for the believer to assent to and hold to the teachings concerning Christ and His work.

And the language in the verse echoes similar language in this same letter. And we can just notice a couple of occasions just to give foundation to what we are saying.

In chapter 3, for example, in verse 1, we read, Therefore, holy brothers who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

We confess Jesus and the truths that we have been given concerning Jesus. And especially in chapter 4 and verse 14, the idea of truths that we confess, that we confess, that we hold to is very apparent.

In chapter 4 and verse 14, we read, Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

[7 : 42] There it is very clear. Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. This truth that has been given to us concerning Jesus and concerning who He is and concerning the work that He has done, this truth, this body of truth, we are to hold firmly to.

And we are to confess it. We are to make it known. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. For he who promised is faithful.

And where is this teaching to be found? That we are to hold unswervingly to. Well, this teaching is to be found in the apostolic writings. The letter of Hebrews, as far as can be established, was written after a great deal of the material of the New Testament had already been written.

And so there was, at the time of the writing of this epistle, already a body of apostolic, authoritative, recognized material in existence, and known by the emerging nascent church.

There was, of course, as well as the written material that was being compiled and indeed being written, there was an oral tradition by which the content of the gospel message was also transmitted.

[9 : 06] And the church was to hold firm to this truth. It's interesting to note in that regard that in the letter of Jude, that, again, those who have studied these matters conclude, was very probably written about the same time as the epistle to the Hebrews, between 60 and 70 A.D.

In that letter, the author is able to express himself in the following terms. And let's just notice what is said there in Jude and verse 3.

There we read, And so here this letter is written, as I say, it would seem at roughly the same time as the letter to the Hebrews, and the author is able to speak of the faith that has been handed to the saints, that is already recognized as that body of truth that we know as the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus.

And Jude exhorts his readers to hold to that faith. And so, too, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts in like fashion.

Now, in the light of this, we can legitimately understand this exhortation that we find in Hebrews chapter 10 as a call to draw near to, or perhaps more accurately, cling to the faith, in the sense of that body of truth that constitutes the gospel.

[10 : 58] The question does arise, if that is what we are claiming is a legitimate way of understanding verse 23, the question does arise, why doesn't the writer then express himself in this way?

Let us hold unswervingly to the faith we profess, rather than, as we have it, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. Why the use of the word hope rather than the use of the word faith?

Well, I think one answer that we can give to that is that the use of this word hope does illustrate the intimate association between faith and hope in the mind of the writer.

So, the appeal that is being made here is not to a severe orthodoxy devoid of a living hope, as if to say, well, these are the doctrines, these are the truths, and you cling to these truths.

It doesn't matter if these truths make any difference to your life. It doesn't matter if they've transformed your life. It doesn't matter the impact of them, but you just hold on to them and don't change them.

[12 : 11] This is not the call that is being made. The appeal, I repeat, is not to what we might describe as a severe orthodoxy devoid of a living hope, but to a living hope that is certainly grounded in an orthodox body of truth.

The call then is to a living hope, but that living hope is grounded in orthodox truth, in a truth delivered to the church.

Hope, in the words of Calvin, is the child of faith, and it is fed and sustained by faith to the end.

So, there is then an intimate relationship between faith and hope. Well, having established, I hope that the exhortation here in verse 23 does refer to our attitude to the truth, and so for us, we can apply it to the Word of God, the Scriptures that we have before us.

We can now move on and notice three elements that should characterize our attitude to our relationship with the Scriptures as we delve more deeply into the exhortation.

[13 : 34] Three characteristics or three elements that should characterize our attitude to the Scriptures. The first thing I would say is that we are to know the truth.

If we are being told, if we are being exhorted, if we are being encouraged to hold unswervingly to the truth, to hold unswervingly to that which we profess, then it is necessary, perhaps obviously necessary, that we must know the truth, that we must know the gospel, that we must know the content of this truth.

It's impossible to hold on firmly to something that we don't know, to something that we're not familiar with, to something that we have only a passing familiarity with.

No, if we are to hold unswervingly to that which we profess, well, we must first know clearly that which we profess. Which rather begs the question, well, how will we know the truth?

Are we born knowing? Is it the case that by some mystical procedure that the truth is granted to us?

[14 : 52] No, we have to learn the truth. We have to study the Word. We have to ponder on and consider the revelation that we have given to us. And in that way, we come to know the truth.

We come to a greater and a deeper understanding of the truth. And this is the challenge that is laid out for us, that is before us. Indeed, as I was commenting in the morning, a part of the motivation for considering this passage is that it would serve as an encouragement to us, that we would participate as we are able, in a measure that we are able, in the neighborhood fellowships.

And indeed, the first study material that we're going to be using has as its purpose to ground us in the truth, that body of truth that we know as the gospel.

Maybe I could just read what it says here in the bump at the back. Rock-solid aims to help us get to grips with twelve great truths that form the core of what it means to be an evangelical Christian.

And as you flick through the book, you'll discover what these twelve core truths are, or that are identified in any case by those who have compiled this material.

[16 : 11] So, it is incumbent upon us if we are to meaningfully and coherently respond to this exhortation, to hold unswervingly to that which we profess, that first of all, we would know that which we profess, and that demands effort on our part.

Well, that is something implicit, as it were, in the exhortation. But explicitly, we're told that we are to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.

So, this truth is not only to be known, this truth is to be professed, or confessed. In other words, we are not to keep it to ourselves. We are not to guard the truth solely by a strict adherence to a confessional document.

Important as that is, and it most certainly is important, that we hold rigidly and faithfully to a confessional document and the doctrines that are contained within it.

As a church, we know that we have, as our subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith. And it is, I think, legitimate to take this exhortation as an exhortation that we would hold unswervingly to those truths that the church has discovered and has systematized in confessions.

[17 : 40] They are useful and necessary to guard the church against error by all means. But as we are exhorted to profess the truth, that exhortation goes beyond holding firmly to a document, however useful that is.

The truth that we know is to be professed. It is to be published abroad. It is to be made known to all. And by all means, let's begin at home. We are to pass on the truth to those whom God has particularly placed under our responsibility, those of us who are parents, that succeeding generations would also receive this heritage and pass it on to the coming generations.

We are to profess the truth. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. And this profession, it involves the verbal transmission of truth to others as we speak of Jesus and witness to others concerning Jesus.

But it also involves the profession made by a life that is lived as a living reflection of the truth. So we are to know the truth.

We are to profess the truth. But also we're told that we are to hold unswervingly to the truth. We are to hold fast to the truth. Now the implication of this exhortation, to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, the implication is that the truth will ever be under attack.

[19 : 17] There will always be those who seek to undermine the truth. Now that attack, that undermining, can be at the level of an attack on a fundamental doctrine, or it can be, and more ordinarily perhaps is, the more subtle questioning of the ethical demands of Scripture.

And there are many today who echo the seducing words of the serpent long ago. Did God really say that? Did He really forbid that behavior?

Is it really that bad to think that way or speak that way or behave in that manner? Is it really such a big deal? This is a common discourse that we will be constantly subject to.

And what are we to do? Well, we are to hold fast. We are to firmly, and if you wish stubbornly, cling to the faith once delivered to the saints.

The detractors and their novel and popular ideas and theories, they will come and they will go, but the truth to which we must hold will remain.

[20 : 33] Finally, as we consider this second exhortation to draw near to God's Word or to cling on and to hold to God's truth, we notice that a reason is given why we should hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.

We read there in verse 23, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. He who promised is faithful. The faithfulness of the message rests on the faithfulness of the Savior.

Christianity is true because Jesus Christ is true. Our hope is sure because the ground of our hope, the Lord Jesus Christ, is faithful and true.

So then let us draw near to God's Word and hold firmly to the truth that we profess. But then briefly notice that there is a third exhortation, and that is that we are to draw near to God's people, and this is developed in verses 24 and 25.

A third exhortation is presented, and it's important to stress that this should not be seen as some kind of lesser duty. We might mistakenly consider some hierarchy in the exhortations given.

[21 : 53] The first, to draw near to God as being altogether fundamental. The second, that we would draw near to His Word as important.

And then the third, to draw near to God's people as of a lesser order of importance, perhaps even optional. But we would be mistaken if we were to conclude that.

This is at the heart of what we are being asked to do, together with the other elements of the exhortation. And let's just answer briefly three questions with regard to this third exhortation or this third element of the exhortation that we are to draw near to God's people.

With what purpose are we to draw near? We can begin with that. With what purpose are we to draw near? Well, the language is clear. It is that we would build others up. Let us, verse 24, let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

The focus is not on what we can get from others, but what we can give. The language of considering others. Let us consider how we may spur one another.

[23 : 08] It's interesting that this same language has been used by the writer to challenge us and encourage us to consider Jesus. In chapter 3 and verse 1, Therefore, holy brothers who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, or consider Jesus.

It's the same verb. Consider Jesus. And now we are told that not only are we to consider Jesus, which we would have expected as an altogether reasonable exhortation, but we are told also that we are to consider the disciples of Jesus.

They too merit our consideration. And this word, or this verb, consider, can be variously understood as to consider closely, to be concerned about, to understand completely and deeply.

This is what we are to do. We are to consider others. We are to consider our brothers and sisters in Christ, how we might build them up and help them to love and to good deeds.

And for this to happen, for us to be those who grow in love, for us to be those who practice good deeds, it is necessary for us to be spurred on, to be stirred up.

[24 : 27] It doesn't just happen. Christian growth doesn't just happen. Good deeds don't just happen. Our default position is to do little, to be satisfied with where we are and not to move on.

That is our default position. If we are to grow, if we are to grow in love and good deeds, we need to be encouraged. We need to be spurred on.

We need to be stirred up in the language of the exhortation. And clearly, for that to happen, that is what we might call a community activity.

A community activity where all are involved. Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. And then in verse 25, but let us encourage one another.

This will happen where there is relationship, where there is friendship, where there is trust, where we know one another. We can gather as we do on an evening such as this and listen to the Word of God.

[25 : 31] And by all means, the preaching of the Word can serve to spur on. It can serve to stir up. But not in the manner identified here, where the picture is of all involved in spurring one another on, of encouraging one another.

Not the majority passively listening and one involved in launching forth the exhortations. No, but that together, helping and encouraging and spurring on one another.

Now, I think we won't need to be too clever to realize that what is being described here in verses 24 and 25 will not happen.

It's not possible for it to happen. In a gathering, for example, on a Sunday morning with 200 plus people coming for an hour, an hour and a half, and returning home.

Well, that gathering is very important and has its place, but it's not the space, it's not the occasion that will allow what is described here to happen in any meaningful way.

[26 : 41] The picture here painted is of a community of believers who know each other and who are growing in their knowledge of each other and so are able to spur on and encourage one another.

And of course, you know where I'm going with this. This is precisely the purpose of the neighborhood fellowships, the fostering of smaller groups where we can know each other and can spur one another on, where we can learn together, where we can pray for and with each other, where we can encourage and correct one another, where we can draw near to God together.

With what purpose are we to draw near? Well, there we have it. Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good needs. Let us encourage one another. But the passage also identifies what we might call a temptation.

What temptation could scupper our obedience to this exhortation? Well, again, it is very clear. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.

There is this temptation to give up meeting together, to drift away from the fellowship. This is true today as it has. It would seem ever been so.

[28 : 00] Here at the very birth of the New Testament church, it would seem that this was already common. Some were in the habit of giving up meeting together.

And the language does seem to portray a situation where people are drifting away. The picture doesn't seem to be of those who are dramatically abandoning the faith and who have decided that they no longer wish to be Christians, that they no longer believe these things.

No. These are people that when you visit them in their homes and you ask them, how are things going? They'll say, well, things are going fine. And do you still believe? Oh, yes, by all means.

Are you a Christian? Oh, yes, of course. Well, at home I'm reading my Bible and I'm praying. You know, but it's just, it's difficult, the time. And you know what it's like, all the obligations and responsibilities.

But I'll be back soon. They don't consider themselves to have abandoned the faith. And I think we could legitimately say they haven't abandoned the faith. But they have developed this very unhealthy habit of no longer meeting together.

[29 : 07] And it's something, no doubt, especially in a slightly larger congregation such as their own, where it may even be imperceptible.

A service here, a service there, perhaps a habit of, and a very healthy habit of gathering to pray at a prayer meeting and we soon, we lose that habit.

An evening service that seems just to be that bit more difficult to participate in. And before we know, a habit has been formed that is difficult to break.

This is the danger. It is our desire to encourage us to meet together, and perhaps in a way that previously we have not done so. But there is this always, there's always this temptation, this danger, that we can rather go in the other direction and give up meeting together as some were in the habit of doing when this epistle was written.

Some might say, well, it's not such a big deal. And yet, as we continue to read the passage, and we've done so already, and so we won't repeat that reading, it is interesting to see how the passage goes on to speak in very solemn terms of how perhaps something that began seemingly so innocently or seemingly in such a gentle way can grow and proceed and lead to, tragically in some cases, to the very abandoning of the faith.

[30 : 40] But one final question in regard to this third exhortation to draw near to God's people, and it is this, and very briefly just to notice, what reality makes this obedience to this exhortation more urgent?

Well, it is identified here as the imminent return of our Lord. 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.

And the reference here, I think, is beyond all reasonable doubt a reference to the Lord's return, to the second coming of Jesus Christ. And the writer says, live in the light of that coming.

Value fellowship in the light of that coming. Take seriously these exhortations in the light of that day coming. That day is approaching.

Now, there will be those who doubt and who question and perhaps who mock. Approaching, approaching, but never arriving, or so it would seem. Well, that is not our concern.

[31 : 53] We are to live as if the Lord were to return tomorrow. If He returns tomorrow, praise be to His name. If He chooses to delay His coming, as some would take it as delay, then we know that it is only of grace that He does so.

But as far as we are concerned, we are to live in the light of His approaching return.

Our priorities are to be molded by that expectation. Our use of time and setting aside the time required to gather with God's people, motivated by a sense of the Lord's imminent return.

And the perspective that such a sense gives to us as to what is really important. So, we are, as we draw things to a close, we are to draw near to God's people.

This, too, is presented to us as part of this great exhortation. Draw near to God. Draw near to His Word.

[33 : 02] Hold unswervingly to it. And draw near to God's people. May God help us so to do.