

The IM-perfect Church

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[0 : 00] Well, as you heard, we're on Hebrews chapter 10, verses 19 through 25, and this reading is not like the others. We're not in Mark today, and that's because in the morning we did something called Ebenezer Sunday.

We were thinking about how God has helped us till now and looking ahead as well. It's a communion service today, so we're not going to be doing the cards and so forth that we did in the morning, writing down what our thanksgivings were and what we'd like to see God do in our church. But it's something good to think about, and we're in a time period right now where we're three weeks into 2013, and it's a good time to be thinking about those resolutions that some of you made. You know, according to statistics, 45% of us in Canada make resolutions every year. 37% of us never do, but there's at least, there's almost half of you that do.

And it's actually not a bad thing to do, even though I never do it. It's, you know, especially when you think of your spiritual life. But I want to think about that in a moment.

[1 : 10] But I want to give you the top 10 resolutions for this year. People do statistics and polls and everything. And here are the top 10 resolutions for 2013.

Number one was lose weight. Two was get organized. Three was spend less, save more. That's not a resolution of the government, by the way. Four, enjoy life to the fullest.

Five is stay fit and healthy. Six is learn something new and exciting. Seven is quit smoking. The eighth most popular is help someone else achieve their dreams, which is an interesting one.

Number nine is fall in love. You can resolve to fall in love in the year. And ten was spend time, more time with family. And you notice there aren't things like play more video games, watch more television, spend more time at work, and that kind of thing.

They are resolutions that people have chosen because they make life better. And even the one about helping with other people's dreams, seeing them achieved, is something that brings joy to the person who is helping that other person.

[2 : 23] And there is this sense of well-being that comes in these resolutions. And there is something in our deep human nature that wants what's best for us.

And I think that's actually what God plants inside of us. Because the thing that is best for us, the greatest good that we can possibly have, has to do with grace.

It has to do with the grace that we find in Jesus Christ. And grace always means extraordinary and undeserved goodness that only God can give.

This is the kind of grace that we hear talked about in the Bible. And grace is the thing that we crave, that we want most, that we know is the best for us.

And so it's actually good at this time of year to ask yourself, how am I receiving God's grace? How do I do that?

[3 : 23] How am I open to that grace that the Bible says overflows in Jesus? That he gives it out in huge measure, in massive amounts.

And he wants us to take in all that we can of that grace. So what steps can I take this year to work with this incredible good that Jesus brings in to my life and your life as well?

And I think the first thing that we need to think about is in taking in God's grace, the best attribute that we can have in our lives to allow that to happen, to take it in, is to be thankful to him.

To be people of gratitude. People who see the incredible gift that we have in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us, to know the full extent of what he's done for us in his love and to take joy in it.

See, this is how we open ourselves up to God's grace. A thankful heart is one that is open to God's goodness and his mercy. Now, the writer of Hebrews does this.

[4 : 37] It tells us what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and spends a lot of time doing it. And then in the passage that we heard today, the writer is joyful.

He is thankful. It is an upbeat passage. And he's wanting you and I to join with him in the sense of gratitude at what God has done in Jesus Christ.

So it's a marvelous book. He has told the readers that Jesus is our priest and that he brings us into the presence of God forever by the sacrifice of himself for our sins.

He is a priest that not only offers a sacrifice, but is the sacrifice himself. And all of that teaching that explores the wonder of who Jesus is for us is really summed up in verse 14 of chapter 10.

Why don't you just look up at that at the top of 10.07. And it says this. It says, For by a single offering, Jesus has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

[5 : 50] Now, this is an amazing thing because it is saying that Jesus has perfected you once and for all. And you think to yourself, well, all I can think about is my failings right now.

I can think about my sin. I can think about the things where I have let God down. But here it's saying that he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

God looks upon us as being perfect. He sees the perfection of Jesus in us because of the offering of the high priest Jesus. It is finished.

You can't take anything away from it. You can't add to it. It is a gift. It is grace. And it means that you and I have peace with God right now.

But not only that. He is your heavenly father and you will see his face one day. That's what we heard in that first reading from 1 John. We will see him as he is and we will be like him.

[6 : 54] That is an awesome thing. There is no treasure in this world that can compare with this. And the writer to the Hebrews takes incredible joy in this.

He is deeply thankful. And that's why in these seven verses, he is so, he wants you to join in his joy. He says, look at what Jesus the priest has done for you.

Now, take in that grace. Take in as much as you can of that grace that is yours in Christ. And what he does is he gives a couple of very wonderful applications.

He says, there's two blessings that I want to point out to you. And then he talks about three ways that we can very practically cooperate, receive the grace, live into the grace that God has given to us in Jesus.

And the first big blessing he points out to us is this. You have confidence in God and with God. How does he put that?

[7 : 59] Look at verse 19. He says, This first big blessing is that we are welcome into God the Father's presence.

In fact, we are as welcome there as Jesus is welcome there. This is a thing that is mind-boggling. We are as welcome there as Jesus is.

And Christians find this hard to believe. We have a hard time believing it because our human nature tends to shift the ground for entering into God's presence to ourselves.

And so that's when we say, I haven't lived up to what God wants. I've let him down. I can't come into his presence. I've disqualified myself. But this verse says, no.

You need to turn things upside down, which Jesus does. Jesus, the priest, he is the reason for your confidence. He alone.

[9 : 14] And you may, well, actually looking out, I see if you can tell that there are probably a lot of very successful, highly motivated, I think maybe people who are high achievers in this place.

And you have a problem. And that is nothing you do or that you accomplish can possibly affect coming into God's presence.

You cannot make it happen. And there are probably many of you have great failings in your life as well. Things that you are ashamed of. Things that you would never want God to know.

And certainly not those around you either. God is saying to us here, nothing can disqualify you from coming in to God's presence.

The only thing that can affect that is Jesus' blood sacrificed for the forgiveness of your sins. That is the only way one can enter into the most holy place.

[10 : 19] If he does that, you cannot add to it. If he does that, you cannot take away from that. You cannot take yourself away from God's presence. And I should tell you that the Hebrew people knew that this most holy place was the place in the temple where the priest comes closest to God.

It was such a powerful thing that the priest, only one priest could go in once a year to this room, the holy of holies, the most holy place.

And that experience was so powerful and it could be so overwhelming that a priest had a rope tied to his ankle when he went in in case he keeled over.

In case he fainted or even died, they can pull him out so he's not stuck in the holy of holies, rotting away. And this verse says, look, Jesus' body crucified for us is like the curtain entrance of that holy of holies.

This entrance is open here. And it is a curtain that is an entrance. Just like this curtain is an entrance to that screen, I guess.

[11 : 32] The curtain in the temple was an entrance. An entrance into the very presence of God. And this verse says that Jesus' body crucified for us is like the curtain entrance into God's presence.

But it is different because it is a new and living way is the way it's put here. In other words, it's not an entrance to an old temple, but it is a new entrance to heaven itself.

And it is a living way because it is an entrance into the place where you receive eternal life forever. And that is your gift in Jesus Christ.

Jesus' body is our doorway into heaven. That's what that verse is telling us. And so it's not our goodness or our failings that determine whether we come into that presence.

It's Jesus' once-for-all offering for our sin on a cross that brings us to God. That alone is the basis for our confidence. That's our present possession.

[12 : 39] It's the greatest treasure that we have. And it ought to bring us joy. Well, the second blessing is in verse 21. And it says there that we have a great high priest.

So not only do we come into God's presence, not only is this something that we have confidence in, but the second blessing is we have a great high priest over the house of God.

And what it tells us is that when you trust Jesus, you become part of the house of God. Sin can no longer keep you out. And that phrase, house of God, means the family of God.

It's telling you that literally you have been adopted into God's family, the people of God, by the grace of Jesus Christ. And there is a person who is the head of that family.

He rules heaven and earth, and he is your faithful and merciful high priest. It is Jesus. Jesus has brought you into his family by his sacrifice, and he will always be your priest for you.

[13 : 50] And the fact that God has appointed Jesus as your high priest says two things about you. It's bad and it's good. The two things that is saying for you is that you're more sinful than you can possibly imagine.

That's why you need a high priest like that. That's why I need that high priest. But it also means that you are more loved and accepted than you can possibly hope for.

More loved and accepted than anything you could experience on this earth. That is awesome grace. The most precious thing to God, his only son, he gives a way to die on the cross so that he can be both priest and sacrifice for you, for your sins.

If this priest is for you, who can be against you? If this priest is for you, who can take you away from the house of God?

Well, the answer is no one. And so these two great gifts, the confidence to enter God's presence and having your own high priest over the family of God that you belong to, are yours in Jesus.

[15 : 01] If you believe in him, this is life changing. It changes your plans for the future. It changes your priority. It changes what you spend your time on.

It is a joyful reality that we ought to embrace completely. And that's where the last three verses come in. That last four verses, they tell us how to embrace that incredible gift completely, that incredible reality.

It tells us how to drink it in as a waterfall is coming down. Not just trying to get that with a straw, but actually to drink it in. And they invite us and challenge us with three lettuces.

So it's a salad ending that we have to our section today. There are three lettuces in 22, 23, 24. And it's saying, let's live life differently.

Let us live it joyfully with thanksgiving. And here's how. The first thing he says is, let us, verse 22, draw near to God.

[16 : 06] And he says how we do it. Well, it's with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our body washed with pure water.

Well, the question is, what does it mean to draw near to God? Well, the answer is, if you are in the presence of God, and you see this in the Bible where people come into the presence of angels, and then they come into the presence of God, immediately they fall down to worship.

They worship. They worship. It is the natural thing to do when you're in the presence of God. And that is what Jesus has prepared us for. When the first covenant relationship with God began, between God and his people, it was with Moses.

God promised to be their God, and they promised to obey the commandments written on the stone tablets. What Moses did was sprinkled them with blood. We're not going to do that tonight, but he sprinkled them all with blood to show that they are participating in that covenant.

Well, the new covenant that God promised is up in verse 16. And it says that he will give us a new heart. It tells us his law is going to be written on our hearts, and he will remember our sins no more.

[17 : 29] A new heart, forgiven sins. And Jesus sprinkles us with his blood to show that he washes us by the forgiveness of our sins, and he gives us new hearts, and bodies that are designed to serve him.

Bodies that are equipped to live for him. And in this way, Jesus prepares you inside and out to think and do the things that honor Jesus and bring glory to him.

The writer says, live this out. He has changed your heart. He will change the way you talk, the way you act, the way you think, what you do with your body.

And this is the, and so you can worship him. It's the most natural thing to do when you are in God's presence. When you are in heaven, it is the thing that you will enjoy doing.

It will be the very stuff of your life, the substance of your life. And I want to invite you to this experiment. And it's a, I guess it's a spiritual exercise.

[18 : 34] Can you, this week, every hour that you are awake, remember that you have access to God? Every minute, every hour, you are in the presence of God.

So, every hour to remember that has a bearing on all kinds of things in your life. What does this mean for how you talk to your friends?

What does it mean for what you do with your money? What does the fact that you are in the presence of God through Jesus mean as you deal with temptation?

What does it mean in how you forgive difficult people in your life? What does it mean to how you spend your time?

What do you, what do you want to do because you have access to God every day? Well, the, the interesting thing about the sinful life, our sinful nature, is that things that, that we would do because we are Christians, can seem like a burden to us.

[19 : 43] Being generous with our money for God, being sexually pure, reaching out to others, reading God's word regularly, praying, these things can seem like hard work.

They can seem inconvenient to us. And our sinful nature can rebel at that. But Hebrews teaches us that these are ways to draw near to God.

It is the way that we can worship him. It is the way that we can open ourselves to the grace of Jesus Christ to overflow into our lives. And that's, that's some of what it means to draw near with God, near to God.

It is a gift because it is something we can actually do. We can actively receive God's grace. The second let us, besides, besides the drawing near, is to hold the confession of our hope without wavering.

Let us hold that hope. And the important thing to remember about this let us is that hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is not something that we do, that we're wishing for an uncertain, a thing that might or might not happen.

[20 : 58] Christian hope is outside of us. It is located in Jesus. It is this certain eternal fact that Jesus will continue to be your high priest, that you will always have access to God, that in his love, he will prepare you for heaven, and he will bring you home, so that you will see God in his glory.

You will see the very face of God. And the writer says, hold on to this, this thing that is outside yourself, without wavering, because it is certain, it will happen, it is happening now.

And this is a very important thing for us. The writer to the Hebrews knew that his people were tempted to waver in confessing that hope.

If you, you know, quickly go down to verse 32 there, you see that they endured hard struggles. They included the loss of their homes and their possessions as just part of life.

And they were tempted to really wonder if that hope they have in Jesus was true. And they must have wondered, are the possessions that we have lost here, are they of greater worth than what we have in Jesus?

[22 : 17] Will I really receive what Jesus, our high priest, has promised? There is loss that comes because I have decided to follow him. And I am sure that all of you have gone through your own hard things in life.

And you, from time to time, have wavered in holding on to that certain hope. To waver means to swerve to the right or to the left. We're tempted to look to our own possessions, to our earthly things that we own.

Or we look to our career, we look to our relationships, to spouses or boyfriends or girlfriends. or close friends. We look to these things to put our hope into.

But these things will let us down at some point. They always will. They are temporary. But Hebrews says to each of us, the hope of Jesus is a possession that is eternal.

It is worth far more than we can imagine. It is a certain hope that can never fail. And the reason for that is at the end of verse 23, where it says, for he who promised is faithful.

[23 : 28] That is the ground to the hope that we have. And it is a constant in our life. Do you know that in our society, hopelessness is a great problem?

And we are affected by that. All of us are. There is a heightened depression and anxiety that afflicts people throughout our Western world.

It is part of the adrenaline, the fast-paced life, the lack of time for us to be able to process what happens to us. And often our thoughts tell us we do not have hope.

There is nothing for us. But Jesus says something completely different. He speaks against that.

Whatever our thoughts may say, there is one thing that is always true.

And that Jesus is your high priest who is always with you and who always brings you into God's presence permanently. And you will see him one day.

[24 : 27] That is a truth that is solid, that just goes throughout your life, whatever you experience of hopelessness. So let us hold fast unwaveringly to the confession of our hope.

Well, the third thing is to let us consider. And really, if you look at the original language, it is let us consider one another.

So if you look at verse 24, it says let us consider how to stir up one another. Well, it should read, let us consider one another. How to stir up one another.

How to love one another. How to make good works happen in one another. 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. Well, isn't this an amazing way for us to receive God's grace? It is by thinking of those who are around us.

[25 : 29] In this gathering here tonight, in your small group Bible studies, in the times when you meet with other Christians as well, those times are crucial. They are very, very important.

You can't consider others. You can't provoke them to love. And that's that word stir up. It's provoke them to love and do his good works if you are not relating with other people.

It can't be done. You have to be with others. And the end of this verse, verse 25, talks about the day drawing near.

And I think there's a reason for that. Because there is a reference to heaven. This is the life of heaven. We will know what life is like there in that we will love each other.

We will be doing beautiful works, good works, works of incredible artistry in a sense, just pure goodness. We will be encouraging one another, bringing great joy to each other, what God's doing in one another forever.

[26 : 35] This is the stuff of heavenly life. And it's part of our worship of God now. In a sense, we have a foretaste of heaven as we meet one another and provoke each other to love each other and to create good works in one another.

Well, what this teaches for us at St. John's is that your presence at church is vital because you come to church carrying the presence of God with you because Jesus is your high priest.

And you're meeting with others tonight and in your small groups who are also in the presence of God. And so this urges us, come to church thinking about how I can provoke that other person to love.

Come to church thinking about how I can encourage that person who I see. Come to church thinking about what it means for me to bless those that I come in contact with.

And one of the questions I asked the staff this week was, how is it that just being in the same place, coming to church or to a small group, how is it that I can stir people up to love and good works?

[27 : 56] How does that happen? It's kind of a hard question to answer, but it's really good to think about. But I know that if I see somebody who I know is going through a tough time and it was really hard for them to come, when I see them here and know that they are so committed to this group, so committed to Jesus Christ that they will come through their pain, that encourages me.

When I see somebody who I know has been praying for me when I am together with them, that is a deep encouragement. It provokes me to want to pray for other people.

It provokes me to have that kind of self-giving love for another person. When I see somebody who is kind to a stranger, and I'm not talking about somebody who is a real outsider, but kind to somebody that they don't know, and welcomes them into their life, here at church or in a small group, that is an incredible encouragement to me.

It pushes me to be kind in that way myself, to go outside natural shyness, or go outside my natural group of people I would connect with for the sake of Jesus Christ.

See, there's a very practical ways that just the presence, our mere presence, encourages and provokes to love. And so if somebody is missing on a Sunday or on a weekday, this hurts the rest of the body.

[29 : 29] There is a person missing who is not looking to stir up other people. And I want you this year to think about what it means to be committed to this group here on Sunday night, and to be committed to the small groups that you are a part of.

It is critical. It is a taste of the life of heaven. And this tells us another thing. It tells us that going to church is not passive. It's not like going to a hockey game.

It's not like going to a concert or to a movie. It is actually incredibly active. It is coming not just to hear God's word or even to sing, which does bless us, but it is thinking consciously, how can I stir up the person who is near me to love them?

How do I encourage people to live their lives for Jesus? It gives strength to another person to see, it gives strength to me to see people stand up for Jesus in courageous ways.

You can't say then, when you're living out this way, that I didn't get anything out of church because you came to give. You came to give of yourself. And so I want to end by saying that as you draw near, as you hold unswervingly to the hope of Jesus, as you consider others, you will be extravagantly receiving grace.

[31 : 00] You will be extravagantly receiving joy from Jesus. Because as you draw near to God, as you are aware that you have access to Him, your life will change.

As you hold on to this hope that is before you, the Bible says you will be purified. God will shape you. He will change you. As you seek to consider other people, you will be deeply changed.

You will actually be living the life of heaven here and now. In an imperfect way, yes, but God is preparing you for heaven in doing that. So may God the Holy Spirit this year fill you with all joy and peace and believing.

May He strengthen you for this joyful worship that these lettuces are calling us to. Jesus, our priest, has brought us into the presence of God. May we live in joyful thankfulness to Him now and forever in the life to come.

Amen.