

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Life-Changing Relationships**

Nurturing relationships that help us follow Jesus.

### **Encouragement**

(Hebrews 10:19-25)

Study #5

#### **Introduction:** Relational rehab...

One of my recurring dreams when I was in my early 30's was to take an old, beat-up classic American muscle car and restore it to mint condition.

The subjects of the dreams shifted from time to time. At times, it was an early model Ford Mustang, at other times a Chrysler hot rod, often a '60's model Chevelle SS 396.

Well, my good friend Ryan Johnson has the Plymouth project well under control and PT Gaines long ago took lead on the Mustang.

So, all that remains is for me to find an old beat-up 1969 Chevelle SS 396 to restore mechanically and to paint candy apple red. (Ain't happening. I lack the skills and I do well to keep my 2002 Ford Ranger running.)

There is something appealing to Ryan and PT and to me - probably to you, too - about taking something that's a little bit broken down, a little creaky, got a lot of miles on it, and restoring it.

That's why physical therapists do what they do and why art restoration experts do what they do. Frankly, it's soul-stirring to restore a broken-down body, a used-up old car, an old painting or old furniture to the way it was intended to work or to look.

The skilled practice of encouragement is, on a personal level, what a new paint job is to an old car. Encouragement is restoration. Christian encouragement's goal is to restore someone made in the image and likeness of God to Manufacturer's original design.

And today, our aim is to grow as encouragers / restorers.

To gain insight into the theme of restorative encouragement, we'll turn to a New Testament letter written to give it to believers in Jesus who needed it.

#### *Background to the book of Hebrews...*

There is a lot we don't know about the New Testament letter we simply call "Hebrews".

For instance, we don't know who wrote it. Yet, from the first century on, Hebrews has been accepted by the church as having been written by an apostle or by a close associate of an apostle.<sup>1</sup> It is an inspired-by-God writing.

In addition to authorship, we don't know where the letter was written, to what place it was sent,<sup>2</sup> nor the date of its writing.<sup>3</sup>

We do, though, have a pretty good sense as to why the letter was written and to the group of people who received it.

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<sup>1</sup> Conjecture as to authorship has ranged from Paul (perhaps written in Aramaic or Hebrew and translated into Greek by Luke), to Apollos, Philip, Silvanus, or Priscilla. Other suggestions have also been made.

<sup>2</sup> Most who play the guessing game, guess that the letter was written from Palestine. As to the recipients, guesses range from Spain to Rome to Galatia.

<sup>3</sup> The date is uncertain, though, as there are no extra-biblical historical markers included in the letter itself. That the tabernacle is frequently mentioned, but never the temple has caused some to believe that it was written after AD 70 when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. But the author writes as if the ritual of the temple is still on-going, reflecting a pre-AD 70 date, before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

The passage we are exploring this morning is in Hebrews, chapter 10. Verse 19 begins, **[19a] Therefore, brethren...**

“Brethren” is an inclusive term referring to all (just like in Spanish, “hermanos” will apply to men and to women). And the ALL in view all believe in Jesus. This is a letter written to Christians.

The particulars of the letter lead us to believe that these were people who had been born Jewish and then were born-again when they put their faith in Jesus. And the letter’s content clues us in as to why whoever wrote it, wrote it.

See, as the Jesus movement grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire, Jesus’ followers faced growing opposition from the Roman government and from the Jews.

And, while life was never easy for the Jews in the first century, being a Christ-following Jew made life dramatically harder.

In the face of this increasing hardship, the temptation was strong to abandon Jesus and go back to following Moses.<sup>4</sup>

Hebrews was written to encourage these Jewish Christians to remain true to Jesus. Keep following Jesus. Don’t turn back.

Now, this is not our situation. We aren’t facing overt opposition because of our faith. We’re not being tempted to revert to our past faith in Judaism.

But if we back away from the exact particulars of the first century, in more general terms I think that what we find in Hebrews speaks powerfully to us today.

- The letters’ first readers were disheartened, discouraged. Many of us today could check that box.
- They were facing hardships in life. How many of you have been there, done that, this year?
- They were tempted to turn from following Jesus to an easier, more pleasant life.

Does any of that sound familiar?

The tensions of our day include a virus that hasn’t yet let up, political discord, and a less friendly societal posture toward Christianity. Child-rearing is harder. Work is harder. School is harder. It all wears on us. It is wearying.

All that we are all facing could tempt any of us to think about backing away from our commitment to Jesus, to live for the cheap treats of NOW rather than for God’s “*Well done!*” THEN.

By the way, did you know that research by the well-known research group, The Pew Institute indicates that over the past decade, the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as Christians has slipped from 77% to 65% and that those who describe themselves as “none” with no religious affiliation has risen from 17% to 26%?

Lots of American Christians, for various reasons, are not the fervent, zealous, Jesus-following Christians they were. And it may be that you are tempted to go there, too, discouraged in your walk with Jesus. If so, what follows is tailor-made for you.

By the time we come to our passage for this morning (Hebrews chapter 10), the author has urged his readers over and over again to remain loyal to Jesus.

His first words here remind all of us of what is true for us in Jesus. This is VERY encouraging.

### **Draw Near (vv. 19b-22)**

### **We Have Confidence... (19b-20)**

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<sup>4</sup> There are several scholars, most notably James Moffatt (writing in the International Critical Commentary), who do not believe that Hebrews was intended for a mostly Jewish Christian audience, or that the purpose was to convince his readers to not revert to Judaism. This is a minority position, though, and I think there is more reason to hold to the thought stated above.

***[19] Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, [20] by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh...***

*The old path to God*

Under the old arrangement of the Mosaic Law, not every Jew could enter the tabernacle.<sup>5</sup>

Entrance was only allowed to the priests who presented offerings and sacrifices, cleaned, and carried on the religious rituals.

Plus, not every priest, but only the High Priest could enter the ***“holy place”***,<sup>6</sup> and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

Entrance into the tabernacle and access to the presence of God was highly restricted under Moses. In Jesus, those restrictions are gone.

*Jesus’ death has created a new path to God*

In the tabernacle, there was a barrier, a curtain, that separated the places where the more typical activities took place from the most ***“holy place.”***

The curtain was a physical symbol of the inaccessibility of God’s presence to the everyday Jew and even for the everyday priests.

Jesus’ death on the cross removed that barrier, opening the way for anyone who believes in Him to enter the spiritual “Holy of Holies”. All Christians have access to God through Jesus.

In fact, that was exactly what God was saying when, while Jesus was dying on the cross (Luke 23:45), the veil in the Jewish temple was torn in two, top to bottom.

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<sup>5</sup> The tabernacle was the place of worship for the Jews when they were in the wilderness after receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. The tabernacle was replaced by the temple some five hundred years later by King Solomon.

<sup>6</sup> Likely referring to the innermost chamber of the tabernacle here, usually called ***“the holy of holies”***; See Hebrews 9:8.

Thanks to Jesus’ redeeming work on the cross, we now have access to God’s presence.

Because of that access, we have an attitude. Hebrews calls it *confidence*.

*We now have confidence*

Earlier, in Hebrews 4:16, we were urged to ***“draw near with confidence*** (same word) ***to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”***

Here, there is no urging. Here, it is stated as fact. We have confidence to approach God.

This access to God is a gift of grace. We don’t take the access for granted. We aren’t flippant about it.

But we do have absolute confidence that we can always draw near to God. We need never fear that God will not welcome us when we come to Him.

We know, as surely as your kids know that they can always come to you with a problem, that we can always come to God with our worship and praise, our confession and repentance, our requests and our needs.

That kind of confidence is a restorative thing. It brings beauty to our lives; it enables us to run like we are designed to run.

Confidence to draw near to God is encouraging. And so is this.

**We Have a Great Priest... (v. 21)**

***[21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God,***

The role of a priest, in every religion, is to be an advocate for people before God.<sup>7</sup>

The Jews who served the tabernacle and the temple all came from the tribe of Levi, one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The priests, who were a subset of the tribe of Levi, prayed and offered sacrifices for people.

And from this subset of priests, a **“great priest”**<sup>8</sup> (High Priest) who was over all the other priests. It was his job to offer sacrifices year after year after year. His work was never finished.

Our great priest, our High Priest is Jesus. And Jesus’ work as High Priest is done. He was both Sacrifice and Sacrificer.

Our Savior, Jesus, is our Great Priest who made of Himself a once-and-for-all sacrifice for our sins and who now is our Advocate and Champion.

Again, how encouraging. And that leads to this.

### **Therefore, Approach God! (v. 22)**

***[22] let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.***

God cleansed you from the guilt of sin when you came to Him by faith. You entered the realm of the Spirit by God’s work in your soul and you entered into the community of the church by water baptism.

So, draw near to God. He is eager to receive you. Arms opened wide.

Then, when you’re tempted to discouragement as the first readers of Hebrews were, when you’re unnerved by all that’s going on, there is an action step to take to stay encouraged.

### **Hold Fast (v. 23)**

***[23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful...***

When you’re tempted to waver in your loyalty to Jesus, like people whose lives are disrupted often are - hold fast. Remember the faithfulness of the God who has promised you life - eternal and abundant.

When speaking to the Jewish rabbi, Nicodemus, Jesus said, ***[John 3:14] “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; [15] so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. [16] “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.***

When talking with a Samaritan woman by the Jacob’s well, Jesus said, ***[John 4:14] but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”***

When speaking to a group of men who were looking for ways to kill Him, Jesus said, ***[John 5:24] “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.***

When speaking to a crowd made up of disciples and skeptics, Jesus said, ***[John 10:10] “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.***

When speaking to Martha after her brother, Lazarus, had died, Jesus said, ***[John 11:25] Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,***

So, encouragement to follow Jesus is there for the taking when we confidently approach the God who welcomes us into His presence. Encouragement to walk with God is ours when we hold fast to the promises of our faithful God.

<sup>7</sup> By contrast, a prophet is a spokesman / advocate for God to people.

<sup>8</sup> A common way to refer to the High Priest. Lev 21:10. The priest that is above his brethren.

The author of Hebrews also tells us that encouragement to remain loyal to Jesus when we face disrupting times comes as we relate to each other deeply, meaningfully, purposefully, and lovingly.

What follows is a “how-to” for redemptive, restorative relating. First, we “**consider**.”

### **Encourage (vv. 24-25)**

#### **The Ministry of Provocation (v. 24)**

***[24] and let us CONSIDER<sup>9</sup> how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds...***

*A thinking person's game*

This is you, with a friend in mind. You think, mull, reflect, observe, be aware, meditate, pray about your friend. You take into consideration all that you know about him, about her.

You want to be used by God to deeply encourage your friend. Great. Encouragement is best given by someone who really knows their friend.

This call to “consider” is a call to a good and holy shrewdness, a sanctified creativity.

To be an encourager will require that you bring your most prayerful, most loving, most inventive self to bear on your friend's life, for Jesus' sake.

So, we think and we pray, and then we provoke.

*The means: PROVOCATION*

***[24] and let us consider how to STIMULATE one another to love and good deeds...***

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<sup>9</sup> Greek, *κατανοεω* - “to direct one's whole mind to an object” (from TDNT, Volume IV, p. 973), indicating the level of concentration being called for here.

The Greek word that my version translates *stimulate* is rendered by other English Bibles as **encourage** (new NASB), **promote** (Holman), **spur** (NIV), **stir up** (ESV, NKJV), and **provoke** (KJV)

The word is the Greek word *paroxysmon* (*παροξυσμον*),<sup>10</sup> and is the word from which we get our English *paroxysm* - as in a paroxysm / fit of coughing or laughter or rage.<sup>11</sup>

You, the would-be encourager, are seeking to provoke your friend. And if you know your friend well, you know his triggers. You know how to get to him. To provoke her.

A rancher knows just how to use his spurs on a horse to get the horse to do what he wants the horse to do. It's not always a hard kick. Sometimes just a little pressure'll do the trick.

But he has to be a student of his horse. He has to know just what nudge his horse needs to get the desired performance. And he'll use his spurs differently on different horses, too.

Different people and different settings require different spurs. We have to be sensitive to the moment. We have to be willing to personalize and customize our interactions. One size doesn't fit all.

Cookie cutter formulas won't win the day if we are going to provoke our friend into “**love and good deeds**.”

*The goal is love and good deeds*

***[24] and let us consider how to stimulate one another TO LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS...***

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<sup>10</sup> The same word described the “**sharp disagreement**” (Acts 15) that Paul and Barnabas had over whether they should take Mark on a second missionary journey.

<sup>11</sup> This word derives from the Greek *paroxynein*, which means “to stimulate” and comes from *oxys*, a Greek word for “sharp.” In its earliest known English uses in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *paroxysm* denoted agitation. It eventually took on a broader sense referring to an outburst, especially a dramatic physical or emotional one.

We set our spurs in our friend's flanks at just the right time and in just the right way to lovingly "**provoke**" them to take their next steps with Jesus.

We here, in the church, are to incite each other, not to violence, but to good works; we're to egg each other on, not to temper tantrums, but to faith; we're to be spurs in each other's side to provoke, not pain, but love.<sup>12</sup>

That's the restorative ministry of provocation. Next, we read about the ministry of presence.

### **Come Together; The Ministry of Presence (v. 25a)**

***[25a] not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some...***

Those can be jarring words to hear in the middle of a pandemic. And I want you to know that if you aren't comfortable having in-person fellowship right now for health reasons in light of COVID-19, no problem.

The way we've been approaching the virus since the spring of last year is to respect each other's convictions and to provide options for those with different convictions.

We respect each other's convictions here. So, if your convictions lead you to remain at home and to not gather for worship during this season, we respect that.

But there were people in the first century who had withdrawn from Christian fellowship for reasons other than fear of a plague.

For some it was fear of authorities or not wanting to be associated with distinctively Christian fellowship. For others it might have been laziness or spiritual apathy.

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<sup>12</sup> Check out Acts 17:16 where Paul was "provoked" (same Greek word as here for "stimulate" in his spirit by the idolatry in Athens. Also, see 1 Corinthians 13:5 where we are told that love "**is not provoked**" - again, same word as here. A great example of a word being used in different ways in different contexts.

To withdraw for those reasons was, and is, to invite disaster. Remaining in community brings strength.

The era of COVID-19 is weird and it won't last forever. As long as it lasts, take advantage of community wherever you can find it.

Give thanks to God for Zoom and FaceTime and email and phones - and use these tools to stay connected.

And join me in asking God that the grip of COVID-19 would soon loosen up. And when it does, rush back into fellowship, for your own spiritual health and for the spiritual health of others.

Provocation, presence - now (wait for it) - paraklesis.

### **The Ministry of Paraklesis (v. 25b)**

***[25b]...but [paraklesis-ing] one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.***

I'm substituting a Greek word for the verb in this sentence to make a point that I hope will become clear.<sup>13</sup>

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He spoke with His disciples about what life would be like in His absence.

Among other things, He told them to expect the arrival of a Helper, the Holy Spirit. Jesus would soon be physically gone, but the Spirit of God would be present within each Christian.

And just as Jesus Himself had a multi-faceted ministry, so the ministries of the Holy Spirit are multi-faceted and varied, too.

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<sup>13</sup> Here is an example of another verse with the English substituted by the original Greek: ***[2 Corinthians 1:3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all PARAKLESIS who PARAKLESIZES us in all our affliction so that we may be able to PARAKLESIZE those who are in any affliction with the PARAKLESIS with which we ourselves are PARAKLESIZED by God.***

Sometimes, the Bible describes the Holy Spirit as a gentle Comforter. He is exactly what we need when our world is crumbling or when we are in pain.

At other times, the Spirit is a hard Convictor of sin who pierces our consciences and drives us to repentance.

The Holy Spirit is a comforting presence when life is hard, and He is a correcting presence when we are hard.

There is a hard and a soft side to the Spirit of God and the Greek language refers to Him by a word that allows this breadth. The word is *parakletos*.

*Parakletos* literally means, “one who comes alongside” to help. That’s the Holy Spirit. His ministry is *paraklesis*.

No matter the problem - sin or weakness, rebellion or brokenness, sadness or unjustified anger - the Holy Spirit sidles up next to us and helps us with what we need.

You should know that the Greek word that describes the ministry of the Spirit also describes how you and I are to be with each other.

A literal rendering of Hebrews 10:25 is “**come alongside one another.**”<sup>14</sup>

For us as it is for the Holy Spirit, *paraklesis* has a very wide range of meaning.

The most common translation of the word is *encouragement*.<sup>15</sup>

We are to be like the Holy Spirit, but with skin on. You and I are to come alongside each other and provide what is needed to promote growth in love and faithfulness.

We are to be sensitive to the moment, to the situation, and to the person we are with.

Sometimes we’ll give strong, gentle comfort. Sometimes our help will take the form of rebuke and exhortation.

Whatever type of encouragement is needed, that is what we give. *Paraklesis* / Encouragement...  
 ...is our loving effort to prompt others to be and do all they can be and do for Jesus.  
 ...is a ministry requiring deep, personal, relational investment and a willingness to sacrifice and to take risk.  
 ...is not a technique to be mastered; it is a sensitivity to people and a confidence in God that must be nourished and demonstrated.  
 ...is a willingness to say what needs to be said and to do what needs to be done to help a fellow Christian take his or her next step with Jesus.

THAT’S what encouragement is all about.

### **Conclusion:**

We can move each other toward maturity and restoration by our deeds.

People who receive the gift of food from the church’s Food Pantry taste more than good food at mealtime. They taste your love and God’s love as that food lavishes value on them.

Money given to the Benevolence Fund makes tangible God’s love and care to someone who can’t quite make ends meet.

<sup>14</sup> The Greek of Hebrews has the participial form of the verb *παρακαλεω*. *Παρακλησις* is the noun form. They are related in form and in meaning, as “encourager” and “encouragement” are in English.

<sup>15</sup> Greek, *paraklesis*.

Meeting pressing needs lets a friend or a stranger see God's love in action. It provides hope and a vision for a future. It is restorative generosity.

And we can restore someone with life-giving words.

Major league baseball catcher Jim Sundberg once said that his father was always telling him, "*Jim, one day you're going to be a great major league catcher.*" Sure enough, that's what Jim Sundberg became.

We can never have too much paraklesis. In the church, paraklesis is like peanut butter added to a sandwich. The more you spread around, the better things stick together.

It is the purpose and plan of God that you and I should be as creative as possible and should work as hard as we can, to spur each other on / provoke each other to love and good deeds.

Today, for whom will you fight hard to determine how to best give the powerful gift of encouragement?

And, the evangelist Bill Glass, who has led "Behind the Walls" - a ministry that serves those in prison - for over forty years, once asked a group of a thousand male inmates, "*How many of you had parents tell you that you would end up in prison one day?*" Nearly every man present raised his hand.

Ah, the power of the tongue to bless and to curse.