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Sermon Summary #27

Draw Near to God! Hebrews 10:19-22

Most of you are too young to remember this, but in the 1970's one of the most controversial books to be released came from the pen of Harvard University professor, B. F. Skinner. It was titled, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. The central thesis of that book was that inasmuch as humanity is on the verge of self-annihilation, it has become imperative that radically decisive steps be taken to control human behavior. Skinner, of course, was an advocate of biological evolution. You and I, said Skinner, are no more than the highest and most developed animal on the evolutionary scale.

Therefore, it only stands to reason that *by means of the appropriate application of technological stimuli, human behavior can be controlled, modified, and manipulated in ways deemed necessary to perpetuate the existence of the human race*. Skinner insisted that freedom is an illusion. Human behavior can therefore be altered and shaped by operant conditioning, not entirely different from Pavlov's dog that was conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell.

Needless to say, Christians have a radically different perspective on human nature and how we are motivated to make our decisions in life. Over and over again throughout the whole of Scripture the Spirit of God seeks to elicit from us and empower in us godly behavior by directing our thoughts and meditation to the infinite love, mercy, and grace of God revealed in the cross of Christ and the empty tomb.

In view of all that Christ has done for us, primarily in the sacrifice of himself on the cross for our sakes, we are encouraged to forsake sinful behavior and pursue holiness of life. Let me give you just two examples.

First, after writing eleven chapters in Romans about the sovereign grace of God in our salvation, Paul opens the practical section of that letter with these words: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"* (Rom. 12:1).

Second, we see much the same thing in Ephesians. Paul spent three chapters talking about all that God has done for us in Jesus, and then opens chapter four with this appeal: *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called"* (Eph. 4:1).

This is precisely what we find here in Hebrews 10. After describing in glorious detail the mercy of God in Jesus Christ for people like you and me, our author opens Hebrews 10:19 with that indescribably important word: "therefore" (10:19a). **THEREFORE**, in view of what Christ has done in making it possible for us to stand in God's presence confident and forgiven, "let us draw near."

Do you remember what we saw last week in vv. 14 and 17?

"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:14).

Therefore, draw near to God!

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more" (Heb. 10:17).

Therefore, draw near to God!

God has qualified you and made you “perfect” to stand in his presence, so, for heaven’s sake, don’t wait another millisecond: draw near to God! Now!

God has declared that he will never again remember your sins or lawless deeds, so for heaven’s sake, don’t wait another millisecond: draw near to God! Now!

There are actually three exhortations found here, but we are only looking at the first one today. He also goes on to say in v. 23, “let us hold fast the confession of our hope”, and again in v. 24, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” But we are concerned today with just this first one. We’ll take up those other two next week.

So, our author has one primary goal in mind and that is to say what needs to be said so that you and I will recognize the glorious privilege obtained for us by Jesus to “draw near” to God. So what does it mean to draw near to God and how is it done?

Draw Near!

But wait a minute. He doesn’t say anything explicitly about to whom or what we are to draw near, so how do we know he’s talking about God? The answer is easy when we look at the three other occasions in Hebrews where our author encourages us to draw near.

“Let us then with confidence ***draw near*** to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

“Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who ***draw near*** to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would ***draw near*** to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

There are several other NT texts that affirm the same thing, two of which are:

“For through him [i.e., through Christ] we both [i.e., believing Jews and believing Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18).

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18a).

Consider something truly profound. In our society there are all sorts of barriers to prevent or hinder access to certain people. You can’t draw near to Hollywood actors or professional athletes. They all typically have personal bodyguards that keep you at bay. If you try to get too close, you’re likely to get cracked upside the head or even arrested. You can’t draw near to the President of the United States and most of the more powerful people in Congress. I doubt if you could ever get an appointment to meet with a Supreme Court Justice.

And there are numerous places and events where we are prohibited from entering. You can’t draw near to the Super Bowl without a very expensive ticket. You can’t get near the Mona Lisa in the Louvre in Paris. You can’t go on stage at the Academy Awards in Hollywood.

Countless people and places and events are off-limits to average people like you and me. But not so with God! Think about it. All these people and places and events combined that limit access are nothing in comparison with God. He infinitely transcends in value and glory and honor and power all such big-shots on earth. But the Bible tells us that he has made the greatest imaginable sacrifice precisely to open up to himself free and unhindered access. And you never need an appointment to draw near to God. There is never an inappropriate time to visit God. You will never, ever be turned away if you draw near to him through faith in Jesus Christ.

So what does it mean to “draw near”? After all, in all the earthly examples I just gave, to draw near usually entails some physical movement or financial expense. You have to fly to Washington, D.C., to meet with the President. You have to drive to Miami (or some other city) to attend the Super Bowl. You have to know somebody who knows somebody if you ever hope to have lunch with a big named actor or actress. And you have to spend a good bit of money to get into Chesapeake Arena to watch the Thunder play.

But none of that is required to “draw near” to God. Since God is a spirit and is everywhere present, you don’t need an airplane or automobile to draw near to him. You don’t even need legs! No physical movement is required. No financial payment is needed. No connections are required. You can be lying in a hospital bed, driving in your car, sitting at your desk, running around Lake Hefner, or even attending a service like this and you can instantly and always draw near to God.

Perhaps the most common mistake people make is to think that if I am going to draw near to God I have to visit some physical structure that is regarded as holy and sacred. The result is that people think God “lives” here in this building and that if I am to encounter him it can only be on a Sunday morning. Now certainly it is crucial that we gather corporately on a weekly basis to seek God and to engage him in life-changing ways. Our author will tell us this very thing in vv. 23-25. But we can draw near to and find God 24-7, anytime and everywhere.

Thus, contrary to what many of our church traditions have suggested, you don’t have to walk down one of these aisles to draw near to God.

So what is involved in drawing near? First of all, we need to keep in mind *the vivid contrast between our situation today and that of the people of Israel during the time of the OT*. As we saw in our study of Hebrews 9 and the tabernacle, there was an elaborate system and structure in place designed to make sure that you did *not* draw near to God. Anyone who attempted to come near to God, other than the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, once a year, would have been instantly incinerated. You didn’t draw near to God under the terms of the Old Covenant of Moses. You kept your distance.

But under the terms of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ all the barriers and obstacles and rules no longer obtain. There is only one ticket into God’s presence, only one requirement for those who wish to draw near: faith in Jesus Christ!

Drawing near is an invisible act of the soul. It is that spiritual movement of the heart of a man or woman by which we cry out to God for help, by which we express our trust in his goodness, by which we lay hold of his promises, by which we believe him to be all that Scripture says that he is, by which we proclaim that he is great and beautiful and praise him for all he is and has done, by which say “You alone are my hope and my joy and my salvation and I refuse to trust in another.”

So what are we seeking when we draw near to God? What are we hoping to experience? To draw near to God means that we have these privileges and blessings:

Prayer: God wants us to tell him everything; to cry out with our complaints and our needs and our gratitude and our confusion and our hopes for the future.

Fellowship: God wants to walk with us in a relationship of intimacy and openness such that when we sin we would never think of running from him in fear but to him in faith.

Power: To draw near to God is to be a recipient of his power; to experience the very power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:19ff.).

Protection: When we draw near to God we enjoy his protection; we avail ourselves of the promise that no weapon formed against us can ultimately cause any harm; to draw near to God is to know and rest assured that “if God is for us, who can be against us?”

Enjoyment: Paul says in Romans 5:11 that because we have been reconciled to God through Jesus we “rejoice in God.” To draw near to God is to freely and openly and sincerely rejoice in his goodness and greatness and every other truth about him that we know.

Pleasures: In Psalm 16:11 we are told explicitly why we should seek the presence of God, for there and there alone we find “fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.”

Hear his voice: We draw near to God when we are open to hearing him speak, first and foremost in and through Scripture but also in those tender communications from his Spirit to our spirit.

Manifest presence: To draw near to God is to experience in an almost tangible way a heightened sense of his presence. Of course, God is always and everywhere present with us but there are times when that presence is manifest or intensified and we are enabled by the Spirit to feel and enjoy and sense it in ways never before known.

Communion with God: To draw near to God is what the Puritans used to call having “communion” with God; feeling his love, knowing his commitment to our welfare, resting in the peace that he brings.

Notice carefully that the essence of this privilege in drawing near to God . . . is God!

We have regularly given to our first-time visitors at Bridgeway a copy of John Piper’s book, *God is the Gospel*. Someone once asked John what is the most important book he ever wrote, and he’s written over 50! He responded without hesitation: *God is the Gospel*. I’ve had people scrunch up their face in confusion when they hear that title. What does he mean when he says “God is the Gospel”? He means that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ isn’t primarily that we get our sins forgiven. Rather, we get our sins forgiven so that we can draw near to God and get God. The good news of the gospel isn’t primarily that we are redeemed from sin and declared righteous by faith and are adopted into God’s family. All these things are good and glorious and wonderful for only one reason: they get us to God. They make it possible for us to get God!

God is the good news of the gospel. Getting him. Knowing him. Seeing him. Savoring him. Enjoying him. Relishing him. Being satisfied with all that he is for us in Jesus. Experiencing God himself in his presence and power and majesty and love. God himself as our faithful friend and constant companion and ever-present lover and Lord is the gospel! Says Piper:

“And all of this is for our joy and for his glory. He does not need us. If we stay away he is not impoverished. He does not need us in order to be happy in the fellowship of the Trinity. But he magnifies his mercy by giving us free access through his Son, in spite of our sin, to the one Reality that can satisfy us completely and forever, namely, himself” (Piper, “Let us Draw Near to God,” March 23, 1997).

Would that God might at this very moment, right now, even as I am speaking, awaken in your heart and empower your soul to cry out with the psalmist:

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps. 42:2).

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. . . . For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:1-2, 10-11).

And remember: these psalms were written from the perspective and experience of those who could never draw near to God in the way that you and I can under the terms of the New Covenant. How much more, then, ought we to rejoice and be grateful for this indescribable privilege and blessing!

Two Good Grounds and Rock-Solid Reasons for Drawing Near to God

How can we be sure that it's o.k. to draw near to God? What gives us the right to do so? What is the basis for our confidence that this is something God actually approves? Our author mentions two grounds.

First, we can and should and must draw near to God because of the shed "blood of Jesus" (10:19). Whatever barrier was in place because of our sin has been removed because Christ shed his blood on the cross for us. If it was the wrath and justice of God that kept us back, it is no more. By dying in our place and shedding his blood Christ has satisfied the wrath of God. If it was our guilt and shame that kept us back, it is no more. By dying for us Christ has cleansed and forgiven us.

Perhaps you wonder, "Why will the holiness and majestic beauty of God not consume me but rather, as you suggest, thrill me and bring unparalleled pleasure and joy?" The answer is because the blood of Christ has been shed and we need never, ever again fear the wrath of God!

Thus our "confidence" (10:19a) in drawing near to God is not based on our having cleaned up our lives or because we figured out a way to break sinful habits or because we went to a counselor and straightened out our thinking and got our emotions aligned. We have "confidence to enter the holy places," that is, the immediate presence of God, because Jesus died and rose again! He opened up for us "the new and living way" through the curtain, that is, "through his flesh" (10:19b). It is "new" because it was previously unavailable to those living under the Old Covenant. Only those who are members of the New Covenant experience this privilege. And it is "living" because it is access through a person who is alive, a person raised from the dead who always lives at the Father's right hand to make intercession for us. And it is "living" because it is life that is imparted to those who avail themselves of it.

But what does he mean when he says that the "curtain" or "veil" through which we pass into God's presence is the "flesh" of Jesus? Clearly he's constructing an analogy. His point is that just as the veil of the Temple had to be torn apart in order to make open and free our access to God, so also Christ's body had to be torn and rent, as it were, by the sacrifice of himself on the cross before he could enter God's presence for us and make a path for our entrance into the arms of our heavenly Father.

But there is yet another reason or ground for us to draw near to God.

Second, "since we have a great priest over the house of God" (10:21) we should draw near to him. I hardly need to rehearse this truth as we have spent considerable time in Hebrews 5-7 talking about the superior high priesthood of Jesus.

Two Characteristics of the Manner in which we Draw Near to God

Just as there were two reasons why we can have confidence to draw near to God, so also there are two characteristics of those who do.

First, we are to draw near "with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (10:22). By a "true" or "genuine" heart he means a heart that does not come trying to fool God or acting as if we deserve to be in his presence. It is the opposite of a hypocritical and insincere heart. I'm constantly amazed by people who think they can fool God by pretending to love him and pretending to praise him, as if God is hoodwinked by our religiosity.

And the "assurance of faith" of which he speaks doesn't point so much to the subjective feelings you experience, as if you can't draw near to God if you ever have doubts about your salvation. No. Rather, ***the assurance we experience is the confidence that Christ has done everything necessary to make our entrance into God's presence a glorious privilege that we can embrace and enjoy without hesitation.***

"But Sam, my heart is so burdened by sin. And I'm frequently cold and hard and resistant to the things of God. I feel so weighed down by guilt and shame. How can I possibly draw near to God?"

That's a good question. And the answer is found in the next statement.

Second, those who draw near are the ones whose “hearts” are “sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” and whose “bodies” have been “washed with pure water” (10:22).

This sprinkling of your heart that cleans your conscience has already been accomplished. It refers to what Christ achieved for you by his death and resurrection. It doesn't mean you have to *feel* clean to come to God, although you can. It means that you rest confidently that you *are* clean because of Christ's cleansing power!

When he speaks of our “bodies (being) washed with pure water” I don't think he's talking about water baptism. Rather, he is referring to that spiritual cleansing mentioned in Ezekiel 36:25 – “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” So the analogy is that just as real water washes our bodies clean from dirt and grime so the spiritual water of God's mercy and grace washes our hearts and souls clean from the guilt and shame of our sin.

You may be greatly burdened by your sin and miserable because of recent failures, but you can draw near to God when you say:

“As bad and pathetic as my life currently is, by faith I lay claim to the cleansing power of Christ's blood that washes me white as snow. Shut up conscience! Speak no more to me of the evil I have done. I know it all too well. But Christ has washed my conscience clean. Praise God! So I will draw near to him to find all I need.”

Conclusion

Are you brokenhearted because someone broke your heart? Draw near to God. He has come to us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to bind up the brokenhearted. He doesn't promise that he will restore the relationship that led to your broken-heartedness. But he does promise to infuse into your heart the healing peace that passes all comprehension.

Do you feel alone and isolated and cut off from everyone else? Draw near to God. He is a faithful companion who will never leave you or forsake you. Into the darkness of your solitude he will shine a bright and beautiful light that will never be snuffed out.

Do you still feel defiled in your conscience, dirty and disqualified? Do you struggle to move beyond the memory of moral failure? Does it haunt you and torment you? Draw near to God. The blood of Christ Jesus will cleanse your conscience and clothe you in his own righteousness. That's right. If you draw near to God through faith in Jesus and cry out for the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he can help you *feel* clean. You *are* clean by faith, but he can do more and enable you actually to *feel* clean.

Do you need wisdom to make some decision, or power to follow through on the decision you already know should be made? Draw near to God. Draw near to him at the throne of grace. Draw near to him through faith in Jesus. He will never turn you away.

Do you just need to know that your life isn't a waste? Do you need to be reassured that you do have a purpose and your life has value? Draw near to God. Let him fill you with his Spirit and awaken in your heart a fresh vision for life and service for the glory of his name.