

INTRODUCTION

We used to live in a world that was totally literal. You had literal friends and literal experiences. But today we live in a virtual world. You can have virtual friends and you can have virtual experiences. For instance, you don't have to go white water rafting literally, you can put on Virtual Reality goggles and you are immersed in a white water rafting adventure without getting a drop of water on you.

I read about a funny email exchange about a virtual romance. A daughter emailed her dad: "Dearest Dad, I am coming home to get married soon, so get your checkbook out! As you know, I am in Australia ... and he lives in Scotland. We connected on match.com, became friends on Facebook, had long chats on iMessage. He proposed to me on Skype, and now we've had two months of a virtual relationship. My beloved Dad, I need your blessing, good wishes, and a really big wedding. Your favorite daughter, Lilly."

Her dad wrote back: "My Dear Lilly, Like Wow! Really? I suggest you two get married on Twitter, have fun on Snapchat, buy your kids on Amazon, and pay for it all through PayPal. And when you get fed up with this new husband, sell him on eBay! Love, Your Dad."

Some people today are looking for a virtual church experience but the writer of Hebrews stresses that we need to have a *literal* experience of gathering with other believers.

Much of Hebrews has been theological in nature, but this begins a section of very practical truth. The writer points out five things we should be doing. Each one begins with the phrase "let us." Our focus is Hebrews 10:19-25. But the passage begins with "therefore." I've often said that you should never start reading the Bible at a "therefore;" you have to go back to the preceding verses to see what it's there for! So let's read beginning in Hebrews 10:17:

God says, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. THEREFORE, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, LET US draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. LET US hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And LET US consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. LET US not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but LET US encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

If you think of the Bible as God's garden, we are walking down the lettuce row. Of these five heads of "let us," four of them are positive, and one is negative. There are four things we SHOULD be doing and one thing we should AVOID doing. When you look at the verbs in the original Greek language, we find that the verbs are plural, which means these are things we do together as the church, and they are in the imperative sense, which means these are NOT just

suggestions that we can take our leave. These are things we MUST do—and we must do together. So let's take a moment to consider each of these wonderful heads of God's "let us."

1. LET US DRAW NEAR TO GOD WITH ASSURANCE!

Remember, this letter was written when the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem. These were Hebrew Christians. From the time they were children, they had been taught that the earthly presence of God dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. A thick curtain hung there separating God from the rest of the world. The only person who could draw near to God was the High Priest, and he could only do it once a year. But when Jesus died on the cross, that curtain was torn in half. Jesus opened a new way to God. Because of that, we read the first "let us." "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith." (Hebrews 10:22)

In this context, the writer is talking about how all believers can draw near to God in worship. Worship is the ultimate expression of our love for God. Adrian Rogers used to tell a story about a woman who was trapped in the third floor of a burning house. The firemen arrived and she was leaning out a window saying, "Help me! Help me!" Within seconds a brave fireman climbed up a ladder and rescued her from the flames. A few days later, she showed up at the fire station with a batch of homemade cookies to thank the man who had saved her. They were both single, and this meeting led to a friendship and deepened into romance. And before long they were married.

Adrian said that is a reflection of our relationship with God. Her cry for help was like when we lay our petitions before God. Her visit to the firehouse with cookies reflects our thanksgiving and offerings to God. But when they got married, and came together in an intimate relationship, that represents our heartfelt worship. Worship is more than petition, it is more than thanksgiving, and worship is a supernatural connection that we have with our Heavenly Father. That's why the church is called the Bride of Christ.

It is a wonderful experience when the Bride of Christ gathers to worship together. Zig Ziglar used to ask the question, "How many of you have ever been to a boring worship service?" When people raised their hands he would say, "You're wrong. There's no such thing as a boring worship service. You might have been to a boring church service, but you've never been in a boring worship service." Worship is an exhilarating experience, and we can approach the presence of God with assurance because of what Jesus has done for us.

2. LET US HOLD ON TO HOPE WITH PERSEVERANCE!

This letter was written during a time when there was a wicked Roman Emperor who was killing Christians. Some of the Hebrew church members were jumping ship and going back to their old religion. The writer is encouraging them to hang on to hope. Our second "let us" is in verse 23, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23)

We live in a scary world, and hope is a valuable commodity because it's so rare. My friend, Jim Denison, is one of the smartest theologians alive today. He has published a little booklet about being hope-full that you can order from his ministry, the Denison Forum on Faith. He gives four facts that should drive Christians toward hope in a pessimistic day.

FACT 1: God is working around the world

There is a spiritual awakening sweeping many parts of the world. A century ago, China was one of the most secular nations on earth, and today there are more than 130 million Christians there. A century ago there was not a single born-again Christian in Korea, and today in South Korea, one-third of the population are evangelical Christians and some of the largest congregations in the world are there. Things may seem hopeless if all you ever do is follow the political news feed, but around the world, God is winning!

FACT 2: God is working in the Muslim world

More Muslims have converted to Christ in the last fifteen years than in the previous fifteen centuries. Over six million African Muslims convert to Christ every year. And the country with the fastest growing Christian population by percentage is Iran, where over a million Christians have to worship in secret. And if you want to learn more about this, come to the Understanding the Times Conference here in three weeks. Tom Doyle, the leading expert on this subject will be the main speaker.

FACT 3: God is working in America

If you just follow the mainstream media, you would be led to believe that atheists and agnostics are taking over America and that Christianity will soon disappear from our culture. But according to a Gallup poll last year 3 out of 4 Americans identify themselves as Christian. The largest churches in American history are in existence today. A mega-church is defined as a church that has over 2,000 in weekly attendance. In 1960, there were less than 30 mega-churches in the U.S. When I came to Tyler in 1991, there were 260 mega-churches in the U.S. and today, there are over 1,600 mega-churches. So don't turn the light out on the church yet! Hang on to hope!

FACT 4: God is still the ruler of the Universe!

No matter what happens in this world, God is still enthroned in heaven. According to Isaiah 40, he measures the universe with the span of His hand. His power and His wisdom are beyond our comprehension. And this earth and this sky as we know it will one day pass away, but His word will never pass away.

As the late, great preacher S.M. Lockeridge so eloquently said it: "My king is the king of the Jews. He's the King of Israel. He's the King of Righteousness. He's the King of the Ages. He's the King of Heaven. He's the King of Glory. He's the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. That's MY King! I wonder, do you know Him?"

We may not always be faithful, but HE is faithful. So don't give up on your hope. HOPE: Have Only Positive Expectations!

3. LET US MOTIVATE ONE ANOTHER WITH KINDNESS!

The first head of "let us" reaches out to God in worship. The second head of "let us" reaches into our hearts with hope. And these last three heads reach out to others in love. The third let us is found in verse twenty-four, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10: 24)

Now, in Texas, we know more about spurs than most people. We have a championship basketball team by that name. But they are named after the sharp-pointed device cowboys attached to the back of their boots to urge their horses to giddy up.

This means we should provoke people toward kindness. Maybe you've been unfortunate enough to encounter a person who is always provoking people to anger. We are to be the opposite of that person. We motivate others toward kindness by being kind to them. Kindness begets kindness.

A few years ago, 8-year-old Myles Eckert was walking up to a Cracker Barrel to eat, and he found a \$20 bill in the parking lot. He was so excited. He and his sister talked about the things he could buy with it. But when he entered the restaurant, he changed his mind. He saw a man at a table wearing a military uniform. Myles suffers from a variety of learning disorders, but he took a pencil and wrote this note: "My dad was a soldier. He's in heaven now," the note said. "I found this 20 dollars in the parking lot when we got here. We like to pay it forward in my family. It's your lucky day! Thank you for your service." The boy signed the note "Myles Eckert, a gold star kid."

The man in uniform was an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel and he took a picture of the note and the \$20 bill and texted it to his daughter. She posted it online and it went viral. CBS did a story on it. When people learned of his disability, they started sending the family money, which the family promptly paid forward to a variety of charities. More than \$2 million has been raised from Myles' simple act of kindness. I challenge all of us to figure out creative ways we can spur people toward kindness by performing acts of kindness this week.

4. LET US GATHER TOGETHER WITH CONSISTENCY!

Of the five heads of "let us," this is the only one that is negative. There is something that we should all avoid doing, miss gathering with other believers. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..." (Hebrews 10:25)

Gathering with other believers on a regular basis is a good habit to get into. A habit is something you do regularly. Some of you are habitual attenders; some of you are on again- off again attenders. And sadly, many church members have are completely out of the habit of gathering to worship.

Some people only attend church three times in their lives. When they're born; when they're married, and when they have their funeral. Their church experience can be summarized in three words: hatched, matched, and dispatched. Some churches throw a little water on the baby. When they're married they have rice thrown on them. And when they are buried, they throw dirt on them. But gathering for worship on a regular basis is more than just a great privilege. According to this passage it is a duty.

Around the turn of the twentieth century there was a fiery evangelist in Texas named Sam Jones. He had been a successful lawyer and real estate investor who got gloriously saved. He served briefly as a Methodist pastor, but he was so blunt, he couldn't hold the job as a pastor. He became a famous evangelist. By the way, Sam Jones came to Tyler to preach a ten-day crusade in 1890 and over 7,000 people attended the last service, and over 1,000 people were saved.

Earlier when he was still a pastor, he got a message from one of his members, a Mr. Green that said, "Pastor, come quick! My son John has been bitten by a rattlesnake!" When he got there the frantic man said, "Pastor Sam, pray for my son! I have promised the Lord that if he recovers, I will come back to church and bring my family, and we'll start living for the Lord."

Sam Jones said he prayed a prayer like this, "Dear Lord, we pray for Mr. Green's son that he might recover from this snakebite. But I want to thank you, Lord, for sending this rattlesnake to bite John. This one snake has done what I and the church has been unable to do in the life of Mr. Green for over three years. During all this time, he has not been interested in church or the spiritual wellbeing of his family, and this one rattlesnake has turned his mind back to You. Lord, what we need in the lives of many of our other church members are bigger and better rattlesnakes!"

Maybe we need a few rattlesnakes. We have over 16,000 members, but about two-thirds of them never attend. Now I'm not preaching to any of you today, unless you are an occasional attender. If you are, apologize to the Lord and ask Him to get you back in the habit of attending every Sunday unless you are sick or out of town. But next Sunday I am going to be talking to those Green Acres members who never attend church. I'll be talking about the danger of spiritual desertion. If you see one of them this week, or have one of them in your family, tell them, "Next Sunday, Pastor David is going to talk about GABC members who seldom attend. You'd better be there to see what he has to say!"

One final word about church attendance: Get your thinking straight. WE DON'T GO TO CHURCH; WE ARE THE CHURCH. Say that with me! But the church is only the church when we are gathered together!

5. LET US ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER WITH URGENCY!

We gather together to draw near to God in worship, but we also gather to encourage one another. That's the final head of "let us." Verse 25 says, "...but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25) What is the Day? It is the

Day of the return of the Lord. There is a sense of urgency in this command. Every week is a week closer to the return of the Lord, so true followers of Jesus, don't start dropping out, or become less frequent in gathering, we become MORE faithful and MORE intentional about gathering and encouraging.

When the early church gathered together two thousand years ago, they had a standard greeting. It wasn't "shalom" or "hello." They would say, "Maranatha." Those were two Aramaic words, "*maran atha*" which literally means, "The Lord is coming." Paul used it to sign off in 1 Corinthians 16, but it appears dozens of times in the writings of the early church Fathers. The believers were constantly reminding one another, "The Lord is coming!"

CONCLUSION

All of these commands of "let us" are connected. They are in the context of the church gathered together. We draw near to God in corporate worship. We hand onto hope together. We spur one another with kindness. We gather together to worship, and all of this is an encouragement to the believers.

One of the best ways you encourage one another is by showing up and serving the Lord. I grew up in the church, and when I was a child, I was what you would call a brat. I was wild and mischievous. Many Sunday afternoons I got a spanking for misbehaving in Sunday School and church. I can't remember a single sermon I heard growing up, but I will never forget those faithful servants of the Lord who showed up Sunday after Sunday and patiently shared God's Word with me, just like many of you are doing Sunday after Sunday.

Let me tell you about three people who encouraged me with their faithfulness. Miss Ethel Donaldson, an unmarried woman who worked with children in our church taught Sunday School and showed God's love to us even when we were misbehaving. We used to giggle when she would pray, because sometimes she would cry. But now I remember those tears as precious as gold. Max Willis taught us boys in both R.A.'s and Boy Scouts. He had to break up fistfights, but he never gave up. But to this day I can still recite the Royal Ambassador pledge and the Boy Scout Oath. He encouraged me.

In college, I was working in a little country church in South Alabama. Grady Nutt, a humorist from Texas, had come to Samford to speak in chapel. He told the story of Pinocchio and applied it to becoming a Christian. I thought it was awesome. So that next Sunday I preached on Pinocchio. I never opened the Bible. It was an awful message. After the service, I'll never forget Miss Betty Wiggins coming up to me. She was about five-feet nothing and she lovingly cornered me and pointed her finger up at my nose. She said, "Young man, I love you and you have great potential. But don't you ever stand in God's pulpit without opening God's Word again." She was encouraging me. And Miss Ethel, Max Willis, and Miss Betty are all in heaven today, and here I stand as a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because hundreds of faithful church members cared enough to show up and share God's Word. They encouraged me, and I encourage you today. Let us gather together on a regular basis and encourage one another in the Lord!

Maranatha! The Lord is going to return soon. If you knew for certain Jesus would return before next Sunday, how would you live your life differently? That's the way we should be living every week!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
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