

Stay in the Boat!

Rich Nathan
July 27 & 28, 2019
Never Give Up
Hebrews 10:19-25

One of the troubling trends in America, mostly among young adults, but by no means confined to young adults, is the continuing movement of people away from church and away from Christian faith. Slightly more than one-third of all Millennials (ages 18-38) are unaffiliated with any faith. Now, that's the highest percentage among any age group. Among the unaffiliated, those who say when they are asked about their religion "none", there is a growing number of people who used to attend church.

How many of you are aware of someone in your own family, especially a young adult, who was raised in church, but no longer attends or no longer shows much connection with Christian faith?

Now, there's lots of blame for what I call the de-churching of young people that can be laid at the feet of the American church. Let me give you some of the most common reasons cited by former attendees regarding why they left church.

Slide (transition these in one at a time)

- The church offers superficial answers to life's most difficult questions.
- Christians are hypocrites.
- The church is opposed to science.
- The church is too political.
- The church doesn't welcome everyone regardless of their sexual orientation.

Now, when I hear a list of the church's failure in America as a pastor, it's really hard to listen to. I want the church to provide thoughtful answers or at least thoughtful, wise ways of approaching life's questions, even if we can't give simple answers. I want the church to have integrity and to be trusted by those inside and outside the church. I want the church to not be consumed by partisan politics or to be allied with one particular political party. The Kingdom of God is so much bigger than the little boxes partisan politics gives us. I want the church to be embracing of science and I definitely want the church to be welcoming to everyone regardless of where they are coming from – in their sexual orientation, in their political orientation, in whatever. I want the church's doors to be as wide-open as possible.

I might add one more reason as a pastor that I think that so many young people have disconnected from church. Most church youth groups offer almost no theological foundation, almost no doctrinal training to the young. In other words, let me drop this

down, most young people regularly attend a church youth group and never really discover what Christian faith teaches or why Christians believe what they believe.

Here's a quote from a recent survey of young people who were self-identified Christians. They did a survey and then they did focus groups on self-identified Christians ages 18-34. The survey summarized their findings saying:

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We found a startling percentage of heretical beliefs in self-identified Christians concerning a range of basic Christian doctrine.

The bottom line, and I'm speaking as a pastor, the vast majority of Christian youth groups in America are really doctrinally thin. In many cases, we're simply not raising our kids to know what the Christian faith is or why we believe what we believe.

Part of the reason we're recruiting teachers for Vineyard Kids and VC Students this fall – through the What's Your Why? Campaign – is to help give our kids and youth a foundation in Christian faith. Here's what Christian faith teaches and here's why we believe what we believe. The kids in this church are just as vulnerable to walking away as anyone else. They need adults in their lives beyond their parents to root them in faith. They need your help!

We've been teaching through the New Testament book of Hebrews this summer. If ever a book could be described as the opposite of doctrinally thin, it would be the book of Hebrews. The theological arguments in the book of Hebrews are really dense, even for a seasoned Christian.

But the focus of today's text is not on the failure of the church – what can the church do better to retain our people or to retain the young. Today's text really focuses on the responsibility of individuals for our own faith. What do you and I need to do to personally stay connected to faith and fellowship? For reasons that will become evident a little later in this message, I've called today's talk "Stay in the Boat!" Let's pray.

Slide Hebrews 10:19–25

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love

and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

For those of you who are visiting for the first time or may have missed previous messages this summer because of travel or vacation, the book of Hebrews was written to Jews who had become followers of Jesus and were living in the city of Rome. The situation that these Jewish believers found themselves in was that the church was under tremendous persecution and pressure from the Roman government. Christianity was not an officially recognized religion in Rome, Judaism was. So, many Jewish believers in Jesus were being tempted to disassociate themselves from church because of the persecution, because of the pressure and they were being tempted to go back to their former way of life in Judaism. In other words, they were tempted to abandon church and abandon Jesus and go back to the Old Testament rituals and beliefs.

The writer writes this book encouraging and exhorting the believers to not go back, to hold on to their confession, to continue on with Jesus and to continue on with the church. The text that I just read begins with the word “Therefore”.

Slide Hebrews 10:19

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,

When we see that word “therefore” in a New Testament letter, it generally means that the author is going to move from principle to practice, from doctrine to deed, from belief to behavior. The author of Hebrews is saying, I’ve just gotten done telling you about the incredible change or what I called a few weeks ago, a total system upgrade that took place because of Jesus coming into the world. Why would you want to go back to the Old Testament and the old ineffective system of laws and sacrifices and priests and the temple when everything is infinitely better because of Jesus? The upgrade that the author has been telling us about for 10 chapters

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What difference does Jesus make?

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Because of Jesus we have better access to God

Here’s what we read in verse 19:

Slide Hebrews 10:19

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,

In the Old Testament, only one person a year could come into God's presence. That was the High Priest. The High Priest could come into God's presence and the Holy of Holies on only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. But because of Jesus, all of us now have the freedom to enter God's presence whenever we want to. We don't have to wait for the Day of Atonement for a priest to speak to God on our behalf. We can go to God when we're depressed, when we wake up at night and we're anxious, when we feel overwhelmed, when we have broken relationships, when we're grieving because of losses, when we're concerned about a loved one, when we feel grateful and we want to thank someone for how good our lives have gone. We can go to God anytime about anything.

The author says, Why would you want to go backward to restricted access when you have complete access to God now?

What difference does Jesus make?

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Because of Jesus we have a better revelation of God

Slide Hebrews 10:20

²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,

The author is comparing the torn curtain that was in front of the Holy of Holies with the torn body of Jesus. Some of you may know that when Jesus died on the cross and he breathed his last, a miracle took place in the temple in Jerusalem. At the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain that was in front of the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom. This meant that not only was there now better access to God that wasn't available before, but a better revelation of God. You see, you never get more insight into the heart of God, what God is really like, until you get in touch with the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

What is God like, the Creator of all things, what is God like? The answer of the New Testament is the best understanding of what God is like, is for you to stare at Jesus hanging on the cross. God is a self-giving God. God is a merciful God. God is a gracious God. You can never experience God more, be more in touch with God's heart than you can by drawing near to the cross. It's in the suffering and torn body of Jesus that we understand and experience God the best. Let me just add that I believe that it's in our own personal suffering that we often experience God the most and understand God the best.

Whenever I ask Christians, tell me what were the most transforming experiences for you in terms of your relationship with God? When did you grow the most? What events in

your life had the greatest impact in terms of your relationship with God? Almost always, the answer concerns times of suffering, brokenness, disappointment. There's something about suffering that tears us open, that causes us to come to the end of our rope, that forces us to be dependent upon God.

It's when we run out of our own bag of tricks that we find ourselves totally relying on the Lord. Have you seen that? Have you ever come to the end of yourself and the end of your bag of tricks and you've been forced to hold on to God alone? The author of Hebrews says, "Why would you want to go back to the old system when you have discovered in Jesus' death on the cross the very heart of God?"

Because of Jesus we have better access to God. Because of Jesus we have a better revelation of God. And

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Because of Jesus we have a better priest of God

Slide Hebrews 10:21

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

Right now, Jesus is standing in heaven praying for you as you sit and listen to me. He's praying for me as I stand up here and speak. The reason why you and I continue on in our faith is because Jesus is praying for us and he is at the right hand of God in Heaven.

Why, the author asks to the Jewish Christians of his day, would you ever want to go back to a situation where you've got some man going into the temple offering up some prayers instead of the Son of God praying for you in the Holy Place in Heaven.

The author's argument is in light of the better access we have in God and the better revelation we have of God, therefore

Slide Hebrews 10:22-24

²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

The author says because of this total system upgrade, this theological foundation which I have been laying for 10 chapters about what you get in Jesus. How should you respond?

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What response to Jesus should we offer?

Now, remember, he is speaking to wavering Christians. Christians who are tempted to become de-churched. Christians who are tempted to walk away from faith and fellowship. He says that in light of all that Jesus has done, here's what I'm asking of you. He says "Let us" three times in the next three verses.

Slide Hebrews 10:22-24

²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

Now, the author organizes the response we ought to have to the coming of Jesus under the three great Christian virtues of faith in verse 22, of hope in verse 23, and love in verse 24. If you want to say, "How should we as Christians live our lives?" You can't do better than saying, "We should live our lives in faith, in hope and in love." Let's look at these in turn.

Wavering Christians, Christians who are tempted to pull away, to throw in the towel on the Christian faith, who wander away like a sheep nibbling ourselves further and further and further away from faith and away from fellowship. Just step by step by step. No big thing. Just a little more neglect, a little more neglect, a little more neglect.

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Let us draw near in faith

Slide Hebrews 10:22

²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

I love this phrase "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart". In other words, in light of what Jesus' has done, come to God as you are. Without pretense. Without hypocrisy. Come to God without your church face on. Ladies, you don't have to put on makeup before you come into God's presence. Maybe you want to put on makeup before you leave the house, but you don't ever have to dress up for God. You don't have to put on your church face. You don't have to have all the right words. Tell God what you're feeling as you would your closest friend. Come to God with utter transparency. There's a priest praying for you, supporting you in your prayers. A Savior whose body was torn is showing you how much God wants a relationship with you. Come to him in truth and with full assurance and full confidence.

Come to him the way my grandsons approach my refrigerator. It's not "May I, dearest Grandpa, have something to drink?" They come in the house and immediately race to the refrigerator we have in the basement. They've got two cans of soda and run upstairs to look for something to eat. Approach him that way. Know that he would spread a banquet table in front of you. In light of all that Jesus has done:

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Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope

Slide Hebrews 10:23

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

He says let us continue to hold fast the confession of our hope. There's an ongoing effort to hold on. We don't come to Jesus one time. We neglect him day after day and week after week. The author says, "Continue to hang on, grab on." What should you hang on to? I love this phrase.

Slide Hebrews 10:23

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Sometimes, translations have this as "the confession of our hope". I believe that the author is talking about the confession of faith that believers in the early church would make at their baptism. Before a person was baptized in the early church, they stood up in front of other believers and they said, "Here's what I believe." And then they'd make a confession of faith. The author was saying, "Hang on to what you said you believe."

What I observe happening more and more in the church today is people start off saying, "Yes!" to the Christian faith. "Yes!" to Jesus as Lord. "Yes!" to his death for my sins. People start by entering this entire new world in baptism. They receive the Christian faith, a faith that you and I didn't create. But what I've observed from people who were baptized, made a confession, and entered this world called Christianity, that is over time they say, "There are some of these things in this Christian world that I really don't hold onto anymore. That Christian teaching that marriage is the only acceptable context in which I might have sex. That seems really outdated. Nobody believes that you have to get married to have sex anymore. This idea that a person needs to place their faith in Jesus in order to be saved. That just seems really narrow and bigoted. This notion that God might send some people to hell seems really harsh. I'm going to reconfigure faith along the lines of what I find acceptable."

Instead of Christian faith being something I received, that I didn't create, a world that I choose to enter through faith and baptism – no. No, Christianity to me is something

that I make. In the same way that I am the center of my existence, I am the center of my Christian faith. I'm the maker, I'm the creator.

Let me put it a little differently. In America, even Christians approach everything in life like consumers purchasing a product. From the time we are toddlers, we are trained to be consumers – deciding which product features we like and which product features we don't. "Yes, I like that car, but I don't like the color. I'd prefer a much deeper red. That red is really more of a raspberry red. I want more of a burgundy or even a firebrick red car. I like the pizza, but I'd like it if it had small chunks of tomato instead of just tomato sauce. The house is nice, but I don't like the back deck. I'd really prefer if the deck had different levels."

We're trained in America to approach everything in life as consumers. My tastes. My preferences. My opinions. What I like. What I desire. What I want. That's what always wins. We're trained in America to believe that the customer is always right. So, when we approach Christianity, we do so in the same way. "I like Christianity, but I really don't like Jesus' statements on divorce or Paul's statements on sex or James' statements on gossip."

The author is saying to Christian men and women who are tempted to amputate their Christian beliefs according to their own tastes or preferences rather than receive what has been given to us by Jesus and the apostles, oh brother and sister, hang on to the confession you once made! Live in a world that you didn't create. It's ok to question, to wrestle with different hard things, to struggle to understand what to read and think. But don't recreate Christian faith in your own image in the image of what 21 century America finds acceptable. It's not a do-it-yourself religion.

Let us draw near in faith. Let us hold on to the confession of our hope. And to wavering Christians, the writer says:

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Let us provoke one another to love

Slide Hebrews 10:24

²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

The writer literally says to pay attention to or fix our eye on how we can incite one another, provoke one another to love better. Christianity is not a solo sport. It's a team sport. We need each other if we're going to continue to hang on to Jesus in a world that is constantly trying to drag us and our children away. We need each other. We need the stimulation of each other, the best of each other.

I don't know about you, but one of the major ways that I have been stimulated to become a better person, a better man, a better Christian is by the model of other Christians. I see someone who seems closer to God than I am and I say, "I want that, Lord. I want the intimacy that person has with you." I see someone who seems to hear God's voice in a way that I don't and I'm provoked, I'm stimulated and I say, "Lord, I want to hear your voice that way." I see someone who is incredibly kind. It is just a joy to be around them because they're so kind. And I say, "Lord, I want to be like that. I want to be kind like that." "They're so honest about their failings. I want to be more transparent. Less prideful and self-protective."

Have you ever been stimulated, been provoked by another Christian? You say, "I want to know God's Word the way they know it." "They're so generous with their money, I want to be generous like that."

But there's one big stumbling block continuing on in the faith. There's one big obstacle that gets in the way of people hanging on to Jesus.

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What obstacle keeps us from Jesus?

People move away from fellowship.

Slide Hebrews 10:25

²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

What blocks us from drawing near to God in faith? Very simply, it's not meeting together with other Christians, it's trying to do the Christian faith alone. What keeps us from hanging on to our hope? What hinders our ability to stimulate one another to love? We abandon the practice of meeting together! We need the church! We need to connect deeply in church and in small groups.

I've met a lot of people over the years who say, "I don't need church. I just get together with a few Christian friends in my house. Maybe we have a glass of wine together. We talk to one another. Why can't I just meet with a few Christian friends that I like? Isn't that the same thing as connecting to a church? Why would I need to go to some building and worship God with music that I don't even enjoy?" Of course, the church isn't a building. The church is God's people. But I can give you 100 reasons why you, if you are a Christian, put your roots down deeply in church. When someone says, "Isn't gathering together with a few Christian friends church?" The answer very simply is "No, it isn't."

It's great that you have Christian friends, people who see the world exactly like you do. They share your musical tastes. You guys have a similar background ethnically, educationally. It's great for you to get together with friends who all have the same political views. You all have the same issues in Christianity. You all have the same taste in food or in movies. Great! But that's not church.

You see, the wonderful thing about church, the almost unfathomable thing for us who are consumer Christians is that we don't pick the people in the church. God does. And God picks people who are very different than us to sit next to us. The beautiful thing about church – and I've discovered this over the 45 years that I've been following Jesus – is that I don't get to pick the people. God does. And God picks people who I don't agree with about a lot of things. People who don't agree with me about a lot of things. People who I frankly might not hang out with. And they certainly wouldn't hang out with me.

We are in this place of being **God's** people, not **my** people – God's people – that I have been stretched to love beyond my own tribe, my own viewpoints, my own way of looking at the world. I've learned how to love people who are very different than me, who come from very different backgrounds, have very different opinions. The beauty of the church compared to a few Christian friends is we don't pick the people, God does.

Recently, I had the privilege of helping a young woman to come to know Jesus and to make a profession of Christian faith. We met together and I said to her, "Now that you have welcomed Jesus into your life as Lord, you need to get into the church if you're going to successfully complete this journey of faith." Why do we need to get into the church?

Then I said, "Let's imagine that you wanted to journey from New York to England and you had to cross the Atlantic by boat. You could get into a kayak or a rowboat by yourself and starting out from Manhattan, paddle your way out. But you'd probably die about 10 miles off shore – washed over by a wave or experience sun stroke or die of thirst in your kayak. That's what it's like when people try to do this Christian journey alone. You'll never make it into the Kingdom of God. A much better way for you to travel is to get on a huge ocean liner called the church with experienced captains and navigators and a wonderful crew. The ship is really big. You could be in lots of different places on the ship. Not everyone is the same. But we're all heading together towards the Kingdom of God. If you want to continue on, get in the boat!"

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Get in the boat!

And having gotten in the boat called the church, the writer here is saying

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Stay in the boat!

Don't move away from fellowship. Keep on meeting with other Christians. Don't abandon the church. Stay in the boat!

Let me tell you a story as I close today. There was a woman in our congregation who was a long time member of Vineyard Columbus. She was here at the beginning of our church and stayed in the church for more than 35 years. I'll call her Joanie.

Joanie had a really hard life. Both of her parents were dead by the time she was 18. She had two younger siblings that she suddenly found herself responsible to take care of. Joanie essentially gave up her life and her dreams to raise her two younger siblings at age 18. She never got married. She never got to complete college. She struggled with a lot of depression in life, even while she worked over the decades. She put on a lot of weight. She had health problems. As an adult, she lived alone with her cats.

Joanie was dealt what many people would say was a really bad hand in life. She never really got to be and do the things that she might have wanted to do in life. Joanie was also one of the kindest, most gentle people you would ever meet. She was just an extraordinarily kind and sensitive person.

A few years ago, Joanie died. I did her funeral. At the funeral, many people told a story like what I told about Joanie. They talked about her kindness and her generosity. One woman stood up and said, "You know, Joanie had a hard life and I've known her since she was a teenager. But there's one thing about Joanie. She stayed in the boat. She showed up at church. Health problems, problems with walking at the end – she was walking with a walker. Through depression, she stayed in the boat. She never jumped out. She never left. And the boat, the church, took her safely to the Kingdom of God."

She stayed in the boat.

The writer of Hebrews is speaking to Christians in his day who were tempted to leave the truth and to many Christians today, especially young people, and he's saying "Stay in the boat! Stay in the boat! Don't jump out or your faith will die. Stay in the boat!"

Let's pray.

Stay in the Boat!

Rich Nathan
July 27 & 28, 2019
Never Give Up
Hebrews 10:19-25

- I. What difference does Jesus make?
 - a. Because of Jesus we have better access to God
 - b. Because of Jesus we have a better revelation of God
 - c. Because of Jesus we have a better priest of God

- II. What response to Jesus should we offer?
 - a. Let us draw near in faith
 - b. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope
 - c. Let us provoke one another to love

- III. What obstacle keeps us from Jesus?
 - a. Get in the boat!
 - b. Stay in the boat!