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Homiletics: Sermon Study on Hebrews 10:19-25 for the First Sunday in Advent

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HOMILETICS

A ROYAL PRIEST—IN MY LOVE TO THOSE IN NEED

The Theme for December.—The Epistle for the first Sunday in Advent describes the Christian's behavior in view of the second coming. The Gospel stresses Christ's Lordship. The monthly theme gets good attention in the Epistle for the second Sunday in Advent. The Christmas Epistle stresses the new life and hence its concern of love. The text chosen below is the outstanding contribution of the month to the theme.

Sermon Study on Hebrews 10:19-25 for the First Sunday in Advent

This Eisenach Epistle for the first Sunday in Advent is well chosen, for in one grand sentence it summarizes the faith and determination of the Christian as a priest of God for the entire new church year.

Grammatically this one sentence is composed of a participial statement and three hortative subjunctives: "Let us draw near"—"let us hold fast"—and "let us consider." The participial phrase, vv. 19-21, in pointing back to and summarizing what the believer enjoys as a result of Christ's work in sacrificing Himself for us, gives the motivation for heeding the three exhortations.

Vv. 19-21: "Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, His flesh; and having a High Priest over the house of God." The "therefore" (οὖν) points back to all that has been written from chapter seven on. In the word "brethren" writer and reader are named as fellow believers, even though not all the readers are strong Christians and some are even in danger of backsliding. The participle "having" has two objects. The one is "boldness" (παρρησίαν), literally, openness, boldness in speech, then confidence and assurance. This assurance deals with the entrance of the Ho-

liest, of the Sanctuary (τῶν ἁγίων) of God. Before one will heed the exhortation "Let us draw near," one must have the confidence that the entrance of the place is open. This confidence we can have because the entrance is assured in connection with the blood of Jesus. Jesus' blood—His suffering and death—has opened the "Holiest" for us.

The relative clause in v. 20 modifies "the entrance" and explains in fuller details that Christ has made a newly made and living way to the Sanctuary of God by means of His flesh. The aorist form of the verb (ἐνεκαίνισεν) (made new) states the historical fact, an act done "once for all." The reference is to all that the writer has said about Christ as our High Priest. This way made by Christ is indeed newly made and living: newly made in reference to the old way of the Law, which had failed, and in reference to the short time since Christ had shed His blood on the Cross; and living because the way is Christ, who is Life, and because it makes alive all those who walk thereon.

As the veil in the Old Testament tabernacle or Temple was the only means of entering the inner sanctuary, so Jesus' flesh is the only means of entrance into the Sanctuary of God. Without Jesus' flesh, apart from the sacrifice of His flesh on the Cross, there is no means for entering into God's saving presence and into saving communion with Him. "The crucified Christ is the only entrance veil." The blood theology of Christ is the only theology that gives an open door to God and heaven.

Expressly the writer to the Hebrews states that this entrance was made "for us." Christ's work was vicarious, substitutionary. Also among the addressees of this Letter were all kinds of people, but all of them, together with the inspired writer, are included in this "for us."

In this opening participial phrase is summarized and clearly stated the priesthood of all believers—every believer has the assurance that the way to the presence of God is open for him. Every believer personally can go confidently to the throne of God because of the sacrifice of Christ's flesh and blood. No intermediary priest is needed. This is an assuring, encouraging, and comforting truth as we enter the new church year. With certainty we can proclaim in the words of the Gradual: "All they that wait on Thee shall not

be ashamed, O Lord." Rightly in the words of the Introit we say: "Show me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths," for that way and path leads directly to the throne of the gracious Lord. Every believer that remembers this truth throughout the church year is blessed indeed.

The second object of the participle "having" is "Great Priest" (ἱερεῖα μέγαν). This Great Priest is Jesus, "who is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing that He ever liveth to make intercession for them" (7:25). All that the writer has said in the entire Epistle regarding Jesus as Priest is referred to in this brief statement. This Great Priest is "over the house of God," not only over the house of Israel or any other separate group of people. Recalling 3:6: "whose house are we if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end," and such passages as 1 Cor. 3:7; Eph. 2:21-22, where the Christian is named as the temple of God, we are here reminded that Christ rules with His grace and mercy over us for our eternal salvation.

V. 22. Having given in the participial phrase the basis for the motivation for the admonitions, the inspired writer continues with three hortative subjunctives in which he portrays the actions of individuals who have the confidence of an entrance to God and the Great Priest. The first of these is: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." "Let us draw near" (προσερχώμεθα) is a liturgical term and points to worship. To draw near means to enter actually into the Holiest of God, to come to Him in repentance and faith, in prayer and worship. This is an admonition to stop being separated from God and apart from Him.

This drawing near is characterized in two ways—"with a true heart" and "in full assurance of faith." All coming to God and all worship of Him must be sincere and without hypocrisy. As we come to the throne of God, as we come into His presence in worship, all pretending, all falseness, must be far from us. Furthermore, this drawing near can be done in full certainty, with a faith "grown up to full persuasion that when we come to God by Christ, we shall have audience and acceptance." No need for

any misbelief or unbelief, no need for any hesitancy or doubt. What an encouragement for us as we enter a new year of grace!

That such drawing near is within the reach of all is indicated by two participial phrases that modify the subject of the sentence. We can draw near with a true heart and in full assurance of faith because we have been (perfect participle) cleansed by sprinkling as to our hearts from an evil conscience and have been washed as to our bodies with pure water. Both verbs from which the participles are derived remind us of the cleansing of the High Priest in the Old Testament—he was sprinkled with blood (Ex. 27:21; Lev. 8:30) and washed with water (Ex. 40:12; Lev. 8:6). Like those high priests of old, we must be cleansed and washed before we draw near to God. Such cleansing and washing has happened to us—we have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, Heb. 2:24; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7, and we have been washed with the pure water of Baptism.

To be sprinkled from an evil conscience means to be sprinkled and thus to be cleansed and set free from the evil conscience. Modern theories regarding conscience may try to explain it away and seek to lull us into being unconcerned, but the truth remains that we are able to approach God uncondemned only if that evil conscience, realized or unrealized, is removed by the cleansing of Christ's blood. Many psychiatric cases, many cases of alcoholism, are the result of the evil conscience remaining. An evil conscience still has the power to drive one into the outer darkness of despair and damnation in this life and in eternity. But we have been cleansed as to our hearts from the evil conscience. Rejoice, and draw near!

The only washing the New Testament knows is the washing of Baptism (Eph. 5:25-27; Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16). The perfect participle points out that we have been washed and are now washed—the permanent efficacy of Baptism performed only once. The adjective "pure" refers not so much to germ-free and dirt-free water as to the effect the water of washing has.

Throughout the new church year we are to draw near to God—in the hearing of His Word, in His service, in prayer and worship—being enabled to do so in sincerity and in confidence because

we have been cleansed by Christ's blood and washed of all our sins in Baptism.

V. 23. The second hortative subjunctive brings the exhortation: "Let us hold fast the confession of hope unbent, for faithful is He that promised." The Greek text has "hope," as Luther has, and not "faith," as in the King James Version. This admonition exhorts us to more than holding fast to the confession of our hope, more than subjective confessing; it encourages to hold fast to the objective confession, to the words and to the expressions of our hope which embody what we hope for. The hope is of course our salvation and deliverance from sin, death, and the devil in the fullest sense.

The application to ourselves is evident. We are not to give up the creeds, the confessions, such as the very words of the Scripture which embody our hope, such as the Apostles' Creed, and other creeds. This is a warning against the tenets of unbelieving Biblical Criticism and the ancient and modern theories and attacks on inspiration and the use of creeds and confessions. Our use of the Scripture readings in the service, of the responses and the fixed liturgical chants, of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, of the Lord's Prayer, is a practice that is in agreement with this admonition. In these as priests of God we are to be faithful in the new church year.

We are to hold fast without wavering, literally, "unbent." As the flagpole stands firm and erect in spite of the winds and storms, so we are to remain unbent in spite of all temptations and adversities and indifference and tribulations. Our hope will undergo attacks, from within and from without, but we will hold fast the confession thereof unbent.

Again the writer mentions a reason for the confidence and assurance we can have by declaring: "Faithful is He that promised." When confession seems to bring pain and distress, when confession seems rather foolish and useless, then we are to remember that the Lord God, who has given us our hope, is completely trustworthy, He will keep and carry out every promise He has ever made. His faithfulness will enable and motivate us to be faithful.

V. 24. "The first admonition deals with the heart, the second with the mouth (confession), the third with conduct. The first

with God, the second with the world, the third with the Church." (Lenski on Hebrews.) "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works." The verb (*κατανοῶμεν*) literally means "to fix one's mind upon." Instead of on selfish, self-centered thinking, each of us is to fix his thinking on one another, considering what the wants, needs, weaknesses of one another are, and what we may do to help. This is to be done for the purpose (*εἰς* with the accusative) of inciting, encouraging, stimulating, one another to love and to good works.

Self-centered thinking results in a double loss—to one's self and to one's fellow Christian. Consideration for others and for one another brings a double gain—to one's self and to one's fellow Christian, for both are stimulated to love and good works. This admonition places on each of us the duty and obligation, perhaps rather the opportunity, of doing anything and everything to strengthen and to arouse the other to great love and good works—a word of friendliness, a word of admonition, a deed of kindness. Every priest of God must seek to stimulate every other priest of God in the exercise of his faith. The love of each is to grow, the good works of each are to increase in number.

Two essential features of this considering one another are mentioned in verse 25, by means of two nominative participles modifying the subject of the sentence. The first is: "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is." Although the custom for some was to desert and to abandon the assembly of the Christians, we must not, if we wish to stimulate one another. The value of the church service and the church meeting is not only the benefit received from the hearing and the learning of the Word of God which will make and keep our faith strong and our love active, but also the benefit received from the fellowship by which we are aroused to greater love and good works. The Christian assembly is in a true and high sense a "pep" meeting. As priests of God do not want to stay away from any church meeting (service, voters' assembly, Women's Guild, Walther League, Synod convention, etc.) where the Word and work of the Church is heard and discussed. It is the concern of every Christian that his fellow Christians meet with him in Christian assembly.

The second essential feature of considering one another unto

a stimulation of love and good works is: "But exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching." As the Christians meet together in Christian assembly, whenever they see one another, they are to exhort, admonish, encourage, so that each will remain steadfast and grow in love and in good works.

How these two ideas expressed by the participles are related to one another and to the main thought of the sentence may be shown by an example. A group of people, traveling in the open in a severe blizzard, realize that anyone leaving the group will be lost. They therefore remain together. If one of the group becomes tired, is benumbed by the cold, and feels that he must sit down and rest or even sleep, the others know they must not let him out of their sight. They will prod him, help him, speak encouragingly to him, reprimand him for his indifference, carry him, perhaps. In like manner we are "to consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, but exhorting one another."

The writer concludes the entire sentence with another factor that demands the heeding of the admonition. "And so much the more, as ye see the Day approaching." The Day is the great Day of Judgment, of which every day of tribulation, persecution, and judgment is a sign and reminder. Those events and items that would cause the readers of the Epistle to turn away from Christ and His redemption are signs of the approaching final Day and should rather cause them to be more faithful in doing the things mentioned. It is true the degree in which we keep our eyes fixed on that Day that is approaching, even though we know not the exact time of its appearance, will be the degree in which we will heed the admonition. We must remember that we are in the last times, the great Day of the Lord is drawing near.

This text is very appropriate for the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the new church year. It contains the gracious and glorious facts of our redemption in Christ and our position as priests before God, together with instructions as to our actions in the new church year. Any sermon on this text easily brings the comfort and the assurance of the Gospel and the admonitions connected with the Christian life. If we follow the outline of the text, we can use the theme: "How Can we Receive the Full Benefit of

Our Religion?" To this question the twofold answer is given: by taking to ourselves the word of assurance (vv. 19-21) and by heeding the admonitions (vv. 22-25). Matzner offers this outline: "We Have Access to the Presence of God." 1. There is a way to God—but it exists only in Christ. 2. The way leads to God—but we must use it. 3. The way has God's promises—but only for Christ's Church." This text presents the "Priesthood of Believers," and one may refer to the foundation of this priesthood (vv. 19-21) and to the exercise thereof (vv. 22-25). Furthermore, each of the exhortations may be placed in the foreground and made the focal point of the sermon. For example, on the basis of v. 25 the theme might be: "A Church Year of Concern for Others," and the motivation and the manifestation of such concern may be discussed. In every sermon on this text the priesthood of believers must be kept in mind and woven into the presentation.

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