

Living in Christian Community

Devotional Reading: Hebrews 1:1–6

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1–12; Psalm 122:1–9; Hebrews 10:19–25

Today's Scripture: Matthew 28:18–20; Hebrews 10:22–25

I. Building the Church Matthew 28:18–20

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

18. The ancient Greek word *authority* in this passage is translated as “power” in other contexts. We often think of “authority” as the *right* to do something, while “power” refers to the *ability* to do something. The two concepts are closely related, with slightly different connotations. Jesus has both authority and power in an absolute sense. He asserts his power and proclaims the dominion given him as a precursor to his right to pass influence and authority on to his disciples. The word *all* appears throughout this section of Matthew 28, indicating that nothing is partial or half-hearted here!

19a. Having established his authority and power, Jesus commands his disciples to *go*. They are empowered through their relationship with him. The disciples’ task is to *make disciples* by teaching others about the resurrected Christ. Jesus’ com-

mission in this half-verse presents non-Israelites (Gentiles) as a new mission field for the disciples. Gentiles are included by his use of the phrase *all nations*. We now refer to the directives in this verse as “disciple-making.”

19b. Making disciples includes *baptizing them*. Baptism signifies entry into the community of God and identifies a person as being “in Christ” (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Colossians 2:11–12). Baptism is accompanied by repentance and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, believers stand in solidarity with Jesus and publicly identify themselves as a part of God’s people.

In this verse, Jesus does not explain every aspect of baptism but says it should occur *in the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. This three-fold guidance became the standard formula for the baptismal practices of the early church. Jesus’ guidance also recalls his baptism, during which the presence of God the Father and God the Spirit was evident (Matthew 3:16–17). Becoming a disciple means identifying with Christ and learning to walk in his ways.

20a. Jesus’ disciples are to teach what they learned from him. Jesus’ words shift the disciples’ role from that of students to mentors and guides. They move from disciples to disciple-makers. This change

does not mean that their learning, growth, transformation, or development are over—these things continue forever in the life of a disciple—but it does shift their responsibility. They’ve had Jesus as their teacher, and now he gives them his authority to do the *teaching*.

It is not enough to know Jesus’ teachings; he also calls believers to *obey everything* he has taught. Observing Jesus’ commands means putting them into practice. Discipleship requires a lifelong commitment to both learning and obedience.

Believers do not graduate from discipleship. We must learn to follow Jesus through every stage of life. Following him will look different depending on the season—teenager, adult, spouse, parent, grandparent, widow(er), etc. However, being a disciple of Jesus informs each transition and provides us opportunities to present the good news to others. Disciples become disciple-makers in an everlasting cycle of learning, growth, and outreach.

20b. Matthew begins his Gospel with the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy: “They will call him Immanuel . . . God with us” (Matthew 1:23; quoting Isaiah 7:14). In this half-verse, Matthew concludes his Gospel with the promise that Jesus will always be *with* his followers. There is no place we can go from his presence.

The phrase *end of the age* refers to Christ’s physical return to earth and the subsequent judgment of both the righteous and the wicked.

II. Living as the Church Hebrews 10:22–25

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 unwaveringly 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.

22. The following verses from the book of Hebrews feature three exhortations that guide the actions of believers. Each starts with the words *let us*. The first is in this verse: Christ-followers are encouraged to *draw near to God*. Direct access to God is available to every believer since the inner curtain of the temple was torn at Jesus’ death. We now have “confidence” to freely approach God by the blood of Jesus. The book of James promises that God “will come near” to those who “come near” to him (4:8).

The author connects having a *sincere heart* with the *full assurance that faith brings*, meaning that we are to approach God filled with complete confidence in his fidelity. The genuine center of our person must trust in God’s promises. Believers can have this kind of faith because he has proved his faithfulness to those who have walked in faith before us.

This verse includes imagery of a worshiper entering the temple. The phrase *hearts sprinkled* recalls the practice of sprinkling sacrificial blood upon the altar to cleanse both the people and the implements of the temple from impurity (Exodus 24:6–8; 29:16–21). God promises to “sprinkle clean water” and to give “a new heart” and “a new spirit” as part of his new covenant (Ezekiel 36:25–27). The cleansing in question is *from a guilty conscience*, which is characterized by unbelief (see Hebrews 3:12).

In contrast to the sacrifices outlined in the Law of Moses, Jesus “offered for

all time one sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:12). As a result, we no longer need a ceremony involving physical blood, as we benefit from the purifying effects of Jesus’ atoning blood. This is the perfect and eternal “blood of the covenant” (9:20; compare Luke 22:20).

We also must approach God’s throne with *bodies washed with pure water*. The author may be referencing the ritual cleansing that occurred before entering the tabernacle. Another possibility is that the author alludes to water baptism. Scripture describes baptism as a washing of the person who has come to faith. It is more likely, however, that this text reveals a more significant picture, one in which baptism is only a part. Believers experience spiritual cleansing through the blood of Christ and sanctification through the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:11).

23. This verse includes the second *let us*. The work of Jesus, which grants us access to God the Father, is trustworthy and may be boldly declared. The author encourages us to do so *unswervingly*. This message undoubtedly speaks to those considering abandoning the Christian faith to return to the Law of Moses. But these words also encourage those who are enduring periods of discouragement.

Our circumstances do not determine our faithfulness. Believers are called to remain faithful because God is *faithful*. He has been faithful to his promises in the past, and he continues to be faithful to us through his Son, Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

24. The third *let us* encourages believers in relationships. The word *consider* means to think about something attentively. The idea pushes us outside of our personal faith lives and into a place where others gain our attention and understanding. The author exhorts believers to influence *one another* in attitude and action. Our lives should

stimulate *love* among our Christian brothers and sisters. This is more than a gentle nudge; our lives are to motivate and incite each other toward something *good*. Christian love is not just a theoretical idea but a demonstrated act. Loving *deeds* should flow from our salvation.

In other words, our faith needs to make an observable difference in the lives of others. The author of Hebrews provides specific examples of behaviors that show Christian love. These behaviors include practicing hospitality, caring for those who are suffering, maintaining purity in relationships, and contentment with material possessions. Loving actions should naturally emerge from trust in our loving God.

25. The author calls God’s people toward regular *meeting*. The intensity of this message is revealed by the author’s using the negative. Instead of saying, “Meet together,” the author urges believers to *not* forsake gathering *together*. He further reinforces the directive by admitting *some* have stopped attending gatherings.

It is unclear whether the author of Hebrews refers specifically to weekly worship services or more informal gatherings. The text does not specify the reasons for these absences, but the lack of regular commitment from some puts the entire community of believers at risk.

The Day approaching likely refers to the future day of judgment when Christ will return. Expectations of judgment and redemption are rooted in Old Testament prophetic texts (Isaiah 2:12–21; 24:21–23; Joel 1:15; Amos 5:18–20; 8:9–14; Zephaniah 1:14–18; Zechariah 14:1; etc.). Anticipation of this day adds a sense of urgency to the need for believers’ obedience and their commitment to the community (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:1–8). The author again emphasizes the importance of assembling by urging them to gather *all the more* as time passes.

Involvement Learning

Living in Christian Community

Into the Lesson

Make a list of occupations or job titles. Beside each, answer: 1—How can people recognize what this person does? 2—What evidence or indicators support the role?

Into the Word

Read Matthew 28:18–20. How have believers obeyed the commands that Jesus gave in these verses throughout church history?

In what ways does the modern church obey Jesus' commands?

How can the church continue to obey Jesus' commands amid an ever-changing world?

Key Text

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

—Hebrews 10:23

Read Hebrews 10:22–25 and consider the text from three perspectives: past, present, and future. How did Jesus fulfill his purpose more effectively than a priest from the Old Testament?

How does understanding what our High Priest has accomplished (Hebrews 10:19–22) assist believers in living out the imperatives found in Hebrews 10:23–25?

Into Life

Choose one command from today's lesson and make a plan for how you will follow it.

Thought to Remember

Christian community obeys God, loves others, and gathers faithfully.