

Whose faith is your calling?

Hebrews 10.19-25

Virtual GroupLink Sunday

MPT – Gospel secures hope and calls us to provoke love and good works in one another.

Intro

Good morning and welcome to GroupLink Sunday here at Mercy Church! Listen the community of people you spend your time with will be the number one most powerful influencer of your relationship with God. That's true whether you are 7, 17, or 57.

I have seen this to be true in my life TIME and TIME again. The reason I went to the youth camp where I became a Christian – that was because some friends were going & invited me. The reason I went on summer mission trips in college where I learned a lot about what my particular purpose would be – friends invited me. The reason I've stepped to the edge of really dumb decisions and NOT made those decisions...friends were there to say "HEY, don't be an idiot." Friends who walk with Jesus will bring you with them and friends who walk away from Jesus will bring you with them too. Good, Jesus loving friends...they are like sparring partners for my faith. You know what a sparring partner is? It's someone who helps you become a better fighter by training with you. Sometimes they make you better by cheering and saying YOU GOT THIS! YOU CAN DO IT! And sometimes they make you better by punching you in the face. We need sparring partners in our spiritual

lives. People who love us. Who are in our corner. And who will train with us. And fight with us if that means fighting FOR US.

And you don't need to wait until the stay-at-home is lifted to begin making friends like these or to step up your game with your current friends. This may be the MOST important time in all of our lives for true, live-giving friendships. It's certainly the time where we've felt the need right? A friend surprised us by dropping off starbucks the other day and our whole family met her at the door. Like A HUMAN! WHO DOESN'T LIVE HERE! PLEASE STAY! We need real friends more than ever ya'll.

So we are devoting THIS ENTIRE worship service to building Jesus-centered sparring partner type community. here's what today looks like: I'm talking to 2 groups of people today. Those in a mercy community group, and those not in a community group. Community groups are a smaller group of people who walk with Jesus together & help each other become more like Jesus. Study the bible, pray, eat, bring meals when you are sick, get on zoom calls, etc.

If you are IN a community group – I want you to think about who your sparring partner is and what your next step in training together may be. Your homework is basically...step your game up! If you are NOT in a group – the goal of today is to link you to a community group. Thus group-link. They exist across the charlotte area. You need to get in one today. You have my permission...It is actually OK to click that "Connect to a group" button...and go get in a group. AT ANY TIME. If you

are like...oh man I need that and you know it. DO IT NOW.
Then come back. Won't take long. We'll be here.

I told you that friends will be the biggest influencer on your faith. Here's my question for you today: **Who is your sparring partner in the faith?** Who has God assigned you to "spur on" in their faith. Who is the person or persons in your life that get to be pushed closer to Jesus by you? That are going to look back in 5 years and say thank God for that girl, that guy cause I don't know where I'd be without them.

BTW – "sparring partner" isn't an official title. Just an illustration I'm using. Everyone knows the number one rule of fight club is that you don't talk about fight club.

Gonna walk through Hebrews 10.19-25. I'm going to give you the 3 truths then 3 action steps. The truths are what you will use to ENCOURAGE your sparring partner. Then the action steps are how to train. Then the action. 3 Realities of what it means to be a Christian and then 3 action steps we take. All the while I want you thinking...**who is your sparring partner?**

19 Therefore, brothers and sisters,

Out of all of the metaphors the bible uses, the one that is the clear winner used to describe the church is family. The Church is a family. When you decide to follow Jesus...the bible says you are born again into a family. Now let's talk about that. Are families perfect? NO. Everyday family life is a hot mess. ESPECIALLY right now when we gotta be around each other all the time. That picture of us hanging on the wall...where we are all smiling and dressed in a matching color

scheme...THAT'S NOT NORMAL! That moment had to be coordinated weeks in advance and only took place under threat of death for certain small humans. No, family is a mess. And you don't pick your family you are born into right? BUT, I love my family. Deeply. And I'm committed to them. NO life circumstance is going to change who my siblings are. I've got two brothers and will always have two brothers. Sibling is an unbreakable forever bond.

Jesus comes along and says ok that whole family thing...I created that to help you understand the bond that I am creating between my followers.

Truth: Christ comes with a family.

And all of you are children in my family. God is the father and you are brothers and sisters. The gospel has bound you together in MY BLOOD which is way more powerful than your blood. Way more binding. So if you are going to believe in me, you are going to belong to my family. And it aint always gonna be that really inspiring picture we put on the front page of the website. Ha! People are going to disappoint you for sure. And yet, they are family. Which means you work through it. And I pause here to say all this because sometimes "church people" are the reason people don't get involved in church. You are thinking "they don't practice what they preach." Listen...its true.

- Christ tells me he's in control. I preach Christ is in control to you fine people. and yet I still get either angry or anxious when things don't go exactly as I planned them.

- Christ tells me he loves me & his love is enough for me. I preach that to you. Yet I still get super concerned with whether or not you like me.

We don't always practice what we preach. Cause we are still messed up by sin. And so are you! Which you know! So maybe you just need a church to say...yep, you are right. No perfect people over here. BUT, we are clinging to a perfect savior who says we are family together. And there is always room for one more whose life isn't always a picture. And your sparring partner is gonna be one of those messed up family members. So they will let you down at some point. And part of being training partners is saying "hey, I forgive you." Hey, its ok. Hey, this is more about you than me right now. Hey let's get back up and push forward. You aren't the enemy. You are a fellow sinner. Let's keep training.

Second truth is SO POWERFUL I gotta go slow here. Just gonna leave this on the screen and like word by word look at this. **since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus — 20 he has inaugurated for us a new and living way through the curtain (that is, through his flesh) —**

SINCE – same as because. Because of this, do that. SINCE the garbage truck comes on Tuesday, let us roll out the cans Monday night. SINCE. Now what is the since? Since we (this Jesus Family, these sparring partners) have **boldness**. That means we are not timid in whatever action he is about to say. Confidence. Not cockiness of course, but confidence...

to enter the sanctuary. Ok now is a good time to tell you that verse 20 & 21 summarize the first 10 & a half chapters of the book of Hebrews. There is a reason the book is called Hebrews. It is an explanation of how Christ fulfilled the promises of God found in the Old Testament. And its written to a jewish audience who knew that the sanctuary was the MOST HOLY PLACE where God himself resided. YOU DON'T GO IN THERE! The high priest only went in once a year and went in with a rope tied around his waist so if he dropped dead from an unholy act in the presence of a Holy God they could drag him out. To a fault, in our day don't think of the presence of God as holy. We think of him as loving but not as holy. Gotta have both.

Well NOW you and I...who have been in sweatpants for 2 months...who are sinful people that would be consumed by the Holiness of God...we can CONFIDENTLY enter into the holy presence of God? HOW? **Through the blood of Jesus.** Short meaning – the reason the high priest was in the sanctuary was to make a blood offering for the sins of the people. He would kill a lamb & sprinkle its blood on the altar. Because sin always has to be paid for in blood. Well the blood of Jesus is different. Because the blood of those lambs didn't allow people to enter the presence of God. It only atoned for their sin. But the blood of Jesus is so powerful, so HOLY...that it paid for our sins...and opened a path into the presence of God to ALL OF US. This is why we sing the old hymn

what can wash away my sin...nothing but the blood of Jesus.

He inaugurated for us a new and living way. This WAY into the presence of God is NEW. Wasn't there before. And not

only is it new...the way itself...the path...is LIVING. This way is ALIVE. It's not a dirt path. It's not a series of steps you have to complete. The way is a living being. I think of John 14.6 where Jesus says I am the WAY.

through the curtain, That is through his flesh. OK get this...the living way is the curtain. The sanctuary didn't have a door. It had a thick curtain. And the moment Jesus died on the cross Matthew's gospel tells us the curtain was torn from top to bottom. Just as Jesus' flesh was torn down, so the barrier between God and man was torn down. So we can WALK IN. Not hesitantly either. We can walk in like we belong there. Christ died to create that way.

Truth: Christ's death for your sin secures your standing with God

We are forgiven, redeemed, and have access to God himself. Not because we deserve it BUT because Christ has made a way by becoming the way! Hear me. This is big. It's the core of our faith. It's what we need to rehearse over one another daily. THE GOSPEL says you can now go to God! You can only go to him through Christ. BUT through Christ....GOD HEARS YOU! He is with you. As you grapple with the very real emotional and psychological weight of this isolation...you can be comforted that God has opened the curtain and invited you into his presence. And you can walk BOLDLY in there and talk to him. You can just SIT there in his presence. CHRIST HAS MADE A WAY! What a hope we need right now. What a flame of hope that will never. NEVER go out. 3rd truth:

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

Remember the high priest who would go into the most holy place? The two key things to know about Jesus are now coming together. He is the way....he took a lowly place. A humiliating death on a cross. BUT, he also takes the high place. The exalted place. He's the one watching over the church. Leading the church. He is STILL the one going to God on your behalf. He's still standing at the throne of judgment saying my blood pays for this one. This one is forgiven.

He didn't just make the way...he REMAINS alive and actively presiding over God's people. The house of God is now the church. My grandfather used to call the church building the church house. This is where that came from. The church isn't a building of course, it's a people. The family of believers is the house of God. AND Jesus takes that exalted place. He's our KING on the throne of HEAVEN and He's our priest advocating for us!

We submit to him as he represents us to God the father. Listen he didn't just leave us an instruction manual. He is with us. He is guiding us. When we pray, we pray to a God who is HERE. Do you believe that? Do you believe Jesus Cares about your life? About his people? He cares! What an amazing God. Who presides over the universe and is intimately involved with his people.

Truth: The exalted Jesus is still caring for you

Those are our truths. Those are the promises that we need to encourage one another with. WE ARE FAMILY. We are not

going anywhere. We are in it. We aren't gonna bail on each other. When we offend each other...we are going to own it. And we are going to give grace. Cause we are family. I'm not going to expect you to be perfect. I'm just going to expect you to keep pressing on WITH ME. And I'll commit the same for you.

And I'm going to keep telling you that Jesus loves you so much he spilled his blood for your sin. He made a way to the presence of God for you. And the presence of God...that's what satisfies the soul. NOT money, not fitness, not marriage, not kids, not alcohol...not drugs, not swiping right, NOTHING is gonna satisfy your soul other than the presence of God! Come back to Jesus! He's still caring for you!

So then here's what we do. Here's how we take these 3 truths and apply them. He's going to say "LET US" 3 times. SINCE....those truths...now LET US do these things.

22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.

Oh my goodness. Ok. FIRST thing sparring partner. First thing you gotta do...if you are going to be any good as a sparring partner...you gotta be nourishing yourself. LET US draw near. Let's go to the throne of grace! Let's go into the sanctuary. You know what I'm going to say? It's the legacy I want to have in your life. That YOU MEET WITH GOD EVERY DAY! GO to him. Years from now I want you to say "yeah pastor spence...he had terrible dad jokes and he was crazy about me spending time with God every day." YES! And you know how you do it?

With full assurance of faith. That means an awareness that our access to the sanctuary of God...to the holy of holies...**only comes through faith. But it comes CERTAINLY by faith.** No doubt about it. How awesome is that!

Hearts sprinkled clean & Bodies washed...this is what Jesus has done for us. Jesus' blood has been sprinkled across the altar of God as a payment for our sin & sets us free from captivity to our evil conscience. He's washed us and made us new! LISTEN....WE ARE MADE NEW IN CHRIST! NEW LIFE. FORGIVEN!

Action: Go to God every day...because you can!

This is what a sparring partner says. GO TO GOD TODAY MAN! GO TOMORROW TOO! Hey did you go to God today? Then you better put the phone down and go. Let's go! Let's get a reading and prayer plan. 30 day plan. We'll do it together. Let's go. Because WE CAN! We'd have to be crazy NOT to go into the sanctuary today. IT'S WHERE LIFE IS! IT'S WHERE HOPE IS! WHY WOULD WE GO ANYWHERE ELSE!? LET's go again today.

Listen sometimes you might have to spiritually knock your sparring partner upside the head and say "LET'S GO!" Because the ONE PLACE the enemy wants us to avoid is the sanctuary. He has no place in there. So he wants you and your friend...to have ZERO desire to draw near. He wants you to think its not a big deal and he wants to surround you with people who also think its not a big deal. And I'm here today to wake you up to the sleepy deadly lie of the enemy. OF COURSE you don't want to draw near if you haven't been drawing near. OF COURSE you want to just cruise along with the pleasures of life.

YOU'VE FORGOTTEN true soul satisfaction so you are settling for numbing yourself with temporary pleasures.

So yes, get in a community group. Get some friends who can show you the way back to the sanctuary. Who can walk with you there. Who will cheer you on and show you how much better life is there! The greatest shield against the attack of the enemy is your closeness to God. Can't get you in there. Seriously. Go get in a group right now. Come back and get rest of sermon. Ok here we go verse 23.

23 Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful.

The second thing we do is hold on to the confession of our hope. That's the gospel. And we are to hold onto it without wavering. Which seems really hard. Cause my faith wavers sometimes. NAH. You don't hold fast in your strength. You hold fast in HIS STRENGTH. Because HE who promised...he who promised he would come and die for your sins. He who delivered on that promise. He who promises his death for your sins grants you forgiveness...he who now watches over you and will never leave you or forsake youHE IS FAITHFUL! We rehearse the gospel over ourselves and remember that we are standing in his strength today!

Action: preach the gospel to yourself every day...because its true!

My old pastor and mentor J.D. Greear put this into words years ago and it is really good. Calls it the gospel prayer and he prays it each day to help him HOLD FAST to the gospel.

"In Christ There is nothing I have done that could make you love me less, and nothing I could do that would make you love me more." The second part says "You are all I need for everlasting joy."

Maybe you pray this gospel prayer. Maybe its something else. But you gotta HOLD FAST. And you gotta help your sparring partner hold fast. Remind them where their identity is. The confession of our hope...the gospel...ya'll that's where we get our identity. No other label matters. You are NOT a failure. You are NOT the funny guy. You are NOT the IMO girl. You are NOT the preppy guy. You are not the Nerd. ALL THOSE LABELS whether we like them or not. All those labels...Unless the king of kings has given it, that label is just a label. And the king has called you CHILD. DAUGHTER or SON. PERIOD.

And it can be easy to live like other labels matter more than that one. That's what the sparring partner is for. To preach the gospel to you and say no, only this label matters. Remember the gospel and rest in it today.

24 And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works,

This is our final action right here. Let us consider one another. Now the sparring partner starts to come out in full form right? Let's not look to ourselves...let's consider one another. In order to provoke...I love that word provoke because the original meaning is to stir up or irritate. Let us get close enough to one another that we can irritate, agitate...stir up

LOVE and good works. You need some people close enough to you that they have a license to irritate you in the name of Jesus. To provoke love in you & good works.

To tell you that the guy you are dating...he's NO GOOD FOR YOU. He doesn't walk with Jesus and he doesn't have friends who walk with Jesus and his hotness is not going to be enough. Physically he might be a 10 but Spiritually he's a 2. And I've noticed since you've been with him you've lost your edge spiritually. You act like Jesus isn't a big deal. You need to GET OUT OF THERE NOW.

You got anybody in your life who can tell you that? Cause listen...every person in every stage of life needs that friend. That's a sparring partner.

Action step: Stir up some one else's faith...because they need it

I have had many times in my life where I "started working out again" and man that's the worst right? I NEVER *want* to go to the gym. Cause its hard. I get out of breath. And I just hurt the next day because of my lactic acid buildup or whatever. BUT, people who break through the restart wall and have a lifestyle of healthy eating and exercise CAN'T IMAGINE life any other way. Because they feel great! And they usually surround themselves with other healthy people. They travel in packs and take pictures on mountains and stuff. And we all act like we hate them because we are envious of them. What any of them will tell you is doing this with others makes all the difference. That's why crossfitirontribeorangefrog are all so

popular. Because they tap into the power of community. And help you break through the "restart" wall and get into a lifestyle.

Maybe you've "restarted" spiritually many times. I'm telling you the gamechanger is community. It's sparring partners. Look how the passage finishes.

25 not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

One of the most encouraging things to me as your pastor is how engagement with our worship gatherings have GONE UP since this COVID crisis started and we were all forced into our homes. All of our engagement markers are higher than they have ever been. You know before COVID the average Christian attended worship services 1.7 times per month? This isn't to guilt you ok. Last thing I want to do is put undue burden on you. But listen – I DO BELIEVE that God is speaking to us in this time. How could he not be? THIS HAS NEVER HAPPENED IN HISTORY! Where God STOPPED THE WHOLE WORLD. And one of the things that should come out of this for us is that instead of neglecting our gatherings. Both worship and in smaller groups...instead of that we should come ready to encourage each other. Ready to encourage each other to draw near to God and to preach the gospel to ourselves each day. All the more as we see the day...that's the day Jesus returns and we enter into heaven with him.

I know I've been using the sparring partner metaphor today. And I hope its helpful but listen spiritual training is entirely more important and on another level than physical training ok.

...train yourself in godliness. 8 For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come -- 1 Timothy 4:7-8

I hope you will commit yourself to training in community. I was a community groups pastor for 10 years before becoming a lead pastor. Let me answer some common objections I used to get and still get to participating:

1. **Objection: I don't know these people** – Well first, that's been true of every great friendship you've ever made. You don't know them until you get to know them. Nobody is asking you to go into your deep dark secrets the first time you step into community. But think about your best friendships...they were forged through shared experiences over time. Trust will come in time and friendship will come with it.

2. **Objection: Is it gonna be weird?** - This is my kind of objection cause this is how I think. Well, first off right now its over zoom so if its weird its really easy to leave. But really these groups study the bible together, pray together, and try to help each other walk with jesus. If it gets weird, you let us know. Now weird is different than awkward. Everybody is awkward until you get to know them. You are awkward. Sorry if nobody has told you that.

3. **Objection: Scheduling.** – Funny how that really isn't a big objection right now. You got nothing to do tonight or tomorrow night or any night. Groups meet once a week. Get in one. And maybe you'll find it to be valuable to you. People always make room in their schedule for what they value. And listen let me go ahead and say if its Childcare...which is a big one: Once you are actually able to get a babysitter again we help cover the cost of childcare for anyone who needs it.

4. **Objection: I've already got friends** – Ok listen first I want to ask you if they are these kinds of friends. Sparring partners. Second, do you have this kind of community here in your local church? That's a huge thing. Because yes the church is global but its expression has always been local. That's where the commitments play out. So you need to dive in to community with people who are heading the same way under the same vision and leadership as you.

Listen there are hundreds of reasons NOT to join a group. You are called to it and I believe going to be better for it. Let me pray for you and then we will continue worshipping together.