

JESUS SAT DOWN  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

One summer when I was in college I got a job working for a construction company. As a summer worker I was at the low end of the construction hierarchy, carrying lumber here, moving a wheelbarrow of dirt there. But it was good physical work, and outside, so mostly I enjoyed it.

The biggest downside to the job was the construction foreman, a petty tyrant whose managerial model was Joseph Stalin. The man took great delight in making the lives of all his workers miserable. He had this idea that no worker should ever be idle, even for an instant. He loved sneaking around to see if he could catch someone goofing off.

So because we knew the way this man operated, we took great pains always to appear busy, even when there was nothing to do. I clearly remember standing with a shovel in hand, ready to start digging at a moment's notice if the man should show up. There was no work to do—we were waiting for the next shipment of lumber before we could get back to work. But I would stand with my shovel, and stand and stand. After several years of this, I'd look at my watch and five minutes had passed. It was a terrible way to pass the time—having to stand and look busy when what I wanted to do was sit down.

I was reminded of that time when I read today's scripture: "Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins." Day after day, again and again—it never ends.

The image is taken from the cultic sacrificial system of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It's not exactly a process we are familiar with, so it would seem that this description of a priest standing day after the day at the altar would have nothing to do with us.

But in our own way, we continue to do what this old priest did, standing day after day, doing over and over again things that we hope will save us.

The commercials on TV promise that if I will buy a new suit, it will make me a new man. I'll not only look sharp; I'll feel sharp. I'll have new confidence; I'll be a babe magnet. It sounds pretty good. So I go and I buy a new suit. And you know what? It works! I do feel sharp in my new natty duds. I stand up straighter, I have new confidence, I'm pretty impressed with myself. It works—for a while. But then the suit begins to get a little worn, and one of the cuffs on the pants gets frayed. If I'm going to get my confidence back, I have to go back and buy a new suit. And it looks good—for a while. And then I have to go back, again and again.

Advertising promises new life. I checked out a few of those promises in magazine ads:

Excedrin: You can feel like new in 30 minutes.

American Express: If you can imagine it, we can get you in.

Calvin Klein perfume: Live the dream.

Viagra: (No, wait, I'm not going to share that one!)

The promising of advertising is that you can be a new person, have a new life, be sexy and smart and sophisticated, if only you buy this refrigerator, this wristwatch, this medicine. And so we buy, and it works for a while. And then it gets old, and we have to go again and again, doing the same things that promise salvation but do not deliver.

It is not just advertising's false promise. Think of the ways we do the same thing day after day:

the person who goes day after day to buy lottery tickets that will never pay the bills;

the person going again and again for cosmetic surgery that cannot halt the drag of gravity and age and mortality;

the one who returns again and again to a porn site on the Internet that gives neither satisfaction nor intimacy;

the one who goes again and again to drugs or alcohol wanting to be released from a craving, but discovering that the craving only gets worse.

It can even happen in church, when a person returns day after day to placate a wrathful God who will send you to hell if you don't keep doing it again and again. Roberta Bondi, who is now a professor of theology, tells of her childhood:

In the “badness” of my childhood depression, I was teeth-rattlingly lonely. The Christianity of my childhood offered me no way out of my unhappiness. Rather, with its emphasis on sin, on the through badness of all people, it gave me an explanation for why I ought to be depressed. If you had asked me in the fourth grade what it took to get our sins forgiven, I would have told you, “We have to repent of our sins.” And if you had pushed me a little further to ask, “And what does it mean to repent?” I would have said, “To feel really, really bad about what a sinful person you are.”<sup>1</sup>

The priest, and we, stand day after day doing over and over the things that never will bring satisfaction or salvation. You recall Albert Einstein’s famous definition of insanity: “Doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result.”

The priest stands. But you know what Jesus did? He sat down. “When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God.” Christ offered one single sacrifice. He offered it for all time. Once for all. Over and done. No need to stand day after day and do it over and over. And then he sat down at the right hand of God. Christ’s work is done. There is no anxiety to have to get back up and do it again, or tweak it and make it better. When Jesus cried on the cross: “It is finished!” he meant it. There is no need now for any additional sacrifice.

You know all those things you buy and do and pursue to try to make your life better? You know all the idols you chase after to attain salvation? You don’t have to do that anymore. Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice. It is done. Do not be anxious. Have a seat. You are safe in the arms of Christ.

If that is true, then it changes everything. I don’t have to worry day after day of pursuing those things that I imagine will bring me satisfaction and salvation. It is done. The writer in Hebrews just spills over with what it means: “We have confidence . . . we can approach with full assurance of faith, with hearts sprinkled clean and our bodies washed with the pure water [of baptism]. We can hold fast to our confession without wavering, for he is faithful.”

Confidence, assurance, no wavering. No longer is there any need to keep at it day after day, again and again, filled with anxiety that if I don’t do it, my life will fall apart. Instead, we worship a Lord who has sat down. It’s taken care of. You’re safe.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Tom Long, *Hebrews* (Interpretation Commentary Series), p. 102.

There are two little things to notice that the writer of Hebrews calls us to do. The first is: we are to provoke one another to love and good works. That's a funny way to say it: provoke to love. Provoke is usually a negative word: "His attitude really provoked me." But maybe that's exactly what Hebrews means. We provoke one another to love. We gig each other. We challenge each other. We call one another out of our comfort zones.

I recall a man who served as an elder in a church where I was minister some years ago. The man was a strong business person with a sharp mind. But he was also somewhat shy and self-effacing. He told once how someone had called him to teach a Sunday school class. "I didn't want to do it," he said. "I was the last person I thought anyone would want for that work. But I considered it and prayed about it, and finally for some reason said yes. And it changed everything. My whole involvement in the church, and really my whole life, changed for the better because someone pestered me into teaching Sunday school."

I don't know if I can promise similar results for all Sunday school teachers. But you never know. We are called to provoke one another to love and good works, to pester one another to live out our Christian calling, to challenge one another to follow Christ. It's so easy to get comfortable. Provoke one another to love.

The other thing that Hebrews says is: "[Don't] neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another." That is, in response to Jesus, come to church.

You want to know why you should come to church? to boost attendance and the preacher's ego? to swell the end-of-the-year statistics? None of that. It is rather that here is where we encourage one another, challenge one another, support one another. Here is where we come together to do the most important thing that happens in human life: to worship Jesus who died for us.

It is not some idealized, perfect worship that I am talking about. It is just what we do here: where the candles are sometimes not lit, and the sermon is boring. Can it really be here that anything significant happens? The local video store has better entertainment; the Titans' game is livelier; the park has a nicer view; the Sunday paper is more up-to-the-minute; the mall is more colorful. Moreover, out there nobody calls you to teach the 5<sup>th</sup> graders, or hands you a pledge card.

It's just that it is here that we are gathered by a Mystery beyond our own seeing and knowing. We are gathered into the great choir of the saints that sing ceaseless praise to God. Things are not what they seem. What looks like leisure turns out so often to be exhausting—you've gotta do it again and again—while what appears to be the labor of worship and prayer leads to what Cardinal Newman's famous prayer promises: "a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last."<sup>2</sup>

Where are the places in your life where you stand day after day, doing over and over again those things that can never take away sin? The call of Christ is to set those things aside. Jesus has done it by his blood, and now he has sat down. No need to rush or hurry or feel ultimate anxiety ever again.

Lift up your head. Seize the confidence of our faith. Live in the assurance of his grace. And while you're at it, provoke one another to live in this life of love, as we gather to meet together to sing and pray and rejoice in the God who loves us that much. ✠

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Tom Long, *ibid*, p. 108.