

**"The Open Secret to Growing in Christ"  
Hebrews 10:19-25**

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After spending 10 chapters rehearsing the glory of Christ's once and for all offering for us, the author Hebrews turns to the practical side of how we respond. So he says in **verse 19, "Therefore..."**. Therefore, or "as a result of", Christ's freeing us from sin and opening heaven and showing us the majesty of God...here's what you are to do..."

And the author gives a list of three commands, all marked by the phrase, "let us..."

1) Verse 22 says, **"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith..."**

2). Verse 23, says, **"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering..."**.

3) And finally, for the third, the author says in **verse 24, "let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."**

It is this third, "let us" that I want to dwell this morning.

The command begins by telling us that we should consider how we can *stir up* one another toward love and good deeds. "Stirring" has an interesting sense to it. You don't force someone when you stir them. Instead, you are inspiring them. You are causing a desire to well up inside of them. Though you may prod or even call out, stirring always retains the freedom to act or not to act.

We are not called to force each other. It is the Spirit who stirs us toward love and good works.

This is a very strange command. Hebrews might have commanded, "Let us be stirred to love and do good works," and that would have made sense. But that's not what it says. Instead, Hebrews says, "Let us *stir one another* toward love and good work." The uniqueness of this call is not simply to love and do good works ourselves, but to stir each other to do such things.

### **HOW DO YOU STIR?**

So the question is: how do you stir someone toward love and good works? If you

cannot force them, how do inspire them? How do you encourage them? How do cause a desire to well up in them?

Hebrews tells us how to do this: BY CONSISTENTLY MEETING TOGETHER. Verse 25, "**Let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some...***"

Does that surprise you? If you had asked me, "how do you stir someone toward love and good deeds?" I would have thought, "give them an inspiring speech," "set up sticks and carrots," "dive into the depths of their soul longings and bring it out of them through a series of heartfelt conversations and well-practiced techniques."

But Hebrews says "Consistently meet together." Something is going to happen when believers, joined in the Holy Spirit, gather together regularly. That regular gathering is going to stir you to love and good works, it is going to encourage you toward Christ.

Notice that I keep saying, "*consistently* meet together." The verse is really clear on this, "Do not neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing." The verbal phrase, "Meeting together" has this present and ongoing sense to it. This is something that should go on regularly. And some, Hebrews notes, have gotten into the opposite habit- not meeting together.

The Greek word for "habit" is *ethos*. Ethos is a popular word today. In corporate and leadership language, ethos is about the culture of something. It's about the essence of a company or an organization or a community. Hebrews is saying, "It has become the ethos of some, to NOT meet regularly together." DON'T LET THAT BE TRUE OF YOU.

It is the *ethos* of modern Christianity not to meet regularly together. Modern Christianity is something to which you attach your name, but not something to which you give yourself.

The ethos of religion in my city is that it does not require consistent gathering. In Mobile, we gather when it works for us- in between vacations and child activities and weekend trips.

I remember the first year I was in Mobile. We had started this little church in the Spring and things were going fine. And then all of the sudden, around May, everyone quit coming to church. I had never seen anything like it. Nobody was there. I thought I had killed the church. I was trying to figure out how to call Gerrit and ask for my job back.

The culture was, church was for religious holidays and seasons. But when it was time for football, or hunting, or especially, when it became beach season- we were done. We stopped meeting together. And I'll tell you what I won't tell them: our church was spiritually emaciated because of it. We lost ahold of Christ every time it happened.

So for a long time, we were a church that gathered sometimes, when it worked for us.

Hebrews is imploring us, "Do not make this a habit." "Do not be as the others in your city are." "Do not become a congregation of believers where 50% (at best) show up on any regular basis to meet together." Be committed to the habit, the culture, the ethos of a church that gathers together and is in it together.

Meeting together for mutual encouragement, as simple as it sounds, is a radical, counter-cultural practice in our day, that will spur you toward Jesus.

### **DOING IT ALONE:**

As Americans, as Westerners, we have been baked in an ethos of individuality. Descartes claims the primacy of the individual when he says, "I think, therefore I am." The individual defines the self. Our great Declaration of Independence (think about that very name for a moment, it screams individuality from the outset) says each person is endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights- life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The past five hundred years has taught us that we are individuals on a journey for ourselves.

So that the vision of the beautiful life for me is total self-sufficiency, encompassed in total self-comfort. It's a grand house on a hill with a large pool, surrounded by miles of property- with no one bothering me. No person that I'm obligated to. No other humans that impede my desires.

Scott Bardwell taught me a long time ago that you can see this radical individualism in the architecture of a city. So if you go to the Oakleigh Garden District in my city, which is something similar to the Garden District here, which was constructed around the turn of the century, you will see houses built near the road, with sidewalks and front porches. Architecture that is designed to create and sustain community. You sit on your front porch and talk to people as they pass by.

You come to my neighborhood, constructed in the 1950's and you will see things have changed. My front porch is glassed in and air conditioned. My house is set far back

from the road. There is no sidewalk inviting people to my front door. There are no sidewalks in my neighborhood either. We don't talk to one another; we just sit inside and judge people as they walk by. I'm an individual.

Money and credit have made us wholly self-reliant. You don't need people to help you anymore. If you get in a bind, you just charge it. Sometimes we need some help when a hurricane hits, but that's about it.

And the phones. Phones make it possible to never need anyone to do anything for you. They give us a fake sense of community and relationship. Social media is just individualism expressed electronically. It's not real community, it really only mimics it. AND YET WE LOVE IT!

We are baked in Western individualism at every level of our being.

Evangelical Christianity has taught us the same. Evangelicalism has taught us that religion is an individual sport, this is why it works so well in America, it flows with our deeply held cultural beliefs about individuality. Consider the manner that Evangelical Christianity works:

- 1) Evangelicalism's core religious practice is in the individual's **quiet time**. God is to be known primarily all by myself. Gathering together is secondary.
- 2) Evangelicalism exploded through the **Christian book industry**: learn everything you need from a book you can read on your own. No need to experience life with anyone else. Just read about it.
- 3) The podcast and YouTube have become a recent staple of our American religion. Have your sermon or teaching time by yourself, on your time.
- 4) Praise music has been a staple of our religion. You can listen on your radio, or now, on your favorite streaming app. You don't need a gathered body, sing praises in your car alone- you don't have to bother with annoying people. And, you get to pick your favorite songs, unlike church, where they sometimes sing songs I don't like. (Can you believe they do that?)
- 5) Evangelicalism has taught us that Discernment and Decision making is an individual event. "The Lord told me to do this." Well did he tell anyone else around you?

Our religion is emphasizing the same values as our secular culture: you are an individual on your own journey. Others are just impediments to the goal of realizing the full you.

### **Where It Leads:**

I think our individualism, “do it on your own” culture leads to negative places:

1) First, it leads us into anxiety and worry. One of the chief reasons we are such an anxious culture is because we are so deeply isolated from one another. We have no friends or community. We take pills to fix it.

2) Our individualism has led to a loss of identity. We don’t know who we are. We try to fabricate our own identities, but it’s not working. Look around, you’ll see how bereft we are of our own identity. Community tells me who I am. So that if I decide I am an astronaut, my community tells me that’s not true, unless, of course, they totally affirm it.

3) Our individualism has left us lost and confused. Everything is left to us to figure out on our own. It’s too much. We can’t do it.

4) Finally, and most importantly, our individualism has led us into self-deception. We don’t know what’s true anymore about anything. Notice how the lies grew when we isolated ourselves during Corona.

Our American and even Christian individualism is rampant, and devastatingly harmful.

### **Following Christ in Community:**

In contrast to this, the Scriptures, from beginning to end, tell us that following Christ is a team game. Let us not “neglect meeting together”. The Greek word is “ekklesia” which is often the New Testament word for “the assembly of the church.”

Hebrews is saying, you can’t walk with Jesus alone. You need to be gathered. You need to know each other and see each other and be in relationship with one another.

The Scriptures describe our connectedness as, “the body of Christ.” Some of us are mouths, some of us are the legs, some of us are ear lobes and some of us are nose-hairs. The point is, you can’t be everything alone, but in community, joined together both spiritually and physically, we can be something much greater.

Together, we can do things we can’t do alone. When you’re listening to a praise song on the radio, you don’t experience the wonder of God’s glory in the same way you do

when you are gathered in the house hearing the voices of brothers and sisters belting praise to their God!

Together we encourage and comfort each other. A couple of weeks ago, one of our member's mother died during the night. She lived with them. He found her dead in her bed that Sunday morning. There was something sweet about it. Then I saw him walk into church that same Sunday morning. I couldn't believe he was there and said to him, "I can't believe you're here this morning." And he said, "Where else would I want to be in a moment like this?" He wanted to be with God and with God's people- to remember and to be comforted by the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He needed God's people for that.

You weren't intended to do this thing alone. And Hebrews 10:25 is saying that practically, that means we should not stop meeting together. We should regularly be a gathered people who know one another and are involved together.

We are not putting on a worship service for individuals to consume. This isn't a huge institution that simply exists to spit out religious products. You are a community of believers. And I'll be honest with you, I've spent ten years trying to build a church that would be like this church in two specific ways. You have two characteristics that are really, really good:

1) You love the Word. I've tried to make Covenant a church that loves the Word like you do.

2) Second, you love one another. I always say, this is a big, small church. There are a lot of members of this church, but First always felt like a small community to me. You always felt connected in relationship to people. And I've tried to build a church that mimics that because I think it's magnificently BIBLICAL and it is absolutely essential to walking with Christ over the course of a lifetime.

Don't forget who you are. Don't forget what makes this special. It's not programs. It's not buildings. It's not staff. It's your love for the Word and your commitment to one another. You are a community of believers, who gather together, to mutually stir one another on toward love and good works.

### **HOW?**

How do you do that though? How do you pursue community in Christ? What does it mean to not neglect meeting together? Let's be practical and specific about this:

### **1) First, as Hebrews said, it means showing up consistently.**

To experience the stirring toward love and good works, to experience genuine Christian community, it takes consistency of presence. You have to be together on a regular and ongoing basis. And that takes Time and Commitment. Because what you're looking for is intimacy. And intimacy is something you demand, it's something given. And that takes time. It takes trust. So you have to be willing to stick in there.

To be honest with you, it probably takes five years of really being in a community to begin to enter real places (probably more like 10). Have to get to know people. Enjoy them. Get annoyed at them, be offended by them, and then come back around to really embrace them and be embraced by them anyway.

We want community to take five minutes. We think community should be like college or grade school: you showed up and made a friend instantly, and then you were best friends for life. That's the only community we really know. It's not regularly like that. It takes a whole lot of time, and basic commitment.

### **2) Meet in Different levels of Community:**

You can start with a large group like this. There is much to be gained in this meeting. But you probably need to go further. You need to go into small groups of people. I know this church has medium sized groups with women's ministry and Sunday school classes. The fall is coming up, commit your life to a small group and go deep with a few people so that you might be stirred toward Jesus. Small groups are the place to pray and be prayed for, to share burdens and carry burdens.

But it does require the habit of meeting together. You have to rearrange and prioritize the schedule of your life for that to happen. Busyness doesn't just disappear on its own. But busyness will drive you to have the ethos of not meeting with other believers. Figure out who you want to be, and then commit your life to things that will get you there. If you want your child to be a great little leaguer, then commit your nights and your weekends to that end. If you want to be a joy-soaked follower of Jesus, commit your life to meeting with other Christians.

### **3) LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS.**

This may surprise you, but this is a community of forgiven sinners. Forgiven, but still sinners...for now. And sinners hurt each other- and that's ok. Don't judge the quality of this community on whether no one never hurts anyone else. Instead, judge this community on your ability to repent and forgive and get back at it together.

I say, “lower your expectations,” because people enter into the community of believers with impossible standards.

Bonhoeffer: “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious.”

Beware of the idealism of Christian community. It will destroy the community for which Christ died.

#### **4) BE OPEN:**

Don’t pre-judge others. Don’t write people off. They may be different, or not to your liking or preference. That’s ok. Some people are nose-hairs, and nose-hairs often seem annoying, except when it’s pollen seasons, and then they’re sneaky useful!

Don’t stay in the box with people. Be open to who God has made them to be.

#### **5) Finally, last piece of advice on how to do this community thing: Don’t be a free loader.**

Give as Much As You Would Hope To Receive. Love As You Would Want to Be Loved.

Don’t come and only be a taker. Come and be a giver as well. If we all come with something to give, then we will all leave with something received.

When I reflect on the things in my life that I’m most proud of, the things that are beautiful, the things that bring me joy, the things have been so good- it’s actually and truly, my life in community. You all are evidence of such things to me. I can’t believe ten years later I get to be here doing this with you. It’s because there is this love story and this connection that we formed and it goes on.

I know I’m the guy from somewhere else, but I’ve also been here and I know this congregation and I love it, and here’s what I would you say to you: don’t take for granted the beautiful thing that God has give you here. Love it, lean into, laugh at the warts, and embrace the beauty of life with other believers.