

Stirring Up Love Through Encouragement Hebrews 10:19-25 (ESV)

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Today we're going to be in Hebrews chapter 10. The end of this year, the last day of 2017, and then the first four weeks of 2018, our church is going to have a five-week series on God's design and priority of the local church, and each of our part in it. We'll look at how God contributes to us through the local church and then how God would have us to contribute to His glory and to His name through the local church. And so, we're going to begin today by looking at Hebrews chapter 10. This series is entitled simply "Stir It Up." God would have us to get involved in the church and stir it up so that there would be more love, more faith, more joy, more service, more Gospel, more evangelism, more discipleship as a result of our participation in it. It's so sweet to be part of something that's eternal.

As Kyle prayed, we mark time by days and years, but that's not true of God and of heaven. There's not a new year today in heaven. It is just eternity. And for all of eternity, God has this church to be involved in the joyful worship of His Person. And that is very, very exciting! Of His kingdom, there never comes an end. And so we're going to be reading from Hebrews chapter 10. We're going to pick up this section that's really an application of this amazing truth that God sent His Son to be our High Priest, to make a sacrifice for sins, so that we could be perfected and know Him. And then today we're going to specifically focus in this message on the last two verses of this section.

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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 with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 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.

Praise God! What a day that will be! Let's prepare our lives for it.

I love Jesus' church! For all her warts and defects and failings, Jesus' church is a wonderful gift to us, His people. Yes, she is a bride whose beauty is often covered by the mud that cakes her face and her clothes. But she has a Groom who constantly, persistently, and successfully works to cleanse her and one day, to present her absolutely spotless. Jesus will complete His work for His church on that future day. So we are right to love Jesus' church. She is God's creation. In fact, "she" is we. We never think of the church as something outside of ourselves, but as something that is part of us, and we're part of her. We don't speak of the church as outsiders looking in, but as members who have been placed into God's church by God Himself. And as members, we contribute to Jesus' church's beauty and beastliness. We contribute to her splendor and to her stains. And that's sobering! It's sobering when we consider the special position that God has placed each one of us who are born again into His family.

I love the universal church! The universal church is the called of God throughout all places and all times. I love thinking about meeting people like the Apostle Paul, or of meeting Augustine, or meeting Martin Luther and John Calvin, meeting Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley and D.L. Moody. And meeting more recent saints like James Boice, who I still benefit from almost weekly. I love thinking about one day being joined together as the church, worshipping alongside those guys.

I also love thinking about the places to which I've traveled throughout my life. I've been able to worship with the church in the Ukraine, and worship with the church in Ecuador, and worship with the church in Israel, and worship with the church in South Africa. And the close fellowship... With many of these churches, I had no bond of a common language, and yet there was a special oneness, a unity that I share with my brothers and sisters in those places as we listened to God's Word together, as we sang praises together, as we called out in prayer together, and as we fellowshiped around the Lord's Table together.

I also love the local church! The local church is a group of worshippers who testify to faith in Jesus and who commit to submit to one another and who submit to the leadership of that local church family. It's all for the purpose of glorifying God; of lifting up His name and fulfilling His mission in this world. In the local church, believers meet together regularly for the purpose of listening to God speak through His Word, of talking to God through prayer, of praising God through song, of lifting one another up in fellowship around the Lord's Table, in conversation.

I love that on the sabbatical that this church so generously allowed me to take for 8 Sundays, that I was able to visit in churches in Georgia and Florida and Texas. And in every one of these local congregations, there was so much difference between them. There was a difference in music and size and culture, in geography, in liturgy. All of these things are so different, and yet in each church, each one of those local churches felt a bit like home to me. I felt warmth and a welcome. I felt a joy in God together with His people. The Gospel sameness was what made each of these local churches a precious treasure. So I love the universal church. I love God's local church. And I must say that I love our local church family here at Bethany.

This is the specific local church where God has called me and placed me to make a personal investment, to place personal concern, and to set personal love. When I was away for 8 weeks on sabbatical, I thought of this church often. And I'll tell you that I didn't once think about this building. I didn't once think about the chairs. I didn't once think about the wonderful sound system. I didn't think about the land and the lake that this property resides upon. I didn't think about our own church's denomination. I didn't think about any of those things. But I thought about the church so often. And do you know what I thought about when I thought about the church? I thought of your faces. I thought of y'all! God would bring so many of you to my mind and my heart. And most often, there was just great joy in thinking about your faith and your love and your encouragement. And for others, there was a great concern as I considered the struggles that I know some of you are experiencing. But I came to recognize in those 8 weeks apart from you, the love that God had placed in my heart for this local church, perhaps more profoundly than when I was just in the midst of it without that break.

I pray that God would provide for each one of us a deep love for His church. It is the most healthy thing in Christian discipleship. In fact, this is part of what I believe is basic Christianity. Basic Christianity is this: Love for our own local church family is a central mark...it's not an ancillary mark, it's not a peripheral mark. It is a central mark of Christ-following discipleship. No one faithfully follows Jesus without loving their own local church. Now that doesn't mean that we like everything about our own local church. But it does mean that we love her. We have a spiritual concern for her and a care for her. We willingly and joyfully labor to strengthen her and be zealous for her welfare. We recognize that we need her for our worship of God. God has designed it to be so. And she needs our faithful love, our faithful participation. God has given us spiritual gifts for the very purpose of faithful participation, so that she might be what God designed her to be; an expression of His presence in this world, a communication of His glory.

God teaches us that He loves His own local churches. He joins us to His church, spiritually gifts us, and we are like God when we love our own local church. Jesus Himself commits to build local churches. It's not just men and women that are building the local church. It is Jesus Himself that has pledged Himself to build His local church, to such an extent that He says, "The gates of Hell will not prevail against it." And so it's Jesus that commits Himself to build and bless the local churches that He establishes.

So this morning, again, we're going to begin a five-week series that encourages us as believers to love the local church where God has placed us. God gives us sweet and precious responsibilities as well as privileges through our union with His church. So as we think about stirring it up within our own local church, stirring up faith, stirring up hope, stirring up love, stirring up worship, we turn to Hebrews 10:24-25. Here, God exhorts each child in His family who loves Jesus to think often about other brothers and sisters. Consider one another! And then in consideration of one another, as we think of each individual person that God has placed in our sphere here in our own local church, to consider not just the person, but to consider, "How can I be used by God to stir up love and good deeds, to encourage that person through my presence and through my relationship in their life?" The central idea behind this passage is that God advances His Name through His local church, so let us live in ways that spur the local church toward spiritual health.

Many believers today feel little biblical compulsion to commit themselves to making the local church something of a deep commitment. They don't think that the local church is necessarily tied to God's great worth. And that's the reason why I want to spend a bit of time this morning considering the priority that God places upon the local church, even before we look at this particular passage. Many believers have what I'll call a "hitchhiker's mentality" toward their local church. They know that they sometimes will need a ride home, but they're really not interested much in that car or what takes place in that vehicle after they get out of it. They hope that the next time they need a ride home, that another car will come along. But as far as a commitment to what's happening with that particular vehicle, it's just useful to help them get to the next ride that they feel that they need. And that is a weakening of God's glory. It is a weakening of the Gospel in this world that is so darkened.

Many Christ-followers view their local church from the perspective of an outsider looking in. Some believers, talking of their own local church, use the pronouns "they" and "them" when

speaking about their church family. So they might say, “They have some really good programs there at that church.” “They have really good music.” Or, “I wish they would do more in outreach for their community.” “I wish they would have more social concern.” “They’re not really friendly there.” So it is not uncommon for believers to consider a commitment of heart and soul to the local church as unnecessary to basic discipleship. I believe that is strange and foreign to the New Testament and to following Jesus. So we begin this morning by reminding ourselves of some eternal truths. Here’s what Jesus said. I alluded to it earlier.

Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

It’s interesting! The church hasn’t been established yet. The Pentecost hadn’t come in Acts chapter 2. And yet Jesus says, “Here’s what I will be about. I will build My church.” It is His own precious possession and He is committing Himself to this building project. And He says, “It’s going to be glorious. It’s going to be complete. And this is the work that I am about. All the attacks and assaults of the Evil One is not going to prevail against My building it into this beautiful, glorious temple for My Name.” So in thinking about the priority that God places upon the local church, I want to consider three ideas.

1. The church is uniquely loved by God.

God describes the church as Jesus’ bride (Ephesians 5, Revelation 19:7). That’s a unique love isn’t it, when you speak of the church being a Bride, the Bride of Christ. God describes the church as being Jesus’ body (Ephesians 4:15–16). In other words, there’s a special care for one’s own body. The Bible describes the church as being God’s own household, His own family (Ephesians 2:17). In other words, it’s His children that make up this family. He is the Father. The Bible describes God as thinking of the church as His chosen nation (1 Peter 2:9), as a holy temple (Ephesians 2:19–22). And indeed, even as His precious possession (1 Peter 2:9).

Theologians wrestle over the question: Does Jesus love the whole world and die as a sacrifice for her, for the world? Or does Jesus love the church and die as a sacrifice for the church? My answer to that question is “Yes!” I believe that Jesus loves the world and He died for the world. But there is a unique and special way in which Jesus loves the church and died uniquely and specially for His church.

I John 2:2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Yet, in Ephesians 5...Listen to this! In Ephesians 5, God is really not speaking about marriage here, though that’s what we often go to, to get our information or instruction about marriage. He’s really speaking about Christ and the church; us! His body! So He says

Ephesians 5:25-27 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

There is a unique and special sense in which Jesus' death was a death for "her," for the church, with the purpose that He might set her apart from the people of this world as His own possession, as His own Bride. So that in the future, He might present the church to Himself without any spot, without any wrinkle, without any failings, without any flaws. That is the future of Jesus' church. Perfect! Full of splendor! Full of glory!

Nearly all of God's letters in the New Testament are written to a local church. Not to individual believers, but to local churches. They are love letters to local churches that God writes to bless those churches in the first century. But because it's the Word of God, it's not just those in the first century that God had in mind. He had in mind every local church throughout the ages, until the end of time. The church is uniquely loved by God.

2. The church is uniquely designed for God's glory.

Ephesians 3:20-21 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

He's speaking about us, the church. He doesn't say "to him be glory in each individual life." Now it's true that God is glorified in individual Christian's lives. But here, the emphasis in this letter to the church at Ephesus is that God would be glorified in the church. So what is God's purpose for the church? It is that His glory would be communicated through His church forever and ever. Amen.

The church is not a creation of man. It's a creation of God. When God created the church, He designed her to be His singular instrument to do His work in the world, to fulfill His mission. There is no mission given by God to anything but the church. It is the church's responsibility to carry out God's mission. Only the church has been given this mission. So all mission must connect to this singular instrument. Therefore, making much of God means that we make much of His church; that we love His church, both universal and local.

As we think of the church being God's own possession, I have a pet peeve to share with you. Often I hear God's people call a church by the name of the pastor. "So I went to Los Angeles and I visited John MacArthur's church." "I went to Minneapolis and I visited John Piper's church." "I went to Texas and I visited Matt Chandler's church." Worst of all is if I would ever hear anyone say, "I went to Peoria and visited Ritch Boerckel's church." That would be terrible! (Congregational Laughter) What I hear when I hear the way the church is expressed that way by good, loving people... This is just encouragement. It's not a strong rebuke. It's encouragement away from it because I believe it's not true and I believe it robs God of His glory, ultimately. When I hear that, I do hear kind of, the nails screeching across a chalkboard. No! No, the church is God's precious possession. All of us in the church are simply members. We are blessed and privileged to be included in this glorious body. The Head of the church is Jesus. He is the One who possesses this church. Any fruit that is born in a church is never born because of the pastor or because of any individual in the church. It's born because God's Holy Spirit decided and

willed to bring forth fruit from the labors of that church, from the watering and from the planting.

Remarkably, God ties His work and His identity in this world to His family, the church. He communicates Himself to man through His church. So we must not think that we can create a better instrument for these purposes. God will be glorified in His church and by His church throughout all eternity. Think about that for a moment. When we connect ourselves to this thing called the church, and really, God connects us to the church and then we engage through active participation. But when we engage through active participation through faith, we connect ourselves to something that will never ever, ever come to an end. There will never be a moment in eternity where God's church becomes obsolete or insignificant to the praise of His Name, to His glory.

That's not true of any other human institution or society. We are right to commit ourselves to other human institutions and societies. That's healthy. Human institutions like physical family, like our own community, like our country. But we are more wise to commit to Jesus' church. For Jesus' church outlives every community. It outlives every country. It outlives nations. It outlives physical families. At the end of time, the church will continue to thrive and thrive and thrive, and be glorious, filled with splendor. Every other community will come to an end. It will cease to exist. But not the church of Jesus.

In heaven, I will not participate in a 4th of July party to celebrate the founding of the United States. I love our country. I love that my sons have committed themselves to such an extent to our nation that they would be willing to lay down their lives for this country. But they won't participate in a 4th of July party in heaven, because there won't be one. The United States will be gone. It will cease to exist. It will not be part of God's eternal plan. In heaven, I will not participate in a Boerckel family Christmas party. I love Boerckel family Christmas parties. I love my family. But in heaven, those physical family relationships will be superseded by the spiritual family relationships. Listen to what Jesus says. This is remarkable!

Mark 3:31-35 And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

Now, He's not dissing His mom. He's just wanting to teach a very vital spiritual truth. And that is that God's family, connected by Spirit, is more unified and it is eternal, where the physical family is not. So the church is uniquely connected to God's glory.

3. The church is uniquely vital to the health of our soul.

God designed His people so that we would grow together as a family. All of our growth in spiritual faith and in worship is connected to His family. It's not outside of His family. It's as we are participating in it. Listen to just a couple passages from Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

You're not separated from God anymore. You're part of God's nation. He's talking about how the church is both a nation which we are citizens of, and a household. We're members in this family. And then he uses another metaphor. He's speaking of the church as a temple unto God for worship. Each of us as believers also are being built together with one another as living stones in this holy temple. And how is this happening? Is it happening because we've decided to join a Christian club or start a new club for Christ? No! It's happening because God Himself created this thing called His church and He is working to build His church together through His people, all by the power of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:15-16 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

He says we're to grow up into the Head. But keep in mind that we're part of this body. Our own personal growth as well as the health of this body together, is uniquely designed for health through our joyful, faithful participation.

Here's the truth that I believe comes from those passages. A commitment to our own local church is necessary for our own spiritual growth. A commitment to a local church does not guarantee spiritual growth. It's possible to be super committed to your own local church and not grow spiritually. In other words, there's other things that could go wrong. But a neglect of commitment to a local church guarantees a lack of spiritual growth. It guarantees it! There is no such thing as a mature believer who is not deeply, intimately, profoundly committed to their own local church. The only exceptions to that would be if a believer is being persecuted and is enslaved or imprisoned so that it's impossible for them to be connected in a vital way to their local church.

There's a goose named Gertrude. Gertrude the Goose decided that she didn't need her flock, and decided one wintry day to fly north on her own without the flock. What do you suppose happened to Gertrude the Goose? She died. She didn't realize how much she needed the flock and the strength that the flock provided in order to carry her to her desired destination. And so in isolation, she perished. It was a slow death. It didn't happen just in one instant. But slowly, gradually she weakened to the point where she couldn't fly anymore without the aid of the flock. God designed geese to flock together and to fly together. And because Gertrude decided to run contrary to God's design, Gertrude perished.

What do you suppose would happen to the whole species of geese if everyone decided to be like Gertrude? What would happen is that geese would cease to be a species. The whole species would become extinct, non-existent because God designed geese to need one another in order to

survive. The parallel of course is for us in God's family. He has placed us in a flock. He's our Shepherd. And what happens when we decide we do not need the flock in order to fly toward God in worship, in purpose and meaning? I want to think about the calling God gives to individuals in the local church. That brings us now to our text. Hebrews 10:24-25.

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 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.

This is not a new problem. From the very beginning of the church, this has been a problem, of "lone ranger Christianity." The context is really important here, so let's take some time to pick it up.

Hebrews 10 teaches us that Jesus' sacrifice has provided everything we need in order to worship God and draw near to him. So becoming part of a church and committed to the church does not address the problem that exists between us and God as a result of our own sin. And that's where Hebrews begins. It doesn't start with this issue of our need to stir one another up to love and to good deeds and not forsake the assemblings. It ends there, but it doesn't start there. It starts with this very central issue that our sin is the great problem that stands between us and God, and that God has done everything necessary in Christ in order to answer that problem for us. And if we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we have a sacrifice that's able to cleanse us. We have a high priest that's able to bring us into the very presence of God Himself.

Hebrews 10:11-14 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

He's talking about the Old Testament priests. Those sacrifices were never intended by God to take away sins. No priest in the Old Testament ever sat down in the midst of his work. Jesus sat down. Why? Because He was finished with the work. The writer of Hebrews is keeping this view of Jesus' certain coming again in power and glory. He's waiting for that day.

Do you know that if you are in Jesus Christ, Christ has accomplished a work that will lead to an end that is so certain, it is spoken of in the past tense? It is already completed. You have been perfected. You are clean. You are forgiven through the blood of Jesus. Everything that Jesus accomplished for all humanity, He has accomplished for you. And that's the point of the Gospel. It's not enough to simply believe that Jesus' sacrifice was enough to cleanse man in general from their sin. Here's what Biblical faith is. All that Jesus has done for all of mankind, He has done for me. He has died so that I might be clean. And that's where worship begins. That's where the writer of Hebrews first takes us. So the first applications of that great truth appear in verses 19-23.

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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 with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

Let's fellowship with God. Let's commune with God. Don't let us be shaken from these truths even though the world is persecuting us now because we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Let's not be shaken loose of our confidence and of our hope in Christ. Let's hold onto Him. Let's not waver as a result of the temptations and trials that this world is pressing down upon God's people. So let's draw near to God. Let's hold fast to this confession. And here's the truth. Before we can fulfill God's call to strengthen His church, we must draw near to God personally.

The power to love others in the church and to build them up flows from our daily rejoicing in God's love for us. If we lose our nearness to Christ Jesus and to God in worship, if we begin to waver in that confession of the hope that we found in Christ, we will be too self-focused and too spiritually weakened to be able to be part of this great work that God is doing in His church, to spur one another on to love and to good deeds, to encourage one another in the faith. Jesus used the imagery of a vine and branches to illustrate that we need constant vital union with Himself in order for His life-giving power to flow through us, so we would produce fruit. Jesus says

John 15:1-5 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit...Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

"Abide in me" is the same idea. Draw near! We need this vital union with Jesus daily in order to bear fruit in the church for God's glory. If we don't abide, then we can't bear fruit. Before we begin to talk about these three responsibilities that God gives us regarding the church, let's keep this as the foundation. Before we can fulfill God's call to strengthen His church, we must draw near to God personally in vital union with Jesus. Now here's the responsibilities. They're simple, but they're profound for us.

Responsibility #1: Stir up one another to love and good deeds.

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

That word "consider" is interesting. It's only used one other time in Hebrews. I take that back. It's not only used once, but there is one occasion where it's used, and I want to draw your attention to it.

Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,

There, in Hebrews 3:1, God calls us to take our eyes off ourselves, off our own smallness and our own lives, and to place our focus upon Jesus. Consider Jesus. The health of our soul demands that we keep Jesus in our line of sight, that we focus our hearts upon Him, that we fill our minds with thoughts of Him. So consider. That's what it means. Consider Jesus. Now we jump forward to Hebrews 10:24.

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

Here, this is where the English translation is difficult. I don't think the ESV captures it. What the writer writes is very similar to the way he wrote in Hebrews 3:1. "Consider Jesus." But now he's going to say, "Consider one another." In other words, the object of the consideration is not this process of how to stir up, but the object of the consideration is the people. So when we think of the church, we are right to think of faces and to think of people, and to let the people in our own church occupy our thoughts, our heart, our mind, to have this spiritual concern. Consider one another. In other words, let's take our eyes off ourselves and place them upon our brothers and sisters whom God has united in a church family. We might be very, very different in our likes, in our culture, in our backgrounds. In so many ways we might be different. But God says, "Consider one another."

And then the purpose of considering one another, of focusing our hearts on each other, is the spiritual welfare or the spiritual joy of one another. So as we consider one another, we think, "What's happening in that person's life, and how can I be an influence that helps them grow in love for God and love for one another, and in good works, in the mission that God has given them that would bring fulfillment to their hearts and to their lives and bring glory to God?"

This passage calls us away from a passive approach to relationships. It says, "Take some time and take some energy to think about the people that God has placed in your own local church family." It doesn't come naturally. Otherwise, we wouldn't be given this command. If we just naturally thought of one another, this wouldn't even be written. But he's saying, "Take the energy of your heart and your love for God, and begin to think over people. Find a way that people in your own church family are called to mind throughout the week. Find a way to make that happen. And as they're called to mind, it's not for the purpose of criticizing them or thinking ill of them, or even being nosy about what's happening in their life. As you think about them, think about their spiritual life, their eternal reward, and how you can help them to greater joy in God, to greater service to Him, to greater glory in God Himself."

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

That word "stir up" also is an unusual word. It's translated differently in almost every translation that you pick up. If you have a New American Standard Bible, instead of "stir up," it reads "stimulate one another." If you have a New International Version, it will read "spur one another on." If you have a New Living Translation, it says "motivate one another." If you have a Holman Christian Standard Bible, it says "promote love and good deeds." If you have a New Revised Standard Version, it says "provoke one another." And actually, that last translation, I think, is closer to the language that the writer to the Hebrews is using. This term "stir up," is most often used negatively. It's used of that argument that Paul and Barnabas had when they couldn't agree

about John Mark and they entered into sharp disagreement. They were provoked (Acts 15:39; 17:16). And I think the writer to the Hebrews uses this intentionally. When we're involved in the local church, it's easy to get provoked. It's easy to look around and say, "Here's some things that irritate me about that person." Or worse, because of that, I'm thinking of ways to irritate them, to provoke them.

When I was growing up, I had two older brothers and one younger sister. What a sweet joy to be raised in the family I did. But I was a little rascal. I really had zero power. The younger sister was so sweet and doted on. The older brothers had all the strength and all the position. I could never get into the "boy's club." And no matter what I'd do...they told me I could earn some points. And I always got close to earning some points, and I never got there. (Congregational Laughter!) So one of the means of dealing with some of the frustration...I wasn't big enough to wrestle them. But do you know what I'd do? I would provoke them. I'd say little things that I knew irritated them. I'd sing little songs. I'd take some of their stuff sometimes and hide it. I remember once that I took my sister's glasses and hid them. I intended to give the glasses back just an hour later, but I forgot that I did it, even. I didn't know that she was still missing them. And a week later, she was in tears before Mom. "Mom, I've had this whole week. It's been so hard because I can't find my glasses." And I'm like, "Oh no!" (Congregational Laughter!) I intended this to be just a minor irritation.

So he says "Provoke. Consider how you might provoke..." In other words, you might elicit some response. But here, he uses that language to say, "How can you elicit a response of love among your brothers and sisters?" It's interesting because he doesn't say "Consider how you might love one another and do good deeds." That's right in itself, but he goes beyond that. He says consider the eternal joy of your brothers and sisters. Say, "I want to be someone that on the Day of Jesus Christ, when they're receiving their eternal reward, they can look and say, 'Thank you for stimulating, for provoking me. I wouldn't have lived the kind of life if you weren't sitting next to me in church, if you weren't praying for me, if you weren't encouraging me, if you weren't provoking me.'"

Responsibility #2: Meet together regularly with focus and purpose.

25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, ...

Already there was a habit among some in the early church to neglect meeting together. Now, "meeting together" refers to the regular services of the church. The early church met often. Acts describes parts of their church meeting daily in houses. So I don't think this only has to do with the Sunday morning service, though it includes it. I think it also includes some way to find these closer communities inside the meetings of the church. So at our church, we have ABC groups. We have Small Groups. We have a number of other ministry groups where people find a connection. But in some way, don't neglect the meetings of the church where you can connect personally with one another. That's the call of God. So "not forsaking" doesn't mean that you never ever, ever miss a church service.

By the way, I want to commend you on such a cold morning. You are the really faithful to be here. (Congregational Laughter!) Don't say that I told that to you, to people who aren't here. But you are really impressive.

But meeting together is when the church comes together for a purpose. It comes together to hear God because He speaks through His Word, to talk to God together, to call out to Him in our neediness, to fellowship. In other words, to talk about spiritual things, things that are eternally meaningful, and then to serve God, to do His mission, to share the Gospel with the world, to help the poor and the needy of the world. And if the church doesn't have members who are committed to that meeting, then it's like a team that seeks to win championship games with the members kind of haphazardly involved in it. It just will never happen. And God uniquely tied His glory to His church. He says, "Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together." He's not interested in Perfect Attendance pins. But He's interested in people who have a consistent commitment to things that are the most important, to eternal matters. And that's where the church comes in.

He uses the word "habit." It's habit-forming to miss or neglect for trivial reasons, and then get into a rut, to get into a habit of missing. All habits begin typically, pretty innocently. I know that some within our own church family struggle with the habit of cigarette smoking. I've never talked to one Christian who said, "I just never, ever want to quit." Almost all of them say, "I want to quit. It's just hard." But at some point in their life, they picked up a cigarette. And habits always start this way. "I'm just going to smoke this one cigarette. It's just once. It's my friends. It's just here. I'll just try it out. I just want to find out what's going on with it."

And it begins, "I'm just going to stay home today. I've heard it's kind of cool to just watch tv on Sunday morning. I've heard it's kind of cool to go out and play golf when all the churches... So I'm just going to try this once. My friends want me to do it. I'll just do it." It's a trivial reason, in other words. It's not sickness. It's not a severe cold. It's not the weather. It's not that our family is traveling. It's just that something trivial has come up.

Well then the next thing is, "I kind of like that cigarette. Now my friends are asking me to do it again. I want to do it again, but I'm never going to create a daily habit for that. I won't let this thing enslave me. I can control it." And so then that habit begins.

A person says, "Well, it was kind of cool to golf. Maybe I'll just join this golf league for just one month or two months or whatever it is." Or follow my Netflix. "I'll just complete that one Netflix series, and then I'll be through." And before long they say, "I have very little motivation to quit. I find it so hard and so difficult. I would even like to, but I've gotten into a habit."

And that was happening. They were getting into a habit of forsaking the assembling of themselves. There's nothing in our physical world that necessarily reminds us that that habit is bad for us. That's why God has to remind us. Because it seems all the way until there is some terrible consequence, it seems like that habit... "Yeah! Everything is going great! It's fine. In fact, I like this way of living. I think I'm healthier and have better relationships than ever." No! Don't forsake that assembling. This is what will happen.

Responsibility #3: Encourage one another by speaking the Word to one another and praying for one another.

25 ...but encouraging one another,...

When you come, come with focus. Come with purpose. That focus and that purpose is to encourage one another. It is to stir one another up to love, to deeper relationships, to good works, to connecting to God's kingdom purpose. You need to encourage one another because there's so many who are discouraged. They're weighed down by temptations and sins, by trials, by sadnesses and by fears, and by anxious thoughts. And we need encouragement.

Spiritual encouragement means that we use God's resources of grace to strengthen one another. That's what spiritual encouragement is. It's using God's resources. God's resources are the Word. We share the Word and say "here's how God really encouraged me this week." We pray. Prayer is a spiritual resource. We love in the body of Christ with a supernatural love. And we use our gifts to serve and build one another up. So as we serve one another, as we love one another, we encourage one another. And we need that encouragement.

Earlier in Hebrews, this is what he writes:

Hebrews 3:12-14 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

He says take care not just for your own self, but for one another. Instead of being careless that apostasy is possible if we are careless, he says, "but exhort one another." Spur one another on. Speak the Word into one another's lives. Pray for one another. As long as you have an opportunity, do it. Do it now! How deceptive sin is.

D. L. Moody was visiting a prominent Chicago citizen when the idea of church membership and involvement came up. The guy said, "I'm a Christian. But I believe I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside of it." They're sitting inside of this man's home. It's a wintry, cold day. There was a fire raging in the fireplace. And D.L. Moody didn't say anything. He just went over to the fire. He took the tongs and he took one of the little logs out of the fire and he set it on the hearth. And he just sat there. The man was quiet for a while. And the man looked at that log that once was burning so bright. It started to grow dimmer and dimmer. It started smoking and then it grew cold. And the man said, "I get your point."

There's an incentive I want to look at in my last minute with you. I think it is so precious.

25 ...and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

I love that! What God is telling us is that if we don't keep this precious hope of the coming of Jesus in view, we'll grow careless about eternal things. So He says press the blessed hope of Jesus' coming close to your heart. Don't lose sight of it. It will cause you to think differently

about relationships in the church. If you think of the blessed hope and what's going to happen...Jesus is going to return in the clouds in glory. The church is going to be translated and we will be perfected with new bodies. We will become free of any temptations, any sins. We'll become like Jesus. We'll see Him as He is. And then we're going to arrive at this judgment day, the Judgment Seat of Christ. There, God's people will be rewarded on the basis of what they've done to participate in God's glory through His church on that future day. And he says keep that in view so that when you're there, please understand that you will see other beloved brothers and sisters in Christ from your own church family. And think about what you want for them to experience. Not what you want for them to experience now, for short-lived joys and pleasures. The most important thing is to think about what you want for them to experience. Encouraging one another all the more as you see the Day drawing near. It is imminent! It can happen any moment. Let's help one another on to have the greatest joy on that future day. To God be the glory! Amen.