

Accountability and the Assembly

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 10:24-25
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We'll be focusing this afternoon on Hebrews 10:24 and 25.

24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,
25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

As we consider this text today, it's important to remember what we started out with last week, that we are now moving into the section of Hebrews in Hebrews 10 where it goes from largely what we call doctrine or teaching to more practical application, that Hebrews in this chapter is shifting. Last week, we focused on the verses just before this which show us that really the first practical application or the exhortations or the calls were to focus our faith on Jesus Christ at the right hand of God the Father, and really, as it were, to enter into the Holy of Holies, to go right through the veil and to be in Christ right and reconciled with God.

Now as we start to move through more and more, it calls now to put doctrine into practice. It's kind of like putting what we've learned to work. Many of us have been through different training programs, you've perhaps trained for one career or another and you've gone to school. Then after that school, perhaps you've had some kind of internship whether you were to be a doctor or a tradesman or whatever field of work you're in, there's usually at least some training period that you go through and then there's the point that you put that knowledge to work. And here we are now coming to really the first very practical outward exhortation of Hebrews, that comes to really now how then shall we live? That indeed the first call of Hebrews is in faith to go to the Lord and to approach God through Jesus Christ, but now it is to together, the tone is a tone of exhortation, for us to gather together. To synagogue is literally the word. The word "synagogue" is the word for the Old Testament gatherings of the church and it's still a word that is used here and it is the word that's used for a formal gathering of believers, that God's people would come together at a time and a place, and they would come together around his word and

here we have really a main, a focal New Testament call to the church gathered, and here we are.

So this is the main, one of the main passages in the Scripture that really calls us specifically to do what we're doing right now, but it's also especially a call to worship that's what we would call bracketed. So right before it, there's an exhortation, "let us consider one another in order to stir up to love and good works," and then there's the call to assembly, and then right after, "exhorting one another." And that's especially what we're going to be focusing on this afternoon, that as we come together to gather, we're to be, let's start now with considering one another. Considering one another. You know, I was once a member of a church and the normal pattern in that church many many years ago, far far away from here, was that many people in the church would show up for church right at the time of church, they would come in their cars, they would walk in, they would sit down for the service without even speaking to anybody else, and then the service would end and then they would go home without speaking to anyone else. Now this passage shows us that that kind of pattern is lacking, that there's more, that there's an important part of gathering as the church that we need to see comes with first considering one another in order to stir up love and good works. And then at the end, the tail end, exhorting one another.

First, consider one another. The word "consider" has the idea of observing or noticing something reflectively. So you notice something happens and then you think about it. Many things happen in our lives and we're so accustomed to that and we get so used to that and we let them pass us by, but here we are called to have a consideration for the church body. It actually makes you think of early in the Bible. You remember Cain's question of God after he murders his brother and he says, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And the idea of "a keeper" is one who watches over and who guards and even has the idea of a city guard, in a sense, later. And here in the picture is, yes, we are our brother's and our sister's keeper and we're all supposed to be watchman to a degree. Every Christian in the church is called to be one who's watching out for one another, who's observing and, yes, looking out to see what's going on in the body. And just as we care and we consider if we hurt ourselves, we cut ourselves or we have a weakness in our own flesh, and sometimes that pain or that struggle or going through those tests, it causes us or it fills our mind as we wrestle with the pain, we should also be thoughtful about the whole body of Christ, that when one member is in pain or in trouble or is backsliding, that we would be observant enough that we would notice and it would also pain us and we'd be considerate.

So here we are to be a considerate body of Christ, thinking about each other, watching out for each other. It's not just a pastor's job or just the elders' job to help each other be held accountable. We'll talk about meddling in a few moments but here it's very clear we're to consider each other, we're to observe, we're to think about what's going on in each other's lives. We're to be interested in one another. You know, sometimes it happens that we're around with a group and the children are playing and they're doing different things, and we see a child wander off and that child wanders off maybe toward some kind of danger or another, or trouble or another, or just getting lost. And some of us, we have

maybe even a good instinct as fathers, we look at that child and we say, "Well, they're going to have to learn the hard way sometimes," and we kind of let them make their own mistakes, but we can get careless in that, can't we, and letting people wander too far. Well, here the picture is, no, we're supposed to be watching quickly even, in a sense, hovering over each other, knowing what's going on. Not just waiting for other people to stumble or to fall but actually looking out carefully for each other. We're to be people watchers, in a sense, watching out with a purpose, though. Not just watching but observing in order to stir up love and good works. There's to be a purpose to our observation.

That word "stir up," stir up is actually too weak. It actually means "to provoke or to poke each other." You think of stirring up, maybe one good illustration of stirring up would be to kindle up a fire, to stir it up so it gets hotter, but here the idea is actually a word is used to stir up that usually has a negative connotation. One example in the Old Testament when this word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament actually has the idea of provoking always in a negative sense, but when you come to the New Testament, you have in Acts 15, that situation where there is that falling out between Paul and Barnabas and there's a sharp contention between them. Well, that word "sharp contention" is actually the same as this word here and it relates to the idea in Proverbs 27:17, I'm sure you've all heard the Proverb, "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend." Stirring up to good works is actually provoking one another. The reality is we all stumble in many ways, we're all prone to halt and wander, and we need the body of the church to be stirring each other up to good works and even doing so on a challenging or a provoking level.

You know, I've heard this saying or this expression which has some wisdom to it, that church should be uncomfortable for an unbeliever, that when a person first comes into church and they don't know anything, it should be like a different world, an unfamiliar place, and they should be convicted of their sin and church should be a little bit unusual and uncomfortable because church is church. And that's actually a good thing. It shouldn't be a comfortable place for somebody who's living in their sin, but did you know that even for a Christian, church should be somewhat uncomfortable. A provoking place at times. A stirring up place, that it should be hard for Christians at times to go to church and especially if you've been backsliding in your Christian life or if you've been living in sin, then I hope that the church makes you uncomfortable at times, and I hope that your brothers and sisters come and ask you, and even if it's on this very theme that we're looking at right now, that somebody is not coming to the assembly as much, it's easily to get offended when somebody comes a little too blunt but, you know, there's a love to that as well.

So this is to be a communal thing and one of the dangers that can come when by God's grace we have elders in the church and we have pastors in the church, is that people can start to default to thinking that all of the pastoring, so to speak, in the church happens just through the pastor and the elders, but really when it comes to this passage and other passages such as Matthew 18 and when it comes to church discipline and accountability, it begins not really with the preacher, it's the preacher's role to call you like I am right

now, but the whole community of the church staying together as a flock and even provoking love and good works.

It's such a fascinating tension, stir up or provoke love. You know, the world right now has a definition of love that is all affirmation and we need to watch out for that. What a danger that is. If you really love somebody, you will affirm somebody even as they're destroying their own life and destroying their own body, and to love them, you just have to accept that and affirm that lifestyle that they may have chosen. But here we see what Christian love is. Christian love is much harder. Christian love is rooted in the cross of Jesus Christ where he lay down his life for his friends, where it cost him everything. And here we're to stir up, provoke to love and that already shows us that Christian love is something different. This is that word "agape" many of you have probably heard of. It's that sacrificial uniquely Christian love which comes from the heart but also involves sacrifice, and it involves even at times some contention and some challenging and some poking at one another and stirring one another up to love and good works and correcting one another, and that comes from the heart.

And it does have an opposite, hatred, a hatred that's incompatible with being a Christian. Hatred also takes many forms and a form of hatred is just letting somebody walk away and slip away without ever helping them, without ever holding them to account. 1 John 4:20 says, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" The interesting thing about this passage here in Hebrews, we're starting to get very practical applications that go horizontal, that teach us how to live and walk in this world with others around us. But that horizontal comes right out of the vertical that we looked at last week, and that if we have a true love for God, knowing what we've received in Jesus Christ, that that will flow out in a love for neighbors that indeed involves accountability but also involves sacrifice, laying down our lives, being willing to take a loss.

Fascinating that later in this passage, later verses it says they accepted the plundering of their goods. You know, these Hebrews were exemplary Christians in a lot of ways but they were being reminded, don't slip away from that self-sacrificing love, that love that's willing to take hurt for the sake of the church and was willing to take even having compassion on the apostle while he was in his chains, that they were willing to help somebody who was thrown in prison, and they were willing to give everything for Jesus Christ. This is true sacrificial Christian love and we need to stir one another up to it, love and good works, and that's looking at things from two sides somewhat. Love really begins in the heart and then it expresses itself in the good works which are love as well.

It's interesting as we go through the passage that we've been looking at, we looked at the verses just before this last week and you really see every part of us that had the heart, the hands, all of ourselves were being called to make ourselves like a living sacrifice of Romans 12:1 where with our head and our heart and our hands we're worshipping the Lord and we're serving his people, and it's a holistic, we could say, Christian life. Head, heart and hands. Stirring up love and good works.

But now the question might come up: but what about meddling? How far does this really go? At what point is somebody being a busy-body and getting too far into somebody else's business? It's a good question and it calls for some wisdom. You can even think of the Proverb which says, "He who overlooks a transgression is wise." There's a time to overlook things. There's a time to understand that we all stumble in many ways. There's a balance to this. We'll look in a moment at the second part of verse 25 and there's a time for the more encouraging exhortation. There's to be a balance in the Christian life and we need to be very careful when we look at Hebrews 10:24, "let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works," that maybe some of you like that idea of stirring one another up, we need to be careful that our character doesn't go off the rails on this and that we don't become like the Pharisees that we've been looking at in the gospel of Mark. There were those who loved to come into the synagogue to criticize and to be critics and to be harsh, and they were superficial and heartless and cold. And that's why the key to this, stir up to love, stir up love and good works, is the motive of the heart, making sure that if you're going to stir somebody up and even provoke them over something in their life, at first you be realistic, you check if there's a log in your own eye, you examine your own heart, but that, second, that you especially make sure that you're doing this out of true and genuine love. Not to make yourself look better, not with a sense of pride, that you'd be examining your heart and that this would not be a superficial and a heartless and a Pharisaical stirring up but a true stirring up to love and good works.

So that's the introduction. You could even think of verse 24 as almost like walking into the vestibule or sometimes it's called the narthex of the church, walking into that beginning area where you're just about to walk in to worship and there you are. And next time you gather into a church and you gather, and here all we have is a field to walk in, are you going to observe who's there and think about them and desire to stir them up to love for God and others? But then, now, we come to the assembly itself, "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." There's some debate over this. Some people try to interpret this very loosely as if this could be any couple of Christians coming together for maybe a coffee or with friends, and that can relate, certainly that can be a wonderful place to stir up to love and good works, that we have a more personal meeting and that we would gather together maybe with some Christian brothers and sisters on a different night of the week and would spend some time together, and certainly that considering one another can happen in that context but here the word is used, the root is synagoging. Synagoging together. It points to the assembly where God's people even publicly and before others, they come together and they gather in together.

And it's stated, actually, negatively. It doesn't say go to the assembly, it says don't forsake the assembly. Stated negatively in the sense of a warning of the danger, and that actually sets you up for verses 26 and following which flow it out of this where it's very very clear that there's a great danger in this. Don't forsake. There's this real and present danger that some people were forsaking the assembly and if you read 10:32-36, that these are Christians, they might be tempted to forsake the assembly probably because of persecution, that in the past there had been reproaches and tribulations. The apostle very likely writing this, the Apostle Paul in chains, that they had been plundered of their

goods. And you know, it very likely could have been that people were forsaking the assembling of themselves together as is the manner of some, very possibly because of persecution, danger. It was dangerous to go to church. There was a risk to go to church and that some people collapsed under whatever that pressure was at that time, and so they forsook the assembly. And 1 John actually warns also in a context of when there was persecution of the church often or certainly very much a social stigma, people looking down on church-going, 1 John 2, "They went out from us but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us."

Now this is pretty sobering. During the New Testament times, Christians forsook the assembly or people who were known as Christians, maybe we could say small "c" christians, they had a testimony. They were known or, sorry, they forsook likely under persecution and hardship and especially for a Hebrew Christian, broken relationships in their family. The Lord Jesus had prophesied, "They will throw you out of synagogues. Father will be turned against daughter, or mother against daughter." And that there would be family breakdowns as people were converted to Jesus Christ and followed him as the Messiah and others rejected them and threw them out. And here what's the danger in our day? People often forsake the assembly out of convenience. They don't come to church as they have something better to do. Now there can be legitimate reasons not to be at church. There are those who are essential, truly essential workers and there are those that have real difficulties when it comes to health or family problems. We need to be careful to judge on this but it certainly seems in our day that many people just have simply the wrong priorities. They don't have their priorities in order. And we need to think twice before we miss a church service, and we need to think even practically that we set patterns for our own families for sake of love of the rest of the congregation, that we put the assembling of ourselves together first, and that we don't slip away from it.

And the great danger in the next verses after this which is the context of skipping out on church, is that that often leads to complete what we would call spiritual declension, falling away, just that outward of missing church. Isn't that the opposite of what many teach in our society and broader Christians even in this area? I found it fascinating being in the cemetery yesterday and going through the cemetery in Powassan just how many Bible verses there are on the graves and how many people take comfort that they're going to be with the Lord. And yet if you were to take a town like this or the average one in Canada where maybe there's many Bible verses on graves, we know for a fact that maybe there's a few dozen people in churches in an area like this on a Sunday morning. What a tragedy that is. How sad that is, that people think that they're doing fine just walking their own walk, going their own way, forsaking the assembly when the New Testament so clearly says, "they went out from us but they were not of us." Yes, the church can be a painful place to be and a difficult place to be sometimes and a challenging place, but let us not be those who forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

The next verses which we'll look at, Lord willing, in a few weeks after Communion, show the great danger related to picture there falling into the hands of the wrath of God if one even departs from the assembly. I don't doubt that some of you young people here, I don't know many of you, you're from different churches, but I bet your parents make you

go to church, some of you. You don't really want to be here. You know, I hope you listen tonight and you stick with that. You're saving your souls from hell. That's what it comes down to. From a false religion, a false Christianity that has spread through our land which says it doesn't matter if you walk your own path and go your own way, and it's okay to miss church here and there, and I know I'm preaching to the choir right now but I don't doubt some of you are tempted to be different places and you'd rather be at the lake and you'd rather be at the campsite. Well, I thank the Lord that you're here. This is the safest and best place to be not because of me, the preacher or the pastor, but because God's people are here, because this is God's house and he's gathering us in for accountability to one another, and how dangerous it is to start getting light with that, to let it go.

Well, there's a cost to assembling. There's a cost to our time. It takes time out of our schedule. There's other things we end up not doing. There's more and more a societal cost to assembling where people look down on us. And the question is: what is your custom and what will be your custom going forward? And more important, if you are here, where is your heart? Is it your desire to be in God's house as we just sung of? We need to continue to be here. But then, we'll now look at the next bracket and I want you to very much see in this passage that the assembling of ourselves together, it's not in verse 25 just the formal assembly, that's the heart and the core of it that we would come to the assembly and that assembly then and now it would have included the Bible readings and the preaching and the prayers and all of that is bound into that word "assembling of ourselves together," and where even a sermon like Hebrews would have been preached to God's people, that's there. But I want you to see especially today how communal that is, "but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." And that's the other bookend or the other bracket to the assembly. You can almost picture verses 24 and 25 as the people walking into church as a community and watching each other and seeing who's there and who's not there and holding each other accountable. Then they come into the assembly and then there's the exhorting one another.

This word "to exhort," it means literally "to call alongside." It has behind it the idea of walking together or calling somebody to walk with you. And it has much more the tone of appeal and encouragement and we even use the expression "coming alongside someone." But exhorting one another, so in verse 24, you had more the stirring up, the provoking that happens in a solid and in a faithful Christian church but here there's the coming alongside, the strengthening. And you know, this calls for wisdom. Sometimes somebody's flagging in their zeal and maybe they're not coming to church even. If we take this topic itself or it might be something else in their life, but maybe they're not coming to church as much as they should anymore and our temptation is to stir them up and there's a place for that, and some characters are better but there's also a place and it calls for much wisdom to exhort them, to call them alongside, to graciously and kindly to have more of this sense of encouraging.

And you can't just come with provoking. You can think of this, even this picture of balance, stirring up but also exhorting, isn't that also true of our parenting? That when we deal with our children, you've probably all seen families where it seemed like it was 99% stirring up and even leaning towards provoking children to wrath. We need to be careful

when it comes to the stirring up to love and good works and the provoking that we don't provoke to wrath, and we also need to make sure that there is this balance of exhorting. Don't just come with a hammer or with a sword. Yes, faithful are the wounds of a friend, and when the relationship can bear it, there's a time to come with strength, but here the idea is there's also the time to come with support or with buttressing, to come with kindness and help, exhorting one another.

It's interesting that this word "exhorting," it calls the whole church to be preachers. You can think in this context of Hebrews itself, very likely actually an old ancient sermon manuscript, very likely by the Apostle Paul. Hebrews doesn't start in the same way in verse 1 as most epistles written do. It starts more and it works through more like a sermon, taking an Old Testament text, Psalm 110, and working through it and we've gone through all those sections and now coming to the practical part, and the interesting thing is that Hebrews is almost like a three point sermon in that sense, working through the traditional way that we would work through these topics and ending with more the practical and the application. But what's interesting is that this preacher or exhorter exhorts the people to exhort. That's part of being a church member and a Christian, that we all have to a degree what we would call the office of being a prophet, that we all need to carefully speak to one another, to exhort, to preach to one another, and also in an encouraging way. And if you're concerned about these very passages, maybe somebody is not coming to church faithfully or you see them slipping in another way, you also are called here to get to work. It's not just the pastor's job or the elders' job to exhort. There's a calling for all of us.

And then here it's sort of ramped up, "so much the more as you see the Day approaching." The idea is double down on exhortation. Here you have a church that was facing much persecution, perhaps even literally facing AD 70, we speak of that time when Jerusalem was destroyed and some think that "the Day approaching" speaks of that, this time when the Jewish people were just scattered all over the world and there would be this horrific persecution that they would face in those years when Jerusalem was destroyed. But a better interpretation is that this focuses us as Christians on the final judgment day, and that we always always live in light of the Lord's coming, feeling that and assuming that he will come soon, quickly. He'll come like a thief in the night. He will surprise us so that we should each generation live as Christians in the light of his coming, ready to meet him.

You see, the Second Coming of Christ is an assembly. It's pictured that way. It's a judgment where all of the people on earth will be called to assembly and the verses after this very much warn of the judgment day, of meeting with the Lord, they're sobering, they're striking, and here it is the idea to exhort, to encourage one another because we're headed for judgment day. Every Christian and every believer, and so as a Christian assembly we're to encourage each other. Yes, things may be getting harder as they were for these Hebrews, but don't cast away your confidence which has a great reward. You have need of endurance. He continues with the exhortation in verse 35 and 36, "you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise." He gives an example there of what it is to call one another, to keep racing.

Right now we have the Olympics going on over on the other side of the world, and there's coaches that will undoubtedly be calling their runners to endurance, to keep going. There's even some runners in some events and it's interesting, I read about this, this week, that the whole reason they're there in a marathon or another race is especially in cycling this happens, is just to break the wind for a better as they go ahead on their bike, the other one falls in behind them and they're there just to make sure that they can have a rest and a break, and it's their job to come alongside others, and there are even pace runners and there are those and we should have this kind of attitude as Christians that we help one another run the race. We don't assume that everybody is strong enough just on their own without encouragement or without accountability to make it to the end of the race. You know, the Lord uses his people to exhort one another, to encourage each other, to bear each other up all the way to the finish line as John Bunyan puts it so beautifully in "Pilgrim's Progress" with a friend brings his friend at the end through the river, that God calls his people to bear each other up.

And so here we see that the assembly is critical to the Christian life, that we would fall without it, that we would atrophy spiritually and we would die without it. There's a great hope in it. Yes, it may be a place of being stirred up but that's good and that's helpful, and that we are called, first in this practical section starting in verse 19, to have boldness to enter the holiest with the blood of Jesus, but that's not an individualistic thing alone. Indeed, you're called to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for yourself but that's a communal call as well, that we together come to the throne of grace each Lord's Day.

Now as we think of the Lord's Supper next week, may we be examining our hearts but also considering one another and exhorting one another and caring for one another along the road. Amen.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord God, our Father in heaven, we come before You and we come with praise and with thanksgiving that You are the Lord who has gathered in Your people, that You are the Lord who has gathered in Your church. We thank You that You give us one another that we would be able by Your grace and by Your word and by Your Spirit to exhort one another. Please help us and guide us in this high calling. We especially think of the Communion that lies ahead of us. Perhaps there are those that are here that are thinking they should have a conversation with another, and they will have to debate whether to stir up or to exhort and what tone to use and what words to say. Lord, we pray that You would give us much wisdom for these tasks. Help us to exhort in love. Help us to be kind and to do this out of a true heart with love and service. We also pray that You would guide us in this coming week that we would glorify You in every word and thought and deed. Please sanctify us, we pray by Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.