

# Gathering Together: Essential, Not Optional

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Date: 22 August 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now we're going to read the portion of God's Word in the Scriptures. This is from Hebrews today, Hebrews chapter 10. The letter to Hebrews chapter 10 and at verse 19.

We'll begin reading at verse 19 and read on through to the end of the chapter. So that's Hebrews chapter 10.

And at verse 19. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. Let us consider how to stir up 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.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

[ 1 : 31 ] Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, and again the Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

[ 2 : 40 ] For yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay. But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls, or those who believe to the preserving of their souls.

I'd like us to turn this morning to words that you find here, especially in verses 24 and 25 of this chapter. Let us consider how to stir one another up 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.

In verses 19 to 24 here, you have what really amounts to a very logical and clear argument.

The way that the points are put together are actually very easy to follow the argument that's here, because it starts there with two senses. Since we have this and since we have that.

[ 3 : 51 ] It speaks here about verse 19, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way. And that's really saying to us, we have confidence coming into the presence of God because of the provision that Jesus has made in his death.

As we come trusting in him, then we are assured that God will accept us and accept our worship, our offerings, because of Jesus, because of the death that he died and all that that means.

Since that's the case, let us come with a true heart and full assurance of faith. And verse 20, the other since statement there is, since we have a great priest, high priest over the house of God, let's draw near to him.

So these two since statements, since we have confidence to enter by the blood of Jesus, since we have a great priest over the house of God, by which he means the cause of God, the church of God, the whole cause of God is overseen, it's presided over by the great priest himself, Jesus.

Since that is the case, what then? Well, he then mentions three let us statements. Three statements beginning with the words, let us.

[ 5 : 07 ] You have the first one there, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith. And the next one, verse 23, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful.

Then 24, and let us consider how to stir one another up to love and to good works, not neglecting to meet together. And you'll notice in passing that each of these let us statements, in turn, contains these very prominent graces and important graces, as we usually call them, faith, hope, hope, and love, drawing near in faith, holding fast the confession of our hope, and stirring one another up to love and to good works.

And it's on the third of these that I want to say a few words this morning to myself as well as to yourselves. In verse 24, let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.

Now, before we look at them, it's important really to remember and to realize the relation between these two verses. Because what you have in verse 25, the meeting together aspect of things, is the means by which we are enabled to carry out what's in verse 24, the stirring up of one another to love and to good works.

In other words, the writer here is saying, when we think about stirring one another up to love and to good works, the primary means of doing it is by meeting together. Let's not neglect, he's saying, to meet together as is the habit of some, but rather meeting together, let's encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

[ 6 : 54 ] So these two verses, we'll take them in turn, but remember this relationship between them. First of all, there's considering one another. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and to good works.

Now, the translation, the ESV here is, I think, not as good as it is in the authorized version. Just one example of where that is the case, though there are probably not that many.

But it's literally saying, and the authorized version keeps to it more literally, let us consider one another in order to stir one another up to love and to good works.

So it's not just merely saying, let's consider how to stir one another up to love and to good works. What it's really saying is, let us consider one another. And what he means by that is, let us give very thoughtful, serious attention to one another, so that the outcome of that will be that we will stir one another up to love and to good works.

When you go back to chapter three, you can see this word consider at the very beginning of chapter three, verse one. Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, and so on, all the way through there.

[ 8 : 13 ] Now, when he says consider Jesus, obviously, he is saying, consider him very carefully. Give serious attention to Jesus. Give your whole consideration to him in such a way that really seeks to take in as much as you can of what is true about him and of your relationship to him.

So consider really is giving very thoughtful, studied attention to something. In chapter three, it's Jesus. In chapter 10 here, it's one another. And if the word consider has that weight as it does in chapter three, then it follows through that it has that same weight in chapter 10.

The weight of emphasis that you give to the word and considering Jesus has that same weight of emphasis. Here, consider one another. It's a requirement of looking after each other as a fellowship of God's people that we consider one another, that we give careful attention to one another.

Of course, obviously, the writer here doesn't mean in a way so as to criticize what they're wearing or to do anything of that sort of negative type of viewing people. It's giving serious attention to our needs, giving serious attention as to where do we actually, where are we actually able to help others out?

Where are we able to see something in them that may require my input or your input? Study one another, consider one another, consider one another in terms of how we should view each other and relate to each other as Christian people.

[ 9 : 44 ] And to opt out of that is really essentially a form of selfishness.

It's a form of individualism. It's really giving credence to the idea that actually, I don't really need anything more by going to church or being part of a congregation than just to turn up for services.

And here is obviously as well as elsewhere in the Bible something that completely goes against that idea. You and I are here today not as mere individuals.

I have my personal needs, you have your personal needs. We all have our personal requirements, our individual requirements. But we're here as a fellowship. We're here to consider one another. We're here to be of help to each other.

We're here to actually look in consideration as to how we can possibly be together, be the kind of people that help one another, look out for each other, that watch over each other, all of these sort of things.

[ 10 : 49 ] Consider one another. And of course, individualism, as it creeps into the church just like any other body, individualism breeds divisiveness.

The more we are individualistic about our Christianity and about our confession, about our Christian life, the more inevitable it will be that we're going to be in somehow or somewhere or other divisive.

We're not going to be really taking part as we should in the body, in the work of the body, in the witness of the body. So here is a word that's really important for us today.

Consider one another. Consider one another with thoughtful attention. And the reason for that is to stir one another up to love and to good works.

Now the word here in other translations is provoking one another to love and to good works. And you know very well that the word provoking is very often or most often used in a negative sense, in a provoking in the wrong sort of way, exasperating people, provoking people so that they lose their temper or whatever, or to break up relationship.

[ 12 : 02 ] That's being provocative in the wrong kind of way, in the sinful kind of way. But the word is used here, provoking in a good way, which means to stimulate, to stir up, to actually motivate, and to spur on.

It's that kind of positive emphasis on stimulation, stirring up, considering so as to provoke. There's a connection between this and the idea you have in Proverbs chapter 27 and verse 17.

Remember there it says, as iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his companion or his friend.

In other words, you see a butcher or fishmonger or whatever sharpening their knife with a piece of iron, with a sharpening device. He's saying, that's really our intention. That's our aim in our fellowship, in our relationships, that we sharpen each other, sharpening in the sense of being of benefit to each other, making our lives as far as possible better lives.

And so, here he's saying, consider one another. It fits in with that idea of sharpening or bringing about a positive result, a positive outcome in people's lives.

[ 13 : 23 ] That's what fellowship is really for. It's not just for enjoying something selfishly. It's for actually contributing to the overall good of the body of Christ, of the fellowship of God's people.

Consider one another so as to provoke. And to provoke to what? Well, it says to love and to good works. Not to one or other, but actually to both.

To stimulate one another to love and to good works. In other words, it's part of the essence of congregational life, whatever congregation it is, that it's a congregation that takes part in and indeed is known for both love and good works.

We are to stimulate one another to both, to both love and to good works. Now, good works are something we perhaps somehow have a difficulty with.

It's maybe not something we give much attention to. It is an important part, nevertheless, of the Bible's teaching that as Christians we engage in good works. Not so that we can try and earn God's favor by them.

[ 14 : 29 ] Reformers were very insistent on that, that that was not what good works were about in the teaching of the Bible. But rather, as it says indeed in our Westminster Confession in chapter 16, it's a chapter given entirely to the subject of good works.

And in that chapter in paragraph 2, it says as follows, these good works done in obedience to God's commandments are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.

And by them, believers, and then it mentions a number of things, by them, by these good works, believers, they manifest their thankfulness, they strengthen their assurance, they edify their brethren, they adorn the profession of the gospel, they stop the mouths of adversaries, and glorify God.

See how much is attached to good works and the benefit of good works. These, let me just read them again, they are the fruit and evidences of a true and lively faith, by them, by these works, we manifest our thankfulness to God, we strengthen our assurance, we edify our brethren, we adorn the profession of the gospel, we stop the mouths of adversaries, and we glorify God.

And we think that all of that is packed into good works and what they mean and what they're for. You can see how important it is, therefore, that we stir one another up, that we consider one another up, so that we are stirred up to love and to good works.

[ 16 : 01 ] There's so much attached to it, so much depending upon it. So that's considering one another, but then, as we said, the next two verses are very much connected with that.

The next verse, rather, is connected with that. 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.

Now, you can see from what we've said already of the need for meeting together. You cannot stimulate one another unless we are actually meeting together. And I'll say something in a minute about virtual church or how we've had to do that for some time due to the COVID situation.

But what it's saying here is undoubtedly to do with meeting together physically in person. And indeed, the idea built into the word that's used by the writer here has in one place included in the whole idea of the word.

It's a word that's not usually found in the Bible for meeting together. But those who know about language and so tell us that it means to gather in a certain place.

[ 17 : 13 ] So it's not just gathering in a general sense, it's gathering together and it's gathering together in a certain place which of course in those days was very evident because very often homes were used when church buildings were not then available or in place.

And they met together for worship but for exhortation as well. They met together to share in the things that God had given them. And you notice it's saying as is the habit of some.

Well, that was the case even in those days. As some were making a habit of staying away from the gatherings, from the meetings of God's people together in one place, in their designated place of worship and fellowship.

And he's saying here, let's not neglect that. If we want to stir one another up to love and to good works, it's by not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some.

A willful developed habit. And you know, it's very easy to fall into that habit and especially over the past year and a half because we've been unable to for some time use buildings and even until very recently unable to use buildings without some fairly serious restrictions being imposed and required.

[ 18 : 32 ] It's very easy then, and especially when there's a pandemic on the go as well, to just slip out of actual church attendance and even as things improve, it's sometimes easy to just keep doing that, to just keep neglecting to be together and just saying and persuading to ourselves, but it's just as good even if I'm not gathered with the rest in a certain building at a certain time.

You see, love promotes fellowship. For fellowship, you need being gathered together. And just as love promotes fellowship, as the first part of our passage today is saying, considering one another, being together so as to give consideration to one another, so as to stir up love and good works, it works the other way around as well.

It isn't simply that love promotes fellowship, but fellowship also stimulates love and good works. This is the whole logic of the passage. And the alternative, you see, it's interesting, isn't it, that once he said, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

He goes back to the same theme again, putting it in different words. So really he's saying, let's consider one another so as to stir one another up to love and to good works, indeed encouraging one another rather than neglecting to be together.

So you can see the way that it all just fits together so admirably in the thought of the writer so that we can follow logically and clearly how important it is to be meeting together regularly, to be meeting together regularly in a place for worship and to be engaged in worship, and how that is so important for all of those who belong to the church of God in the world.

[ 20 : 26 ] What then about virtual church? Because that's something we've become so very used to over the last year and a half or so, and I think it's important that we give some attention to how that fits into what the passage is teaching, or rather how the passage and the teaching of the passage bears upon that topic of virtual church and meeting together online or taking part as some are today in live stream services.

Now, we're not going to decry the benefits of that. It's been a wonderful provision, the technology that we have available to us, not just for worship, times of worship when we couldn't meet together, but also other meetings that the church has to engage in or other agencies as well.

The technology that's available to us today is surely something we're thankful to God for. We're not here to actually decry that or just think of it in a very negative way.

And it's good that you can download sermons, that you can watch live stream services. It's good that you can take part in them or even have them afterwards if they're recorded, that you can actually watch and listen to them.

But what I'm saying is, and what this passage is very definitely saying to us, that must not be the norm. That must not be what defines the gatherings of the church.

[ 21 : 53 ] Yes, at times they're needed. Yes, at times, certainly in the past experience of our own experience, it's been essential at some times to be online watchers of service or participants.

But that's not to be the norm. Live stream is convenient. And there are always people, and this is why we've kept live stream going, and I want to make this clear, we've kept live stream going not so that people can feel comfy at home when they should or should be able to come to church.

Live stream is going for those who cannot physically get to a service, cannot physically get to be with others in a gathered place of worship, in a gathering in a place of worship.

Or for some throughout the world, indeed, as we've seen, who can actually locate and take part in watching live stream services when they don't maybe have a church for hundreds of miles.

That's essential, that's important. That technology is for the good of the gospel. But like I'm saying, it should never be the norm for you or for me, or even for those watching online today who can be physically gathered with God's people here in this building or wherever else you are.

[ 23 : 09 ] Yes, live stream is convenient, live stream is very comfy. You don't have to really organize your family in the same way, and it's difficult, I know, for those who have children to actually organize them, to bring them to church Sunday morning, whatever, so many things that need to be attended to, so many things, you're rushing into the car, you've forgotten something, you need to go back.

I know it's difficult, we all know it's difficult, it's challenging, not just for that, but even for ourselves as individuals, as older people, challenging really just to get up and get dressed or put on whatever clothes you have, coming to church and make the effort of coming to church, make the effort of coming to gather with God's people.

Of course, it's more convenient at home, it's more comfortable at home, but then is love really always comfortable? Is stimulating one another to love and to good works always comfortable?

Is helping one another in relationships always going to be comfortable? No, that's why you cannot do it from home, because the church is a body, a spiritual body, and it's involved in relationships being attended to and helped and furthered.

It's involved in discipleship, which really you can only do in a very limited way by following online courses, because discipleship really is about relationships and building relationships and contributing to relationships and taking the time and making the effort and putting up with the discomfort sometimes that is necessary in helping people through their crisis points.

[ 24 : 42 ] Jesus put himself out. Jesus didn't actually virtually attend to people's needs. He put himself out.

He was prepared to live that life of disciplining his time and discipline his circumstances. Everything that he did was directed to serving the Father to the benefits of his church.

And that's the pattern, friends, for ourselves, isn't it? To individualize faith or worship is inevitably going to damage the church as to what it is and how it carries out its functions.

And that's the danger of just confining ourselves to online services or just to watching services. Even if you have four or five services to watch on the Lord's Day, is that really better than being together with God's people as we are here today gathered together?

Of course it isn't. Because individualizing our relationship to other Christians, individualizing our worship, and that's the danger of a virtual church.

[ 26 : 01 ] That you individualize your Christianity. That's what the devil is aiming at. That it's all about me and it's all about you and what I can get out of it and how I'm going to progress.

It's not about other people who have their own lives to live. Well, that's not in accordance with the Bible's teaching at all. Let us consider one another, it says. Let us consider one another so as to stir one another up to love and to good works.

Not neglecting to meet together, to meet together in a place as is the habit of some. But rather to encourage one another.

See, the church has been created by God. The church as we find it in the world. I'm not dealing just now with a distinction between those who are saved and those who are not. The church in the visible sense of it as we've gathered here today as a visible body of people to worship the Lord.

God has created that entity known as the church to be visible in the world. How is the church going to be visible in the world if our main attention is going to be given to virtual church?

[ 27 : 10 ] Who's going to see your Christianity? Who's going to see your commitment to Jesus? Who's going to see my commitment to the Lord if I just do everything online?

If I stay at home? If I say it's more convenient and more comfortable than I should actually travel or go to be with the Lord's people? Friends, I know I'm preaching to the converted in that sense, but it's a reminder to ourselves of the dangers that exist in our world even through things that we can actually gain much advantage from.

So let us not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some. And I want to say to you who are online today that it's great to have your participation. It really is, and I genuinely mean that.

But I do want you to think of what this text is saying. If you are able to be here at all and not prevented by illness or some disability or some mental health issues, then this really is a text for you.

Be encouraged, please, to come and join all of those like us here today who are worshipping God together. Because here are the benefits of it spelled out.

[ 28 : 28 ] Here's the negative side of it also spelled out for us. I do encourage you. This place is a safe place. This place is a place where every effort is made to make you feel, if you like, as at home as possible.

I'm not saying preaching is always going to make you feel at home. I hope it isn't. There are things that need to be said in preaching that will actually cause us some pain in our hearts. And it's the same in our relationships too.

It's not all easygoing and indiscriminate love. Relationships have to be built up, have to be worked at, have to include all sorts of things like advice and counsel, sometimes even pointing out one's faults.

And as Matthew Hendy once put it, I think it was him or his father, if we are sincerely desiring to be holy, we will love having our faults pointed out to us.

If they're genuine faults. That's what the Bible is for. To enable us to see ourselves as God sees us. And to bring the healing of the gospel, the healing of Christian fellowship, the healing of the Holy Spirit to bear upon that.

[ 29 : 47 ] And you see it saying, so really we're saying from that in terms of virtual church that live stream is a benefit, but it's never to be an alternative to gathering together.

And he's saying finally, encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Now that day is the day mentioned there in chapter 9 and at verse 28.

Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many shall appear a second time not to deal with sin, but to save those who eagerly are waiting for him.

It's the day of Christ's appearing, the day of judgment, the day of the Lord's return. And what it's saying to us is that the more we're anticipating that, the more we're looking forward to that, as I hope we all are.

Because it's essential to our salvation that we regard the return of Christ as an essential element of doctrine in that salvation. And the more we're looking forward to his return, then the more concerned we will be to gather together.

[ 31 : 01 ] That's the logic of the verse. All the more you gather together and encourage one another as you see the day drawing near. Today, the return of the Lord, whatever it's going to be in terms of time, who knows?

The Lord knows. God only knows. But today you and I can say, in our experience, in the church's experience, it is near than it was last year or even yesterday.

And as day by day goes by, so the day of the Lord's return is drawing near as far as you and I are concerned. And the Bible gives us the teaching that the more you realize this, well, the point it's making here is the more we'll be concerned to meet together, not to neglect meeting together, but rather to consider one another in our gatherings so that we will stimulate one another to love and to good works and encourage one another all the more as we see the day approaching.

May God bless this word to us. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we give thanks for all the direction your word gives us in regard to the present life and the life that is to come as well as what is in our past.

We give thanks that you are the God who presides over the events of life, that you are the one who has appointed all things that take place in the world as well as in our own lives as miniatures within it.

[ 32 : 30 ] We thank you, O Lord, that your interest is in your people and we give thanks for the encouragement you give us in terms of meeting together regularly for worship, for fellowship, for stimulation of one another to love and to good works.

We thank you for the opportunities. We pray for those today who don't have the ability to come out, who would love to be here but are prevented in providence.

Lord, we pray for them. But we pray too for those who may be fearful, for those who may have a block in their minds as to coming to gather together with others after such a period of COVID and restrictions.

Encourage them, Lord, we pray, and give us to be encouraging to them. And help us together to stimulate one another to love and to good works. Continue with us now throughout this day, we pray.

And be our portion this evening as we anticipate, once again gathering for worship. Hear us, we pray, and forgive our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. We're going to conclude our worship this morning singing in Psalm 27.

[ 33 : 43 ] Psalm 27 verses 4 to 6. This is in the Sing Psalms version of Psalm 27. One thing I'll plead before the Lord, and this I'll seek always, that I may come within God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze, and in his house may seek to know direction in his ways.

That's from page 32, if you're using the Psalm books. Verses 4 to 6, Psalm 27. One thing I'll plead before the Lord. Again we stand to sing. One thing I'll plead before the Lord, and this I'll seek always, that I may come within God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze, and in

God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the earth may come within God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the earth may seek to know direction in his ways. For in his dwelling he will keep me safe and troubled days.

For in his dwelling he will keep me safe and troubled days. He will keep me safe and troubled days.

Where then they stand in shelter me, and on a rock me raise. My head will then be lifted high, above my head and be lifted high, above my head and be lifted high.

[ 35 : 55 ] And in his day, above my head and be lifted high, above my head and be lifted high. And in his day, above my head and be lifted high. And in his day, above my head and be lifted high, above my head and be lifted high.

And in his day, I'll sacrifice. Sacrifice with shouts of joy and praise.

One other intimation I forgot to give you. The funeral of the late Alastair MacDonald, Plasterfield, will take place, God willing, on Tuesday. The funeral service on Tuesday at 1.30pm.

That'll be in the seminary. So that's 1.30pm on Tuesday. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen. Amen.