

Provoking One Another Heb 10:19-25

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We have been looking at the question that the Lord challenged me with when I was away for a few days at the end of August. "How do you measure up?" How do I, and indeed anyone of us, measure up personally and how do we measure up as a local church?

So we have taken a preliminary look at how we might evaluate how we are growing. Last week Dave looked at how we grow, not just gradually but more often than not in spurts, in his message on *Change*. The Willow Creek research called *Reveal* led them to a fairly simple overview of the Christian life, made up of spiritual practices and spiritual behaviours.

The spiritual practices are:

1. Confession - keeping short accounts with God.
2. Prayer - you don't have because you don't ask.
3. Bible reflection - meditation more than study
4. Quietness - taking time to hear from God

The spiritual behaviours are:

1. Giving - mainly relating to money
2. Serving - using our gifts and ministries
3. Witnessing - reaching out to the lost

In addition to these practices and behaviours they also looked at involvement in the local church, which is **the spiritual context** in which we grow.

1. Worship - praise and thanksgiving
2. Teaching - having the word expounded
3. Small Groups - fellowship
4. Breaking bread – having meals together and remembering Christ
5. Admonishing one another

We will be unpacking the practices and behaviours over the coming weeks with a view to measuring how we have progressed in each of them and how we can grow further. But this morning I want us to consider together the importance of the local church in our personal growth and also begin to consider how we together as a whole community have grown and can grow in the future.

Please turn to **Hebrews 10:19-25**

These verses give us five **imperatives**. Usually an imperative takes the form of an instruction: Draw near to God, hold unswervingly to your hope, consider how you can spur one another on, Do not give up meeting together, Encourage one another. When the first person plural imperative is translated into English we usually say 'Let us draw near to God' but that lacks bite and sounds rather watered down, optional rather than compulsory. So I want us to see each of these imperatives as they are. These are instructions that it is imperative that we comply with.

Drawing near to God and holding unswervingly to your hope are vital to our walk and growth in God but they are hard to do alone. Too easily we are drawn away from God rather than drawing near to God; it is difficult to hold onto our hope without wavering on our own. We need other people to help us, to stand with us, to hold us up. I don't know if you saw the recent News article where researchers showed that taking exercise together gives us more endorphins in our bodies than exercising alone. They tested rowers who rowed alone and with others and found that it is far more beneficial to exercise with others than it is to exercise alone. Eccles 4:9 says *"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."* This is often quoted at weddings, because it is particularly true of marriage, especially the three-stranded cord: God, husband & wife - three strands not easily torn apart. But this is true of life - we need others, a spouse, a partner, friends, a community. This is why small groups are so important and why really being part of a local church is vital.

Now we have three more imperatives.

1. Consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. Do we ever consider how we can provoke one another to spiritual life and growth and actions? The Greek word spur on is *paroxysmos* - from which we get paroxysm - an uncontrolled outburst, particularly of emotions such as a fit of the giggles or uncontrollable weeping or an outburst of anger. It can also mean a seizure or a coughing fit or a sneezing bout. The Greek word actually means to sharpen something, and is therefore used to mean provoke, prod, spur on, even to irritate, exasperate, provoke to anger, or **INCITE**: We hear a lot today about incitement to hatred but what about incitement to love and good deeds! I like that word in this context - incitement! We all have a role to play in inciting one another. This is not 'sympathising with poor me' - this is challenging ungodly attitudes, actions and words spoken, and may even come out as an outburst! "What do you think you are doing? Can't you hear what you're saying?" But to often we let each other get away with stuff Jesus would never have let his disciples get away with! So we have to look into and consider how we can help one another intentionally in such ways.

2. Don't give up gathering together. Here is the local church or your small group getting together but you are off somewhere else, leaving everyone else behind to their meeting. You let everyone else get together but you absent yourself, and the writer says this is 'the habit of some'. It is a bad habit. It's a nice day today, let's miss church, we've got people coming for lunch let's miss church, I've had a hectic day, let's give group a miss tonight. If you have kids they will learn from your bad habits, and will share your same bad values: swimming, football, and other sports on a Sunday morning instead of church – this all tells our kids God doesn't matter; he comes second to everything we want to do. We will go to church and worship God, only if we've got nothing else better to do. What habit have you developed? A habit that puts God, worship and our spiritual nourishment first or where we fit God in around our plans? Is it time to change?

3. Encourage one another. The word encourage essentially means 'to get alongside someone' to help them, uphold them, strengthen, inspire, embolden and put heart into them. We can be very good at doing the opposite of this, pouring cold water over things, discouraging. To be able to encourage we need the Holy Spirit who is The Encourager (better translation than Comforter or Advocate) whom Jesus promised, (see John 14 -16) the Encourager who will be with us for ever, who was alongside us but shall be inside us. Have you laid the foundation of receiving the Spirit, the Encourager filling you with all the fullness of God? If so we will also then be encouragers, 'speaking truth in love, so that in all things we will all grow up into Christ, Head of his church'. "All the more" there is day coming when this world as we know it will end and that day is closer today than it was yesterday and will be even closer still tomorrow. What are we doing to prepare for that day?

We can't grow in God and change and become everything God wants us to be without one another, mentors, spouses, brothers or sisters whom the Lord uses, like iron sharpening iron.

So being together in a spiritual context is an essential prequel to enabling to love and do good deeds. In other words it leads to good behaviours. As we shall see when we are involved in good behaviours it will drive us to good spiritual practices. We may think it is the other way round. Give ourselves to good personal practices like bible reading and prayer and that will inspire us to serve and give; but actually it is the other way round. When we give ourselves to serving and witnessing, we find that we cannot do it without spending quality time with God. I can tell you that from my experience. I don't know that I would pray or read or spend time with God as much as I do, if I was not so involved in serving as leader of this church. We will unpack these things in coming weeks.