

Hebrews 10:24-25  
Spur One Another On  
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I wonder if anyone here has ever ridden a horse? Maybe many of you at one time or another, but I'm guessing it's probably not something most of us do on a regular basis—at least, it's not for me. But I remember my last experience vividly. After graduating from St. Olaf, I had the great pleasure of going to visit with 8 of my roommates our dear friend Kyle's family in the hills of West Virginia. Kyle's family lived on a 600 acre plot in the mountains, their home was situated in the middle of a vast amphitheater of pastureland. Beyond that was forest as far as the eye could see. It was a dream.

There was no limit to the activities we could enjoy, but the thing we all were looking forward to most was horseback riding. I think secretly we all imagined ourselves atop a noble steed riding with our shirts off, wind blowing through our hair over the grassy hills. We would be riding Redbone. Redbone, it had a great ring to it. I imagined he would be a tall noble beast, with auburn colored hair. What we found, however, was quite different. He was instead a short, shaggy, beast of burden whose back was in a "U" shape from the years of pulling and bearing heavy loads.

Nevertheless, we were there to tame the wild beast. I was first. After saddling Redbone, I did what any great cowboy does, I put on my helmet. Then I climbed on which in my mind looked like this, but in reality probably looked more like this. I was ready. Hiiyaah! Giddyup!! Nothing.

There we stood in the field unable to make the horse move. "You've got to dig your heels into his side," Kyle said. So I pressed the rather smooth heels of my Nikes into the horse's ribcage, which I imagine felt like I was giving him a warm hug. Still nothing.

"This is why it helps having spurs," Kyle said. "But doesn't it hurt the horse?" I said. And Kyle said this in response: "It doesn't hurt the horse, but it doesn't feel good either, and that's the point."

So, with that image fixed in your mind, the image of a spur, and not the image of me riding a horse, let us look at this morning's passage. Again, this summer we are in a series of messages called One Another, in which we're looking at some of the nearly 40 passages in the New Testament in which Jesus uses this phrase *One Another* to describe how we live in community with each other and him. Today, our passage comes from the book of Hebrews. So I invite you to stand with me, and let's read aloud Hebrews 10:24-25.

**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

The book of Hebrews over and over again drills down into the theme of the centrality of Christ. Pulling no punches, the author emphatically lays out his argument for why faith in Jesus is better than the whole system of Jewish faith. Time and again, he points us to Christ as the center of our faith, until we as readers perhaps get a little impatient—enough already, you made your point.

Perhaps that's why the New International Translation and New RSV use spur or provoke for this interesting Greek word, *Paroxusmos* (par-ox-oo-s-mos). Paroxusmos which literally means to irritate or incite. It's a provocation which literally jabs someone so they "must" respond. It's used in the Old Testament to describe those instances in which God's people were so frustrating to God, that they aroused the anger of the compassionate, longsuffering God. It's not necessarily a happy word, but in this sense, it is used in a positive way. The author of Hebrews says spur one another on, encourage one another, provoke one another, stir up the Christians around you, not so that you harm them, but also so that I won't feel good either. Here the author says, irritate one another in Jesus' name.

There are times when following Christ will feel like the most free and natural thing in the world, and there are other times when it will confound and irritate. And if this is the case in your experience, then you're probably on the right path. But if this is not your experience, and faith is only gum drops and lollipops, or it's like wearing a hair shirt, then something is off.

Jesus told a story once about a man who was wealthy and devout. This man came to him and said, **“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** And sensing the arrogance in the questioner, Jesus replied, **“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’”** And he said, **“All these I have kept from my youth.”** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, **“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”** But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Do you notice how Jesus responds? He doesn't massage the man's self-righteous ego, nor does he condemn his arrogance offhand. He sees the opportunity for development, or “growth edge” as we like to call it in our culture, and he gently but no doubt irritatingly gives him the next step.

In some of our baptism liturgies that we've used throughout the years, the parents of children will be asked: do you promise to bring up your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. What does it mean to nurture and admonish someone in the Lord? I heard one pastor put it this way: “the nurture is God's pat on the back, and the admonition is God's kick in the pants.”

I like that. Because the God we worship is loving and compassionate, always ready to offer that pat on the back or that warm embrace. But God also loves us enough to kick us in the pants when that is what we need. God loves us just the way we are, but he loves us so much he's not willing to let us stay the way we are. Amen?

So what does it mean to spur one another on? To get a sense of how we do, the English majors in the room would have us know that the command in the sentence, the action is not actually to spur. It comes before where the writer says consider. **Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.**

The writer of Hebrews is remarkably wise in his/her counsel here when they say consider. Maturity and the growth in maturity in Christ with one another involves thoughtfulness. Take into consideration what a person may be feeling or going through, what they might be struggling with, or where they may have some success in their lives. Often when we step back and take a thoughtful approach to our one anothering, we'll find that it may not be the right time to say so, or perhaps

they're not ready to hear the hard word yet.

You ever know someone who is quick to offer those little, unsolicited nuggets of advice or criticism without knowing the whole story or being sympathetic to what you're going through? How helpful are they? How receptive are you to hearing what they have to say? That's why it says consider; discern, wrap your mind around, perceive before we spur.

For these last two weeks, I had the privilege of traveling in the Holy Land with a remarkable group of people through an incredible organization known and loved by this church, The Outreach Foundation. And I look forward to sharing more deeply those experiences with you. But first I need to spend some more time processing what I just experienced...and getting back to a normal sleep pattern.

But one of the key elements to our journey, which isn't something that pilgrims from other countries always do, was to meet with Christians in the Holy Land and hear what God is doing through His Church there today. Men and women like Said and Habib our Tour Guides, Salim Munayar from Mushalaha, Daniel from Bethlehem Bible College, Nashat from Palestinian Bible Society, the people of Diyar Consortium and the Dar al Kalima University.

This place that is so meaningful to our faith contains a community of Christians who make up only 1.5, or if we're being generous 2% of the population. The Christian Community—whose roots trace directly back to the day of Pentecost—struggle faithfully to continue to be a witness to the hope and good news of the Gospel of Christ in a very confusing, religiously diverse, and politically charged environment. That 2%, largely Palestinian Arab Christians, invited us to hear their story. To sit with them as they spoke of a faithful, grace-filled Savior, and consider how we might spur one another on.

And believe me, the stories we heard both warmed and encouraged our faith, as well as rubbed us and confronted our misunderstandings. This is what it means to consider how we might spur one another on.

[Marilyn's Video]

But then the author continues by offering the framework or context in which this thoughtful consideration and meaningful encouragement can happen. He goes on to say: do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing (25).

On our last night in Galilee, one of our team members had what I call divine mis-speech, accidentally combining the words with and witness, asking what is our "*witbness?*" I love this word, what is our withness? Our witness in being with one another.

You see, it is only in the context of loving and compassionate community—which by the way includes, but is not limited to gathering for worship—where we can trust one another enough and know one another enough to spur or provoke one another in this way.

It's the difference between thinking of yourself as a bunch of grapes instead of a box of Cheerios. You see a cluster of grapes are surrounded by one another in the bag or package, but there is something unique about their fellowship. Each and every grape is interconnected with the others,

they share resources, and are a part of a larger whole. This is what a congregation is like, we are all joined to one another and nurtured and resourced by Christ, and when one is struggling, the whole body knows it and feels it.

A box of Cheerios, on the other hand, is a collection of individual units all poured into the bag together. They don't share anything in particular with one another, other than their nature and their proximity. Do they have any particular relationship with one another? No. And if one of the Cheerios is taken from the box, it doesn't really affect the whole. Not really.

[Tracy's Video]

This is why Amy, last week, charged us with the task of taking seriously the gathering together for worship. You see, worship doesn't just give your life a little boost of Vitamin J (Jesus), but worship inextricably binds you to the vine, to the life blood, to the source of all that is good and worthy for our lives. Worship reorients you to God's view for your life and that view always includes one another.

But that's not it. As good as worship is, when you look around this room, do you feel like a cluster of grapes who are all connected and known, or is there a bit of a Cheerio feel? We need to have an organic cluster of people who know us, who are committed to pray for us, who when we begin to disconnect, call us back to fellowship. A few weeks ago, I sent out a letter to many of you asking for your feedback on our small group ministry Thumbtack Groups. In the process of restarting these groups, there was, I think, a little confusion, and I aim to clarify these by placing folks in groups that work for them. Many of you responded, those who do and do not wish to be a part of a group. If you haven't already, or you are not in a Thumbtack Small Group, please fill it out or connect with me individually. Because these can be your opportunity to be a part of a small community of people who keep you connected to the life-source, and who will not allow you to literally break that bond in separating.

And finally, the way we spur one another on in addition to our thoughtfulness, and our *witbness*, is our peacefulness. As we traveled around meeting with Christians from different backgrounds, all with the common thread of being a persecuted minority in this Holy Land, the thing that struck me more than anything else was their sense of peace; in Hebrew it's the word Shalom, and in Arabic it's the word Salaam. Many who had experienced things we may never experience, things that I will talk about in due time, had this remarkable sense of calm, confident, peace. If I were to have my home taken from me, you bet I would be indignant. But these people, many of whom are living in what they call the "open air prison" of Bethlehem have a deeper sense of history, and a deeper trust in God's goodness and unfolding plan. They had peace in the Savior who is seated, remember that, seated at the right hand of the Father.

A little earlier in the text, it describes the Priest who would daily offer sacrifices for the atonement of the people's sins, and who stands by the altar. He can't sit, because as soon as that blood is sprinkled on the altar absolving the people of their sins, somewhere in Israel someone was committing a sin. And so day after day, the priests would stand by the altar, there was no chair in the temple. But when our Great High Priest Jesus the Christ offered for all time the one sacrifice for sins (himself on the cross), he sat down at the right hand of God. Did you see that, he sat down, he rested because the work had been done, the job was finished. Perfect peace was available now because once and for

all, our sins were forgiven. Everything you've ever done, everything you will ever do is covered by the blood of Jesus, and he is sitting down. So be at peace.

So now we can spur one another on, as we were in the Holy Land, and we are here in Wabash, to love and good deeds, not to earn God's approval, not to pursue a political or religious agenda, but rather as a simple response to the peace-filled Good News that Jesus has overcome our sins and he is seated next to the Father and is at peace.

[Deena's Video]