

March 6, 2022

The Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life: Assembling Together
Hebrews 10:23-25

We read today from the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 23-25:

²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

One of the things that Rebecca and I tried to do when our kids were small was to teach them how to do housework: dishes, floors, putting your socks in the laundry instead of under your bed, and so on. These are life skills that everyone who can't afford domestic staff has to learn, unless they just want to live in filth. As you might imagine, these lessons were not the joy of our kids' lives. Bluntly, they hated housework. So it wasn't enough for us to *encourage* them to clean their rooms. If they'd had any other option, they wouldn't have done it, so they didn't get the option. Not while they lived at home.

Now, of course, they no longer live at home. They are all out on their own, free from the persecutions of our oppressive totalitarian regime, and they don't have to do housework. It's *their* choice, not ours, whether they want to live in filth and eat off of moldy, unwashed dishes. And that was why we forced them when they were small: we were teaching them how to live with some measure of hygiene so that they had the choice. Now, if they should happen to decide *not* to live like pigs, they have some idea how to go about it. In different measures, they all do okay with cleaning now, even though they don't have to.

There are a lot of things in the Christian life that are like that: preliminary, basic components of following Christ that all of us should learn. If we don't ever learn these things, our discipleship, our Christian living, is stunted, and we will stumble more often and never quite reach the potential that each of us has. Now most of these basic habits will not come naturally, any more than housework comes naturally to children, and there isn't any way to make them natural. At least at the start, you may have to just force yourself to do them, because doing them will teach certain skills that we all need. I'm calling these things the "Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life," and for the next few weeks I'll be talking about some of these things that we just have to do, whether we want to or not.

But wait a moment, some of you may be thinking. What is this? "Things that you just have to do to be a Christian?" Isn't that, like, "works righteousness"? Doesn't it say somewhere that the Christian life is not about legalistically following religious rules? Like maybe all through the New Testament? Yeah, technically. And that's the fine line that I'm trying to walk here. I want to talk about certain things that you just have to grit your teeth and do – sort of the way that my kids did housework – just as if they were the absolute laws of God. *But these things must not remain laws for you.* Once you have learned how to do these things and developed the habits, then you not only can but *should* let go of the sense of duty and obligation and decide for

yourself whether you will continue. Once you have learned the nuts and bolts of the Christian life, then you need to do them because you want to, or not at all.

Our scripture today from Hebrews highlights the first basic habit that a Christian must develop: meeting regularly with other believers – in other words, going to church. Now you can see what I mean. When you're a child, or maybe a new believer, the weekly routine of going to church can seem to be nothing but a burdensome duty. I know that when I was a child, the only reason I went to church was because I had to, and any day that I could get out of it – say, by faking illness – would have been a good day. (Not that faking illness ever worked. My parents were . . . well, it was disappointing to me how suspicious and untrusting my missionary parents were.) No, I went to church because that was the way the rules of my family were written.

But then, when I went off to college, those rules no longer had any power over me. It was up to me to decide whether I went or not. It took me a while to figure that out, though. A habit's a habit, and I started going to the church across the street from the campus. But I can still remember the day during my first semester in college, when I woke up on Sunday and didn't feel all that great. There were no real symptoms – Mom and Dad would have made me go to church anyway – but that morning it suddenly hit me that nobody was going to make me go. So I didn't. I picked up a book and read. It was wonderful. And the next week, when I felt fine, I got up and went to church, but it was different. It was still a habit, but now it was also a choice.

Some people never reach that point, and going to church remains for them forever and ever just a burden and duty. Most of those people stop going to church as soon as no one is making them do it. A few continue to go, their whole lives, hating it all the way. Neither option is especially helpful to a growing faith. The way it ought to work is this: at the beginning we force ourselves to gather with other Christians, but eventually we outgrow the law and come to church because we want to.

This is an interesting subject to take up right now, isn't it? I'm preaching this sermon on assembling with other followers of Christ to a congregation that is mostly watching on Facebook or YouTube or listening on the radio – and for some very good, justifiable reasons. But it's also a good time to think about this, because over the past couple of pandemic years, we have learned some things about the Sunday morning gathering. First, it is possible to worship together in creative new ways. We can pray together, meditate together, reflect on God together, even when we can't all be in the same building. Yes, we're separated in space, but for some, that's helpful. There are those who will join an online service who are not ready to step into the front door of a church building. We have connected with people we would never have known otherwise, and so we will continue our remote worship options. But the other thing we have learned is that no matter how creative and welcoming we're able to make our remote worship experience, it isn't the same. There are some parts of the Sunday worship experience that you can only get in person.

What are those things? Look back at our verses in Hebrews. Notice that when the author of Hebrews tells people to gather together he doesn't mention a sermon, or music, or Bible study, or any of the things that we can translate into an online service. The real reason we go to church is for *encouragement*. Human beings are social creatures. We need other people, and we reflect the people around us. Oh, yes, we need to be strong as individuals. We need to be ourselves,

distinct from our peer group. But we still need community, or we lose something necessary from our souls. Well, what is true of humanity as a whole is true for Christians too. We need Christian community. You hear people say that they don't need church because they can "worship God in my own backyard." Well, that may be true on occasion, and skipping church in favor of a day of private meditation may be a wonderful experience, but in the long run it just isn't so. Following Christ is all about love, and love involves other people. Our Sunday gathering is, in part, a laboratory for love. We cannot grow in Christ apart from other Christians. Think about it: who are the people whom you think reflect Christ most fully? Do they spend more or less time in the community of faith? The Early Church, filled with the Spirit of God after Pentecost, met daily. If there was ever a group of believers that you'd think didn't need to go to church it was them, but they had church all the time.

Being with other Christians also renews our commitment. When we see others dedicating their lives to serving Christ, it reminds us of our own resolve. Hebrews puts it this way, "Provoke one another to love and good deeds." Being with other Christians challenges us, because we see how God is using them. Being with other Christians consoles us when things get hard, because here we can see that we aren't alone. Other Christians are struggling, too; other Christians are just as screwed up as we are. And finally, spending time in the community of faith lets us breathe. For this morning every week, you can relax. You're not the outsider here. Nobody thinks you're weird for being a dedicated Christian here. Take a breath and let it out. Tomorrow you may be the only Christian in your workplace again, but right now, you're at home. This is why, as soon as and as often as you can, you need to come to church, not because God commands it, but because without this time of community and encouragement, we lose sight of who we are and why we're here.

A final word. I'm reading a book about the 17th century Puritans right now. They talked a lot about going to church on Sunday, but they had a different view of that experience than I've presented here. It wasn't about encouragement. They called their services "Preaching Time." That was why you went to church, and sermons generally went from two to three hours. Well, the Puritans were wrong. Preaching's not a bad thing, usually, but it's not the most important thing that happens here on Sundays. It's not what church is about. Do not forsake our assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another. That's why we're here, and that's why going to church is one of the basic building blocks of the Christian life.