

# The Centrality of the Local Church

By Joe Trofemuk

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**Bible Verse:** Hebrews 10:19-25  
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Don Green: I have the privilege of introducing to you Joe Trofemuk as our guest speaker here this morning. Joe comes to us via Lakeside Community Chapel where he has been the administrative pastor for over 10 years, serving on staff and teaching God's word alongside our good friend Steve Kreloff. Joe is a graduate of the Master's Seminary. He was a practicing attorney for a number of years in the state of California. He's here with his wife Debbie and they have three beautiful daughters. I would want you to know that Joe's a close friend of mine. For a number of years, we lived just two doors down from each other on a cul-de-sac in the Santa Clarita area in California, and so I have gotten to know Joe on a personal level as well as a professional ministerial level and without going into all of the details that inform what I'm about to say, I want you to know that Joe is a man of God. I have seen him in so many circumstances manifest a consistent trust in Christ, a consistent faithfulness through trials, and there is an aroma of godliness that informs everything that Joe does and I know that you're going to see that as he opens God's word to you this morning. Debbie, welcome. We're glad you're with us. Joe, come and open the word of God for our people this morning.

Joe Trofemuk: Well, it is my privilege to be with you today. I'm very thankful for the opportunity that I have and Don's words are very kind and I can be emotional, so he gets me a little choked up thinking about our past history and I will try and overcome that as I come to you this morning.

I do bring greetings from Steve and Michelle Kreloff. You have a very special place in their heart and they were excited that we were coming up here and so Steve wanted to send his personal greetings to you. He loves this church, he loves Don, and he loves the things that you are doing in this part of the country.

As I think through the special privileges for me to be standing in the pulpit that Don fills on a regular basis, Don alluded to a few things that came into my mind. As I was preparing yesterday and I was going over my notes and I was thinking through my message, I had to marvel at the sovereignty of God. I know you believe in the sovereignty of God, that God orchestrates and deals with everything in the world and nothing escapes his notice, and I was thinking and being reminded with some of the things Don just said. I was thinking about them yesterday, that me standing here today preaching really is the culmination of a series of events that started in August of 2000.

As Don mentioned, I was a practicing attorney and it was early in my legal career in 1993 where I was truly born-again. I was born and raised in Florida, I had moved to California to go to law school. My wife is also a native Floridian. Eventually, I convinced her that we should get married and she came to California and life was set up for me. I was in a good legal practice, I was content, my life was mapped out and I was going to do a lot of things, and then I was saved, I was born-again, and as has happened with many of you, actually all of you in some respects but in terms of the desires of your heart starting to change and they are different, and all the things that I thought that I had set up my life to obtain suddenly didn't look the same and over time the Lord worked in my life and I began to feel the call to ministry and after several years and some godly men pouring into me, I moved my family from where I was practicing law down to the cul-de-sac that Don mentioned. And I'll never forget as we were coming to our new home and we didn't know anyone in the area, a neighbor from across the street who, he was a nice enough guy, I'll call him a little bit of the cul-de-sac busybody, he knew what was going on in every household, and so a new house comes in, he's going to find out what's going on. So he hustled over and he had a small daughter and he saw our daughters so I think there was a connection. Then just a few moments on my front porch, I still remember standing there talking to this man whose name was also Joe, and he asked a little bit and I gave some history of my family but I mentioned that I was an attorney and that I practiced law but that I was coming here to go to seminary and that I was going to become a pastor, Lord willing, and I'll never forget, he had a funny look on his face. You never know, is it okay? Did I offend somebody? What did I say? And he took a step back and he pointed two houses down and he said, "There's a guy right there, the same thing," and that was Don Green.

Then when our family eventually moved down, the moving truck came in. Don and Nancy and their children that were all very small came over and helped us and over time Don and I did become very good friends. In fact, in my beginning Greek class in seminary, Don was the teacher of that class. We would carpool every day to the seminary and over time the Lord developed a special bond between us, some of that, no doubt, because we were former lawyers who had the same type of thinking, but also more importantly because the Lord had done a work in our lives and our goals were similar. And one of the things that I do recall as Don and I would many times have conversations sometimes in the car going back and forth on the freeways in LA, sometimes just sitting on the front porch as our kids were playing and as Debbie and Nancy were talking, we talked a lot about the local church. We bonded over many things but our views on the local church and our passion for the local church and the things that we thought were the priorities of the local church were a real source of bonding for us.

So as I have the opportunity to preach today and I'm a stranger that kind of drops in for the time to preach, as I was thinking through what to teach, the Lord was working in my heart. I've spent many years teaching through the book of Hebrews and so I thought as I came to a church that I know is like-minded in many respects, that I would encourage you in your church attendance and participation and membership and commitment with a text of Scripture that you will find in the book of Hebrews. So if you want to turn in your

Bibles, we're going to spend our time this morning looking in Hebrews 10 and we're going to be looking at a portion of Scripture that is found from verses 19 to 25. I pray that it's a Scripture that will challenge you, that will make you think, that it will convict you, but also encourage you in what you do.

Now it's a larger section of Scripture than I normally teach at one time. It's just something about going verse by verse when you're teaching, it takes a while, but I realize it's going to be a little bit of a challenge because I'm covering what for me is a lot of verses, so I understand I have a lot of material to get through in the time allotted, but because of the size, I'm going to give you a little bit of a road map of what I'm going to do so that you can, I hope, follow along clearly as we work our way through this text.

First, I'm going to give you a little bit of a context for where we find ourselves in the book of Hebrews. It's always important when you drop into a text that you establish the context even in a small way so that you understand what is going on in the mind of the original author at this point in his argument, and this text actually divides itself into two parts. There is a summary of theology in the first three verses that I'm going to cover as a summary of theology; and then there's an application of that theology, I believe, that occurs in the final four verses we're going to be covering, and at that point I'm going to give you a little bit of an outline if you're a note-taker so that you can follow along and I can emphasize the things that I believe the Lord would have us emphasize from this text.

So as we follow along, though, I want to give you a point of personal application. I'm going to be talking about the church and you're going to hear me say a lot of things that are the obligation and responsibility of the entire church, of the entire congregation, but I want you to be thinking of these verses in the context of your own life and so I'm going to ask a simple question, it's a rhetorical question, just something for you to mull over as we work our way through this text and it's a relatively simple question. I could ask it in 100 different ways but why are you at church this morning? As you were sitting at home and you were getting ready and you were preparing yourself to come to this place for this service, what was your motivation? What inspired you to take those steps? So again, that's just a little backdrop, something for you to be mulling over as we work our way through because I'm going to provide some answers from the text, maybe you thought of them, maybe you didn't, why you're here.

So let's, first, look at the immediate context of the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews was written to people who came out of a Jewish background, hence the name. These people, many of them had been raised, perhaps all of them had been raised and steeped in the traditions of Judaism. I believe from the historical context and from references in the book, at the time of the writing of the book of Hebrews, the temple in Jerusalem was still standing and the temple was the center of every aspect of Jewish life. All of the religious rituals that the people believed drew them closer to God centered on temple sacrifices, the sacrifice of animals. So everything about their life revolved around the rituals and traditions that they believe came from Moses, many of them did as we know from Jesus' teaching, many of the traditions were added to by the Pharisees, but the reality was these individuals to whom the author of Hebrews is writing came out of a

Jewish background and there was something about that Jewish background that still had an allure to their hearts. The book of Hebrews is really written as a preventative letter, as a cautionary letter that says, "Look, don't go back to what you left."

The strong warnings on apostasy that are found in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 probably indicate that some people were just wanting to leave Jesus altogether, they were going to go all the way back to Judaism and the warnings there were very powerful, but for some it seems that the temptation was to take Jesus and add to him other things. "We'll have Jesus plus we'll have some of these rituals that are kind of near and dear to our heart." And the writer of Hebrews was emphasizing this simple truth, something that was just reiterated for us by our Brother Snelling, it's that Jesus is all there is. You don't need something else. Jesus is all-sufficient. If you have Jesus, you don't add anything to him, you don't add the Old Testament sacrifices, you don't add animal sacrifices. None of that is necessary because when Jesus made the one true sacrifice, it truly was finished. There is nothing else, and yet these individuals were so, perhaps, drawn back to the old ways of doing things, that the writer of Hebrews spent parts of six chapters convincing them in a very systematic way that, "You don't need any of those things, you have Jesus. That's enough." And where we find ourselves this morning, this text is really at the end of a long argument that began at Hebrews 5:1, and the first few verses today that I mentioned are a summary of theology, are really the author restating all of the arguments that he has just made and then he turns to apply them.

So that's our context historically in the book and so if you'll follow along with me, I read from the New American Standard version, that's what I preach from if the words are slightly different, but follow along with me. I'm going to read the entirety of the text and then I'm going to just jump in and begin to discuss it.

19 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Now when the writer begins this with the word that's translated for us "Therefore," he's really tying it into those 5+ chapters of arguments and the writer, for all of his strong language and some of the language in Hebrews is as strong as anywhere of Scripture, particularly the warnings against apostasy, but he even talks to the churches about, "Beware that there not be in any one of you an evil unbelieving heart." Some strong language but he loves them. The reason he's sharing such powerful truth and why he's

giving such stern warnings is because he has a love for them. He calls them his brethren. And he walks them, again, through those key truths that he spent chapters explaining.

He says,

19 ... since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus,

He's stating a fact. We do have this confidence. This is true. Every genuine believer in Christ has confidence to enter into the presence of God because and through Jesus Christ. Because of the blood of Jesus which truly was an acceptable offering for sin, believers have access to God himself, something that was completely foreign to anybody from a Jewish tradition, and the way to God's presence wasn't through sacrifices, it wasn't through animal sacrifices, it wasn't through all those rituals, the way is through the blood of Jesus. In fact, he describes the blood of Jesus and he explains how this all came about.

He says, "by a new and living way," meaning different from anything that you know from Judaism,

20 by a new and living way which He [Jesus] inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh,

The writer is summarizing again some truths that have to do with the Old Testament system. The imagery he's borrowing is from Judaism and from the day of atonement and from the temple and when it says he inaugurated, it's not necessarily a word that we normally use in that context, but what he really means is Jesus opened the way. Along the lines, Jesus said, "I'm the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." This is similar thinking in that Jesus opened the way to God the Father.

The new covenant is completely different and when Jesus died as a sacrifice and rose again, everything changed. The door was opened and it says he opened it "through the veil, that is, His flesh." In the Old Testament system, many of you would understand this from your studies of the Old Testament or from having heard it taught, in the Old Testament system God was unapproachable. What do I mean? The system set up by the Lord, given by Moses, was that only once a year could anyone come into what was perceived to be the presence of God. The tabernacle originally and the temple following, were set up with an inner room called the Holy of Holies. It's where the ark of the covenant was. It's where God's presence was said to dwell and on one day a year on the day of atonement, one person, the high priest, if he did everything correctly, could go pass the veil into the presence of God, and if the high priest did it incorrectly, if he didn't follow God's rules, he died.

So if you were steeped in Judaism and if you were raised that way, it was incomprehensible to think that you had access to God because they knew access to God was only once a year, in a particular way, by one man, and it was separated by a veil. But

you recall what happened on the day that Jesus died. It's recorded in several of the Gospels. I'll just read from Mark 15:37-38,

37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. 38 And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

That was no longer the separation or the access to God. It wasn't a veil in the temple. The path to God is through the blood of Jesus. Access to God was also, though, now available on a scale nobody could ever comprehend. Every single one of you if you know Jesus Christ, if you've been born-again, you have direct access to God. What a privilege for all of us. That's why we can have confidence.

Jesus' physical body was the doorway that provided access to us and the writer, again, in dealing with people that were tempted to go back to the Old Testament sacrificial system with their multitude of priests, the Levites, and all of those things, he's made the argument that, "You have the only priest you need." He continues that in verse 21,

21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

Again, that's one of the dominant things of the book of Hebrews. Jesus is the only priest you need. Forget all of those people doing all of those things, Jesus, the great high priest, made a one time sacrifice, it is finished, now the access is available to everyone who places their faith in Jesus Christ. And it's interesting because everyone who placed their faith in Jesus Christ are described by phraseology at the end of that verse, "the house of God." The house of God. That's who we are.

In Hebrews 3, the writer has already alluded to this. He's in the context of a discussion about Moses in Hebrews 3:5-6 and we see this. As the writer is praising Moses but also distinguishing Moses and elevating Jesus, but he says,

5 Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; 6 but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

We're a part of this house. Truth Community Church, all those who are born-again, are a part of that house of God.

So as the writer of Hebrews completed an argument and he just summarized these great truths that Jesus is all-sufficient; he's the only priest you need; his death provided a way for us to have access to God unknown to anyone; and all believers have confidence that that access is available and it is real and we're all a part of God's house if we're within his family. In light of all of that, in light of that truth, in light of those precious realities, he then begins to exhort the believers and he exhorts us to do something with that theology.

I love theology. I know you've been taught great theology by Don and others here. Theology matters. I love the name of your church, Truth Community Church, because truth is in short supply in the world in which we live, but everyone who loves the Lord would tell you knowing the truth requires you to live the truth. In James 1:22, it says, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."

So against this backdrop, in this context, let's begin to see what some application of this truth is for us individually but for you as a local body of believers. So I'm going to give a brief outline here. It's just a way to organize my thoughts and perhaps if you take notes, be significant for you. I'm going to give you three reasons the local church must be of central importance in our lives. Three reasons the local church must be of central important in our lives and the first reason is this: the local church helps us draw close to God.

When we get to verse 22, there's exhortation. There's a command,

22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith

Let us draw near. Notice it's plural. It's not just an individual, it's all of us. We have to draw near. It's a call for us to take advantage of the access that Jesus gave us to God the Father. Again, it's directed to all of us as we comprise the church and it's the reality that our sin which separated us from God, with our sin in place we could never be before a holy God, but when Jesus paid the penalty, that's taken away and we have access to God. The veil is gone.

You understand this individually if you were saved as an adult like me or if you were saved at a younger age if you know this truth: we were lost in a world of sin and Jesus came and made a way for us and came and got us. The fact that Jesus himself came and walked on this earth and endured what he endured to save sinners like us is remarkable. We know we're not lovable. We know we're not deserving of his grace and of his mercy and yet even now he sits at the right hand of God in the position of power and authority interceding for us with God the Father and refuting the accusations of our adversary the devil.

The writer is saying in light of all of these truths that you know and that are your present reality and that give you confidence, you come near to God. You don't stay from a distance. You come near to him. You draw near to him. Be close to the God who loves you and saves you. And we don't draw near merely as isolated saints. Praise the Lord that if you get stuck on a desert island by yourself, you have access to God. But you're not on a desert island which means he intends for you to draw near with brothers and sisters in Christ. All of you have to draw near to him and you do that corporately and collectively together through the assembling of the body.

But again, to draw near to God, it's always on God's terms. He says, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith." I think what God is doing here is just

reiterating that you still have to make sure that you've gone through Jesus Christ. We know we have wicked hearts. How could we ever be described with a sincere heart when God's taken away our heart of stone and given us a heart of flesh? When he's regenerated our hearts? That's the only way we have a sincere heart. In fact, I alluded to it before, I quoted from my mind, it wasn't in my notes, it's a reference but it's in my notes now. Hebrews 3:12, the writer had said, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you," again, he's writing to a church, "that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." He's aware at that time that there were people that gathered in churches that weren't genuinely saved. Jesus talked about wheat and tares; talked about wolves in sheep's clothing even in church leadership at times.

The warnings of the attacks on the local church are throughout the New Testament but we draw near with a sincere heart, we've been born-again, and with full assurance of faith. Here's the point in this context: he's been stating truth that is absolutely accurate. There is no basis for doubting the word of God. God has promised us in his word that we can know that these things are true.

I won't read the entirety of it but 1 John 5:11-13 makes this clear and it concludes, "so that you may know that you have eternal life." There can be assurance from the word of God. The Bible isn't ambiguous on this point. We're told, of course, to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith, that's just a self-examination to make sure that our lives don't prove that our words are hypocrisy. But if we've been born-again, we can know that we're born-again. We can have full assurance of faith.

So with hearts born of the Spirit, new hearts, and a confidence that our faith in the living God is real and his word is true, we draw near arm-in-arm with the other saints that are around us, and the writer gives an additional description of what a life of faith looks like and here he uses language that we don't always use but I think I can show you, I believe the best understanding is he's referencing, again, an Old Testament text that a person of a Jewish mindset would understand. He says,

22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

This is a description of what's already occurred in our life, not what we must do to obtain God's favor.

I believe a good understanding and explanation of this is found in Ezekiel 36:25-27. There is an Old Testament reference to new covenant salvation. That's what Ezekiel is setting forth. It's an explanation of the new covenant and it says there,

25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will

remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27  
I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and  
you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The writer has already made it clear that we're cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, the one perfect sacrifice. I believe all he's doing in his phraseology here is alluding to the new covenant picture of salvation that was painted by Ezekiel. It all describes God's amazing work on our behalf. You understand, we can't cleanse ourselves from our sins. There is not enough baths we could take. We couldn't be baptized enough times. We can't undo by good works for 50 years even one sin against the holy God of the universe and all the writer of Hebrews is doing is he's telling us, "Draw near to God," is he's reminding us why we can draw near to God and why we should have confidence and why we should have full assurance of our faith, because we truly are cleansed.

We may not feel that way, but it's true theologically. Certainly we repent of our sins, we turn away from our sins. Our status before the Lord as cleansed by the blood of Christ isn't an excuse for us to go and sin, but the reality is we can have true heart allegiance to God because of the saving relationship which we have through Jesus Christ and we can draw near to him. We can come to him and cling to him. We cling to our faith in the living God but we can't do it from a distance. We must draw near and one of the ways we draw near is by doing what you're doing this morning, by coming together as God's people to spend time in worship; to sing praises to the Lord; to hear the word of God read to you; to pray together; to be encouraged just by the interactions you can have with one another. These are the means that God has given us to draw near to God. In fact, one of the reasons whether you were consciously thinking of it in this context or not, that you got up and got dressed and came to church was because you needed to draw near to God today.

I've watched your local news a few times, I've seen what's going on in your area a little bit, but wherever you go in America, wherever you go in the world, you realize the world is chaos. Sin seems ascendant. I saw something yesterday. Debbie and I were privileged to be given the opportunity to go to the Ark Encounter and a little t-shirt that caught our eyes, "Reclaim the rainbow," I think it said. The rainbow's been out in Cincinnati this weekend and everywhere else, including in Florida, but as you know, all those things are distractions. At times if we're not careful, we could lose hope and almost think, "Well, evil has won," but we know the end of the story, that's not true. God is still on his throne, God is still working through his people and when you come to this place with brothers and sisters in Christ, it shields you from the chaos for just a little bit.

So one of the reasons the local church must be of central importance in our lives is that the local church helps us draw close to God. Secondly, the local church helps us cling to the truth of God's word. The local church helps us cling to the truth of God's word. Verse 23, the writer again with an exhortation,

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

There are countless encouraging Scriptures in the Bible. I've had a lot of people ask me, "What's your favorite verse?" and it's whatever I'm studying at that time. So it's always, probably always hyperbole when you say, "Well, this is the most encouraging verse," but make no mistake, this is an incredibly encouraging verse for you individually but also for you as members of the local body of Christ here at Truth Community Church.

Now again, the writer is giving a command that's plural, "Let us hold fast." If you look throughout Hebrews, over and over the writer is saying similar things, hold fast. It's in Hebrews 3 in multiple places. Hebrews 4. But a person who comes to faith in Jesus Christ is supposed to exert their own energy in maintaining the relationship to the truth that God has provided. When he says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope," it's another way of just saying, "You hold on to the truth that you have already believed, the Gospel of good news that is our salvation, the truths of Scripture about who Jesus is and what he accomplished." I love the way it's the "confession of our hope." The truth of God's word is our hope.

We hold fast, we're supposed to do it without wavering. Being wishy-washy or tossed to and fro is never commended in Scripture. In Ephesians 4:14, a good description of I think what it's talking about "without wavering." It shows what wavering looks like. Ephesians 4:14,

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

Does that not sound like a lot of teaching from pulpits in so-called churches throughout our country? Every wind of doctrine, new things that show up. "Well, you just misunderstood the Bible. You didn't really understand what it said."

Hold fast the hope that you're being taught which is the truth of God's word. Always be a Berean. Examine the Scriptures to make sure that what anyone, including me, tells you is true but don't waver in your confidence in God's word. Our faith is supposed to inspire us to cling to the Gospel and all of the truths that are found in the Bible; to hold fast; not wobbling; not waffling; not saying, "Well, I'm not certain."

You have privileges that few people have. 1. You have Don Green, one of the most gifted Bible teachers I've ever heard standing in this pulpit teaching you. You know the truth. You're blessed with Answers in Genesis and the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter which, in my view, do some of the hardest work in Christendom because most of Christendom has jettisoned the book of Genesis. But you have access to the truth and people that can explain things in a way that you could do true apologetics and defend the faith.

The whole picture is just holding on for dear life. If you can imagine holding onto something at the end of a piece of elastic, if you hold it tight it's there, but if you loosen

your grip, it's gone away. That's sort of the imagery. You hold on to the truth. You don't ever loosen your grip. You don't ever waver in your confidence that when God speaks, he speaks truth.

And yet for all of that, that's not the most encouraging part of that verse because that's just telling us what to do, but on the back end we understand how we do it and the hope we have.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

I think when you put this together, there is a very touching image of our loving heavenly Father and his care for us. We're told to draw near to God, come near to him, draw close, and we're told to hold on to his word, the truth, unwavering. Behind it all, though, is the God who is faithful, who is holding on to us, who is keeping us safe in the faith.

It's a very imperfect analogy but several years ago on a family vacation, I've got a daughter who's now 11, she was probably 7 or so at the time, and as many of you have ever seen people do, many of you have probably done it, we were with some friends and they had access to a boat and there was an inner tube behind the boat and you could ride and it would pull you around. It was a lot of fun. But she was a little girl. She wasn't as strong of a swimmer so my older daughters could get on it by themselves and have fun but we positioned ourselves and I rode with her and I told her, "You hold on for dear life. Don't let go!" She was wearing a life vest. I knew she was going to be safe but I told her to hold on and as best as her little arms could, she was white-knuckled the entire ride. But I never let her go. The whole time I had her gripped and I was holding on because I knew for all of her efforts, at the end of the day her little hands couldn't hold as tight as they needed to when that boat whipped through a corner and so I was grabbing hold of her and I knew she wasn't going anywhere.

Now that's just a human father with limited strength with his little girl, but in a far greater, more real way, that's what God does with us all the time. No matter the twists and turns of life, we're told by Scripture, "You hold on knowing that our loving heavenly Father is holding us." The command is real. We do draw near. We do hold on. We don't waver. Those are real things that we must exert our energy to do but we know that God is faithful. He doesn't command us to do anything that he doesn't empower us to do through his Spirit.

I find myself many times going back to the words of Jesus in John 10:27-30. These have application in so many areas of life. I sometimes use them in the context of encouraging people in our church or when I'm doing counseling, and sometimes I read it for me. Jesus said beginning in verse 27,

27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is

greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.  
30 I and the Father are one."

No one can snatch us away from God the Father. And the promise of John 6:37 is,

37 ... the one who comes to Me I will never cast out.

So nobody can pull us away from God and God will never throw you away if you're his child.

So that's how we draw near and how we hold fast and that's why we have hope and confidence. We have the assurance that the God who has drawn us to himself and saved us will never leave us nor forsake us. So let me encourage you today: hold on. The number of people in this room, I can tell people just the nature of life in a sin-filled world and our frail bodies, there are people who are hurting here, I don't doubt. Don mentioned briefly trials that I don't need to go into, but each of us has our trials, the hurts of the heart. It's in those times that we cling to the Lord. It's in those times that we cling to the promises of God which are found in the truths of his word and we do that not just individually in our own time to study with the word, we do that here together, and one of the reasons you came to church today, whether you know it or not, because it helps you hold firm. Your fingers get a little tired and your muscles get a little cramped but when you come here, it's rejuvenating because you're reminded when the word of God is opened up, this is real. Whatever is going on out there, I have hope, I have assurance. Week after week, that's why you gather, to be reminded of truth, to be taught truth, and to cling to the truth of God's word.

So three reasons the local church must be of central importance in our life. First, the local church helps us draw close to God; second, the local church helps us to cling to the truth of God's word; and third, the local church helps us look beyond our own circumstances. The local church helps us look beyond our own circumstances. We'll see this in verses 24 and 25 and I'll explain it and I think you'll understand clearly what I'm talking about.

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

These verses have some of the most practical and simple instructions for believers and for the church that show what God intends. In fact, many people, even if they haven't done a detailed study of the book of Hebrews, will remember those verses from somewhere because they've heard them quoted in some context. But I hope we'll be stretched a little bit today, even if the verse is familiar to you, and I pray that we've laid sufficient groundwork for you to understand the overall context for how this finds its way into Scripture. The meanings are not that hard to understand, the application is critical.

Verse 24, it's another exhortation, "and let us consider." Again, you keep seeing these plurals. This is to all of us. This is instruction for the body of Christ and he's telling the entire church to ponder this, "let us consider," think deeply about this. Pause and reflect. When we heard a good word on meditation, this is true biblical meditation. Think and consider and contemplate these things. In our society, sustained concentration on anything can be difficult because we're set up to live in 15 second increments, be it commercials trying to sell you something on the tv or radio or on the ad on the internet; or in political discourse which complex issues aren't talked about anymore, just insults are traded and whose insult did you like the most? That's who you vote for, it seems. We get quick news and we have quick travel and we have quick meals. Everything is going at fast pace and it's only getting faster. I try to explain to my kids that when Debbie and I were first married, nobody had cellphones. They existed but nobody had them. And they look at us, of course, like we're 100 years old but life was different. But now everything is instantaneous. Well, God's telling us in this verse, "Slow down. Let us consider. Think about these things. Concentrate."

It's a corporate call to action but individuals have to do this because the corporate body only acts when the individuals that comprise the body act.

24 and let us consider [what?] how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,

The phrase "one another" is a key. It's not how do you stimulate yourself to love and good deeds, how do you stimulate others? Think about this. Ponder this. How do you stimulate other people, one another, to love and good deeds?

The word "stimulate" is expressive and graphic. It's to stir up; it's to provoke. In the context of this verse, it's obviously a positive thing but I think from a visual standpoint and many times I think of things visually, it's seen by a negative aspect of this. In our country in the last many years, there have been a lot of police shootings, lots of controversy about that. I saw even this week there was a shooting in Pittsburgh, the controversy, and what you see that seems to materialize after every one of those controversial incidents are protests, and what you often see and it was reflected in the Pittsburgh protest, you see one or two people with either a megaphone or center stage and what are they doing? They're screaming. They're leading chants. What are they doing? They're trying to work the crowd into a frenzy. They're trying to stir them up so they're chanting, they're speaking into the megaphone, they're commanding the attention but what are they doing? They are trying to motivate people to act in a certain way. Now sadly in our culture, that too often turns into rioting and other types of destruction, but I think you've seen the videos, you've seen the tv clips, you understand what I'm talking about, that one person that's stirring everything up.

Now, certainly in no way negative, what the writer is telling each one of us, not just the pastors, not just the elders of your church, he's telling each one of us, "Let us consider how to stir up, stimulate, provoke in a positive sense, others around us in the church to love and good deeds." We're supposed to be involved in each other's lives, at times

poking and prodding and asking questions and encouraging and stimulating, motivating to action.

Love and good deeds isn't specifically defined per se, but we understand from Scripture this is just the Christian life. This is living out the fruit of the Spirit, living in a manner in every circumstance and every interaction that's filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It matters whether we individually are doing this. This is what we're called to do, but the point of the writer of Hebrews is that when you gather together, you're supposed to be thinking, "How can I stir him up and her up to do all of these things?"

Every believer is required to live a godly life. That's something you know. Jesus said, "If you love me, you'll obey my commandments." And Ephesians 2 makes it clear that even though we are not saved by our works, when we're saved there's work to do. Ephesians 2:8-10,

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Part of the job of each one of us as members of the local church is to try and help people find those good works that God called them to do and help them to walk in them. Again, you look at the Bible from cover to cover and there's an extensive array of things that God says that his children should do which would fit within the category of love or good deeds. In fact, there are countless references to do certain things to one another in a positive sense. Care for the needs of others. Admonish others. Be united with others. Be devoted to one another. Give preference to one another and honor. Be kind to one another. Love one another. On and on, all these things fit within the context of the writer saying, "Consider. Think about how to stimulate the other believers to love and good deeds."

Here's the crux of what I want to encourage you and perhaps exhort you today. For all the personal blessings you receive when you show up at church, and they are many, church is not just about what you get out of it. In fact, a big portion of what you're supposed to be doing is thinking about others, not yourself.

This is hard teaching in many American contexts for a variety of reasons. A couple jump to my mind. 1. Because we don't want anybody telling us what to do. If somebody comes over and says, "Let me exhort you to love and good deeds in this way," the first thing we think is, "How dare you. What makes you think I'm not already doing that? I know that. Go find somebody that doesn't know that and tell them." We're very private people. That's foreign to the New Testament concept of a church family.

But beyond that, we can't help at times but be influenced by the consumer driven nature of our culture. "What's in it for me? What do I get out of it?" You're probably aware of people that have hopped from church to church to church not looking for good teaching but just looking for what they wanted. "What's in it for me?" It happens all the time. In fact, there's a whole philosophy of the last few decades, rejected of course by this church, rejected by our church, rejected by the seminary where I studied, that even tells you, "Don't bother to preach for an hour. Nobody cares. You've got 15 minutes so just come up with something that makes people feel good in those 15 minutes and you've done your job." Well, of course, that's a lie. That's not true. But if church is just about what I want, you can see the appeal. If church is just about, "Well, what's in it for me?" of course that makes sense.

But the Scriptures say otherwise. You're supposed to be here in part looking for ways to stir up in other brothers and sisters the desire to go and love and do good deeds. In fact, you almost get the feeling when you look at this in context that the writer anticipated that, "As soon as I say this, some people might check out," and I think verse 25 is sort of looking at that. Verse 25 continues on with this thought,

25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another;

The text means what it says. Believers are not supposed to stop going to church. I hesitated because that sounded almost like a double negative and I don't know if it did, so let me make clear: believers have to go to church. That's how we assemble together. We need fellowship with other believers. We need help drawing near to God. We need help clinging to the truth. We need others who can look at us and stimulate in us the desire to do love and good deeds and that only comes in the setting of the local church.

The habit of not going to church is being rebuked and called out. You almost get the sense that some people didn't want someone provoking them, perhaps didn't want someone giving them encouragement, perhaps they just wanted to be left alone and that's foreign to the Christian life. Don't do that. Don't forsake gathering together with believers. It was some people's habit. It can't be your habit.

Now, I believe God being a compassionate God, certainly allowances could be made for someone who is home-bound physically. They can't move. They can't get out. Praise the Lord that there are people that go and visit with them and that they can access teaching of God's word through the internet or radio or some other means because they physically can't go, but for those who can, to stop attending church is unacceptable. It's contrary to what God commands. Again, "If you love me, you'll keep my commandments." One of the commandments is, "Don't forsake gathering together with other believers."

I don't want to be misunderstood because, again, there can be a legitimate reason such as physical illness or inability, but many times in my adult life, I was saved in 1993, what is that? About 25 years. Many times I've heard people that as I have a conversation with them, they go, "Oh yeah, I'm a Christian." Where do you go to church? "Well, I don't go

to church." What? "I just don't like church. I don't go." Let me tell you, when you run across somebody like that, you've got to question their claim to love Jesus because Jesus makes it clear, "If you love me, you keep my commandments." One of them is to gather together. And sometimes people will add in, "I had a bad experience in church. I don't like people in church." 1 John 4:20, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." That's not me, that's the word of God.

How you view church and church attendance says a lot about your spiritual state but you're here so I know it's not your habit to forsake gathering together, so I praise the Lord for that. Make sure it doesn't become your habit. Make sure you don't lapse into that. And one of the things you can do as you consider, "How do I stimulate someone else to love and good deeds?" is if you find that there are church members who have stopped attending, find out why. Lend a hand. Reach out. Ask if there's a concern. Find a way to bring them back into the fold. But encouraging one another. That's what gathering together helps to do. We need that provocation from other believers. We need that prodding and poking at times. We need continual encouragement in the faith.

The writer of Hebrews closes this verse with something that adds urgency to what he said.

25 ... and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

I think the writer is just alluding to the fact that we don't know when the ultimate day of judgment is coming, we don't know when Jesus will return, but every day it's closer than it was the day before, and there's an urgency in this. You've got to be focused. You've got to be committed and you've got to have a sense of urgency to exhort and to provoke. And what's the ultimate emphasis that I'm trying to bring is that you can't do any of those things if you're not thinking about other people. I realize every one of us at times goes through difficulties where we can't help but care for our own family, that we have to at times minister to those closest to us, but at some point the pressure relents and we've got to be looking out for others as well. One of the reasons you came to church today whether you know it or not is because of the interaction you're going to have with other believers. They may need a word from you that encourages them this week to live in love and with the good deeds that God has prepared for them, or perhaps you need that encouragement and exhortation from another brother or sister.

Church helps each one of us stop thinking only about our own issues. When I'm in my car driving to church, it's easy just to think about me but as soon as I step through the doors and I see all the other people, I remember the prayer requests and I remember the hurts and the needs. God uses church to take our focus off of ourselves and put our focus on the other children that he's called to worship with us.

So let me encourage you. You're doing a good thing by being a part of this church. If you're visiting, let me encourage you to come back. If you live in another area, certainly get involved at a good church in that area because the local church has to be of central importance in your lives. That's the way God designed his family to work. It's how we're

going to draw close to God. It's how we're going to cling to the word of God. And it's how we're going to look outside of our own circumstances to meet the needs of others.

Here's the ultimate answer of why you came to church today: you're here to help and serve everyone else who came to church today; to help them draw near; to help them cling to the truth; and to help them in the midst of their struggles and trials.

Please join me as I close this teaching time in prayer.

*Dear heavenly Father, I thank you for my brothers and sisters here at Truth Community Church. Lord, I thank you first and foremost for the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ; that you would save sinners like us is remarkable, it's incomprehensible. Lord, we thank you for that salvation and we thank you, Lord, that you didn't just save us and leave us to flounder about, but you saved us and you made us a part of your family and you provided the local church to be the place where your family meets. Lord, I thank you for this local church. I thank you for the faithful teaching they get week-in and week-out, and I pray, Lord, that you would stir up in their hearts a renewed love for the fellowship of the saints. Lord, I pray for each one of us that we will approach church next Sunday with the right heart attitude. Lord, we do need church for ourselves, we do need to be confronted with the truth, we do have personal needs when we walk through the doors but, Lord, help us not be so consumed with ourselves that we miss the opportunity you give us to meet the needs of others. And I pray, Lord, for every person hearing my voice, that they would draw near to you and they would cling to the truth, but I'm mindful, Lord, that at any point in time, there can be those who don't truly have a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. I pray, Lord, if such a person is here in the state that I was in many years of attending church in unbelief, I pray that you would prod their hearts today, that you would draw them to yourself that they would understand that they truly are sinners before a holy God and there is no hope for a sinner before a holy God apart from Jesus Christ. And I pray that you would draw them to yourself, you would open their eyes and change their hearts and help them to repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ. Lord, we thank you for this privilege that you've given us to be called your children and to gather together with other believers today, and we pray that the things we've heard and the things that you've shown us from your word would inspire us to change where needed. We love you Lord. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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