

A Spur in Their Sides

Hebrews 10:19-25

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Sunday, September 28, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

“Let us now consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Let us pray. We approach you now with boldness, Almighty God, amazed that we can hear you speak to us. So we now offer ourselves to listen to your holy word in Jesus Christ, and receive the teaching of your Holy Spirit to change our lives. Amen.

When I was a child, my grandfather managed a ranch in the Tehachapi Mountains of Southern California. He had several horses—some of which he allowed us to ride. One of these horses was named “Lightening.” The name was ironic; he was the slowest and most predictable horse in the herd. No matter where he was encouraged to go, if the rider was not diligent with direction, Lightening would inevitably turn back, turn around, and head back to the barn and the corral. He had a powerful attachment to the safety of his sanctuary, and little interest in risky adventures into the wilderness. After all, there were bears and mountain lions out there. Lightening would not bolt or run. His speed was always a walk, whenever you saddled him and rode him out. However, if he was allowed to stop, he would turn and trot back to the barn. He was not anxious to ride out, but he was always excited to return home. You had to spur him on with a nudge of your legs and ankles, applying pressure to both of his sides, or he would take over. It’s rather tough on an elementary-aged school kid to apply enough pressure to a horse’s side; so, many of us children had a very bumpy ride back to the barn.

For centuries, riders have worn spurs to accent applying pressure to a horse’s sides. Spurs are to be extensions of the rider’s legs and heels—to provide a gentle incentive to encourage the horse forward and to guide it in the right direction. In a description of the delicate use of spurs in classical dressage, one author said, “Think of spurs as a sculptor would use her chisels. She would use a fine, smaller chisel to refine her work and bring out the beauty of the piece. Spurs are not implements of torture or crudity; they are designed to engender more sophisticated feel and response in both horse and rider.” The subtle sense of spurring is to refine the mutual artistry of the rider and the horse. Spurs are to be used graciously for a more graceful ride.

The spur is to be used as gentle provocation. In fact, some New Testament translations do not use the word “provoke” here; they use the words “spur one another on to love and good deeds.” But the metaphor still catches us a bit off guard. After all, we are not horses; we are humans. What such assertive language? Provoke? Spur? As one commentator said, “The employment of [this particular Greek word] in a positive sense is very unusual. Most of the time it’s used negatively—‘stick it to’ the horse, ‘stick it to’ the person.” To arouse; incite; provoke; irritate; foment or instigate... even a person or a crowd; it is the root of the word “paroxysm”—convulsive response and reactivity.

Why would the writer of Hebrews use such a strong word that is often negative? Why would an apostle of the gentle Jesus exhort us, as disciples, to ‘provoke one another’—even to pressure one another to a kind of paroxysm? As much as we might like to do so, let us not give-in to the temptation that this gives us some license to really “stick it” to one another. After all, it says right there in Hebrews, we should “provoke one another!” But here, “provoke” is ironic. It is a positive, sharpening and focusing in intensity—to resolve and to pursue a more loving direction in life. One of the great Hebrew traditions in the Old Testament, in fact, was to use language and metaphor that was full of irony. Irony permeates the language of the Hebrew Exodus, for example. When Israel left Egypt, the narrator says they “plundered” the nation— even though all the wealth was voluntarily given to them as a gift. As Israel scurried out of Egypt, the narrative says “they marched out boldly, ready to do battle.” But in that very context, as Pharaoh’s army descended upon them, they panicked in great fear and cried out to Moses, “What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”

Irony. Hebrew story tellers loved to insert a twist to make their point; and that's what the writer of Hebrews does here: "Pay very close attention!" Something important is being said. Something unanticipated is about to happen. Something wrong is being confronted, and something hard should be done. Here in Hebrews, the author is saying, "You have direct access to God in worship! You can be bold in approaching God! You can also be bold in provoking the best of one another." Worship and provocation of excellence go together. Don't do the typical thing. If you are a follower of Jesus, do the exceptional thing. If this word normally calls you to do something mean, do well, instead. Don't just sit there in worship, isolated from each other. Get connected to the sacrificial love and the promotion of good deeds! That is the appropriate outcome of worship and gathering together in Christ. Don't provoke each other to anger and retribution. Put gentle pressure on one another to walk humbly, to love mercy, and to do justice. Hold each other accountable to stop evil. Use your words and actions to inspire others to good words and actions.

In two of his letters to the Church, the Apostle Paul cautions fathers in how they should raise their children (to all parents). In Colossians: "Fathers, do not provoke your children or they may lose heart—don't push your kids to despair." How many children today are being pushed to despair because we have such expectations for them that they cannot measure up? In Ephesians: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Here, "provoke" is not irony. It's the Greek version, which says, 'Do this exactly the way I've stated it.' The writer invites them to come to Jesus, where he touches the children with gentleness and leads them with generosity and kindness; and invites the congregation to do just like Jesus does. Jesus provoked the children with welcome. He spurred the disciples on with healing. He incited them with forgiveness. He stirred them with striking stories. He aroused them in provocative teaching. He inflamed them with passionate sacrifice. He instigated a world-changing counter culture called the Kingdom of God, by sharing grace and mercy.

Yes. Jesus is, in fact, provocative. But he did not provoke hostility from his followers. He did, however, evoke some opposition from his adversaries, for his healing was so popular and his forgiveness was too successful. As followers of Christ, as teachers of vulnerable disciples and children, we need to be very careful how we treat each other in the life of the church. We need to put gentle pressure on one another—and I restate that as "gentle" pressure— to behave as Christ. We need to be one another's keepers in healthy and helpful ways. We need to make sure loving and truthful community is what the world sees among us so that it will be attracted to Jesus. We need to be careful how we talk to each other and how we act with each other. Let us not attack one another, or criticize each other, or pass judgment on one another, demean each other, or provoke each other to anger and resentment.

Let us carefully consider how we might, in fact, spur one another on to love and good deeds. Careful consideration of this takes some time. It is not made by spontaneous or serendipitous conversation. It takes some reflection—let us consider it for awhile. Take time to consider what you say and how you say it. Often, in this hyper-sensitive culture, the best thing is not to speak, but to model a better way to live, even in the conflict and the tension. Hostility tends to breed reactivity. Vindictiveness tends to breed defensiveness. Arrogance tends to breed anger. Nosiness tends to breed avoidance. Self-righteousness breeds resentment. Let us not provoke each other to anger, or to denial and avoidance. Let us spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us come alongside of each other, even today, as we are getting to know one another, and be 'spurs of encouragement,' not 'burrs of irritation.' Let us not 'saddle up' on one another and 'ride each other off' into despair— out of the church and away from the presence of Christ. That is exactly the opposite of what Hebrews is calling us to do.

In the past, sad to say, some families have come to me in this church and felt like they've been driven away from worship with their children. They were provoked by some of us who are irritated that children would be in worship. The hostile look... the mean word... the harsh body language... all send a message. And it's not a message of welcome or accessibility to the presence of God. The message is, "Please go away; you're bothering me." That blurs the purpose of the Gospel. Such impatience veils the loving face of Christ who says, "Let the little children come to me and don't hinder them." And this is the opposite of what Hebrews is saying about accessibility to God. Our provocation in Christ is not to wound one another, but to nurture each other with a gentle kind of discipline and mutual accountability. And listen to the voice of the children. Parents, however, let me make this very clear: it is good to have boundaries for you and for your

children in worship. If they become frustrated, then put them out of their misery and take them out.

Worship of God should stoke our desire to be better connected to one another, to provoke one another to grow in Christ, and to serve in the community of the Holy Spirit. Let us not fall into the tedium of attending worship and stifling our mutual call to be together and to help each other. If Christ calls us to come close to him, at the same time he's calling us to come close to each other. Let us not find ourselves sitting in Stone Hall at the Connections Corner and re-living this scene that I recently saw in a cartoon: "Mr. Norlander, as your Gift Assessment Consultant, I have the task of connecting you with the ministry you have tested most gifted to perform in the church. After much deliberation, it's my conviction that you'd serve the church best as a pew sitter!" No, that's not right. I hope we are not reduced to the instincts of my grandpa's old horse, Lightening— just wanting the safety of the barn, and not willing to be spurred on into the risk of growth and service.

This is the heart of the message of Hebrews: "19Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his very own flesh), 21and since we have a great priest over the house of God..." Let us approach God in worship. Let us hold fast to the confession of hope that we have in Christ. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, as the great Provocateur of our souls and our actions in this world, as you have shown us how to lay down our lives because you have laid down your life for us, we pray that you would help us to spur one another on gently, to the best that we can possibly be. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.