

## The Encouraging Community

November 20, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### Hebrews 10:24-25

*<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> 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.*

When I was in high school I was required to write what were called “argumentative essays.” The teacher would give us hot button topics of the day about which we had to do some research and report on it. I remember that our first topic was “euthanasia,” which I was positive that the teacher pronounced it “Youth in Asia.” At first I thought she wanted us to write a paper about Asian youth, and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what was so controversial about that. No, someone explained to me. It was about mercy killing. Yes, that was a hot topic, I agreed. And this was before Dr. Jack Kevorkian became well-known for his role in all that. The other essays we had to do were similarly controversial topics of that time.

What was unusual about these essays for me was that I was to argue different sides of the issue, usually from a conservative point of view AND from a liberal point of view. Both points of view had to be convincing. Then, at the end of the paper you would have to choose one point of view and explain your reasoning for why you chose that view. I tend to think that my argumentative essays landed on the opposite side of what my teacher thought, because I had a hard time passing that class. It was a formational experience for me, though. I had the opportunity to really think about what someone thought who thinks quite differently than I do. Even though I did not agree with their point of view and still could not say that I was able to “step inside their shoes,” I could still appreciate, and even respect, why they felt their point of view was the correct point of view. I believe it helped me to learn to respect people even when I disagreed with them. We could agree to disagree but not think less of the other person as a person.

Agreeing to disagree seems to be much more rare in today’s culture. Today we have what has been termed “cancel culture.” “Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. Cancel culture is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming.”<sup>1</sup> I have experienced individuals in effect canceling other individuals as well. That is, if they don’t agree with them, they just write them off. Instead of trying to understand why a person believes and thinks the way they do, people just treat them as though they don’t exist or, at the very least, treat them as though their opinion doesn’t matter. When you are on the receiving end of cancel culture, it is very demeaning. I imagine that is one of the main reasons we have so many angry people and so much public, and seemingly unprovoked, violence.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

Not even in church do we escape the cancel culture mentality. I have had people tell me about individuals who no longer come to church because they disagree with how we have helped somebody out or supported a ministry that they don't totally agree with. Whereas I can respect that someone doesn't like everything Franklin Graham stands for and that they personally do not want to support a ministry like Operation Christmas Child, I don't understand why someone would cancel being a part of the church because of it. And that's just one instance of a number of reasons people have given for cutting off their relationship with the church, when they could not personally support a ministry the church supports but that they disagree with. Friends, cancel culture should have no part of the community of faith where the people call Jesus their Lord.

Jesus doesn't call it "cancel culture," but he does address the issue in the gospel of Luke chapter 15. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were infamous for canceling people they didn't agree with. They criticized Jesus for hanging around such people, muttering to themselves, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Then Jesus proceeds to tell them three parables about how God rejoices when the lost become found. Jesus didn't tell these parables to the people who were lost. He told them to the people who thought their perspective was the only one that mattered and who were ready to write off anyone, the ones they called sinners, who was different.

Jesus told the Pharisees and the teachers of the law that just like a shepherd who finds his lost sheep, just like the woman who found a lost coin, just like the father who finds his lost son, "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who think they are so righteous they do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7).

In the parable that is typically referred to as the "parable of the prodigal son," there was no one who told the prodigal son that he was doing the wrong thing. There was no one who said to him, "You are a sinner." There was no one who was pointing fingers of judgement at him that convinced him to change his lifestyle. It was only when the prodigal son lived out of his choices, discovering for himself that the choices he made were destroying him, that he "came to his senses" (Luke 15:17)

When the prodigal son returned to his father, there were no words of judgement, no rebuke of "I told you so." There was only a warm welcome and an invitation to be part of the family again. The only judging of lifestyle going on in the parable was that by the elder son, who was angry, refused to go in, and simply wanted to write his brother off. The parable ends with the father saying to the elder son, who was the personification in the parable of the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law: "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:32)

We live in a world where criticism abounds. Too many people are ready and willing to take cheap shots at people because they act as though the people they are criticizing do not matter. What our world needs is not a cancel culture but a culture of encouragement. That's why I think what the Scriptures say in Hebrews chapter 10 is so vital for us today. Some translations read, "Provoke one another – on toward love and good deeds." Usually when we think of provoking one another, it is not with love and good deeds; it is with barbed words and harsh criticisms. What should set the Christian community apart of all other communities is that we are to be an encouraging community provoking one another toward love and good deeds, not giving up on

meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but instead, encouraging one another. And encourage one another all the more as we see the Day of the Lord coming ever closer.

Now, just so you don't get me wrong, just because we are to encourage one another, it doesn't mean that we also should not hold one another accountable. We should be encouraging one another to live holy lives, lives separated to living out the life and freedom God intended for us.

Here's how author James Bryan Smith put it:

I want a community who will take an interest in my well-being, a community who is not afraid to ask me to make a commitment to my own spiritual growth and service to others, a community who dares to offer me a reliable pattern of transformation and then backs it up by challenging me to enter into some form of accountability in order to help me meet our commitments. I want a community who will challenge me to become who I already am: one in whom Christ dwells and delights, a light to the world, salt to the earth, the aroma of Christ to a dying world. I want a community who reminds me of who I am and will watch over me with love—which means offering both comfort and warning—so that I might live a life worthy of my calling.

But how do we do this without being judgmental and legalistic? How do we do this in the spirit of the One who loves us without condition and offers forgiveness and reconciliation no matter what we have done? How can we be both comforting and challenging at the same time? I believe it entails three things: (1) reminding each other who we are, (2) showing each other what we can be and (3) having the courage to hold each other accountable.<sup>2</sup>

[Talk about the value of an accountability partner, like with [discipleshipbands.com](http://discipleshipbands.com)]

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 130-131). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.