

HARD RIGHT TURN

Together Series (Part 1) | Matt 7:13-14; Heb 10:24-25

One of the most beautiful words in the English language, I think, is the word "TOGETHER." Say that word with me: TOGETHER. Together suggests a common spirit... a shared adventure... a unity of purpose... an alignment of affection... in other words, exactly what often seems missing in American life today. You being "you" is good. Me being "myself" may be fine, on my best days. But being truly "together" as friends or family, as a team or as fans, as a church or a society... well that is something better and higher. Are you with me on that?

When we read the Bible, it's hard to miss God's emphasis on the value of togetherness. One of the most luminous examples is found in the Book of Hebrews chapter 10. It's like the writer is offering a common resolution for a New Year and a pretty timely one at that. He says: **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 [of Christ's return] approaching (Heb 10:24-25).**

Now, I invite you to notice the words that I've emphasized in the text. When I first read this passage, I was struck by the intensity of those words: Consider... Spur... Don't give up... Encourage! It's as if the author believes he has to be emphatic because the people he's writing to are under the influence of powerful forces, driving them in the opposite direction of where God is calling them to go. That was likely true for the original audience for this material. Scholars think that the Letter to the Hebrews was written to shore up the Christian faith and practice of Jewish believers whose commitment to the Way of Jesus was being diluted and distorted by the Roman Way of life.

Imagine being someone who lives in a culture so overwhelming in its influence that you are in danger of becoming like a lemming -- one of those rodents whom myth says are willing to rush over the edge of a cliff -- simply because all the neighbors are doing the same. How important would it be to be able to hear God's voice saying: Stop and consider how you're living and where you are going? Imagine living in a society that drives you daily you to be more and more suspicious and hard-hearted toward others and more and more selfish with the resources you have. How crucial would it be to have a voice spurring you to love and generosity instead? Or picture this, though I know it's far-fetched. Imagine being someone who lives in a setting where the tempo and technologies of life leave you increasingly isolated from others, lost in your own duties and distractions. How key would it be to have the voice of Jesus urging you: Don't give up meeting with and striving to truly know and be known by others?

I don't know fully what it was like to be a Jewish Christian living under the pervasive influence of Rome, but I know well what it is to be a believer living under the powerful influence of our society today. And this I believe. If you and I don't stop and consider

often the direction of our lives... If we don't take steps to keep refocusing ourselves on being people of love and good deeds... If we don't make it a priority to be meeting regularly with people who encourage the character of Christ in us, we will miss out on the best of what life might hold.

It's why the words emphasized in this version of the text are so worth noting. God did not intend us to figure out or do life on our own. He made us for LIFE TOGETHER and to LIFT TOGETHER all the other people we can. This is why being part of a faithful church and committing ourselves a smaller group of fellow disciples matters so much. Share this with your kids and grandkids and anyone else who might listen: The people we choose to do life with, the Voice they are prioritizing in their life, and the direction we drive together, are among the most life-changing choices we make.

When I was a teenager growing up in New York, one of my favorite activities was driving out to Jones Beach on Long Island with my friends, Rich, Dan and Joe, buddies since fourth grade. On a good day, the drive would take us about ninety-minutes, with the Beach Boys blasting the whole way on the cassette stereo of the old Chevy Malibu my grandfather passed down to me. I swear that car knew the route to Jones Beach so well it might have been the first self-driving car!

There were weekends during the summer, however, when the trip to Jones Beach was H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks. The traffic would pile up, slow to a crawl, and then to a standstill. We'd worry about running out of gas or the engine overheating and even Good Vibrations couldn't save us. One day, we found ourselves not too far from the beach as the crow flies but an eternity away as the traffic flows. We were moving so slowly that I finally saw it – a little sign I must have passed dozens of times at speeds too high to have noticed much less read it. The sign just said "Beach" with an arrow pointing off to the right, down a narrow dirt path that cut through a break in the berm.

For a moment, I looked back at the massive armada of cars in front of me, with heat mirages rising from their hoods, all going down the road I'd always driven. And then, my friend Rich said from the back seat: "Let's try it!" And with a sudden twist of the wheel, I made a hard... right... turn... over some bumpy ground, past the little sign and on down the lane. For a moment, it wound around, taking us in a direction that was clearly AWAY from the beach. But the lane turned again and again, till it wound further around and then, suddenly, opened up on a parking lot at the seashore. And the crowd went wild (the one in my car). So, Help Me Rhonda!

Toward the end of his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said this to the massive crowd who had gathered to listen to him: **Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matt 7:13-15).**

How many of you had a mother or father or some other mentor who said to you at some point: "Just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean that YOU have to?!"

Let's face it: We can get lost TOGETHER. We can be doggedly determined to travel a particular road because it is very well-trafficked. We figure, this must be a good path with so many on it. So said every proverbial lemming!

There are many well-traveled roads along which Jesus posts a sign that says: "TURN." One of the most obvious today is the very wide road of Consumer Materialism. We spend ourselves into destruction, if not financial or physical then spiritually speaking. We shell out a thousand to upgrade to the next ME-phone when those same resources could advance the cause of love in a Kenyan child's life and we'd still have the blessing (or curse) of a working smartphone! We spend untold hours surfing screens or pages of luxury goods, when time we can't get back could have been spent praying, reading a great book, or exploring the wonder of a loved ones' thoughts and feelings. We spend our energies worrying over, dusting, storing, re-arranging and protecting so much stuff. We allow ourselves to feel embarrassed when something we have is OLD and what our friends have is so NEW. And we think this is the Way to Happiness? Why do we keep travelling this road? Because so many other cars are on it. Look in front of you. The shimmering mirages of Hades, rise from a long wide road filled with consumer engines.

Some of you are thinking by now: "Gosh, Dan, you're going a little hard here. Did you not have a nice Christmas?!" Let me be quick to confess that I am a driver on this road too. We're in this confusing, challenging journey TOGETHER. Like you, perhaps, I sometimes respond to the Voice of God calling me to consider my real path and priorities and invest more in love and good deeds by reminding God and encouraging myself that at least I'm TRYING. "Hey, Lord, give me some credit. I'm doing some things right. I mean I'm on the road of faith and trying to head toward the seashore of your Kingdom. I'm not like one of those folks in Grand Theft Auto who are out there intentionally running people down. I'm more loving and generous than a lot of people."

It's easy to think that because we're doing some things right, we must be righteous in the eyes of God. It's also easy to forget that God wants us to change our course further because he wants even better FOR us. All those years I drove out to Jones Beach on that big wide road, I felt like I was heading toward the right place. I was. But I was consistently missing a cut-off that was a better route to the beach. I could have enjoyed more of the sea and sun, if I was paying better attention and made even earlier a hard right turn.

In the Bible verses that come right after Jesus' teaching about the wide and narrow roads, Christ gives us three vignettes that are driving toward helping us reach our destination in the best way possible. We know this stuff is hugely important because these are the last words of the most famous sermon of the most famous figure in all of human history. I strongly encourage you to read the end of Matthew chapter 7 for yourself but here is the summary. Jesus talks about prophets who LOOK like healthy trees but who bear bad fruit. He describes disciples who TALK the right religious things but don't actually do what Jesus asks. And he teaches about builders who IMAGINE a house but end up constructing it on poor foundations.

Each of the objects of the story (the bad tree, the false disciple, and the poor builder) has some things right. Compared to others, they look good, talk eloquently, and imagine well. But all three of the people Jesus describes lack the most important elements God looks for -- good fruit, true faithfulness, and a solid foundation.

So as I move to a close today, let me offer you a ProTip. If you want to be certain of making God smile as you move through this year ahead, resolve to be – as the writer of Hebrews commends -- a generous person. The Bible defines GENEROSITY as **love and good deeds** that LIFT others up. If you want to pick one commitment you can make this year that will definitely please God, then resolve to be even more generous. Generosity is the good fruit, the true faithfulness, the sign that you've built the house of your life on the foundation of Christ's teaching and example. Generosity is clear evidence that you are developing a heart and habits like God's.

Let me be blunt. You and I are living on a crowded superhighway lined with cars that are following billboards telling us to envy more, buy more, and store more. But Jesus calls you and me to make a hard (as in difficult), right (as in good), turn (as in change of direction). The Bible's word for that is "repentance." Jesus said that while many travel the wide road, there will be a few who find this better road that he called "the kingdom of heaven."

Let me close by saying: I hope you do. I hope this Church, your small group, your family, and the people you and I influence in the year ahead, will be among those who find this path to life in all of its fullness. As you'll be reminded in the video we are about to watch, one year ago today, you and I responded to the call of Christ to LIFT 10,000 others toward their God-given potential. The commitments we made twelve months ago are now showing themselves in good fruit, true faithfulness and in hearts and habits more like God's.

But one day, you and I will experience an even greater fulfillment. We'll find ourselves with Jesus on another shore. The warm light of the Son will illuminate everything we've been through. The waves of his grace will wash over and heal everything we've experienced. All the lives that Jesus used our generosity to change for good will be fully clear. In the meantime, this is a tiny foretaste of what our church is doing to respond to the God who seeks to LIFT everyone toward his ultimate good.

[LIFT Progress Video]