

#### I. Introduction

According to the dictionary, maturity is “the state of full development or perfected condition.” In other words, maturity is a process of growth and change over time that leads toward a standard or measure of quality and completeness. In the world I work in, we can analyze the maturity of an organization’s ability to develop software by observing the consistency and repeatability of their processes and standards. That is, we evaluate how well developed or effective their processes are and how well they follow them. As these are measured over time, we then assess the maturity of their process by how well they measure up against a standard of quality and completeness within the industry.

While I could probably go on for hours about software development, this morning I would like to look at the purpose of community, which is maturity. We have only to observe the pattern of life all around us to see that growth and maturing are a natural part of the design of God’s creation. This is true of individual life as well as in the more complex structures of community life.

We can learn a simple lesson on maturity from the growth of the human body. When you really think about it, it is an amazing thing. From your start as just a few cells of life to your development as a mature adult, the design of the different parts of your body worked together in a coordinated and united way to build it up according to the pattern or measure stored within your DNA. Think about how everything has to work together as you grow. Your skin has to grow along with the bones and muscles to support the frame and structure of your body. Your organs, hormones, nervous system, circulatory system, and brain all have to adapt as the body grows to ensure the body functions correctly.

When this all works, we hardly notice the changes. But when you miss the gradual steps, the subtle signs of maturing are more obvious. Our daughter Laura is away at college for the first time. As we visited her this weekend, she asked us if she would think that her younger brothers Kevin and Kyle would look older when she came home in a few weeks. Keep in mind she has only been gone for a month. But all of us can remember a time when we see a child that we hadn’t seen for a year or more. The change is obvious and the maturing stands out clearly. But when we speak of maturity as community, it is important to remember that we are talking about the less visible quality and completeness of spiritual growth as measured against the standard of God’s word. Scripture compares the body of Christ to the growth of the human body. The workings and design of our bodies provide a helpful picture of the workings and design that are to be present in the church.

Listen as I read Ephesians 4:11-14. *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."* It is this process of equipping and building up to achieve the standard and completeness of spiritual growth defined by scripture that is the maturing that God gives to us as a community of believers.

1 Corinthians 13:11 says, *"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."* This verse speaks to how, as we grow older and wiser, our perspective on maturity changes. How many of us teenagers looked at younger children as immature? How many of us as young adults looked at teenagers as immature? And how many of us married veterans see the immaturity of young couples just getting started with marriages? The point here is that we pick up on the absence of maturity in others much faster than we do in ourselves. The challenge at a spiritual level is to draw upon God's word and the counsel of others to establish the standard and quality of maturity that will open our eyes to, and allow us to evaluate our own level of maturity.

So what does this real maturing look like? As we saw last week, the community of Israel held many promises that were shadows or pointers of the reality that was to come in Jesus Christ. This is made very clear in the book of Hebrews. Simply put, Hebrews was written to show that Christ came to bring a better way. We see this line of thinking come to a point in Hebrews 10. The Law, the system of sacrifices, prophets, and even Moses were supplanted by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have all the shadows, all the promises, and all our hopes fulfilled. There is nothing more, nothing else, and nothing greater; Christ is supreme. So what does this real maturing look like? The text this morning connects these promises with a necessary response that establishes a standard of maturing that is to be seen in our growth as a community.

As a way of completing this introduction, read with me the text that comes before the passage that we will be studying this morning. Turn to Hebrews 10:1-18. Follow along as I read.

[Read Hebrews 10:1-18]

The sacrifice that Jesus made was His own life. Not the blood of goats and bulls, but His own blood. And not only was Jesus the sacrifice, He is also our one and only High Priest. He gave Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice that permanently covered our sins that they should be remembered no more. And now He sits, the work completed, at the right hand of God, having conquered His enemies and finishing all that He had been given to do. Christ establishes a new covenant and a new community that is superior to the old. Jesus Christ is the hope of our salvation, the means of our redemption, and the reason for our community together.

[Pray]

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## **II. Our Resulting Response**

Let's begin by reading verses 19 to 21.

[Read Hebrews 10:19-21]

In these first few verses we observe our resulting response. We must first note that the word "Therefore", points us back to what has preceded this text. Without an exhaustive study it is hard to sum up the previous nine chapters. But the essence here is simply to remind us of all that God has done in fulfilling the promises of the Old Covenant with the better and perfect realities that are found in Christ. In other words, based upon all God has done in securing our salvation in Christ and seen along the redemptive lines of scripture, we have the better and perfect realities of the new covenant. Because these things are true, we are to now live as if it is true because of our confidence in Christ.

What is important here is that these truths call us to action. To respond in a way that involves every aspect of who we are. It is a response that engages our affections and strengthens our faith on both vertical and horizontal planes. That is, it is a response that draws us to our God and to one another at the same time. As part of the new covenant community, our response to God and one another is to be shaped by our confidence in all that has been accomplished in Christ. So what follows the words "Therefore brothers" packs into the few verses of this passage, what are our response and responsibilities to "believe and do" as a part of this community.

### **a. In Our Entry**

This passage provides two reasons for our resulting response and is indicated by the use of the word "since" in these verses. These occur at the beginning of verse 19 and verse 21, and establish the basis for our response to the truths that have come before. The gist of the declaration or argument is along this line. Therefore brothers, since this is true, and since this also is true, your response should be as follows. These first three verses establish the basis for the following the three instructions that follow.

In verses 19 and 20, we see the first reason for our response. Because of all that God has done, we have confidence in Christ who is our entry into the very presence of God.  
[Read 10:19-20]

Imagine what it was like under the Old Covenant economy. No Jew would ever dare enter into the Holy of Holies. Yet in Christ, we have confident access through the curtain into the heavenly sanctuary because of the blood and sacrifice of Jesus. This is a tremendous blessing to those who are a part of the new community. Those who are in Christ may enter into the presence of our God with boldness, or literally with a “free confidence” through the new and living way established by Christ.

There is no longer a barrier or separation between God and His people. At Christ’s death the veil was torn symbolizing that the barrier was now removed. In this sense, we are now a community of priests able to come to God and dwell with Him. It does not matter who you are, what family line you are born into, or what status or position you have achieved in life. All true believers have access to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. To the early Jews this would have been a radical and wonderful thought. As modern Christians, we have a tendency to take this blessing for granted. Our access to God was bought with the blood of our Savior so that we could dwell in the presence of God every moment of every day. This is an incredible privilege that we are not deserving of. And it is only by the grace and mercy of our Lord that we have been included in a community that has been given the confidence of entry into His presence.

#### **b. In Our High Priest**

In verse 21 we see the second reason for our response. **Because of all that God has done in Jesus Christ who is our High Priest.** [Read 10:21]

Depending on your translation, you will see that the Greek words here are literally “Great Priest”. This is the only place in Hebrews where this phrase is used rather than “High Priest.” The sense here is that Jesus Christ is not just the High Priest over the community of believers, but He is our King as well. We know from Hebrew 5, that He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, who was the first in the type that combined both priest and king into a single person. Jesus is both the High Priest who offered Himself as a sacrifice and who also reigns as King over the community of believers. We not only have access to God through the way made possible by Jesus, but we also have the blessing of that same Redeemer being our Priest and King. Jesus has done all that was required to enable our community both with God and with one another. He is not only a community maker, He is a community enabler.

The last part of this verse clearly ties the community of believers to Christ. He is over the house of God. This is not a physical building or structure, but rather the Church is physically made up of people. Moreover, the Church as a community exists in the present on a spiritual level as the Body of Christ and exists eternally as the universal Church that will one day be present with Christ in heaven. Even as we think of Clearcreek Chapel, what should come to mind is not this building, but rather the people who gather in it. This verse also reminds us that a local church is made up of a community of believers whose home is not of this world, but is in heaven, as part of the house of God. The blessing we have in Christ, is that we gather this morning not in a church, but as a church.

### **III. Let Us Draw Near**

OK. Now listen carefully because this is going to be a long sentence. Since we have confidence in our entry into this new community that dwells with God in the present, and since we have Jesus Christ as our High Priest and King, we are to respond in belief to these truths in three ways. Each of these responses is clearly seen in this passage beginning with the phrase "let us". These three statements define our response to these truths as a new community, which is the Church; the body of Christ.

While it is not directly said, I believe that the essence of these three elements of our response helpfully defines a maturing community. Notice that each of the three statements here is in the plural, as in "let us". Let us draw near. Let us hold fast. And let us consider one another. The author of Hebrews is addressing the church; new covenant people; the community of believers. As these three elements of our response become more and more true about us as a community, they are evidence of our maturing. Yes, there is an individual aspect to this response. But what is true of our response individually makes up our response collectively as a community in Christ.

This is the appeal that is being made in these verses. That these truths are not something to be taken for granted nor should our freedom and liberty be abused. Rather, since we have these superior realities in Christ, we should be a community where this kind of response is increasingly more and more common within our community; a Christ-centered, others-oriented community whose purpose is to mature in Christ.

So let's begin to see what this response is to look like. [Read 10:22]

**The first of these responses is to let us draw near.** Because of what we believe to be true in Christ we are to draw near to God. If as a community of believers we have a full and confident access to God through Christ who is both priest and king, then we are to draw near to Him. The construction of the text sees this response as a natural and necessary result of believing that verses 19 to 21, and all that has come before in Hebrews, are true. Just as the Church is not a physical building, drawing near to God does not mean simply walking into a Church brings you near to God. It may help as you are faithfully taught the Word, but a response of simply coming to Church on Sunday will not help you live for Christ the rest of the week.

#### **a. With An Assured Heart**

So how are we to draw near to God? There are two ways indicated in this text. **First, we are to draw near with an assured heart.** That is, we come with true heart that is fully assured or confident of what Christ has done. It is a heart that has been changed by God for His glory. It is a heart that desires to do His will and has a genuine affection for Him. It is an assurance that is not based on one's ability to perform and meet some man-made standard of holiness. Rather, it is a heart that is fully assured that Christ has done everything for us so that we can enter into God's presence as part of the community of believers.

The sense from this passage is that it is a sincere heart and faith. Drawing near to God cannot and will not happen unless there is a genuine, Spirit-enabled faith. It is not a passive “let go and let God” kind of faith that does not require active involvement. There is an imperative to this verse that calls us to action. As a part of this new community, we have a new and living way into the presence of God and are to draw into a relationship with Him. Especially, since Christ is present in our community. It is because of His presence with us that we are called to a fellowship or communing with Him; a fellowship that intentionally directs our thoughts and affections toward Him.

It is in knowing Him through His Word and in our worship of Him that we draw close to Him in a way that transcends this world. A sincere heart finds satisfaction in knowing God and His word and finds great joy in glorifying Him in both personal and corporate worship. And in a very real sense, it is this drawing near to God that is a measure of our maturity and growth in Christ as we treasure our fellowship with God and one another in a way that produces a love for Him and one another. Or, in a negative sense, if we lack the desire to fellowship with God and His people, we have reason to examine our hearts and the lack of a sincere faith that responds to Christ.

#### **b. With A Cleansed Heart and Body**

So how else are we to draw near to God? As we just saw, we are first to draw near with an assured heart. **And second, we are to draw near with a cleansed heart and body.** Just as the priests under the Old Covenant had to wash and perform a series of cleansing rituals before offering a sacrifice to God, we must come into God’s presence cleansed and holy. As a holy people, cleansed by Christ’s blood and with pure consciences we can draw near to God. The use of “sprinkling” here is not an inference to water baptism, but rather is an allusion either to the Old Covenant rituals of cleansing or more likely the sprinkling of blood over the doors during the Passover in Egypt. We are to see that a believing response to the cleansing work of Christ is sufficient to keep our hearts from a guilty, condemning conscience and fully cleanse the body spiritually for fellowship with God.

Let’s dig just a little deeper. There are two aspects to this cleansing in the last part of this verse. First, we draw near with a clear or pure conscience that is the result of believing that Christ has atoned for all our sins. We have no reason to be condemned, nor to condemn ourselves. Christ has satisfied the wrath of God that we may boldly enter into His presence. Second, we are positionally cleansed and holy, our bodies washed from the stains of sin through Christ who is our righteousness. But unlike the Old Testament cleansing, Christ has cleansed us from the inside out. We are now new creatures in Christ. We have been justified by the blood and sacrifice of Christ and now as a part of the new covenant community, have been set apart for fellowship and service to Him.

Another way of looking at this is that we are first cleansed by Christ's blood. That is our sins are not held against us and the penalty for our rebellion has been removed. In a word, it is salvation. Spiritually, we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. Unlike the old covenant cleansing that washed only the outside, Christ has cleansed us inside and out with pure water. God's standard of perfection has been satisfied in Christ.

But secondly, we are also sprinkled by Christ's blood in the sense that there is a continuing effect that cleanses our conscience from guilt and strengthens our faith in the present. It is both a reminder that God has passed over our sins because of the blood of Christ and a motivation to confess our sins so that we may have a right fellowship with Him. We are no longer condemned and therefore are to have a clean conscience that results from knowing that our sins, both past and present are and will be forgiven. We can have true peace with God.

#### **IV. Let Us Hold Fast**

So the first element of response as a community is to draw near. **The second element of this response is to hold fast.** [Read 10:23]

Within our community we are to cling or hold without wavering to our hope. The idea here is to hold with confidence and strength. You might think about the kind of grip you have on those things you treasure and hold dear. It is a response that clings to these truths with a firm conviction that is steadfast until the end. **One way of knowing how firmly we hold to this hope is measured in what it takes to get us to let go of it.** Our response as a community is not just to draw near to God, we are also to work at a hope that is built firmly upon a faith in Christ and does not let go until death calls us home.

##### **a. To Our Confession of Hope**

So what are we to hold fast to? **First, we are to hold fast to our confession of hope.** There is a mutual sense of confessing our hope as a community that is an expression together of what we hold to be true. It is a confidence in God's promises and a trust in Christ's sacrifice that cannot be shaken. It is a corporate fidelity to sound doctrine and a clear avoidance of false teaching and the deceits of the world. It is a commitment to Christ and His body the church. As a community, we are to tie down or secure those truths which we treasure and value, so that together, we will not depart from them. Rather, we are to grow and mature in a way that embraces these promises, possesses them as our own, and professes them to be true.

Moreover, this not a Sunday confession; it is an everyday reality that evidences itself in every aspect of our lives. It is a 24 by 7, passionate holding that never lets go. If your hold leaves the moment you step back into worlds of family and work lives, you are not holding to these truths. If your grip loosens the moment you are drawn to your heart's latest idol, maybe you need to the help of this community to secure these truths. If your commitment wanes at the first sign of tension or trouble, maybe you need a hope that is enabled by the Spirit through a regular feeding on the Word. But in this response, we must strive to be a hope-giving kind of community that aids those who are struggling, warns those who are drawing away, and encourages those who are faithfully clinging to Christ.

### **b. To Our Source of Hope**

**Second, we are to hold fast to our source of hope.** We cannot separate our confession of hope from the source of our hope. To doubt these promises is to doubt the one who made them. Our assurance of these promises is in the fidelity and faithfulness of God. Our hope is based in a grace-enabled faith that rests in the trustworthy character of our God. As a community of believers, we are a people of God and are mutually connected to these promises in Christ. God is faithful even if we are not. We can completely and unreservedly put our hope in all that God has promised and given us in Christ. He will never, ever fail.

In thinking about this, I was reminded of the simple trust that a young child has in their father. When my kids were only one or two I loved tossing them high into the air and catching them in my arms. I would toss them higher and higher with each turn. Even at that young age, their smile and laughter indicated their total trust in my ability to catch them no matter how high they went up. I know at times that friends and family would get a little nervous. But my children never wavered in their complete trust. They would cry out to "Do it again!" until my arms were too tired for another toss. This is the kind of hope and trust we are to have in the promises of our Heavenly Father. In His promises is the assurance that He will always catch us and never let us fall.

### **V. Let Us Consider One Another**

So this is how we are to respond in a way that evidences our maturity as a community. As a community we are to draw near; that is to exhibit our faith by **boldly coming to God**. We are to hold fast; that is to have a steadfast hope in God. **And lastly we are to consider one another;** that is to have a love for one another that reflects and flows out of our love for God. [Read 10:24-25]



If within our community we believe and hope in God and his promises, then the natural byproduct of this response will be a love and consideration of one another. Here the reality of these promises comes face to face with the essence of our community together. How can we say that we believe these truths and firmly hope in God but then show no evidence of it as a community? How can we say we have fellowship with God, but then refrain from fellowship with His people? Consideration for one another is a fundamental element of our response to all that we are in Christ. It is a fixing of our attentions and affections on one another. Please note that the emphasis in this passage is not on what we get from being a part of the community of Christ, but on what we can contribute to it. The author recounts three essential ways in which we are to consider one another in a response that produces maturity within our community together.

#### **a. In Our Love**

The first of these ingredients is to consider one another in our love. What does this love look like? This verse provides a rich description of the love that is to be evident without our community. First, the evidence of our love is to stir up, or more literally, provoke one another to love and works of goodness. Now I'm not sure about you, but when I hear the word provoke, love and good deeds are not the first things that come to mind. Yet that is to be the sense of our community life; to spur or stimulate one another to love and works of righteousness. It will sound funny to our ears, but the way you really know if a brother or sister in Christ really loves you, is whether they are willing to challenge you and have your maturity and care as their primary aim. That is the measure of an authentic love in the body of Christ.

There is to be a mutual concern and encouragement that is not only willingly communicated but also willingly received. How many of us, when we read this verse, think of ourselves on the sending ends of these conversations. But we are also to be humble recipients when lovingly provoked to serve others or deal with sin in our lives. It is all too easy to be provoked to anger or defensiveness when we are challenged by someone in an area of spiritual concern. But even if the challenge is made imperfectly or is not warranted, we are to have a spirit that appreciates the concern that has been shown and the aim toward God's glory.

I have said this before, but you cannot love someone you do not know. You cannot stimulate someone to love and good deeds unless you know where they need to be provoked. This verse clearly has in mind relationships with others that are focused on developing a maturity and righteous life that stems from the hope and faith we have seen in the previous two elements of our response. Thus, there is an implicit call here to be cultivating these kinds of relationships with one another as we develop and value our community together.

## **b. In Our Gathering**

The second ingredient of our considering one another is in our gathering. The word “not” at the beginning of verse 25 connects this thought to the previous verse. In essence, how can you stimulate and love one another if you are not meeting together? Therefore, an essential element of our considering one another is based in our gathering together.

Let me ask you this. What does it take to keep you from gathering with this community of believers? More to the point, what is it that you value more than being with your brothers and sisters in Christ? We can, and have in other messages, establish the mutual dependence we have upon one another. There is a sense of growing and maturing together as the body of Christ that happens amid our local gathering. I don't want this to sound harsh, but this cannot and will not happen if all you do is come to Clearcreek on Sunday to hear the AM message. Brothers and sisters, there is to be an earnestness and even urgency to our gathering together that is motivated by a love for one another and a love for God.

There is a weaving together of our community that requires us to engage and embrace one another at a deeper level than just shaking hands and saying “Hi” on Sunday morning. If you want to be provoked to love and good deeds, come to the Sunday morning Bible Education hour and engage in teaching and discussion over our faith and hope as we draw near and hold fast in our hope. If you want to be strengthened in your faith and secure in God's promises, come to our Sunday evening service. If you want to build relationships that are about more than discussing sports or the weather, regularly attend a flock group. Our fellowship and community together is to be born out of a passionate desire to see one another grow and mature in Christ.

There are other opportunities to gather as a community. If it is not possible to attend each of major weekly gatherings, consider women's Bible study, baby showers, Men's Night Fellowship, Iron Sharpeners, any of our all-church-events, or any time we gather together. Beyond this, we can invite people out to lunch or breakfast, have them in our homes, or even make a simple phone call. There are many ways to fit gathering into the fabric of our lives, strengthening and building our community together.

The clear command here is to not forsake our gathering together as a community of believers. You cannot abandon God's people without abandoning God at some level. You cannot neglect mutual fellowship without neglecting your fellowship with God. You cannot forsake loving and serving the body of Christ without forsaking He who is its head. Yes, this places a high view on community and the additional demands it implies. And in a day-in-age when churches are abandoning Sunday evening services and shepherding of the flock, Clearcreek will continue to treasure and be faithful to a gathering that enables the authentic worship, teaching, prayer, serving, fellowship, and shepherding that God's Word calls us to.

### **c. In Our Encouraging**

The last ingredient to our considering one another is in our encouraging. I believe that the sense of this verse is to call us as a community to encourage one another toward a growing maturity and faithfulness. As I hinted at earlier, there is to be even a sense of urgency to see one another grow spiritually. The last half of this verse is connected to the first by the word "but". We are not to neglect meeting together, but are to be faithfully gathering so that we can encourage one another. All three ingredients must come together as part of our response to what we believe and have placed our hope in.

Therefore our community as a local church must demonstrate our commitment to encouraging one another. This is one of the reasons we support and maintain an active counseling and discipleship ministry. This is one of the reasons we faithfully commit ourselves to the process of church discipline. This is one of the reasons we provide practical, real-life teaching in our Bible Education hour. Because we are committed to encouraging one another to a love for God and others as Scripture commands.

So let me ask some questions to characterize the quality of our encouraging. Will we be the kind of community that encourages the care for and searching out of the one lost sheep? Will we be the kind of community that encourages the hard work of building relationships that provide real, substantive spiritual encouragement? Will we be the kind of community that encourages a striving toward unity in doctrine, ministry, and service? This is the kind of encouraging community that we are called to. It is not just a fellowship and community for its own sake. But rather it has as its purpose the encouragement and spiritual interests of others. It is a community that has at its essence a self-sacrificing, others-preferring heart that desires to see others becoming more like who we truly are in Christ.

This verse ends noting one of the motivations for our encouraging. That is the return and second coming of Christ. We do not know the day that He will come but we are to live like it is imminent. There is to be a joyful expectation of that day that compels us to love, live rightly, faithfully gather together, and encourage one another because of the certainty of His coming. There is to be an urgency to our community that reflects the hopeful anticipation of the Groom coming for His bride. So as we wait for that day, let us mature and grow as a community so that we may increasingly glorify Him in all that Christ may sanctify us and present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Amen!

## VI. Conclusion

Let me bring us back to the passage in Ephesians that we opened with this morning. Listen to Ephesians 4:15-16, just a few verses later in that Chapter. *“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”* The marvelous truth here is that Christ is actively equipping us as a community to grow and mature, that we may be perfectly formed together to work in proper and complete way, that the body may grow, so that it will build itself up in love. What a wonderful and clear picture of maturity in the body of Christ. Maturity is not a suggestion here. We are commanded to grow; to mature in every way into the image of Christ who is the head and center of our community together.

Therefore, if Christ is at the head and center of all we do and we are maturing in Him, by His grace, our response will be to grow together in unity, in faith, in soundness of doctrine, in wisdom, and in love according to the standards of Scripture. However, we can use those standards to measure the level of maturity of others or we can apply those standards to ourselves. And even that is a measure of spiritual maturity. So as we focus the lens of scripture on ourselves, let’s look at what Hebrews 10 has shown us as a standard for maturity in the community of Christ.

First, **we are to be a community that is drawing near to Christ and desires to be changed for God’s glory.** Our heart’s response to the promises and truths of God’s word will be to draw near to God. **Moreover, I do not believe that we can draw near to God without an accompanying desire to be in His Word and with His people.**

Secondly, **we are to be a community that holds firmly unto the precious hope that we have in Christ.** When we look at the shadows and copies of the old covenant and consider the marvelous supremacy of Christ, we will treasure who He is and what He has done for us. And that which we value, we will hold on to according to our attachment to it.

Thirdly, **we are to be a community that demonstrates genuine love for one another overflowing out of our love for Christ.** Several places in scripture, love follows faith and hope. Several commentators see this pattern in the passage we have studied this morning. As we draw near our faith is enlarged. As we hold firmly our hope is increased. And as we love one another we are strengthened as a community.

By God's grace and mercy may Clearcreek be a community that is marked by growth and maturing in these areas. Very quickly let me give a few challenges that develop out of this passage. They are hard questions, but I do not mean them to be harsh. They are born out of a passion for community that has steadily formed as I study it in Scripture. And the more I study it, the more I am convinced that it is something we are losing; the more I am convinced that it is something we should be fighting hard for; and the more I am convinced that it is something we need by God's design. We were created to be a community and spiritually we will grow and function best when we fully participate and mature into the community God intended us to be.

So here are some questions for all of us to consider. I include myself in this and am not just pointing my finger at you. Write these down and pray about them over the next few weeks and months. First, **are we fully participating in our gathering together as a community?** What gatherings don't you come to and why? Are your strongest relationships inside or outside this community? Do you have a desire to be with God's people and if not, why?

Second, **are we a place that truly welcomes new people into our community?** Do we remember what it was like to come through those doors for the first time? Do we really take the time to invite people into our homes and lives so that they can truly feel as though they are part of our life together?

Third, **are we actively looking for ways to encourage and stimulate one another to live for the Lord?** Do we know of someone who is hurting but never make the time to be an encouragement to them? Do we regularly pray over the needs in our flock and church? Are we too busy to offer our time and talents to others? Do we care enough to say the hard things and risk creating tension in order to help someone deal with sin in their lives?

Fourth, **are we open to the provocation of another for the sake of Christ?** Would our reaction be a defensiveness or humble gratitude at the care shown by another? Do we create relational barriers that discourage others from speaking the truth to us? Do we truly desire to change and welcome the correction and encouragement of others?

Last, **are we willing to give sacrificially to meet the needs of others?** What will community require of us? What of our time, energy, talent, and treasures will we offer to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Are we willing to spend ourselves and pour out our lives for the sake of others?

May Clearcreek be the kind of community that is willing to grow and mature according to the standard of God's word and image of Christ that we bear. May our hearts be bent to Christ and to His people in a way that weaves and glues us together for the Glory of God. May we treasure our gathering and being a holy people in a way that displays a love for one another that shines brightly to those around us. And may the unity and love that is true of us in the spiritual realm be true of us here today.

[Pray]