



Season 1, Episode 6: “Encouragement: Meeting Together and The Need to Belong”

Punky Tolson:

Before we begin the podcast, I want to take a moment to address the obvious. Today’s episode: Encouragement: Meeting Together and The Need to Belong, was recorded before the current events of today became a personal reality for us in the United States. In the past 7 weeks things in our world have changed due to COVID-19, this massive *intruder* we call the Corona Virus. In just the last 10 days our lives have changed dramatically... I don’t think there’s a person on the planet that has not been impacted by this virus in some way.

My heart is heavy for all, and I join with Michelle, our ministry team and with many others in fervently praying for them.

For those of y’all listening... Our new normal includes *social distancing* (really hard for us huggers out there) and *shelter in place*. Lots of us are at home right now...not “stuck”, but *purposefully positioned* there, with lots of time on our hands and lots of kiddos to manage...trying to figure out what to do. My plan is to make the most of this NOW season and continue encouraging each of YOU, right where you are right now... so that you can be an encouragement to the people around you.

The following episode is all about meeting together... but since we can’t do that in the traditional way we’re used to, it just means we have to be a little more creative... And there are still many ways that we can meet together and “gather together” to encourage one another, sharpen one another and build up one another in our faith!

So, after prayerful consideration—and much encouragement, I’ll begin a 7-week online LIFE ON LIFE Bible study starting next Thursday, March 26th... and everyone is invited! We will be sending out an email with important instructions on how you can sign up participate in this Bible Study.

It’s absolutely free, BUT ... **we have to have your email**. So, go to my website: PunkyTolson.com and scroll down on the home page a little bit and you’ll see the email sign up

box. Enter your name and email and **choose to receive updates from the #LifeOnLife Bible Study** list in the dropdown... so you can join the group!

Also-- Watch social media: Instagram, Facebook and Twitter for announcements about the **#LifeOnLife Bible Study** *and share it with your friends!*

The podcast will continue on, but we'll take a pause with our theme "Better Together: Doing Womanhood Well" and in the meantime, we'll post recorded portions of the bible study that will encourage you, strengthen your faith, and **keep us all focused upward (on God) and outward (on others).**

As we "shelter in place" let's not forget that our true SHELTER is permanently IN PLACE in Christ.

Jesus is the only one who can do anything about everything that concerns us... so look up to him. Before you look out at the world look up to Jesus, look over to your neighbor and encourage one another while we can in whatever way that we can!

That's that for that... and now here's episode 6 of the podcast, "Encouragement: Meeting Together and The Need to Belong."

I love y'all!



Punky Tolson:

Hey there friends, come on in! Last week we talked about what encouragement is and why we need it and that we have both a biblical obligation and an opportunity to stir up one another to love and good works by encouraging them, provoking them, challenging them to grow and flourish in their life of faith and love of Christ that's exhibited and becoming more and more loving and doing good works, works and service that is a benefit to others... encouraging one another as a way of life for Christ followers. It's a command to heed because everybody in the body of Christ needs encouragement and it happens in community. There's no true biblical encouragement without meeting together, coming together and when we do, we find that we are better together when we come together to encourage one another in truth and in love.

Hey guys, do you recognize this little jingle?

Yep! That is the theme song from the classic sitcom "Cheers." It ran from 1982 to 1993 and it has one of the most popular sitcoms of all time. It took place in a Boston Tavern that was a

meeting place for a handful of people who shared life together in a bar. Yep. That's where they met. That's where they did life together and their lives unfolded before us and it was one of the most classic commentaries on our culture of the day and I wonder why that is. Why do you think that would be so popular and that so many people would love watching these people share their life in this bar? I think the lyrics to the theme song say it best, "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came. You want to be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You want to be where everybody knows your name." I think we all want that. *We all desire to have a place that we go where everybody knows our name and they're always glad that we came.*

We've been looking all this season at what it means to "do womanhood well" and that we are "better together." Our passage we've been focusing on is from Hebrews 10:24-25 and Michelle's going to read it for us.

Michelle Schroeder:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Punky Tolson:

I hope by the end of this podcast season that you're going to have that passage of scripture memorized! It's a good one! It's a good one to remember. So let's break this down a little bit. Again, I'm going to repeat some things from last week, but I think it's important to hear them again.

1. We've got this obligation and opportunity because of what Christ has accomplished for us and because we have new life and new hope in him. The scripture says, "Let us hold onto unwaveringly the confession of our hope and respond to it in this way." Which we've just seen in verses 24 and 25.
2. We are to stir up one another to love and good works. Now, this is not a command to love each other and to do good works. *This is a command to stir up one another to love and good works.* There's a big difference here. This shows that there's an intentionality and focusing on another person to stir them up, motivate them, propel them, inspire them to love and good works.

The aim of your life and the aim of my life is not merely to do good and kind and loving deeds of service. We're supposed to do that, yes. But it is to stir up and to stimulate, provoke and motivate others to get out there and live lives of love and good works to the glory of God. Basically what is being said here is that we are to help people get out of their all-about-me worlds, to get their

noses out of their navels and become self-forgetful by giving serious, heartfelt thought to how to motivate others toward living a life of love and doing unto others good works to the glory of God. If you read Rick Warren's classic book, The Purpose Driven Life, he starts out the book with these words. "It's not about you." And truer words have never been spoken because if there's anything that is classically the hallmark of the Christian life is that it is selfless, that we are giving ourselves away.

And here we have this beautiful encouragement to encourage others to stir up others. And I find, I don't know if you experienced this too, but I find that the more I give encouragement and encourage others to do love and good works that I get encouraged in the process.

Michelle Schroeder:

Yeah, absolutely. It's like exercising the muscle.

Punky Tolson:

There you go.

Michelle Schroeder:

The more you do it, the stronger it gets.

Punky Tolson:

Absolutely. And we see that in the scripture too. But here's the thing, in order to stir up others, we have to be stirred up too and we're going to pretty much stir up others with what's stirring us up. You know what I mean?

Michelle Schroeder:

Absolutely.

Punky Tolson:

So what is stirring you up these days?

Michelle Schroeder:

Oh Lord, this whole political season for one.

Punky Tolson:

Right. Politics, politics gets everybody stirred up.

I think it's really interesting if you take a stroll through your own social media posts, if you look at someone else's, you can pretty much tell what they're about, what gets them stirred up, jazzed up by reading their posts. So our posts tell a lot about us and sometimes it's telling some things

we don't really want people to know about us, but nevertheless, I think what we put out there is indicative of what's being stirred up in us. What gets us excited, what we're passionate about.

You mentioned politics, but like health and fitness gets us stirred up, which is a good thing. Lots of skincare tips out there, lots of fashion tips out there, diets, that kind of thing. There's just any manner of thing. And those are all good things. It's perfectly fine to get stirred up about those things and to motivate people with those things. *But is that really the kind of love and good works that this passage is talking about specifically?* Let me ask you this: Who is stirring you up to love and good works? Can you name a person or a few people, maybe somebody you follow, maybe somebody that's mentoring you and who are you presently stirring up and motivating to live a life of love and good works?

The next thing I want to look at is that word: **Consider**. *Consider how to stir up one another*. It's used in Hebrews 10:24 (we talked a little bit about it last week and it means some intentional thought towards something). So this leaves no room for aimless living. And a lot of us are about some good things that we're doing and it's creating a lot of activity in our life. But there's a lack of thoughtfulness or a lack of intentionality as far as it's inspiring and encouraging others toward love and good works.

I look in my backyard, especially today because it's been so windy in Dallas and there's leaves blowing around everywhere, and once upon a time those leaves were alive and hanging off of a tree. Then they fell in my backyard and they started to blow around. Lots of activities swirling here and there, but they're aimless. They're going nowhere.

There's a lot of work like that in our lives. There's a lot of activity like that in our lives. We have to be able to discern what is the work that's really eternal work. **What is the work that is really the good work of love and good works?** It's expressed here in Hebrews 10:24 so it really means to *consider, to give some serious, intentional, heartfelt thought to how you can help others live a life that's marked by love and good works*. This is the focus of your life and it's a focus of my life. Not living aimlessly, but purposefully and thoughtfully. Strong's concordance gives a definition in the original language of consider as this to perceive, remark, observe, understand. It means to consider attentively to fix one's eyes or mind upon something. Vine's dictionary describes it this way, the action of the mind and apprehending certain facts about a thing.

Now think about these as I'm reading them...

Listen to this from Eugene Peterson's Message Bible: **Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love...**

The Amplified Bible reads this way: **Let us consider and give attentive thought, continuous care to watching over one another, studying how we may stir up or stimulate an insight to love and helpful deeds and noble activities.**

So in a nutshell, we're to study others, be a good student of the people around you. Listen to them, observe them. Ponder, be creative and imaginative and how you can stir them up to love and good works.

So how do we do this? The scripture tells us by not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. So we see right here, according to this passage that some people were in the habit of not meeting together. So not meeting together can become habit forming. And you see this a lot in this day and age when there's so much access to so many good things online. I mean there's tons of sermons we can listen to. Watch on television, we can have church right on our couch. And there's nothing wrong with that, but we're missing out on this tremendously critical aspect of what is going to help us to flourish and grow in our faith.

Michelle Schroeder:

Yeah, especially in this season of having a now-almost toddler. I certainly can resonate with that. My church doesn't offer streaming and I kind of wish they did because there's many Sundays that I don't make it and I am thankful for the churches that do offer that kind of streaming service so that I can receive the word of God and somehow participate in that. ***But I feel it. There is a definite difference*** in listening to a podcast of a sermon or even watching a sermon online instead of being there and worshiping and listening together with those in your church, those that you have chosen that these are the ones I'm going to partner up and do life with.

Punky Tolson:

Right. And it's easy sometimes in church to kind of slip in unnoticed and then slip out and then that becomes a habit. And then it's like, "Well, why do I need to go at all? I can just listen to somebody online and I don't really have to be there." But like you said, you really feel it. So last weekend I was so exhausted, and John and I had had two back-to-back weeks and weekends of just pouring out, pouring out. And I so easily could have said, "No, I'm not going to go."

But I went and it's exactly what you said. I get there and it's like walking into Cheers, I feel like, *those are my people. That's my place. They know my name, I know their name, and they're always glad that I came.* And I'm always glad to see them and I'm glad to give them a hug or a fist bump or an elbow bump or whatever we're doing these days. But there's something that is not just energizing, but something that makes me feel like I've come alive when I've been there. And of course, it's the Spirit present right there and throughout the worship and all of that.

There's a big deal with people-to-people contact and social media can't do that for us. As connected as we like to think we are, we're really not. Anything online is certainly a benefit to add to what's already there, but it doesn't take the place of that *real meeting together*.

So in this passage we see that we are to meet together to encourage one another. So there's meeting together plus encouraging one another. And these two groups that are mentioned, those who meet together to encourage one another, and those who are in the habit of neglecting meeting together, we don't want to neglect it. There's certainly times where we have to take a break or can't get there. We've got a sick child or we're just exhausted and it's fine to do that on occasion, but not let that become a habit.

Meeting together— what he's talking about here, what the writer of Hebrews is instructing us in as not just regular church attendance. It is that, *but it's more than that*. It is also certainly small groups. Your fellowship groups you might have at church, your community groups, we call them “radius” groups. And in my church, that's one aspect of it also. But that phrase “one another,” (and I've mentioned this before, there's like 59 “one another” passages in the new Testament that make this an important phrase one another) it implies that there's something mutual happening between two people. There's a one and there's another one. So there's this back and forth, mutual encouragement. And Romans 1:12 Paul says, "When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours." So here we see this proverb come to life from Proverbs 27:17 as “iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend” so there's no sharpening, there's no real encouragement and depth of intimacy without this coming together and this coming together. This one-another-ness is also a very important aspect of life on life disciple-making relationships and we're going to talk about that toward the end of this season's podcast.

I think one of the things that made Cheers the sitcom so popular is because we watched for 11 years these relationships develop. We saw these people come together in this bar week after week and share life together. We saw how their relationships had ups and had downs and had all the way arounds. I think that's another reason why reality TV is as popular as it is because we like to watch people in relationship. Relationship is foundational to every human on earth. It's an aspect of our life that is just wired into us and we've all got this deep need for relationship and this deep need to be known. I mean, you can read Psalm 139 and you see that's what King David writes about so poignantly as just this deep need that he has to know and to be known by the one who created him.

Well, we've all got this deep need to belong. We're wired for connection. We're wired for friendship. We want to have our place, our group, our club, our neighborhood, and we want our people, those people who know us personally and intimately without judgment, but who love us enough to tell us the truth. We all want people, we want friends who have depth perception to see

the best in us when all we can see is the worst in ourselves or can't see anything at all because there's just such a fog around us. We need those around us who inspire and encourage us by calling out the God-given potential they see in us when we don't realize it. And we need to be the ones who see with spiritual insight and hindsight and encourage one another's in the truth of what God's word says about them. It's what we see in the scriptures as community and it's one of the most beautiful foundational hallmarks of the Christian life.

We see it described as the fellowship of the believers in Acts 2:42-47.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The fellowship that's described there is a word called *Koinonia*. It means *deep intimate fellowship* and it's something that the body of Christ has to have.

All people need it, but in the body of Christ, we simply will not thrive or flourish and there simply will not be the fruitfulness that we see described here in Acts 2 by the fellowship of the believers that as they met together as they encouraged one another, as they shared their lives together, it says *day by day the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved*. So that says to us right there that because of the way they did life together, not only were they encouraged, did they flourish, but others came to know Christ through their coming together, through their togetherness, through their meeting together.

Technology has given us a wonderful thing and social media is certainly a wonderful way to keep connected with people that you're out of touch with, but we can't mistake that for true fellowship and true connection and togetherness. We've really never been more disconnected as a society because we've been duped into thinking that all of our followers and all of our friends equate to some kind of connection and togetherness when it's only superficial at best. There's really no flourishing in our faith-life without real authentic woman-to-woman, friend-to-friend, sister-to-sister, life-on-life relationships and Jesus.

We simply will not thrive and flourish and reach our God-given potential any other way and *the enemy knows it*. He doesn't want us to flourish. So he stirs us up and pits us against one another. As we've talked about in past episodes, he causes us to compare ourselves with one another and compete against one another, ignore one another, distrust one another, and become cynical,

critical, jealous, and envious of others. And it's just plain old sin. Not only that, James writes in his epistle that it's actually demonic.

So what's the answer and how do we do this? How do we foster meeting together? How do we foster community, fellowship and true connection among one another, with women doing womanhood better? Well, here's your spiritual life hack for this week.

First thing, we're going to pray. We're going to pray before we go into the groups that we're a part of. So maybe you are in a group... maybe it's the junior league or charity league or some sort of service group that goes into different parts of the city and serves a particular need. Maybe it's a workout group you have, a singles book club maybe, your running group, mom's in touch, a prayer group at your kid's school, or the PTA group. My friend Kim back in Orlando has a group of friends that live in her community and they get together and call themselves "The College Park Cuties" and they meet together for fellowship.



SPIRITUAL LIFE HACK

Before you go to your group and gather together in those meeting times, start to prayerfully think about each person in that group. Start to pray for them. Ask the Lord, how can I be an encouragement to someone in that group today? Don't think of yourself and how you can get encouraged but think about how you can be an encouragement. Again, it's that freedom of self-forgetfulness. So, who can I be an encouragement to?

And then listen- listen when you get there- listen to how people talk or be the one that asks good questions. Get some "table topic cards" or think of some questions on your own. (You can get table topic cards that just about any Christian bookstore or you can get them online.) Have a few questions ready that you're going to pitch out when you get together in your group to start to go deeper.



We're all comfortable having superficial conversations. We need to go a little bit deeper and start to draw people out. I have found so often; people really do like to talk about themselves! So be the one that draws them out and starts to listen and then do a study on them. Be a good student of the people in your group.

All right, now what if you're not in a group? Maybe you don't have a group together. Maybe you don't have kind of neighborhood connection. Well, I'm going to encourage you with this and *it's more of an exhortation*: I want you to step outside your comfort zone and start doing some **inviting**.

My husband tells a story about this woman that he knew in Houston, Texas years ago, and he challenged her to really use her life to make a difference and she wanted to do that. She was a little bit on the shy side, but she said, "You know what? I think I can do this." He said, "Why don't you go around and invite some of your friends to come over and have a coffee or a tea and I'll come over and I'll just encourage them by giving a talk on how to have a life worth living." And so she did and he was thinking there'd be maybe like, five, six people show up. She had 100 people packed in her living room!

This is what she did: she went around to every home in her neighborhood and she left a little invitation that she had handwritten on everybody's door and it had said, "Just come on over for coffee, come on over for tea and some cookies. And I've got a friend coming over and he's going to give a talk on how to have a life worth living."

She had 100 people show up in her house. She wasn't expecting 100 people, but there they were all gathered together waiting to hear a good message. That's how she put it into action! She trusted God. She prayed about it and she went out and she did the thing and lo and behold, it was fruitful. So what are you going to do to gather together the women in your neighborhood, the women in your community? Maybe meet somebody at the gym, maybe you met somebody at your kid's school. Just invite them over for coffee or tea or invite them to meet you at a coffee shop. I find most people are just waiting to be asked. *They just want to be asked.*

As we bring this to a close today, I want to encourage you with a story from scripture and introduce you to a really good friend of mine.

Her name is Lydia and her story is in Acts 16. *I love this woman.* I love her name, Lydia, but Lydia had it all going on. She was a cool woman. But this is where the story begins with Paul, and his team as they are on their way to Philippi. It's the Sabbath day and it says in Acts 16:13-15 (MSG):

On the Sabbath, we left the city and went down along the river where we had heard there was to be a prayer meeting. We took our place with the women who had gathered there and talked with them. One woman, Lydia, was from Thyatira and a dealer in expensive textiles, known to be a God-fearing woman. As she listened with intensity to what was being said, the Master gave her a trusting heart—and she believed!

After she was baptized, along with everyone in her household, she said in a surge of hospitality, "If you're confident that I'm in this with you and believe in the Master truly, come home with me and be my guests." We hesitated, but she wouldn't take no for an answer.

I love that— she was just insistent that they all come and gather at her house. Then we read in the end of that chapter, Paul and Silas had been imprisoned. Then they were released from prison and it says, *"Walking out of the jail, Paul and Silas went straight to Lydia's house, saw their friends again, encouraged them in the faith, and only then went on their way."*

So a couple of things here about Lydia in this story:

1. Lydia opened her home.
2. Lydia gathered people together and she opened her home and invited them in.
3. She exercised her gift of hospitality (and hospitality doesn't have to be your gift) so just do it. Just open your door, take that initiative this week.

Prayerfully consider what you might do or how you can do this. It's something I challenged my best friend Patty with several years ago. We were talking about this very passage in Hebrews chapter 10 especially verse 25 "and do not forsake meeting together as some are in the habit of doing." It was really heavy on her heart to meet together with some women and I just challenged her, *open your home and do it.* She's got a great house, a great home. It's warm, it's inviting. And I said, "You know what? I bet there are women all over this neighborhood and all over town that would just love to come gather here and sit at your feet and have you teach them the scripture." So I challenged her, *open your front door, go out on your front porch, open up your arms and say, "Lord, this home belongs to you. This is your address. You bring the women to this front door and I'll invite them in and I'll teach them your word."*

Within an hour or two, she had a girl from around the block come over and she pitched it out to her. She said, "Hey, would you ever like to come over and meet together and just study the scriptures together?" And she was thrilled and said, "Sure I would!" Well, by the end of the day she had two more. And then she ended up getting together like seven or eight different girls. They gathered together in her home once a week and she taught him the scriptures for a number of years and she's still in touch with many of those girls.

*So it's just that easy. And it's just that hard. **It just takes faith.** It just takes courage to just step out and be the one that says, you know what? *I'm going to stir some women up. I'm going to call them together to meet together and I'm going to be the one that encourages them for you, Jesus, for all you've done for me.**

So let's make that our prayer today.

Lord, will you just stir up in us what you want us to do to stir others up to love and good works. Father, we give you all that we have, all that we are and all that we're not and we surrender it to you and ask you to use us Lord, to make a difference, to be an encourager, a true encourager, and to meet together as often as we can with the women that you call us to, specifically to encourage them to love and good works. And we ask this in Jesus name.

OK, that's that for that. And don't forget that you are greatly and dearly loved by The King!

xo -P