Hebrews 10:24-25 *Personal, Not Private: The Church*

***Trip to Texas***Last weekend, I got to be a part of my eldest niece’s wedding. She asked me to officiate the marriage ceremony. The wedding was in San Marcos, Texas.

San Marcos is about half-way between Austin and San Antonio. It is a long ways away. I know, because we drove. We went down over the course of two days, but we drove back straight through. It took us 17 hours.

It was an outdoor wedding. It is hot in Texas. For the weekend, the temperature reached 100 degrees each day. I was wearing a suit, and all the men in the wedding party were wearing tuxes. We were sweaty.

But, funny thing happened during the wedding ceremony. It had not rained in San Marcos in something like 3 months. But as my brother walked his daughter down the aisle, we could hear the rumbles of thunder. And then, about five minutes into the ceremony—right after the “I dos” and as I was reading from 1 Corinthians 13—it started to rain. And not just a little drizzle, either. A big, heavy downpour.

Now, the wedding party was standing under a little gondola, so we were dry. But all the wedding guests were uncovered; and they were getting soaked. So my niece made a quick decision, and the wedding got put on pause. We moved into the reception area and finished the ceremony there.

My niece is pretty easy-going, the guests took it with good humor, and now they have a good story to go with their wedding.

***Being the Church***  
Also, while we were down there, Beth and I had a chance to visit a church that we admire. Austin Stone Church has a strong worship ministry, and several of the songs that we sing here at Hope came from them. Songs like “Jesus is Better” and “Center my Life” and “Glorious Grace.” Since we knew their music, and since we were only about 25 miles away, we thought it was a great opportunity to go to one of their services.

And I’m glad we did. Not only is their music great, but they are a very solid, Biblical church. They have five campuses in the Austin area, and the one we visited was meeting in a middle school gym. There were 300 to 400 people there. There were mints at the information table and candles burning in the restrooms (they said it helped with the fact that they were meeting in a middle school). And the message was Biblically driven and practically helpful.

In fact, the preacher—a man named Matt Blackwell—said something that really stuck with me on the ride home: He said that **our faith is personal, but it is not private.**

Our faith is personal, but it is not private. And what that means, he said, is that there is something very, very personal about faith. It is important that each and every one of us make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. That’s not something that someone else can do on your behalf. You don’t become a Christian because your parents are Christians. You don’t become a Christian just because you live in a certain town or neighborhood where everybody else is a Christian. You don’t even become a Christian because you show up for church every Sunday morning. You have to make a personal decision to follow Jesus. It is a decision only you can make for yourself. And it is often something that is deeply personal, even to the point that it can be hard to put into words what Jesus means for you.

So faith is personal.

But it is not private. That means: your commitment to follow Jesus has an affect not just on your personal salvation, but also on your interaction with others. Following Jesus is not a private matter. Biblically speaking, when you follow Jesus that MUST affect your relationships with others. Your relationships will change because you follow Jesus. Because you follow Jesus, you are adopted into the family of God and you are now a sibling to every other person that follows Jesus (Ephesians 2:19). Because you follow Jesus, you are named an ambassador of His Kingdom and now have the responsibility to tell others about Him. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Your commitment to Jesus is not a private matter. Your commitment to Him colors your interaction with every other person you meet.

I was so glad I got to visit Austin Stone Church and hear that sermon. That phrase: “Our faith is personal, but it is not private” gave me a way to summarize something I’ve been thinking about and wanted to share with you. I think it gives us a pretty good vision for our church.

For a while now, we’ve had this Sunday and next marked on our church calendar as vision Sundays. This is the day that we start our new year of Sunday School. This is the week that our youth ministries get kicked-off. Along with the fair, these are the weeks that we get our programming in gear. And so, we like to take a couple of Sundays around this time of year to sort of reset our vision. To talk about what it means to follow Jesus Christ as a part of Hope Church.

And Matt Blackwell’s phrase gave me the perfect coathook to hang this year’s vision messages on. Because I want to talk about two things: I want to talk about how **our commitment to Jesus affects the other people here--the church,** the family of God. And I want to talk about how **our commitment to Jesus affects people out there—the world,** the people who don’t know Jesus yet.

Our faith is personal, but it is not private. This week we’ll talk about what our faith means for us in the church, next week we’ll talk about what our faith means for us in the world.

***Hebrews 10***So, this week, let’s think about how our relationship with Jesus affects our relationship with His church. When we become followers of Christ, we are adopted into God’s family. That means we are brother and sister with every other follower of Christ. On earth, that family is called the Church, of which there are hundreds of thousands of local congregations. And so the Bible assumes that if you are a follower of Jesus, you will also be a part of a local church. The Bible knows nothing of the solitary Christian. Our love for God is connected to our love for one another.

I’ll put it like this: **As a Christian, you need the church, and the church needs you.** You can make a personal decision to follow Jesus…you NEED to make a personal decision to follow Jesus… but you should not keep it private. Your decision to follow Jesus should lead you to become actively involved in a local church. And, of course, Hope Church is one such place where you could be involved.

There are several places in Scripture where we could look to see the importance of being part of the church, but there is one passage in particular that I think gives a vision for how we can influence one another. And that passage is **Hebrews 10:24-25**

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

Notice, this is plural. “Let us.” There is a corporate response of faith. This is about how we treat one another.

And, specifically, I see four things that we are being called to do in the church, for one another. Four ways that say: we need the church, and the church needs us. Specifically, we are being called to 1) consider one another, 2) spur one another, 3) meet with one another, and 4) encourage one another.

***The Gift of Seeing***First, we are called to **consider one another.** In the church, we offer one another the gift of seeing. The gift of noticing. Look again at the beginning of **verse 24:**

**24**And let us consider how we may spur one another on…

It doesn’t show up so well in English, but in the original language the word “consider” is actually the main verb for this whole sentence. The other exhortations we are going to look at--spurring one another on, meeting together, encouraging one another—actually get their force from this verb. Everything that we are commanded to do in this sentence begins when we “consider” one another.

And that means to notice one another. To see each other.

To give consideration to someone means you pay attention to that person. They can’t just be pieces of scenery here at church that we don’t notice. They cannot just be blurry faces in a crowd that all blend together. Instead, we should make it our particular goal to meet individuals at church, to get to know them, to learn their stories.

Honestly, it would be a tragedy—but I think it sometimes does happen—for someone to come to church here at Hope and not be noticed. It should be impossible, if we are doing this Christian thing--this church thing—correctly; for anybody to come here on a Sunday morning, sit through service, and then walk out wondering if anybody even knew you were here. It should be impossible, but I’m afraid it might happen more than we think.

They say that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. At least when someone hates you, they are thinking about you, they are noticing you. But when someone is indifferent, when they pay no attention, when there is no consideration… that’s hard to take.

To love someone begins with seeing them. With stepping outside of our own selfie-driven, self-contained bubble, and paying attention to someone else.

And this was something Jesus was so good at. Think of the stories of Jesus, walking in crowds, and then noticing individual people.

I think of the woman with the issue of blood. For 12 years she had been poked and prodded by the doctors. For 12 years she had been a medical mystery impossible to solve. For 12 long years she had been considered unclean by the rules of religious purity. And then, one day, she sees Jesus walking along in a huge crowd of people, and she manages to squirm her way through and just catch the hem of his robe, and immediately Jesus says: “Who touched me?” And the disciples think He’s losing it. There’s a huge crowd, everybody is trying to touch Him. There are elbows flying and feet getting stepped on. But Jesus is insistent, He felt the power go out, and He particularizes the woman, He singles her out, and makes sure she departs not only with healing but a blessing as well. (Mark 5:25-34)

Or, again, another crowd. People are climbing houses and trees just to get a glimpse of Jesus. Everywhere He goes is like a Rose Bowl Parade. But Jesus sees one, a tax collector name Zaccheus, a man despised by his neighbors, and Jesus calls out to Him. He says: “Zaccheus, come down. For I am going to your house today.” (Luke 19:5) Jesus noticed. He considered others. He paid attention.

Jesus was not too busy to notice people. And guess what? Jesus was very busy. He had three short years of public ministry to teach about God’s love and prepare His disciples to understand His death. He had plenty to do, but He was not too busy to consider other people.

What about you? How are you doing at considering others? Do you need to maybe particularize some of the people around you? Do you need to take the time to hear somebody else’s story? Maybe there is someone here at church, someone you have been seeing for a while, but you have never really met. Maybe you need to walk up to that person, break the ice, introduce yourself, and listen to their story.

Being the church begins with considering one another.

***An Irritant***Then, second, we are called to **spur one another on**. In the church, we are called to challenge one another; to get the best out of each other. Look again at all of **verse 24:**

**24**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

Spur. The word here, in the original language, is actually a word that means “irritate” or “exasperate.” So this verse is literally saying that we are supposed to irritate one another. Which, I suppose, can be—for some of us—a pretty good description of our church experience. Sometimes it seems like the church is filled with people who are only there to get under our skin.

But that’s not exactly what this means. I think the English translators made a good choice when they chose the word “spur.” You know what a spur is, right? I was just in Texas. We didn’t ride any horses, but that’s the land of the spur. A spur is a little metal thing that a cowboy wears on the heel of his boot. When he rides a horse, he sometimes sticks that little metal thing into the horse’s side. The idea is not to hurt the horse, or draw blood, but to irritate the horse a little bit. To get the horse’s attention, and help direct the horse in the way it should go.

And that’s the idea here. It’s the idea of accountability. It’s the idea that in the church, we need one another to help provoke us in the right direction. We need brothers and sisters who will speak to us the truth in love; who can point out when our lives are moving away from Jesus and who can steer us back toward Him.

This can be a little uncomfortable. We’re not always excited about having the hard conversation with someone whose words or behavior is less than Christian. And we’re not really crazy about putting our lives out there for other people to examine. Sometimes we wish other people would mind their own business.

But we need this. We need accountability. Proverbs says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” (27:17) We need to be in a community of people who have the courage to call out our junk.

And notice, the point is not to just have a critical spirit. The idea is not to take delight in finding other people’s flaws. It’s to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. The goal is to help us be better Christ-followers, to challenge one another to reflect more and more of the love of Christ. It’s like when you work out with a group of people in a gym. There will be people there pushing you to lift more weight, to run a little faster, to swim one more lap. Not because they want to tear you down, but because they want to build you up. To make you stronger, faster, thinner. In the same way, in the church, we need to push each other to build up our spiritual muscles. To flex our love.

So how are you doing at this? Who are you spurring on? Maybe there is someone you need to have a conversation with about how they treat their spouse; or being spiritually present for their kids. Maybe there is someone you need to invite to pray with you; or someone you need to get into a Bible study with.

And who has permission to be a spiritual irritant in your life? Are you open to someone asking you hard questions? Do you allow someone to have that kind of role in your walk with Jesus?

***The Gathered People of God***Our faith is not private. Our faith in Jesus affects the way we are in the church. We’re called to consider one another. We’re called to spur one another on. Now, third, we are called to **meet with one another**. It’s important that we come to the gathering of the church. The beginning of **verse 25:**

**25**not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,

Here we go. Here’s the preacher talking about how you are supposed to come to church on Sunday morning. Here’s the lecture on church attendance.

I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to think of myself as the church police. We try to pay attention to who is here every week, but it’s not like we are keeping an attendance record. We don’t hand out gold stars for perfect attendance.

But the Bible does say it is important. When the author of Hebrews talks about how we respond to Jesus’ love for us, He includes showing up for the weekly meeting as an important part of that.

Now, let’s get something straight. Our weekly meetings probably do not look much like their regular meetings. That is to say, they would be mystified by our projection system and our electric guitar and our drum kits. Not to say, they would have had a hard time imagining our church building and the size of our meeting space. Most of the churches back then were house churches, and they gathered in groups that were counted by the dozens, not the hundreds.

And yet, almost from the moment Jesus rose from the grave groups of Christians were meeting weekly on Sunday mornings, and the heart of what they did was the heart of what we still do today. They joined their voices together in hymns and spiritual songs, they listened to teaching from the word, and they celebrated salvation in the sacraments of baptism and communion. Not to mention they prayed together and fellowshipped together.

And that weekly meeting has always been a crucial part of being the church. That meeting has been the opportunity for Christians to share in their faith, to renew their commitment to Christ, and to strengthen one another.

But even back when the Bible was being written, there were people who were opting out. You see that in verse 25? Some were in the habit of skipping the meeting. Some thought they had better things to do on Sunday morning. Some were trying to be “lone ranger” Christians.

The author of Hebrews is saying: “Don’t do that. Don’t cheat yourself in that way.” He’s almost pleading, and I almost want to plead with you as well. Don’t get in the habit of missing church. When you are not here, you miss us and we miss you. When you are not here, the church suffers. Your voice is not present to add to the singing. Your prayers are not present to add to the prayers of the rest of us. Your face is not out in the lobby to consider others and encourage them and spur us on. We miss you.

And I hope you miss us. You miss the opportunity to be encouraged. You miss the opportunity to connect with Jesus, and to be energized in worship, and to feel your faith quickened by the rest of us.

There is something vital and life-giving and important about the gathered people of God.

I know that this Sunday, with the beginning of Sunday School, can be a Sunday that brings a lot of people back to church after a summer where there were a lot of other things competing for your Sunday mornings. If you’re back after being gone for a while, I’m really glad you are here. And I want to challenge you to make regular Sunday attendance a priority. Make a habit out of being here on Sunday. I know it’s easy to get in the habit of missing, but I hope you can make it a habit to be here.

***Walking Alongside***Then, fourth, we are called to **encourage one another**. In the church, we are called to walk alongside of each other; to hold one another up. The end of **verse 25:**

but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The word translated “encouraging” here is a great word in Greek. It is *parakaleo.* It’s a compound word that’s pretty powerful. “Para” is a word that means “to come alongside.” And “Kaleo” is a word that is translated as “speak kindly to.” So, together, “parakaleo” means to come alongside and speak kindly to one another. In other words, encouragement. Strengthen. Comfort.

This word is pretty much the opposite of the word for “spur.” That word means to irritate, to provoke, to push. That’s a strong word, almost confrontational. Some of you, maybe, are thinking you’d like to do the spur thing. Maybe there are some people in the church that you would like to set straight. Right? Some people who need to hear a piece of your mind.

Well, this word is the balance to that. This word is what keeps us all from turning into the “church lady,” always looking to point out flaws. Because encouragement calls us to be gentle. Encouragement is about grace. It’s about recognizing that there are struggles, that we all struggle; and sometimes what people need is not a shove in the back but an arm around the shoulders.

So both of these things are necessary in the church. Both of these are a part of being in loving community.

We need to be a group of people that encourage one another. Not just pointing out shortcomings, but helping to carry the burden. Coming alongside and saying: “How can I help you carry the load?” Helping people to run the race that is marked out before us, not giving up, not quitting to soon.

At that service at Austin Stone, they played a video that is a tremendous illustration of what this encouragement looks like. Derek Redmond was an Olympic sprinter from England at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. He was a record holder in the 400, but he had missed the 1988 Olympics because of an injury. In the four years that he worked to get ready for 1992, he had to endure 4 surgeries. Like all Olympic athletes, he made all sorts of sacrifices and dedicated countless hours of practice to get himself ready.

He was a favorite in Barcelona, and he cruised through his two qualifying races. But in the semi-finals, as he hit the backstretch, he felt his hamstring give way. His dad was in the stands. This is what happened:

**<<play video>>**

That’s “parakaleo.” That’s coming alongside.

When you see Derek get back up, when you see the pain in his face, that’s not just the pain of a torn hamstring. That’s the pain of 7 years of hard work, of a lifelong dream, being dashed. But Derek was going to finish. And when his dad comes up to him, and puts his arm around him, Derek says he thought it was another medical person, and he was going to tell them to go away, that he was going to finish. But it was his Dad. And his Dad got it. And he knew what it would mean to his son to cross that line. Parakaleo. Encouragement.

Church, in a congregation this size, we’ve got some people who are limping along right now. They’re just struggling to keep going. We’ve probably got some people who are on the ground, not even sure they can get back up. Who can you encourage? Who can you come alongside? Can you go up to somebody and say: “let me carry some of that load?”

This is what I mean when I say that our faith in Jesus is personal, but it can’t be private. Our faith in Jesus affects those around us. It has implications for how we are with one another. We are called to consider one another in the church. To see each other. To spur one another on. To challenge each other in love and good deeds. To meet together. To make this a priority. And to encourage one another. To carry one another’s burdens.

You need the church. And the church needs you.

So as we see the Day approaching, as we know there is a finish line when Jesus is going to come and make all things new, let’s respond to His love and grace in our lives by loving the brothers and sisters around us.