Hebrews 10:19-25 *Force of Habit: The Habit of Meeting Together*

***Sunday Morning Pattern***When we have a Starting Point class for people who are considering membership here at Hope Church one of the things we always do is share our God stories. And because I don’t want to ask anyone to do anything I’m unwilling to do myself, I always share my God story.

Pretty much all of you who have taken the Starting Point class, then, will recall that a big part of my story is that going to church was a habit for me growing up.

I grew up in a small town with a century old church, and on any given Sunday four generations of my family could be found sitting in the pews. My great-grandparents, my grandparents, my parents, and me and my siblings—we were all in church week in and week out.

In fact, I cannot remember ever having one single argument with my parents about whether I would be going to church or not. I never once questioned them or tried to get out of it. Not, mind you, because I was such a good and obedient child; but because I never realized there was any other option. If it was Sunday, we were in church. That’s just the way it was.

Like I said, it was a habit. Like Pavlov’s dogs, when the church bells rang on Sunday, we were there.

Now, if you remember my story, an important moment for me was when church stopped being something I just did and became something I chose. Part of the danger of making church attendance into a routine is that it can become an empty exercise, just something I do because that’s what I’ve always done. It was very important for me to come to the realization that having a relationship with Jesus is something I wanted. I didn’t want to just go through the motions.

But that doesn’t mean that I am sorry that church attendance was habitual for me growing up. Far from it! By making regular church attendance a part of our weekly rhythm, my parents instilled a pattern in me that has lasted a lifetime. More than that, they put me in a position to learn the stories of the Bible and hear the good news of Jesus. Because I was habitually involved in church and church activities, I was well-positioned to receive God’s grace.

***Declining Attendance***You may have heard that church attendance in America is declining. A Pew Research study released last October showed that in the last decade the share of Americans who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7 percentage points. **10 years ago**, the number of regular worship attendees outnumbered those who attend only occasionally or none at all 52% to 47%. **Today, those numbers have flipped**. More Americans now say they attend religious services a few times a year or less than say they attend at least monthly (54% to 45%). <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

Even perceptions of what constitutes regular attendance are changing. One author on the trend interviewed for a Washington Post article said

that when he moved to Charlottesville to be the college and young-adult minister at Christ Episcopal Church, “regular church attendance” usually meant someone would attend three times a month. Now, he said, someone who attends regularly is someone who attends once a month. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/11/15/christianity-is-declining-rapid-pace-americans-still-hold-positive-views-about-religions-role-society/>

We are seeing similar trends right here at Hope Church. At our annual meeting in December we noted that our **active church membership increased** 14 people in 2019. Our official membership count is 557 teen and adult confessing members. But, at the same time, our Sunday **morning attendance declined** by 24 people per Sunday, to 429 per week. This continues a 4-year trend of declining attendance, while our actual membership has increased over the same time frame.

By every other metric we can think of to measure church involvement, we have as many people connected to Hope Church as we ever have. We had more pre-school and elementary age children involved in our Christmas choir than ever before. Our youth group trips and special events are connecting to more students than ever before as well. And yet, in our weekly Sunday School and youth group meetings our attendance numbers are flat or declining.

The only conclusion we can reach: people are not making attendance a consistent habit.

Now, I want to be careful here. There is a perception of churches that all they want is another name and another dollar. That is, sometimes churches give off the impression that they just want to point to the size of the crowd they can gather and the amount of money they can raise. Sometimes it seems like churches are just treating you as a means to an end.

I don’t want to do that. My friend Dave Bartlett likes to say that numbers in the church matter because every number represents an ever-living, never-dying soul. We care about attendance numbers at Hope Church because each person in attendance at one of our services or programs represents a person who has an opportunity to grow closer in their relationship with the Creator and Redeemer of the world. And that matters. My concern with declining attendance is whether we are doing the best job we can in helping people grow in their relationship with Jesus.

I also want to be careful that I don’t give the impression that church attendance is the most important thing in your relationship with Jesus. It’s not. Just because you are in the church building every time the doors are open does not necessarily make you a Christian. As the saying goes: just because you are standing in a garage, that doesn’t make you a car. And, vice versa, you can be a Christian without regularly attending church.

But—and this is going to be the point of this whole sermon series—regular, **habitual church attendance can be one of the best ways we put ourselves in the path of God’s grace**. If you want to grow and develop in your relationship with God, prioritize church attendance. If you want to regularly receive the blessings of God’s grace, regularly attending church is one of the most important things you can do.

The Bible says so.

The passage that we are going to be looking at for the next five weeks is **Hebrews 10:19-25**. This is a passage that talks about making church attendance a habit:

**19**Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, **20**by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, **21**and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22**let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. **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.

***One Long Sentence***The key line for our purposes is the phrase at the **beginning of verse 25**: “not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” Church attendance can be a habit. It can be a habit that we regularly attend church, or it can be a habit that we don’t.

A little context here. The book of Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who were under quite a bit of pressure to stop being Christians. There is mention of persecution, prison, and the confiscation of property (cf. Heb. 10:32-34). The letter is written to assure them of God’s preservation, and to urge them to persevere.

But obviously, some of them were dropping out. They were no longer “meeting together.” Attendance at the weekly, Sunday gatherings of the church was one of the most visible ways they were exposing themselves to persecution, so understandably some were avoiding it. But the author of Hebrews says this is a grave mistake.

This passage is going to be our key text for the next 5 weeks. We are going to have the opportunity to dig around in it quite a bit. But let me see if I can give you a quick overview of the passage so that we can understand the logic.

It doesn’t show up in English, but this passage is actually one long sentence in the original Greek. The translators have had mercy on us by breaking it down into English sentences, but originally it is all one, long, extended thought. I’m kind of a grammar geek, so I enjoy figuring out the structure of this thought.

You’ll notice that this is a “since/then” kind of thought. Since certain things are true, then (or “therefore”) certain other things should happen.

The “since” part is **verses 19-21**. The author says: “since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” and “[since (it is implied)] we have a new and living way through the curtain” and “since we have a great priest over the house of God.” Essentially, this is a summary of the things that were talked about in the first 9 chapters. The audience for this book is a group of Christians who have left Judaism (that’s why it is called “Hebrews”); and so, the thought is that if they leave Christianity, they are going to go back to Judaism. The first 9 chapters, then, are an explanation of how Jesus is better than the old sacrificial system. In the old system, access to God was limited, there was a curtain keeping the people out, only the high priest could approach God and even he could only do so quickly because he was always a sinful person.

But Jesus has changed all that. Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice on the cross tore down the curtain that separated us from God; and Jesus’ position as fully God and fully human who never sinned makes him the perfect High Priest. The argument of the first 9 chapters, highlighted and summarized here, is that Jesus is better. Jesus has done everything that needs to be done. There is nothing we can do to add or take away from the salvation that has been won by Jesus.

Which leads to the “therefore.” Since this is all true, then we should do certain things. Even though “therefore” is the first word in the passage, it might be better to read it later, like at the **beginning of verse 22,** and the beginning of verse 23, and the beginning of verse 24.

I actually like to think of this passage as the “salad passage” because there is so much “let us” in it. The way the author sees it, there are at least three things that should follow from what Jesus has done. Since Jesus is the perfect High Priest who opened the curtain, therefore let us draw near to God…therefore, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess…and therefore, let us consider how we may spur one another on.

And how are we supposed to do those things? **That’s verse 25.** By not giving up the habit of meeting together. Or, to put it more positively, by continuing to meet together. It is by continuing to meet together that we are best positioned to accomplish these things.

That, then, is the outline for this series. We’re going to talk about why the habit of weekly church attendance is important, and we’re going to find our answers in the “let us’s” of Hebrews 10: we make meeting together a habit so that we can **draw near to God**, so that we can **hold unswervingly to the hope we profess**, and so we can **spur one another on toward love and good deeds**. Then, we are going to add one more, from the middle of verse 25, so that **we can encourage one another.** Those will be the next 4 sermons.

***In the Path of God’s Grace***Before we leave the structure of this passage, I have one more important thing to point out, and it has to do with the “since” part, **verses 19-22**. We probably won’t spend much time on these verses in the weeks to come, but it is important to remember that they are there.

The whole train of thought of this passage is that because Jesus has already accomplished these things for us, there is nothing left for us to do. The exhortations of this passage are not about earning God’s favor or twisting His arm into showing us grace; rather they are the proper and logical response to the grace that has been given.

This goes back to what I said earlier about going to church in order to be a Christian. Being here week after week does not make you a believer in Christ. You are not earning points on some cosmic score sheet with God. But, in light of what God has done for us, it makes sense that we would want to do the things where we can best experience His grace.

David Mathis has written a book called “Habits of Grace” which I am using for this series. It’s a book about Bible reading and prayer and church attendance—the kind of habits that keep us in regular contact with God. **He writes**:

The [habits] of grace are not about earning God’s favor, twisting his arm, or controlling his blessing, but readying ourselves for consistent saturation in the roll of his tides. (p. 21)

If you imagine God’s grace as a gigantic ocean, you realize pretty quickly there is nothing you can do to control it or direct it. But what you can do is walk down to the beach be positioned to be soaked in it when the tide rolls in.

Later, switching metaphors slightly, **Mathis writes:**

We cannot earn God’s grace or make it flow apart from his free gift. But we can position ourselves to go on getting as he keeps on giving. We can “fight to walk in the paths where he has promised his blessings.” We can ready ourselves to remain receivers along his regular routes.. (p. 25)

My argument in this series is that the habit of meeting together is one of the main routes God has promised to pour out his blessings. The big idea of the series, again, is that **the habit of weekly church attendance is one of the most important ways we put ourselves in the path of God’s grace.**

So don’t come to church to earn God’s favor; He gives it freely by His grace. Don’t come to church to twist God’s arm into saving you; our salvation is not by works. But do come to church because meeting together with God’s people is one of the main paths where the blessings of God are encourntered.

***The Power of Habit***For the rest of the time we have this morning, I want to talk about habits. In preparation for this series, I picked up a book called “The Power of Habit” by Charles Duhigg. It’s not a Christian book, but it is a survey of research that has been done the last few decades on habits and why we do the things we do. There are some insights about habits that I think are very useful as we think about cultivating the habit of regular church attendance. I have four things.

**1. Habits free our focus.**Habits are defined as “the choices that all of us deliberately make at some point, and then stop thinking about but continue doing.” (Duhigg, p. xvii) Habits are basically when our brains go into auto-pilot.

Have you ever had the sensation of getting in your car and getting a few blocks from your home and then wondering if you put the garage door down or not? You’re pretty sure you did, but you have no active memory of doing it. That’s because the whole process of starting your car, backing down the driveway, and pushing the button on your opener has become such a habit that you can do it without actively thinking about it.

Or, better yet, have you ever driven to work and then, once you get there, realized you have no memory of the drive? Sometimes we think we must have been distracted, but actually, it’s because we are so used to that drive that we can do it out of habit. If something had happened, if a car had pulled in front of you or the roads had been icy, your brain would have snapped out of auto-pilot and reacted. But as long as the drive stayed routine, your brain felt free to focus on other things.

I read a profile of President Obama in Vanity Fair back when he was still in office, and one of the things it noted was that Obama always wore a gray or blue suit. This was an intentional decision on his part.

“You’ll see I wear only gray or blue suits,” he said. “I’m trying to pare down decisions. I don’t want to make decisions about what I’m eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make.” He mentioned research that shows the simple act of making decisions degrades one’s ability to make further decisions. It’s why shopping is so exhausting. “You need to focus your decision-making energy. You need to routinize yourself. You can’t be going through the day distracted by trivia.” <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2012/10/michael-lewis-profile-barack-obama>

The point is that habits are a God-designed shortcut our brains utilize to keep from having to make too many decisions. The more good habits you can create, the less you have to muster up the will power to do those things. This holds true for exercise and sleep as well as Bible-reading and church attendance. David Mathis writes:

By forming good habits — for instance, by making a beeline to the Bible in the morning, by praying at meals and at regular points throughout the day, and by meeting together with the body of Christ — we position ourselves in the paths of God’s grace. Habits free us from being distracted by our own actions and techniques so our attention can focus on God. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-will-hold-you-through-your-habits>

By making regular attendance at church on Sundays a habit, you can eliminate those internal debates with yourself about whether to push the snooze button on the alarm an extra-time on Sunday morning; you can eliminate family votes on Saturday evening about what you will be doing the next day; and you can get better at controlling your weekend schedule.

**2. Habits are cumulative.**Researchers have identified what they call “keystone habits.” They’ve noted that the development of certain habits can lead to significant changes across the board. For example, Duhigg notes research into weight loss. He writes that conventional wisdom has long been that the only way to make substantive gains in weight loss was to radically alter a person’s life. So when a doctor told a patient it was time to lose the weight it would usually involve an overhaul of the person’s diet, an aggressive new exercise plan, and ongoing counseling sessions. The only problem was that such a radical change in habits was overwhelming, and most patients quit before they started.

Then a group of researchers tried something new. They asked 1600 overweight people to make one small change. Once a week, they were told, they should keep a food journal for that one day.

It was hard. Many forgot their journals or would snack and not note it. But for some, it became a new habit. Not just once a day, but every day. And those who kept regular food journals began to notice patterns in their eating. They realized, for example, that they often ate a snack at 10 am, so they started keeping a healthy option at their desk. Others used their journals to plan their menus in advance, and thus avoid grabbing whatever was convenient. Researchers had not suggested any of these behaviors, but this one keystone habit of food journaling led to all kinds of other significant changes. At the end of 6 months, those who had kept daily food journals lost twice as much as everyone else in the study. (Duhigg, p. 120-121)

My suggestion, and (I believe) the suggestion of Hebrews 10, is that church attendance can be a keystone habit in your relationship with God. If you want to deepen your faith and grow spiritually in this New Year, a good place to start is by making regular church attendance a keystone habit.

**3. Habits protect what is important.**There was a rather famous experiment conducted at Stanford in the 1960s. A group of four-year-olds were brought into a room with a selection of treats, including marshmallows. They were offered a deal: they could eat one marshmallow right away, of if they waited awhile, they could eat two. Then the researchers left the room. Some kids gave in to temptation right away, others held out for awhile, and 30 percent made it the full 15 minutes until the researcher came back. These were duly given two marshmallows.

The researchers kept careful track of which children had the self-control to earn the second treat. Then, years later, they tracked down the study’s participants and looked at their grades, their SAT scores and their ability to maintain friendships. What they discovered was that those who at age 4 could muster the will-power to delay gratification the longest were those who at 18 were the most successful in school, the most popular among their peer group, and doing the fewest amount of drugs. It seemed that if you knew how to avoid temptation as a youngster you were more likely to grow up with the self-regulatory skills to do your homework, make friends, and resist peer pressure. (Duhigg, 133)

This study, and others like it, show that good habits help prepare us for moments of pressure. Companies like Starbucks regularly role play scenarios with their employees where they are confronted by angry customers so that, when it happens for real, the employee knows how to respond without losing his or her cool. Practicing good habits when the stakes are low gives people the tools to make good choices when the chips are down.

In the same way, practicing good habits in your relationship with God during the routine parts of life—going to church week after week even when you don’t feel particularly stressed or troubled—puts us in position to rely on God when the storms of life come our way. David Mathis writes:

Good habits protect what’s most important. They keep us on the track of perseverance even when we don’t feel like persevering. They help us access the channels of God’s ongoing grace in the times we need it most (often when we don’t feel like it), and so preserve and keep our souls. Good spiritual habits keep us in God’s word, and in prayer, and among God’s people, even as we ride the emotional ups and downs of life. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-will-hold-you-through-your-habits>

**4. Habits are driven by desire.**One of the most interesting things I read about in the Habit book is what is known as the Habit Loop. The habit loop is a simple three step process. There is a cue, something that triggers an action. Then there is the routine, which is the habit itself. And that leads to a reward, the result of the action that keeps you coming back.

The book describes an experiment done with a monkey. He was fitted with electrodes to measure his brain activity, and then set in front of a computer screen. His job was to touch a lever whenever a shape appeared on the screen. When he did so successfully, a drop of blackberry juice would run down a tube and onto his lips. The monkey really liked blackberry juice.

So, there was a cue: the shape on the screen. There was routine: pulling the lever. And there was a reward: blackberry juice. Printouts of the monkey’s brain activity showed a sharp increase whenever the juice arrived--a spike of pleasure that said “I got a reward!”

But something interesting happened: the better the monkey got at pulling the lever—the more it became a habit—the quicker the pleasure center of his brain would light up. It got to the point where as soon as he saw the shape on the screen--the “I got a reward!” part of his brain would spike. Even before he got the blackberry juice. (Duhigg, p. 45-46)

Scientists concluded that this is how habits are formed: we begin to desire the reward so much that as soon as we receive the cue, we begin to carry out the routine We know that the thing we desire is coming, so our brains automatically carry out the habit.

What does this have to do with going to church?

Well, the reward in going to church is not sitting in pews and listening to sermons. Rather, the reward—the thing we desire—is more of Jesus. And the more often we that encounter Jesus at church and see His grace flowing in our lives, the more habitual will become our desire to be at the meeting week after week. David Mathis again:

The ultimate goal of cultivating holy habits is having Jesus, “possessing him” by faith, knowing and enjoying him. He is the great end of perseverance. He himself is the center and apex and essence of our great reward… Habits of grace…help us get our eyes off ourselves so that we might regularly taste “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” ([Philippians 3:8](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Phil%203.8)). They help to make persevering in the faith not be about our technique and actions, but about knowing Jesus.

…The great reward that drives our habits is knowing him. The great end of all our habits, and all our perseverance, is a *person*.

So as we enter into a New Year let me challenge you to commit to making regular attendance at church a habit. This keystone habit is one of the best ways we can put ourselves in the path of God’s grace.