Hebrews 10:24 *Force of Habit: Spur One Another On*

***Missing Church***When I am away on a Sunday morning, I like to worship at other churches as much as possible. It doesn’t happen that often, and sometimes the activities we have planned for our vacation mean we are not able to find a place to worship on Sunday morning; but in general, if I’m not here on Sunday morning, I like to visit another church.

I have a few different criteria for choosing a church to visit. If I am near a community where a colleague or friend is the pastor, that is generally my first choice. If I am in a bigger city, one where there is a pastor who has written a book I’ve read or a church that has a band whose music I know, that might be where I go. Other times, I’ll look for the closest Reformed Church or a church that is similar in style and belief to our own.

For me, attending another church is both relaxing and challenging. The relaxing part comes because it is nice to be able to sit and listen to the ministry of the Word. I listen to and read a lot of sermons during the week, but it isn’t very often that I get to sit and listen to someone else preach on Sunday mornings. The challenging part, though, is I often feel like I’m investigating the other church. Since I don’t visit other churches often, when I do, I find myself looking around and seeing what I can learn that might apply to our own church. Sometimes that makes it hard for me to focus on Jesus, because I’m so busy making mental notes.

But here’s the thing that I’ve found: even when I go to a church with really great preaching and really great music; and even when I go to a church with great hospitality and really good facilities; even when I go to a church that does everything better than we do; I still miss being at Hope. I’ve been to some of the bigger and better churches around the Midwest—churches that I admire and respect and can learn a lot from—but for me, I’d still rather be here on Sunday morning.

And here’s why: it’s because you all are here. If I miss church on a Sunday morning, I miss you.

***“Let Us”***We are in a series of messages we are calling “Force of Habit.” We’re talking about making a Habit out of attending Sunday Morning worship. And the Bible text for the series is **Hebrews 10:19-25:**

**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.

We’ve been saying that there is an argument being made in these verses. Because Jesus has already done all the work of opening a new and living way to God, we should not give up on faith but we should make a habit out of meeting together in order to deepen and grow our commitment to Him. And the benefits of meeting together are contained in the exhortations of this passage—what I’ve been calling the “salad verses”—the three “Let us” phrases.

So in this series, we’re talking about the things we do on Sunday morning. We have God’s ear. That is, we worship. That’s verse 22: “Let us draw near to God.” We also hear God’s voice. That is, we listen to a sermon and we look at God’s Word. That’s verse 23: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.” And, we are part of God’s body. That is, we have fellowship with one another. That’s verse 24, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds.” That’s what we are going to talk about today and next week.

And if I’m honest, this is the main reason why it is important for us to belong to a local church. This is why it matters if you are, physically, here. Because there is a lot of great music out there that you can listen to and sing along to. And there are a ton of great preachers and Bible teachers out there that you can watch on YouTube or download on podcasts. Or, if you wanted, you could go from church to church on Sunday mornings—there are lots of good ones all over Northwest Iowa—and I am sure you could benefit from the different styles of worship and the different messages you would hear; but what you would miss is you would miss being a part of us.

The church is people. Remember the little finger play? “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and see all the people.” The church is people, and when you miss on Sunday morning you miss church.

I really appreciate the elders doing the video intros for this series of sermons. I give them a lot of credit, because talking in front of a camera was not really in any of their comfort zones. And they all knew what the topic would be for their intro, so they tailored their comments accordingly. And yet, when we asked them what they miss if they miss a Sunday morning, they all said essentially the same thing: they miss the people.

Now think about that. I’m the one that was asking the questions. But none of them said: “Oh, I’d miss the sermon.” Hello? Do you not see me? Craig was the one behind the camera. He’s standing right there. But none of them said “I miss the singing.” They all said, to an elder, “If I miss church on Sunday morning, I miss the people.”

So, making a habit of Sunday mornings worship is one of the ways we are part of the body of Christ. This is so important that we are actually going to give it two sermons. This week we are going to talk about spurring one another on to love and good deeds; next week we’ll talk about encouraging one another.

***Lest Your Heart Be Hardened***Let’s put just **verse 24** up on the screen. This is our text, and it is our big idea. There are three words or phrases I want to pull out of this verse: spur one another on, love, and good deeds.

First, **spur one another on**. Being a part of the church is important because **we need the provocation and protection of other believers** who are willing to challenge us to stay committed to Jesus.

Spur. In the original Greek, this is a word that means “irritate” or “exasperate.” It’s not always a positive word. This verse is literally saying that we are supposed to provoke 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.” 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.

David Mathis, in the book *Habits of Grace* writes: “True fellowship not only labors to win the lost, but serves to keep fellow saints saved (146).” We are here to protect one another. To collectively challenge ourselves to live up to our profession. Mathis points to **Hebrews 3:12-13,** which he calls a twin text to Hebrews 10:24:

**12**See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. **13**But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

The Bible gives the responsibility of guarding one another’s hearts from the hardening of sin’s deceitfulness to brothers and sisters within the church. A long time ago, Cain asked God, rather sarcastically, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Bible’s answer is, in the church, yes you are. Mathis writes about these verses:

Here the charge lands not on the drifting saint to get himself back on the path, but on the others in the community—to have enough proximity to him, awareness of him, and regularity with him to spot the drift and war with him, for him, against the sin. (148)

This can be a little uncomfortable. We’re not always excited about having the hard conversation with someone whose words or behavior are 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.

In a book called *Church, Why Bother?* Philip Yancey compares the church to a 12-Step Recovery program. He shares a brief anecdote about the beginnings of Alcoholics Anonymous. He writes:

According to historian Ernest Kurtz, Alcoholics Anonymous came out of a discovery Bill Wilson made in his first meeting with Doctor Bob Smith. On his own, Bill had stayed sober for six months until he made a trip out of town, where a business deal fell through. Depressed, wandering a hotel lobby, he heard familiar sounds of laughter and ice tinkling in glasses. He headed toward the bar, thinking “I need a drink.”

Suddenly a brand new thought came to him, stopping him in his tracks: “No, I don’t need a drink—I need another alcoholic!” Walking instead toward the lobby telephones, he began a sequence of calls that put him in touch with Dr. Smith, who would become AA’s cofounder.

Church is a place where I can say unashamedly, “I don’t need to sin. I need another sinner.” Perhaps together we can keep each other accountable, on the path. (Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?,* p. 51-52)

We are all sinners. We all have struggles. But one of the great things about the church—a reason to love the church in fact—is that it is full of people who care enough about us to come after us when we stray.

***By Our Love***Now, second. Let’s **put the verse back up on** the screen and pay attention to the word love. We should make a habit of meeting together so that we can spur one another toward love. **Church is the laboratory where we learn to love.**

The book of 1 John was written to help people identify the evidence of true salvation in their lives. The primary thing we are supposed to look for? Genuine love for others**. 1 John 3:14** says:

**14**We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

Mark Dever writes:

Do you want to know that your new life is real? Commit yourself to a local group of saved sinners. Try to love them. Don’t just do it for three weeks. Don’t just do it for six months. Do it for years. And I think you’ll find out, and others will, too, whether or not you love God. The truth will show itself. (quoted by Josh Harris, *Stop Dating the Church*, p. 57)

That’s what I mean when I say the church is a laboratory for learning to love. One of the Bible’s favorite metaphors for the church is a family. That’s why it refers to fellow believers as brothers and sisters. And one of the defining traits of a family is that they have just as much potential to annoy us as to make us happy. As the old saying goes: “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.” In the same way, you don’t get to choose who all is a part of the church you belong to; but you can commit to loving everyone in the church regardless of whether you have anything else in common. We’re all part of the same family.

Philip Yancey tells this story about his childhood church:

I think back fondly on two people in the church of my childhood in Atlanta, Georgia—people I took turns sitting with when my mother was off teaching Sunday School. I loved sitting with Mrs. Payton because she wore animals around her neck. She had a stole, a garish bit of frippery that consisted of two minks biting each other’s tails. All during the service I would play with the hard, shiny eyes, the sharp pointed teeth, and the soft skin of those animals. Mrs. Payton’s minks helped me endure many a wearisome sermon.

Mr. Ponce wore no animals around his neck, but I knew no kinder person anywhere. He had six children of his own, and he seemed happy only when a child was occupying his lap. He was a huge man, and I could sit there contentedly for an entire service without his leg falling asleep. He praised the pictures I drew on the church bulletin, and drew funny faces in my hands that would smile and wink when I moved my fingers a certain way.

I remember Mr. Ponce for his kindness, and also for an enormous sprout of nasal hair, easily visible when I looked up from his lap. If you had asked me then who I liked best, Mrs. Payton or Mr. Ponce, I would have had a hard time answering, but probably Mr. Ponce would get the edge. My own father died when I was only a year old, and Mr. Ponce provided for me a comforting male presence.

Later, when I grew older and more sophisticated, I learned the facts about Mrs. Payton and Mr. Ponce. Mrs. Payton was rich, which accounted for the animals around her neck. Her family owned a successful Cadillac dealership. Mr. Ponce, on the other hand, drove a garbage truck and barely brought in enough money to support his large family. When I learned these facts, I realized to my shame that as an adult I probably would not have befriended Mr. Ponce. Conversation with him would have been awkward, we might have run out of things to discuss. We probably would have shared few interests.

I am glad, very glad, that the church of Jesus Christ in my childhood included both of these friends. I now see that the church should be an environment where both Mrs. Payton of the hairy stole and Mr. Ponce of the hairy nose should feel equally welcome. (*Church, Why Bother?* p. 53-54)

Church is the community in which we practice love. In Philippians 4 the Apostle Paul makes reference **to two of his friends**:

**2**I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3**Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

This is one of those tantalizing pieces of Bible gossip. This is the only reference we have to Euodia and Syntyche. You can’t help but wonder what they were fighting about. Did they both wear the same hat on Easter Sunday? Did one of them make a biting comment about the other’s contribution to the church potluck? Or was it something more significant? (Probably). But either way, Paul is pleading with them to find a way to love each other again. And he’s asking the others in the church to help spur them in this direction.

Jesus said the world will know we are His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35). We should make a habit of meeting together so that we can learn to love.

***Created to do Good Works***Third point. Back to **Hebrews 10:24.** Now let’s think about good deeds. Don’t give up the habit of meeting together because when we meet together we can spur one another on towards good deeds. I’ll put it like this: **if you want to be the kind of person who does good things, then you should hang around other people who do good things**.

Let me be very clear: it is not good deeds that are going to save you. Just like being present in church Sunday after Sunday isn’t going to save you either. Remember, the whole context of this passage in Hebrews is that Jesus has already done the work. It’s His sacrifice that has opened a new and living way to God. His sacrifice was perfect. There’s nothing we can do to add to it.

**Ephesians 2:8-9** puts it like this:

**8**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **9**not by works, so that no one can boast.

Good deeds do not save you. You can not work your way to heaven.

But, if you know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then the desire to do good deeds should follow just as naturally as breathing. The **next verse in Ephesians:**

**10**For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Part of the saving work of Jesus in our lives is that we become a force for good in the world. As new creations in Christ we have been created to do good works. If the primary test of whether you are saved is if you love other people, a close follow-up is whether or not you are doing good works. As James says, faith without works is no faith at all.

And one of the best ways to increase the good that you do is to be around other people who are doing good. As the verse says, we are to spur one another on towards good deeds.

I’ve mentioned a couple of times in this series a book called *The Power of Habit*. It’s a book about how we form habits and how we can change them. And one of the things it talks about is the power of groups and communities to influence our behavior. In other words: peer pressure.

We often talk about peer pressure as a bad thing; we caution our kids that if they are hanging around with the wrong group of people they might feel pressured into doing things they know they shouldn’t be doing. But peer pressure can also be a force for good. If we are hanging around with the right kinds of people, peer pressure can influence us into positive choices.

An example cited in the book comes from the so-called Freedom Summer of 1964. In 1964 the battle over segregation in the South was at its hottest point. The Mississippi Summer Project was organized as 10-week program devoted to helping register black voters. College students from across the country—many of them white—were recruited to travel the South and assist with the project. Most who applied knew it would be dangerous, and in the months prior to the summer magazines and newspapers wrote about the project and predicted violence. The predictions proved true in the first week when three volunteers were killed by vigilantes. More than a thousand applicants were accepted into the program, but when the time came to start more than 300 stayed home.

Several years later, sociologists decided to make a study of those who stuck with the program to see if they could figure out what made the difference between volunteering in the face of danger and backing down. They read through the applications that had been submitted, and what they found was that those who followed-thru were those who belonged to the types of communities where both their close friends and their casual acquaintances expected them to get on the bus. The book says:

When [the researcher] looked at applicants with religious orientations—students who cited a “Christian duty to help those in need” as their motivation for applying…he found mixed levels of participation. However, among those applicants who mentioned a religious orientation and belonged to a religious organization, McAdam found that *every single one* made the trip to Mississippi. Once their communities knew they had been accepted into Freedom Summer, it was impossible for them to withdraw.

The book goes on to say:

When faced with the prospect of getting arrested (or worse) in Mississippi, most students probably had second thoughts. However, some were embedded in communities where social habits—the expectations of their friends and the peer pressure of their acquaintances—compelled participation, so regardless of their hesitations, they bought a bus ticket. Others—who also cared about civil rights—belonged to communities where the social habits pointed in a slightly different direction, so they thought to themselves, *Maybe I’ll just stay home*. (228-229)

In other words, if you want to be the kind of person who does good things, then you should hang around people who do good things. If you want to be the kind of person who cares about the poor, then you should hang around people who take trips to Haiti. If you want to be the kind of person who cares about helping kids, then you should hang around people who pack meals for school kids on the weekend. If you want to be the kind of person who helps people who are struggling to feel loved, then you should hang around people who celebrate the good news of God’s love.

You get the idea. One of the reasons to make a habit of gathering with the church week after week is because we can spur one another on to love and good deeds.

***People Who Jump***Last week we looked briefly at a phrase from later in Hebrews 10 **that I really liked**:

**39**But we do not belong to those who shrink back.

I really like that phrase. To put it positively: We belong to those who don’t shrink back. That’s a group I want to be a part of. That’s what we represent to each other.

It reminds me of a story I’ve told before:

There was a general who was reviewing a platoon of paratroopers. These were highly trained special forces who were among the bravest in all the military. These men represented the sharp point of the spear, men who knew that in any invasion they would be the first ones in, jumping from thousands of feet to land behind enemy lines. They stood in their finest uniforms as the general worked his way down the line.

With each man, the general asked the same question: “How do you like jumping son?” And man after man saluted smartly and said: “Sir! I LOVE to JUMP! Sir!” Until finally, the general got to a man near the end of the line and asked: “How do you like jumping son?” To which the man replied: “Sir! I HATE to JUMP! Sir!” Astonished, the general asked, “Then why are you a paratrooper, son?” To which the soldier replied: “Sir! I LOVE to be around PEOPLE WHO JUMP!”

We are the church. We are the people who don’t shrink back. I love to be here every Sunday because I love to be around people like you.