

“The Strongest Warning in the Bible”

Heb. 10:26-31

- INTRO. - The Book of Hebrews is known for its strong warning passages. We have already seen three of them, and today we come to the fourth. And since *this one* is widely regarded as the strongest of the four – we can rightly say that this is the strongest warning in the Bible.
- *All* of the warning passages in this book deal with the same thing – the danger of falling short of embracing the gospel and receiving eternal life through saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- In *this* case, the danger is of the greatest kind – because this warning has to do with *apostasy* – a knowing (and intentional) turning away from the truth after having been exposed to it.
- John MacArthur says that “this chapter...deals with those who had heard the gospel, had come face-to-face with the claims of Christ, had been associated to some extent with His church, but [were in danger of turning] away.”
- He says, “These were people whose hearts had been warmed toward the gospel of Christ, who had made a superficial commitment of faith to Him, and had identified themselves visibly with the true church.”
- And yet, they were *not* genuinely born again. It is very clear (from this passage) that this is addressing the danger of apostasy, which is a turning away from the truth of the gospel without embracing it.
- This is the very same warning we saw in chapter 2 – the warning *not* to “drift away” from the gospel or to “neglect so great a salvation.” And (remember) the idea there is *not* to drift past the harbor and completely miss it.
- It’s the same warning we saw in chapter 3, that we would *not* be like the disobedient Jews in the wilderness and fall short of the Promise because of unbelief. It’s the same warning we saw in chapter 4, that we would *not* fall short of entering into God’s salvation rest.
- It’s the same warning we saw in chapter 6, that for those who have been enlightened (concerning the truth of the gospel) and have experienced (by close proximity) all the good blessings of salvation – but then have turned away – that it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.
- Now, I won’t go back to all those other warnings (because we have already dealt with them), but this warning is the strongest of them all, because this warning lays out the judgment that will come to those who become apostates.

- And again, this passage (like all the warning passages) has been greatly abused throughout the history of the church, and there have been *many* faulty interpretations and applications of it.
- For example, there are those who have taught that it teaches you can lose your salvation. Some think that this passage (along with the other warning passages) deal with those who are genuine believers who *then* apostatize (and turn away from the faith).
- No, the Bible is very clear – those who are truly born again children of God can never turn away from the faith – and those who *do* turn away from the faith were never truly saved to begin with.
- So whatever else we might say about this passage of Scripture, that is *one thing* we must rule out because the Bible is clear on that. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is clearly confirmed in Scripture.
- And (of course) there are *some* who believe this passage is addressed to Christians, but that would make the warning against apostasy meaningless. The only ones who could apostatize are those who have *not* yet been born again through spiritual regeneration.
- And since this is clearly a warning against the danger of apostasy, then it must be addressed to unbelievers. As we have seen, they are unbelievers that are very closely associated with the church, but they are unbelievers nonetheless.
- And (by the way) this reminds us of the sobering truth that there are always unbelievers sitting on church pews. As was the case here, so it still is today, there are many people who are closely associated with the church that are *not* truly born again.
- We don't have to go overseas to be a missionary, and we need to be reminded that (often) we have a great mission field right in our own churches. And one of our primary responsibilities is to do everything we can to make sure everyone that attends this church is truly saved.
- But this is a strong warning against rejecting God's truth and the serious consequences of doing that. In the previous section (vv. 19-25) he had appealed to his listeners to make the *appropriate* response to Christ's sacrifice. Here he warns against the *inappropriate* response.
- He's *not* saying that any of them have already apostatized, but he is saying that some of them are in danger of that. As O'Brien puts it, "He is deeply concerned that *some* (v. 25) are perilously close to falling over the precipice, and his intention is to pull them back from such a disastrous course of

action by the strongest of warnings that focuses on the certainty of divine judgment.”

- Apostasy is the most serious of all sins, because it is a deliberate and willful form of unbelief. It is *not* a sin of ignorance, but of rejecting known truth. And the great tragedy is, that there are some who move toward Christ, right up to the edge of saving faith, but never cross the line.
- This is where the Hebrews were. They were closely associated with the church. They knew the gospel. They had seen the changed lives of the true believers in that congregation. But they themselves had never made a full commitment to Christ.
- So (with that as the context) let's move (now) into this passage of Scripture, and we're going to divide this into 6 parts. We begin with:

I. THE CONDITION OF APOSTASY (v. 26a)

- Look with me at v. 26, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth...” (Stop right there.) This is (probably) the clearest biblical definition of apostasy.
- Apostasy is “receiving the knowledge of the truth [that is, the gospel]” but willfully remaining in sin. An apostate is one who has heard the truth of the gospel. In fact, he might even be able to articulate the gospel himself. For some, they may have sat under the teaching of the gospel

for a long time. But they have rejected it – *not* necessarily in a defiant manner, but by simply failing to embrace it.

- But the first part of v. 26 seems to emphasize two aspects of apostasy: the knowledge of the truth and the willful rejection of it. MacArthur says, “Every apostate is an unbeliever, but *not* every unbeliever is an apostate.”
- Why is that? Because *not* every unbeliever has heard the gospel. *Not* every unbeliever knows the gospel. But the apostate is one who knows it. He has a “knowledge of the truth.” He knows more than enough to be saved.
- There are two Greek words for “knowledge.” The word “gnosis” has to do with ordinary knowledge, but the word “epignosis” has to do with “full knowledge” (or “experiential knowledge”). That is the word that is used in v. 26.
- In other words, what this is saying, is that the ones being described here are those who have more than just a passing acquaintance with the gospel. They have full knowledge of it.
- Another way to explain this, is to say that the apostate has all the information. He lacks nothing (at all) intellectually. He may even be convinced of the truthfulness of it (intellectually) – but he has never committed himself to it.
- This is why you find most apostates in the church. They may have been attending church for years. They like all

the good things about the church, or maybe they just go to church because it is (culturally) the thing to do. But they have never responded to the gospel with genuine saving faith.

- Eventually (though) they may lose interest and fall away. They end up going back to a life of sin. They return to “sinning willfully.” And (for some) this process of falling away may be gradual, but eventually it will become obvious that they are an apostate.

- Notice the word “willfully” (there in v. 26). In the Greek, it comes first in the sentence, so that makes this emphatic. It carries with it the idea of deliberate intention.

- One commentator says, “The reference here is *not* to sins of ignorance or weakness, but to those that are planned out, determined [ahead of time], or done with forethought.”

- And the verb indicates that is a habitual activity. It is a present participle. So the idea is that of willfully continuing in sin.

- Of course, even genuine believers sin at times. But this is describing a lost person, who has sin as an ongoing pattern of his life. And the concept here also includes a settled way of thinking and believing. He is an unredeemed sinner, and sin is what characterizes his life.

- By the way, what happens when a genuine believer sins? The Lord disciplines him. And there are even times

when the chastening of the Lord is so severe that He takes the believer on to heaven. But generally, the conviction of the Lord is so strong on the believer’s life that he eventually repents and is restored to fellowship with God.

- While he is in sin, he forfeits joy and peace (and many other blessings) but when he repents, all that is restored. In fact, it is sometimes very difficult to tell who is an apostate and who is backslidden. But there *is* a great difference because one is a true child of God and the other is *not*.

- In fact, the Apostle Paul distinguishes between apostates and disobedient, fleshly Christians in his second letter to Timothy. In 2 Tim. 2:12-13 we read, “If we deny Him, He also will deny us...” That is describing an apostate.

- But v. 13 says, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful...” That’s describing a true believer that has become “faithless” (or has fallen short in his faithfulness to the Lord). What happens with him? The Lord remains faithful to him. He denies the apostate but He stays faithful to the true believer.

- So there is a big difference between an apostate and a backslidden Christian. The general condition of the apostate is that he knows the truth but he has rejected it.

- You *could* say he sins directly against the truth. He goes on sinning willfully after coming to the knowledge of the truth. He continues on in his sinful lifestyle, even

though he knows the truth of the gospel. So we move (secondly) to:

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF APOSTASY (vv. 26b-27)

- Look with me at v. 26 again, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins...”
- The author of Hebrews gives two serious consequences for apostasy. First:

A. A Forfeiture of Forgiveness (v. 26b)

- Following the conditional clause “if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth” he says the result will be that “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins...”
- The author of Hebrews has spent much time making the case that Jesus Christ is the perfect High Priest who has offered the only sacrifice for sin that can cleanse the conscience and permanently deal with sin.
- So what this is saying is, that for those who know the truth of the gospel and then reject it, they are beyond salvation. Their hope of eternal life is forfeited. There is no other “sacrifice” that is acceptable to God – so if they reject the sacrifice of Christ, there is nothing else that can be done for them.

- To reject the atoning work of Christ leaves a person in their sin, and ultimately it will lead to eternal damnation. Apostasy means giving up eternal salvation. The apostate has repudiated the power of the cross – and there is no other power that can save.

- Christ has done all He can do to save them, but if they have knowledge of that truth and then turn away from it in unbelief, there is nothing else that can be done for them. And then (secondly) he says there will be:

B. A Fury of Fire (v. 27)

- Instead of having a sacrifice that atones for sin, what can the apostate expect? Look at v. 27, “but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”
- Since there is no further sacrifice that can take away their sin, they are judged for it in full. All that is left for them is this terrifying expectation of the wrath and fury of God.
- The adjective “terrifying” (in the NASB) refers “to something or someone who causes fear.” It is much more than just a feeling – it points to a real event that is to come.
- This is a graphic picture of the judgment of God. This includes eternal torment in hell. God sees the one who knows the truth of the gospel and turns away from it as an “enemy.”

- The greater the sin, the greater the judgment – and apostasy is the greatest sin of all – therefore it incurs the greatest judgment. Apostasy is a sin against the grace of God, and therefore is the greatest of all sins.

- Listen to the way Paul put it in 2 Thess. 1:7ff, “...the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power...”

- And (by the way) people have the idea that it is the Old Testament that shows the picture of a harsh, judgmental God, while the New Testament shows one of love and compassion.

- The truth of the matter is that the NT is much more graphic in its description of the wrath and judgment of God than the OT is. Both testaments describe *both* the mercy of God and His wrath, but it is the NT that provides the most vivid pictures of hell.

- MacArthur says, “It is true that we have a more complete and beautiful picture of God’s grace and love in the New Testament; but we also have a more complete and terrifying picture of His wrath.” (And I could go to a *number* of passages in the NT that demonstrate that...)

- And another “by the way” – if you think that no one should ever be motivated by fear, then you don’t know much about the Bible. Fear is often used in Scripture to motivate sinners to repentance and saving faith. It might *not* be the *highest* of motivations (in our minds) but it is an important one nonetheless.

- But what we have to understand about this passage of Scripture, is that the author of Hebrews is not just talking about a feeling (in v. 27). He is describing a very real event that can be expected by all those who reject the gospel.

- Another thing to note about v. 27 is that it is an allusion to Is. 26:11. In that OT passage we see the contrast between the righteous (those who walk in the ways of God and long for His presence) and the wicked (those who go on doing evil in spite of God’s grace toward them).

- The “fire” of judgment is reserved for the “wicked” – those who spurn God’s grace and continue on in their sin. This is the very same concept of apostasy that we see (here in Heb. 10).

- So we have the *condition* of apostasy and the *consequences* of apostasy – thirdly we see:

III. THE COMPARISON OF APOSTASY (vv. 28-29a)

- Look with me at v. 28, “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of

two or three witnesses.” This was under the old covenant. And every Jew knew that there were certain offenses of the Mosaic Law that were punishable by death. This is based on Deut. 17.

- In certain cases, the people were instructed to take the offender out into the wilderness and stone him to death. And (as some translations read) “your eye shall not pity him.” They are *not* to be extended any mercy. Justice is to prevail. If there were at least two witnesses to verify the person’s guilt, then this was to be the punishment. They all knew that.

- But the argument (here) is from lessor to greater. Go on to v. 29, “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?”

- In other words, even the worst offender under the old covenant cannot begin to compare with the person who has heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and has rejected Him. The greater penalty comes under the new covenant because it is a covenant of grace – and to reject that grace is the greater sin.

- And notice the phrase “how much severer punishment.” The worst penalty under the old covenant was *physical* death, but the worst penalty under the new covenant is *spiritual* death (eternal death). And the Bible is clear, that

this is the penalty for anyone who knows the truth of the gospel of grace and rejects it.

- O’Brien says, “Those who reject the new covenant sacrifice of the Son of God deserve a punishment even more severe than [physical] death.” The gravity of such willful repudiation of the Law of Moses under the old covenant serves to highlight the much greater seriousness of apostasy under the new.

- Why is the punishment so much greater under the new covenant? Because those of us in this dispensation have full knowledge of the gospel of grace. We have a much greater opportunity to receive the eternal salvation of God.

- Remember the warning of chapter 2? “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” This great salvation has been fully revealed to us in the NT. We are completely without excuse. There is no reason for us to miss out on God’s eternal salvation, unless we have unbelieving hearts.

- But v. 29 also provides the essence of apostasy – so we need to move fourthly to:

IV. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF APOSTASY (v. 29)

- It is v. 29 that makes it most clear that the author of Hebrews is speaking of apostasy. The rebellion of those who have turned away from the gospel is depicted in terms of three actions that are very graphically portrayed.

- This really defines the phrase we see in v. 26 “if we keep on sinning willfully.” This is (in essence) what we are doing if we continue on in our sin without embracing the truth of the gospel.

- And (as O’Brien points out) “the three clauses do *not* refer to three different groups of people since they are linked by the same definite article. Nor are the expressions synonymous or ascending in gravity or seriousness. Rather, each describes different aspects of apostasy.” The first one is:

A. Rejecting the Son of God (v. 29b)

- Verse 29 says, “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God...” To reject the truth of the gospel is to “trample underfoot the [very] Son of God”!

- What an awful way to treat the one and only Savior of the world! The word for “trample” (there) was used by our Lord to describe what would be done to salt that had become useless. It was also used to describe what swine would do if you cast pearls before them (Matt. 5:13, 7:6).

- In other words, the apostate treats the Son of God as worthless or without value. And (as John MacArthur points out) “it is a fearful and damning thing to count as worthless the One whom the Father has declared to be of infinite worth.”

- To trample the Son of God underfoot denotes contempt of the most flagrant kind. There could *not* be any stronger language than this. The metaphor of “trampling on” someone was used in both classical literature and the Greek Old Testament as an image of utter disdain.

- And as George Guthrie writes, “...those who have rejected the gospel have shown the lowest form of contempt, *not only* for a set of teachings, but for the very Person of God’s Son.”

- This is why apostasy is such a serious, abominable sin. But it is more than that. As Jay Adams puts it, “That is *not* mere sin; it is sin that involves the rejection of all that is essential to the [Christian] faith.”

- This book has made it very clear that Jesus Christ is the final and complete revelation of God to man. It has made it clear that He (alone) is the Great High Priest who has offered the only sacrifice that can remove the guilt of sin. We have seen that He is the divine Second Person of the Trinity that is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, with all power and authority – so how dreadful it is for anyone to treat Him in this way!

- He is the glorious Son of God, the one and only Savior of the world – how can anyone treat Him with such contempt?

- And we also need to remember that God the Father has promised to make all His enemies a footstool for His feet – and trampling underfoot the Son of God makes one an

enemy of Christ. It puts the apostate under the condemnation of ultimate defeat. (Pause) But there is another characteristic of apostasy, and that is:

B. Repudiating the Sanctification of God (v. 29c)

- Look again at v. 29, "...and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified..."

This is like someone walking through the blood of a slain son. The word for "unholy" (there) can be translated "common, defiled, or unclean."

- This means to treat the new covenant blood of Christ as no better than the most common death. It means that the perfect sacrifice of Christ, which is the only way by which we can become sanctified in God's sight, is treated as if it was nothing at all.

- Now, one very important point of clarification is needed here. The phrase that is translated (in the NASB) as "by which he was sanctified" cannot refer to the apostate (because he is certainly *not* sanctified).

- There are two possibilities here. One is that it refers to Christ. If that is the case, then it has more to do with Christ sanctifying Himself (as it says in John 17:19). This would have the meaning of Christ being set apart for God in His atoning work.

- But I think there is a better solution. It can read "by which one is sanctified." In other words, the apostate is *not* sanctified through the sacrifice of Christ (because he

has rejected it) but the believer is. This interpretation fits the context better.

- Another way to say this would be, "the sanctifying blood of the covenant he has regarded as unclean." The apostate regards this atoning sacrifice as profane, despised, and worthless.

- In regarding the sanctifying blood of Christ in this manner, he is (again) rejecting the Second Person of the Trinity, who shed that blood on the cross.

- The priceless treasure of the blood of Christ (that which the Word of God calls His "precious blood") is counted as nothing by the apostate. But there's even more. A third characteristic of apostasy, is that it is:

C. Resisting the Spirit of God (v. 29d)

- Look again at v. 29, "...and has insulted the Spirit of grace..." Now, what is this? The Bible refers to this as "the unpardonable sin."

- In Luke 12:8ff Jesus said, "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who will speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him."

- Why is that? It is because the Spirit bears witness of Christ before men. To resist the divine verification of the Spirit that Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior (and thereby reject Him) is to commit the unpardonable sin.

- In essence apostates insult the Spirit of grace by doing exactly what the Pharisees did. They attributed the work of the Spirit to the devil. This is the essence of the unpardonable sin, and this is exactly what apostates do.

- The HS is the “Spirit of grace.” He is the One who bears witness to the gospel of grace. And when we resist the Spirit’s testimony concerning Christ, we are on our way to apostasy.

- Well, I have a lot more I need to say about this dangerous sin of apostasy, but we are out of time for today. I think I will come back one more week on this subject.

- But I’ll close with this. I agree with the words of an old evangelist, who said, “To walk out the door of this assembly unsaved is to walk over the pleadings of the Holy Spirit, the precious blood of Jesus, and the loving appeal of the Father.”

- It is the rejection of all three Persons of the Godhead. It is the most serious of all sins to ultimately turn away from the gospel of grace – and if you say “no” today, you might be on that path.

- There cannot be a stronger warning in all the Word of God. Will you heed it this morning? Will you avoid the deadly path of the apostate?

- PRAYER