

“The Strongest Warning in the Bible”

(Part 2)

Heb. 10:26-31

- INTRO. - The passage of Scripture we are focused on (again) this morning can rightly be designated the strongest warning in the Bible. Hebrews contains many strong warning passages – but this one is (perhaps) the strongest of all.
- *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.
- You see, whenever the gospel is presented to an unbeliever, only two responses are possible. After he has heard the basic truths concerning the Person and work of Jesus Christ, he either believes and is saved, or he disbelieves and becomes an apostate.
- If he continues in unbelief, and dies in that condition, he will be judged as an apostate. MacArthur says “Apostasy...is the sin of rejecting the gospel, for which there is no forgiveness.”
- Perhaps the clearest passage on apostasy is 1 John 2:19. It says, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.”
- Apostates are those who may appear to be Christians at first. They may make a profession of faith and get baptized. They may learn the language of Zion (that is the Christianese that is spoken in the church). They may participate in various church activities. But eventually they will turn away from the faith and leave the church – then it will become evident they were never truly born again. (At least that is *one* form of apostasy...As we will see, there are others...)
- But we would have to say that apostasy is the most serious of all sins, because it is the most willful and deliberate form of unbelief. It is *not* a sin of ignorance, but of rejecting known truth.
- Perhaps Judas Iscariot is the classic apostate. No other rejecter of Christ had such a close exposure to the Lord Himself. He knew the Lord intimately. He was with the Twelve who walked with Jesus for three years. He saw the miracles of Jesus as an eyewitness.
- And think about this – if he had believed, he would be one of the Apostles. But he rejected the truth and became an apostate. He had the greatest

opportunity for salvation that anyone has ever had, but he turned away in disbelief.

- By the way, his example really destroys the old argument that certain people would believe if they had more evidence. Sometimes we base our apologetics on the idea that people will believe if we just give them more evidence of the truth of the gospel.
- But the truth of the matter is, you can have all the evidence in the world and still *not* believe. Judas had more evidence than anyone else who has ever lived – and yet he became an apostate.
- Apostasy has been defined as “an intentional turning away or withdrawal – a defection.” Of course Paul speaks of the great Apostasy of the last days. In 2 Thess. 2:3 he wrote, “Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first...”
- There is going to be a massive turning away from the truth in the last days just before the return of Christ. In Matt. 24:10 Jesus described this by saying, “And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another.”
- And going back to Paul, he said that apostasy will be a primary characteristic of the last days. He wrote in 1 Tim. 4:1-2, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the

faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron...”

- And yet, every age has had apostates. This warning against apostasy in the Book of Hebrews was aimed at those who were being tempted to return to Judaism in rejection of the new covenant gospel of grace.
- 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.
- The frightening truth is that there are people who come right up to the edge of salvation without crossing over into it. They hear the truth concerning Christ, and are (perhaps) drawn to Him. They may be deeply convicted of their sin, and even make a profession of faith.
- But over time their lack of true spiritual regeneration becomes evident. They begin to lose interest in the things of God. They begin to lose interest in the church. Temptations and worldly attractions may begin to pull them away. Eventually they may turn to another religion, or no religion at all. This is the danger of apostasy.

- So this is a strong warning against rejecting God's truth and the serious consequences that 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. 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.
- And last time we got through the first four points of our outline. We began with:

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

- Verse 26, "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth..." That 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.

- 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 the apostate loses interest and falls away. He ends up going back to a life of sin. He returns to "sinning willfully." This will eventually make it obvious that he is an apostate.

- The word "willfully" carries with it the idea of deliberate intention. The verb also indicates that is a habitual activity. 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. He is an unredeemed sinner, and sin is what characterizes his life. Then we saw (secondly):

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...”

- 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. 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 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. Thirdly, we saw:

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.

- 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.

- 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. But v. 29 also provides the essence of apostasy – so we spent time (fourthly) on:

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. 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”!

- The apostate treats the Son of God as worthless or without value. To trample the Son of God underfoot denotes contempt of the most flagrant kind. There could *not* be any stronger language than this.

- And we 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. 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...” The Bible refers to this as “the unpardonable sin.” 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.

- 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. Now, all *that* is review, but we move on (now) fifthly to:

V. THE CONDEMNATION OF APOSTASY (vv. 30-31)

- Look with me at v. 30, “For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’”

- Here we see two quotes from the Song of Moses in Deut. 32. This song was sung by Moses at the end of his life – eloquently delivering to the people of Israel a strong warning of God’s judgment toward a faithless people who had turned their backs on his covenant.

- In spite of all He had done for them, their response had been rebellion and unbelief, so God’s response to that was scathing judgment. And the relevance for the hearers of the Book of Hebrews could *not* be more striking.

- The author’s quotations compare two parts of Deut. 32:35-36. Here’s how it reads (in the NASB), “‘Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them.’ For the LORD will vindicate His people, and will have compassion on His servants; when He sees that their strength is gone, and there is none remaining, bond or free.”

- Guthrie writes, “Both portions quoted by Hebrews – “It is mine to avenge, I will repay,” and “The Lord will judge His people” – emphasize that God himself takes responsibility for judging those who have spurned the gospel and deserted the community of faith.” It is God (through the mouth of Moses) who is declaring this.

- This is simply warning that apostates will be severely judged by God. MacArthur writes, “God is long-suffering and patient, and loving, and infinitely gracious, not willing that anyone should perish (2 Peter 3:9). But for the one who turns his back on God’s grace, there is nothing left that God can offer or do for him. Only judgment remains.”

- And notice v. 31, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The word for “terrifying” can be translated “fearful or dreadful.” This word is placed first in the Greek for emphasis.

- The phrase “to fall into the hands” of God speaks *both* of God’s awesome power and of the helplessness of the recipients of His judgment. One author wrote, “There exists no means of escape for those who have rejected the grace of the Living One...”

- Listen, people often make jokes about hell, but soon they will find out that “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

- Most are familiar with the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. Of course, Christ is pictured by the character of Aslan, the mighty king of the jungle. And one striking comment by Lewis on this character is, “He is *not* a tame lion.”

- It is a dreadful thing to fall into His hands as an enemy. He is Lord of all and will vanquish His foes in His own good time. No one can ever think of sitting in judgment

of Him, and to think of controlling Him in any way is preposterous.

- George Guthrie writes, “The Living God has cosmic-sized, power laden hands and is dreadful indeed. He will not be tamed by our postmodern repulsion for Truth, nor by our aversion to the concept of judgment.”

- It does *not* matter how detestable that concept might be in the minds of people today – it is the absolute truth of Scripture. We are repeatedly warned of God’s judgment throughout the NT, and apostates will certainly face it without mercy.

- So the question is, “Why would anyone ever turn away from the gospel of grace? Why would anyone ever become an apostate? Why would anyone ever get to the place where they know the truth of the gospel and fail to commit themselves to it?”

- John MacArthur suggests a number of reasons why this may happen, so we turn now to:

VI. THE CAUSES OF APOSTASY

- In one sense, we would have to say that apostasy has only *one* cause – willful unbelief. Anyone who turns away from the gospel of grace (after coming to know the truth of it) is willfully choosing to reject Christ.

- But in another sense, there may be a number of factors that may contribute to that decision. So I want to spend a

few minutes on these possible factors – and they are in no specific order of priority.

- Some of these factors are given in Jesus’ parable of the soils. In that parable, there are a number of reasons for why the seed (of the gospel) does *not* take hold and bear fruit.

- One of these is *persecution*. What may drive a genuine believer closer to the Lord may drive an unbeliever further away. For some, the cost to follow Christ may seem to be too high.

- Of course, history shows that persecution makes the true church even stronger. Times of severe persecution purify the church and make it stronger spiritually and morally.

- But persecution can have the opposite effect on those who are unbelievers. It may drive them away from any association with the church. This was likely the danger for the congregation that is being addressed in this sermon.

- As we will see later in this chapter, they had already suffered some pretty serious persecution, but they may have been reluctant to go through that again. What they had already suffered was probably simply because they were Jews – but they may *not* have been willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

- For those who are affiliated with the church but are *not* genuinely born again, the price of suffering persecution may be perceived as being too high.

- MacArthur says, “Hard times are not for the self-willed unbeliever who is simply using the church for business, or social, or other personal reasons – or who may have been raised in the church and has simply never gotten out of the habit of attending.” He says, “Persecution, sometimes as mild as criticism, is usually enough to break that habit.”

- And another interesting truth, is the fact that (if the persecution is severe) the apostate may *not only* leave the church – he may also join in on the persecution.

- We *know* that this is going to be the case in the last days, just before the return of Christ. Jesus warned (in Matt. 24:9-10), “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away [there are the apostates] and will deliver up one another and hate one another.”

- In the last days, the apostates will join in on the “delivering up” of Christians to be killed. But that won’t be the first time this has happened. It has happened all throughout the history of the church.

- But there is another factor that may cause some to fall away from the truth of the gospel, and that is *false teaching*. Whereas persecution may *frighten* unbelievers

away from the gospel, false teachers *entice* them away. They may lead them to embrace a false gospel.

- As Jesus said in Matt. 24:11, “...many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many.” I hope you understand that this is a great danger in the church. False teachers have caused incredible damage by misleading *believers* (who are too immature to discern the error that is being espoused).

- But false teaching has also led *unbelievers* to become confused about the truth of the gospel, or to get so caught up in trivial debates that they miss the importance of the gospel. False teaching always distorts the gospel in some way.

- And I don’t know about you, but every time I see all this charismatic nonsense going on – and being so publicly broadcast on so-called Christian networks – I think, what are unbelievers thinking about this? I wonder how many have concluded, if that is what Christianity is all about, I want no part of it.

- And the Bible also warns us that in the last days this will become much more prominent. 2 Tim. 4:3-4 warns, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

- This is already happening to a great degree. There is very little spiritual discernment in the church, and there has been a great forsaking of “sound doctrine” in favor of trendy, experiential fluff.

- Although a genuine believer will never totally fall away from the faith (even under the influence of false teaching), an unbeliever may be influenced by this distorted teaching to apostatize and totally turn away from the truth.

- Thirdly, there is *moral temptation*. This would be the case any time the lure of sin becomes stronger than the promise of the gospel. There are many times when the things of the world become more attractive than the things of God.

- When Jesus gave the parable of the soils, He described some who become apostates because their hearts are represented by “rocky soil.” What He was describing was the situation where the seed (of the gospel) fell into soil that was only a couple of inches deep – but below that, which no one could see, was a layer of bedrock.

- The seed would quickly sprout (and look real good) until the roots hit that bedrock, and then they would quickly die away. These are those who seem to make a commitment to Christ, and they are all gung ho at the first. They may (at first) appear to be the most deeply devoted followers of Christ – but as soon as any kind of temptation comes along (or any kind of persecution) they are out the door.

- Demas may have been this kind of person, because Paul said of him that he deserted “having loved this present world.” Some are unwilling to let go of a sinful lifestyle in order to follow Christ. Some have a “pet sin” they are *not* willing to let go of – and they are in danger of total apostasy that leads to total, eternal judgment.

- And it really doesn’t matter if it is a series of small temptations over a long period of time, or one big one that comes suddenly, the end result is the same. The temptation keeps the apostate from committing to Christ in saving faith.

- But there is a fourth cause of apostasy – and this one may be the saddest one of all. It is the matter of *neglect*. This is a person who keeps putting off making a commitment to Christ. He’s *not against* Christ – in fact he may believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be (and that the gospel is generally true) – but he never comes to that place of making a commitment to Him. He keeps putting it off.

- This is so (eternally) dangerous, because we never know at what moment we may enter into eternity. In essence, to fail to respond to Christ in saving faith, is the same as rejecting Him. And (of course) we have a strong warning of that in this book.

- Back in Heb. 2:3 there is the question, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” What’s the

answer? We won't escape! To neglect such a great salvation is to come under the judgment of God.

- Listen, you may have every intention of someday committing your life to Christ – but if you never actually do it, and you step into eternity without having done it – it is the very same thing as total apostasy. It is the very same thing as becoming a fervent persecutor of the church. To fail to decide *for* Christ is to decide *against* Him. Even neglect can make you an enemy of Christ.

- Fifthly, there is the danger of *clinging to the old*. In the case of these Hebrews, this was especially tempting. The danger was that of hanging onto the Old Covenant and missing out on the New. This was a real danger for them – and that is a main part of the argument of this book.

- But even in our day and time, this can be something that might keep someone from committing to the truth of the gospel. Some may be hanging onto religious practices or religious beliefs they have been taught (even though they are unbiblical). And please understand – religious traditions have long been one of the greatest barriers to the gospel, and one of the foremost contributors to apostasy.

- In a similar way, some may be hanging onto an old lifestyle that they have become comfortable with and don't want to let go of. It might be some sort of cultural practice or some sort of tradition that is preventing them from making a full commitment to the gospel.

- But my friend, *nothing* is worth hanging onto if it keeps you from Christ and eternal life. It doesn't matter if your family is pressuring you in some way, or your friends are making you feel like you need to conform in some way – *nothing* is worth keeping you from missing out on genuine salvation.

- Well, one last factor that may lead to apostasy is the forsaking of fellowship with the church. Some may lose interest in the church, or (perhaps) become disenchanted with it, but the fact that they are *not* genuine believers may lead them to become less and less involved in it.

- They start becoming irregular in their attendance. Maybe they get to the place where they only show up every once in a blue moon. But this becomes a factor in their ultimate apostasy, because they are no longer under the preaching of the gospel and the influence of true believers.

- Back in v. 25 the author of Hebrews had warned against this danger of forsaking the assembly of the church. This applies *not only* to genuine believers, but is especially dangerous for those who have *not* yet made a commitment to Christ.

- And one of the most terrifying things about this passage of Scripture, is that these being described were (at one point) connected to the church. They had enough affiliation with the church that they knew the gospel (they knew the truth) but they were in danger of turning away from it (in unbelief).

- The point of this passage of Scripture is that you may know the truth and *not* know Christ. You may know about the new covenant (the gospel of grace) without ever having entered into it. You may *not* consider yourself to be an apostate – but you *could* be anyway. If you know the truth of the gospel but have failed to commit yourself to Christ (and receive Him as Lord and Savior), you are an apostate, and you are in danger of eternal judgment.

- Oh my friend, don't fall short of embracing the gospel. Don't let any of these factors lead you to apostasy and eternal destruction. Repent of your sins and put your full faith in Jesus Christ today.

- PRAYER