

Title: Clear and Present Danger
Text: Hebrews 3.7-19
Theme: Watching our souls
Series: Hebrews #8
Prop Stmt A genuine believer cannot persevere in rebellion.

Read Text:

A friend of mine who has been listening to this series from Hebrews on-line, emailed me the other day and said, "I get the impression that you think that there are unbelievers in your church." I said, "absolutely." Beloved, I fear that more than anything else, but I fear that it is true.

For this series I have gathered a number of works on Hebrews. Some of these books are the result of years and years of study. Hebrews is fascinating. It is intellectually challenging and stimulating. It is theologically robust and intricate. It is a complex piece of literature and continues to fascinate the greatest minds of seminary faculties. I read these guys and realize that they have the IQ firepower of a nuclear submarine carrying 24 warheads, compared to my mental bb gun. The more I dig into this book, the more my heart is fired with these truths, but, beyond all of that, way beyond all of that, I am struck with how pastoral this book is. Yes, the arguments are exacting and the logic is devastatingly precise. But, the appeal to our hearts is the reason why this book was written. So, my presentation of this book to you, while based on a solid, immovable doctrinal foundation, is going to sound very pastoral because that is its ultimate purpose. If the author of Hebrews was concerned about this church (in Rome), then I/we must share in that concern about ourselves.

Now, this text, like many passages in Hebrews and other texts in the NT speaks to an issue that is not clearly understood by many of you. I will address this later in a separate sermon, but I need to broach the subject now. The question is: Can a person who professes faith in Christ lose their faith and therefore lose their salvation?

If you are from a theologically Arminian tradition (Free Will Baptist, Wesleyan, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Methodist) you'd be inclined to answer, "Yes." If you are from a theologically Calvinistic tradition you'd be inclined to answer, "Of course not." Now, here is how this usually (not always, but usually) plays out. Question: "Do you believe that you can lose your salvation?" Or "Do you believe that once saved always saved?" Both sides whip out their favorite verses and attempt to use them as proof-texts to slam the opponent. For example, in this corner, weighing in at John 10.27-29 is the heavy-weight contender for "once saved always saved." (read) In the other corner, weighing in at Hebrews 6.4-6 is the heavy-weight contender for "you snooze, you lose." (read)

What are you supposed to do with that? Entire denominations are formed on how you view this issue. It is a big deal. But, many people do not look at this issue deep enough. Now, this morning, I am not going to take the time to unpack this yet. But I want to get you headed in the right direction. Do not forget this; why is this even an issue? Behind

the debate are people who have professed faith in Christ but their lives do not reflect any evidences of grace. What are we supposed to think about them? How are we supposed to treat them? And how do you know if **you** really are a believer? And a huge part of the problem is how we have thought about and presented the gospel. Some of you have been given the impression that Jesus is the ticket to get on the salvation train that leads to glory. I have challenged that heresy in an earlier message. Jesus is not simply the means to an end, Jesus is the end. Jesus is the goal. He is the means and the end. He is not a ticket that you get, and that once you get on board, you throw the ticket on the floor because you don't need it anymore. But, that is how some think. "I just want to know that I have the ticket. I just want to know that the people that I care about have the ticket." And, how do you get the ticket? You pray a prayer to get the ticket. Ask Jesus to come into your heart and you get the ticket. Now, there are some elements of truth to what I have said, but the entire picture is faulty because it not only reduces the gospel as the ticket to a happy life that is all about me. But, this perspective does not understand what it means to actually BE a believer and live as a follower of Christ which means as a member of a church body and the kingdom of Christ. Living as a follower of Christ seems optional, if you have the time. But, if you have the ticket, it really doesn't matter if you love God, or if you are a member of the church, or if you have affections for the gospel, or if you are walking in obedience. After all, when you die, you are going to go to heaven and you have the ticket to prove it. So, to some that means, that you can sin till the cows come home, or the Lions win the Super Bowl, and it doesn't matter because you have your ticket. That, my friend is dead wrong! Listen! The question of "can you lose your salvation" is actually a secondary question. It is an important secondary question, but the primary question is, do you have authentic faith?

Forgiveness from your sins and being declared righteous in the sight of God is your salvation. This salvation is offered by God, according to Romans 3.21-26, as a gracious gift that can only be accepted through faith alone in Christ alone. Faith in Christ alone is the only currency that God accepts to grant you the gift of salvation. Now, back to our example. What if you gain possession of the ticket with fraudulent currency? Then you have to get off the train. Know what I mean? If the means by which you acquired the ticket is not valid, then the ticket that you think is yours is not really yours. So, how do you know if your currency is genuine? How do you know if you have genuine faith? At the moment that you profess faith in Christ, I cannot tell whether or not you really believe. Time and pressure will reveal the authenticity of your faith. The authenticity of your faith will be revealed in the endurance and perseverance of your faith. That is why the author of Hebrews keeps making this connection between faith and perseverance and between unbelief and rebellion or falling away. It is not enough to be intellectually aware of the content of the gospel, nor is it enough to be intellectually convinced of the truth of the gospel. You have to believe with your heart! Believing with your heart is not disconnected from your brain, but there is an eternity's worth of difference between just knowing (that is intellectually aware) and believing with your whole being.

As you know we interview every person who wants to join the church. We ask you to explain the gospel. We ask you if you believe that. You may be able to explain the gospel and you may say that you believe it, and you may actually think that you do, but

time will reveal whether this is some phase that you are going through, some new idea that you are trying out, or if you really get it. Now, if you don't get it, then this will be revealed in your life. What do you want other believers to do if they see signs that you really don't get it? Should the church be comprised of people who love each other? Do people who love each other, stand around and talk about the NCAA tournament while they watch people walk off cliffs to their death? Can we claim to be people who watch over one another and ignore evidences of a crumbling marriage?

Disobedience and unfaithfulness (sin) wreck havoc in people's lives and must be responded to with the gospel. This is not a new problem.

1. **Unbelief-driven Rebellion is a historical reality.** (7-11)

Verses 7-11 are a quote from Psalm 95 that is given as a logical corollary to verses 1-6. In other words, since Christ is superior to everything and everyone including Moses, and since those who rejected the leadership of Moses faced dire consequences, how much greater will the consequences be for us if we neglect such a great salvation offered to us in Christ?! So, the argument that is being made is this. Look at God's response to the rebellion of the children of Israel in the desert. Since God responded to their rebellion to Moses, how much more will he respond to your rebellion against Christ. (read)

Notice the major change in tone at the end of v.7. Do you see the connection between the two sections? Praising God is a wonderful thing but it is only legitimate worship if your worship is coming from a sincere heart and obedient life. Worship is no substitute for obedience! This Psalm was written as a warning to the people of God to NOT be like the generation of people who came out of the land of Egypt, who saw all of the signs and miracles, who heard God speak at Mt. Sinai, who received the law and who built the tabernacle, but did not really believe God. How do we know that they did not really believe God? Because, they persisted in rebelling against God. Finally, God made an oath (v.11) "They shall not enter my rest." And that generation did not go into the land. Now, when you back to our text in Hebrews, you will see that this text was selected because while it refers to a specific historical reality, there is a current emphasis.

Notice that the warning of this text is for you, right now. "Today, if you." The hearing his voice is not referring to just hearing audibly. The children of Israel heard the voice of God with their ears, but they did not hear with their hearts. When you hear the word of God, it must be responded to with obedience. If you only hear the word, but do not respond with obedience, then the hearing of the word will have a hardening affect upon your heart. That dullness of heart, that unresponsiveness of the will, that stubbornness of the spirit creates a blindness that is so pervasive that a person will not believe the truth even though it is standing right in front of them. There is no logical explanation for sin. The children of Israel saw all that God had done to bring them out of Egypt and yet, while they heard God speak, they did not "hear his voice." That is, they did not obey him. Verses 12-19 function as a commentary on this section, but the point of this OT quote is very clear:

1) Unbelief is the root of all disobedience.

Unbelief = disobedience/rebellion = God's response
(heart) (evidence) (consequence)
Belief = obedience/faithfulness = assurance

The children of Israel were characterized by unbelief and rebellion. The immediate and temporal consequence was that they were not permitted to enter the land. However, the Psalm from which this is taken was written well after they were in the land. The Psalm serves as a warning to the people of God that if they disobey like their forefathers, then they will fail to enter God's rest as well. Since they were already in the land, the Psalmist understood that the rest that they were in danger of forfeiting was more than a piece of land, but had to do with being in a condition of blessing.

This is a huge point, particularly for parents. You have children who disobey because in their hearts they want to disbelieve God and believe themselves. The battle that you are engaged in, is not for their actions but for their belief. You need to parent in a way that goes after their hearts.

2. **Unbelief-driven Rebellion is a clear and present danger.** (12-19)

In verse 12 the author speaks to his audience as brothers (and sisters – implied). When he speaks to the entire church he refers to them as believers, and yet the warning is valid because he recognizes that among the believers there are unbelievers who are blind by their own stubbornness and may end up at the end finding out they were never truly believers.

A. **Guard your heart** (12)

“Take care” means to watch out for something that is hazardous. Look out! Beware! But notice that the warning is not because of the sin that is out there in the world, but the warning is to look out for the sin that is in your own heart. What is an evil, unbelieving heart? What does it mean to be on guard against an unbelieving heart? It means that when you are confronted with a truth or when the Spirit of God convicts you of a sin and you blow it off and ignore it, you are not taking care of your heart. When you ignore the truth and believe that you are the exception to the rule or find excuses as to why you do not have to obey or (favorite one) find fault with someone in the church, which gives you the excuse that you need, you are placing your word above God's Word. You are choosing to believe that God is not serious about his Word. The problem is, we all naturally think that way. We all think that we know better than God. Kids think they know more than their parents, parents think they know more than God.

Brothers and sisters, this warning is real. I am preaching to people right now, whose life is so full of excuses, unbelief, hypocrisy, arrogance and rebellion that even though you put on a good act here, your real self is angry, manipulative, demanding, defensive and

blind. Sin has been allowed to reign unchecked in your life. You are playing with fire. I believe that verse 12 is referring to the sin of apostasy. This is not the sin of weakness or the sins of struggle. No, this is the person whose sin is so apparent but who refuses to repent, refuses to listen, refuses to be admonished and instead points the finger at everyone else and says, “You are the problem!” If we do not guard our hearts (that is guarding one another), if we do not ask the Spirit of God to take the Word of God and plow deeply into the soil of our hearts and expose our sin, and allow brothers and sisters to speak into our lives and ask us tough questions about our desires and our demands, but instead keep covering up and covering up, then, we cannot claim to be followers of Christ. People who are genuine followers of Christ have lives that are characterized by authenticity and openness, not darkness and isolation and privacy. If you do not take care of sin, sin will take care of you. If you have an evil, unbelieving heart it will lead you away from the living God, which means that you will get to the point where even though you were at one time exposed to the gospel, and sensitive to it and perhaps emotionally moved by it, but because of your persistent unbelief, you will confirm yourself in that state of unbelief and will never be able to repent. That is apostasy. And that is eternal!

But, guarding my heart does not come natural to me. I would rather find fault with others than look at my own heart. That is why I need faithful brothers and sisters. That is why I need the body of Christ. That is why this text is given to the local church. That is why I implore you to be a member of the church and function like one. If you refuse to join the church because you do not want to be accountable to anyone or under the care of anyone and you do not want to be responsible for anyone else, then do us all a favor, do not claim to be a believer, because you are certainly not believing or behaving as one. If you have never placed yourself under the care of the church, then when your heart wanders, like it is prone to do, you do not have someone that you have charged to look after you.

B. Exhort one another daily (13)

“But” How do we guard our hearts. What can we do to help protect each other from being deceived and then hardened by sin? Exhort one another daily! I want you to do to each other, what I am doing to you in this letter. That is what he is saying. Now, this word that is translated as “exhort” is the word, *parakaleo*, which in a noun form is a title for the Holy Spirit. *Para* – alongside, *kaleo* – to call. Come alongside of each other daily. That means that you are your brother’s keeper and your brother has a responsibility for your life. Now, for some of you that scares you to death. You do not want someone else involved in your life – why not? Because, God’s involvement in your life is very limited or non-existent. And some of you are more concerned with what others think of you than you are of the fact that there are no evidences of the gospel in your life! If God were involved in your life then you would welcome involvement because if we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship with one another (yea, but what about my sins?) and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. That is 1 John 1.7. Now, if you say, “I’m not doing that. I don’t need that. Verse 8 is for you. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Hey, if we claim to be a church, then we have to committed to Christ and each other and we have to cultivate an atmosphere where, based on the gospel we invite people to speak into our lives and we

welcome encouragement and correction. And guess what, if you think you have the gift of correction – you don't! You need to be corrected. If you don't, some of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. What kind of a church do you want to be? Do you want to play church or be church?

C. Understand what is at stake. (14-19)

1) Our share in Christ (14-15)

The author clearly understands that there is such a thing as fraudulent faith. The person who does not persevere has a fraudulent faith. The assurance of our faith is born out of our perseverance. You cannot claim to be in Christ and persist in disobedience. "But I used to teach S.S. I used to help with concerts. I used to be involved in VBS. I used to serve on committees. I used to do things for the poor. Besides all of that being an appeal to works righteousness, remember this...

2) Exposure and Experience are not evidences of faith. (16)

16-18- questions designed to get us to think, followed by the warning (19)
In fact, the more exposure, the greater the accountability. And remember,

3) There is a limit to God's patience. (17)

He is kind. He is gracious. He is merciful. But he will not be mocked. His Word is true and will be rejected at great peril.

4) There are eternal consequences for persistent unbelief. (18-19)

The lost generation of Israel is equivalent to the people who fall away. Where are you?

Palm Sunday application (crowd – praise; not genuine faith). If your life is characterized by a persistent ignoring of the Word of God, you cannot claim to be a believer. What should you do? Cry out to God and ask him to grant you the faith to believe and then to trust Christ! I must preach the gospel because your soul needs it. You need it in order to come to faith in Christ and you need it to press on as a pilgrim. I need to preach it and you need to hear it. You need to be here every Sunday to hear it, so that you can be reminded of what you need to say to yourself and to others who are struggling. We need to pray together and sing together as means of exhorting one another and helping each other take care of our hearts. There are days when you are so discouraged that you cannot sing. There are days when you are so under the weight of sin that you wonder whether or not you really believe. Then you hear the choir, or the great choir sing and affirm our allegiance to Christ and declare his supremacy above all, and you hear the Word read and the Word preached and the Spirit of God resonates in your soul and visits you with a deep settledness that reminds you, and speaks to you and tells you, this is who you are, this is what you believe, this is where you belong.