



The Deadly Danger of Apostasy

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 6:4-12 (4-8)

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Without a question, this text that we have read this morning, along with the text that we will read in Hebrews 10, is the most controversial text in the book of Hebrews and in the whole of Scripture. This text is solemn and sober and it brings forth a flurry of questions. “Who is the writer talking about? Can a true Christian lose his salvation? How many sins do you have to commit? What kind of sins do you have to commit?” and on and on it goes. There are no shortages of opinion, disagreements, and arguments over this text. Some, to avoid all discussion or real striving with this text, will say, “Well, this is just hypothetical. The writer of Hebrews is describing something that couldn’t really happen, but if it did happen, this would be the result.” But, beloved, this is not hypothetical. What would be the point of a hypothetical warning? Why warn against something that you cannot do, that cannot happen to you? It would be the spiritual version of “Stop making that face or it will stick that way.” No one takes that seriously and, listen, if the writer of Hebrews is anything, he is deadly serious.

Others will use this text as a jumping off point to answer the question, “Can a true Christian lose his or her salvation?” And depending upon the preacher’s theological background and faithfulness to the whole counsel of the Word of God, they will come up with different answers to that question. Now that’s an important question, and one that necessarily comes up in this text, but it isn’t the main point of the text at all. Still others will ignore this text all together, saying in essence, “If you have made a profession of faith, if you have asked Jesus into your heart, it doesn’t matter how you live, you will die and go to heaven.” Now granted, that is an oversimplified description of a convoluted position, but this text reveals that statement to be a monstrous lie.

This text is hard, no doubt, and it has a great deal of interpretive challenges, it makes the heart tremble when you think about it, but this is God’s Word and He wants us to know what

it means, and how it applies to both the Hebrews and the modern church. There is a message in this text that we need to hear and to take seriously. And the best way to understand this warning is to keep it in the context in which we find it.

Remember the Context It is vitally important that we understand the Word of God in its context. You have heard me say that often. That is why I believe that it is so vital to exposit books of the Bible, most times, rather than preaching topically. The context of any passage, but especially this one, is absolutely fundamental. Remember the context. The writer of Hebrews is addressing a congregation of confessing Hebrew Christians, who were formerly Jewish in their religious beliefs and who have now professed faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as the Son of the Living God and the Savior of sinners and Great High Priest over the people of God. They have confessed that Jesus Christ is the one to whom the Jewish faith was pointing all along. And now, some of them are wavering in their commitment, wavering in their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. There are various factors involved in this wavering that was taking place. They were facing persecution from the Roman government for confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord and for being part of a religion that was not sanctioned by the Roman Empire. More than that, they were being ostracized by their families, excluded from their families, being disowned by their Jewish families for believing in Christ and for following Him as Lord, rejected by friends who thought them fools, and marginalized and mocked by the pagan society. They were experiencing a real pressure to return to the easier and simpler life of the Jewish religion. That was all true.

But like we saw last week, there was an even greater threat that they were facing – and it wasn't coming from the outside, it was an inside issue. Collectively, they had become dull of hearing when it came to the Word of God. They were not receiving the Word as they once did, were not applying the Scriptures to their own lives. As a result, they had become sluggish and had regressed in their spiritual growth. They were immature in the faith. Though by this time they should have been strong and able to encourage, exhort, and correct one another and keep each other pressing on in Christ, they needed to hear the gospel basics all over again. They preferred milk to the solid food of the Word that would give them real strength and spiritual backbone. As a result, they were unskilled in the word of righteousness, unable to discern good and evil. Collectively this church was in a dangerous place, regressing from the life they should be enjoying in Christ. That is the context for this warning.

Look, there are some underlying realities that motivated this warning from the writer of Hebrews that we cannot forget. First, God's judgment is an undeniable fact of reality. We will all give an account before the Lord for our lives. We will stand before Him clothed in our own unrighteousness, or clothed in the righteousness of God by faith in Christ, a faith that endures to the end. A good start does not guarantee a good finish. We saw that with the Exodus generation. We are called to persevere in our faith. Second, there is such thing as a false profession of Christ, a spurious confession of faith that falls short of the real thing and which is ultimately revealed by the way that we live our lives. Again, we see that in the Exodus generation. Third, we need to think seriously about our Christianity. Jesus is to be the center of our lives, having no rival, with our affections fixed upon Him as our King and Lord. He is the One that is to give meaning and shape to the whole of our lives. And fourth, maturity in Christ is not a fixed point, not a level of achievement, but an ongoing pursuit. The way that the writer of Hebrews sees it, there is no middle ground for a professing believer – you are either pressing on to greater and greater maturity and satisfaction in Jesus Christ, to greater devotion to Jesus regardless of the cost, or you are falling away as a false believer. And again, the Exodus generation is the perfect illustration.

The writer's purpose is not to expose anyone but to warn the whole congregation. He knows and loves these guys and he knows that they are not where they need to be in their spiritual walk. They have become dull of hearing and spiritually lazy. If this situation wasn't corrected, and soon, grave spiritual danger lay ahead. He isn't preaching this so that the hearers can identify and categorize everyone else; it's a warning to everybody.

So coming on the heels of the writer reproofing and rebuking the Hebrew Christians for their dullness of hearing, for their lack of maturity, their lack of spiritual growth and strength, then challenging them to grow up by the grace of God, he gives them:

A Sober Warning About the Reality of Apostasy (4-6) Look at verse 4-6. These verses are a stout warning regarding the danger of someone who professes faith in Christ, but who does not show the fruit of faith in Jesus. The writer of Hebrews says to them, "You have got to take responsibility for what you have already heard, you have got to hear and receive and respond, to hear and be corrected, to repent, to receive the Word of God with faith and with meekness, and with a desire to obey and grow in Christ. You need to hear what I am saying to you and to respond rightly, and here is why." ***"For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the***

Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”

(Hebrews 6:4–6, ESV) In other words, he is saying, “Listen to what I am saying to you. Heed the words of God that are coming through me. Grow up, mature, and press on. If you stay on this track that you are on, you are going to end up like the Exodus generation. If you stay on the path that you are on, it is going to prove that you never truly belonged to Christ. This path that you are travelling leads to apostasy.”

Before we go any further, let me give some definition the word “apostasy.” Apostasy means “to fall away from the Christian faith, to fall away from or to desert or to renounce a profession of faith in and commitment to Christ.” It is speaking of those who outwardly profess Christ, who for a while walk with the people of God, whose profession looks very much like other true believers in the congregation but who at some point, either publically and vocally or by the way that they live and their lack of responsiveness to the Word of God, decisively and conclusively reject the Lordship of Jesus Christ. At some point, they turn away in their hearts from Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. They fail to endure, to persevere, to be fruitful in their walk with Christ and so fall away and prove they never were Christ’s.

Let me show you what I mean. In this text, the writer of Hebrews is setting up a contrast between spiritual experiences and true spiritual fruit. One, spiritual experiences prove nothing, the other, spiritual fruit, proves everything. Let me say that again, the writer of Hebrews is setting up a contrast between spiritual experiences and true spiritual fruit. One, spiritual experiences prove nothing, the other, spiritual fruit, proves everything.

Watch this. The description in verses 4-5 presents a picture of someone, who like the wilderness generation of Exodus, has such spiritual experiences that you would almost guarantee that person has to be a true believer in Christ. Listen again. He describes ***“those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.”***

These persons, the writer of Hebrews says, **have once been enlightened**. They have heard the words of God and been under the influence of the preaching and the teaching of the gospel. They are not ignorant of God's truth; they are not in the dark. They have heard the gospel and the explanation of the character and holiness of God, the reality of their sinfulness and guilt, the gracious work of Jesus Christ to give Himself as the sacrifice for all who repent of their sins and believe in the saving work of Christ's death and resurrection.

These people **have tasted the heavenly gift**. That is, they know something of the experience of the Christian faith. They have been in the assembly of God's people, they have been in the atmosphere of worship and taken part in the singing, the fellowship, the praying – the worship of God's people. They have professed faith in Christ. They have had the experience of being in and being involved in the company of the redeemed.

These people **have shared in the Holy Spirit**. More than any other, this description seems to imply salvation. The idea is that they had experienced something beyond the common working of the Holy Spirit, but it was something that stopped short of true salvation. Is that possible? Yes, we need look no further than what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-22. There, sandwiched in a section of Jesus' teaching regarding the fruit of salvation and the importance of building your life on His truth, perseverance in faith, He says, **““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:21–23, ESV)** Notice that Jesus does not say, “You didn't do these things.” He says, “I never knew you.” Their faith wasn't genuine.

Then last, the writer of Hebrews says, these people **have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come**. In other words, they know something of the goodness of God's promises to His people, the benefit and the blessings that God's Word promises to the faithful. They have even seen God move in miraculous ways. All of these experiences have been theirs and yet they still have fallen away from Christ, fallen away from their profession of faith in Christ. Is that possible? Yes it is.

We need look no further than those of the Exodus generation, who themselves fell away. They had been enlightened by God through the preaching and teaching of Moses, had experienced the blessing of being in the company of the redeemed, had experienced the presence of God, seen the goodness of God as He kept His word of promise time and time again, had seen His miraculous hand at work at the Red Sea, had even “made a profession of faith” when they put the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts when the last plague that led to their release, the death of the firstborn, descended on Egypt. And yet the great majority of them fell away from God, fell away from their profession of faith.

We only have to look at the close circle of the disciples of Jesus to see such apostasy from up close – Judas Iscariot who for years seemed to be just like the other disciples, working and ministering with them, serving Jesus, and yet fell away from his profession. There are a number of people that Paul mentions – Alexander, Hymaneus, Philetus, Phygelus, Hermogenes, and Demas. In John 2:19, John speaks of those who have departed the local congregation of believers to whom he is writing and he says: **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”** (1 John 2:19, ESV)

Now here is the deal. These Hebrew Christians had all experienced these same things – they had been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come. They had experienced all of this and were being tempted to leave Christ. They had heard all of this and had become dull of hearing, had regressed in their faith, had regressed in their maturity, and had been challenged by the writer of Hebrews to grow up, to press on to maturity in Christ, to hold fast to their profession of faith, to consider Jesus, to refocus their hearts and minds on the glory, majesty, excellence, faithfulness, power and worth of Jesus and to return to a vibrant faith in which Christ was the center of their lives and the Lord whom they gladly and wholeheartedly served and worshipped. How would they respond?

Would they respond in repentance, glad for this word that arrested their slide and engaged their souls in self-examination and led them to return to an active, pursuing, faith in and love for Christ? Would they receive this word as a needed tonic for their souls, as the encouragement and challenge to persevere in their faith, as a much-needed “wake up call” and an exhortation to shake of their dullness of hearing and to return to the vibrant faith that once defined them?

Or would they continue in their dullness and ignore this warning, and despite all of their spiritual advantages, turn away from Christ, slide away in their hearts from real love and devotion to Christ and in so doing, reveal that they never truly were His?

Without question, some would respond in faith, in real and true faith, and would persevere in Christ, but not all. But the end, for those who resolutely and stubbornly refused to hear the voice of God through the preacher of Hebrews, who turned a deaf ear to the preacher's earnest warning, would be horrible and inescapable. For the Hebrews who had experienced these manifold blessings of God and who did not respond in repentance and real faith, the warning is clear. For those who have been enlightened like this, the writer says, ***“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened... and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”***

Those are scary words and they are meant to be. He is saying that there comes a point, for those who are dull of hearing, where it is impossible for them to repent. That is the frightening truth. The word impossible means just what we know it to mean – impossible. There is such thing as spiritual hardening and deadness that leads to permanent soul deadness.

Remember what the author is dealing with here. He is speaking to this Hebrew church in which there were some who were considering abandoning Christ, renouncing their profession of Christ, and going back to Judaism. To go back to Judaism was to say, either openly or by their actions, they do not need Christ for eternal salvation or for fellowship with God. To do so would be ***crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm*** – agreeing with the unbelieving Jews and the unbelieving world that Jesus Christ is not Savior and Lord and that he deserve to be put to death for blasphemy. It would be ***holding him up to contempt*** – making a mockery of His incarnation, His sacrifice, and His love. It would be to regard Jesus with derision and with scorn, with humiliation and shame. John Piper writes: ***“When a person chooses against Christ and turns back to the way of the world and the sovereignty of his own will and the fleeting pleasures of earth, he says in effect that these are worth more than Christ is worth. They are worth more than the love of Christ and the wisdom of Christ and the power of Christ and all that God promises to be for us in Christ.***

And when a person says that, it is the same as saying: I agree with the crucifiers of Jesus. Because what could shame Christ more today than to have someone taste his goodness and wisdom and power and then say: No, there is something better and more to be desired. That puts him to a public shame.

It is one thing for a stranger to the faith to resist Christ. But it is another thing for a person who has been in the church and has been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit and tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come -- it's another thing for that person to say after all those blessings and all those experiences: I think what the world offers is better than this. That is a re-crucifying of Jesus and a putting him to public shame worse than any outsider could, who never tasted the truth.” He’s right. In effect what an apostate, someone who falls away, is saying is, “I tried faith in Christ; it was a sham. I was on the inside so I know what I am talking about. Faith in Christ is worthless.”

And here’s the thing. After being brought by the blessings of God to the very edge of repentance and saving faith, those who fall away cannot be brought to that same place again, since there is nothing left to be added to that which was insufficient before. There is nothing left to be said, nothing left to behold, nothing left at all.

All the spiritual experiences in the world do not a Christian make. The real measure of the reality of our faith is our response to those experiences, the response of the heart to the blessing of God. Remember I told you that the writer of Hebrews is setting up a contrast between spiritual experiences and true spiritual fruit. Here it comes full to fruition in verses 7-8.

The True Measure of the Soul (7-8) The true measure of the condition of the soul is not all of the spiritual experiences that we may have; it is our response to those blessings. Look what he says: ***“For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”*** (Hebrews 6:7-8, ESV)

The evidence of real faith, of true conversion to Christ, is our response to what we have received. He pictures here two kinds of ground, two kinds of people in the church. The rain that falls on the ground is the same. It's the same rain, which in this context is both the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the blessing that comes with it, and the warning that the writer of Hebrews is giving to them. Both of these plots of land, these kinds of people, have seen and experienced and heard the same thing.

One brought forth the fruits of repentance and faith – real and true faith, devotion, perseverance, endurance, obedience, worship, holiness, ongoing repentance, listening to the voice of God and hearing and loving His Word, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But the other brought forth only thorns and thistles, the works of the flesh, worldliness, continued dullness to the word of God, insincere worship, and eventual apostasy. Both received the benefit of the rain – only one brought forth fruit in keeping with faith.

And that, beloved, was exactly what the writer of Hebrews was hoping for with this congregation. That is the heart of what he says in verses 9-12, ***“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*** (Hebrews 6:9–12, ESV) We will look at this more next week, but what is clear is that the writer truly believes that the greater part of the Hebrew church is saved and all they need to return to diligence and endurance is this exhortation. Their works and love they have shown for Christ, strongly testify to their genuine faith. But he wants them to have a full assurance of hope until the end; he wants their faith to endure. That is the only reliable sign of eternal life, a faith that does not fail and continues to the end of life, and one that results in fruit, in works of love for the sake of Christ. It may at times wax or wane, sometimes falter, but true faith will never fail. Jesus promised, ***“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”*** (John 10:27–29, ESV) Now the question of course, is how does this message to the Hebrews affect us?

How Does This Text Speak to Us? Here's the deal, beloved, though our ethnicity may be different, and the exact circumstances slightly different, this message is on point for us in 2016 America. Just like the Hebrew church, our church and we as individuals face a constant barrage of external threats to our faith. It's hard and it's only getting harder. But not only do we face the external pressures, we also face the very real challenge and threat of becoming dull of hearing and of regressing in our faith. If you hear this text and think to yourself, "This really doesn't affect me. This text really has no application for me," then you misunderstand the perseverance of the saints. We are told to persevere, to hold fast, to endure, to be steadfast and faithful; never are we told to rest on our profession of faith, or to find security in a decision that we made several years ago. We are to remain faithful to Christ and to cling to Christ as He holds fast to us. Assurance and confidence are found in pressing on in the Christian life.

In every church, there are some who have attended church in the past or attend church even now but who really do not know and are not living a life of faith and surrender to Him. They come to worship perhaps, have experienced the blessings of God in the fellowship of believers even, like the Hebrews the writer describes, but who do not build their lives on the Word of God, do not desire to grow in Christ, do not hear the Word of God mixed with faith and with a desire to obey, so not want to be held accountable for sub-Christian attitudes and actions, and it isn't a bump in the road or a season of struggle or doubt, but has become a way of life. And we need to see that to renounce our confession of Christ, either to actually and verbally do so, or to functionally and in practice renounce Christ is to step across a line we do not want to cross. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you most likely have know friends that have made certain choices, chosen a path away from Christ, chosen do engage in things that are not in keeping with a profession of faith in Christ, and have never returned. And the author of Hebrews is calling us to really examine the content of our faith, not from the perspective of our spiritual experiences, but from the perspective of the fruit of our confession in our lives. He wants us to be assured that we belong to Christ.

It is a strong warning, no doubt, and it not meant to unduly scare us, but is meant to motivate us to faithfulness and self-examination. Let me put this as personally as I can and I am indebted to John Piper for the way that he does this so I am going to paraphrase him.

If in the coming years I commit apostasy and fall away from Christ, it won't be because I have not ***once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.*** But if over the next several years -- 5, 10, 20 -- if Nick Shaffer begins to cool spiritually, if I lose interest in spiritual things, if I become more enthralled with worldly things, with making money, and I buy into the lie that a new wife would be better, and my kids can fend for themselves, and that the church of Christ is a drag, and that Christ is not all that, that my wisdom is superior to whatever I have read in the Bible, and there is only one life to live so I better fill it up with all the experiences that I can get, then know this. Nick Shaffer was tremendously deceived for the first 48 years of his life. My faith was really a sham. My faithfulness to his wife and family was a temporary passion and a means to remain qualified; my preaching was driven by pride and liking to hear myself talk. My outward faithfulness to Jesus was a means to receive approval and acceptance by people in the church. And my worship and prayer was an attempt to get God to make much of me. And I do not have a part in Christ's inheritance.

If that realization, that possibility, does not make me serious and watchful, if it does not drive me to faithfulness, and to pursue Christ as my treasure and my all, as my highest joy, as my King and my Lord, what will?

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