

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ
 SERMON: **Will It Be Apostasy or Perseverance?**
 SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 10:26-39
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Introduction: The problem of the heathen is one that everyone of us has wrestled with at some point, and I dare say some here this morning probably find it a persistent roadblock to faith. “What about those who have never heard? Is it fair for God to send them to Hell?” I raise that issue today, not because I am going to try to resolve it or even address it directly, but rather to highlight the fact that the difficult passage before us this morning is *not* talking about the heathen. The severe warning in this passage and the horrible judgment of God which it predicts is not designed for those who have *never heard* but rather for those who have *heard everything*. In other words, this is not a sermon for pagan America; this is a sermon for the Church.

Please turn in your Bibles with me to Hebrews 10:26-39. If you thought Hebrews 6 was a strong warning, listen to this one:

*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said,
 “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,”
 and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”
 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

(Thankfully our passage doesn't end there).

*Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.
 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while,
 “He who is coming will come and will not delay.
 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.”*

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

I am somewhat concerned about first-time visitors when I have to preach a passage like this. Apostasy is not a pleasant topic. I could wish your first visit was last Sunday, because we were studying a very encouraging passage about the access we can enjoy into the presence of God. And I hope you'll come back next week as we begin a month-long study of God's Hall of Faith. I just have to trust that God brought you here today for a reason. Perhaps you should ask Him what that reason might be.

Since I mentioned the heathen, I will be honest and tell you that I do believe the Bible teaches that hell is the eternal destiny of all those who do not put their faith in Jesus Christ. But Scripture also teaches that there are degrees of punishment, and the worst punishment of all is reserved, not for the heathen, not even for the disobedient Israelites of the OT, but rather for people who have turned their back on God after hearing and knowing the truth as revealed fully in Christ.

The theological term for what is described here is apostasy. We have used it several times already in our study of Hebrews.

The nature of apostasy (26)

We defined apostasy back in chapter 6 as “the abandonment and rejection of the faith by someone once knowledgeable about it.” This morning I'd like to offer another definition, related but a little different.

Definition: Apostasy is the deliberate rejection of what one knows in one's heart is true. You ask, “Why would anyone do that?” Well, people do it all the time. People know intellectually that alcohol can and will kill them if it's abused, yet millions of Americans abuse it everyday. People know that casual sex is destructive to their bodies and minds, but millions regularly engage in such activity. People know that poor diet and lack of exercise will result in all kinds of medical issues and a shorter life span, yet most of us fail to eat wisely or exercise regularly. The nature of human beings is such that we can know truth and deny it at the same time.

Our passage begins by stating a similar kind of paradox: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.” Let me state the point in another way: If we know the truth, yet deliberately reject the truth, we're toast. But what truth is being rejected? Not just truth about alcohol or casual sex or diet and exercise—something much more foundational than that.

It's very important that we wrestle with this phrase, “if we deliberately keep on sinning,” because whatever it refers to is unpardonable (because no sacrifice is sufficient to forgive it). First, it might help to clarify what it doesn't mean. Clearly it is not talking about unintentional

sins. Unintentional sin is by definition not deliberate. Nor is it talking about sins of passion, whereby a person is caught in a weak moment and before he knows it, he's done something he knows he shouldn't. It's not talking about backsliding, which might be described as a period of coldness in one's walk with God, for Abraham and David both went through such times, and clearly they were forgiven.

I don't even think it's talking about every sin that might be considered in some sense "deliberate," as when a person knows it's wrong to use God's name in vain or to lie or to steal, but does it anyway. That's serious, and it's inexcusable, but I don't think that's what he's talking about either. I'm sure everyone of us has sinned that way; i.e. we have known perfectly well what God's law prohibits and we have violated it anyway. Is this passage teaching that there is no forgiveness for anyone who has sinned knowingly? I don't think so. Well then, what is it?

The tense of the verb, "keep on sinning," reveals that the author is talking about a lifestyle, a pattern that is deliberate, unrepentant and rebellious. Sins like lying, stealing, and adultery are just symptoms for this person. The root disease is something much more basic. It is related to the knowledge of *the* truth, verse 26, (BTW, when the article "the" is used with "truth" it refers to the Christian faith itself, the Gospel), and it is described in drastic terms like trampling the Son of God underfoot, treating as unholy the blood of the covenant, and insulting the Spirit of grace. Friends, lying and stealing are serious and sinful, but they can hardly be described *that* way.

I think the context reveals that the deliberate sin in our passage is a persistent rejection of the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, i.e. the Gospel. The person knows the truth about salvation through the Cross of Christ, he has even at some point and to some degree received that truth, but then he has consciously and deliberately rejected that same truth, and said, in effect, "I'll do it my way."

Let's examine more carefully the three characteristics of apostasy mentioned in verse 29. . .

The characteristics of apostasy (29)

1. It amounts to trampling the Son of God underfoot. This phrase denotes contempt of the most flagrant and treacherous kind. To trample underfoot is to count as worthless. When protestors want to show contempt for our nation, they frequently trample on the flag. Friends, it is a fearful and damning thing to count as worthless the One whom the Father has declared to be of infinite worth and value.

William Barclay tells of a man in Germany during Hitler's reign who was arrested, tried, tortured and put into a concentration camp. He faced it all with gallantry and emerged erect and unbroken. Then by accident he discovered who it was who had betrayed him—it was his own son. The discovery broke his heart and he died. Attack by an enemy he could bear; but attack by one whom he loved dearly killed him. A similar sense of betrayal must be felt by our Lord every time a person for whom He died turns away and rejects His love. Apostasy is not mere

rebelliousness against law; it is the wounding of love.

2. It amounts to treating as unholy the sacrifice of Christ. The word “unholy” means “common” or “ordinary.” To treat the blood of the New Covenant as ordinary blood—no different from anyone else’s, no better than the blood of a bull or goat—is to repudiate Christ’s sacrifice and all the blessings which flow from it. By the shedding of His blood all those who believe are sanctified or made holy. So the irony is that the one and only instrument by which God makes men holy is treated as unholy by these apostates.

3. It amounts to insulting the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the One who guides us, teaches us, and convicts us when we are drifting into lethargy. He is the one who comes alongside us to help us. To disregard His voice and His help is to insult Him. What makes the matter worse is that he is “the Spirit of grace,” that is, He gives us what we do not deserve and withholds from us that which we do deserve. When we turn our backs on the truth, we insult the Holy Spirit.

The causes of apostasy

Perhaps the term “causes” is not the best to use here, for the ultimate cause of apostasy is certainly the wickedness of the human heart. I’m thinking of factors that contribute to apostasy or factors that can result in apostasy if we are not spiritually watchful. The first two, persecution and false teachers, are discussed in Matt. 24, beginning in verse 9.

1. Persecution (Matt. 24:9-10) Jesus is discussing the signs of the end of the ages and says in verse 9:

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Persecution is strongly hinted at here in Hebrews 10 as one of the key reasons some of the people receiving this letter had made a habit of absenting themselves from the fellowship. It was easier to go back to the synagogue than to endure the pressure.

I always feel very hesitant and unqualified to speak about persecution because I have never suffered any. Who of us knows for sure how we would react if we were threatened (or our children were threatened) because of our faith in God? The point Jesus is making is that persecution separates the sheep from the goats. Those who are interested in the church because of the business contacts it provides or because of the beauty of the stained glass windows, or those who attend because of tradition or even out of guilt will be shown for who they really are when the screws of persecution begin to turn. Few are willing to die for business contacts or stained glass windows or tradition, but true believers are willing to persevere even to death because of their personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, false teaching is mentioned in the same Matthew passage: “many false teachers will appear and deceive many people.”

2. False teaching (Matt. 24:11) Persecution frightens people away from the truth, whereas false teachers entice them away. I received a powerful letter some time ago from a woman in our church whose cousin was a pastor in a mainline church. Though taught the truth as a young man, this pastor lost his faith in seminary but still went on to serve several churches. When faced with depression he was counseled by some denominational colleagues that perhaps he was repressing latent homosexuality. He was encouraged to claim that lifestyle and come out of the closet. He took his own life at age 47! I’ll read one short paragraph from this letter:

“I’m firmly convinced that the _____ Church (she mentions the denomination) contributed to my cousin’s death. Had he received adequate counseling directed toward grace and forgiveness instead of being poisoned with ideas that run contrary to the Word of God, I believe he would be an active, thriving minister doing the work God set out for him to do today. But the church was so bent on twisting God’s Word, pushing its own agenda, and accommodating everyone, that he was engulfed with lies.”

Friends, false teachers lead people into apostasy, yet God holds the individual responsible for what he does with such teaching. Listen to 2 Tim. 4:3, “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.” People listen to false teachers because what they hear fits with their sinful lifestyles.

The cycle I have often seen goes something like this: First, a person professes faith in Christ and takes it seriously for a time. Then he begins to realize that Jesus demands discipleship, obedience, and holiness in life, which calls for changes in his behavior. Since no one can live indefinitely with such disequilibrium he must either change his behavior or change his beliefs. The false teacher provides him an easy way out of his dilemma, for the false teacher promotes an opportunity to do his own thing but still retain a form of godliness. Eventually the sinful behavior makes even the facade of false teaching distasteful and before long the reluctant disciple is a total apostate.

3. Temptation (Luke 8:13). And for this we turn to the parable of the soils. Let me read from Luke 8:13: “Those who are planted on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.” The word for “testing” is often translated “temptation,” and either fits in this context. Apostates are often rocky-soil hearers who are attracted to the Gospel for a while, but then are tempted away from full commitment. Temptation or testing can come in many forms. People can fall because of a lust for power, fame, or sex.

4. Neglect and apathy (Heb. 2:3) Back in chapter 2 of Hebrews we were asked, “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” There are those who eventually become apostate by simply traveling the comfortable road of neglect. They don’t mean to turn their

backs on God. They don't even make a conscious decision to reject Him. They just neglect the means of grace—Bible reading, prayer, fellowship. Pretty soon neglect and apathy yield to coldness, and coldness to opposition.

How serious an issue is apostasy? That can be answered by looking at our text for the results, two of which are clearly mentioned:

The results of apostasy

1. No remedy for sin is possible. (26) That's what verse 26 says. But why? Because the only remedy God has ever provided, namely the blood of Christ, has been rejected. What do you expect God to do? In fact, that's a question C.S. Lewis asks in a chapter on Hell in his great book *The Problem of Pain*. Listen to it:

"The answer to all those who object to the doctrine of Hell is a question, 'What would you like for God to do?' To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They refuse to be forgiven. To leave them alone? That is what Hell is."

And Helmut Thielicke adds,

"For to be in Hell simply means to be utterly separated from God, but in such a way that one is compelled to see him, that one must see him as a thirsty man sees a silvery spring from which he dare not drink. This is Hell; to be forced to see the glory of God and have no access to it."

I agree with both of these statements. Yet I wonder if both Lewis and Thielicke may in some sense soft-pedal the doctrine of hell, for our passage speaks not just of a place where people are left alone, without access to God, but of severe judgment.

2. Severe judgment is earned. (27-31) In fact, I don't know how one could speak of God's judgment in harsher terms than the author uses here: "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

As I said at the beginning of this sermon I believe there are degrees of sin and judgment. Jesus told Pilate, "He who delivered Me up to you has the greater sin." (John 19:11) Pilate's sin was great, but Judas' was greater. Both were unbelievers, but Judas was an apostate. He had light and evidence far beyond what Pilate had, and was therefore far more guilty in betraying Christ. The same truth is taught in Luke 12:47,48: "That slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few."

Here in our Hebrews passage the author compares and contrasts the judgment experienced by an OT Israelite who rejected the inferior covenant and the inferior priesthood, with that deserved by one who is defiant toward the far superior New Covenant and the Great High Priest God has appointed over us. Greater knowledge results in greater sin and brings greater judgment. I

would assume this means that if someone were to walk out of this service without bowing the knee to Christ, it would have been better for them not to have come at all than to hear the truth and still turn away.

Now lest some should think that he has overstated the prospect of judgment, the writer turns to the character of the judge. The words, "For we know Him" in verse 30 at once focuses attention on God, and then several quotations are offered from the OT that speak of His vengeance and His judgment. A summary is then offered: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

You've heard people contrast the God of the OT with the God of the NT. They say, "The OT God was a God of judgment, the NT a God of love." Friends, that is a false dichotomy. He's the same God. This is the NT speaking: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Now I want to focus the rest of our time on our final point, the Deterrents to Apostasy. Our author's purpose is not to discourage his readers, but to embolden them, and so he offers reassurance and encouragement starting in verse 32. Fear is an appropriate motivation but encouragement is even better.

The deterrents to apostasy

1. Look back. (32-34) Let's read again verses 32-34:

"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."

Do you realize how often the Scriptures teach us to look back and not forget the past? I did a study of this and found these things we are urged not to forget:

- Don't forget God. (Deut. 6:12)
- Don't forget God's Word. (2 Peter 3:1,2)
- Don't forget God's Day. (Ex. 20:8)
- Don't forget God's people. (Heb. 13:2)
- Don't forget God's grace. (Ps. 103:1-5)
- Don't forget God's works. (Isa. 51:12,13)
- Don't forget God's judgment. (Luke 17:32)
- Don't forget what you once were. (Deut. 9:7)
- Don't forget that God doesn't forget. (Mal. 3:16-18)

Here in Heb. 10:32-36 the author tells his listeners not to forget the hurdles they've already crossed and the spiritual victories they've already won. They were publicly insulted, i.e. their

good reputations were smeared, but they stood their ground. Then they were physically afflicted, perhaps even tortured. What is perhaps even more difficult, particularly when one's children or loved ones are at risk, they stood side by side with those so treated. They sympathized with those in prison, probably taking them food and words of encouragement, risking their own lives in the process. And they joyfully accepted confiscation of their property. Their attitude is not one of resignation but actual joy!

Wow! That really blows my mind! Most of us react with anger or a lawsuit if something of ours is taken unjustly. But these people said in effect, "Lord, everything I have is Yours; I'm only the caretaker. If you want the Romans to take your stuff, that's O.K. with me." They could only take such a perspective because, as verse 34 says, they knew they had "better and lasting possessions." That can only refer to eternal rewards.

We may find it hard to relate to the exact experience of these Jewish believers, but the point the author is making can easily apply to us if we translate their experience into ours. Let me paraphrase this way:

"Look back at the time when you first received Christ. Remember how excited you were, how eager you were to tell others about Him, how bold you were in the face of criticism, how your priorities were all geared around Him, how you wouldn't miss a service at church unless you were too sick to move, how prayer was such a delight and you couldn't read enough of the Scriptures? Remember that? If so, do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded."

And that brings us to his second antidote to apostasy:

2. Look forward. (35-38) Notice the future tenses in these last verses:

"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."

God's people here are urged not to throw away their confidence in Him, in His Son, in the Holy Spirit, in the New Covenant—not because of persecution, or false teachers, or temptation, and certainly not because of apathy or neglect. Perseverance in the faith will be rewarded, and not just rewarded, but richly rewarded. Those rewards may not show up in personal financial statements; they may not appear in the near future; they may be preceded by much tribulation; but they *will come*.

The key word in these verses is obviously the word "persevere" in verse 36. "You need to persevere," to endure. Perseverance is one of the great unromantic virtues. Most people start well at a task. Almost everyone can do well in spasms. Some can mount up with wings as eagles for a crisis. But the greatest ability of all may be to walk and not faint. "You need to persevere." It's not optional and failure to do so can be fatal.

Conclusion: May I reiterate that the alternative to apostasy is perseverance. What path are we taking? The author says to his parishioners in the last verse, “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.” Let's not misinterpret this statement. I don't believe he is saying that *no one* in the church he is writing to is in danger of apostasy and judgment; otherwise, why would he even include this dire warning?

Rather he is offering a final word of encouragement. He's saying to his friends, “I believe in you. You began your Christian career in that carefree spirit which accepts without question the assurance of Christ that 'whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel's shall save it.' Now *maintain* that spirit of faith to the end and you will see God.”ⁱ

Notice, too, how much this whole passage has to do with public identification with Christ and His covenant people. There comes a time when we must be willing to be counted with Christ or against Him. There is no middle ground; we all must choose one side or the other. And not to choose is to decide against Jesus Christ.

i. Based on F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 276.