

The Dangerous Practice of Unbelief

Hebrews 3:7-19

Delivered by Michael Uyeda

I hope you've been enjoying your summer, as much as I have. One of the ways in which I've been able to enjoy the summer with my family is by spending as much time at the WATER PARK as possible. We've gone several times now and each time we're there, I am thoroughly IMPRESSED with something that may seem *insignificant* to others around me. What I've noticed at our water park is that there are lifeguards all over the place. You literally cannot walk or swim more than twenty five feet without running into a lifeguard. Obviously, that comforts me a great deal as a parent of young children. But, what impresses me is not so much the number of lifeguards that are there, but the VIGILANCE with which they do their job. It impresses me that these teenagers sit in a chair, above the pool and do absolutely NOTHING ... *except* keep watch for signs of danger in the water. I'm not sure how much they get paid, but it's clear that they realize that what they're called to do is LITERALLY a matter of LIFE and DEATH!

This morning's text (and message) is similar in that we, as a Christian community, are called to exercise VIGILANCE and GREAT CARE with each others lives, because what is at stake today is a matter of *spiritual* life and death. You see, this writer is *very concerned* that there are many in the church, who presume to be "Christians", but show NO EVIDENCE of the Sovereign work of God in their lives. In a similar manner, God has burdened my heart to speak from this passage because it concerns me that such a large number of people who identify themselves as "Christians" don't possess a *worldview*, a *passion in life or language* that is GOD-CENTERED!! Let's read the sermon text found in your outlines, from Hebrews 3: 7-19.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, [8] do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, [9] where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works [10] for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' [11] As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.' " [12] Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. [13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. [14] For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. [15] As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." [16] For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? [18] And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? [19] So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

As we begin, let me quickly give you a little background to our passage. In verse 7, we see the word "*therefore*" - and all you good Bible students know that if you see that word, you should always ask the question, "what's the THEREFORE, there for?"

Well, the book of Hebrews, whose author is unknown to us, is a letter written to Jewish Christians who were being tempted to defect from the New Covenant IN JESUS CHRIST and go back to their old practice of JUDAISM. So, in Chapter 1, the author begins by explaining to these professing Christians why everything they need in life can be found in Jesus. In fact, the truth that pulsates throughout this wonderful book is the theme: JESUS IS BETTER. The writer wants to convince his readers that Jesus Christ is to be PREFERRED above all other people and things in this life.

You may already be aware that the book of Hebrews contains five major warnings. In Chapter TWO, we find the first warning; NOT to DRIFT away. He says we must pay MORE CAREFUL attention to spiritual matters because much more has been revealed TO US, than to our brothers and sisters in the past. He continues on in Chapter THREE, explaining how Jesus is our model of faithfulness – and if we want to be faithful in our walk, there’s no better example to follow than Jesus, Himself. So, with those three lessons in mind, he brings us to verse 7.

Now, because our hearts aren’t NATURALLY inclined to obey and listen to God, the writer of Hebrews begins verse 7 by saying, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says ...”. Now, I don’t want you to miss the significance of that statement. We know that ALL Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he emphasizes the Spirit’s role in this warning as if to say: “These are not just nice SUGGESTIONS of things we *MIGHT* want to do ... “*if we have time*” or “*if we feel like it*”. And because this is a matter of spiritual life and death, it would also be wise for us to pay CLOSE attention to what He says.

To begin with, there is a warning for you and me today (in vs. 8) to make SURE that we don’t harden our hearts toward God. And, you’ll notice that those words from verse 8-11 are in QUOTATION MARKS. That’s because the author is taking these words directly from PSALM 95. He quotes this Psalm as an illustration, of how Israel hardened its heart in UNBELIEF and it cost them heaven. He quotes it again in verse 15 and emphasizes that it was UNBELIEF that caused them to miss out on God’s rest.

So, common sense would tell us that, “if unbelief can cause a person to miss out on heaven, then I need to know how the Bible defines ‘unbelief’”. For starters, we can think of UNBELIEF as the opposite of belief – but recognize that to the Jewish mind belief not only involved *intellectual* understanding, but EXPERIENCE and PRACTICE as well; they wouldn’t say they “believed” something unless they actually practiced it in their lives. So, belief and unbelief are not simply a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with Scripture. Belief or unbelief is seen in how we actually LIVE OUR LIVES as Christians.

The actual Greek word used here (for ‘unbelief’) is a word that describes someone who fails to respond to God in TRUST with his/her life. It’s a person who has developed a PATTERN of repeatedly ignoring what God’s Word says and trusting more and more in their own ability to make decisions without Him. But, don’t think that this problem of unbelief goes away by simply changing your behavior. Quickly, looking back at verse 10, God says that the ROOT PROBLEM is not in their behavior, but it’s because “*they always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways*”.

Unbelief is (FIRST) a problem with our attitudes and heart – and at the heart of Unbelief is a REJECTION of JESUS CHRIST. In the context of our passage today, unbelief is the rejection of Jesus as the One object to be preferred over all other things. It is a rejection of God’s warnings to take spiritual matters seriously. And, it’s a rejection of JESUS as our MODEL of faithfulness. So you see, unbelief is a VERY SERIOUS matter that we need to deal with today.

Some may argue – “if unbelief is that serious, how does it affect me, as a believer? Doesn’t the fact that I claim to be a ‘Christian’ excuse me from this warning of unbelief?” The answer is ABSOLUTELY...NOT!

We need to consider that the writer of Hebrews is addressing a group of professing believers, just as I am today, in this church. And, as much as we want to believe that everyone in this church is saved, the fact of the matter is that many are NOT saved, regardless of *how long* you’ve been coming, who *you know*, who you’re *related to*, or how many *ministries* you’ve been *involved in*. The writer of

Hebrews is writing to the same demographic. Some are true BROTHERS (and sisters) in the faith and some may not be saved (and know it), and others (the ones he's mainly concerned about here) THINK they're saved, but show no evidence of it in their lives. So, regardless of where you think you're at, please don't ignore the Spirit's conviction, because HEAVEN and HELL could be at stake for you today.

As I suggested earlier, Jesus was used as the perfect example of faithfulness to us. But in using this Psalm, the author wants to make it clear that the Israelites are a model of what NOT TO DO ...if we want to enter God's rest. What He wants is for you and me to hold up this picture of the ISRAELITES and their relationship with God, and compare it to our lives.

Beginning in verse 16, the author wants to remind his readers that the ENTIRE Nation of Israel had experienced God's grace and mercy, IN SPITE OF their grumbling and unbelief. Consider that God delivered them from Egyptian slavery by parting the Red Sea, He mercifully provided them with sweet water after they grumbled about the water being bitter at Marah, He remained patient with them; giving them manna in the morning and quail at night when they wanted to return to Egypt for food, and after they complained of having no water He commanded Moses to strike the rock with his staff and watered poured forth from that rock.

For 40 years they had seen miracles and experienced God's goodness and faithfulness in their lives. Surely, they had matured and grown to trust God with their lives, right? Not quite. Because for those same 40 years, their lives were marked by unfaithfulness to God and unbelief in His promises. The ultimate test came when God brought them to the Promised Land. They didn't realize it, but God was giving them one last opportunity to repent and trust God in what He had promised. You remember, of course, what happened when he sent the ten spies to check out the land He had promised them? With the exception of Joshua and Caleb the people were overcome with fear and rejected God's Word in unbelief. So, after 40 years of grumbling, complaining and not trusting God, His patience finally ran out. He pronounced judgment on those who failed to trust Him with their lives and they were shut out, forever, from the rest He had promised.

I hope, at this point, you're starting to make the spiritual connections in YOUR OWN life. We've all had our share of times in wilderness, haven't we? And in spite of OUR grumbling and complaining, God has proven Himself to be faithful to us time after time. How have WE responded to Him? When we think of all the different struggles that God has brought us through, has it made us MORE confident in His promises or are we MORE comfortable ruling our own lives? Now, don't get me wrong – God created us and knows that we are made from dust. So, He doesn't expect us to fake it and pretend like life ISN'T a struggle – But, the *ultimate* PATTERN and TRAJECTORY of our lives should have an UPWARD SLOPE to it; As time passes, we (and others around us) should see us becoming more Christ-like as we mature and grow in our relationship with Jesus. In other words, if we were to GRAPH out our Christian lives in terms of time and maturity it might look something like this: (*I borrowed this illustration from Dr. Neil Anderson*)

Many Christian lives can be characterized by a "ROLLER COASTER" pattern, where no REAL growth takes place because the person's faith rises and sinks as often as their emotion's change. So, over time, the net result in this person's life is really no change at all. Other professing Christians seemingly START OUT WELL and look like they'll be spiritual giants in no time. But life gets tough or they ultimately prefer the things of this world over Jesus. Eventually we see these people DROP completely out of the faith and when we see them years later, it's as if they've NEVER heard the gospel at all! Now, what Scripture describes as "normal" Christianity is this UPWARD TRAJECTORY. You'll notice that it doesn't shoot *straight up*, because, we still sin and fail at times

and our growth stops periodically. But, the real test of true saving faith is seen in the fact that OVER TIME – this person continues to MATURE and GROW in their faith.

When you look over your life the past ten years, five years, six months what do you see? Are you MORE obedient to His Word? Do you have a passion for doing His will? Are you discipling others in these things? It's THIS kind of self-examination that the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to when he says in verse 14: For we share in Christ (that is, "for we are saved"), *IF* ...indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Now, that's a PRETTY BIG "IF" in that verse, isn't it? When you look at the structure of the verse, notice what it ISN'T saying. It DOESN'T say that IF WE hold our original confidence firm to the end, *then* we WILL share in Christ. What it IS saying is that if the pattern of our life has this upward trajectory in terms of growth and maturity – it will PROVE that we really were saved all along. In other words, verse 14 is NOT telling us HOW to get saved. Verse 14 is merely saying that the PROOF or the EVIDENCE that we really were saved in the first place is in whether or not we have been faithful in our walk with God. The writer of Hebrews is so sure of the Sovereign work of God in our lives that in essence he's saying: "True believers will ALWAYS ENDURE and FINISH WELL in the Christian life!"

Now, the last thing I want to do is confuse you or be unclear about the meaning of verse 14. So, let me quote one of the most widely respected Bible scholars the church has. Listen to what Wayne Grudem has to say about passages such as this:

"The purpose [of this text and similar ones] is never to make those who are presently trusting in Christ worry that sometime in the future they might fall away.... Rather, the purpose is always to warn those who are thinking of falling away or have fallen away that if they do this it is a strong indication that they were never saved in the first place" [Bible Doctrine, 339, author's italics].

Remember that the author knows these words are being received by those who are genuinely saved as well as those who have a false assurance of being saved. So he exhorts them, as a COMMUNITY of professing believers, and says, beginning in verse 12: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. [13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. This writer of Hebrews is thoroughly convinced that this sin of UNBELIEF is such a legitimate threat to destroying our faith, that he gives us this strong warning.

There are three observations I want to make here:

First, the command to "*Take care brothers...*". This command is given to us, as a CHURCH, to take care of each other, by being WATCHFUL and OBSERVANT about how we live our Christian lives. We're told, specifically, to guard each other's lives against UNBELIEF and FALLING AWAY (As a side note, we get the word APOSTASY from the Greek root of "FALLING AWAY"). It's a call for us to be SO CONCERNED that these two things don't become a reality in our lives -- that we would be willing to get in each other's faces and hold each other accountable. Now, maybe you've noticed some of these signs in a FRIEND'S LIFE, or perhaps your OWN. Maybe you've been concerned about a brother, sister, son, daughter or parent who PROFESSES to being a Christian... but shows NO FRUIT, NO ABIDING FAITH or SPIRITUAL GROWTH. I pray that God would burden our hearts for EACH OTHER to obey verse 12 so that we can confidently say that we have taken every opportunity to fight unbelief and apostasy in each other's lives.

A second observation is that the writer says we should exhort one another EVERYDAY as long as it is called “today”. His point is that we don’t know how many “TODAY’S” we have left. This command to exhort each other is something we need to act on and obey TODAY! But, does the writer literally mean “everyday”? I’m not sure, but I think, in the context of this passage ... the point is that we should be SO CONCERNED that no one within our reach destroys their faith, -- that we would use EVERY, and ANY, opportunity to make sure we not only START WELL, but that we FINISH STRONG in the faith.

Many of YOU are in small groups, some of you meet often for lunch, some of you are in ministries together. When you’re together, what are your conversations like?? I want to challenge you to redeem those times and devote just a FEW MINUTES (each time you’re together) to talking about your walk with God and how you’re *growing* or what you’re *struggling with*.

The THIRD, and final observation here is that the writer describes SIN as being “deceitful”, and that’s important to remember isn’t it? Sin promises SO MUCH to us and yet delivers so LITTLE. I’m not sure about you, but, when the Holy Spirit convicts me of a sin, most of the time I say in my heart, “How in the world did I do that AGAIN!” (even though, the last time I resolved not to do that)? The answer: It’s because sin is DECEITFUL! And the way in which the writer says we need to combat that in our lives is to EXHORT each other in the church as often as possible. We do it by asking the tough questions and holding each other accountable. We do it by praying for and confronting each other with things that seem inconsistent with being a follower of Christ.

Now, hopefully, I’ve explained and interpreted the text faithfully enough so that we would want to DO SOMETHING about this issue of unbelief TODAY. So, let me leave you with THREE PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS of this passage:

Application Number ONE

The Christian life is NOT a life of coasting!!

You see, this book was written to blow away the notion that we can say a prayer to get saved and then set our spiritual lives on “cruise control” all the way to heaven. Some of you are under the incorrect assumption that, once conversion takes place, everything in the Christian life is AUTOMATIC, and we just need to hang out at church until its time to go to heaven. But, in contrast to that way of thinking, I’m just going to read the Word of God so we can hear how the Christian life is described:

- Peter 4:12-13 “12Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”
- 2 Tim. 4:7 (ESV) I have *fought the good fight*, I have finished the race, I have *kept the faith*.
- 1Peter 5:9-10 “Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.
- Matthew 24:13 “But the one who endures TO THE END will be saved”.

Now, does any of that sound like coasting to you? What all these verses tell us is that: Christianity is NOT about how well you START; it's about how well you FINISH! This is what the writer of Hebrews is trying to teach his readers, in this text. So, should we celebrate when someone FIRST accepts Christ and conversion takes place? Absolutely! *But...* we don't just breathe easy and think that it's normal if they 'coast' for the rest of their lives. That's like ... when a baby is born, we reason that "babies learn to talk and walk and eventually grow into adults. We don't really need to be concerned with feeding, loving, teaching or disciplining them." We *know* those things don't happen automatically, so what would make us think that this would be the case with spiritual maturity?

I think, coasting is the result of people misunderstanding or not being taught what salvation is. Conversion, by itself is NOT SALVATION; Conversion only marks the BEGINNING of a Christian's life; your spiritual birth. The rest of your life, as a believer, should be spent cultivating the relationship you started with Jesus so that you become more like Him – that's referred to as "SANCTIFICATION". But, this shouldn't be news to you, because if you've been coming to this church for any length of time, you know that this is why John Carlini has devoted such a large part of his ministry to DISCIPLESHIP; it's so that none of us would make shipwreck of our faith and fall away from the living God.

I'll have to say that one of the helpful things that John has taught me, is in HOW to ARTICULATE my salvation, so that I'm constantly reminded NOT TO COAST; this is simply how our salvation is talked about in Scripture. We can think of our salvation by saying: We *WERE saved*, we *ARE BEING saved*, and we *WILL BE saved*.

We *ARE* saved, refers to our conversion that took place somewhere in the PAST – this is when you asked Jesus to come into your life and take control. We *ARE BEING SAVED* refers to the process of sanctification; this is the life we live while we're on earth -- battling SIN and UNBELIEF and seeking to become more like Jesus in our *thoughts, words and actions*. We *WILL BE* saved refers to our glorification when we will receive new bodies and be with Him forever. The problem with COASTING is that the emphasis lies completely on the "we *WERE* saved" part of salvation, (conversion) and everything else gets neglected. And I have to tell you, that if that describes YOU, that is a VERY dangerous place to be, spiritually! It's like trying to stand on a three legged stool with two legs missing!

As I read and listen to different teachings, I'm convinced that much of what is being taught in the church these days is actually giving FALSE ASSURANCE to those who *may not really be saved*, because many people think that SALVATION is simply saying a "prayer". I want to urge you NOT to buy into that theology, because that is not an accurate depiction of Christianity and it won't save you.

My favorite preacher and someone I consider to be one of the best modern theologians we have, is John Piper. Listen to how he describes the Christian life:

"True Christianity is like swimming upstream in a river of godlessness ... We swim with the stroke of love to Christ, and the stroke of faith in Christ, and the stroke of joy in Christ. And while we swim, we do not get swept away with the godless toward the terrible cataracts of judgment down river. God keeps us ... through faith. He enables us to keep on swimming against the stream with the strokes of faith, love, and joy, so that we don't get carried away in the current of Christlessness".

That's a GREAT picture of what it means to live like a Christian and I hope that picture remains with you, as it has me, because it reminds us of how spiritually dangerous it is to COAST. Because if John Piper is accurate in his description of Christianity (*and I think he is*) -- then many of us need to wake

up today and pray that God would grant us the ability to swim hard against the current of godlessness in our lives – before it's too late.

APPLICATION Number Two
**God has ordained that Christian perseverance is to be accomplished,
through the community of believers in the church.**

I will not stand here and lie to you and tell you that the Christian life is EASY. In fact, I think it's so much easier (in some ways) to live life as an UNBELIEVER. Thankfully, God has designed His church in such a way that we can persevere in our faith by being in a network of relationships that helps to strengthen our faith and causes us to grow. But, many of us will need to examine the relationships we have now (Christian and non-Christian) to see if we can apply this passage in the context of those relationships. Here's a litmus test; suppose you went out to lunch today, with some of your friends, and you said, "Man, I really need you to pray with me and hold me accountable in my walk with Christ to make sure I'm growing and making disciples of others. Can I count on you?" What would their response be? The answer to that question may give you a big clue as to how you need to start praying for a group of friends who care enough about your salvation (and their own) that you'd be willing to get in each other's faces to make sure that you don't fall away. Small groups, worship service, one-on-one discipleship, getting together for meals ... I want to challenge you to start viewing those times as CRITICAL to your perseverance in the faith. Start realizing that heaven and hell could be at stake in those meetings, because (for some) it can mean helping them make it one day closer to finishing the race and PROVING that they were partakers in Christ.

APPLICATION Number THREE
Treasure your relationship with JESUS and the salvation that comes with it.

Jesus told a parable in Luke 7, saying:

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [42] When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" [43] Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Jesus' point is that the degree to which we treasure our salvation and our relationship with Him is directly proportional to our understanding of the gospel; of being able to see how our sin has created this INFINITE CHASM between us and GOD. Remember how the writer of Hebrews warns us that sin is deceitful. And one of the lies we buy into that fosters *unbelief* and a *falling away from God*, is the attitude of ENTITLEMENT. Satan would love for you and me to believe that we DESERVE to be saved by God. However, the truth is that God tells us in Romans that HE ALONE determines *Who will* and *Who will NOT* be saved. Apart from His grace and mercy to unconditionally ELECT us, we *cannot* be saved. Sadly, many would like to believe that because "God is Love", He should save EVERYONE. The problem is that we forget that the essence of Who God is – is HOLINESS, and as sinful beings, we cannot stand before this HOLY GOD.

What we really need to understand is that He didn't have to save ANY of us!! So, without Christ, as our savior, the only thing each and every person deserves is Hell! That's why, if you happen to be saved, the only REASONABLE response to a God who has RESCUED YOU from hell - is *not*

UNFAITHFULNESS, UNBELIEF, GRUMBLING or COMPLAINING...the only REASONABLE RESPONSE to *THAT* kind of grace and mercy is to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice in WORSHIP!!!.

What could be *GREATER* in life than being saved by a Holy, Righteous and Just God???! This passage is pleading with us not to take our salvation for granted -- but to TREASURE Christ and our relationship with Him.

Many of you are familiar with the Christian term "once saved always saved". I would caution you that that is ONLY true IF, by that, you also mean "once having a relationship with Jesus, ALWAYS having a relationship with Jesus". We need to be careful not to confuse our PROFESSION of faith, with our POSSESSION of faith. In other words, we aren't Christians just because we SAY we are; there should be clear indications that God is sanctifying us. This passage is clear that those who SHARE in CHRIST *will* persevere in their faith.

And, I'm confident that those of you who are truly saved -- and see a problem, will respond to His voice today and, by His grace alone, will heed the Spirit's conviction in your lives. If, however, you could care less about what this passage is saying, I want to strongly caution you to evaluate whether you are really saved. Some of you will admit that you've been "coasting", that you feel far away from God and that if you died right now -- you're not sure where you'd spend eternity. There is a world of difference in the assurance you can have, as a Christian, based on whether you treat Jesus as your "ticket broker" to heaven or as the ONE WHO own the keys to the Kingdom. If you treat Him like a ticket broker, you don't really need to know Him because you purchased your ticket when you said the "salvation prayer".

Wouldn't you rather have 100% confidence and assurance that you'll live in eternity with Christ, by walking with Him on a DAILY BASIS?! If you have a personal relationship with the Owner of the Kingdom, you won't need a "ticket", because you can walk hand in hand with Him as He opens the gates for you!

In closing, let me read you quote from John Piper:

"The story is told of a vulture who spotted the corpse of a fox on a big hunk of ice floating down the river toward Niagara Falls. He flies to the ice, lands, and begins to eat the fox. He watches the falls approaching and hears the warnings of danger, but he tells himself that he has wings and is free and does not need to pay attention to such warnings. He is destined for the sky. At the last minute he finishes his feast and spreads his wings but he can't fly because his talons have frozen in the ice and he is dragged over the falls to his destruction. And so it will be with people who have heard the warnings of Scripture to abandon their worldly lusts and pursue holiness, but who say, "I have wings, I am a Christian. I can fly anytime I want to." The day will come when they may try and will not be able to repent because they are so hardened and addicted to the world they can't even feel one genuine spiritual affection".

Today, if you hear His voice, do NOT harden your hearts. Let's pray.