

Lesson 50
The Warning Against Indifference
Hebrews 12:12-17

We now take up the last warning passage in the Book of Hebrews. Altogether there are five warnings: the danger of drifting (2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (3:7—4:13), the danger of falling away (5:11—6:20), the danger of pulling back (10:26-31), and the danger of indifference to God's grace (12:12-29). These warnings were addressed to all the Christian assembly to whom the author was writing and were given to keep the Hebrew-Christians from apostatizing. An apostate is one who has adopted Christianity as his religion and advanced into it to some degree but then turned back to his original paganism or old religion. An apostate is one who has had great intellectual knowledge of Christ and has experienced some of the external benefits of Christianity and yet had no true saving faith. No true Christian can ever become an apostate because a true Christian is born of God's Spirit and perseveres in the faith. An apostate, however, turns completely away from Christ and not only wants nothing to do with Christ, but actively works against Him. An apostate's heart is so hardened by the sin of unbelief, refusing to genuinely repent and believe in Christ, that he passes a point of no return in his life when he can no longer be saved.

The Hebrew-Christians to whom the author of Hebrews was writing had a unique situation. They were being persecuted by the unsaved Jews and some of them were buckling under the pressure of persecution. Some of them were seriously thinking about abandoning Christianity and going back into Judaism to escape persecution. In fact, a few of the Hebrew-Christians had already apostatized and gone back into Judaism. The author, therefore, is concerned about those who were still contemplating this move. The author is convinced that most of the Hebrew-Christians were saved, but he was deeply concerned about a few of them, for he feared that they had never really been born again and were in danger of apostatizing. Because the author did not know the human heart, he warned the whole assembly about the danger of indifference to spiritual things. He felt these warnings would encourage the true believer to push on and mere professors to think twice before abandoning Christ for Judaism.

INDIFFERENCE TO PERSECUTION - Hebrews 12:12-13

“Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble . . .” – “Therefore” is the key to this section and it takes us back to what has been mentioned in Hebrews 12:1-11. These Hebrew-Christians were told to run the Christian race with patient endurance. They were not to fold up under persecutions, problems, and pressures, for they were designed by God to discipline or son-train them. They were to endure (persevere) all persecutions, for they were designed by God to make them holy or Christ-like in life. However, many of them were buckling under the pressure and giving serious consideration to leaving Christianity to go back into Judaism. They were falling into the sin of unbelief and losing confidence in God's sovereignty to handle the situation.

The words “strengthen the hands which are weak (hang down) and the knees that are feeble

(palsied)” are figurative language. To cure their drooping spirits and sick spiritual condition, these Christians were to get a divine viewpoint toward suffering and be active in persevering in the Christian faith. There was a tendency in many, because of the despair and discouragement that accompanies persecution, to abandon their discharge of Christian duty and give up, taking the path of least resistance. These Christians were challenged to push on when the going got tough, for this was an evidence that they had true saving faith.

The Christian who is actively involved in perseverance needs never to fret about apostatizing from the Christian faith. The cure for lethargy in our Christian walk and indifference to divine discipline is persistence and endurance in spiritual realities.

“... and make straight paths for your feet ...” -- Christians are to proceed straight forward in the faithful discharge of their Christian duty. The path set before the Christian is the way of godliness and suffering. A Christian must be careful not to become indifferent in his life to God and he must beware of turning aside to any degree that may lead to abandonment of the right way altogether.

The Christian, who with great determination and commitment, perseveres in the faith in spite of the many obstacles, never has to be concerned about apostasy. Perseverance is proof that one will not apostatize.

“... so the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” -- Again, this is figurative language and probably refers to those in the assembly who were spiritually weak, so much so that they were succumbing to pressures and seriously considering abandonment of Christianity.

Christians are to be strong in the things of the Lord, so as to be an example and encouragement to weak, doubting and insecure professing Christians, so they will not fall away and apostatize.

INDIFFERENCE TO GODLY LIVING - Hebrews 12:14

“Pursue peace with all men ...” -- These Hebrew Christians were to strive for peace with all men. This has a particular reference to the unsaved Jews who were persecuting these Christians. They were to do everything in their power, short of compromising the truths of the Christian faith, to live at peace with the unsaved world. They were to avoid any needless persecution.

Christians live in a world of men whose thinking and feeling and acting are very different from - and at times directly opposite to - theirs. The Bible states that all Christians will receive some persecution from the unsaved world.

“And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).

“In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

However, when persecutions come the Christian must be careful that he does not provoke and feed it by improper behavior. He must be sure he is suffering for Christ and the gospel. Indifference to pursuing peace will invite more persecutions and cause unwanted pressures.

“... and the sanctification (holiness) without which no one will see the Lord.” -- These Hebrew-Christians were also to pursue holiness or sanctification of life. “Holiness” is practical righteousness and godliness which comes about because of the divine design of persecution.

“For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:10-11).

They were to yield, submit, and bend to the persecutions because they were planned to make them more Christ-like.

To pursue holiness is to be separated or devoted to God. In a sense, “holiness” means to put to proper use, and when Christians are submitting to the lessons God wants them to learn through discipline, they are producing holiness and being put to a proper use by God. Christians are being put to a proper use when they are devoted to God, promoting His interest and advancing His glory. Indifference to holiness of life could lead one to apostasy.

This verse states very clearly that if practical holiness does not show up in a professing Christian to some degree, he is not saved, and he shall not see the Lord in heaven. Notice carefully, it is not perfect holiness that God demands (for we all fall short of godly living in this life) but practical holiness, where our disposition and desires are towards spiritual things. This is a warning to professing Christians that perseverance and holiness of life are essential because they prove that the life of Christ is in them.

John Newton, that great preacher of days gone by, had a right viewpoint of holiness:

I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by God’s grace I am what I am.

INDIFFERENCE TO GOD’S GRACE - Hebrews 12:15

“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God ...” -- There was to be a concern on the part of all the Hebrew-Christians for every brother and sister in their assembly. The word “see” means “to watch over” or “to have oversight.” The true Christians in the assembly were to be looking over the congregation for those who might be coming short of true saving faith. Some of these Hebrew-Christians were acquainted intellectually with God’s grace in salvation but were not committed to Jesus Christ. They had become the beneficiaries of many of the external, non-

saving values of Christianity but had never been born of God's Spirit. They "came short of God's grace" and their profession of faith in Christ was crumbling because of the persecution they were facing. If they left Christianity and went back into Judaism, they would become apostates with no possibility of being saved.

This verse states clearly that Christians in a local church have responsibilities to one another. They are to exhort and encourage one another to persevere in holiness of life.

"... that no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble ..." -- The "root of bitterness" must refer to those in the assembly who were becoming embittered by the persecution they were suffering. They began to gripe, mumble, and groan about their situation and made overtures to leave Christianity to go back into Judaism. This is a quote from Deuteronomy 29:18 which refers to apostates.

"... lest there shall be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood" (Deut. 29:18).

A root is hidden at first but later reveals itself, so a false professor can conceal himself for a while but will one day flag his true colors.

These false believers were causing trouble in the assembly. Their strife and debate were producing grief and regret among many weak brethren in the local church. Genuine, strong Christians are to deal with potential apostates immediately, seeking to bring them to a right understanding of Christ and a commitment to Him.

"... and by it many be defiled ..." -- Potential apostates, who are troublemakers in a local church are going to affect and defile many weaker brethren. Professing Christians and potential apostates must be dealt with immediately in the local church before they infect the whole church with their evil.

"... a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (1 Cor. 5:6).

"... 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Cor. 15:33).

"... avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness" (2 Tim. 2:16).

Indifference to God's grace may lead one to apostasy, but indifference to apostates by true Christians may produce more apostasy!

INDIFFERENCE TO SPIRITUAL HERITAGE - Hebrews 12:16-17

"... that there be no immoral (fornicator) or godless (profane) person like Esau ..." -- Now the author points back to an Old Testament example, Esau, who was a classic apostate. Esau is

called an “immoral person” or a “fornicator.” This may have only a spiritual meaning and indicate that Esau was a spiritual adulterer, abandoning the one, true God, and giving up his faith. However, this might mean that he was an actual fornicator, being a sexually immoral person. The Old Testament does not tell us that he was a fornicator, but we do know that he married two Canaanite women, who were Gentiles and heathens, against the will of his Jewish parents. Esau is called a “godless” (profane) person in that he looked upon spiritual things as common and was totally indifferent to his spiritual heritage and privileges.

Don't miss the point - immoral and godless folks should not be left in the local church. They are to be disciplined and brought to repentance, but if there is no repentance, there must be excommunication. The curse of the twentieth century church is that it harbors fornicators and godless people, sapping its very power and strength.

I once heard from reliable sources of fornicators and profane people being harbored in some of the more respectable churches in the city of Roanoke. One person was an elder, who tried to be “one of the boys,” and when outside of the circle of church influences, swore, told dirty jokes, and made light of Christ and true Christian commitment. He was guilty of treating sacred things as common.

Another case was a Sunday school teacher who was highly thought of by his community but was having an affair with a woman other than his wife. This was known by some in the church, but nothing was being done about it because he was such a nice man.

“... who sold his own birthright for a single meal.” -- Esau was born with a great spiritual heritage and blessing. He was born among the covenant people of God and had a pious upbringing by godly parents, and he appeared at first to be a true believer, but he ended up an apostate, committing a sin for which he could not be forgiven. He sold his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34). The birthright was very significant for the first-born son, and Esau qualified over his twin brother Jacob. The birthright had the following blessings: 1) A double portion of the father's estate; 2) The privilege of being the head of the family, and 3) In the case of Esau, the blessing of Isaac embraced the favor of being an heir of the Abrahamic Covenant, of which there were physical and salvation blessings.

Esau gave up his birthright for a single meal because he was indifferent and flippant to God and took his spiritual heritage lightly. He sacrificed spiritual privilege for worldly advantage. He preferred gratification of the flesh rather than the blessing of God. He gave up all his spiritual privileges for a temporary gratification of the body. He placed a higher value on secular things than on sacred things. His whole attitude was earthly, sensual and indifferent to the things of God.

By selling his birthright, Esau proved that he was only a professing believer, but not really born of God's Spirit.

“For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected ...” -- Esau made a decision to sell out his spiritual heritage and birthright, and that decision was final as far as God was concerned. However, Esau, after he realized what had happened and the

consequences of that decision, wanted Isaac to change his mind and give the blessing back to Esau, taking it away from Jacob (Gen. 27:34-40). Isaac, the priest in the family, speaking on behalf of God, rejected Esau and would not change his mind.

Esau had gone so far downhill that he sold out to his flesh and gave up all of his spiritual heritage. This final decision classified Esau as an apostate and he was cursed rather than blessed.

Esau apostatized and left his spiritual heritage, and these Hebrew-Christians were thinking about leaving Christianity for Judaism. If they should make this final decision to leave, they would become apostates like Esau and never be saved.

“... for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it with tears.” -- The “repentance” here does not refer to Esau repenting, for he could have if he had wanted to, but to his father’s repentance. Esau begged and pleaded with his father to change his mind (repent) but Isaac would not do so. It was too late! Esau made a fatal decision and it cost him his soul. Esau was never repentant for his sin of despising God, but only sorry that he missed out on the birthright. Esau could have repented if he wanted to, but he despised God and spiritual things. Esau’s hardness of heart took him downhill, first in exposing the fact that he was not saved and then abandoning his birthright and the possibility of salvation. This fatal decision took him past the point of no return, and he became an apostate.

CONCLUSION

Saved

Christian, if you have been born of God’s Spirit and truly trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you need never fear that you will apostatize. Christ is in you and the Holy Spirit will give you the power to push on, even in the midst of problems, pressures, and persecutions. Therefore, Christian, persevere in the faith and prove that you are truly among God’s people.

Unsaved

Are you without Christ, without salvation? Trust Christ and you shall have your sins forgiven and be granted eternal life. Perhaps you have been raised in a Christian home, instructed from the Bible by parents and the church, but you are not saved. Perhaps you are well acquainted intellectually with Christianity and many people think you are saved, but you are not. Are you indifferent to your spiritual heritage? Are you secretly immoral and godless? Do you live a double life? Are you flippant about spiritual things? My friend, you are a mere professor of Christ and you are in great danger! You may become so hardened in your sin that one day you will make the fatal decision to throw off all Christianity for the world or false religion. Turn to Christ and be saved before you pass the point of no return! Turn to Christ before you apostatize and come to the place where you will never be saved! Turn to Christ, for your eternal destiny is at stake.