

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 30, 2024)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

A Gracious Invitation...a Severe Warning Study #10 (Hebrews 10:19-31)

Introduction: Choices...

Given that we are leaning so heavily on the Old Testament and are learning so much about the Old Testament while making our way through Hebrews, I thought I'd start off with an Old Testament story to set the stage for today's passage.

Late in the book of Deuteronomy, we read of God's offer to His people of abundance if they obeyed Him, or catastrophe if they did not.

This choice between obedience leading to blessing vs disobedience leading to catastrophe is recorded in Deuteronomy 27. The place where the choice was laid out was right in the middle of the land of Israel on two mountains.

With the twelve tribes gathered in the valley of Shechem, those from six of the tribes climbed up Mount Gerizim and those from the other six tribes climbed up Mount Ebal.¹

The mountain of blessing was Mount Gerizim. When the priests read from the Law all the blessings that would come to them if they obeyed God's Word, the people all shouted, "**Amen!**"

The mountain of catastrophe (or cursing) was Mount Ebal. When the priests read from the Law all the curses that would come on them if they disobeyed God, they all shouted, "**Amen!**"

The purpose of this ceremony was to put before the people a clear choice: Will you obey God, or will you not obey God?²

If they obeyed, they would experience great blessing and God's favor. If they chose not to, they would experience His judgment.

In what we'll see today in Hebrews, we who believe in Jesus are faced with a similar choice. Follow Jesus into the rich adventure of grace. Or don't follow Jesus...but be warned!

We could have easily given two Sundays to look at these two very important passages. But I'm giving them together this morning because I want us to see them for the contrasts they are.

The first passage (10:19-25) is a picture of life in Jesus as Jesus designed it: beautiful and holy and irresistible for its compelling witness to the power of Jesus and His New Covenant.

The second passage (10:26-31) is a cautionary tale to any Christian who chooses to disregard the Jesus Way and follows another path.

What we'll see in the second passage is the most pointed and severe warning in the letter.

It comes at the end of the discussion of Jesus' role as our High Priest after the order of Melchizedek and drives home the application - Follow Jesus! - with a very forceful warning.

But we'll begin by viewing a Mount Gerizim-like picture what it looks like when we follow the Jesus Way.

The author begins by reminding us of the prevailing conditions under which we live in Jesus.³

¹ In between was a valley and the town of Shechem where many Israelites lived.

² It was repeated in the days of Joshua. See Joshua, chapter 8.

A Gracious Invitation to LIFE (10:19-25)

Remembering Prevailing Conditions (vv. 19-21)

Since we have confidence to enter the holy place (vv. 19-20)

Confidence to enter the holy place (v. 19)

[19] Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus...

Under the Old Covenant (the Moses Way), there were lots of rules, restrictions, and regulations about who could enter the holy places in the tabernacle.

In brief, only priests could enter. Then, when it came to the innermost section of the tabernacle - The Most Holy Place (or “Holy of Holies”) - the restrictions were very strict.

Into that space only the high priest could enter and even that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he offered sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.

But our author, writing under inspiration by the Spirit, here did something that would have been inconceivable to a first-century Jew.

He invited all who believe in Jesus to enter the most holy place, not in the temple in Jerusalem, but the real presence of God.

This open invitation to all believers in Jesus to enter the holy place was radical, different, and new. It gave them - and it gives us - an understanding of the unprecedented access we have in Jesus to God’s presence.

We have confidence to enter because we’re invited. And we are compelled to enter because the new way of Jesus is alive.

³ You’ll note, as is evident throughout this letter, that the author is writing to fellow believers in Jesus, identified here as “*brothers and sisters.*”

Confidence to enter by a new and living way through Jesus (v. 20)

[19] Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, [20] by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, through His flesh

The author wants us to think about the veil in the tabernacle that separated the Most Holy Place from everywhere else.

That veil symbolized the separation that existed between God and His people.

The gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us that when Jesus died, that veil was torn, top to bottom, signifying that by His physical death, the way into God’s presence is wide open.⁴

So, the way of Jesus is new because of the access we have to God. It is also living because of the resurrection of Jesus.

The Old Testament sacrifices that were offered by priests and high priests were all uniformly dead. And they stayed dead.

But Jesus, who actually died on the cross is now alive. We serve a risen Savior!

So, friends, you and I have confidence in our standing before God. The author also encourages us by reminding us of something else.

Since we have a great High Priest (v. 22)

[21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

⁴ The tabernacle had long been done away with and replaced by the temple in Jerusalem. It was in Herod’s temple that the veil was ripped at Jesus’ death.

In Hebrews we have seen that our great High Priest is merciful and faithful AND that He made propitiation for our sins. (2:17). He comes to our aid when we are tempted. (2:18).

He has passed through the heavens (4:14) and yet can still sympathize with our weaknesses. (4:15). Like us, He has been tempted in all things - except that He didn't sin. (4:15) He is approachable (4:16) and will grant us mercy and help in our time of need. (4:16)

Given these wonderful prevailing conditions, our author commends a life-giving way for us. Here we are, up on Mount Gerizim.

First, he tells us to **"...approach God."** OK.

Commending a Life-Giving Way (vv. 22-25)

Let's approach God (v. 22)

We know that God is loving and kind and gracious. That sounds approachable.

But He is also holy, all powerful, and all knowing, and righteous. That's a bit less approachable.

So, we're unsure about that **"approach God"** thing. We might be tempted to be a bit reserved. Standoffish.

We put away standoffishness when we come to Him with **"full assurance of faith."** Our hesitation to "approach God" falls away as we remember what we have learned about Jesus in this letter.

Full assurance of faith

[22] let's approach God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith

Jesus is the One God appointed heir of all things and through whom God made the world.

He is the radiance of God's glory and is the exact representation of God's nature. He is the One who paid the price for our sins, satisfying

God's justice. He has now sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (1:2-3)

Jesus will reign as king over all forever. (1:8)

He tasted death for us, has now been crowned with glory and honor, (2:9) and has rescued us who believe in Him from the fear of death. (2:14)

That is Jesus, the Son of God. He is approachable.

Our confidence to approach Him grows as we learn to approach Him with clean consciences.

Hearts and consciences washed clean

[22] let's approach God...having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.⁵

This imagery is taken from the Old Covenant practice of sprinkling blood from sacrificed animals for dedication, along with the priests' practice of bathing before they served at the tabernacle.⁶

The sprinkling and the washing prepared them for service. We avail ourselves of the on-going cleansing power of Jesus when we confess our sins.

On the last night of His life, Jesus washed the dirty feet of His disciples during the last supper. (John 13)

After that foot-washing, Jesus pointed out that foot-washing was a cleansing for those who had already taken a bath but had gotten dirty in their walk through the day.

The foot-washing was a picture of people who were once-and-for-all forgiven receiving daily cleansing by way of confession.

⁵ Is this a reference to water baptism? Many think so. I don't. Nowhere is Christian baptism portrayed as having the purpose of cleansing the body.

⁶ See Exodus 29:21; 30:17-21; Lev. 16:4; 8:6.

The Apostle John tells us that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

THAT - knowing that we are clean before God - is a picture of the refreshment God gives us when we confess our sins.

How many of us stay sidelined, feel unfit to serve, derailed in our walk with God because of a failure to honestly confess our sins?

Liberation comes when we allow Jesus to (spiritually speaking) “wash our feet” and cleanse our consciences. Wha a relief!

When we confess, we can be confident that God has, again, cleansed us. He has re-established fellowship with us.

Yes, God is eminently approachable. God wants us to draw near, to approach Him - regularly, repeatedly, at any time, just as a father loves to be approached by his children.⁷

Following that first “*Let’s*” is a second one.

Let’s hold firmly to our hope (v. 23)

[23] *Let’s hold firmly to the confession of our hope⁸ without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.*

What may first strike you from this “*Let’s...*” is that if we’re exhorted to “***hold firmly to the confession of our hope,***” it is evidently possible that we might not.

⁷ James invites the same thing in his letter, **[4:8a] *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.***

⁸ The “hope” is not that we will go to heaven. It is the blessed hope that King Jesus is coming back AND that we will receive our inheritance and great reward for our faithfulness in this life.

Our firm hold on our confession of hope - everything that we believe about God and Jesus - is entirely dependent on the degree to which we are confident that Jesus is faithful.

We listen to Jesus, who said on His last night with His disciples, **[John 14:1] “*Believe in God. Believe also in Me.*”**

On the very next day, He proved Himself worthy of that belief when He gave Himself for us on the cross. We can trust Him.

Jesus is eminently approachable. He is completely faithful.

And now a third “*Let’s...*”

Let’s encourage one another (vv. 24-25)

The call to “encourage” one another (v. 24)

[24] *and let’s consider how to encourage⁹ one another in love and good deeds, [25] not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

At first blush these two verses taken together look like a couple of really encouraging verses, complete with two encouragements to be encouraging.

On close examination, though, the first “*encourage*” has a meaning quite distinct from what we usually mean by *encourage*.¹⁰

The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament. The most famous occurrence is found in the book of Acts, where we read about a disagreement between the Apostle Paul and his longtime friend and partner in ministry, Barnabas.

This disagreement turned so heated that the two men parted ways and - as far as we know - didn’t serve together again.

⁹ The previous (1995) edition of the NASB has “*stimulate,*” a fine translation.

¹⁰ The Greek word is *paroxusmon*, the word from which we get our English word “paroxysm” - meaning an “outburst of emotion or action.”

The word that described their dispute is the same word that we have here in Hebrews, translated “*encourage*.”¹¹

It is a strong word. The usual sense is “*to irritate*” (or *provoke*, *incite*, *agitate*),¹² which Paul and Barnabas were evidently doing to each other before they split up.

The point of using the word here in Hebrews is not to urge that we divide, but to urge that we be willing to be irritating in our attempts to prod each other toward “*love and good deeds*.” - specifically “*love and good deeds*” done in the Name of Jesus.

Remember that the first recipients of this letter were Christian Jews who were suffering for their faith in Jesus and were being tempted to revert to Judaism to avoid persecution.

Doing good deeds and being loving would not have been that much of a challenge. Doing such things in such a way that their light would shine for Jesus would have been a great challenge.

Hence the need for the ministry of irritation.

They were to never leave of, never neglect giving credit to Jesus for their loving actions. They were to remind each other, “*It’s all about Him, not us.*”

And let’s not forget to give God the glory for our loving actions, either.

When we serve people with food or benevolent help, we do it not because we’re generally nice people. It’s because Jesus has lavished grace on us, and we love to lavish that same grace on others.

We are Jesus followers who want more than anything else for people to see by our gifts of food, money, friendship, ESL classes, warm greetings, that we are captivated by the love of Jesus and are compelled by the love of Jesus to share all good things with others and especially to share Jesus with others.

The writer continues.

Don’t forsake gathering together

[25] not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another

It is clear what was already happening at the time this letter was written.

Christians were not gathering with others to worship, to serve, to connect. They weren’t getting with fellow Jesus followers for encouragement’s sake.

Then, the temptation to not gather may have been because of fear of being identified as a Jesus follower.

Today, if you or I aren’t drawn to gather regularly, it’s probably because of something else.

It may be linked to a sense, “*No one needs what I have to offer.*” Or, “*I don’t need what others have to offer.*”

Two things are true about every one of us. And it is critical that each of us embraces both if the church is going to be all Jesus wants it to be.

One: You are needed.

Two: You are needy.

Somebody needs what only you can provide, and that something is missing if you’re not here and engaging. You need something somebody else can provide, and you’re missing out if you’re not here and engaging.

¹¹ The same word describes Paul’s “outrage” over the idolatrous worship he saw in Athens. (Acts 17:16) It is also the word Paul used in 1 Corinthians 13 when he said that love is not “*provoked*.”

¹² Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, article on *paroxysmus*. Vol. 5, p. 856. Seeseman.

And the "**encouragement**" here is the kind we usually think of when we think of encouragement: coming alongside someone to help, showing concern for another, engaging meaningfully, exhorting each other to walk with Jesus into the most demanding sorts of discipleship.

One anothering one another by encouragement helps us avoid drifting away from following Jesus.

My prayer to God is that each of us here today will see the vital need for gatherings like this for worship, coming together to serve, and making time to deeply connect on Sundays...and on Mondays.

And each day that passes brings us one day closer to the time of Jesus' return. So, let's ramp up the intensity of encouragement around here.

Ramp up intensity as the "the Day" approaches

[24] and let's consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, [25] not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

We need each other's rich encouragement, of all kinds, and at all levels. Encouragement sparks spiritual vitality, preserves hope, nurtures love, and equips for service.

Encouragement spurs us on to follow Jesus!

To give up on following Jesus when it gets tough is to lead a life of disobedience.

It's to stand on Mount Ebal (the mountain of cursing) rather than on Mount Gerizim. Or it's to be like those Jews at Kadesh-barnea who failed to enter the Promised Land.

Well, the author of Hebrews is a realist. He knows that some Christians may not draw near, hold fast, or connect with one another.

So, let's listen as he tells us what the consequences are for following that tragic trajectory.¹³

First, he reminds us of the consequences for ignoring the commands or prohibitions of the old Law of Moses.

A Severe Warning of Judgment (10:26-31)

Baseline: A Severe Judgment (v. 28)

[28] Anyone who has ignored the Law of Moses is put to death without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

As his readers knew, an infraction of any of the Old Covenant major commands resulted in a quick death.

The death penalty was imposed for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:11-16), murder (Leviticus 24:17), false prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:20), idolatry (Deuteronomy 17:2-13), and more.

As serious as the punishment was for these infractions of Moses' Law, the author will tell us (v. 29) that it will be far worse for the Christian who violates Jesus' covenant.

Let's examine the passage to be sure we know who is in view in the warning that is coming.

Raise the bar: A More Severe Judgment (vv. 26-27, 29)

The identity of the one who is sinning willfully (vv. 26, 29)

He has received the knowledge of the truth (v. 26)

¹³ Notice that in what follows, the author includes himself in the warning. That is one of many clues that the warning is directed at believers.

[26] For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge¹⁴ of the truth...

The New Testament usage of this phrase implies more than an accumulation of information about truth. Its normal usage implies a genuine and personal knowledge.¹⁵

Normally, we would see this phrase and understand that the writer is talking about Christians.

That understanding is affirmed by what he says in verse 29.

Was sanctified by the blood of the covenant (v. 29)

[29] How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

As we have repeatedly seen in our weeks of studying Hebrews, to say that someone is “*sanctified*” is to say that they are born-again.¹⁶

The conclusion is clear. The person being warned here and who is being described here belongs to God. He or she is redeemed.

But this Christian is caught up in sin. The sin is not named in this passage, but the seriousness of the sin is clear.

The sin in view (v. 26, 29)

[26] For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins...[29] How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has

regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

The person in view here is guilty of willful sin. This is purposeful and intentional.

The Old Testament term for such sin is “high-handed.” It refers to sins such as King David committed on the worst days of his life when he violated a married woman (Bathsheba) and then killed her husband (Uriah).

There was no sacrifice for such presumptuous sins.¹⁷

In some way, the person in view here has treated Jesus with disdain and contempt. He has “*trampled underfoot the Son of God.*”¹⁸

He has behaved in such a way as to say, “*There’s nothing special about Jesus’ death on the cross. Nothing to see here. Just a guy dying on a cross. No big deal.*”

He or she “*has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant.*”

Probably by rejecting and ignoring and denying the power of the Holy Spirit, he has “*insulted the Spirit of grace.*”¹⁹

Taking all of this together, those being warned have drifted away (2:1). They have fallen away. (3:12; 6:6)

They are no longer following Jesus.

And to these people, our author issues the most severe set of warnings we find in the whole letter.

The consequences

¹⁴ “*Knowledge*” here is the Greek *epignosis*, implying full knowledge / genuine experience.

¹⁵ See 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1 - the knowledge of the truth held by believers.

¹⁶ See Hebrews 10:10, 14.

¹⁷ See Numbers 15:27-31.

¹⁸ Similar to the words of Hebrews 6:6 - “*they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.*”

¹⁹ See Hebrews 6:4 where those being warned “*have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.*”

There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (v. 26b)

[26] For if we²⁰ go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins

Our author is not saying that the believer who falls away is under God's condemnation, that he will go to hell. No. He has been sanctified. His eternal life is not in jeopardy.

He is saying that there is no place to turn to find protection against judgment in this life IF we have abandoned the Jesus way.

There is no means of cleansing before God available to him, other than the one he has renounced. So, what remains for this "fallen away" believer is an expectation of judgment.

The author never spells out the precise form of the judgment. He is content merely to stress its severity.

A terrifying expectation of judgment (v. 27) worse than what happened under the Old Covenant (vv. 29-30)

[27] but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. [29] How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve ...? [30] For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."²¹

That last comment assures us that we're talking about God's judgment of believers. The other comments are simply sobering.

After the wrestling I have done with this passage in recent weeks, I have come to believe that what is in view here is severe judgment in this life.

²⁰ Again, note the use of "us" / "we."

²¹ Both here and in chapter 6 the author is silent about what might transpire AFTER the judgment.

And the purpose of this judgment is both *punitive* (remember the listing of the wrongs in vv. 26 and 29) and *redemptive*.

It is not unheard of that God is willing to judge His people. In fact, we see this in lots of places in the Old Testament.

In Deuteronomy 32, we read about famine, plagues, wild beasts, snakes, destruction by disease, by enemies and various other sufferings.²²

For his disobedience, King Saul's judgment consisted, in part, of paranoia and depression, and being consumed by hatred and fear.

The results of David's sins were terrible personal suffering, family tragedy, and national disgrace.

You may be surprised to know that we see the same thing in the New Testament. God judges His people.

- God put Ananias and Sapphira to death for lying to the Holy Spirit. (Acts 5)
- The Apostle Paul delivered a sinning brother in Corinth to the judgment of "**turning him over to Satan**" to eventually turn him to repentance. (1 Corinthians 5)
- Paul warned the whole Corinthian church to stop abusing the Lord's Supper because it was for this sin that some members of the church were sick, and some had died. (1 Corinthians 11)

Conclusion:

Our time together this morning kicked off with a picture of a beautiful walk, hand-in-hand with God and with each other, into the life of faith and grace.

That was the first passage. The second passage gave us an ugly picture of a walk away from that walk.

²² The point of the Deuteronomy 32 judgments is to turn the nation to God.

And here at the end we have considered the possibility that if we stop following Jesus we will discover, **[31] It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

The author of Hebrews wrote to give compelling reasons to those who believe in Jesus to keep following Jesus. He's done a great job - and he's far from finished!

But some Christians still may choose to slow down in their Jesus-following ways, sit on the sidelines, or stop following altogether.

There are Christians who turn away from public worship or confession of Jesus in the public square out of fear of persecution.

There are Christians who stop following Jesus because of tragedy they have suffered. They are wounded, blame God for their pain, and abandon Him.

And there are Christians who stop following because they find believing in the cardinal truths of Christianity difficult. Rather than wrestle with God over these difficulties - thinking, praying, reading - they walk away.

These and other things can derail a Christian.

So, one day, Jesus and the twelve apostles watched as thousands of people walked away because Jesus said hard things, refused to give them more fish and loaves, and refused to wear the crown they wanted Him to wear.

Jesus turned to His followers and asked them, ***"You don't want to go away also, do you?"***

Simon Peter answered, ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have already believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."*** (John 6:67-69)

Follow Jesus. Everything and everyone else who vies for your following pales in comparison to Him.