

A Study of the Book of Hebrews

Jesus is Better

Sermon # 17

"The Danger of Playing Church."

Hebrews 10:26-31

Because our daughter Nikki grew up in a Pastor's home, when she was small she and her friends sometimes played a game they called "Playing Church." Now "Playing Church" had a lot of variables but there were couple of things that were constants. First, Nikki was in charge and secondly, somebody is going to get "*bab-a-tized*." So all her friends and some of their pets got "*bab-a-tized*." Now there is nothing wrong with children playing church but there is something inherently wrong with adults "playing church."

This morning we come to the fourth and last warning passage in Hebrews, (2:1-4, 3:7-4:13, 5:11-6:20) and it is by far the most serious and sobering. Here we are faced with the fact that there are only two possible responses when one is presented with the gospel of Jesus Christ. One either goes on to believe, and is saved or one stops short of actually believing and becomes apostate. Apostasy can be said to be the most heinous of sins, because it is the most deliberate and willful form of unbelief. It is not a sin of ignorance, but rather of rejecting known truth. Apostasy is the sin of rejecting the gospel for which there is no forgiveness.

Some people in our world today obviously consider that their involvement with the church at some point in their lives as adequate cover from the wrath of God. These are individuals who although they may have been a part of the Church, really are not believers.

Outwardly they appeared to share in the blessings of God, but inwardly their hearts is unchanged. The visible church does not contain a pure body of genuine believers. Not now, nor has it ever! As much as church leaders try, as closely as Scriptural principles are adhered to, absolute purity is impossible in this world. Tares are going to be found among the wheat. Goats will be found among the sheep. But the day will come when the Lord *distinguishes* between the wheat and tares, the goats and sheep. In that day there will be no more hiding and masquerading as Christians. The question we must ask ourselves is, "*What will that day expose about me?*"

There is no clearer text of the sobering reality of playing church than the one we will examine today.

Turn with me to Hebrews 10:26 where we will see
First, The Characteristics of Apostasy
(v. 26) "*For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.*"

There are two very clear characteristics of apostasy given in verse twenty-six.

- There is sufficient knowledge to be saved.

John MacArthur says, "*Every apostate is an unbeliever, but not every unbeliever is an apostate.*" There are many people who do not know the Gospel, they have never had anyone explain to them the saving message of Jesus Christ. This is not true of an apostate. An apostate knows the truth intellectually. They can quote chapter and verse. They may even attend a local church, but their hearts are far

from God. They know the truth, but they have refused to receive the truth so that it might transform their lives.

One scripture that comes to mind when we think of this subject is 1 John 2:19, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us."* John says that some who had made a profession of being Christians in that day had all the outward trappings of being Christians. They bore the Christian name, and they identified themselves with some local assembly, some church. They were baptized, immersed, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They took the bread and the cup at the communion service. But John says that the way you can tell whether or not one is really a child of God is that eventually a man will show his true colors and will leave the assembly of God if he is not a child of God. He will withdraw from the Christians, the body of believers, and he will go right back into the world. To know God's truth, to study about it, to hear about it, perhaps even identifying with a body of believers and then turn away, that is to become an apostate.

Does this happen today? We see it when we see young people that grow up in the church with Christian parents. They have heard the gospel on a regular basis. They may have even professed to be Christians at some point in their early years and gave outward appearance of being serious. But the day came when they were challenged about the gospel and rather than believing God, they embraced a lie. Not repenting of such sin they continued to grow cold

toward any thought of divine truth. The years pass and they care nothing of the church of Jesus Christ, easily forsaking the church because they have forsaken the gospel of Christ. They shunned warnings with ease. Their heart gets harder. They may even still be able to rattle off the basic elements of biblical truth but it means nothing to them. In willful defiance they turn away from Christ, the gospel, and the church.

- There is a willful and deliberate denial of the truth.

The Greek word for "willfully" (*hekousios*) means, "voluntarily, willingly, of one's own accord, to sin willfully as opposed to sins committed from ignorance or from weakness." In the Greek "willfully" is the first word, laying stress on the defiant nature of the sin it describes. John MacArthur writes in his commentary on Hebrews, "Willfully... carries the idea of deliberate intention that is habitual. The reference here is not to sins of ignorance or weakness, but to those that are planned out, determined, done with forethought. The difference between sins of ignorance and sinning willfully is much like the difference between involuntary manslaughter and first-degree murder. ...It not only is deliberate, but is an established way of thinking and believing. It is the permanent renunciation of the gospel, the permanent forsaking of God's grace." [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary - Hebrews*. (Chicago: Moody, 1983) p. 273.]

Judas Iscariot is the epitome of apostasy in that no other rejecter of Christ did so with so much exposure to Christ's love and grace. He had sat while the Lord Himself had taught; he had witnessed the miracles with his own eyes. He had experienced intimacy with Christ that only a few were given. For three years he had lived with the truth incarnate and yet he turned his back and betrayed Jesus.

Secondly, The Causes of Apostasy

This morning I want to share just a few things that can cause apostasy. (Drawn from McArthur. Pp. 274-275)

First, there is Persecution. What will drive a believer closer to the Lord will drive the unbeliever further from Him. Whenever the church has been persecuted the faithful have become strong and those who don't really believe have left. When hard times come the apostate will not only leave the church but sometimes join the persecution. Some apostates not only turn away from the church but turn against it. I have often told the story of Ted Turner and how he turned from the church when his sister died. He seems to be a perfect example of an apostate. One who had sufficient knowledge to be saved. A person who at one time associated with believers but who because of a crisis in his life turned from the church. But he not only turned from the church, he turned against the church.

Another thing that can cause a person to turn away into apostasy is false teachers.

Where persecution frightens unbelievers away false teaching entices them away. When unbelievers get fed up with the Gospel, or when the Gospel demands more than they are willing to pay, they can usually find someone who will feed them something they find a little palatable with their life- style. In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul says, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers."

Temptation can also lead to apostasy. Sometimes this temptation comes in the form of many small temptations over a long period of time and a sometimes strong temptation that comes very suddenly. But regardless of how it comes, it is successful because the person does not have the resources in and of themselves to resist.

But perhaps the saddest cause of apostasy is neglect. A person can put off making a decision for so long that they actually lose the opportunity. Not to decide for Christ is actually a decision against Christ.

Third, The Results of Apostasy (vv. 26-31)

The results of apostasy are terrifying in prospect.

- There Is No More Forgiveness

(v. 26) *"For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."*

Anyone who rejects the sacrifice of Christ for our sins will not find any other means of removing their sin. If you reject the one and only path that God has provide to heaven, then you have in essence committed the unforgivable sin.

- There is Greater Judgment.

The greater the sin the greater the judgment. Since apostasy is the worst sin, it will have the worst judgment. Verse twenty-seven reveals. "but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries."

This judgment is deserved because apostasy is a personal rejection of each member of the Trinity. Verse twenty-eight states, *"Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. (29) Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he*

be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (30) For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people."

What I want you to notice is how this rejection is directed to all three parts of the Trinity in verse twenty-nine. First, it regards as nothing the Father's sacrifice of His only son, *"trampled the Son of God underfoot."*

Secondly, regards the shed blood of Christ on Calvary as nothing, *"counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing."* Third, *"insulted the Spirit of grace" that is the apostate disregarded the work of the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation.*

This last warning closes in verse thirty-one with chilling words, *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*

I cannot read verse thirty-one without thinking of the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. On July 8, 1741 Edwards preached what has become one of the most famous sermons in history of our country entitled *"Sinners in the Hands of Angry God."* It was a remarkable sermon for remarkable times.

The 18th century in America began what was referred to as "The Great Awakening." Throughout New England the Spirit of God invaded one community after another, bringing the spiritually dead to life, and transforming the worship of churches. It was not that there were no professing Christians in these villages. Each little community had a village church with many of the townspeople having been baptized into membership. But there was little spiritual reality until the Holy Spirit began to move through the dry, dusty corpses of church

members. Like Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, upon the preaching of the Word, the Spirit of God breathed life.

Though neighboring villages had experienced the spiritual awakening, Enfield, Connecticut had not. They remained stubborn and defiant, self-satisfied with an outward form of religion; playing Christian we might say, without knowing the peril before them. On July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards arose as a substitute preacher to declare before them the word of the Lord. Remarkably perhaps, this sermon was not new to Edwards since he had preached it previously in his own church in Northampton, Maryland. Without any pulpit antics or pulpit pounding, Edwards read the sermon in a monotone voice, and actually asked the audience to quiet down so he might finish his sermon.

Edwards delivered a devastating picture of divine judgment upon sinful men, particularly upon those who were the baptized members of the church and yet gave no evidence of really being saved. The last verse of our text (v. 31) provided the basis for Edwards' title, "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" was no delicate, entertaining sermon, but a striking portrait of the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of Man. In this sermon Edwards compared sinners to a spider dangling by a thin thread over the fire of God's wrath.

The effect of the sermon was immediate. The audience was so frightened that many attendees were found openly weeping. There were also a number of reports of swooning, outcries and convulsions from audience members. I want to share just one quotation that is

too good to miss. A pastor from the Northampton area reported the effects of his sermon on people on May 14, 1741. *"Under this sermon, many had their countenances changed; loosed, and their knees smote one against another. Great numbers cried out aloud in the anguish of their souls. Several stout men fell as though a cannon had been discharged; and a ball had made its way through their hearts."*

His sermon says in part, *"Your wickedness makes you as it were as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottom-less gulf... There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God, it would immediately burst forth upon you... the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward... The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all of you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls, all that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and (thus those who have never experienced) light and life, are in the hands of an angry God."* [Jonathan Edwards. "Sinners in the Hands Of An Angry God." Sermon Classics by Great Preachers. Compiled by Peter F. Gunther. rev ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1982) pp. 30-31]

Far from being more tolerant of sin today, God is less tolerant because men today have the advantage of greater light.

In Acts 17:30-31 Paul preaching in Athens says, *"Truly, these times of ignorance God over-looked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,*

(31) because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God. But remember how different it is for believers. David said in 2 Samuel 24:14, *"Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great."* For the believer no hands are as gentle as God's hands.

Conclusion

The question we must ask ourselves is, *"Am I just playing church?"* And I would like to offer in closing "Three Signs That You Might Be Playing Church"

1. You have never made a personal commitment to Christ and His Church.
2. You know more Bible than you live out in your life.
3. You continue to hear God's word preached but you are never convicted to change any of your attitudes or actions.