

## ***Our Corporate Commitment to Running with Endurance***

### Hebrews 3

This morning we are going to limit our focus to Hebrews 3:12-13. These verses warn against a progression from the deceitfulness of sin to becoming hardening to unbelief. This is obviously a serious topic; it's not particularly fun to preach about. But I think it's a vital message for us today - whatever your stage of life and wherever you are in your walk with God. I really think God wants to speak to us here today through this passage. Before we look at these verses in depth I want to discuss the context of this warning: the context of the entire book of Hebrews and the immediate context of chapter 3. Context is important so that we experience the full impact of these verses.

***The context of the book of Hebrews:*** The overarching challenge of the book is to "run the race with endurance." In Hebrews 12:1-2 we read:

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He points out in verse 1 that we need to lay aside "every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us." If we want to persevere through this life (running the race with endurance), we need a very intentional approach toward our sin. If left unchecked, sin will slow us down and trip us up in our walk with God; it will be a lot like running in the woods where you're tripping over brush and weeds. Hebrews 3:12-13 give us some specific, tangible ways of "laying aside . . . the sin which so easily entangles us."

***The context of Hebrews 3:*** This whole chapter is basically screams at us, "Don't respond to God like the children of Israel in the wilderness who squandered every spiritual advantage they had." They had seen God work miracles in freeing them from slavery in Egypt. They saw God part the Red Sea so that they could escape from the Egyptian army. They saw God miraculously provide manna and quail when they were hungry. When we read in Exodus what they experienced we tend to think, "If I had seen those miracles I'd trust God with every detail of my life from that point forward."

But when things got tough they began to grumble and complain. Grumbling is a symptom of a deep spiritual problem. They accused Moses of incompetence and recklessness ("You brought us out of Egypt to kill us in the desert. . ."). They consistently hardened their hearts against God to the point where He swore in anger that none of the adults who left Egypt would enter the Promised Land. One thing we're told over and over in the Bible is that it takes a LOT to get God angry; He is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. But they managed to provoke God to anger with their unbelief.

The author of Hebrews quotes extensively from Psalm 95 which looks back at the unbelief of the children of Israel in the wilderness. He quotes Psalm 95:7-8 three times (twice in this chapter and once in the next) as an exhortation to his readers: "Today if you hear [God's] voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me." In other words, "Don't respond to God as the children of Israel who squandered every spiritual advantage they had. They rejected Moses who was faithful as a servant in God's house. But you are on the verge of rejecting Jesus who was faithful as a Son in the house of God." And so there was more at stake for the Hebrews than there was for the children of Israel.

In light of the overall context of the book of Hebrews as well as the context of Hebrews 3, let's consider ***A Progression to Avoid: the deceitfulness of sin. . . being hardened . . . having an evil, unbelieving heart.*** (Hebrews 3:12-13) This is the main application of chapter 3.

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

If we work our way backwards from the end of verse 13, we see the progression we should avoid: the "***deceitfulness of sin***" leads to becoming "***hardened***" which can lead to "***an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.***" We'll talk about each aspect of this progression. As we do so I'll share some insights of others here at Faith. This past week I asked several people to share with me their insights concerning this progression - what they'd experienced and what they'd observed in the lives of others.

At the end of verse 13 he mentions the "deceitfulness of sin." If something deceives you, it fools you; it makes you believe something that really isn't true. We aren't told here ***how*** sin deceives a person, but there are some common ways that this can happen. Ultimately sin deceives us about ourselves, about the character of God, and about our relationship with God.

One person mentioned that sin deceives us into thinking that "God is holding out on me, forbidding something that I could enjoy (whether it's pornography or greed or vengeance or whatever)." He went on to say that sin ultimately deceives us into thinking that God really isn't "for us" and so we have to make our lives work without Him. The reality is that sin yields only temporary pleasures ("the passing pleasures of sin" - Hebrews 11:25). The most satisfying, fulfilling life involves laying aside the sin which so easily entangles us so that we can "run the race with endurance."

Maybe you can identify ways that sin has deceived you in the past. But there may be ways that sin is deceiving you in the present that you don't even notice (uh - because you're deceived). That's why these verses advocate the types of relationships in which others have the freedom to help us deal with our blind spots.

Verse 13 also speaks about being “**hardened** by the deceitfulness of sin.” Instead of being soft and receptive to the voice of God and to the Spirit of God, sin makes us hardened and less receptive to God’s work in our lives. We need to have a healthy fear of becoming hardened. That’s why the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95:7-8 twice in this chapter (in verses 7-8 and verse 15) and once in the next (verse 7):

15 while it is said,  
“Today if you hear His voice,  
Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.”

I hope you hear the urgency in this verse: “Today if you hear His voice. . .” There’s no guarantee that you’ll hear God’s voice tomorrow, not because He’ll be silent but because you might not be listening. This is why “today” is **the** most important day of your life. Yesterday is important, but it’s over. You may or may not be alive tomorrow. But today if you hear the voice of God, do not harden your heart as the children of Israel did. You and I have a say in whether or not our hearts will become hardened. We have a choice as to how we respond to sin and how we respond to hurtful situations.

This past week one person told me about a time recently when she experienced something hurtful; it would have been very easy for her to become bitter and angry. But she heard God’s gentle, strong voice telling her, “Do not harden your heart.” Instead of dwelling on the offense, she prayed and released the situation to God and His sovereign ways. And she experienced great freedom and rest (as we read about at the end of chapter 3). Sin deceives us and tells us, “You have a right to be angry and hold a grudge!” But the result is a hardening. It will be a little easier to become angry the next time and a little harder to love your enemies next time.

Can you think of ways that you have become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin? I’ve had numerous people tell me basically that they never pray to God and ask Him to work in specific ways; they’ve been disappointed in the past and they aren’t willing to risk trusting God again (at least in any tangible way). That’s evidence of a hardening because we’re told many times to pray. Or perhaps you’ve been dealing with some habitual sin or addiction; maybe you’re so worn out that you’re not really expecting God to give you freedom in that area. You’ve become hardened to the prospect of the Holy Spirit Himself bringing about this transformation.

If the deceitfulness of sin leads to hardening, a person can eventually have “**an evil, unbelieving heart** that falls away from the living God.” The author is picking up the language of Psalm 95 again. The children of Israel hardened their hearts to the point of “unbelief” (v. 19). In Exodus and Numbers God says repeatedly that they **would not** believe in Him; they were responsible to engage their wills and actively trust in God to provide for them and to defend them. The author is warning the Hebrews not to respond to God the way the children of Israel did.

The progression is important: their unbelief was the result of a prolonged period of hardening their hearts. Occasionally someone will move from faith to unbelief as a result of being unable to resolve deep intellectual questions (e.g., some wrestle mightily

with the problem of suffering). But more often, I think, a person moves from faith to unbelief after a prolonged period of disobedience that leads to a hardening. When your heart is hard to the voice of God, it's much easier to view Him as distant and unconcerned and unwilling to help you in your circumstances. When you're not experiencing Him as a compassionate Father who can't get enough of you, it's easier to accuse Him of being the type of God you can't trust.

Significantly, the author clarifies what he means by having an evil, unbelieving heart; one with such a heart "falls away from the living God." The term translated "falls away" simply means to "depart" or "leave" someone or something. It's one thing to leave or fall away from a "dead god" - one made out of stone or wood. But it's quite another to abandon "the living God" - the One who can actually act in power (see Num. 14:20-25).

One young man told me this week that he finds it helpful to step back and ask the question, "What do I want my life to be like in 50 years?" Specifically, if I continue in this sin what will my life be like? He is realizing that he can't continue in specific sins without some consequences. He's realizing that some people end up with hearts so hardened to the things of God that they no longer walk with God.

In order to avoid this progression, these verses also advocate **A Commitment to Adopt: encouraging one another daily**. Notice again how intentional we're supposed to be in our relationships in the church:

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Our author addresses the entire congregation, but he's concerned about the spiritual health of each individual. They need to be careful that there not be "**in any one of you**" an evil, unbelieving heart. His desire was that "**none of you**" be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. He envisions the type of mutual encouragement that keeps every single one of us from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. And he envisions **daily** encouragement.

That's a challenging commitment in any local church or within any specific ministry within the church (e.g., youth ministry, women's ministry, men's ministry) or within a campus ministry. It's relatively easy for individuals to remain invisible and isolated. We need a broad willingness within the church to **give** encouragement and to **receive** encouragement. Here are two questions to ask yourself. . .

***First, am I committed to encouraging others (paying attention to their lives, saying/doing things to help them pursue the will of God)?***

Becoming an encourager isn't about learning a few tried-and-true techniques or clever things to say. It's about becoming the kind of person who legitimately cares about the spiritual wellbeing of others. It's about being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in any

given situation because encouragement will differ from one situation to the next. Sometimes a person needs a word of affirmation; other times they need a word of correction. Sometimes a person doesn't need words at all; they may be powerfully encouraged by you simply listening.

Mark Batterson tells about the time when he was four years old and visiting his grandparents. The only thing off limits in his grandparents' house was his grandfather's fossil collection; it was like the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (it was the one thing he couldn't enjoy). But one day he couldn't resist the temptation to hold one of the fossils. Batterson says that decades later he can still feel the emotions he had when that fossil slipped out of his hands and shattered on the floor.

I knew what I had done was wrong. And I expected and deserved to be disciplined. So I was totally unprepared for my grandfather's graceful reaction. He walked into the room, assessed the situation, and picked me up to give me a hug. He didn't scold me. He didn't tell me that what I had done was wrong. All he did was hold me. It was the most graceful hug I've ever received, and without his uttering a word, I heard him say loud and clear, "Mark, you're far more valuable to me than a fossil collection." (*Wild Goose Chase*, pp. 103-104)

His grandfather is an example of someone who kept in step with the Spirit enough to discern the exact thing needed at the moment. In another situation a stern word might have been needed. But when that four-year-old was quivering in fear, a hug was the need of the moment. That's what encouragers do: they try to discern the need of the moment (see Ephesians 4:29).

Consider committing yourself to encouraging just a few other people. . . being very intentional about noticing what God might be doing in their lives and then saying and doing things that will help deal with sins and whatever else might slow them down in their walk with God. I think it's good to identify specific people God has put in your life to encourage. It's always good to start with those closest to you - family or roommates or close friends. You don't have to announce, "God laid it on my heart to encourage YOU!" You could just launch into a lifestyle of encouragement unannounced.

Admittedly, some people seem to encourage others naturally and effortlessly. Other people have to work hard to say and do things that encourage others. In either case, there needs to be a willingness on the part of others to receive encouragement. That leads to the second question.

### ***Second, am I putting myself in a position to be encouraged by others?***

This question reflects the reality that it is possible to go to church for years and years and remain completely isolated spiritually. Lots of people may know your face or your name, but nobody really knows what is happening inside your soul. Some of you find it easy to be transparent and vulnerable with others; but others of you can hardly imagine putting yourself in a position where you are truly known. Maybe you don't know anybody that you trust enough to be that transparent.

Our passage this morning suggests that we need to intentionally put ourselves in a position so that others can encourage us (as opposed to sending off the vibe, “I don’t want or need anybody else.”). This passage makes clear that at least a few people need to know the sin that so easily entangles you so they can encourage you to do the will of God, so that they can help you deal with blind spots and hardness of heart.

Whatever your stage of life, I’d urge you to welcome this type of encouragement from another person or two. Some of you are already experiencing everything I’ve talked about today. But you may be in your 30s, 40s, 50s or older and never experienced the type of relationship I’m describing. It will require you taking some initiative and even some risks. Perhaps there’s somebody in your life group with whom you can connect on a deeper level. But consider giving at least one other person the “green light” to encourage you in any way needed - whether a word of affirmation or a word of warning or correction.

Or you may be a freshman in college, away from home for the first time. My freshman year in college was basically a wasteland spiritually; I did a lot of things that I had to undo when I started walking with Christ my second year in college. If you’re in college, one of the most strategic things you can do is put yourself in a position to be encouraged by a few others who know who you really are - your strengths and weaknesses, your gifts and your sins. You might find a relationship like this through a life group here at Faith, through a campus ministry, or through some other means.

There’s too much at stake to ignore the way God has designed the body of Christ. God has designed us to be interdependent. If we are going to run with endurance the race set before us, we will need help from others to lay aside the sin that so easily entangles us. It is the will of God for us to be committed to giving and receiving encouragement.