

## ***Voices of Warning, Voices of Encouragement***

### Hebrews 10:26-39

Today's passage is Hebrews 10:26-39. The two paragraphs of this passage illustrate two complementary voices that we each need in our lives. In the first paragraph the author gives a fierce warning against abandoning their faith in Jesus. This is the fourth warning passage in the book of Hebrews (see 2:1-4, 3:12-15, 6:4-8). The author wants them to be very clear about the consequences of apostasy. But in the second paragraph he quickly adds a strong word of encouragement about the spiritual fruit he'd seen in their lives in the past. He basically says, "I've seen your lives and your devotion to Christ. I'm convinced that your faith is real and that you aren't going to abandon your devotion to Jesus. Now you need to persevere."

It is significant that these two voices - both warning and encouragement - are found side-by-side in the same letter. We saw this same pattern in chapter 6 (warning in vv. 4-8 and encouragement in vv. 9-12). This suggests that in the normal course of walking with Jesus, we each need both words of warning ***and*** words of encouragement.

Just to let you know where this message is going. . . When I talk about words of warning, I'm not talking about "telling people off" or being inappropriately intrusive or beating people over the head with Bible verses. I'm talking about "speaking the truth in love" about the consequences of not following Jesus - either in specific areas of our lives or in a more comprehensive sense. I'll argue that we need to be people who are able both to give and receive words of warning.

And when I talk about words of encouragement, I'm not merely talking about saying nice things to other people or lying to people to make them feel better. I'm talking about telling each other ways that we see God at work in each others' lives. Sometimes we spot God at work in others' lives easier than we spot the same in our lives. I'll argue that we need to be people who are able both to give and receive words of encouragement.

Let's consider these two paragraphs and the implications for how we relate to each other.

***The Voice of Warning: We each need others who remind us of the consequences of not following Jesus.*** (Hebrews 10:26-31) Remember that the book of Hebrews warns against drifting away from Jesus. In 3:12-13 we noticed the progression of the "deceitfulness of sin" leading to "hardening" - which can lead to "an evil, unbelieving heart." This paragraph specifically warns against the final state of an evil, unbelieving heart (i.e., rejecting Jesus or apostasy). But this warning against the final state is also a warning against the deceitfulness of sin.

Verse 25 had spoken of "encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." "The day" was a reference to the return of Christ. On that day those who have persevered will be rewarded; those who have rejected Christ will be punished. In verses 26-31 the author draws out the consequences of rejecting Jesus.

26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.

Under the old covenant, when you sinned willfully/defiantly (in full knowledge of what you were doing), the punishment was decisive and swift (see Numbers 15:30, Deut. 17:12-13). The example given in Numbers 15 involved a man gathering wood on the Sabbath; the man was taken outside the camp and stoned. That punishment may seem harsh to us, but that's the point: "If we go on sinning willfully after receiving knowledge of the truth . . . [we too will have] a terrifying expectation of judgment . . ."

The \$10,000 question is, "So what is he talking about in the new covenant? What in the new covenant is analogous to carrying wood on the Sabbath?" The following verses make rather clear that the author doesn't have in mind specific sins of the flesh. He's talking about the sin of apostasy - rejecting the sacrifice of Jesus. If you reject Jesus' death on the cross, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." There is no plan B for dealing with your sins; there is nothing else that can make you pure and holy in God's sight. The only thing that remains is "a terrifying expectation of judgment" and "the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries." God lavishes grace on everybody who will receive it, but if you position yourself as God's adversary, you're inviting His fury.

In verses 28 and 29 he points to the consequences of apostasy under the old covenant and then asks, "How much more severe will the consequences be under the new covenant?"

28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*.

Deuteronomy 17 outlined what would happen to the person within Israel who rejected the Law of Moses (the old covenant) and began worshipping other gods. Based on the evidence of two or three witnesses, the person was stoned to death. That person "dies without mercy." Because of the superiority of the new covenant, the author asks:

29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot 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 author uses three terms that make clear that the sin he's describing is full-blown apostasy. First, this person has ***trampled under foot the son of God***. To "trample something under foot" meant to show contempt. To reject Jesus is the most egregious type of contempt imaginable because He is the creator, sustainer, and heir of all things and because He provided the once-for-all sacrifice for sins.

Second, this person has ***regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified***. The author has argued throughout the book that Jesus' blood represents the sacrifice of a spotless, sinless sacrifice that inaugurated a new covenant

that cleanses the human conscience from dead works (9:14, 20). Here the author says that the blood of the covenant is the instrument of sanctification - the means of making profane people holy! Rejecting Jesus is tantamount to regarding as unclean/profane the blood of the covenant.

Third, this person has ***insulted the Spirit of grace***. The author had mentioned the Holy Spirit in 9:14, saying that Jesus had offered Himself without blemish to God “through the eternal Spirit.” The Holy Spirit had been intimately involved in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Rejecting Jesus is the ultimate insult to the Holy Spirit who showers us with grace day by day.

And so, in light of who Jesus is and in light of what He’s done, the author asks, “. . . how much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has rejected the Son of God?” Since the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, rejecting the salvation it brings warrants a more severe punishment. [We saw this same line of reasoning back in Hebrews 2:1-4.] The author quotes two verses from Deuteronomy 32 to solidify his point:

30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”

First, God will personally take vengeance on His enemies; He’s not going to delegate that to anybody else. Second, God will vindicate His people. (That’s the sense of “the Lord will judge His people.”) Therefore, the Hebrews needed to make sure that they were God’s people, not God’s enemies (which would be the result of apostasy). The final statement in his argument is found in verse 31:

31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It’s a terrifying thing to fall under God’s judgment. He points this out in order to reinforce that because of Jesus’ sacrifice they didn’t HAVE to be God’s enemies. Remember that the author warns against this final condition so that they would avoid the progression that leads to apostasy. The Hebrews were supposed to think, “Because I don’t want to be God’s adversary and experience the terror of His judgment, I need to avoid the deceitfulness of sin and the resulting hardening.”

Just like the Hebrews, each of us here today needs people who will speak the truth in love and warn us of the deceitfulness of sin and the dangers of becoming hardened to the point of unbelief. We can and should receive warning directly from the Scriptures as we read it and think about it and hear it taught. But we also need people who will be this voice of warning in our lives. This spiritual reality prompts me to ask two questions.

First, ***Who provides this voice of warning in your life?*** Is there anybody else who knows the specific sins with which you struggle and who has permission to talk with you about them? Sin is so deceitful that if you don’t have anybody else who provides for you a voice of warning, you’re in a rather dangerous place spiritually. You’re missing out on one of the primary ways that God extends His grace to you.

Some of you do have this voice of warning in your life. You have invited others to speak words of warning and tell you hard things that you need to hear. Instead of skulking around in the shadows hoping that nobody will ever find out about your anger or lust or alcohol abuse or depression or other obsession, you have brought your sin out into the light so that another person can help you. They tell you, "You need to be careful when you're in this situation. . .you're entering the danger zone." They remind you of things you already know because the deceitfulness of sin makes us forgetful - sometimes intentionally forgetful.

Others of you might not currently have a voice of warning in your life. You obviously don't want to invite just *anybody* to speak into your life in this way. You don't want someone who is mean or judgmental or gossipy or angry to fulfill this role in your life. You want a kind, compassionate, spiritual-minded person who can keep things in confidence. In other words, you want someone who is Christ-like. My encouragement for you is to keep your eyes open for people who are like Jesus in this way; pray about the possibility of inviting someone to provide the voice of warning in your life. Btw, if you're married, having the voice of warning in your life will be a wonderful gift to your spouse; now s/he won't have to be the one to tell you everything you need to hear.

Second, ***Are you providing this voice of warning in the lives of others?*** Another way to ask the question is, "Do you care enough about the spiritual health of others to pay attention to their lives?" And "Are you willing to take the risks associated with providing the voice of warning in their lives?" There are risks; there is no guarantee that the other person will appreciate your insights. But the risks are worth it because of the deceitfulness of sin and the dangers of becoming hardened.

I remember one person telling me, "Until I'm perfect I don't have any right to talk to anybody else about their sin." But that's not the mind of Christ. Jesus said, "First take the log out of your own eye and then you'll see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). Not many people love going around warning others about sin. But it's a normal and vital part of the Christian life.

***The Voice of Encouragement: We each need others who notice what God is doing our lives.*** (Hebrews 10:32-39) Beginning in verse 32 the author mentions things that he had seen God doing in their lives. He points to their past endurance as evidence that their faith was real.

32 But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings,

After God had opened their eyes to the truth about Jesus, they had "endured a great conflict of sufferings." Instead of giving up or running away, they had stood their ground and endured. Specifically he mentions two things:

33 partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

First, they had been ridiculed publicly for their faith in Jesus. They had been ridiculed through “reproaches” (i.e., insults) as well as through tribulations (a term that suggested “acts of violence” or “physical cruelty associated with imprisonment, beatings, and deprivation” - see O’Brien, p. 385). They had shared in (what Paul called) the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings (Philippians 3) in some extreme ways. The author wanted them to remember that they had paid a high price because of their loyalty to Christ.

Second, they had become “sharers with those who were so treated.” They identified with others who had been ridiculed verbally and physically. In verse 34 he continues to describe their compassion.

34 For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

In that day, family and friends had to supply water, food, and clothing to prisoners; no doubt the Hebrew Christians supplied these things along with prayer and encouragement. The fact that they identified with and cared for other believers who were imprisoned was evidence that their faith in Christ had been real. In chapter 13 the author will urge them to continue to remember fellow believers in prison (13:3).

In addition, they “accepted joyfully the seizure of [their] property.” We don’t know whether their property was seized by mob violence or by governmental authorities. Either way, they **joyfully** accepted this persecution, “knowing that [they] had a better possession and a lasting one.” They knew they were storing up treasures in heaven, not treasures on earth. Their joy and their perseverance was evidence that their faith was genuine. The author points to this evidence and challenges them in this way:

35 Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

In light of the Bible’s emphasis on grace as “unmerited favor,” the topic of “rewards” can be confusing because we associate rewards with merit and earning. But in the Bible rewards are more a function of God’s generosity than human merit. When we do the will of God we are rewarded not because we’re so amazing, but because **God is so generous**. In 11:6 the author will say that “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” At the return of Christ every single person will agree that God rewards those who seek Him. Those who live by faith and persevere believe that ahead of time and act accordingly. He quotes from Habakkuk 2:3-4 to reinforce that those who live by faith persevere:

37 For yet in a very little while,  
He who is coming will come, and will not delay.  
38 But My righteous one shall live by faith;

And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

The author has been warning against “shrinking back” throughout the book of Hebrews; he’s warned against drifting and falling away and neglecting to assemble together. Shrinking back is the opposite of persevering. Verse 39 must have been a powerful encouragement to the Hebrews. The author speaks of both the Hebrews and himself when he writes:

39 But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

After giving his fierce warning about the judgment that awaits those who abandon their faith in Christ, the author gives this word of affirmation. He was convinced that they were genuine believers who would persevere to the end. He provides this voice of encouragement that should have given them the confidence they needed to continue following God even when their lives were hard. This paragraph also prompts me to ask two questions:

***Who provides this voice of encouragement in your life?*** I think that there are two inter-related issues here. First, we need to live in community so that others have a chance to notice how God is at work in our lives. Here at Faith this often happens in the context of life groups. There you share your life with others who (hopefully) are interested in what God is doing in your life and will reflect that back to you. You need to live in community for this to happen.

Second, you need to be willing to receive what others observe about God’s working in your life. Maybe you’ve had the experience of trying to encourage someone else, and that person is almost afraid to hear what you’re saying. We certainly need to beware of pride creeping in; but we also need to beware of rejecting legitimate encouragement that God might be providing you.

***Are you providing this voice of encouragement in the lives of others?*** This type of encouragement should be a normal component of relationships in the body of Christ. Last week Brian taught from Hebrews 10:24-25 which tells us, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together. . . but encouraging one another. . .” We’re supposed to think about things we can do and say do that will give each other courage to seek God.

I’d encourage you to think of specific people whom God has placed in your life and intentionally begin noticing what God is doing in their lives and reflecting back to them what you notice. Some of you are very, very skillful at this; I know because I’ve been the recipient of this type of encouragement. It is a powerful encouragement when someone else notices you and what God is doing in your life.

In his book *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Gordon McDonald writes about an experience that puts into context this perspective that each of us needs both words of warning and words of encouragement.

Recently I turned over a two-by-six board that had been lying on the ground behind our home for a long time. I was startled to discover an enormous city of bugs hiding underneath. It seemed as if there were thousands and thousands of them dwelling in that dark and damp place. And it was clear that they did not appreciate my exposure of their life on the underside of that board.

As I watched them scurry for cover, I thought of what might be called the underside of the church: those numberless people who walk into sanctuaries all over the world carrying their secrets behind bright clothing and forced smiles. They sing the songs, pray the prayers, listen to the sermons. And all the while the secrets fester within the private world causing either a constantly broken heart or a hardened heart. They come in fear of their secrets being exposed, and they quite likely go in fear that they will have to live this way for the rest of their lives. Believe me, the underside of the church is there, listening and watching to find out whether there is anyone with whom their secret might be safe if revealed. (p. 67)

In the body of Christ nobody should have to carry their secrets behind “forced smiles.” The church should be a safe place where people can come out into the light and help each other deal with the issues in our lives. This involves being people who both give and receive words of warning and words of encouragement.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, we remember that because of the body and blood of Jesus we don’t have to hide in the darkness anymore in fear and shame. We can walk out into the light before God and before a few trusted brothers and sisters in Christ. If you trust in Jesus alone, we invite you to join in the Lord’s Table with us today. Please hold the bread and then the cup until all have received; then we’ll eat and drink together.