

HEARING AND SPEAKING TIMELY WORDS (Hebrews 6:4-12)

This morning, I want to use my words as a brush. Your life is the canvas. I want to paint several portraits of significant events, each of which shares a common feature.

You are 18, 19 years old. Maybe you are going off to college, going into the military, or just moving across town to your own small apartment. In any case, this is the first time you will be living away from home. Your mother is off to the side crying. You are excited, to be sure, but that excitement is mixed with a bit of trepidation and uncertainty as to what will happen. Your father enters the scene. You notice that his eyes are moist. He was never one to make speeches, but he has a few things to say. He speaks words of blessing, and caution, and love. He speaks timely words.

It is your wedding day. Once again, mom is crying, but this time, she gathers herself, because she has something to say to you. Her message carries the wisdom of experience as she offers counsel and reassurance. She speaks timely words.

You are in school, maybe high school, maybe college. You are given an assignment. It could be a research paper or an art project or some other kind of project. Even though the work is difficult, it energizes you. You put your all into it. When you finish, you feel good about it. A couple of days after you turn it in, your teacher or professor asks you to stay after class. At that impromptu meeting, she says, “What you did was a cut above everyone else. She recognizes your potential. She is not just complimenting you; she is offering guidance and direction. You have been struggling with what to do after school. From her response to your work, you begin to envision a future career. She speaks timely words.

You are in your first real job—not a summer job, not part time work. One day you make a mistake. It costs the company money, a good deal of money. Your boss wants to see you. You fear he is going to fire you go, but he doesn’t. He knows that you know you messed up. He says to you, “Today you are more valuable to this company than you were yesterday because you now have the value of experience. I am quite confident that you will not make the same mistake twice.” He speaks words of affirmation rather than condemnation. He speaks timely words.

You and I need to hear timely words, but there are occasions when we need to speak timely words. Let’s consider those same scenarios but put you in a different position. It is your child who is leaving home. You are the parent. What will you say? Will your words be timely words?

It is your child who is getting married. You have the opportunity to speak to him or her before the ceremony. What will you say? Will you speak timely words?

You are the teacher or the professor. It is your student who turns in that excellent paper or project. What will you say to him? Will your words be timely?

This time, you are the boss. It is your employee who has messed up, who has cost the company money. What will you say? How will you handle it? Will you speak timely words?

Sometimes we need to hear them; sometimes we need to speak them. And sometimes,

words aren't the order of the day. Sometimes, all that is needed is a look.

- The stern, disapproving look of a parent or teacher may stop the misbehaving child in his tracks.
- The smiling nod of the coach affirms the player. He knows he got it right.
- The stamped foot and folded arms of the wife tells the husband everything he needs to know.

Sometimes, what is needed is neither a word nor a look but rather a touch. Sometimes a simple touch communicates everything that is needed. It may be a pat on the head or a pat on the back that says, "You made us proud! Good job!" A hand that is laid gently but firmly atop another hand that is working feverishly says, "Stop striving. Take a moment. Rest!" A lingering hug says, "I'm on your side. I love you. I'm with you."

Researchers say that nonverbal cues and tone account for 93% of our communication whereas the actual words we speak account for only 7% of our communication. Body language and touch speak volumes. While that is true, there are times when words are required, when spoken words are essential, when nothing else can be substituted in their place. When that is the case, we need to be able to hear or speak timely words.

Wise King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 25:11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." Eugene Peterson paraphrased that verse this way: "The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry."

In Hebrews 6:4-12 we find some timely words that we are going to look at today. The author of this letter had just taken his readers to task over the fact that they had not grown and matured in their faith as he had expected. By this time, he writes, they should have been teachers. Instead, they were in need of being taught the elementary truths of God's word. Words of warning and words of encouragement follow. Such words are to be in our ears and on our lips.

We Are to Hear and Speak Timely Words of Warning

Many agree that vv. 4-6 are among the most debated and most difficult words to interpret in the NT. It just so happens that last Tuesday morning at a Bible study, I spoke with a 90-year-old man who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Hebrews 6:4-6. He and I don't agree on how to rightly interpret this passage. There are many things about which he and I don't agree, but he is a Christian brother, and I greatly respect him.

There are basically three ways to interpret the meaning of these verses. Some view it as being **hypothetical** in which case, the passage teaches that if a person walks away from the Christian faith after having been saved, then that person will be eternally lost, but those who hold this view say that it really can't happen. The passage is simply meant to encourage Christians to keep on walking with Christ. The drawback to this interpretation is, why would the author of Hebrews waste ink and time warning his reader about something that can't really happen?

The second way to interpret the passage is to consider the people presented here as **actual** Christians who actually walk away from the faith. They are being warned that if

they do that, they will be condemned. Those who hold to this position obviously believe that a person can lose his or her salvation.

The third position is the one to which I hold. It says that the people presented in this passage are **potential** Christians. They are close to being saved. They have walked up to the brink of being saved, but then they shrink back and walk away. If someone gets that close and turns their back on Christ, they will never come back. In this case, the person doesn't lose his or her salvation because you can't lose what you never really had in the first place. They appear to be Christians, but they aren't believers in reality.

Consider how they are described. They were *once enlightened*. The light of the gospel has shown on them. They have knowledge of the truth. There is a difference, however, between knowing the truth and embracing the truth or acting on it. To be shown the truth and to walk away is to sin against the truth.

They have *tasted the heavenly gift*. Again, there is a difference between tasting and ingesting. When you taste something, you enjoy it momentarily. When you eat something, it becomes part of you. If you taste the goodness of God and spit it out, it will do you no lasting good.

The third thing said of them is that they have *shared in the Holy Spirit*. For me, this is the most difficult thing to explain. How can you share in the Holy Spirit and not be a true believer? If you read the Greek text, you can see that the definite article *the* is not found. The text literally says *sharers of Holy Spirit*. This leads me to believe that what the text is warning against is that it is possible to witness the work of the Spirit, to observe His activity, without ever actually receiving Him into your heart and life.

We find the fourth description of them in v. 5. Again, we see the word *tasted*. You can experience the goodness of God's word and observe God's power at work in the lives of others without inviting Him to work in your life.

You might wonder, "How could anybody get so close to being saved and turn their back on Christ?" If you are wondering that, I would suggest that you ask Judas because that is exactly what he did. He lived with Jesus for 3 to 3 ½ years. He saw Him up close and personal. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. He must have been impressed with the authenticity of Jesus' character. When you live and work with someone 24/7 you get to know the real person. Judas must have known that Jesus wasn't putting on an act, that what He said matched with how He lived. Despite all of those advantages, Judas walked away.

The author of Hebrews is warning us, "Don't make that same mistake."

In 1997, a young man by the name of Josh Harris wrote a book entitled, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. It became a best-seller in the Christian community. Harris was in his early 20's when he wrote the book. By the time he was 30 he became the lead pastor of a mega-church. He pastored that church for over 10 years. In 2016 he disavowed what he wrote in his first book saying his views had changed. In July of 2019 he announced that he and his wife were separating. They have since divorced. Later that same month he wrote, "By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practice faith and I want to remain open to this, but I'm not there now."

I fear he will never get there. It is possible and quite common to live for years thinking you're a Christian, then realize you are not, repent, and experience true salvation. I've known many who were saved in that way. If, however, you act and even think you are a Christian, and then walk away from Christ, the Bible warns that there is no road back.

The author of Hebrews follows up the warning of vv. 4-6 with another warning. Look at vv. 7-8. If a piece of land does not yield fruit year after year but only thorns and thistles, that land deserves to be burned.

If a man or woman goes years and produces no spiritual fruit, that is powerful evidence that there is no indwelling Spirit of Christ in that person. If there is no fruit on the outside, there is no life on the inside. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus taught His disciples to look for fruit. He warned them, "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:18-20).

This past Monday evening your pastor was stopped by an Oklahoma State Highway Patrol officer. I was on Highway 51 east of Hennessy coming back from a preaching conference in OKC. I was following the car in front of me, driving at the speed she was driving. We were going about 65 MPH which I thought was the speed limit. Just as the patrol car passed us going in the opposite direction, he turned on his lights and turned around. We saw his lights, and we both pulled to the side of the road.

At first, I didn't know why I was being stopped. The patrol officer explained that I was in a construction zone, and even though there were no workers there at the time, the speed limit was still 45. He also explained that earlier in the month a 19-year-old Enid man died on that stretch of road. He, too, was speeding. Now, that patrol officer is patrolling that area to cut down on the speeding.

Graciously, the officer only gave me a warning. There were warning signs all around me on that road, but I hadn't heeded them. The officer stopped me to give me another warning. I heeded that one.

God has given us warnings in this Book. We need to hear them. We need to heed them. We need to pass those warnings on to others. That is the wise and loving thing to do.

We Are to Hear and Speak Timely Words of Encouragement

Look with me at vv. 9-12. We have some unanswered questions about this letter. First, we don't know who the author was. We can only guess. We don't know the intended destination of the letter. We know the intended audience were Jewish Christians, but where were these Jewish Christians living? Many places have been suggested. A likely candidate is Rome. There was a large community of Jewish Christians living in Rome.

The author of Hebrews was fearful that many of the Jews who had been attracted to the Christian faith were in danger of abandoning the Christian faith and going back to their Jewish religion. That is why he issued the warning we just examined. In v. 9, however, he says to his readers, “In your case, we feel sure of better things.” He encourages them. He is painting a picture of a bright future for them. They would enjoy better things.

In v. 10, the author assures them that God has noticed their work and their love and their service to one another. I like the way the NLT renders v. 11: “Our great desire is that you will keep right on loving others as long as life lasts, in order to make certain that what you hope for will come true.”

As Bible-believing Christians, we know that we are not saved by our works, but also know that saving faith is a faith that works. By the word *works*, I mean “acts of service that are prompted by our faith in Jesus.” As the believers to whom this letter was sent continue to serve the Lord, that service was tangible evidence that their faith in Jesus was real. That continued service was confirmation that their hope of heaven and eternal life with Him would one day be fully realized.

The author was encouraging them. He was saying, in effect, “Keep on keeping on. You are doing well. Keep it up.” Instead of settling into a sluggish faith, he was encouraging them to imitate those who exhibited both faith and patience.

We need encouragers in our life. Don’t surround yourself with critical people. They will suck the life out of you. We don’t need people who are continually pointing out where we don’t measure up. Most of us are painfully aware of our shortcomings and our faults.

It is true that we all have blind spots. We all need correction from time-to-time, but we don’t need to be reminded daily of where we are failing. We don’t need to be made to feel guilty. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction. Don’t try to do His job in the lives of others.

I am big on the “one another commands” of the NT. At least 35 times we are told how to act towards one another. We are to **be kind** to another, **pray** for another, **greet** one another, **rejoice** with one another as well as **weep** with one another. We are to **comfort** one another and **pray** for one another. Of course, there is the big one. We are to **love** one another. All of the one another commands are specific ways that you and I are to love one another.

There are also things we are not to do to one another. The NT teaches: **Don’t slander** one another; **don’t grumble** against one another; **don’t be puffed up** against one another. One of the most quoted verses in the Bible is, “**Don’t judge one another.**”

While that is true, one other one another command is, “**Admonish one another.**” There are times to we are to do that, but the NT never commands us to **convict** one another, **to put** one another **on a guilt trip**, **to berate** one another. No, more than once we are told to **encourage** one another.

As I said before, we don’t know who wrote Hebrews. It remains a mystery. That hasn’t stopped people from making guesses, and that is what they are, just guesses. One of the most guess-getters is Paul. It could have been him. He wrote 13 of the letters of the

NT, but in each of those, he told us he was the author. Why would he quit doing so here?

Martin Luther guessed Apollos. He was a Jew from Alexandria. We meet him in Acts 18. We are told, “He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (18:24). Luke, the author of Acts tells us, “He powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (18:28). Later, Paul wrote, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” I suppose that Apollos is a good guess for the author of Hebrews, but it is just a guess.

I can tell you who I would like the author of Hebrews to have been. I would like for it to have been Barnabas. The name *Barnabas* was actually a nickname. His real name was Joseph, but everyone called him Barnabas. It means, “son of encouragement.” Barnabas was an encourager. He often encouraged people. He encouraged Paul. When Paul became a believer, everyone else distrusted him. He was the one who went around arresting Christians, but Barnabas showed up with open arms to receive him as a brother and work side-by-side with Paul.

Barnabas encouraged John Mark. John Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabas. They were far from home on a mission trip. John Mark got homesick. He may have been scared. He left the two and hightailed it back home. Paul was upset with him. As they were preparing for their next mission trip, Paul said, “John Mark isn’t going with us. He’s not invited.” Barnabas, however, believed in John Mark. They went together on their own mission trip, and Paul chose somebody else.

Barnabas had a heart for encouragement because he had a heart for people. It would be fitting for Barnabas to be the author of this letter we call Hebrews. Not only is the word *encouragement* used later in this sixth chapter, but I want to show you what we find in Hebrews 10:24-25. The heart of the author of this letter was the heart of an encourager. While it is true that Barnabas had such a heart, the truth is that every follower of Jesus should seek to be an encourager.

We need to hear timely words of encouragement, and we need to speak timely words of encouragement.

I close with this story. The late Bruce McIver pastored the same church in Dallas for 30 years. He finally retired after his second heart attack. After his retirement, he wrote two books that are a delight to read. The first was titled, *Stories I Couldn’t Tell While I was a Pastor*. The second was subtitled, *More Stories I Couldn’t Tell While I was a Pastor*. In the last chapter of his second book, McIver writes about his friends John and Doris Hurt. He said they were the best encouragers a pastor ever had. It was while he was recovering from his second heart surgery that he learned John had died. He wondered what he was going to do without his friend.

A few weeks later, Doris visited him. She reported, “People ask me, ‘What are you going to do?’” She smiled and said, “I tell them I’m going to do Proverbs 3:5-6 and Philippians 4:4-7.”

After Doris left, McIver reached for his Bible to re-read those two passages that Doris said she was doing to do. The verses from Proverbs tell us:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart

And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.

Those are some good words to do. Then, we come to Philippians 4:4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.
Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which
transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

If you ever wonder or if you are every asked, “What are you going to do?”, tell
yourself and tell others, “I’m going to do Proverbs 3:5-6 and Philippians 4:4-7.”
May God take these words I have spoken and make them timely in your life.