

THE THREE R's OF FOLLOWING JESUS (Hebrews 10:26-39)

I often began a sermon with an anecdote, an illustration, a story. I am going to begin today's message with a quotation. Listen to what Russell Moore wrote:

For too long, we've called unbelievers to "invite Jesus into your life." Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life is a wreck. Jesus calls you into His life. And His life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable.

Again and again in the gospel accounts, Jesus issues the command, "Follow Me." It is a command, by the way, not an invitation. You can accept or decline an invitation. It is up to you. A command, however, is either obeyed or disobeyed. Jesus made Himself clear; He really does want us to follow Him, and there are real consequences if we don't.

In the 11th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus issues what sounds like an invitation, but I think it is a command, too. It is a command accompanied by a promise. Always remember that a King's invitation is to be accepted, and make no mistake, Jesus is the King of the World. In Matthew 11:28-30 the King said:

²⁸ Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

Jesus wants us to learn from Him. He wants to be our Teacher. He wants us to enroll in His class. If we will come to Him, He will teach us all we need to know about living His life. It is through living His life that we will find rest for our souls. Living His life may wear your body out, but He will give you rest for your soul, and that is the thing for which people are truly looking.

All my life, I've heard that you go to school in order to learn the three R's. You know that the three R's are: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Of course, only one of those words actually starts with the letter "R," but you only know that because you went to school.

As we look at today's text, we are going to focus on the three R's of following Jesus, and the three words we will examine actually do start with an "R." Let's begin by reading our text. The entire text is Hebrews 10:26-39, but let's begin with just vv. 26-31.

These words are among the most sober in the NT. The author of this letter offers a clear warning of what we can expect if we turn away from Christ. This text describes that the judgment of God that will fall upon the one who is guilty of *apostasy*. That is a big word, one we don't use every day. What does it mean? It means *to totally desert or completely depart from that to which one has declared allegiance*. It means *to fall away or forsake*. The one who commits apostasy is called an apostate.

Is it possible for a true Christian to become an apostate? That is the \$64,000 theological question. Baptists have historically held to what we call the security of the

Believer. We believe that God keeps true believers from walking away from the faith. Jude ends his little letter with a doxology, a prayer of praise. He wrote, “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy . . .” (Jude 24).

Jesus said, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).

We can’t deny that church members walk away from the faith, that preachers even come to the point where they deny the validity of what they preach. It has happened, and it seems to be happening with a greater frequency. What is going on?

I believe that those who fully and finally walk away were not true believers in the first place. They were professors of faith, but they weren’t possessors of true faith. They were only pretenders.

This was happening in the days of the Apostle John, and in his first epistle, he explained it. He wrote, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” (1 John 2:19).

So, what we have in view in this passage is a group of Jews who have been attracted to the Christian faith by the preaching of the gospel and by the lives of true believers. They have seemingly turned away from the Jewish faith and have embraced the gospel message. After having done so, persecution hits the church. They are being persecuted. Many are tempted to say, “Wait a minute. I didn’t sign up for this. I thought once I became a Christian, life would be grand, and swell, and so very wonderful. That’s not what is happening. This isn’t for me.” They are in danger of turning their back on what they said they believed.

The author of this letter is saying, “If you do that, there is no coming back. All that is left is for you to receive is the just judgment of God.”

How do we keep that from happening? That brings us to the first “R.”

Repent Because God’s Judgment Is Real

Repentance is the only way to stay the hand of God’s just, judgment. That has always been the case. That is the way it was in the Old Testament. In the book that bears the name of the prophet Jonah we are told that God has decided to destroy the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. God also decides to send the prophet Jonah to Nineveh and to announce to them the coming judgment. Jonah isn’t so keen on going to Nineveh. Jonah knows God well enough to know that God is gracious and compassionate. He knows that if he goes to Nineveh and warns the people about God’s impending judgment upon Nineveh, God is going to lead them to repent, and then He is not going to destroy the city. He knows the Assyrians are bad news. They are bad people, and they deserve to be destroyed, and he wants to keep God from making a terrible mistake.

Jonah boards a ship going in the opposite direction. Jonah can run from God, but he can’t hide. God knows exactly where he is, and God is the One who keep Jonah from

making a terrible mistake. Through a bit of dramatic persuasion, God convinces Jonah to go to Nineveh. He travels through the city delivering a one-sentence sermon, “Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

Jonah’s worst fears are realized; the entire city repents, and God spares them. Jonah is the only revival preacher I know of who was disgusted that his evangelistic campaign was a roaring success.

Repentance stayed the hand of God’s judgment. That was true in the Old Testament, and it is true in the New, also. Peter gets up on the Day of Pentecost. It has been 50 days since Jesus’ resurrection. He preaches to a large crowd that has assembled. He points his finger at the people and says, “You are guilty of crucifying Jesus, the Son of God. He says of Jesus, “Let all the house of Israel know for certain that that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

They are cut to the heart and cry out, “What shall we do?” Peter looks at them and says, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:36-38).

That day, 3000 souls were saved and baptized. They were saved because they repented. We have said this before, but it bears repeating. When a person is saved, what is he or she saved from? If you are saved that means you are saved from God’s judgment. You are saved from God’s wrath against sin. Those who are saved are saved from God. You are saved from other things, too. You are saved from living a wasted life, from the controlling power of sin. Primarily, however, when you are saved, you are saved from God.

If you walk away from the offer of God’s grace and you don’t repent that means:

- According to v. 26, “There no longer remains a sacrifice for sin.”
- According to v. 27, all that is left is a fearful expectation of judgment.
- According to v. 29, you have done three things worthy of judgment. First, you have attacked the person of Jesus; second, you have disgraced the work of Jesus; third, you have outraged (disrespected) the Spirit of grace. This is the only time in the NT that the Spirit of God is called the Spirit of grace. What a wonderful title! To walk away from Jesus is to spit on grace.
- According to v. 31, you have fallen into the hands of the living God.

This text reminds me of the most famous sermon ever preached in North America. I didn’t preach that sermon. Billy Graham didn’t preach it. In fact, you have never heard this man speak on radio or seen him preach on TV. The most famous sermon ever preached in North America was preached long, long ago.

I prepared this message on the 281st anniversary of the most famous sermon ever preached on this continent. On July 8, 1741 Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards was the pastor of a church in North Hampton, Massachusetts, but on the date mentioned, he was a guest preacher at a church in Enfield, Connecticut. With very picturesque language, he portrayed unconverted people as in danger of falling into the pit of hell. It is said the people held on to the pillars

of the church in fear that they were about to plunge into the fiery abyss at any moment. People moaned and cried out, “What shall I do to be saved?”

The sermon was greatly used of God and many came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. This was preached during the time that is known as the Great Awakening. It was the first, great revival in the American colonies. Scores of people were saved while John Wesley and George Whitefield crisscrossed the 13 colonies preaching the good news of Jesus.

What made Edward’s message so effective is that the church in which he preached that sermon allowed many people into the church through what was called the “halfway” covenant. These were the children of converted church members who were themselves still unconverted. They were people who were baptized even though they were not yet Christians. These baptized unbelievers were granted membership in the church but were barred from participating in the Lord’s Supper.

One man explained, “Edwards gave [these] people a whiff of the sulphurs of hell that they might deeply inhale the fragrances of grace.”

Edwards wanted the people of his day to do what God wanted the people of Nineveh to do in their day and what Peter wanted the people in Jerusalem to do in his day. He wanted them to repent. The word means *to turn, to have a change of mind that will lead to a change of direction.*

D.L. Moody said that everyman is born with his back towards God, and when he repents, he turns and faces God. The meaning and act of repentance is captured in the chorus, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.” The lyrics read:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Is the Spirit of God leading you to repentance today? Have you been playing a game, pretending to be what you know you really aren’t? It is time to turn. Turn from your sin and turn to faith in Jesus because His judgment is real. It is coming. As surely as Jesus is coming, so is God’s judgment.

We come to the second “R.”

Remember Well Your Past Victories

Look now at vv. 32-39. In the Greek text, v. 32 contains a word that is translated as “struggle.” That is the Greek word from which we get our word athlete. An athlete, be he a wrestler, or a boxer, or a football player, or any other athlete struggles to overcome his opponent.

The author is telling his reader, “Look back. Remember how you successfully endured your struggles. Suffering was involved. You experienced ridicule, affliction, and you even helped those who suffered with you. You were partners, teammates in the cause of Christ.

Listen to v. 34 from the NLT: “You suffered along with those who were thrown in jail. When all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew you had better things waiting for you in eternity.”

In effect, he is saying, “Don’t give up now.” He is saying, “If you want your life to end well, there are two things you need to do. First, you must start well, and then you must remember well.” Our start in the Christian life is not when we were born. Our start is when we were born again. He is telling them to look back and remember those early victories.

We are often called upon in Scripture to remember. In the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation, Jesus gives John seven letters that he is to pass on to seven separate churches. Jesus specifically tailors each message for each church. To five of those churches, he calls upon them to repent, and to two of them remember because by remembering they will be helped to repent.

Listen to the counsel Jesus gives to the first church, the Church in Ephesus. Jesus says to them, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.” Jesus then added a warning to his call to remember and repent. He said, “If not, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.” If you were to go to Ephesus today, all you would find is the ruins of a once vibrant city. The city is gone as is the church. If a church loses its love, that church will lose its light.

That is true of every church in every age. Liberty, if we lose our love for the Lord and do not regain it by remembering and repenting, we will lose our light. We will cease to exist as a church.

In 2021 Lifeway conducted a study of three-dozen denominations. They found that in 2019, 4,500 churches closed in 2019, but in that same year only 3,000 churches were started. That means that churches are closing at a faster rate than new ones are forming. The study also found that the median worship attendance in U.S. churches dropped from 137 people to 65 people over the past two decades. That is a more than 50% decline. All of this was before the pandemic. I was not able to find statistics for 2021. I’m not sure that I really want to know those numbers.

We are to remember, and as we remember, that should induce us to return to our first love.

Let’s look at one more truth from our text.

Respond with a Faith That Perseveres

Look again at vv. 36-39. We have a need of endurance, and according to the last verse of the chapter as recorded in the NLT, “We have faith that assures our salvation.”

In his commentary on Hebrews, R. Kent Hughes wrote, “The key to successful perseverance is faith.”

Notice the beginning of v. 38. This is a quotation from Habakkuk. This is the same verse that Paul quotes in both Romans and Galatians. This was the text that Martin Luther seized upon and that sparked the Protestant Reformation. We are justified by faith, *sola*

fide, “by faith alone.”

While we are saved by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone. It is a faith that impels us to serve. It enables us to persevere in living a life of service to the Lord.

The next chapter in Hebrews, chapter 11, is a chapter that focuses exclusively on faith, but that chapter is introduced by the closing verses of chapter 10. Faith that wins is a faith that perseveres.

In his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, Max DePree wrote: “A friend of mine described a colleague as great at running the ‘95-yard dash.’ That is a distinction I can do without. Lacking the last five yards makes the first 95 pointless.”

Don’t give up with so little left to go. Persevere in your faith. Paul wrote, “Don’t get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time” (Galatians 6:9).

Brian Clay grew up in Hawaii. When he was just 8-years-old, he dreamed of winning one of the most prized gold medals in the Olympic games—the decathlon. In the 2008, at the Olympics in Beijing, he accomplished that goal.

As the name implies, the decathlon is comprised of ten separate events. The various events are held over a two-day period. Brian had a commanding lead going into the last event, the 1,500-meter run. Clay could have just coasted to the finish line and still have earned the gold medal. When Clay was asked when he knew he had the decathlon wrapped up, he gave a surprising reply:

In the last race when I was about 10 feet away from the finish line—that’s when I knew I’d won. I’d worked, trained, and competed for eight years to be able to . . . have the gold [medal] hanging around my neck. And if there was anything those eight years of competition had taught me it was that in competing against the best in the world in ten grueling events, anything can go wrong before you cross the finish line.

I doubt you have ever competed in the Olympics, but I know you have competed in life. I hope that like Brian Clay, you’ve learned that the race isn’t over until you cross the finish line. Some of you are in the very last years of life, but you haven’t crossed the finish line yet. That means you need to keep running. You need to keep striving. You need to keep serving. You don’t do those things to be saved. You do those things because you are saved.

That’s what Jesus did, and we’ve been called to follow Him.