

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN

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Introduction¹

In the history of our country, one of the most famous men of all time was a man of extraordinary intelligence, a scientist, inventor, statesman, and philanthropist. His name was Benjamin Franklin. Benjamin Franklin was one of America's "Founding Fathers," and in some ways he may have been the foremost among them. One historian called him, "The most accomplished American of his age and the most influential in inventing the type of society America would become."²

One of the things for which Benjamin Franklin was famous was his emphasis upon virtue. For Franklin, civic virtue went hand-in-hand with religious virtue. He insisted that our republic could not stand unless we lived virtuous lives. And he thought that Christianity was an excellent way to live a virtuous life. He even said, in a letter he wrote shortly before he died, "As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I think the system of morals and his religious as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see."³

But that was all there was to Benjamin Franklin's spirituality. Yes, he believed in a god, and even in life after death, and that a god would judge men in the afterlife, but he made clear that he did not believe Jesus was the Son of God, nor that the only way he could be saved from God's wrath was by Jesus' death upon the cross. He didn't see any harm in people believing those things, as long as their beliefs made them behave better toward each other. But he himself took what he wanted from Christianity and left the rest behind. Benjamin Franklin saw Christianity simply as a useful tool for creating a nice, orderly society.

But if there is anything we have learned from our study of the letter to the Hebrews, it is that what matters more than anything is a heart of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Simply being nice to each other is worthless. The Israelites who refused to enter the promise land were being nice to each other. They said that the reason they wouldn't enter in and face their enemies was because they didn't want their wives and children to get hurt. They followed God as long as they didn't see any harm in it, but when God demanded absolute, 100% faith in their hearts, they refused. "Therefore," God said, "I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" (Heb 3:10-11)

And neither shall we enter God's rest if we refuse to listen to God's Word – *all* of God's Word. For a month now I have been preaching from the second warning passage in the letter to the Hebrews (3:7-4:13), and that's what we saw last Sunday. Whether the promised "rest" for the people of God is referring to eternal life in heaven, as I preached last week, or to something that we enjoy here on this earth, as some believe, this much is sure – the hard, unbelieving heart will not know peace with God.

1 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: an American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 492.

3 *Ibid.*, 378.

This morning I will preach on the last part of that passage, where the writer of Hebrews sums up this passage with a command and a warning that you and I need to hear:

Hebrews 4:11-13 11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Here we see that:

- We must strive to enter God's rest
- We must strive because the Word of God is living and active
- We must strive because we cannot hide from God

I. We Must Strive to Enter God's Rest

Verse 11 says, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." I want to answer two questions. What does it mean to "strive," and how do we do it?

A. What it means to strive

Depending on the Bible translation you are looking at, you might see "Let us strive to enter that rest" in v. 11, or you might not. The KJV says, "Let us labour," and the NIV says, "Let us make every effort." That sure makes it sound like there is something we have to *do* to enter this rest, doesn't it? But this whole passage is not about *doing* but *believing*. This is all about the heart. That is crystal clear in vv. 12-13 of our passage this morning, and that is exactly what we have seen for the last three weeks leading up to this point. The hard, evil, unbelieving heart will not enter God's rest. Only the believing heart will enter God's rest.

So it would be strange indeed if we suddenly encountered a command here in v. 11 to *do* the right things to enter God's rest. It's true that the believing heart will *result in doing* the right things, but that's a different sermon. The point of this passage is to believe. And in fact the Greek word here fits perfectly. The Greek word conveys the idea of making haste, being eager, being zealous. The ASV might translate it best – it says, "Let us give diligence to enter that rest."

This is important. It is important because it is so often misunderstood. If you don't get this right, if you think that this is all about *doing* the right things, then you will miss the whole point. You might think that the way to enter God's rest is just to try really hard to be a good person. But the whole point here is to have faith, to *believe* – and this is so important that you are supposed to strive to believe, give diligence to believing, make haste to believe, be eager to believe, be zealous to believe.

There are at least two massive, life-changing truths here. First, you must give up any hope you have ever had in your own works. As long as you are believing in

yourself, you aren't believing in Jesus. As long as you cling to the hope that God will somehow overlook your sin because you are basically a good person, you aren't believing in Jesus. The gospel means "good news" for a reason – without it, you are left with the horribly bad news that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22). Nothing *you can do* can ever change that – not going to church, not getting baptized, not taking communion, not praying prayers, not giving to the poor, *nothing*. The Pharisees were the most religious people on earth in Jesus' day, but Jesus told them:

Matthew 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." (Rom 3:20b) The good news of Jesus Christ is that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (Joh 3:16b) Those who believe:

Romans 3:24b-25a are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

That is what you must strive for – faith in Jesus Christ!

This brings me to the second massive truth that we see here. This striving never ends. Faith in Jesus Christ is something that you must strive for, present tense, right now, today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, for the rest of your lives. "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." (Heb 3:14) True faith in Jesus Christ is an enduring faith, a faith that does not end. Maybe you prayed the "sinner's prayer" and "asked Jesus into your heart" once upon a time. Maybe you have even been baptized in water. That isn't what proves that you have come to share in Christ. What proves that you have come to share in Christ is that *you are believing in him right now*. Do you see why it is so important that you zealously devote yourself to believing in Jesus Christ? That's what it means to "strive to enter that rest" here in v. 11. But just how do we do it? How do we go about this striving to believe?

B. How we strive

To answer that question we need look no further than the two kinds of commands we have already seen here in the letter to the Hebrews. One kind of command has been positive, and the other has been negative. Positively, we have been commanded to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it," (Heb 2:1b) and "consider [pay close attention to] Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession." (Heb 3:1b) Negatively, we have been commanded, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb 3:7b-8a). And since the deceitfulness of sin is what hardens our hearts (Heb 3:13), that means we must not be deceived by sin.

So the way we strive to enter God's rest begins with "what we have heard." It begins with, "Today, if you hear his voice." In other words, it begins with God's Word. (That's the connection to the next two verses, by the way – it makes perfect sense for vv. 12-13 to be about the Word of God, because this is all about God's Word and how we respond to it.) How do we strive to believe? We hear God's Word. We pay close attention to it. We read it and hear it preached and meditate upon it and discuss it with one another and pay close attention to Jesus Christ, whom we find in God's Word and through whom God has spoken in these last days, so that our faith will not fail. We fix our gaze, our faith, the sight of our souls, upon Jesus Christ, and do not turn our eye to the left or right to the sin that would deceive us. And we heed the exhortation of others – even as we exhort one another – lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. This is how we strive to enter God's rest.

Living daily in this way, instead of living a life of wild spiritual ups and downs, is the normal Christian life. The normal Christian life is a life of constant attention to God's Word and our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not just something that happens after a sermon when every head is bowed and every eye is closed. It is certainly not something that just happens through special revival meetings. I wish our brethren would forget about holding revival meetings and contrived-crisis-camps and simply *strive to believe!*

This is something that you do at home and at work. It is something you do around your neighborhood and around your dinner table. It is something you do when you are alone with your Bible, and during family devotions, and during your conversations, and during the gathering of the assembled church. In all times and in all places, you strive to hear God's voice and believe God's voice, instead of the lie of sin.

This is how we strive to enter God's rest. And yes, this is all-out, 100%, full-commitment Christianity. It will dominate your life. It will change your life. It will *be* your life. There are people who think this is way too much. They'll think that I'm a raving lunatic, or some kind of crazy cult leader, to say this stuff. All they really want is just a weekly dose of religion. Sundays are enough. If they're really devout they'll remember to pray before their meals (unless they're in a restaurant, of course – they wouldn't want people to see them praying in public). But as far as *striving to enter God's rest through faith?* No way. They'd rather dabble. They'd rather enjoy a form of godliness while denying its power.

Beware, my friends. Do not make that mistake. You dare not make that mistake. Because while you may hide a hard heart from everyone around you, you cannot hide it from God. God – the very Word of God – will find you out.

II. We Must Strive Because the Word Of God is Living and Active

This brings us to the next verse, and the next part of our sermon. We must strive because of the Word of God! Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." I want to look at

this verse in two parts. First, the Word of God is living and active, and second, the Word of God discerns our thoughts and intentions.

A. The Word of God is living and active

What does this mean, that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword? There are some who focus on those words, “the word of God is living and active,” as proof that the Word of God is constantly evolving as we interpret it in a new way for a new age. But that is an anachronistic reading, imposing the same modern idea of a “living document” that people apply to the U.S. Constitution. That is not what it means that the word of God is living and active. It is the very opposite of what this verse means. As we will see in a few minutes, this verse does not mean that we sit in judgment of the Word of God, adapting it as we see fit – it means that the Word of God sits in judgment upon us!

But before getting to that, I have to dispense with the most popular interpretation of this verse. The most popular interpretation of this verse is that it is effective to change us – that the Word of God is so powerful that it can pierce into you and get inside you and change you. And that of course is true, but I’m afraid that is a different sermon. That’s not what this particular verse means. To understand what this verse means, you have to pay attention to how it fits with the verse before and the verse after. In other words, you have to pay attention to the context. Unfortunately it has long been fashionable to quote this verse all by itself, taking it out of context. Don’t do that. This verse is not a pearl on a string between a bunch of other pearls, for you to pick up and admire all by itself before putting it down and admiring the next pearl all by itself. These verses are links on a chain, all linked together.

That’s why there is that little but hugely important word, “for,” at the beginning of v. 12: “*For* the word of God is living and active.” That word “for” is crucial to understanding v. 12, because it means that the writer is giving the reason for what he just said in v. 11. And which part of v. 11 is the writer explaining? Clearly, the last part: “so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” That last part of v. 11 is about the judgment of God, and it is clear that v. 12 is explaining the certainty of that judgment, because the end of v. 12, about the Word of God discerning our thoughts and intentions, leads into v. 13, which is all about God’s judgment!

So when we read, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,” we’re not reading about how the Word of God is effective to change us. We’re reading about how the Word of God is inescapable. You cannot afford to ignore it. You can try to ignore the Word of God, but it will not ignore you. You can harden your heart against the Word of God, but the Word of God will show your hard heart for what it is.

The Word of God is the Bible, the revelation of God, which, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” (Heb 1:1-2a) And the Bible is not like other books. Other books can sit on your shelf and gather dust and crumble into

dust. They are not living and active. They will do you no great harm if you ignore them. But the Bible is different. The Bible endures. And no matter what you do, you cannot escape it. If you harden your heart against the Bible, it is more dangerous to you than a glowing, deadly piece of radioactive metal. You can bury it in a lead-lined room deep underground, but you cannot escape it. You can dismiss the parts of it you disagree with, with your “enlightened,” rationalist mind, like Benjamin Franklin did, or even cut out the parts that you disagree with, like Thomas Jefferson did, but you cannot escape it. You can throw it in a bonfire and turn its pages into ashes, but you cannot escape it. “The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” (1Pe 1:24b-25a)

The Word of God is not just a book of helpful advice. It is not just an ethical guide that is useful to make your marriage better or to help you keep your children under control. It is living and active, all of it – and though you try to hold the Bible at arm’s length, it will pierce through your hand and your arm and straight through to your heart, because the Word of God discerns your very thought and intentions.

B. The Word of God discerns our thoughts and intentions

That’s what the rest of v. 12 says. The writer of Hebrews compares the Word of God to a sword – not just any sword, but the sharpest sword of all. The readers of this letter may have feared the sword of their persecutor, but here they see that the sword of their persecutor is nothing compared to sword of God. The sword of God is the only sword truly worth fearing. As Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mat 10:28)

All this about the Word of God being so sharp that it can pierce “to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow,” is simply to say this: it is ever “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb 4:12) You can hide your heart from the others around you, but you cannot hide your heart from God. Harden your heart against the Word of God, and instantly the Word of God shows the hardness of your heart to God himself.

Is it clear to you that this is a matter of your *heart*? And is it clear to you what that means? This is about your thoughts and intentions. That’s what this whole warning passage is about, this warning passage that we’ve been studying for a month now. This is about how you think and feel, not about what you *do*. Yes, a right heart will result in the fruit of faith, but if it was just a matter of how you live, then what would it matter what was in your heart?

You can be the greatest citizen this country has ever known. You can help little old ladies across the street. You can create millions of jobs and make the economy strong and give your money to the poor. You can build a hospital and find the cure to cancer and help millions of people live out their lives on this earth for a few more days. But if your heart is hard, if you do not have faith, if the thoughts and intentions of your heart are not turned toward God in faith in Jesus Christ, then all you are doing is shaking your fist at God. You are just being defiant, saying, “I can do all this without you, God, thank you very much!” You are committing the

same basic sin that Adam and Eve committed, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Rom 1:21)

And no matter how good you look on the outside, no matter how you fool the people around you, the Word of God discerns your thoughts and intentions. The people around you may think you are really quite a good person, because you are polite, or because you are a hard worker, or because you go to church, or because you put money in the plate, but all they can see is the outside. The Word of God pierces you and lays bare what is on the inside.

That is why you must strive to believe. You must strive to believe because of the living, active, piercing, discerning Word of God. And in v. 13, the writer of Hebrews drives this point home. You must strive because God see you – God sees the heart that his Word lays bare.

III. We Must Strive Because God Sees Us

Take a look at v. 13: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” You and I must answer to God – and we cannot hide from him.

A. We cannot hide

You cannot hide from God. God’s all-seeing eye never sleeps, never closes, never looks the other way. It never has, and it never will. If your heart is hard, you may think that you can hide from God. You may take comfort in the fact that day after day you wake up and live out your life without any problem that you can see. But make no mistake about it, God sees you.

Have you ever seen a police helicopter search for a suspect at night? I don’t think that happens very often out here, but it happens all the time in the Twin Cities. The helicopter flies overhead and shines a brilliant, powerful searchlight down on the ground. Everywhere that searchlight falls, you can see everything, even in the darkest night. But did you know that the searchlight isn’t even what the police are using to look for the suspect? All that searchlight is for is to make the suspect move. What the police are really using to look for the suspect is infrared night-vision. They aren’t even looking where they are shining the light. They are looking where the light isn’t shining. Because with their night-vision, they can see you hiding in darkness as clearly as if it were day. You may think that as long as the spotlight isn’t shining on you, you are safely hidden. But with their all-seeing, infrared eye, you are naked and exposed to the eyes of the police officer in that helicopter. So it is with God, but more so. You may think the spotlight isn’t on you from day to day, but God not only sees you everywhere you go, he sees right through you to the heart laid bare by his Word – he sees your thoughts, your intentions, your attitudes. He sees what you truly believe – and what you do not believe. You cannot hide from God.

Police today have amazing ways of finding you out, if you have committed a crime. There are even TV shows and crime novels about the police tracking down criminals with fingerprints and DNA samples and black-light. Murderers try everything to cover their tracks. They try to wash away all the evidence, but the police can track them down from just one little hair follicle that they leave behind. Murderers can scrub away all the blood that they can see, but the police can use black-light and see the bloodstains that are invisible to the naked eye. Such a challenge is it to get away with a crime these days that people even dream of “the perfect crime,” a crime that is done so perfectly that there is no way for the police to catch you.

But as powerful as the police are today at finding you out, they are nothing compared to God. God does not need a crime lab to find out if you have sinned. God sees you when you sin – and not only when you sin, but in the moment before you sin. You see, God can do what the best crime lab can never do. God can see your heart. He can see what you believe. And you and I must answer to God.

B. We must answer to God

We must “give account” to God, the end of v. 13 says. We must give account to him today, and we must give account to him in eternity. In other words, God is our judge – and we have already seen how God judges the hard-hearted: “‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (Heb 3:10b-11) For, “Whoever believes in [Jesus Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (Joh 3:18) And there is no fury like hell for our God scorned.

There may be somebody here who thinks this sounds too harsh. You might think this makes God sound like an angry man in the sky who is just itching to smite you. But nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that even now, God is lovingly inviting you to be his child.

Don’t forget that this is all about responding to God’s Word in faith! And what is God’s Word? I love you. I love you so much I have given my only Son to die for you. I love you so much that on that day when Jesus died, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit groaned with pain so that you would not have to. I love you so much that even now, I am being patient with you, even now, I am giving you another chance to believe. I love you so much that if you soften your heart and turn to my Son, I will forgive all your sins, and I will wash you and heal you and call you my child.

That is love. That is mercy. That is grace. Despite all we have done, despite all the reasons we have given God to turn his back on us, God has gone out of his way for us, bent over backwards for us, even *suffered* for us. And patiently, so patiently, God holds out this gift to us. If we harden our hearts against this loving God, it is we who are being harsh, not God.

Conclusion

And in the end, this points to what faith is all about – turning to God in all of his loving-kindness, believing in his loving Word, believing in his loving promise of rest in Jesus Christ our Savior. The love of God is the one and only thing that makes God's rest worth wanting. What makes a believer a believer is that he sees, with the sight of his soul, that nothing but God himself will do, nothing but God in all of his mighty Word.

Are you believing in the good news of Jesus Christ? I hope you are. I exhort you to believe. Do not let your heart be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, the lie that the empty pleasures of sin are worth wanting more than God himself.

Let us strive to enter God's rest. Let us strive to believe God's Word, forever and always.