

Living Boldly
Hebrews 10:26-39
6/10/2018
P.D. Mayfield

And this is a preacher's worst nightmare. My sermon is at the printer in my office. So Randy, will you please run and go get that? Yeah, you get to miss out on while I'm up here sweating. So if you have your Bible, turn to 10:26-39. Makes me think of the sloth on *Zootopia*. Great.

We are finishing up a large section of—the middle section of Hebrews, which starts all the way back in 5:11. And this is the bulk of this letter, this sermon, where the author of Hebrews is focusing on the priestly work of Jesus, how he is a better priest than the Levitical priests, how he is in the order of Melchizedek, how he is going to make sacrifice, atonement for the sins of the people. And even more so than that, as a sacrifice, he himself is going to enter into the very presence of the living God and intercede on behalf of the people. And so this passage is concluding this block. And we are going to be pivoting in chapter 11, the famous chapter on faith, as well as the remaining chapters to how we respond to this message that the preacher of Hebrews has been preaching. Thank you.

But this passage, this section, is actually quite beautiful and also very uncomfortable. Randy talked about this last week, living boldly, and how being connected in the body of Christ does involve a level of discomfort. We prefer comfort. We prefer to be with people who are like us, who think like us, who even look like us. But the inertia of the gospel, of God's redeeming love, is always external. It's always expanding. It's always including more and more, ingrafting people who are not in Christ and bringing them into the household of faith. And we see how Jesus as the high priest secures this access to God, and he intercedes daily on our behalf as we live by faith. So let's read this passage and begin looking at it. Hebrews 10:26-39.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For,

"Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

God, bless this reading of your Word. Help us to understand it in our minds. Just understanding what it means. Lord, and by your Spirit, help us to apply it for how we are to live it out in our lives. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Now, it’s not the most pain a person can experience, but it was the worst pain that I have ever experienced. I was in Nashville, Tennessee running the Country Music Marathon. I remember meeting a guy that morning in my starting gate group, and he was from New York, and we were chatting. And he told me how he preferred half marathons. So here I am running my first marathon, and he’s all—you know, he’s the veteran telling me, “Yeah, I don’t do full marathons. I do half.” Didn’t know what I was getting into at that point. And the reason why he liked half marathons was because he could enjoy the race and enjoy the festivities. The Country Music Marathon has bands about every mile. And it’s a lot of fun. It’s an enjoyable race in an enjoyable city. And the other part that he loved was that he wasn’t too bent out of shape after the race was over. That was going to be foreshadowing to come for me.

Being in my mid-twenties, all of that made sense to me. But I wanted to endure the race. I wanted to experience all that it had to offer. It was what I had set my mind on. It was what I had trained for. It was what I was ready for, insofar as I knew. For this first race, I didn’t care so much about enjoying the day. I wanted to say I ran 26.1 miles. And as it goes in life, everything is fine until it isn’t. I began experiencing intense pain on my knee, and on two separate occasions I wanted to quit. Not just, “Oh, man, I want this pain to end.” Like, I was breaking down crying in pain as well as crying for other reasons, too. But it was associated with the pain. It was a much deeper pain than the physical pain. It was the fear that I was not going to finish. That fear was excruciating. Something I had worked hard for and trained for, and the thought of not finishing what I had set out to do was very emotional.

And just like life’s circumstances can sometimes overwhelm us, we like to do the exact opposite of what is actually worth continuing for. And similarly, the audience of Hebrews then as well as Christians today, we are tempted to shrink back from the Christian life. That is the temptation. It gets hard. There’s suffering. There’s pain. There’s hardship. And the temptation is to try to quit. Well, at least the thought to quit. And that’s what’s going on here in today’s passage. But because Christ is our great reward, we must persevere boldly until the end. So if we’re tempted to shrink back, the message of this passage is to persevere to the end. That’s the imitation of the gospel. It’s to come to Jesus and to persevere to the end, as he is our great reward.

So how does this passage call us to persevere boldly until the end? Well, we’re going to look at the passage in two quick sections. First, with a sober warning, and second with sustained encouragement. So first as we look at verses 26 through 31, we see that it’s because God is giving this sober warning, we must persevere boldly until the end. It’s him himself that’s giving us this caution. Look at verse 26 and 27, “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” The warning that is in this passage is against something specific. It’s against apostasy, and it involves judgment.

And we looked at apostasy earlier on, back in chapter 6, several weeks ago—maybe months ago now. But the author of Hebrews is bringing it back up. Now, the features in this passage very much parallel the features in chapter 6. The key questions Christians have asked throughout the centuries is this: is this warning for a person who commits certain grievous sins, or even patterns of habitual sins,

after knowing and experiencing the truth of the gospel? Or is it warning a person not to commit apostasy?

Well, as I've already mentioned, and I think that the flow of Hebrews makes this clear, I take this passage to be warning specifically against apostasy for several reasons. And we need to put these verses in context. The phrase "go on sinning deliberately" alludes to Numbers 15:30, where sinning with a high hand, kind of an idiom that means deliberate or willful—sinning with a high hand is against the Lord and carries the consequence of being cut off from the people. This high-handedness implies that deliberate intentionality, and it has no desire for repentance.

Secondly, the context of this verse follows from last week, as we looked at verses 19 through 25. We see a person can draw near to God because of who Jesus is, as he is the great high priest. We can draw near with confidence because of what he has accomplished, as he is our atoning sacrifice for sins. And we can draw near to God because of where Jesus is located, in that he has entered the Holy of holies and is in the very presence of the Living God.

And then number three, the context in verse 29 gives further descriptors for the person who is guilty of this specific sin. Look at these three with me, these three descriptors. First, a person that is committing this particular sin is trampling underfoot the Son of God. The picture of Jesus under this person's foot captures a very powerful image. Think about a dirty foot walking around the highways and the byways, full of sand and other unpleasanties that are found in a more agrarian society. There's also something about domination that is involved with that. And so for this person to be trampling the Son of God is this picture that captures the scorn and disdain that they have for him.

Secondly, this person is profaning the blood of the covenant. Now, you may have another translation that says something to the effect of how the blood is being treated as an unholy thing. Instead of treating the blood of Jesus as sufficient for cleansing you of your sin, cleansing your conscience before God, it is considered common and ineffective.

And thirdly, we see that this person is outraging the Spirit of grace. Or another way of just modifying and describing the Spirit. The gracious Spirit who draws near to those who love God. When we outrage the Spirit, this is acting as an insult to him who is gracious. The Spirit who draws people to Christ, convicts them of their sin, and testifies to their adoption as sons and daughters. The very essence of welcoming them into the family. It's insulting that. It's rejecting that. This is what is akin to Jesus's words in the gospels where he talks about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. "The unpardonable sin," as it's sometimes referred.

Taken together, these through descriptors make it more clear that the author of Hebrews has a willful and decisive rejection of Jesus Christ in mind. These people no longer rely upon him being sufficient to forgive them of their sins. They no longer consider him effective in bringing them into the presence of God to worship him face to face. And likewise, they reject that God through Jesus is able to grant eternal life. This is the reason he says that there is no longer—there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. He doesn't mean this that there are certain sins a person can commit or a repeated pattern of sins in your life that become all of a sudden outside the reach of God's grace. No, he means that a person who rejects Christ has no hope of experiencing what only Christ accomplishes and only Christ offers. There is no other way. Jesus is the way. That is what Christianity proclaims. That is what Jesus himself has proclaimed. That is what we're seeing in the Book of Hebrews as his sustained argument, as he's building and showing how Jesus is better. Better than the angels. Better than Moses. Better than the Levitical priesthood. Again and again, he's showing him to be better. And so to reject Christ is to say, "I'm going to strike out on my own. I'm going to find my own way." And the author of Hebrews is giving us a warning, a sober warning, that there is no other way.

And so the consequence to be expected from such willful rejection of Jesus is judgment. Now, we see how he makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. You see, if a person turns aside from the

law of Moses as the authority for faith and practice under the old covenant, and if there's judgment then, how much more will there be judgment deserved to the person who spurns Jesus, who has the authority for faith and practice under the new covenant? This is not to be taken lightly.. This passage has a long history of interpretation. Perhaps in your own journeys of faith, you've heard different ways of it being explained. Maybe you have heard that Christians can commit apostasy. Maybe you've heard, no, Christians can't commit apostasy. Maybe this has been used very powerfully in your life to manipulate you out of fear.

But make no mistake—there is a sober warning here for all to hear. But it's in perspective. Look at verses 30 and 31—how this sober warning is placed in the proper perspective. This judgment is reserved to the sovereign rule of God himself. Now here again, the author of Hebrews who quotes the Old Testament all over the place, he's referencing Deuteronomy 32, 35, and 36. We see how God—his judgment is connected directly to his sovereignty, his justice, and his holiness. It's imperative for Christians to allow God's justice to remain in this realm—the realm of his methods and his timing to carry out such justice. For if we take this justice upon ourselves, if we decide to rule in such ways, then we will tend to one of two extremes.

On one extreme, we'll have the propensity of minimizing the seriousness of sin. And in our attempt to show mercy, we actually undermine and fail to give justice to the very one who is offended by our sin. The other extreme is that we can become overly zealous for dispensing this justice, that we become overbearing, impatient, and narrowly defying lesser offenses with greater severity. We can become rigid. We can be harmful in what it means to call someone to repentance. Again, being heavy-handed on the fear, as if that is a carrot that actually sustains us and motivates us.

Now, hopefully I've been around long enough and you know me well enough to know that I love history. And we can learn, always, things from history. And it's worth your time—because I won't go into it today—but it's worth your time to learn about controversies in the church. There is a controversy from the mid-third century where a Roman priest by the name of Novation—it was during a period of persecution. And there were Christians in the face of persecution, they—what was sometimes called—they lapsed. They renounced their faith in Jesus, and they performed some sort of ritual sacrifice to the gods of Rome. Usually something in connection with loyalty to the emperor. Now, Novation was of the opinion that when these Christians later on, after persecution had subsided, that they wanted to come back to the church. Novation had a strong opinion, and he led many others to exercise discipline in the church in a way that says, "No, you can't come back. You have sinned against the Lord." I don't know if this is the case, but maybe he even quoted these scriptures. "You have trampled underfoot the Son of God. You have rejected Jesus. How can we let you back in? Because there's no sacrifice for sins anymore."

Now, similar dynamics would come into play in another part of the Roman Empire a couple centuries later with the Donatists. Again, worth your time to look up. Because these dynamics play out even all these centuries later in our churches. But the church ultimately came to the conclusion that Novation was wrong. Why? Why might that be? For there is a difference between renouncing Christ out of weakness and fear for your life, and the willful disdain that is described in these verses. Do you hear the difference? And at the end of the day, it comes down to repentance. Those believers who under the stress and trauma of persecution wanted to come back to the church after the fact—they were seeking to come through repentance, recognizing how in their weakness, whether in their doubt, whether in their fear, they were seeking repentance and restoration in Jesus Christ. They were not looking for another way. Whereas the person that is being described here has no interest in repentance, because they have no interest in Christ.

So how do we apply these warnings to the life of the Christian who is not committing apostasy? Well, first we need to make a distinction between the two possible groups: one, a person who has done what is described here, and a person who is living in a prolonged season of sin and spiritual drifting. So what is the difference? Because on the surface, and in a certain snapshot of time, both could look very

similar in the way they're going about their life. But again, it is the one who is returning with repentance. The person who has done what is described here doesn't even want to repent and has no desire for the Spirit to work in their life. That is the key. Because we're all weak. We all fail. We all succumb to the pressures, even though our context might not be under direct duress or persecution that's the context here. But still, the pressures of the Christian life wear us down, and we are fatigued.

Who's fatigued in your life? Who's pressured in all the demands of your life to say, "You know what? I'm tired, and I think I'm going to figure out something else on my own. I'm going to go this way for a while." And it's that slight pivot, "I'm going to go this way," that is why the warning is here. Because when you shift, you are starting to drift away from the one who holds you securely. And so it's a sobering warning at stake—to remove yourself from the ministry of God's saving grace through the Son of God, who makes atonement for sins, intercedes for us from his position of power and glory, who is sufficient to make that atonement through his priestly work, and where the believer will be vindicated in the end.

This is in the context of what perseverance is: persisting to the end. You're going to fall. You're going to scrape your knee. You're going to break a bone, maybe. Your knee is going to be in pain, because you trained on this surface, but in Nashville they have concrete over here. You trained going up hills in Clinton, South Carolina, but all the route is going downhill in Nashville. All of these changes in the game plan of what I had in my plan of a successful marathon run was not what was in store for me that day.

So Christians, heed this sober warning. Cultivate your reliance on Christ and persevere by following him with perseverance and faith. Grow your faith in Jesus. Cultivate your identity in him, and embrace the community of disciples. We must heed God's sober warning. But as I've mentioned, warnings are not sufficient alone. We must have a greater reason to persevere boldly. And that brings us to verses 32 and 39, where God provides sustained encouragement as we persevere boldly to the end. And we see right out of the gates, he calls us to remember, to recall the former days when you were enlightened, when you became a Christian, when you accepted him as Messiah, when you relied upon him for the forgiveness of your sins. He's casting their experience as the paradigm for the present and their immediate future. This is encouraging those who have a direct memory by strengthening their resolve to endure.

Remember? Remember what it was like when you first believed? Remember what you did? And then he lists. You endured hard struggle. That word "struggle" is where we get the cognate, the word that comes from athlete. The struggle with sufferings. And then he lists more. Sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction. Here we see how what's being conveyed is this exposure to ridicule, being held up to public shame. Just merely to the action of bringing people up on stage. But most often, it is associated with a negative experience of being made a spectacle and being subjected to public abuse. This reproach is signifying their verbal assaults, their jeering, their accusations. And their affliction indicates how acts of violence most likely accompanied their jeering. But they had sympathy. You see, they were being partners with those who were being treated such. So whether they were being directly impacted that way, or as they identified themselves with a community of believers, they were indirectly being impacted by that. And so they had compassion on those who were in prison. They joyfully accepted the plundering of their property.

Now, here there is a sense of how the mirror—or, the mirror is an okay example, but it's a continuation of the implications of how Jesus becomes God incarnate, takes on flesh, and identifies with what it means to be human. And here the people of faith, the followers of Jesus, are likewise taking on what it means to share and identify with those who are suffering. It's displaying their identification. They're taking on and imitating Jesus with those who are in need. It's literally putting skin in the game. And when you put skin in the game, you risk getting blood on you when the people you're with—when their skin is cut. The gospel in this context of this encouragement to endure and to share in these sufferings is a call to put skin in the game.

But if you've ever put skin in the game, you can't do it forever. Because as most people, we really are encouraged with kisses, and we're discouraged with kicks. Because such suffering brings about trauma. It brings trauma to those who experience it directly. It brings about that collective fatigue to those who are being impacted. And when your family member experiences pain and loss, though you don't directly experience it the same way, it weighs on you. Isn't that right? Isn't that your experience? How we share in that together? And so the encouragement that the author gives by remembering their fervency in their youth—most scholars would say maybe this was even ten years before the writing of this letter—is to recapture the fervor that had characterized them when they first believed. Display again, now, what you displayed in the past.

Now, this is incredibly important for you, Christian, who are in your later years of life. You see, the path of discipleship is not—and the picture of endurance is not, “Well, I've done some labor. I've put some skin in the game. I've done my time. And now it's just time to wait it out.” No, now is the time to remember what it was like when you were doing it when you were younger, and to do it all the more. Because now, you have the memory of experiencing it. And this is where discipleship happens. You bring other people along who are experiencing it for the first time—those new believers who are accepting Jesus with love and excitement, and it's all fun and games until it's not. We have to be together and encourage one another to endure.

Because it's a challenge, right? When the metal was sharper and shinier than it might be now. But the challenge is for us to continue staying sharp and continue staying shiny, as well as passing on that sharpness and passing on that polish to others. It's abiding in Christ. Enduring it with great joy. Now, whether or not their homes were confiscated, or whether because they were in prison there was looting—regardless, stuff is happening to them. There's loss. And they endured it with great joy. And why? What was their joy? How is it even possible to do that? Because it says, “You yourselves had a better possession, and an abiding one.” This is our encouragement. The sustaining encouragement to persevere boldly is in that we have a better possession, a greater reward.

If I didn't have a desire to run 26.1 miles, I would not run 26.1 miles. And I certainly would quit when the going started getting tough. But when you have an eye on a prize that supersedes the pain that you are enduring in the present, it's the motivation. It's the inspiration. It's the encouragement to go further, to keep going. Now, there's time to take a rest. When I broke down those two times, like I said. And I guess in a technical way, I didn't run 26.1 miles. I ran, like, 22.4 miles and walked the rest. But I finished. It's the most pain I've ever had, and my knee still hurts because of it. But that's life, right? We have memory. Our bodies carry memory with scars and pains and triggers.

And there is suggestion here that the author of Hebrews is specifically talking about—when he talks about Habakkuk, that's what he's quoting here in verses 37 and 38. There is a sense where he might be referencing Isaiah 26, where in the context of persecution, in the context of struggle, the temptation is to go inside your house and shut the door and wait. And so instead, the author of Hebrews points them to Habakkuk. And he does a little spin on the actual text. He is placing it in context now of who Jesus is, because he's talking about Jesus the Messiah who will come and will not delay.

So when you think it's time to bow out because this is pointless, when you want to stop fighting temptation because you're going to lose anyway, it's picking your eyes up and looking for where Jesus is, and trusting in the promise's that he is going to return. It's that perspective that allows you to endure. It's the community of faith that also gives you that encouragement. As I mentioned, the Country Music Marathon is a fun marathon. There really are bands, like, every mile. But I will tell you this. The full marathoners and the half marathoners all start at the same time. When we split, it got real lonely.

And so again, this calls back to the author's—the importance of not neglecting to meet. Not only is it because you're not fearfully identifying with Christians who are engaged in this or experiencing this persecution, and you don't want that to fall on you—that's part of it. But it's also important to not neglect

this because you need them. You need that person running beside you. When you're wanting to stop, the other person is going, "Come on. Keep going. Come with me. I'm with you." You need that voice of encouragement, and you need to be that voice of encouragement to others. This is the boldness.

This is the confidence that we have in not shrinking back from it even though it is tough. Even though it is painful. Even though it is great suffering, as we follow Christ. It is worth it. Because he is worthy. The great reversal in God's kingdom is that he intends for his church to joyfully engage the world's kicks, because we have received the Son's kiss. Let me say that again. The great reversal in God's kingdom is that he intends for his church to joyfully engage the world's kicks, because we have received the Son's kiss. We need to heed the sober warning, but our reservation comes from a greater reservoir. It come from the inspiring, life-giving, living stream of waters of the Son of God himself. And in his ministry of grace and abiding love is the motivation and the power to enable us to continue. The gospel is the good news that we are not alone in our sins. We're not alone in our struggles. We're not alone in our sufferings. But all the more, Jesus is with us, and he calls a community to be around us as well.

This passage continues the author of Hebrews' pastoral heart for the community of Christians to not drift back, not to shrink back to anything other than Jesus. He is the power to save. He is the sufficiency to forgive you your sins. He is the sufficiency to purify us, to pursue a life of holiness, to where we might be banged up, but we're going to finish. Because when we can't go any more, we find all along that he is the one that has been with us, holding us secure. And so the Christian can't apostatize, because it is the Lord Jesus who holds you firm, secure.

And so when you are faced with struggle of your own, or the struggle of others in your life, it is the same security, the same ministry of Jesus of where he is in the very presence of the Living God that gives you the grace to live in that moment. Because you are to live out by faith. Not to shrink back in fear, not to close your doors and to just wait, hoping that it's going to pass you by. No, the call to discipleship is to go inward, to go forward, to continue the path that the Lord has called you to. And again, as we have in the assurance of pardon, God himself is going to finish the work that he has begun. We can persevere boldly, because he is going to finish the work. Amen?

So this sermon, this passage, hopefully—my prayer has been for you to be a little unconformable and to sit on that. But to not sit on that forever. Because just like the text pivots, your hope pivots. Your hope pivots to the Lord who holds you secure.. And there's no reason to fear the judgment that he mentions in those earlier verses. There's no fear to be worried that you have lost something. You can't lose what you didn't gain or lose yourself anyway. The Lord is gracious to preserve you to the end. May he continue to do it for us as a church, for you as a believer. And for those who are wrestling through this as you're exploring Christianity, I hope you're also uncomfortable. Because I encourage you to listen to the Lord's words, and for you to wrestle with what this might mean for your life. Let's pray.

God, we ask for your Spirit's ministry in our lives. Would you pour out your grace? May we accept it fully. May we not shrink back in fear, but rather move forward with confidence and courage and strength. Because you are our sustaining grace. May we persist and continue to fight the good fight of faith as we follow you, Jesus. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.