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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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The Church's Vigilance Over One Another

Hebrews 3:12-14

The Isolation of Our Age

We live in an unprecedented time of isolation in America. There has been isolation in the past history of our country... think of the isolation of the pilgrims in Plymouth as they faced the bitterness of winter, of starvation, of disease, and of death alone, with no one to help them. But I would contend that many American Christians are even more isolated than they were.

The early settlers who travelled through the Cumberland Gap and settled in Kentucky and Ohio were very isolated from each other... many lived as many as fifty miles from the nearest settlers. In similar manner, the settlers who lived in the vast stretches of prairie land in Oklahoma and Nebraska lived even further from their nearest neighbors, going it completely alone in sod huts with struggling cash crops like corn and wheat... they might go months between seeing other human beings.

But the isolation of 21st Century America is of a vastly different kind. The isolation of the pilgrims and the settlers was a physical isolation... but our isolation is a spiritual one. We live in neighborhoods, in close proximity to one another, but we hardly know each other. People are content to pull in their cars into their garages, pull up the drawbridge, and settle into a weekend of microwaved meals and electronic entertainment. We drive on I40 at rush hour, sitting alone in our cars and surrounded by other people also sitting alone in their cars. Our technology has brought us privacy and ultimately isolation.

Social network sites actually underscore our lack of genuine community; we can have virtual relationships with people we don't know at all; we can deceive them and ourselves by creating an e-personality that scarcely connects with reality... we can craft what image we want to present by what information we post on Facebook, and we can have 10,000 "friends" who don't really know us at all.

So it is also at church. In many churches it is possible to be an anonymous member... to come, listen and leave. To present a façade of Christianity and spirituality, of health and happiness, and no one really knows us at all.

Friends, I smell a Satanic rat in all of this. Fungus grows in the physical darkness of basements, and sin grows in the spiritual darkness of isolation. If no one really knows us, it is immeasurably easier to drift away from Christ through habitual sin. Satan wants to keep us isolated from genuine community so that he can pick us off one at a time.

The remedy to the danger of drifting away from Christ is a genuine Christian church.

In our church covenant, we have promised to “watch over one another in brotherly love.” In this sermon, I want to unpack what I think that means. In another time, some might have felt that meant “When some natural disaster or illness or other tragedy strikes a fellow church member, we will pass the hat and help them get back on their feet.” However, I think the writers of that church covenant had a far different thing in mind when they wrote those words... I think that by far the best passage of Scripture on that concept is Hebrews 3:12-14.

I. The Greatest Danger: Turning Away from the Living God

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

A. The Danger in a Word: Apostasy!

1. Greek word: **avposth/nai**

To stand apart or away from ... hence to withdraw, to absent oneself from,

1) to make stand off, cause to withdraw, to remove 1a) to excite to revolt 2) to stand off, to stand aloof 2a) to go away, to depart from anyone 2b) to desert, withdraw from one 2c) to fall away, become faithless 2d) to shun, flee from 2e) to cease to vex one 2f) to withdraw one's self from, to fall away 2g) to keep one's self from, absent one's self from

2. Second in a series in the NIV

Hebrews 2:1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

Hebrews 6:6 ... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance

3. Nearness to God is the goal of salvation... these people are going AWAY from God

a. Over and over, the author of Hebrews will speak of the closeness of God to us in salvation

b. He exhorts us to DRAW NEAR to God

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 7:19 a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith

- c. But apostasy is to turn willingly away from the living God; to choose to live a life apart from His holy presence; to try to carve out a separate existence where God is not the center, or perhaps not present at all
4. They turn away because they don't truly believe in God or truly love Him... they turn from God back to idols of their own imagination
5. The danger here seems to be more of a drifting from God caused by unbelief and by trials rather than an angry rebellion against the Gospel... they might quietly assent that the facts of the gospel are still true... but the Christian life has proven too difficult for them; they sadly turn away because of a desire for a comfortable life here on earth

B. The Living God

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

1. Remarkable expression... used 28 times in Scripture, and FOUR TIMES in the Book of Hebrews... twice as much as any other book in the Bible
2. The Scripture uses this expression to focus the minds of sinful man on the central truth of the universe: there IS one and only one true and living God, and all other so-called "gods" are idols of man's imagination or demons impersonating God

Deuteronomy 5:26 For what mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived?

The gods of the nations are dead... there is no life in them:

Psalm 115:3-7 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. ⁴ But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ⁵ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats.

3. The Creator of the Universe is the only God, and He IS ALIVE... all life comes from Him... we live because of Him
4. To turn away from this one, true, living God is the greatest evil in the universe, in fact is the essence of all evil

5. To turn from the living God is to embrace DEATH... the essence of life is to be in God; the essence of death is to be away from God, separate from Him

C. Context: The Focus is Christ

1. This warning is an application of the previous section... a meditation on Psalm 95... the context of that was the overall point of the first five chapters of Hebrews: the Superiority of Christ in every respect
 - a. Hebrews 3:1-6 Christ is superior to Moses

Hebrews 3:3 Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.

Hebrews 3:5-6 Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house.

- b. Hebrews 3:7-11 Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as the Israelites did when they refused to enter the Promised Land and rebelled against God, shrinking back from God's blessing through unbelief and disobedience
2. The author draws out of Psalm 95 lessons from Israel's past, and he will return to it immediately
3. But first, he interrupts his argument to get right to the point... it is not merely a history lesson about Israel's rebellious past... rather, the author fears that these Jewish professors of faith in Christ are going to make the exact same mistakes again
4. This time, however, Christ Himself is the Promised Land... He is the goal of their Exodus, He is their inheritance and their life... to turn away from Christ is to turn away from the living God!!!
5. So the author stops and warns the Jewish Church to be constantly vigilant over sinful hearts that turn away from the living God
6. The danger is APOSTASY FROM CHRIST!!

D. This is the Greatest Danger of Our Lives

1. Nothing in the world is more precious than human souls

***Mark 8:36-37 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?
³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?***

2. The greatest danger is that we should lose our souls

3. An initial profession of faith in Christ is NOT ENOUGH... for there are many counterfeit versions of “faith”... faith must be tested to prove its genuineness
4. The only true faith is that which GOD GIVES, and only that faith will survive the tests that God brings against it

SO... the Greatest Danger is Apostasy—Turning Away—from Christ

II. The Root Cause: Sin’s Effect on the Heart

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

A. The Apostasy is Caused by a Sinful, Unbelieving Heart

1. The “heart” is the root of human existence... the essential part of every man and woman, boy and girl
2. It is the part of us that thinks and reasons, that feels, that perceives and understands, that loves and hates, that chooses and rejects... such is the HEART
3. The gospel of Jesus Christ goes after the heart... it is a heart religion
 - a. The Sermon on the Mount speaks again and again of the heart
 - b. The essence of the Christian life is a transformed heart that trusts in Christ and loves God
4. The Apostasy from Christ is caused by a heart that turns away from the living God
5. Jonathan Edwards: *Treatise on Religious Affections*
 - a. The heart has the ability to perceive and assess everything in the universe of which it has knowledge... and then
 - b. To be attracted to or repelled from that thing to a greater or less degree
 - c. We understand with the heart and we love or hate with the heart
 - d. We are ATTRACTED TO something or REPELLED FROM IT
6. But the danger here is of a heart that TURNS AWAY from the living God... is repelled from God and from Christ
7. Note the adjectives...

B. A “Sinful, Unbelieving” Heart

1. Two very strong descriptors... the essence of sin is to turn away from the living God for something else
2. The essence of unbelief is not to see Jesus as the most attractive, the most delightful subject it can ever consider
 - a. Faith sees the invisible world, and especially Christ at the center of it
 - b. Faith sees in the person and work of Christ the most staggeringly beautiful thing imaginable... the glory that comes from the love He showed in dying for us; the radiance of Christ's power in creation, in redemption, in His blood shed on the cross, in His powerful crushing of Satan and all our enemies in one great triumph at the cross; the glory of His resurrection, the incredible beauty of His resurrection body, and of the promise of life it means for us; the awesome radiance of His glory in heaven, on His throne at the right hand of Almighty God
 - c. BEAUTY!!! RAVISHING BEAUTY!!!
 - d. And faith alone can see it
 - e. It is why so many hymn writers meditated on the theme of the beauty of Christ; they are speaking of the way their hearts are ATTRACTED to Christ and to the cross

“Beautiful Savior”

“I long to be where the praise is never ending; yearn to dwell where the glory never fades; where countless worshipers will share one song; and cries of WORTHY will honor the Lamb”

You're beautiful Savior, wonderful counselor; clothed in majesty, Lord of history; you're the way the truth the life; you're the Star of the Morning, glorious in holiness; you're the risen one, heaven's champion, and you reign over all!

“Fairest Lord Jesus”

Fairest Lord Jesus... Lord of all nature... O Thou of God and man the Son; Thee do I cherish, Thee do I honor, Thou my soul's glory, joy and crown

**Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations, Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration**

“Jesus the Very Thought of Thee”

Jesus, the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills the breast! But sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest.

To the eye of faith, nothing in all the universe is as beautiful—as morally perfect, as attractive as Jesus Christ...

... the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature

3. It is the most sinful thing a person can do—to turn away from Christ unfulfilled and seek happiness in something else

C. The Origin of a Sinful, Unbelieving Heart: The Deceptiveness of Sin

Hebrews 3:13 hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

1. Sin is a great deceiver... it NEVER tells us the truth about its intentions

Romans 7:11 For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

2. Sin is exactly like its originator, Satan... he is a deceiver as well

2 Corinthians 11:14 Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light

Genesis 3:13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Revelation 12:9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world

3. Satan uses many DECEPTIVE techniques to draw us away from Christ
 - a. Deceptive teachers

2 John 1:7 Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

- b. Deceptive philosophies

Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy

- c. Deceptive lusts

^{RSV} Ephesians 4:22 Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts

- d. Deceptive wealth

[thorny soil hearers] Matthew 13:22 “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful”

D. The Hardening of Sin’s Deceitfulness

1. Sin has a hardening effect on our hearts
2. As we become accustomed to sin, our hearts little by little get harder and harder to the gentle quiet voice of the Holy Spirit
3. A soft heart = yielded, submissive, eager—HAPPY—to obey Jesus
4. The opposite is a hard heart: resistant, peevish, sluggish to obey, hesitant, ultimately rebellious
5. Sin’s deceitfulness works on our hearts OVER A LONG TIME... little by little, we become desensitized... first to sin’s outrageous and wicked nature, then to sin’s great danger, then to sin’s presence

Illus. “Time Changers” movie... shows how popular American culture became little by little desensitized to evil... now we hardly even notice when it is around

Like the proverbial “boiling of the frog”, Satan has worked evil into our world and into our hearts so that we cannot hear the Holy Spirit command us gently and clearly by God’s word

So our hearts become little by little HARDENED BY SIN’S DECEITFULNESS

6. Examples

- a. Sexual sin
 - i)
- b. Laziness
- c. Evangelism

III. The Remedy: The Vigilant Encouragement of the Church

Hebrews 3:12-13 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

A. Christ Established the Church to Labor in Each Other’s Salvation

1. Christ has not left us as orphans in Satan’s word
2. First and Foremost: The Holy Spirit

3. Secondly: The Church... its members ministering to one another

B. A Healthy Church Will Protect Its Members from their Own Sin

1. Fundamental to a healthy church is a commitment to watch over each other spiritually
2. All of us have the deadly seeds of our own spiritual destruction in our own hearts... INDWELLING SIN

Romans 7:15-17 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

3. No healthy Christian can confidently say “I can handle my sin problem myself... I don’t need anyone’s help!” That is the language of pride and of self-destruction!!

C. Word for Word Instruction

1. See To It
 - a. Literally, “Watch”... “Look to it”
 - b. Keep your eyes open, be alert, be aware,
 - c. Similar to the watchfulness each of us should have over our own souls

Mark 14:38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak

- d. Similar also to the watchfulness elders should have over the flock

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

- e. So also ALL CHURCHMEMBERS should have this same kind of watchfulness over each other

2. Brothers

- a. This is addressed to all church members... this is a watchfulness we should have over our brothers and sisters in Christ
- b. Jesus loves His church; He died for it; He cares for it

- c. So also every church member should care for every other member... it should matter to you whether a fellow church member is drifting away from Christ
 - d. This is a family matter... we are God's household, God's family
 - e. We are to watch over each other in brotherly love
3. That None of You
- a. Christ said that He would lose NONE of all that the Father has given Him... how many are we willing to lose?
 - b. Furthermore... if even one person develops a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, that person can serve as a source of infection for the whole Body of Christ...
 - c. Better to nip the thing in the bud
4. Has a Sinful Unbelieving Heart
- a. How can you detect the development of a sinful unbelieving heart that is in the process of turning away from the living God?
 - b. You have to KNOW each other! You have to know and be known... develop close relationships with people... get to know their habits, their moods, their strengths and weaknesses
 - c. When they stop attending Home Fellowship, give them a call and say "How are you? We miss you at Home Fellowship! Have you been busy? Not feeling well?"
 - d. When they pull out of a ministry team, you talk to them to find out why... what's going on in their lives
5. But Encourage One Another
- a. This is the remedy given by the whole book of Hebrews... the entire letter is a word of "encouragement"

Hebrews 13:22 ¶ Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

It is the remedy consistently offered to us in dealing with each other

Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

b. The word is a rich one, with a range of meanings:

1. call to one's side, summon, invite; Summon to one's aid, call upon for help;
2. appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage
3. request, implore, appeal to, entreat
4. comfort, encourage, cheer up
5. in some passages may mean try to console or conciliate

Sometimes, therefore, the Christian is called on to COMFORT someone downcast in their Christian walk; sometimes a word of EXHORTATION is called for...

Illus. Boston Marathon, 20 mile mark... "Heartbreak Hill"... people stand there and EXHORT the runners not to give up

Sometimes a word of cheer or consolation based on the promises of God is just what the Lord wants from us

SPEAK THE WORD OF GOD to each other!!!

6. Daily; As Long as It is Called Today

- a. The time frame: every day... as long as we live
- b. "Today" is the special era we live in as time-bound creatures
- c. As long as we are running this arduous race...
- d. Olympic 10,000 meter runner does not need exhortation or encouragement after the race is over... it's only while the race is being run that words like "Keep going! You can catch him! Don't give up!!" mean the most
- e. So , as long as it's called "Today" every day we encourage each other
- f. Daily = shows how quickly things can change... someone can be doing well in their Christian walk in November, but very poorly by January... it can change very quickly

7. So That None of You May Be Hardened By Sin's Deceitfulness

- a. We are seeking to help each other fight their battle with sin
- b. We are trying to show each other those blind spots

C.J. Mahaney, *Humility*:

EXAMPLES

IV. The Warning: Only Those Who Finish Ever Really Began

Hebrews 3:14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

A. The Clearest Mark of Regeneration: Perseverance to the End

1. Jonathan Edwards spoke of the mysteries of eternal election by the hidden counsels of God
2. How can I know if I have been chosen by God? How can I know if He predestined me for heaven?
3. Various marks... but the clearest by far is running the painful race of holiness in this sinful, Christ-hating world with endurance TO THE END

B. Partakers in Christ

1. The Greek word is a strong one: it implies fellow-laborers with Christ, but even more than that
2. It implies that we are co-heirs with Jesus... that we have come to SHARE IN HIM... to be in Him spiritually, to receive our inheritance through Him

C. The Past Tense with a Conditional??? Strange!!

1. Greek: “We **have come to** share in Christ”... Greek tense is perfect... past action, completed with lasting results... COMPLETED action... God completely made you a partaker in Christ
2. At some time in the past we have been born again, made partakers in Christ
3. To link that with the word “if” is grammatically strange...

Example: “George Washington was elected the first President of the United States if...” IF WHAT??? Either he was or he wasn’t!

4. But here, it makes a little more sense... either you are a partaker in Christ or not... if you are, you became one for all time... nothing can change that; “Once saved, always saved”... once you are a partaker in Christ, you will be for all eternity...
5. BUT DID YOU become a partaker in Christ? How can you know for certain? No radiant angel came down from heaven with a golden shimmering certificate of salvation just for you at that moment... your assurance is completely based on faith

6. How can you know you are truly a partaker with Christ and will sit with Him at the wedding banquet in heaven? KEEP RUNNING THE CHRISTIAN RACE!!
7. Hold firmly to the end the confidence you had at first!!!
8. At the beginning you had the strong assurance of faith in Christ... you trusted Him and received the assurance of forgiveness of sins in His name; you were then baptized based on your confession of faith in Christ... WONDERFUL!! Keep on going!
9. Only those who truly finish ever really began!

Matthew 10:22 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

V. Applications

- A. Come to Christ
- B. Humble Yourself and SEEK HELP in Your Battle with Sin!
 1. Be a Covenant Member of a Good Church
 2. Assume Sin is Deceiving You at Some Point
 3. Seek accountability
 4. Pray for each other
 5. Correct each other... with gentleness and humility
 6. Ask God to soften your heart about sin's deceitfulness
- C. Support the Elders' Ministry in this Area
- D. Watch Over One Another in Brotherly Love!
- E. Embrace our Church's Counseling Ministry
- F. Keep Running the Christian Race