

Sermon Summary #7

Test Yourselves! Hebrews 6:4-12; 2 Corinthians 13:5

[If there is anything that we can learn from this series on the subject of eternal security vs. apostasy it is that we should *avoid arrogant dogmatism*. Although I am persuaded of the truth of eternal security and am quite passionate in my defense of it, I also recognize that certain biblical texts are problematic. Hebrews 6, the passage we are looking at today, is a case in point. In the final analysis, it comes down to *higher or lesser degrees of probability*. I believe that once all the biblical evidence is weighed the scales of balance incline heavily in favor of eternal security. At the same time, I do understand why some people struggle to embrace it. I simply want you to know that regardless of where you finally land on this issue, you are welcome at Bridgeway, and you will not be judged or rejected because you happen to differ with me or the Elders.]

When we started this series a couple of months ago I began with a hypothetical scenario to help us focus our thoughts on what the practical issues and implications are. I spoke of a young man whom I called Charley.

Charley was born into a Christian family, attended church throughout his teen-aged years, and appeared to give every indication that he was born-again and had put his faith in Jesus Christ. Following graduation from high school, he fell in with a different group of friends at college. They challenged his faith and insisted that he was naïve to believe in Jesus.

It wasn't long before Charley stopped attending church and eventually declared himself to be an atheist. His anger and resentment towards anything remotely religious grew with each passing day. Charley is now 30, already twice divorced, an alcoholic, and painfully bitter and unpleasant to be around. He wants nothing ever again to do with Christianity. So what's up with Charley? What happened?

Those who insist that Charley was genuinely converted and saved early in life and then later apostatized and lost his salvation will typically point to Hebrews 6 in defense of their view.

In fact, I'm quite sure that, during the course of this series, many of you have been asking yourselves: "Well, Sam has made a few good points in defense of eternal security. But what about Hebrews 6? When is he going to find the courage to tackle that thorny text?" Well, the answer is: right now, today!

So, then, who are these people who "have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away"? It is important for us to know because "it is impossible . . . to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."

There are probably a dozen or more interpretive options of this passage. It isn't my purpose to interact with them here. Rather, I am focusing solely on the question of whether the terminology in vv. 4-5 would lead us to conclude that these individuals were born-again, justified, believers.

If these are born-again Christian men and women, is the doctrine of eternal security destroyed? My good friend, Dr. Tom Schreiner, who teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, doesn't think so.

He believes these are indeed Christian men and women who are being warned about the eternal consequences of apostasy. The author of Hebrews doesn't assert that they *have* fallen away but rather

admonishes them so that they won't. In other words, *the warnings are designed to awaken and empower and motivate Christians to escape the threatened consequence*. Thus the Lord uses such warnings as the *means* by which he prompts his people not to apostatize. None of God's elect, says Schreiner, will fail to heed the warning and thus all will persevere. Many find this unpersuasive and insist that if Christians cannot in fact fall away from the faith it is meaningless to warn them not to. But Schreiner is not without a response. He directs our attention to **Acts 27**.

During the course of Paul's journey to Rome, a life-threatening storm erupted on the sea. Everyone's life was in danger, including that of Paul himself. In the middle of this storm Paul spoke to the crew on board:

"Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for *there will be no loss of life among you*, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you." So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told'" (Acts 27:21-25; emphasis mine).

The divine promise is clear: no one will die as a result of this life-threatening weather. Nevertheless, a number of the sailors clearly didn't believe Paul and thus prepared a life-boat in order to jump ship.

"And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go" (Acts 27:30-32).

Wait a minute! Didn't Paul say that *God had promised that no one would die*? Yes. But now he warns them that if they leave the ship they will die! How does that work?

Paul's warning is clear. If you leave the ship no one will survive. Everyone is needed to direct the ship to safety. *The apostle evidently did not think that the promise of everyone's survival precluded the need for warning them what would happen if they jumped ship. It would appear that the warning he issued was one of the means God employed by which he spared and preserved all their lives.*

Is the warning emptied of significance simply because the threat of death never came to pass? No. *The threat never came to pass because everyone heeded the warning*. Tom then applies this principle to the many warning passages in Scripture like Hebrews 6 -

"The warnings to the elect are not meaningless simply because the threat never comes to pass for those who are truly saved. The elect escape the threatened judgment precisely by heeding the warning. And I would contend that all the elect heed the warning, and hence they never will face final judgment" (96).

Tom's point is well taken. However, I'm still not convinced that it applies to Hebrews 6.

This leads me to ask, *"Is it possible for a person to experience some form of spiritual 'enlightenment' and to 'taste' spiritual blessings and to 'partake' of the Holy Spirit and yet never know Jesus in a saving way?"* I believe the answer to this question is Yes (as we saw, for example, in our study of John's gospel). Let me begin by giving six reasons from the book of Hebrews itself why these people are *not* born-again believers who have apostatized.

Reasons Why the People in Hebrews 6:4-6 are Not Christians

First, the situation described in vv. 4-6 is illustrated in vv. 7-8. There we read, "For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it [this drinking of frequent rain refers to the blessings of vv. 4-5: enlightenment,

partaking of the Holy Spirit, tasting spiritual blessings, etc.], and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it yields thorns and thistles [this corresponds to the “falling away” of v. 6a], it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”

Rain falls on all kinds of ground, but one cannot tell from that alone what kind of vegetation, if any, will appear. The picture here is not of ground that receives frequent rain, yields life and vegetation, and then loses it. The picture is of *two different kinds of ground altogether*. One responds to the rain [spiritual blessings and opportunities] by producing bountiful vegetation, while the other is barren, lifeless, and thus condemned. Likewise, people who hear the gospel and respond with saving faith bring forth life. Others, however, who sit in church and hear the truth and are blessed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit but eventually turn their back on it all are like a field that never yields vegetation and thus comes into judgment.

Second, in 6:9 we read of a significant contrast: “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation.” The “better things” in view are stated in vv. 10-12, things like “work” and “love” and “serving the saints” and “diligence” and “full assurance of hope” and “faith” and “patience” and “inheriting the promises.” These “things” are “better” than the experiences of vv. 4-6 precisely because they “belong to” or “accompany” *salvation*.

In other words, the author of Hebrews is confident that most of those reading his letter have experienced and displayed “better things” than those people whom he described in vv. 4-6. These things are “better” because they involve salvation. His obvious point is that the blessings in vv. 4-6 do **not** pertain to salvation. The contrast is unmistakable and clear!

Before going farther, let’s summarize vv. 7-12. The illustration in verses 7-8 compares the people in vv. 4-6 to land that fails to produce fruit. It only yields thorns and thistles. These people, then, were obviously never genuinely converted or saved. Then, in verses 9-12, he says that his readers, whom he calls “beloved” (v. 9a), have experienced “better things” than any of the temporary experiences of vv. 4-6. These are “things” that pertain to the genuine experience of salvation. It would seem clear, then, that both the analogy in vv. 7-8 and the explicit assertion in v. 9 tell us that the people described in vv. 4-6 were never truly saved in the first place.

Third, according to Hebrews 3:14 (and 3:6), “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” Note well: he says we “*have come*” to share in Christ, not “will come” or “are now partakers,” if we persevere in faith. In other words, holding fast in faith, i.e., persevering and producing spiritual fruit, proves that you *became* a partaker of Christ in the past. Failing to hold fast, i.e., apostatizing from the faith, proves that you *never were* a partaker of Christ. ***Apostasy or falling away (6:6a) doesn’t mean you once were in and have now fallen out of a saving relationship to Christ. It means you never were or never became a partaker with Christ in the first place.***

Fourth, we read in Hebrews 10:14 that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” Here we are told that for those who are now being sanctified (i.e., indwelt by the Holy Spirit, growing in holiness by faith) “the offering of Christ on the cross *has perfected that person for all time*. For all time! In other words to become a beneficiary of the perfecting, justifying work of Christ on the cross is to be perfected in the sight of God forever. This suggests that Hebrews 6:6 does not mean that those who re-crucify Christ were once really justified by the blood of Jesus and were really being sanctified in an inward spiritual sense” (Piper, Sermon, 5).

Fifth, our author concludes this letter with a prayer relating to the fulfillment in us of the blessings of the New Covenant. He prays that God would “equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:21). This is the promise of the new and “eternal” covenant (v. 20): that God will put in his people a new heart and cause them to walk in his ways and not turn away from doing them good (see Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; Jer. 24:7; 32:40).

This prayer clearly tells us that perseverance in faith and in doing God's will is ultimately the work of God in us. It is finally dependent, not on us, but on God. This is the way he fulfills his promise in the New Covenant. But if some of God's people fail to remain believers and fail to pursue holiness of life and thus apostatize from the faith, God will himself have failed to fulfill his promise to "work in" us "what is pleasing in his sight."

Sixth, we must take note not just of what is said of these people in vv. 4-6 but what is not said of them that is usually said of Christians. Typical terms used to describe believers, such as regeneration or being born again, conversion, justified, adopted, elect, faith in Jesus, are conspicuous by their absence. This is more than merely an argument from silence when we consider the way Christians are described in *the book of Hebrews itself*. Here is a listing of what is said in Hebrews of the true believer, all of which are absent from the description of those who apostatize in 6:4-6.

- (1) God has forgiven their sins (10:17; 8:12)
- (2) God has cleansed their consciences (9:14; 10:22)
- (3) God has written his laws on their hearts (8:10; 10:16)
- (4) God is producing holiness of life in them (2:11; 10:14; 13:21)
- (5) God has given them an unshakable kingdom (12:28)
- (6) God is pleased with them (chp. 11; 13:16,21)
- (7) They have faith (4:3; 6:12; 10:22,38,39; 12:2; 13:7; etc.)
- (8) They have hope (6:11,18; 7:19; 10:23)
- (9) They have love (6:10; 10:33-34; 13:1)
- (10) They worship and pray (12:28; 13:15; 4:16; 10:22)
- (11) They obey God (5:9; 10:36; 12:10,11,14)
- (12) They persevere (3:6,14; 6:11; 10:23)
- (13) They enter God's rest (4:3,11)
- (14) They know God (8:11)
- (15) They are God's house, his children, his people (3:6; 2:10,13; 8:10)
- (16) They share in Christ (3:14)
- (17) They will receive future salvation (1:14; 7:25; 5:9; 9:28).

Someone might object by saying: "O.K., typical descriptions of the saved are not found in 6:4-6, but neither are typical descriptions of the lost found there either!" That's true. But that is to be expected. After all, before they commit apostasy their spiritual status is uncertain. No one can know with certainty whether or not they are truly saved. "It remains to be seen whether they are among the saved or the lost. They have not yet given decisive indications either way. That is the reason the author warns them not to turn away – they are still at a point where a decision to be among the saved or the lost must be made" (Grudem, 171).

How can Non-Christians be Described in these Terms?

What about the terms used in 6:4-5 (enlightenment, tasting, sharers, etc.)? On the one hand, it is certainly the case that all Christians experience these realities. But do *only* Christians experience them? Or is it possible for these experiences also to be true of people who have been repeatedly exposed to the gospel and to the benefits it brings, yet without personally embracing the person of Christ as Lord and Savior? Let's look at each one in turn.

(1) They have "once been enlightened" – Have true Christians been "enlightened"? Yes. But this term need mean no more than to hear the gospel, to learn or to understand. Countless non-Christians who grew up in church, perhaps attended a Christian college or seminary, understand a great deal about the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit can actually enlighten them and give them insight which they in turn ultimately reject. Merely understanding Christian doctrines does not prove one is saved! All of us know people, perhaps family members, who have been repeatedly exposed to the truth of the gospel, understand what it means, can articulate the claims of Christ with incredible precision, yet refuse to put their trust in him as Lord and Savior. Thus, ***whereas all true Christians have been enlightened, not all those who are enlightened are true Christians.***

(2) They have “tasted the heavenly gift” and “the goodness of the word of God” and “the powers of the age to come” – This certainly points to a genuine spiritual experience. But must we conclude that it was a genuine *saving* experience? These are not strangers to the gospel or to the church. These are people who have come under conviction of the Holy Spirit, who have experienced some degree of blessing both through common grace and through their close, intimate contact with genuine believers.

Perhaps they have been healed (remember: the vast majority whom Jesus healed were not saved). Perhaps a demon has been cast out. They have heard the Word of God and have come to taste and feel and enjoy something of its power and beauty and truth. They have felt the “wooing” of the Spirit and have seen great and wonderful things in the body of Christ. Those in Matthew 7:22-23 preached, prophesied, performed miracles, and cast out demons in Christ’s name . . . *but were not saved*. Jesus said to them: “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (v. 23). These, then, “have tasted” the power and blessings of the new covenant, but *they have not personally prized, cherished, embraced, loved, trusted, treasured, or savored the atoning death of Jesus as their only hope for eternal life*.

(3) They “have shared in the Holy Spirit” – Whereas the word translated “shared” or “partaken” can certainly refer to a saving participation in Christ (cf. Heb. 3:14), it can also refer to a looser association or participation. See Luke 5:7; Heb. 1:9 (“comrades” or “companions”). These people had in some way come to share in some aspect of the Holy Spirit and his ministry. But in what way? Must we conclude that it was a “saving” way? Why does our author *not* use terminology that would put the question of their spiritual status to rest, such as “filled with” the Spirit or “baptized in” or “indwelt by” the Holy Spirit?

(4) They have in some sense “repented” – There is a “sorrow for sins” and a turning from them that even non-believers can experience. This is clear from Hebrews 12:17 and the reference to Esau, as well as the “repentance” of Judas Iscariot in Matthew 27:3. Paul refers to a repentance “that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Cor. 7:10a) as well as “a worldly grief [that] produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10b). The implication is that there is a repentance that does *not* lead to salvation. As with “belief” and “faith”, so too with “repentance,” we must always distinguish between what is substantial and saving, on the one hand, and what is spurious on the other.

Wayne Grudem provides this helpful summation:

“What has happened to these people? They are at least people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin and a decision to forsake their sin (*repentance*). They have clearly understood the gospel and given some assent to it (they have been *enlightened*). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayers in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts (they have become ‘associated with’ the work of the Holy Spirit or have become *partakers* of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have *tasted* the goodness of the Word of God). These factors are all positive, and people who have experienced these things may be genuine Christians. But these factors alone are not enough to give conclusive evidence of any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life (regeneration, saving faith and repentance unto life, justification, adoption, initial sanctification). In fact, *these experiences are all preliminary to those decisive beginning stages of the Christian life*. The actual spiritual status of those who have experienced these things is still unclear” (153).

I conclude that the people described in 6:4-5 who, according to v. 6, “have fallen away” are not now and never were born-again believers. They are not Christians who have “lost” their salvation. They are non-Christians who perhaps made a profession of faith in Jesus, perhaps became members of a church, perhaps even participated in leadership, and then willfully and with a hard heart turned away and rejected everything they had come to know.

I believe the spiritual state and experience of those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 is virtually identical to that of the first three of four soils in the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-15). In that parable, only the fourth soil is called “good” and subsequently bears fruit. The other three represent those who hear the gospel and respond with varying degrees of understanding, interest, and joy, none of which, however, bear fruit that would testify of genuine spiritual life. That is to say, they experienced “enlightenment” and “tasted” the goodness and power of the ministry of the Spirit and the blessings of the kingdom, yet turned their back on the truth when trials, troubles, or temptations came their way. Their apostasy was proof of the falsity of their initial “faith” (see esp. John 8:31; Heb. 3:6,14; 1 John 2:19).

My response to this passage, therefore, isn’t to lament over those who once were saved but now are irrevocably lost. My response is to appeal to you who have become comfortable in your surface familiarity with the Christian faith and yet have kept Christ at arm’s length. My appeal is to you who have grown in your understanding of Christianity and have experienced great blessings because of your presence here and your association with the church, and yet you do not trust and treasure Jesus above all else. My appeal to you is to repent and believe the gospel lest after some time you fall away from what you know and are guilty of holding Christ up for contempt.

2 Corinthians 13:5

Let’s bring all this to a conclusion by meditating for a moment on what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5. Most often people who live in fear that they aren’t saved are the ones who need worry about it the least. Unregenerate people couldn’t care less about their sin or salvation. They find the beauty of Christ unattractive and are indifferent towards the countless ways in which they violate his will and fail to honor him as God.

If you are painfully concerned over your sin and distressed by your failure to love and obey Christ as you know you should is precisely why I would feel free to encourage you and reassure your heart that you do, indeed, truly know him as Lord and Savior. It is the stinging conviction of sin that testifies to the Spirit’s saving presence in your heart!

If there are many who are saved but think they aren’t, even greater is the number who aren’t saved but think they are. These are the ones that need to hear Hebrews 6! Having walked an aisle when they were seven or prayed a prayer at the age of twelve, or perhaps on the assumption that living in the U.S. and being raised in a church necessarily entails salvation, these folk presumptuously believe themselves to be Christians whose eternal destiny is set and secured.

D. A. Carson has articulated what we know all too well, that “there are millions of professing believers in North America today (to say nothing of elsewhere) who at some point entered into a shallow commitment to Christianity, but who, if pushed, would be forced to admit they do not love holiness, do not pray, do not hate sin, do not walk humbly with God. They stand in the same danger as the Corinthians; and Paul’s warning applies to them no less than to the Corinthian readers of this epistle” (178).

Here in 2 Corinthians 13:5, we find the apostle Paul issuing a pointed and passionate call to the Corinthian church. “Examine yourselves,” says Paul, “to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

To “fail” the test is to discover, after self-examination, that Jesus is not, in point of fact, in them. Paul is not talking about the possibility of someone having Jesus in him, only then to apostatize and discover that Jesus is no longer there. His point is this: if the Corinthians are truly Christians, they will realize that Jesus **is** in them.

Certainly Paul believed that the majority of those in Corinth were true believers (see 3:1-3; 6:13). However, although confident that they will “pass the test,” the possibility always exists that some may discover that they have “failed.” In other words, *the reality of self-delusion and false assurance must be faced.*

This is where we must turn our focus from the first century to the twenty-first, from the Corinthians and their spiritual state to us and ours. How should we today examine and test ourselves?

Perhaps we should begin where Paul did, with *the objective revelatory truths* found in God's Word, "the faith" (v. 5), as he put it. Are we "in" it? Are my beliefs governed by Scripture or by personal likes and dislikes? Do I elevate my opinions above God's? Most important of all, who is Jesus to me? Do I accept Scripture's claim that he is God incarnate, that he lived a sinless life and died a substitutionary death, absorbing in himself the wrath of God I deserved, and that he rose again bodily from the dead? Do I set my hope in personal effort and sincerity and the confidence that my good deeds will outweigh or somehow trump my bad ones?

What is my response to the apostolic message? Does it resonate in my heart? Do I relish the revelation of Christ about whom Paul and Peter and John and others wrote and for whose name's sake they gave their lives? Am I submissive to their teaching? Do I shape my life and recast my beliefs and formulate my choices to conform with the theological and ethical principles they defend?

I must also test and examine myself by determining not whether I sin, because I most certainly do, but *how I feel and respond when I sin*. Am I unmoved and indifferent and cold toward my failures? Do I find ways to rationalize what I know is inconsistent with Scripture? Do I simply acquiesce to my sinful desires and lusts and illicit longings by saying, "Well, that's how God made me so it can't be wrong. I'm just being me. Surely God can't argue with that!"

The last thing I want to endorse is a morbid, introspective obsession with the state of our souls, as if we are called upon each moment to take our spiritual pulse, oblivious and blind to the hurts and needs and desperate condition of those around us. But we must also avoid the opposite extreme that is characterized by presumptuous self-delusion and a proud indifference to the ethical demands of the gospel.

In conclusion, and most important of all, when I realize that nothing in my life is perfect and that all my beliefs are to some extent flawed and that every effort I make is tainted by selfishness and sin, *do I look to Jesus and to him alone*, whose life and death and resurrection are my only hope? That is the ultimate test.