

Sermon Series: *Small Groups*

Exhort One Another Every Day

Hebrews 3:12-13

12 *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.*

13 *But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

“Daddy, what are we going to do tomorrow?” It seems that question is frequently one of the last questions my children ask me before going to sleep. They want to know what is happening next, where we are going and what we are doing. If you are like my children you too may want to know, what we are going to do next. So before we turn to the text this morning, I’d like to talk a bit about our next sermon series.

An Introduction and An Invitation

I want to do two things. First, I want to offer an introduction and second I want to extend an invitation. I want to begin by offering an introduction to our new sermon series and conclude with an invitation to become involved in a small group.

An Introduction

Before we turn to our text for this morning, let me offer a brief introduction to our new sermon series. Next Sunday we will begin a new sermon series in the gospel of John. Back in June when we went away for our annual elder’s retreat, the fall sermon series was one of the issues about which we sought the Lord in prayer.

We have spent a significant time in a topical series on the Persona and the Work of the Holy Spirit and we sensed that it was time for us to return to an extended exposition of a book. The natural question was, “Well, then which book?” The gospel of John seemed good to us all at the time. We then continued to pray about this through July and August. At the end of August we remained in a place of agreement—that the gospel of John was the book to which we sensed the Lord was leading us.

The next question then was, “How long will we be in John?” So the elders asked me to talk to the Lord about this. I did. Every time I sat down to sketch out a plan for how long it would take to preach through John, I became very uncomfortable and ill at ease. The task felt out of place and constraining. Nevertheless, the elders had asked me to offer an answer and I had given my word that I would, so I went back to them and offered them the preaching plan that I had come up with. However, I explained to them my discomfort at using the plan and they sensed it too. In the end, the answer that we mutually agreed to is, “We don’t know.”

We don't know how long we will be in John and we believe that is OK. I'm asking that you too be OK with that answer. What we do know is that we are all agreed and are convinced that the Lord is inviting us to preach through the gospel of John however long it may take. Because we are convinced that He is leading us here, we are content in not knowing exactly how long we will be there.

This is not unlike our God to lead in this way. When God first spoke to Abram, in Genesis 12, He said,

Genesis 12:1 (ESV)

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

God called Abram to leave one place and go to another place that He would not show Him until he was on the way. God wanted Abram to begin the journey first, before He would reveal the destination. So God led him forward without revealing beforehand where the journey would end. I believe we are in a similar place. I believe the Lord is leading us into the gospel of John and we need not know with absolute certainty how long we will be there. If we did, we might be tempted to focus too much attention on arriving rather than on enjoying the journey.

This actually gives us great freedom. Beginning a lengthy series does not mean that we cannot break into the series when we sense the Lord leading in a particular way. We can choose to break into the series for whatever reasons we sense are appropriate, for example Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, visiting missionaries, Easter, commissioning services, etc. We would simply return to the series after the break.

Reasons Why This Gospel Will Be Good For Us

As I was praying about this I listed some of the reasons why I thought preaching through the gospel of John would be good for us. I presented nine reasons to the elders. I want to share three with you.

1) To Us Keep Reaching Out

The first reason the gospel of John will be good for us is because **it will remind us to keep reaching out**. The gospel of John was written to reach out to people who do not know Jesus to convince them that Jesus truly is the Son of God and that eternal life only comes through faith in Him.

John 20:30-31 (ESV)

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; **31** but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The goal of the gospel of John to **reach out** to people who have no hope, and give them an unshakable hope in Jesus.

Reaching Out is one of the three purposes for which this church exists. We must keep this purpose constantly before our eyes so that we do not become too inwardly focused. This is why we keep our three purposes in the bulletin every week. Of course the danger is that laying them before our eyes every week will cause us to never see them.

Sherlock Holmes once said to Dr. Watson,

“You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.”

“Frequently.”

“How often?”

“Well, some hundreds of times.”

“Then how many are there?”

“How many? I don’t know.”

“Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.”¹

Keeping our purposes in front of our eyes does not guarantee that we will live according to them. However, it is a good reminder. We all know that our Lord Jesus wants us to be a people who are continually reaching out to others who do not know Him and have no hope in Him. However, there are people before our eyes everyday and yet somehow we can easily become quite content to remain silent and never share the radiant hope that fills our hearts. How can this be?

We cannot remain content in this kind of rebellion of His clear commands. We must constantly remind ourselves that reaching out in love to others in the name of Jesus is one of the purposes of our lives and one of the purposes for this church. The gospel of John will keep that purpose ever before our eyes.

Won’t you invite someone to join us on this journey? Write an article to the local paper? Invite someone to subscribe to the podcast or download the sermon on the website. May all of Winchester come and investigate and see if what is said about Jesus is true?

2) It’s All About Jesus

The second reason the gospel of John will be good for us is because **it is all about Jesus**. The gospel of John is centered entirely upon the the life and person of Jesus. The first twelve chapters focus on His public ministry and the last nine chapters zero in on the last week of His life (and His appearances after His resurrection). The book is clearly written with an evangelistic purpose, but that is not its only purpose. It is written to convince the unbeliever, but it is also written to strengthen those who already are believers.

John states (in Jn 20:30) that Jesus is the Christ, that is, the Messiah. Jesus is the long-promised Messiah, therefore John demonstrates again and again the many, many ways in which Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about Messiah. John refers to these as “signs.” His obvious desire is that the disciples of Jesus have a well-informed and reasonable faith. John wants those who do believe in Jesus to be able to articulate the reasons why they believe that Jesus is the Son of God. John wants the disciples of Jesus to be equipped to give answers to those who ask them for the reason of the hope that is within them (1 Peter 3:15).

If you already are a believer, then hopefully, this series will allow you an opportunity to grow in your ability to articulate your faith. I pray that this intense and specific focus on the ministry of Jesus will strengthen your skill at explaining the reasons why you believe what you believe.

¹ Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan (1999). *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* “A Scandal In Bohemia” (Kindle Locations 56-61). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.

3) It Will Help Us Fall More Deeply In Love With Jesus

The third reason this series will be good for us is because I believe **it will help us fall more deeply in love with Jesus**. I think one of the best definitions of a Christian is, “Someone who is in love with Jesus” (and who demonstrates that love through obedience to His commands).

The most convincing evangelists are the ones who love that which they are commending. When love is what motivates a person to share their faith in Jesus, it is incredibly difficult to deny that what is being shared is something good. Guilt is never a lasting and successful motivator for sharing. Love is an attractive and natural motivator for sharing that which you already know and enjoy. We will not guilty people into the kingdom, but we can love them into the kingdom.

The gospel of John was written by “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”² There existed a special relationship of love between Jesus and John. That intimacy is evident throughout the entire gospel. John portrays Jesus not merely as the strong Savior of the world, but also as the “Lamb of God who takes away sin” by willingly laying down His life for those friends whom He loved.

Love is uniquely present in this gospel and it will be impossible for us to remain unaffected by this fact. I believe this gospel so displays the glory of Jesus that your (and my) love for Jesus will explode in growth.

Will you join us on a journey through the gospel of John? Will you consider inviting some of your friends to join us who aren’t yet convinced about Jesus? Would you expect that the Lord will bless our time by strengthening your ability to reason about your faith? And will you ask the Lord to enlarge your heart that you might fall more deeply in love with Jesus?

An Invitation

Now, as we turn to the text before us this morning, I would like to extend an invitation to you to consider your involvement in a small group. Our desire is that all of you participate in a small group.

Hebrews 3:12-13 (ESV)

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Three questions will help us get to the point of these two sentences. The point is this, **experiencing regular and consistent fellowship with other believers is one of the necessary means by which God has ordained that faith be safeguarded against apostasy**. Apostasy³ (Gk. *apostēnai*) is turning away from God “in deliberate and persistent rebellion.”⁴

² See John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20; cf. 21:24–25.

³ Kenneth Wuest defines apostasy “as the act of someone who has previously subscribed to a certain belief, and who now renounces his former professed belief in favor of some other which is diametrically opposed to what he believed before. In other words, his new belief is not merely a new system of faith, but one which at every point negates his former belief.” See Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Heb 3:12.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Heb 3:7–4:13.

Let me restate the main point another way, **one of the ways that God has ordained that you keep your faith and not loose it, is through constant exhortation from and fellowship with other believers.** In a word, *getting safely into heaven is a group effort.*

Three questions will help us see this.

1. To whom is the author speaking?
2. Against what danger is he warning?
3. What remedy is he prescribing?

To Whom Is He Speaking?

The first question is, “To whom is the author speaking?” Verse 12 indicates the author is speaking “brothers.” The Greek word is *adelphoi* (ἀδελφοί) and it refers to,

“... a group of persons having a well-defined membership (in the NT ἀδελφός refers specifically to fellow believers in Christ)—‘fellow believer, (Christian) brother.’ The masculine form ἀδελφός may include both men and women.”⁵

The author, then is writing to a community (including men and women) of Jewish Christians. We know they were Jewish because in the previous five verses (vs. 7-11) he briefly recounts a particular episode of rebellion from the story of Israel’s wilderness wandering. These 6 verses are a quote of Psalm 95:7-11 and he obviously expected them to know and understand their own history (to which he was referring).

We know they are Christians because he mentions the gospel of Jesus in the first two chapters and says, in chapter 2 verses 1 and 3,

Hebrews 2:1, 3 (ESV)

1 *Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*

3 *How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard...*

Note the several uses of “we” and “us.” He personally knew those to whom he was writing for he had been with them when they received the gospel and apparently together they had believed. So *the author is writing to a community of believers in Jesus with whom he is personally acquainted.*

Furthermore, he has them **all** in mind. His concern for them extends to them *all* of them. He says in verse 12 that they all should “*Take care..., lest there be an evil heart in **any of you!***” Then in verse 13 he says, “*I want **none of you** to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*” He has in mind **all** of his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters who have professed faith in Jesus. These are the ones to whom he is writing.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

Against What Danger Is He Warning Them?

The second question is, “Against what danger is warning them?” If we combine what is said in both verses (12-13), we will have our answer. We can condense it down into one sentence. **He is warning them against having an evil, unbelieving heart that becomes hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and thus falls away** (or “turns away”) **from the living God.**

An Evil Heart

Let’s examine a couple of these words that will elucidate the warning. The word translated “evil” is *poneros* (πονηρός) and it means,

“...evil in active opposition to the good. When Satan is spoken of as the evil one, the word used is *poneros* (πονηρός). The *poneros* (πονηρός) man [is corrupt and] is not content unless he is corrupting others as well, and dragging them down into the same destruction with himself. The English word which best translates this Greek word is “pernicious.”⁶

Pernicious, of course, means having an “evil, corrupt, or destructive effect [on another] through gradual or subtle means which causes irreparable harm.”⁷ So the kind of **evil heart** being spoken of here is one in active rebellion against God. This kind of evil heart is not haphazardly or accidentally wandering away from the Lord, this evil heart is actively turning away from God with a deliberate and willful intention. This evil heart sees God, then says, “No way! I am not going toward Him. I don’t like what I see of Him so I will turn around and go the other way.”

An Unbelieving Heart

This evil heart is an **unbelieving** heart. This unbelief describes a *refusal* to have faith. All unbelief is evil. The heart that persists in unbelief and continues to refuse to believe the truth of God, as seen in Christ, is a heart that leads **away from the living God.**

The word translated “fall away,” (ESV, NAS) or “turn away” (NIV) or “departing” (KJV) “...is *aphistemi* (ἀφίστεμι) which is made up of *apo* (ἀπο) “off,” and *histemi* (ἵστεμι) “to stand,” the compound word meaning “to stand off from.”⁸ We might say, “to stand aloof from,” i.e. to stand aloof from God. This is the result of an unbelieving heart—it increases the distance from God, it separates us from God. This evil, unbelieving heart is never content to draw near to the Lord but is more comfortable moving away from Him.

The Hardening Effect of Deceitful Sin

The author says that **sin is deceitful** and it has a **hardening** effect on the heart. Sin always promises more than it can deliver. Sin promises lasting pleasure, but only delivers disappointingly brief pleasure. Sin promises life, but delivers death. Sin promises joy, but eventually only delivers sorrow in the end. Sin promises happiness, but ultimately only delivers sadness. Sin never delivers what it promises because it is **deceitful** and a heart that has been often deceived is a heart that will soon be irreparably hardened.

⁶ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Heb 3:12.

⁷ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

⁸ Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader*, Heb 3:12.

If These Are Believers, Why Warn Them Against Unbelief?

You might be wondering, “If the author is writing to a community of Jewish Christians, then how can he expect to find such evil, unbelieving hearts? If these are believers, then why is he warning them against unbelief?”

Every community of believers is a mixed community. In every community of faith there will always be those who have faith and those who do not. (At least there ought to be and we pray that there always will be.) There will always be people who are investigating and testing to see if Jesus is really who He claimed to be (i.e. Messiah, the Son of the living God!).

And there will always be people hanging around who just want to enjoy the benefits of being near God’s people. One of the benefits is that food is often the centerpiece of gatherings. For example, we have lots of picnics. Some people just come for the food. This was true in Jesus’ day and it is true in our day.

One day after feeding the crowds there were some people who were looking for Jesus. When they found Him, Jesus said to them,

John 6:26 (ESV)

26 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

27 Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”

It’s OK if it’s the food that got you here. But hear this warning—do not continue disbelieving. Do not remain in unbelief. If you come into the community of believers in Jesus and begin to sense that all this talk about Jesus is true, then do not go on in unbelief. If you do, if you continue in the evil sin of unbelief, then your heart will grow progressively harder and harder toward God and we do not want this to happen!

So what are we to do? How are we to avoid this dangerous, evil, unbelieving, hard heart?

What Remedy Is He Prescribing?

The third question is, “What remedy is he prescribing?” The prescription is two-fold; it involves **taking care**, which is **individual vigilance** and **constant exhortation**, which is **corporate vigilance**.

Individual Vigilance

The word translated “take care,” in verse 12, is *blepete* (βλεπετε) and the grammatical construction in Greek means, “Be seeing to it constantly, keep a watchful eye ever open.”⁹ This is a call to individual vigilance. This is the call of Proverbs 4:23.

Proverbs 4:23 (ESV)

23 Keep (or “watch over”) your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

You must “take care, be on guard, be ever watchful” over your heart. You must constantly be asking yourself, “Is my heart in the right place? Am I drawing closer to the Lord? Or am I running from Him?”

⁹ Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader*, Heb 3:12.

Is my heart tender toward Him? Or is my heart growing hard toward Him? Am I fighting against the deceitfulness of sin? Or have I given up the fight by attempting to justify my sin? Am I believing the promises of God? Or am I growing comfortable with continuing in a condition of unbelief? Individually we must be actively “taking care” to fight against all unbelief. Individual vigilance is required.

Corporate Vigilance

However, the problem is that sin is subtly deceitful. This means that I’m not always able to be as aware of my own sin as I need to be and so I need help. This leads us to part two of the prescription.

Hebrews 3:13 (ESV)

13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The word “exhort” is *parakaleo* (παρακαλεο), made up of *kaleo* (καλεο) “to call” and *para* (παρα) which is used here to intensify the meaning of the verb.”¹⁰ Adding *para* to *kaleo* renders a meaning something like, “to call aloud” or “to urgently call in a loud voice.” From this we have our word, “exhort,” which means “to beg, entreat, beseech, or strongly encourage.”

We are to “exhort one another.” We are to strongly encourage one another not to be deceived by the subtleties of sin. We are to “call aloud” to one another with pleading, beseeching words. We are to beg each other not to turn away from God by embracing sin. We are to warn each other when we see someone stumbling or running into sin.

And when are we to do this? We are to do this “every day, as long as it is called today.” We need this kind of urgent, pleading, encouragement to keep away from sin **every day**. Not a day goes by that we are not in need of some exhortation to stay near to God and away from sin.

For how long should we continue this urging and pleading? Answer: “as long as it is called ‘today!’” This is great. We call today, today! So we need this encouragement today! When we wake up tomorrow, what will we refer to that day as? Answer: we will call it “today!” We will need this urgent, pleading, encouraging, exhortation then as well. And we will go on needing this kind of exhortation for as long as today is called today.

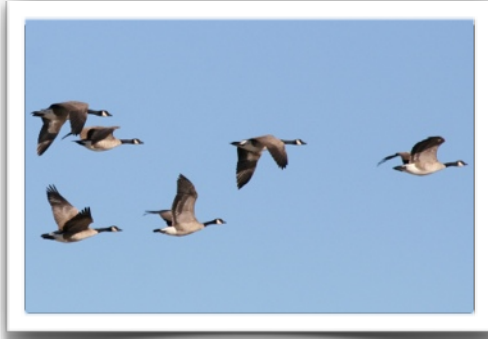
The point is there is never a time that we do NOT need to be encouraged and exhorted to stay away from the deceitfulness of sin and remain near to our loving Lord. We need to be reminded every day that sin is deceitful and it results in hard hearts. We need to be exhorted and encouraged every day to keep the faith and fight against unbelief. We need these reminders every day. **These exhortations are among the necessary means ordained by God to keep us in the faith and avoid turning away from the living God.**

So how will we here at Hope do this? How will we facilitate these kinds of exhortations? The best answer we have is by providing small groups. Small groups is the best way we know of to provide the kind of loving context for these kinds of conversations and exhortations to take place. In order for people to be consistently involved in our lives so that we can even see when the deceitfulness of

¹⁰ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Heb 3:13.

sin is slipping in, we need to be in regular fellowship with one another. Small groups provide this kind of regular and consistent involvement in one another's lives.

God did not intend for His children to live the Christian life all alone. He intends for us to live our lives in community with one another. It is good to be in a small group community. Every one knows this. Even animals know this.



One of the peculiarities of life in New England is the abundant supply of Canadian Geese. When I first moved here, I was utterly amazed at how many there were. They're everywhere! And they are never alone. If you see one, then you see a dozen. Canadian Geese know that it is good to be in a small group community. They never fly alone. They are always in formation with other geese.

Who are you in formation with? Who are you in a small group community with? Who have you given permission to help you take care of your heart? Who have you specifically granted permission to help you remain alert to the subtle hardening of sin? Who will help you avoid the deceitfulness of sin?

If you are not in some small group in some form or other where speaking into each others lives is encouraged and embraced, then I can't see how this passage can be obeyed. Don't leave today without taking steps to change this. Pick up a small group booklet and look at which small groups are available and join one.

Exhort one another every day, because getting safely to heaven is a group effort.