

Hebrews 3:12-19

Taking Heed Against Unbelief

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief – v. 12

The phrase *take heed* warns us that we need to be careful or to be on our guard – to watch for something that could happen to you if you're not careful. It's a little bit like a tornado warning. If you hear the warning siren and you don't take heed to it by taking cover in your basement or some other form of shelter you run the risk of being injured or worse when the tornado strikes your home. The tornado warning, just like the warning in our text is a call for watchfulness. When I hear that warning siren I might not immediately go down to the basement of the house but I will, at the very least, turn on a local weather broadcast so I can track where tornado sightings have been made and see on the Doppler radar how severe the storm will be and how long it will last and what pathway the storm is taking. This is all a part of being watchful.

Our text, therefore, is calling for that same kind watchfulness but in the spiritual realm. It's interesting to note in the New Testament just how many ways this exhortation is applied.

- Mt 6:1 *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.*
- Mt 16:6 *Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*
- Christ tells us to take heed what we hear in Mk. 4:24 and take heed how we hear in Lk. 8:18.

We're further warned by Christ to take heed that we be not deceived (Lk. 21:8). As Christians we're to take heed how we use our liberty so that we don't put a stumbling block before a weaker brother (1Cor. 8:9). We're also told that when we're tempted to think that we stand we should take heed lest we fall (1Cor. 10:12).

We could add more to the list – we're to take heed that we don't be consumed by each other when we take to biting and devouring each other (Gal. 5:15). And as Paul writes to Timothy in 1Tim. 4:16 *Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.*

In Heb. 3:12 this is the only place where we find such a phrase in this epistle and I think you'll agree with me that it's a very serious and solemn warning – *Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.*

Guard yourself against unbelief – that's what the apostle is saying. Be aware of your vulnerability to this awful condition and the dreadful consequences that follow. I think you can see how this exhortation pairs itself with the statements we looked at in our last study. Last week we looked at that phrase *holding fast. But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto*

the end (v. 6). For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end (v. 14).

In fortifying ourselves with grace so that we can remain faithful to Christ I think the phrase *hold fast* approaches the issue from a positive point of view and the warning to *take heed* approaches the same issue from a negative point of view. The two ideas working together will certainly help us to persevere in our faith especially during times of trials and testings. So we're to hold fast to Christ and we're to take heed.

And we come today to consider this exhortation to take heed. And as the text clearly indicates – the thing we're to take heed against is unbelief. *Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.* We see this matter of unbelief emphasized in the last two verses of the chapter. Heb 3:18 *And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?* Heb 3:19 *So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.* This is where we must be watchful, therefore. This is where we must guard ourselves and fortify ourselves and not be so proud and foolish as to think that we're not vulnerable to this very thing. The moment we think that we're invincible in our faith is the moment we set ourselves up to fall.

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.

I would like to analyze this warning this warning in order to equip you to follow it. How do we take heed against unbelief? Consider first of all that:

I. We Must Realize the Nature of Unbelief

It's an internal issue – an issue of the heart. Notice how Paul identifies that internal issue when he says *take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.* Unbelief, then, is a matter of the heart. It's something that strikes at and springs from the very core of our being. We know this, of course, in our own experience. Faith is the thing that we often times find hard. Under certain sets of circumstances we find it challenging to exercise faith and we reveal the heart tendency toward unbelief.

When the disciples crossed the stormy sea and thought that they would surely sink, it became hard for them to exercise faith in Christ. *Carest thou not that we perish?* – they asked Christ. And when Christ arose and stilled the storm He marveled at them as much as they marveled at Him. They marveled at His power to still the storm. He marveled at their unbelief. *How is it that ye have no faith?* He asks in Mk. 4:40.

When He went into His own country, in Mark 6, we read in vv. 2,3 how when He taught in the synagogue *many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him.*

They were offended at him because they didn't believe in Him and so a few verses later we read in v. 6 that Jesus marveled at their unbelief. It seems that He did less in His own city than He did anywhere else because unbelief in His hometown was so strong.

We tend to view unbelief as the norm don't we? We marvel when we hear of great exploits of faith. We never marvel at unbelief. Who hasn't heard the story of George Mueller's orphanage and learned how he proved the Lord time and time again in humanly impossible circumstances – how he had all the children seated at the dinner table with nothing to give them and then the answer to his prayers would come in that very moment through some unusual providence? Such stories lead us to marvel.

Faith seems to be the exception and unbelief seems to be the norm and the reason it's the norm is because the unregenerate heart knows nothing but unbelief. A rebellious heart refuses to believe. I heard on the radio the other day an interview with a preacher who was sponsoring some sort of seminar on creation. *Come to this seminar* he said *and I will prove to you that God is the Creator and that Creation is true rather than evolution.*

I'm not against such seminars but I couldn't help but wonder if that preacher knew that any unsaved sinners that would come to his seminar would need something deeper than intellectual persuasion. Sinners, you see, know the truth of God and know the truth of God's creation. The problem is not an intellectual problem it's a spiritual problem and the need is for hearts to be regenerated and thus be delivered from unbelief. God can certainly use such seminars in order to effect regeneration especially as the word of God is preached and taught. But the evidence of creation, in and of itself, won't persuade the sinner. Unbelief, you see, is too steeply entrenched in the heart.

But would you notice how the nature of unbelief is described morally in our text. It's not only an internal matter of the soul but it's also a moral issue and so Paul writes *take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.* Unbelief may be the norm but the fact that it is the norm doesn't make it right or good. Paul identifies it as evil.

The simple truth of the matter is that we should believe in God and in Christ and we should believe the gospel of Christ. Unbelief, you see, in any and every manifestation of it is sin. Unbelievers, in Rev. 21:8 are categorized with the worst of sinners. So we read in that verse: *But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*

Do you see how unbelievers are classified with murderers and whoremongers and liars? Let's not ever make the mistake of playing down unbelief and treating it as if it were excusable. We ought to believe the truth. God expects us to believe in His Son. Unbelief is an evil propensity of the heart and if we would take heed against it then we must dread it the way we would dread the plague.

This dread becomes all the more easier for us when we see next:

II. The Cost of Unbelief

Paul resorts to a history lesson in this chapter. It's the history of the Israelites in the wilderness. Unbelief had such a hold on them in the wilderness in spite of all they had seen God do for them. They saw the plagues unleashed upon the Egyptians while they themselves were protected. They saw the Red Sea opened for them so they could cross the sea on dry land. They saw the Egyptian army destroyed. They saw each day God's provision for them in the manna that God gave them.

But when the time came for them to conquer Canaan their unbelief got the best of them. You know the story – I've referred to it on occasion. The report came from the 12 spies that the land was a good land that flowed with milk and honey but the people of the land were strong and cities were walled. Giants lived there – the sons of Anak who made 10 of the 12 spies appear as mere grasshoppers in comparison.

Let us go up at once, and possess it Caleb says in Num. 13:30 *for we are well able to overcome it.* But the voice of the majority says in the next verse *we are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.*

And in the dispute that followed between faith and unbelief Joshua and Caleb bring the issue into very sharp focus when they say in 14:8 *If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us: a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us; their defense is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not.*

Do you see the key issue where faith needed to focus? *If the LORD delight in us* – that's what Joshua and Caleb said. There probably wasn't anybody among the spies that the Lord could work miracles in Canaan the same way He had worked miracles in Egypt. But does the Lord delight in us?

I believe that the strongest leverage unbelief gains over the people of God comes through the consideration of that very question. We know the Lord can do anything. We know the Lord is all powerful. We know the Lord can work miracles. But does the Lord delight in us? Should the Lord delight in us? It's certainly not hard to build a case against ourselves on this question. Why would the Lord delight in us? We know that we sin and come short of His glory. We know that we constantly fail to live up to the standard of His law. We know that we really couldn't blame God dealing harshly with us so how can we believe that God delights in us?

In the case of the Israelites they were absolutely convinced that there was no way they could conquer Canaan and the very suggestion that they could, if God delighted in them, so provoked their anger that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb with stones. And that day became a day of infamy. It's referred to in our text as the provocation. Heb 3:15 *While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.*

And that provocation cost them the blessing of God. You might argue that it cost them God's delight and led to God being grieved with them. And why? The last verse of the chapter tells us Heb 3:19 *So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*

Do you begin to see that there is a price to pay for unbelief? In the case of the Israelites it cost them the promised land. But it went even further and so will it go even further with us in terms of what it cost us. Note again the words of our text – Heb 3:12 *Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.*

Faith brings us nigh to God – unbelief leads us away from God. We depart from the living God through unbelief. We lose not only the blessing that God would have for us but we lose God Himself. I emphasized in our study last week that phrase *the living God*. There are many people, you know, that profess to be Christians that follow some form of religion – that show up in church once a week but who nevertheless couldn't really be said to exercise faith. They more or less go through the motions of religion but their religion doesn't have any real vitality to it. Faith, you see, brings us to the living God and faith enables us to walk with Christ and follow Christ. Unbelief leaves a man with dead religion because unbelief leads one away from the living God.

So there is a price – a very high price that must be paid when unbelief holds sway. We forfeit the blessing of God and we forfeit the presence of God and we're left in the wilderness of this world to expire and if unbelief continues to hold sway over our souls then we demonstrate in the end that we never really were the children of Christ to begin with.

What dread should fill our souls, then, when we contemplate the awful cost of unbelief. Like the distressed Father that Christ encountered who sought healing for his demon possessed son, we should cry out *Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief*. We must, therefore, engage in the spiritual warfare that is necessary to overcome unbelief. We must never become indifferent to the issue. We must be on our guard. We must recognize our vulnerability. We must, in other words, *take heed*. The cost is too high not to take heed. The consequences are too dreadful not to take heed against unbelief.

It's an issue of the heart – it's a moral issue and the well being of our souls is at stake. William Gouge lists a number of the damages of unbelief. He says:

- Unbelief hardens men's hearts against means afforded for their good.
- It keeps them from being established in the way of God
- It makes them reject those whom God sends.
- It takes away the profit of God's word
- It perverts the plainest manner of teaching
- It makes miracles not to be regarded
- It enrages men's minds against the truth
- It makes men unfit to call on God.

May we take the exhortation to heart, then, by being on guard against this dreadful sin of unbelief. It remains for us to consider:

III. The Action Required on Our Part in Taking Heed against Unbelief

In a sense you might say that I'm treating this point out of sequence in our study. I might have done better to preach this sermon last week and then do last weeks study today. And the reason I say that is because the antidote to unbelief is holding fast – holding fast to Christ. Heb 3:6 *But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.* Heb 3:14 *For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end;*

William Gouge is helpful on this point also. He lists a number of practical guidelines under the heading *Of preventing and redressing unbelief.*

1. Use all means to get, prove, preserve, and exercise faith. As life keeps out or drives out death, and light darkness, and heat cold, so faith keeps out or drives out unbelief. There is a spiritual fitness behind faith much the same as physical fitness effects the body. You won't become physically fit by merely reading books on the subject – you have to exercise. So in the spiritual realm we must exercise faith – conscious acts of faith.
2. Set God always before thee, and frequently and seriously meditate on God's presence, providence, power, truth, mercy, and other like excellencies. Due meditation on these is a singular antidote against unbelief.
3. Give good entertainment to the Holy Spirit of God; stir up and cherish the good motions thereof. Hereby they spirit will be quickened and revived and it will not continue under the dumpishness of unbelief.
4. Do not willfully and obstinately stand against any good counsel given, or duty required, or direction prescribed, as the Egyptians did. As willfulness and obstinacy are joined with unbelief, so they do increase and aggravate it.
5. When you find your heart dull, heavy, doubting, and distrustful, use your judgment and understanding and thereby reason and discourse with your stubborn will and say, as David did in psalm 42:5,11 *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? Why art thou so stubborn, O my will? Why dost thou not believe? Hath God said this and that? Is He not true and faithful? Is He not able to make good His word?*

What this last point amounts to is preaching to yourself. A Christian needs to learn to preach to Himself. Lloyd-Jones makes much of this point in his book *Spiritual Depression*. He points out that David is talking to himself in Psalm 42. He does the same thing in Ps. 103 but there he says *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.* Lloyd-Jones draws an interesting distinction between talking to yourself and listening to yourself.

The person who listens to himself becomes the passive recipient of whatever foreboding thoughts fill his mind and sound off there. The person who talks to himself takes the matter in hand and girds himself to rebuke his unbelief and sluggish heart and to bring himself to faith in his resolve to bless the Lord.

There's a text in Zechariah that I sometimes utilize when it comes to specific areas where unbelief seems to reign strong in my life. Zec 4:7 we read: *Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it.*

Can't we use this text to preach to ourselves against unbelief? Who art thou, O great mountain of unbelief? Lord reduce this mountain to a plain – yea, bury this mountain and bring forth the headstone thereof and do it, Lord by thy grace. I plead thy grace against this mountain of unbelief and I pray that by thy grace thou wilt not only forgive me of the heinous sin of unbelief, but give me victory over it. The double emphasis by the repeated word *grace* and the fact that it is with shoutings that we plead grace, grace unto it makes this verse a good one to preach to yourself with regard to whatever mountains are before you.

And don't we know that victory comes through grace and that grace reigns through Christ and that grace, in the end, will forgive and restrain and conquer unbelief. May the Lord, then, give us victory over this sin. May we appreciate the heinous nature of this sin. May we never reach the place where we become complacent to this sin and come more or less to accept it because we find it so common.

This sin costs us too much to take it lightly and besides that it's an affront to God. May we instead hold fast to Christ and utilize the means of grace to tend to our faith. May we take the matter to heart and in hand rather than do what so many in our day have come to do which is to yield to the spiritual apathy and sluggishness and treat the absence of spiritual vitality as a thing of little consequence.

Oh brothers and sisters in Christ – if you know nothing of that spiritual vitality that you once knew it's because unbelief has led you to depart from the living God. Take heed to yourselves, therefore, so that if you've departed you may return to the living God and if you have not departed take heed lest you depart from the living God through the deceitfulness of sin.

May the Lord stamp this word of warning on our hearts and may we indeed take it to heart that we may go on with Christ rather than depart from Him.