

Before the Lord

Hebrews 4:8-13

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So this morning as we return again to the Book of Hebrews, the fourth chapter, I'm very aware that what we are doing in this particular chapter is we've broken it up in such a way that each week is, in some sense, very much an extension of the previous week. It's not because we're trying to beat a dead horse, as it were. But it is the reality that chapter four is central to the core themes of this book to the Hebrews. And what happens here in chapter four will continue to be themes that will be unpacked for the remainder of the entire book. And so making sure that we hear it in its most robust sense, we've broken it up over several sermons.

So with that in mind, I want you to be aware that in the passage which I'll be reading this morning, we'll be covering some ground that I covered last week. So I'll be covering the first point rather quickly to get us to really what he is driving us towards, what he is calling us to. And in fact, what he is doing is he is reminding us that we all live—all, whether those who profess faith or those who do not—the Scriptures clearly teach that we all live and move before God and under his gaze.

The question is, how do we grapple with that reality? How do we process that truth and keep us from either legalism or self-condemnation or rejection of the Lord? He's calling us to come before the Lord, because it is the Lord who gives us grace to walk with him, to walk before him, and to experience and receive the gifts that he gives. He's calling us deeper yet. And then next week, we will hear Pastor Song as he takes us to Christ as our high priest. What a rich, rich book we have before us. Hebrews 4:8-13. Hear now God's Word.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you again pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would help us to go deeper yet in the richness of your Word. But in the richness of your Word, may your Holy Spirit bring the light of truth, instructing our minds and reshaping the loves of our hearts, that as we live before you we would do so reminded that it is only by the grace of Christ, and nothing in ourselves. But that before you, there is grace and new life. Help us to hear it. Help us to understand it. And by your Spirit and grace, help us to live it out. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So you see in your outline as we look at this passage together, we're going to look at first the anticipating of the rest that we are given and promised from the Lord. We are also called to be people of striving—striving to walk in obedience with Christ. Finally, standing—that we are standing before the Lord. Do we recognize that we are standing before the Lord? And what does that do to us? Your

understanding of the gospel is reflected in how you understand your standing before him. We'll get to that in a few moments. So anticipating, striving, standing.

So anticipating. Verses eight and following—eight through ten, rather—give us what we're called to anticipate. And what he's doing is he is going back, and the preacher of Hebrews is doing what we call biblical theology. On the one hand, if you go back to the Old Testament details of Israel awaiting its entrance into the promised land, we would perhaps come to the understanding of the conclusion that the rest that is only being talked about there is rest finding its place in Canaan. And as I said the last two weeks, what is very clear from this passage and as you continue to read through the Old Testament—that what is being promised in Canaan is a very real rest. A rest from being attacked by their enemies. Rest from having to wander in the wilderness, and having plenty of food and a place to grow their families. But there is a spiritual rest. There is a place where they understand that the land is a reflection of the salvation and redemption of our heavenly God.

But what is clear from the preacher of Hebrews is some misunderstood Canaan as being the only place of rest, which is why he goes through the repetition of saying in verses eight through nine, "Wait a second." Yes, they were promised to rest, but it wasn't Joshua who was giving it to them, even though Joshua led them into the Promised Land." It wasn't Moses, even though he was intended to be the leader and was replaced by Joshua. But God, in fact, spoke of another day. And we've looked at the last couple of weeks that that other day is the final restoration of all things when Christ comes again at the final resurrection, and when he will judge the living and the dead. And all those who are found to be with the Lord, their bodies will be raised and united with their spirits, and we will live with the Lord on a renewed earth and a renewed heaven. And those who do not believe, yet who continue in unbelief and rejection of the Lord, as this Scripture teaches and the rest of the Bible teaches, they will go into eternal separation from God in judgment, which the Bible calls hell. So he's saying to them—he's reminding them that God has spoken of this final rest.

Now, one of the things we looked at the last couple of weeks is also that we who have called on the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and profess him as believers have already begun to enter that rest. But it's not finally done. We've only begun. So there's an already of experiencing the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. Forgiveness of sins, being reunited in a wonderful relationship vertically with our Heavenly Father, experiencing the presence and gift of the Holy Spirit—and we have the power to walk with him. That means we've already begun to enter into the rest. Yet we have not completely made it. There is a not yet. And that "not yet" is the final consummation, the final picture, the final union, the final great marriage feast with Christ the lamb on a renewed heaven and a renewed earth.

So we still have plenty of anticipation. We still have lots of anticipating yet to do—longing. But a longing that is filled with hope if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you are not, the Lord is inviting you into this relationship with him, inviting you into this living hope in looking to the final restoration of all things. And so he says in verse nine, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." So there is an "already," but there's lots of "not yet" in that one verse.

But what is being pointed to is that God has rested from his works. You remember we looked at Genesis 2, where it says, "On the seventh day, God rested from his works." And he remains in that rest. Because at the conclusion of that description in chapter two of Genesis, it doesn't say, "There was evening and there was morning, the seventh day," because we're meant to pick up on the reality that God is in his eternal rest. That doesn't mean he doesn't still uphold things. He very much does. But God who is outside of time is holding all things in his hands. He has provided for us, and we are called to anticipate and to enter.

Now, he gives us a picture of what it means to enter into that rest. We call it Sabbath. We call it the Lord's day. And what we do on the Lord's day, on Sundays, we gather together for worship as God's

corporate people. Those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ gather together. We sing. We pray. We have coffee, food—yes, that’s worthy to laugh at. Coffee is a gift—or tea, whatever your deal is—or nothing at all, water, whatever it may be. So every sip, every word of encouragement, every smile, every opportunity, someone puts their arm around you and you’re in need of prayer—when we gather together, whatever encouragement you receive from being gathered together as God’s people, and when you go home, you’re called and encouraged to seek to rest from your vocation the rest of the week and find a place where you can rest. Why? That’s intended not by the law. It’s intended by creation. For Sabbath was a gift to man. So it is an encouragement that we seek to rest from our vocational work, to worship together, to praise God, to enjoy the benefits that are ours in him horizontally from one another and vertically from him through the gift of his Holy Spirit. And when we do, what we’re experiencing is Sabbath rest.

But this word in this couple of verses, in verse 9, “Sabbath,” is the only place where this word is used. Some would even suggest the preacher made it up. Because it is translated for us “Sabbath,” but it is far more than what we understand as Sabbath. It definitely includes this day, but it is far more. And that’s what he is talking about in verse 10. “For whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.” It is talking about eternal, final, restorative, redemptive rest. So all of our working is a good thing, but we’re not working to get to that rest. Our working is a gift from God to provide for us so that we can rest. Which is why, to a people who are busier than, well, lots of other people—all of us are busy, which is why I try to say I’m not busy.

Because everybody’s busy. We’re all fractured. We’re all distracted. We need a time where we can rest. It’s not that we don’t work. We’re working a lot. And that work looks like a lot of different things. But our resting together in worship, our resting together from our work, enables us to work even in more disciplined ways. It helps us to work with greater purpose. We rest because it’s a gift. But it is a gift that is not yet fully realized and will come. There is a day when the Lord will return, when all things will be made right. Amen? That is our anticipation. And when we work Monday through Saturday, whether it is at home or from home or a café or an office—regardless of what we do, as we looked at in a Sunday school class in January—the work that we seek to do which God calls good is working towards that final day of rest. Because the work that we do here which God calls good will endure. And when we do it in his name, we do it by thanksgiving of his gifts, it will endure. The Lord will bring about good things from our work. It will not return to us in vain.

So, moving forward. That is the anticipating. But he says in verse 11, “Let us therefore.” That is, because the rest is not yet fully realized. Because there is a final rest that we will experience if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 11, he says, “Therefore, in the meantime, during the not-yet, we are to continue to strive—to strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” What may seem as a contradiction is really not. So let’s look at this together.

When he uses the word *striving*, what does he mean? Well, remember it’s in the context of this chapter. We looked at last week and the week before the reality of the deceitfulness of sin. And one of the things we talked about is how we try to reason with sin, how sin tries to convince us that it’s really tempting us only to see the pleasure and never the downside of the consequences, how sin always tempts us to extract ourselves from the community of faith saying, “We’ve got this,” and we’re no longer in the Word. We seek to do it on our own, thinking that we can reason with sin if we allow just a little bit into our lives. It’s really not going to be that big of a problem. I mean, other people are doing it. In fact, it’s practiced and encouraged in our culture. Even some Christians practice it. I mean, we find all kinds of reasons.

The problem is, sin is crouching at our door. And Satan is prowling around like a lion, seeking whom he may devour. And as I said the previous weeks, we must repeat again—sin can never be reasoned with. It is a horrible dictator. It lies about the promises, but it only demonstrates the truth of the brokenness and consequences of sin once we have fallen to it. Guilt, self-condemnation, shame, and

separation is what we begin to feel. Sin is always sweet to the taste but bitter going down. So when he says, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest," that striving is to be aware of that we are inclined to reason with sin—that we must fight it. We must exert energy and discipline to walk in obedience. We must give ourselves to the Word, being reminded that the Word tells us how we ought to live, and to flee from those things which promise good things but in the end is only a thief.

And so we have to understand this striving. Yes, Christian, if you are a believer—we are called with all the energy that only God gives by his Spirit—we are called to exert discipline and work to walk in obedience. The question is, how do we understand this striving? Do we understand it from a self-justification standpoint or a spiritual nourishment standpoint? What do I mean? If we're not careful, when you hear the word *strive* or you hear me saying, "We ought to strive to flee disobedience and to walk in new obedience," what you might here is, *Well, I just need to do more, pray more, read the Bible more, come to church more, doggone it.* And we beat ourselves up.

But I want you to be aware that I'm making sure you understand—I'm not calling any of us to any sorts of legalism. Because legalism in our day is very fashionable. What do I mean? First, if you are accustomed to or given to old-line conservatism—that is, the old conservative sort of Bible-belt, like what I grew up in—you understand legalism to be, you know, you don't go to bad movies. You don't listen to bad music. You don't dance. You don't smoke. And you don't hang out with people who do. Now, I recognize that's sort of reductionistic, but that's what I thought it was. And so we try to avoid. Some might think that it's that—so just be really good.

There's also an old-school liberal legalism. An old-school liberalism that rejects the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, but nonetheless calls people to all forms of legalism. That is, *give more, march more, care more.* Be for justice and righteousness. Feed the poor and seek to educate. Stand for just and righteous causes. In and of themselves, those are not bad things. But if anyone thinks that churches which reject the gospel and are simply teaching a new form of righteousness are as immersed in legalism as the old school Bible-belt, we are deceived. There are many churches today, many, who still preach, yet we don't need to—we don't need all this "Jesus is the only way, the life, and the truth." But they are very much calling us to a way of legalism and a righteousness just like everything else used to. It's just a different form.

But what he's calling us to here is not self-justification by way of old-school conservatism or old-school liberalism. But nor is it calling us to what some would call, if you will, a new form of legalism. And it's within the evangelical church. And this oftentimes is a message preached at young people, that you can have lives of impact for Jesus. Give your lives to service with Jesus. And there's all forms of these things. There are conferences, seminars, where you can learn how to live a life of impact for Jesus. And on the surface, it sounds really good. The problem is, it's just another form of legalism. Because it's not up to me whether I have a life of impact. It's up to the Lord. What we are called to is a daily yet quiet, not self-referential, but glorifying giving of ourselves to him. The rest is up to him.

If he wants your life impact to be becoming the president of an organization that is transforming the world, praise be to God. But if what he wants you to do is to live at the end of a cul-de-sac with you and your family, going to the local school, enjoying relationships just on your cul-de-sac, and you're helping to encourage others representing Christ, being faithful to say, "We trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and his grace alone"—if that's your impact, praise be to God. Because God is not wowed by our visions of world impact. Great, if that's what he wants to do. But what matters to him is day-in, day-out quiet in saying, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. By your grace and by your Spirit, help me to be a good parent today. Help me to be a good employee today, not back-biting, not operating in the culture of gossip in my office place, not stabbing others in the back so I can get ahead. No, help me to walk in quiet, steady obedience by your grace. The rest is yours."

So he's not calling us to self-justification, but he is calling us to spiritual nourishment. When he says for us to strive, fighting against the presence of sin—even though we're not slaves to sin, if you are a believer, the presence of sin is very much there. We are to strive to fight against the presence of sin, and we seek to walk in him in love. As Jesus said to the great question to him, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus responded in Matthew 22, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." We, as a result of God's grace and Christ's redemption in our lives, we seek to do what we do out of love for him, a love for others, and, yes, a love for ourselves.

So if you see the word *striving* or if you hear my words that we are to strive to fight against disobedience and to walk in obedience, if what you're hearing is legalism or if you find yourself condemning yourself, or if, when I mentioned a couple of weeks ago about how we reason with sin, and if your response—because I know some of you did this—if your response was, *Man, I was, like, boom—that's like a ton of bricks. I'm know I'm just so horrible.* You know who you are. If that's what you felt or if that's what you thought, that's not the gospel.

Striving to walk with him is never about self-condemnation. It is about recognizing that our God of grace calls us, empowers us to strive and to walk with him not by beating ourselves up, not by resting on our own strength, our own selves and giftedness, but alone by the grace that he has given. Because it is his grace that saves us. It is his grace that shows us the path of obedience. It is his grace that is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the only power that you and I have that we are able to walk in faithfulness with Christ.

The only way I can to go before the Lord continually, confessing my own self-dependence, is only by the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. The only way that I can pastor this church or you can do the work that you do is not by the sum of the total of our gifts, ever. It is alone by coming to him on our knees, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. May your grace be strong in my weakness." Let me give a testimony of what I mean. This is not self-condemnation. This is not self-justification.

Yesterday afternoon, as I was texting back and forth with Pastor Flora about something completely unrelated and we were just sharing a little bit, he said, "Will you pray for me this afternoon?" It was 3:45. He said, "Will you pray with me this afternoon? Because at 4:30, I have to conduct a service, a wedding service." And he couldn't wait. It was going to be wonderful. Now, I've known Tim Flora for seven years. Strong, robust. He's done many services like this. For him to say to me, "Will you pray for me that I would have the strength to conduct this service?" is a recognition of his weakness and God's grace. Never, ever in his finest moment of health or yours or mine did we do anything under our own strength. It is alone by the Lord's grace and his Spirit that we strive. And strive we must.

So Christian, I say to you, where is sin still present? Have you given up? Have you given in? Or by God's grace, can you not be renewed this day by his Spirit to strive against the presence of that sin? To say *no* to ungodliness? And by God's spirit and his grace, empowering grace, to say, "To love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love my neighbor as I love myself, not because I'm self-indulgent, but because Christ died and he says he did so because God so loved the world." Do not condemn that which God loves, and he loves you. Do not condemn that which God loves, the one you're having a hard time forgiving. We do so alone by God's grace, empowered by his Spirit. Strive. And in so doing, by his grace, we are getting ever closer to that final rest which is promised.

Now, I need to finish, so I'll finish with this. The final point is standing. You see in verse 12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight." Now, these verses have been used by some to try to convince us that we have all these different parts of our body, and it's some special meaning—that's not the point of the text. The point of the text is simply to say that when we are before the truth of God, everything is exposed.

That's how powerful the Word of God is. And so we stand. We stand before the watchful eye of a holy God. Do you know that when you stand before the watchful eye of a holy God, what is your sense of that standing? Who do you believe God the Father to be?

This has been powerfully demonstrated recently in a film, *The Big Sick*, a 2017 film. It's the somewhat-fictionalized story but yet patterning a true story of Kumail Nanjiani, who's a comedian. And the movie is about his real-life engagement and love for a woman. He's Pakistani. She's an American-born, blond-haired woman—the exact opposite of what his mother wanted for him. And as the film goes along, he's trying to balance the one who he loves. And every week he goes to his parents' house, his mother has someone who just drops by who she wants him to meet. And so he keeps a cigar box of all these pictures that these arranged—hopefully arranged marriages his parents are hoping for him. And he's like—but the truth is, he doesn't want an arranged marriage. But he's never told his parents that. Furthermore, every time he's at their house, he goes down to the basement where they believe he's, as a Muslim, praying faithfully. But what he does is he lays out the carpet, and he sits on a chair, and he plays on his iPhone.

Now, it is worthy of laughter, I agree. It is funny. But there's a moment in which he's finally had enough. And his parents come to his apartment. And they tell him, "Why are you doing this to us? Why aren't you being serious about being married? What is wrong with you?" And he finally has enough. And he declares to you, "I must tell you—and I don't want to hurt you, I love you—but I do not want an arranged marriage. And I have not prayed in years. When I go to your basement, I simply sit on my phone. I am in love with someone else, and that someone else is Emily. And she's neither a Muslim nor is she Pakistani." And he says, "I know my saying this will cause great hurt to you and maybe even make you want to reject me." And his father looks at him, and he says, "Why are you doing this to us?" And his mother turns and does not look at him again. And she is, for a good while—he is dead to her. Now, in truth, they eventually reconcile, and he marries this woman in real life.

But it was a powerful moment. And my fear, that powerful moment is repeated in many peoples' lives when they hear these words: "There is no creature hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." That when they hear those words, that what they sense is that before the watchful eye of a holy God, that they believe that what they're going to hear is God saying to them, "Why are you doing this to me? You are dead to me, until you get your life in order. I told you to be righteous. I told you to be obedient. Why aren't you doing it?"

We have projected onto God a character that the Scriptures do not recognize. While God is holy and he is watchful, nothing is hidden from his sight, and God is the only righteous judge, and he will judge on the last day—this day is a day not of judgment, but a day of invitation and grace. And that his face towards you is not one of disappointment. Because what these words tells us is a powerful truth that is a double-edged sword. The Word of God exposes all of our motives, our selfishness, our self-righteousness, our self-indulgence, and our sin. It goes to the very core of who we are and does not mince words. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

But these words also say—they also say that the word that goes to the very center of who we are tells us the truth of who we are with the truth of who Jesus is—that God's face towards you is one of invitation and grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, because of Christ. Because the payment for sin is finished. And he invites all who profess faith in him, if you have fallen off the path and you have stopped striving, today is a day of redemption and renewal. And he can restore you and forgive you and give you grace to walk anew in obedience.

If you are not a believer, today is a day of belief, because he invites you into his redemption and salvation through Christ alone. Those in self-condemnation—he invites you to self-exposure before the only one who truly knows who we are to the bottom and who also says, "I love you to the point of giving my own Son." Yes, amen. Amen? Our God whom we stand before seeks us and knows us, invites us to

strive with him by all the appointment that he's given us in his Spirit and by his grace. But his invitation will always be, until his return, "Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Christian, be renewed. Be restored. Those of you who do not know him, today is the day of salvation. Let's pray.

Now, Heavenly Father, we ask that by your grace, may you strengthen us. May you remind us of your renewing grace, of your restoring grace, and the invitation of your grace, that by your Holy Spirit and Word we might strive to walk in obedience, saying *no* to ungodliness, and to love you with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. And may your Word, which goes to the very core of who we are, go with the truth of what we are. But the grace which abounds—may it declare to us that Jesus and his grace is greater than all our sin. Restore to us. Restore to us, O Lord, your grace. In Jesus' matchless name we pray. Amen.