

It's not how we start the race that matters, but how we finish. Of course, that means the time in between matters greatly. Jesus uses the example of two sons, one who said he will go, but then ultimately didn't. The other said he wouldn't go, but then ultimately did. The second did the will of the Father, not the first. The Lord saves us grace alone, that is, apart from anything good in us. The Lord saves us by faith alone, that is, apart from anything we've done. We know this through Scripture alone, that is the sole source and norm of how we know God.

However, how you live as a Christian matters. You can lose your salvation. You can resist the work of the Holy Spirit. You can be fooled into unbelief and despair.

Our text opens: **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”** We are continuing our sermon series Sabbath Rest as the author of Hebrews continues to warn and encourage his listeners to keep the faith despite obstacles and despite hardships. Our word of encouragement today: **OUR TRIUNE GOD USES THE TRUTH OF FORGIVENESS TO OVERCOME SIN AND UNBELIEF.**

The author of Hebrews warns us writing, **“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.”** We will spend time circling around this verse. I. All sin deceives, but the Spirit never lies. The fact of the matter is that sin deceives. Sin wishes to pull the wool over your eyes. There are blind spots in your own life that immoral behavior is causing.

How often we can look at a situation from the outside in and say, “How could someone be so dumb?” Sometimes it's a news headline: corporate executive gets caught embezzling millions, tabloid journalist goes bankrupt over publishing lies, or man gets arrested for murder. Other times it may not make headlines: your friend is cheating on his exams, your neighbor is cheating on her spouse, or your cousin is cheating on his taxes. When the consequences come, you ask, “What did you think would happen?”

Do you think the shareholders would somehow not notice that millions were missing from the earnings report? Do you think the families about whom you told lies were going to sit idly by when slandered their loved one? Do you think you're going to commit the perfect crime? If you sneak the right answers from the answer key in calculus 1, what's going to happen in calculus 2? Is your husband never really going to find out? Don't you think the IRS has ways of double checking your numbers?

The deception is that nobody is good at sinning. However, sin wishes to trick us into believing that it's okay and that nobody notices. Yes, it's easy to look at the headlines and our next door neighbor. But we need to look at ourselves. There are things that I'm doing, and there's things that you're doing, that if everybody knew about them, perhaps someone would think, "What did you think was going to happen?"

That's why we need the Church. That's why we need God's Word. That's why we need the accountability of fellow believers. We need a sanity check because in a world run by sin, death, and the devil, the lunatics run the insane asylum. The Spirit will tell you the truth, even if the truth hurts. The Lord will never abandon you, even if He asks you to abandon your sins.

Second, II. All sin hardens, but Christ forgives every sin. The devil knows the power of the Lord and His Word, and he'll use every trick to prevent you from following the Lord. When an enemy knows his opponent is stronger than he, he will use indirect assaults. If he can't take out a Christian directly, he may go for side attacks: causing suffering to make one lose focus on God, sowing seeds of doubt, and using small temptations to form a path to big sins

Throughout this passage, the author of Hebrews warns against the hardening of the heart. Specifically, sin hardens our hearts. The first time Bernie Madoff got money dishonestly wasn't his multibillion Ponzi scheme. The first time Alex Jones told a lie wasn't about the Sandy Hook shooting. The night the man murdered the woman wasn't the first time he hurt her.

God can forgive any sin, but each sin we commit hardens our hearts to commit a sin that will hurt someone else more, a sin that will desensitize us even further, and a sin that will deafen our ears to hear the Lord’s pleas for us to repent.

The example we are given is the Israelites in the wilderness. One would think that they of all people who witnessed the miracles of the escape from Egypt would be the ones to make it to the promised land, but they chose to rebel and were overthrown in the wilderness. If it can happen to them, it can happen to us.

Don’t be fooled away from the Sabbath Rest that is our inheritance as Christians. Don’t be fooled to think that that drinking habit can’t turn into alcoholism that will drive you away from your family, friends, and your church. Don’t be fooled to think that the search for alluring pictures on your phone won’t turn into an addiction that will drive you away from family and future romantic partners. Don’t be fooled into thinking that a few lies here and there can’t lead down a path where you tell more lies than the truth itself. The heart hardened by sin ultimately rejects God, and that is the one unforgiveable sin.

III. Unbelief rejects God, but Christ takes us to the Father. That is the devil’s endgame: unbelief. The hardening of our hearts can take the form of a militant atheism or outright denial of God. Oftentimes, rather it takes the form of a, “meh.” We stop going to church because we either think we’re too bad for church, or our hardened hearts grow callous to sin and we consider ourselves fairly good people who don’t need a savior, anyhow.

But the author of Hebrews ends with some good news, “**For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.**” Despite our hard heartedness, despite our apathy, despite our sins, you still share in Christ, even if you’re dangling by a thread. “**a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;**” Jesus sinners doth receive.

In C.S Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narina: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* a character named Eustace Scrubb acts unpleasantly toward

his cousins Edmund and Lucy until they land on an island where Eustace in his greed steals a magic bracelet which turns him into a dragon. As a dragon he can't speak, he can't sail away with the others to the next island. He is trapped. Until he approaches a round bath where he tries to peel off his dragon skin, but one layer reveals the next of dragon skin.

Aslan, the God-figure in the Narnia series must bathe Eustace, and the dragon skin comes off, even if it does hurt like the dickens. Eustace is a changed boy from that point forward in the book.

Your hardened heart is not anything you can fix yourself. Your unbelief is not something that you can will yourself out of. It takes a new heart and a new start. In baptism, the Lord has replaced your heart of stone with a heart of flesh. Your sins have been forgiven, and you have been taken from a life of sin to a life of following God.

Jesus forgives you for your habitual sins. Jesus forgives you for the dumb things you did when hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. He forgives you for your unfaithfulness, your lies, and your theft. He forgives you for the times you absented yourself from the healing Word delivered regularly in Sunday morning worship.

Jesus sinners doth receive, and what was accomplished on Calvary as Jesus died is delivered to you through baptism. It is through baptism that the forgiveness of your every sin won on Calvary is received. It is through baptism that the hardened dragon scales fall off your heart, and an eager and listening heart emerges.

However, our sinful heart keeps being misled and the scales keep re-forming. The good news is that in baptism, we are encouraged daily to die to sin and daily to rise again to new life. **“Exhort one another every day,”** not just on Sundays, not just when you did something really bad, not just when you feel like it.

Great stories of redemption are a hallmark of the Christian church, Jesus Christ has turned around the lives of so many people in spite of their sins. Jesus reigns victorious over sin, and through the Holy Spirit He wants to finish what He started in you to lead you to the Father. Amen!