

Wheelerburg Baptist Church 2/15/2026
Hebrews 3:7-13 “The Sin Behind the Sin”—part one **

Brad Brandt

Main Idea: In Hebrews 3:7-19 the preacher exhorts us to confront the sin behind the sin which keeps us from experiencing rest. We'll take two weeks to ponder this serious warning about a sin we tend to overlook, the sin of unbelief. This morning, in verses 7-13, we'll look at this sin from two perspectives.

I. The Holy Spirit confronts the sin of unbelief (7-11).

- A. It's a universal problem (7).
 - 1. Hearing God's Word is good.
 - 2. Hearing God's Word is dangerous.
- B. It's a heart problem (8-10).
 - 1. When we hear God's Word, we should trust and obey.
 - 2. When we harden our hearts, we go astray.

C. It's a costly problem (11).

- 1. It triggers the anger of God.
- 2. It forfeits the blessing of God.

II. We must confront the sin of unbelief (12-13).

- A. We must confront it first in our own hearts (12).
 - 1. It's the part of you that nobody sees.
 - 2. It produces fruit that everybody sees.
- B. We must help each other confront it (13a).
 - 1. We can't make it alone.
 - 2. We need others to help us see when we're starting to slide.
- C. We must confront it by engaging in the ministry of encouragement (13b).
 - 1. We need to think about our church family more than once a week.
 - 2. We need purposeful involvement in each other's lives every day.
 - 3. We need to find ways to put courage into the hearts of our brothers.
 - 4. We need to go after those whose hearts are growing cold.
 - 5. We need to do this for the sake of Christ.

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves two important questions.

- 1. Do I have any unbelief in my heart today?
- 2. Who can I encourage this week?

As we open our Bibles to Hebrews 3, we're returning to our series, *“Rest in the Son: An Exposition of Hebrews 3-4*. The word “rest” is all over the place in Hebrews 3-4. We see it *twelve* times. This is the gift God has given us in His Son. Rest. Security. The confident assurance that the rescue work is done. A true Christian *rests* in the Son.

But there's one sin that fights this rest tooth and nail. It indeed is the sin behind the sin, behind *every* sin. What is that sin, and what can be done about it? Let's find out.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 3:7-13

So what is the sin behind the sin? Did you spot it? It's one of our biggest foes, yet most of us seldom give serious thought to the reality that it is a dangerous foe. The sin behind the sin is unbelief. Always. When I sin, it's because in that moment I have become a practical atheist. I have stopped believing that God is there.

Unbelief is perhaps our greatest problem, yet it seldom makes our top ten list of concerns. Why do we struggle? We seldom think it's because of unbelief.

What is the sin of unbelief? As the word indicates, it's the absence of belief, the failure to *believe God*. It's not just my unsaved neighbor's problem. It's my problem and yours. In fact, we could make a strong case that every other sin boils down to the sin of *unbelief*.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelerburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Think of the college student who looks at pornography on his computer in his dorm room. He commits the sin of fornication in his mind. Yet accompanying this sin is another, more fundamental sin, one that makes the mental fornication possible. And that is his tolerance of the sin of *unbelief*. This young man really doesn't believe God is there, for if he did, he surely wouldn't be visiting those websites, not with God watching.

Think about it. This young man certainly doesn't want his roommate to see him viewing pornography, and because he believes his roommate exists and that there may be shame if his roommate knew the truth, he avoids those sights when his roommate is present. But when he's all alone, it's a different story. And that's the problem. He thinks, he lives like he is *all alone* in that room. So for all practical purposes, he doesn't believe God exists, at least not at that moment and not in that room. Oh, he may have sung loud praises to God in church on Sunday, but there in his room on Monday he has become a practical atheist.

The sin of unbelief underlies other sins too, if not all sins. Think of the middle-aged woman who uses her tongue to tarnish reputations. Behind her sins of slander and gossip lies the sin of unbelief, for if she truly believed God was present she would not say the hurtful things she says about people.

Think of the child who tells her parent, "I came straight home from school, just like you asked," even though she didn't come straight home. What made the sin of lying possible was the presence of the fundamental sin of unbelief, for had this young girl really believed that God existed and that God was omnipresent, would she have lied?

It shows up in other subtle ways too, ways we tend to excuse. Think of the elderly person who's full of anxiety and can't sleep at night because she's fearful of the possibility of having to live in a care facility some day. Or of the man who's irritable with his wife and children because he's heard a rumor that he may lose his job due to company cutbacks. Has not God promised never to give His people more than they can bear? And has He not promised to be with them and to meet their needs in every situation? Yes, and yet those promises do not help us if we fail to *believe* them, or to put it more precisely, if we fail to believe *Him*.

A little over nineteen centuries ago a group of Jewish men and women heard the good news about Jesus the Messiah and of the forgiveness and eternal life that God offered through Him. They gladly embraced Jesus and consequently stopped going to Jerusalem to offer sacrificial lambs. But then the opposition began, from their family members and neighbors who said, "How dare you turn your back on your Jewish heritage!" And it got worse when the critical words turned into violent actions, to the point that some of the young followers of Christ began to waver.

"Maybe we made a mistake," they started thinking. "Maybe we should go back to our old ways."

And so, the book of Hebrews was written, to help those struggling with the sin of unbelief. How do you help someone struggling with the sin of unbelief? Here's how the writer of Hebrews did it. In the first two chapters he exalts the supremacy of the person of Jesus Christ, for once we know who Jesus is, we'll see how foolish it is *not* to believe in Him.

And then, as we saw last week in Hebrews 3:1-6, the writer commands us to *consider Jesus*. Faith is not hype, so if I want my faith to be strengthened, I must consider the object of my faith. Who is Jesus? He is the apostle, the one that God sent to us (1a). He

is the high priest, the one that represents us before God (1b). He is the one who is faithful (2). He is the one who is worthy (3). He is the Son who is over God's house (4-6a). Consider Jesus and make Him the hub (not just a spoke) of your life.

Yet if Jesus is going to be the hub of our lives, there's a root sin we must eliminate. Unbelief is one of the biggest foes we must overcome if we're serious about Jesus-centered-living, and the writer of Hebrews addresses this very sin head-on in the very next passage. In Hebrews 3:7-19 the preacher exhorts us to confront the sin behind the sin which keeps us from experiencing rest. We'll take two weeks to ponder this serious warning about the sin of unbelief. This morning, in verses 7-13, we'll look at this sin from two perspectives.

I. The Holy Spirit confronts the sin of unbelief (7-11).

Verse 7 begins, “Therefore [‘wherefore’ in the KJV; “So” in the NIV].” In light of what we’ve just learned about Jesus. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice...’” The writer begins to quote from Psalm 95:7-11, a text he will cite over and over again in this chapter and the next (see also 3:15, 4:3, 4:5, and 4:7). When he quotes this psalm in 4:7 he acknowledges that David wrote it, but here he attributes it to God the Holy Spirit. That of course is because God the Holy Spirit worked through human instruments like David to reveal and record the written word of God (2 Pet. 1:20-21). When we read our Bible or hear it preached we are hearing from God Himself. That’s why it’s a dangerous thing to say, “Oh, I know what the Bible says, *but...*” What the Bible says, dear friends, is what *God says*.

The writer of Hebrews invites us to ponder carefully what the God Holy Spirit said in Psalm 95. Psalm 95 gives us three insights into the sin of unbelief.

A. It’s a universal problem (7). “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” To whom is the “you” referring? As just mentioned, the Holy Spirit revealed this psalm *through David*, so the “you” is referring to the Israelites who lived in David’s day, approximately 1000 B.C. This means that people in David’s day struggled with the sin of unbelief.

But read on. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as *you* did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where *your* fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.” Who does David have in mind this time? The second “you” is referring to the Jews who lived in Moses’ day, around 1440 BC. Like the Jews in David’s day, so too the Jews in Moses’ day struggled with unbelief.

And so did the Jewish Christians who received the book of Hebrews around AD 60. They also struggled with the sin of unbelief, and that’s why the writer confronted them about it here.

By extension the “you” refers to *us*, for the Holy Spirit who revealed and preserved Psalm 95 also revealed and preserved the book of Hebrews because this book is for *everyone*. And that’s because *everyone* struggles with the sin of unbelief. It’s a universal problem.

Now notice again what the Holy Spirit says to us. He begins with “*Today*.” The author of Hebrews loves the word “today,” and uses it eight times in the book, three times in this chapter alone (verses 7, 13, & 15).

It’s worth noting that Psalm 95 is a worship psalm. It begins with a call to come, sing, and shout to the Lord (1), to give Him thanks and extol Him with music (2), to bow

down and kneel before Him (6). And for these reasons: He is the great God and king (3-5), and He is our God and shepherd (7a).

But worship is tarnished when unbelief is present. Hence, the warning that follows in Psalm 95, the same warning that the writer of Hebrews cites. *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”* Interesting, isn’t it?

Hearing God’s Word is good. However, *hearing God’s Word is also dangerous.* It’s good if we hear His invitation to come, sing, shout, give thanks to Him, and so on, *if* what happens? If we believe and obey His Word. But what if we don’t? What if we hear it and *harden our heart* to it? Then, as the rest of Psalm 95 declares, it’s dangerous, *very* dangerous, for it may cost us our lives. So unbelief is a universal problem.

B. It’s a heart problem (8-10). It’s been well said, “The heart of every problem is a problem in the heart.”¹ When we read verses 7-10, we can’t help but notice that the sin problem for the Israelites began *in the heart*. In verses 7-8, David says to his people (and by application, to *us*), “Today, if you hear his voice, *do not harden your hearts*,” and then looks back for an example to the Jews in Moses’ day in verses 8b-9, “As you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.”² Now notice the core problem, according to God’s own assessment in verse 10, “Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always *go astray in their heart*; they have not known my ways.’”

The sin of unbelief is an indicator of a *heart* problem. God said the hearts of His people were unstable. They had fluttering hearts, wandering hearts, off and on hearts, hearts that continually were *going astray*. And verse 10 indicates that *wandering hearts* are linked to *not knowing God’s ways*. It makes sense, doesn’t it? If we don’t know *God’s ways*, that is, if we don’t know the path He wants us to walk in life as well as His purposes for taking us on that path (which often includes hardship), then we’ll be inclined to wander from that path, first in our heart and then in life.

To put it simply, *when we hear God’s Word, we should trust and obey.* But *when we harden our hearts, we go astray.*

In the Bible, the term “heart” refers to the inner person, the part of you no one can see but God. It includes your thoughts, feelings, and will. That’s where sin begins. That’s where the sin of unbelief begins, in the part of you that no one else sees.

The Israelites were grumblers and complainers. But those were fruit sins. This was the root. They weren’t right with God in the *inner man*. They didn’t personalize the ways of God. As Leon Morris explains, “They were not blamed simply for not knowing but for not knowing things they ought to have known and acted on.”³

Just think of the Israelites in the wilderness. They murmured over and over again. They weren’t satisfied with God or what He did for them. At Rephidim they had no water and so questioned God’s presence and goodness (Exod. 17:1-7). At Marah they complained because the water was bitter (Exod. 15:23-26). In the Desert of Sin they complained because things weren’t like they were back in Egypt where “we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted” (Exod. 16:3)—talk about short term

¹ Observation by many people, including Warren Wiersbe, p. 288.

² It’s worth noting, as Robert Gromacki points out, “The period of forty years was also the approximate length of time from the Crucifixion to the writing of Hebrews. These believers were also being tested by God (2:18).” Gromacki, p. 64.

³ Leon Morris, p. 35.

memory loss! God gave them manna but then the people complained because there was no meat (Num. 11:10ff). It's unthinkable, yet the Israelites so hardened their hearts that they wanted to go back to Egypt, to return to the land where they had been slaves.

So what did they need? A pep talk so they'd stop grumbling? They needed what your children need when they grumble, what we need when we grumble. Not simply to hold their tongue, but to experience a change of heart.

These are the realities of the sin behind the sins we commit. Unbelief is a universal problem and a heart problem. Thirdly, it's a costly problem.

C. It's a costly problem (11). In verse 11 the Lord says, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"⁴ The Old Testament account of Numbers 14:21-23 gives the fuller version of what God said on that fateful day.

"Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it."

Let there be no doubt about it. Unbelief is a serious matter. How serious? According to Hebrews 3:11, when unbelief is present it results in two frightening outcomes.

First, *it triggers the anger of God.* "So I declared on oath *in my anger*," says the Lord. Second, *it forfeits the blessing of God.* "They shall never enter my rest."

You say, "I thought God was loving. Can a loving God be angry?"

Oh yes. He is loving, but He also exhibits anger at times. He is not a tame lion as C. S. Lewis put it. When does the Lord become angry? Here's something that makes Him angry. When people who see His glory, disbelieve, and then disobey Him.

You say, "Well then, I'm good, for I've never seen His glory." Really? Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." Have you ever seen the stars at night? Then you've seen the glory of God demonstrated. How did you respond? Did you look at those stars and say, "Almighty God, You are so great! You made all these billions of heavenly lights and made me too! I praise You!"

Is that how you responded? How many times do we look up at the nighttime display of the glory of God and not even think about God, let alone praise Him for His greatness? And it's not just the stars. All creation reveals the glory of God (Rom. 1:18-23).

Greatest of all, Jesus Christ reveals the glory of God. As Hebrews 1:3 declares, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory." This means that right now, through the proclamation of God's Word, we are once again seeing the person of Jesus Christ and thus we are seeing the very radiance of the glory of God. If it's unthinkable to look at the night stars and not give God honor for the privilege of seeing His glory, it is the highest of insults to see Christ as He is revealed to us in His Word and then fail to respond in faith and obedience.

Beloved, hear the invitation of Hebrews 3 and Psalm 95. "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." Every time we hear God's Word we should respond with a heartfelt, "Yes, I believe that word!" and "Yes, I will obey that word!" and "Yes, I praise You Almighty God for Your grace extended to me through Jesus Christ which makes my faith and obedience possible!"

⁴ The NIV says, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

To put it another way, every time we hear God's Word, we must place ourselves *under* it, not *over* it (as a judge), not *beside* it (as a curious inspector), not *away* from it (as a spectator), but *under* it as a humble and grateful servant.

Oh beloved, the sin of unbelief is so subtle and so serious. In this room right now, behind your smiling face, and your nodding head and your voice that cries "Amen!" to the Word is the part of you that nobody but God sees. And it's there, in your heart and mine that we must allow the Spirit of God to have His way.

Allow me to give a very practical suggestion. Every time we are exposed to God's Word, and I mean *every time*, whether it's a sermon in church, or in Sunday School, or listening to a sermon online, or as we're having our devotions, *every time*, let's be intentional about dealing with the sin of unbelief. Say something like, "Lord, I have just heard Your Word. Thank You! And I believe it's true. And by your grace in Christ, I will put into practice what I've just heard." As the song-writer said, *Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus.*

This brings us to the second perspective for dealing with the sin behind the sin. The first is that the Holy Spirit confronts the sin of unbelief. Now it's our turn.

II. We must confront the sin of unbelief (12-13).

Look at verses 12-13, "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 [NIV "But encourage one another daily"], as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

The writer says we must confront the sin of unbelief in three ways.

A. We must confront it first in our own hearts (12). Listen to verse 12 again, this time from the KJV, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." Notice the command, "Take heed!" If we're going to deal with the sin of unbelief, we cannot be passive, and specifically we cannot be passive when it comes to the *heart*.

This is the truth about your heart, my friend. *It's the part of you that nobody sees. But it produces fruit that everybody sees.* Jesus said in Matthew 15:18, "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man." Our hearts are key, which is why the writer of Hebrews urges us to give attention to the prevention of three potential dangers lurking in our hearts.

See to it that none of you has, first, an *evil* heart [NIV says *sinful* heart], second, an *unbelieving* heart, and third, a heart that is *leading you to fall away from the living God* [NIV says *turns away from the living God*]. These three enemies go together. Evil. Unbelief. Falling away.

There's evil. There's falling away. But right in the middle is heart of the problem. Unbelief. Sin always begins in the heart. Sin manifests itself by a life that turns away from God and goes its own way. But it's this one particular sin that leads the way, the sin of *unbelief*. Make sure you don't have an *unbelieving* heart, says the writer of Hebrews.

The solution for unbelief is *belief*, or *faith*. That's what's needed and later the writer gives us a whole chapter showing us what faith looks like. He offers this bottom line assessment in Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

To come to God, you and I must *believe*. But that's our fundamental problem. We are born with *unbelieving hearts*. And even after we experience God's salvation, we still struggle with unbelief.

Very few things amazed Jesus, but this did. Mark 6:6 says, "And he was amazed at their *lack of faith*." Do you remember the father in Mark 9 who came to Jesus with his demon-possessed son? Do you remember what he said in Mark 9:22? "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us?" And do you recall Jesus' response in Mark 9:23? "'If you can'?" said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for him who believes.'" I love the reaction of the dad when he said to Jesus in the very next verse (24), "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

We struggle with *unbelief*. It's not coincidental that the Bible calls non-Christians *unbelievers*, for this sums up the natural man's approach to life. It's our bedrock problem. Thankfully, God Himself provides what the non-believer needs. Not just salvation, but even faith itself. These are His gracious gifts to sinners, as Ephesians 2:8 makes clear, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

So we need to do as did this father in Mark 9. "Help me overcome my unbelief!" We can't be saved without that admission, for apart from God's grace no sinner will ever believe in Christ. Yet it's a fitting cry for saved people, too. "Help me overcome my unbelief today, in this very moment, sitting in front of this computer, before I speak this word! Help me believe that You are really here with me."

Dealing with our *unbelief* involves first and foremost confronting it in our own hearts. But there's more to the battle, according to Hebrews 3, a second way to confront unbelief.

B. We must help each other confront it (13a). There's something that we Americans often miss in our rugged individualism. According to verse 12, fighting unbelief is a corporate responsibility. "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart (NIV)." The verse says we must give attention to a present tense, ongoing assignment ("take care"/"see to it"). We need to make sure that *none of us* has a sinful, unbelieving heart.

It's not just *my* heart that ought to concern me, but *your* hearts, too. We're supposed to be giving attention to each other, and specifically, to each other's hearts, and specifically, to make sure that no one in our church family is harboring an unbelieving heart that, if left unchecked, will result in that person turning away from God.

"But how would I ever know if my brother is tolerating unbelief in his heart?"

Now that's a great question! We won't know the condition of the hearts of our church family members unless we what? Unless we get to know them. And as I mentioned last week, that's why Sunday morning isn't enough. That's why we need to be clean-players when it comes to participating in the life of the church. Church is not a Sunday morning organization. Church is a people with whom we do life. This is true for many reasons, but consider two specific reasons from Hebrews 3.

First, *we can't make it alone*. "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." Can you relate to the confession of the hymn-writer? We're prone to wander, especially when we isolate ourselves from our church family members.

The fact is, secondly, *we need others to help us see when we're starting to slide*. That's what verse 12 says. To paraphrase, "Look at each other, brothers, and keep

looking! Make sure not a single one of you has a heart that is beginning to waver with doubts and is turning away from God.”

That’s a negative command. It’s something we’re *not* to let happen. In the next verse, however, we’re given a positive command, and it reveals a third way for us to confront unbelief.

C. We must confront it by engaging in the ministry of encouragement (13b).

Listen to verse 13 in the NIV, “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” The ESV says, “exhort one another every day.” This is such a practical verse. It shows us that one of God’s gracious provisions for dealing with the sin of unbelief is the ministry of encouragement.

Think now. Why do we struggle with unbelief? It’s because we can’t see God, right? He’s with us, for sure, but since He is a Spirit, we can’t see Him. And because we can’t see Him, we’re prone to doubt His goodness, to doubt His love, even to doubt His presence.

But here’s the good news. Even though we can’t see Him, we *can* see Him. We can see His body, for *we* are His Body. We who know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are His body. And He intends to make Himself known to us through our relationships with each other, and specifically through the ministry of encouragement.

If it’s true that we are the body of Christ, then five responses are in order.

1. *We need to think about our church family more than once a week.* Encourage one another *daily*. Let that word sink in. *Daily*. God never intended church to be simply a two-hour activity on Sunday morning. Church is our identity. And our identity is to affect our lives 24/7. Specifically, the ministry of encouragement is to be a *daily* aspiration in our lives. One of the ways we can think about our church family on a regular basis is by praying for them. Your church directory is a great tool for prayer.

2. *We need purposeful involvement in each other’s lives every day.* Fix your gaze on that word “today” again. We’re told to encourage/exhort one another every day, as long as it is called *today*. What’s true about *today*? Today comes and goes and then it’s gone. Today doesn’t last very long. So if we’re going to accomplish something *today*, like encouraging one another, we can’t be passive. We must be proactive and intentional. We must think daily about ways to get involved in each others lives so as to bring about encouragement.

That card to the shut-in God has placed on your heart won’t get written unless you go buy it (or make it), write it, and stick in the mail. That meal won’t reach your afflicted sister’s table unless you bake it and take it to her. That phone call to your Sunday School classmate you haven’t seen in two Sundays won’t happen unless you pick up the phone. That lunch appointment with the teenager you’ve wanted to thank for the faithfulness you’ve observed won’t occur unless you put it on your schedule. That new family that you’ve wanted to get to know will still be a family of strangers to you a year from now if you don’t invite them to your home for dinner.

And Hebrews says, “Do it *today*.” Make purposeful involvement a priority.

3. *We need to find ways to put courage into the hearts of our brothers.* That’s what our English word *encouragement* means, literally “to put courage into.” In the Greek it’s the verb *parakaleo*, a word that covers a wide range of activities (of the 109 times it appears in the New Testament, it’s translated in the KJV, for instance, ‘beseech’

43 times, ‘comfort’ 23 times, ‘exhort’ 21 times, ‘desire’ 8 times, ‘pray’ 6 times, and ‘intreat’ 3 times).

I ran Cross Country in the eighth grade and once the season ended I decided that was enough. No more running in the fall for me. The pain wasn’t worth it. And then one evening the following summer I saw a car drive back our third of a mile lane, park at the house, and out came the Cross Country Coach, Mr. Lehman. A five minute conversation later and I was ready to run again. It’s amazing what a word of exhortation will do!

This isn’t talking about generic encouragement though. This is a call for a special kind of exhortation. We need on a daily basis to get intentional about putting courage into the hearts of our brothers and sisters who are struggling with unbelief.

Unbelief shows up in a person’s eyes and words. I urge you to look carefully into people’s eyes when you see them on Sunday. Do you see joy and peace which are the Spirit’s fruit? And then listen to the words they use. Are they hopeful and edifying, or negative and critical? Do they talk about the Lord’s goodness, or have they lost sight of Him? If they have, you’re seeing the seed form of unbelief, as well as a wonderful opportunity for your encouragement.

I didn’t say a wonderful opportunity for a lecture. They need *exhortation*, says the writer, not a lecture.

You say, “What’s the difference?” Exhortation is coming alongside someone to help them with an appropriate word or even action. Jesus gave helpful guidance in what we call the golden rule. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

If you were struggling with unbelief, what would you want others to do? Talk about the weather with you? Ignore you? If that’s your answer, you don’t understand the seriousness of unbelief. No. Unbelief that’s left unchecked will lead to future disaster.

What I want is someone like my college roommate Rick. When I was struggling, he would ask questions and not let me slide by either. “How are you doing, Brad?” “I’m fine.” “No, really. How *are* you doing? You know I’m your friend. I’m here for you.” And sometimes he’d take it step further. “I’m concerned for you, my friend. That attitude needs some work and I’m here to help you.”

Let me be frank about this. I wouldn’t want to hear those words from Steve, or Carl, or Bobby. I knew those brothers. They too were fellow students. But they didn’t know me like Rick did. They hadn’t invested in my life as he had in lots of ways. So when Rick gave me a word of exhortation, though I didn’t like it at first, I loved him for it.

I think of our college students who are trying to figure out if their parents’ faith is really their own faith. I think of those who are suffering great hardships and trying to figure out how the goodness of God relates to their experience. Friends, the opportunities to put this into practice are ever present. Let’s take this a step further.

4. *We need to go after those whose hearts are growing cold.* “Encourage one another...so that *none of you* may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Did you catch that? *Not one* should escape the body’s care. *Not one* should drift away unnoticed. Philip Hughes writes, “If there should be a concern of the individual for the community (‘exhort one another’), there should also be a concern in the community for the individual (‘lest any one of you...’).”⁵

Beloved, my heart is heavy as I ponder this. We have individuals in our church family who are not participating in the life of the church as they once did. They’ve

⁵ Philip Hughes, p. 148.

drifted away. Are they responsible for their absence? Yes. Do we have responsibility? Yes. We need to pray for them, reach out to them, and encourage them to come back into the fold.

Yet let's not wait until people are gone to reach out to them. Far better to put a fence at the top of the cliff than to run an ambulance service at the bottom. Let's address the sin behind the sin by engaging in the ministry of encouragement this week.

Let's start today in our community groups. Here's an assignment for each group today. It's question 5 on the handout.

Allow this passage to guide you as a group in a time of meaningful prayer by having three individuals pray. First prayer: affirm your trust in the Lord, as the text exhorts us to do. Second prayer: ask the Lord for help in dealing with the sin of unbelief, and particularly pray for those who admit they are struggling with unbelief. Third prayer: give thanks to the Lord for His gracious help which enables us to confront our unbelief.

“But what if I seek to encourage someone, and they don't take it well?”

That could happen, my friend. We need a higher motivation than people's appreciation. And here it is.

5. *We need to do this for the sake of Christ.* As verse 14 states, “We have come to share in Christ.” That's what should motivate us. It's *Christ*.

We'll pick it up there next time, for there's more to be said about dealing with the sin of unbelief. But as we respond to what we've learned today...

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves two important questions.

1. *Do I have any unbelief in my heart today?* Be honest with yourself. Are you struggling with doubts. There's hope and help available. Open up to a brother or sister. Search God's Word together and approach His throne of grace in prayer.

2. *Who can I encourage this week?* Write down the name of the person God puts on your heart, and seek to put courage into that brother's heart today.

Closing Song: #409 “*I Know Whom I Have Believed*” (all four verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. Today in our series *Rest in the Son*, we learned about the importance of confronting the sin behind the sin if we're going to experience God's rest. Take time to read again the passage, Hebrews 3:7-13. Then do a quick review of the main points from the sermon outline.

2. What does it mean to say that unbelief is the sin behind the sin? Demonstrate how this is true. Pick a sin (e.g. lying or gossip or lust) and talk about how the sin of unbelief is ultimately behind (or at the root of) that sin.

3. What do we learn about unbelief in verses 7-11? What is the solution for unbelief according to verses 12-13?

4. Verse 13 says we should be helping each other deal with the sin of unbelief. What are some practical ways we can do that this week?

5. Allow this passage to guide you as a group in a time of meaningful prayer by having three individuals pray. First prayer: affirm your trust in the Lord, as the text exhorts us to do. Second prayer: ask the Lord for help in dealing with the sin of unbelief, and particularly pray for those who admit they are struggling with unbelief. Third prayer: give thanks to the Lord for His gracious help which enables us to confront our unbelief.