

Text: Heb. 4:1-11

Title: "Our church's godly fear and eager labor"

Time: 9/21/2014 pm

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The passage we just read this evening contains two commands for the local church. The first is "let us fear" (v. 1). And the second is "let us labor" in v. 11 (ESV: *strive*).

I want to begin by noting that the labor referred to here is an attitude long before it is an action. This is clear in a number of other passages where the word is used (Gal. 2:10 - Paul was *eager* to remember the poor when told to do so; 1 Thess. 2:17 - there was great desire, and eagerness, behind Paul's endeavoring to see the Thessalonian church; 2 Tim. 2:15, as we study God's word it should be our enthusiastic delight [Ps. 1:2]).

It is possible to labor without much enthusiasm, eagerness, or diligence. This word refers to the eager enthusiasm that makes labor diligent.

So the two commands are "let us fear" and "let us eagerly and enthusiastically labor." These things can go together in much of life. Fearing something can make us labor more enthusiastically to prevent what we are fearing. If I am playing defense on a soccer field, and I suddenly fear that the other team is going to score a goal from my side because someone has just made a great pass behind me, that fear creates in me some eager labor. I begin running faster and doing all I can to prevent the outcome that I fear. The same effect of fear and more eager labor is encouraged in our passage as we contemplate the example of a lost generation in Israel.

Jesus is the Apostle and High Priest of our profession (3:1). As our Apostle, He is worthy of far more honor than Israel's apostle, Moses. And yet, Israel and Moses teach us something about following our Apostle that should make us follow the two commands we have in this passage.

The example of men and women never entering God's rest and instead dying in the wilderness should make us as a New Testament church fear, and it should make us diligent to labor in a certain way. The title of the message this evening is "Our church's godly fear and eager labor," and I want us to notice three things about these commands from the passage.

I. A terrifying possibility should give our church godly fear and eager labor (vv. 1-3).

Illustration: I enjoyed some of the new Ken Burns presentation on the Roosevelts this past week. One of the things that I learned about Teddy Roosevelt was that he became very concerned about the rules of football because his son Ted Jr. often got injured while playing the game for Groton and Harvard.

During one game at Groton the younger Ted broke his front teeth and his collarbone and still finished the game. After the game Ted's father wrote him and said, "Now do not break your neck unless you esteem it really necessary." After a while, however, the joking stopped, and President Roosevelt became intimately involved in changing the rules of football to lessen injury and get injured players the help that they need.

Application: When a football player appears to be injured on the field, the game should stop and something should be

done about it. There ought to be a fear for the safety of the person who appears to be having difficulty. There is a similar possibility for the team called the local church that should be even more terrifying to us. It is the possibility that some who have been evangelized actually do not believe. Notice three things with me about this possibility:

1. It is tragic because it means that God's promise goes unfulfilled, and His rest goes unexperienced (v. 1). God's promise is a promised rest. Saphir: "Hence, if you will think of it, this Sabbath of God is the substratum and basis of all peace and rest – the pledge of an ultimate and satisfactory purpose in creation. Without this idea the world is nothing else but constant motion without progress, journey without end, toil without reward, question without answer." Saphir's apt description reminds me of our hamster's hamster wheel – motion without progress, journey without end, toil without reward, and question without answer. To miss rest from that wheel of lostness is a tragic possibility to contemplate.

2. It is tragic because it means that the church is not unified in faith (vv. 2-3). The phrase *not being mixed* translates a word used in 1 Cor. 12:24, "For our comely parts have no need: but God hath *tempered* the body *together*, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked." That is the core idea in our passage here (ESV: "the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened").

When the gospel is mixed with the faith of local church members, the faith of those believers tempers the church together through the gospel as one body in Christ. Where there is no true saving faith in the heart of one who has heard the gospel, that one, though he be one of us church

members (v. 1), is actually not tempered together with us. We are trying to do something that we cannot do, because we are not what we claim to be – one body.

So the possibility of this ought to be one that causes in us a godly fear and an eager diligence. When someone in our church membership appears to be living the life of an unbeliever, we must respond, or our local church unity is threatened, and with it God's blessing on our ministry.

So a terrifying possibility should give us as a church godly fear and eager diligence in the work of the Lord. This terrifying possibility is that one of us could be an unbeliever.

II. The importance of "Today" should give our church godly fear and eager labor (vv. 4-9).

Illustration: There is one day a month that I have marked indelibly in my mind – it is the day that my credit card bill is due. That day is the day that the bill must be paid, or all that retroactive interest drains my financial well-being. It is usually the 16th of the month, and on that day I know that I have to do business with the credit card company.

Application: There is a day for doing business with God. It is not the 16th of the month, it is not someday when I figure out what I really want; it is not when the football or hunting season is over and I have more time; it is not when I grow up; it is not when so and so finally apologizes.

No, the day for doing business with God is always the day called "Today" (v. 7). God had a day of sabbath rest – the seventh day after six days of creation. We have a day of sabbath rest – Today (Heb. 3:12-13). How do we do this business with God? We believe Him in such a way that we obey His voice (v. 6, unbelief is disobedience).

Two stages connect in this disobedience – first comes the evil heart of unbelief, then comes the departing from the living God.

Each time we hear the gospel preached (v. 2, 6), we either believe what we hear or we do not. When we do not, that is called hardening our heart. When we believe what we hear, that is called entering the rest.

It is in this sense that God’s Word never returns to him void. Each time we hear preaching, we either believe God’s truth or harden our hearts in unbelief against it. Our author will say more about the power of God’s Word in this regard (v. 12), but we must ask ourselves, was our response today to the preaching of the gospel a response of faith or a response of a hardened heart? It was one or the other.

So a terrifying possibility gives us as a church godly fear and eager diligence for our labors. The importance of “Today” should give us as a church godly fear and eager diligence for what we are all about as a church. Now finally,

III. A natural tendency to rely on works for salvation should give our church godly fear and eager labor (v. 10-11).

Illustration: I saw a list today of phrases that were called “awfully good oxymorons.” An *oxymoron* is a phrase that sounds like a contradiction in terms (*awful* and *good* are opposites, so it is an oxymoron to say that something is awfully good). Some others listed are bitter sweet, civil war, clearly misunderstood, pretty ugly, and crash landing.

Application: Labor to rest seems like an oxymoron (v. 11). It is not, because what comes natural to unbelief is to please

God by works rather than simply rest in God. Works-based salvation is the natural default ideology for man's religions. It takes a diligence to not go back to a works-based salvation as these believers were tempted to do.

Sadly, I have met some former Baptists in my life, and often they are now committed to a works-based religion of some kind such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or Roman Catholicism. This author was concerned that local church members would convert back to Judaism, because they had within an evil heart of unbelief. We have to fear and be diligent in our labors, because there may be among us some who are not yet entered into that rest of salvation by faith and not by works. When we see the theme of works-salvation creeping into their lives, we must caution them to faith alone, by grace alone, in the work of Christ alone.

Conclusion: We must be a church of godly fear and diligent labor. The terrifying possibility that some among us have not hearts of faith ought to motivate us. The importance of "Today" ought to motivate us. And the natural tendency of the hearts of men to trust in their own works for salvation ought to motivate us.

Are you one of those of whom we must be concerned? If so, Today, harden not your heart. Believe God's word, and come to Christ for salvation. As you hear this plea, you have one of two choices only – true faith in Christ or more hardening of the heart. The problem with allowing your heart to be hardened is that the next time you hear the gospel, it will be harder to believe. Each of us has a limited number of times to hear and respond in faith to the gospel. As the Proverb says, "He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that with-

out remedy." Time is running out. Harden yourself no more.

Are you one of those who must have this concern for others? Are you a true believer whose responsibility it is to live with a godly fear and a diligent labor for the faith of your fellow church members? If so, be faithful to your local church responsibilities for the sake of these who need desperately to see the reality of our faith in Christ, that they might be encouraged to come to faith in Him too.

Remember Cain's response when God asked him how his brother was doing? Cain objected, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Our passage gives us the Lord's answer: "Yes, of course, we are our brother's keeper." Therefore, "let us fear," and "let us eagerly and diligently labor."

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*