

### Hebrews 5-6: Apostasy & Perseverance

In Hebrews 5 and 6, as is so often the case, there is a sense in which Hebrews is moving seamlessly. Chapter 4, verses 14-16, closes the section of chapters 3 and 4, but it also opens a section in chapter 5. We go straight from the idea that Jesus is the high priest who passed through the heavens and who is merciful and gracious straight into chapter 5, which talks more about Jesus as a high priest. It describes Him as He is, but it also describes Him in comparison to human priests. Now the book of Hebrews has a love of word play and a love of intricate structures and so forth, and one of them is right here in front of us. It is called a chiasm. A chiasm is when you have a structure that has inversions to it. The author is going to make four points describing Jesus as our priest, and then he is going to make four points again, but in the reverse order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Point one, about human priests, is in 5:1. Priests are taken from men. Every high priest is selected from among men and appointed to represent them. Verse two says priests have solidarity with the people. It says the priests are able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray because they see themselves as subject to weakness. As they show solidarity, they do a couple of things. They offer sacrifices for the sins of men, but they also deal gently with those who go astray because they know what it is like to stray. Verse three, therefore, says they offer sacrifices, both for the people and for themselves. Verse four says they do not take this on themselves, but they are appointed by God. That is a human priest. Then Hebrews says Jesus is like these human priests, but more, and the author describes it in reverse order: 4, 3, 2, 1. Just as priests did not take the priesthood themselves, so also Jesus did not take it to Himself. Verses 5 and 6 say, “The Lord said, ‘You are My Son, my priest forever.’” Jesus did not take it to Himself. Next, verse 7 says that Jesus offered sacrifices for the people. Now it said earlier that a human priest offers sacrifices for himself and for the people, but now it says Jesus offered only for the people because He did not have to offer for Himself. It also says Jesus offered up prayers and petitions. The reason why that slipped in there is because the Jews in Jesus’ day thought of prayers as a kind of sacrifice, a sacrifice of the lips. So Jesus did offer two sacrifices, in a way, one for the sins of His people and the other was the sacrifice on His lips, but He did not have to offer a sacrifice for His own sins.

The next point is that Jesus also has solidarity with His people. He learned obedience through what He suffered, and He is given the title of high priest by God. He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, so He is like a human priest, but in every trait He is better than the human priests.

Now what this passage does is it starts to introduce us to the way in which Jesus works with His people. Priests offer sacrifices to God: gifts of thanksgiving and praise, and fellowship with God through sacrifices for sins. So the two kinds of offerings in the Old Testament are sacrifice for sin and also praising God and expressing gratitude for His bounty. The second thing priests do is that they deal gently, verse 2, with those who stray in ignorance. This is actually another one of the author’s little rhetorical flourishes. It is called a hendiatus, which means making two out of one. The idea is not that they stray and are ignorant, but that they stray in ignorance—that is two ideas put together. It is the job of a priest to deal gently with those who stray in ignorance. Let me illustrate.

Yesterday, my youngest daughter was unloading the dishwasher and she has seen me and her sisters and her mother unload the dishwasher, sort of grabbing three or four dishes at once. She tried to do the same thing and pulled out a stack of three small dishes and you know what happened. They all fell and one of them broke. She looked up, immediately looking sad and maybe on the verge of tears (depending on what mommy or daddy would say), and I asked her a question. I said, “Honey, has anybody ever told you that you should not do that?” and she said, “No, I was trying.” And I said, “Okay, you broke a dish,

but you were not naughty—you did not disobey.” She sinned in ignorance, right? Now I went on to say, “Let me ask you another question. Which would be worse: to not know you were doing a wrong thing but still doing a wrong thing and breaking a dish, or to know you were not supposed to do that and doing it anyway, but not breaking any dishes? Which would be worse?” She said it would be worse if she did it and had been told not to even if nothing broke. I said, “You are absolutely right because a sin of ignorance is very different from a deliberate act of disobedience.” This is a tip for you parents. Do not evaluate your children’s actions based on their consequences, but evaluate them based on their essence. That is the way God treats us as His children. He is gentle and tells the priest to be gentle with those who go astray.

By the way, this little word, “deal gently,” is kind of a special word. In Greek it is *metriopatheo*, similar to the words “pathetic” and “pathos.” The Stoics in this day said that whatever comes, you must respond with “*apaface*,” which you can hear as “apathy;” that is to say, not apathy in the sense of boredom, but apathy in a sense of not responding with passion—not being moved. The Stoics said that whatever fate gives you, you accept that and you do not rejoice, you do not grieve, you just accept it. You have to fit into life. But the author of Hebrews, along with the rest of the Bible, says, no, apathy is wrong. What you need is to respond in a measured way to what happens in life. You do not explode, but you are not indifferent either. You deal with ignorance, but you deal with it gently and that is the point that he is making here in chapter 5, verse 2. Now he goes on to talk a little bit more about the work of a priest, and especially the work of Jesus as priest. In the following verses, he also says that Jesus did not take the priesthood to Himself. As a priest He fulfilled God’s work and did it even offering up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death; He was heard because of His reverent submission (verse 7).

What do you think that is referring to? What historical event are we talking about here? It is talking about the Garden of Gethsemane. He offered up loud tears, petitions, pleading—was He heard? He was heard, but He suffered anyway. Again, this is so vital for the Hebrews and for us to hear, that it is possible to pray with all your might and be heard because you are loved, but still have to suffer. That is what Hebrews is all about: enduring suffering, whether that is God’s will, and what to do with it. You can be perfectly obedient, perfectly heard; the Father can hear every word you are saying, but as for Jesus, so also for you. You may yet have to suffer. The Hebrews needed to hear that. We need to hear that. Verse 8 goes on to say that although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, became the eternal source of salvation for those who obey Him. What does it mean that He learned obedience by what He suffered? Did Jesus not know how to obey? Was there some deficiency in Jesus? Again, no, but rather we would say He learned from the inside. How many of you here have ever dislocated a shoulder or broken an ankle or something like that? How many of you have seen it happen? It is one thing to see it happen and quite another to experience it yourself. When it happens to you, you know how bad it is because you know it from the inside. Similarly, you watch the flu and then unfortunately you learn about the flu from the inside. Or Adam and Eve knew about rebellion against God in a way and then after they rebelled they learned about it in another way. They learned about it experientially.

I am speaking analogically to you. I do not think we can fathom the sense in which Jesus learned or the way in which the mind of God operates. But the text says that Jesus learned obedience. Maybe this is part of what was going on, that He came in flesh and blood to experience it in flesh and blood and so He is able to perfectly atone, and also to perfectly understand, what happens to us.

Now the author of Hebrews is about ready to address the theme of great interest to him, the theme of the high priestly ministry of Christ. In verse 9 he mentions eternal salvation, and in verse 10 he says Jesus

was designated to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. But the author is worried that his people are not listening to him. When people do not pay attention, it is hard for the teacher to proceed. Now here we are not talking about people who are sleepy, but a different kind of not paying attention. There are actually three kinds of sin to make it difficult; this is what he is really worried about. He is really worried that they are not going to pay attention because of their sin. They have been falling down or falling apart as Christians, and so they are not ready for the advanced teaching he is about to give them. Listen to verses 11 to 14 as I read them to you:

We have much to say about this [this high priestly ministry of Christ], but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instructions about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment. And God permitting we will do so.

Chapter 5:2 pointed out that some people stray in ignorance. And we should be merciful toward them, but these people are straying in a different way. They are straying through negligence. They are straying, becoming undiscerning—becoming forgetful. They are stuck on the fundamentals so that when it is time to now move into some meaty teaching about the high priestly ministry of Christ, the writer thinks maybe they are not up to it—not because they have been sitting for a long time in a class, but because they have not been growing as Christians. As Christians, they have been content to stick with a few fundamentals and now they are virtually infants. They are not progressing to becoming leaders and teachers. He says in verse 14 what it takes. He says if you want to be mature, if you want to be able to handle the higher teaching, you have to use it. Solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish. Do you want to know how to become sharper as a Christian? Tackle some difficult questions. One preacher a long time ago chose for himself the motto, “I have not shirked the difficult questions.” That is a good motto if you want to be a leader. Go after the hard things and the easy things will seem easier still. But they have done just the opposite so that they are unable to move forward.

Now in a minute, we are going to get to another group, a group who are in danger of committing apostasy. You need to distinguish between these three groups because the group that sins in indifference is the group that is sinning because of long-term lethargy, which is different from accidental sin. They are saying, “I really do not care; do not bother me, I am advanced enough.” As one person said, “You make it seem like being a Christian is so serious. Could you just lighten up a little? It is kind of an easy thing, just loving God and being happy, right?” I said, “Well, that is part of it, but there is more to it than that.” So they have been lazy and indifferent.

The third group is made up of those who commit deliberate violations. Using traffic and driving as a model, I will try to give you an example of what each of these groups might look like. A sin of ignorance would be if you go to Europe from the United States and you drive on the right side of the road. That is wrong and we should not do it because it will cause an accident. But you will pull out in your car and be driving in the right lane for a second and say, “Why is that car coming at me in the wrong lane—oh, I am in England! I better get over in the left lane.” That is a sin of ignorance. A second sin, a sin of indifference, would be like habitually speeding. You get in the habit of going five or seven miles over the speed limit. That sort of works because the police only pull people over when they are

going 10 miles over the speed limit. But if you are in this habit and then you are not paying attention—a great song comes on the radio—if you do not watch out, you will be going 15 miles over the speed limit and the police will pull you over. The point is, by being indifferent to the traffic laws for a while, it is possible to go really wrong. The third group would be like somebody who says, “If I just turn the wrong way down this one-way street it will save me four minutes.” That is a deliberate violation of the traffic laws. And you know if somebody does that once, they probably have done it and other such things many times. That is the trio of possible ways of going wrong in traffic and in theology. Now you can learn theology while driving around the city, or at least you can mediate on theology.

In 6:1 the author wants to proceed and move forward. By the way, along this theme of looking at God’s work in us, 6:1 says, “Let us be carried on to maturity.” God is working: “Let us be carried.” Be carried by whom? Be carried by God. When you have a passive verb like that (“let us be carried”) in almost every language, it specifies what the agent is. When the agent is not specified in the New Testament—this happens 150 times—that is called the divine passive. When the agent is not specified, you presume that the agent is God. In those days, they avoided using the name of God for fear of taking His name in vain, so that is why they did that.

So chapter 6:1 says, “Let us be carried on to maturity and get beyond these basics.” I do not know about you, but when I read this list of basics it is kind of a baffling list—not all these basics are what I would call basic. The idea of repentance from acts that lead to death and having faith—this is basic. But how basic would instruction in baptisms be (it could also be translated, “instructions in washings”). Here is what is going on: these points he is making are all things he will talk about later. Faith will come up again in chapter 11. Repentance from dead works will come up again in 9:14 in particular. And washings that do not cleanse are part of the themes of chapters nine and ten. The teachings about how Jesus really cleanses us with His blood and the laying on of hands are probably an illusion to the idea that the Old Testament priests are ordained by the laying on of hands. He will also talk about the Old Testament priesthood and how Jesus surpasses that. So what he is saying is that, really, the fundamentals are fundamentals of the Old Testament system and you have to know the basics even if they do not seem very basic to you. And then you can build. But he is also saying, “My problem is that I have to explain everything to you because you have not been paying attention.”

He wants to go on, but he is still concerned about these people who are not really ready to go with him. Verse three says, “God permitting, we will do so,” but he does not feel quite free to do that. He still wants to say another word to the people who are listening, specifically to those in this third group. The first group consists of those who stray in ignorance, and the second group consists of those who are lethargic. The third group contains those who are really considering apostasy, who look like they may abandon the faith. This is very, very different from a sin of ignorance. You cannot abandon the faith by accident. It is a deliberate act.

Now this is one of the passages that causes everyone to worry a little: 6:4-6. I will be translating this out of the Greek New Testament. It starts off this way:

For it is impossible for those who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come and if they now fall away to come again or to be restored again to repentance since they are crucifying to themselves the Son of God and subjecting Him to disgrace.

The core idea in this passage is that “it is impossible to repent again.” That is the basic root of the whole sentence. But the writer is not just saying that. He is saying it is impossible for specific people to repent again. Who are those people? They are marked by five traits. These traits are all linked together into one. It is not like you could have one or two of them; they are all a group. The first trait is that they have been enlightened. The second trait is that they have tasted of the heavenly gift. The third trait is that they have become partakers of the Spirit. The fourth trait is that they have tasted of the goodness of the Word of God. The fifth and final trait is that they have tasted of the powers of the age to come. If, after all that, they fall away, it is impossible to repent. The word “fall away” here does not mean slip or stumble a little, but rather it means to take a calculated and deliberate act of renouncing God and the faith. If you taste all of those five things and then you step away and say, “I do not want any part of it,” then it is impossible to come again to repentance. Why would it be impossible? Because you are re-crucifying Christ and humiliating Him once again. That is the basic description here. Now, I have just told you what the passage says, but we are just getting started.

The great question that people have about this passage is, “Can you lose your salvation? Is he saying that it is possible to be saved and then lost? Armenians historically say that you can be saved and lost. Some people would think, then, that this passage would be the favored passage of Armenians because it seems to say you could be saved and lost, but the truth is, most Armenians are very uncomfortable with this passage too. It proves far too much for their system. What it says is, if you taste all these things—it looks like, if you become a Christian—and apostatize, then it is impossible to come again to repentance. But almost all Armenians say that you could be saved and lost and then saved again. This passage says you can never be saved again. Thus this passage is not just difficult for Calvinists; Armenians do not like it either. That is what I hear from Armenians. They tell me that it unnerves them.

What shall we make of this passage? First of all, we have to ask the question, “Who is being described here?” One answer is that this passage does not describe real Christians. Rather, it describes people who have been around the church and had many Christian friends and many near-Christian experiences, but who are not really Christians. Those who believe that way would read it like this: to be enlightened means to be baptized, to taste means to participate in the Lord’s Supper, and to be a partaker of the Holy Spirit means you have seen the Holy Spirit at work. Thus those who hold this position would say that this is talking about people who are baptized, have been confirmed or have joined the church, have taken the sacraments, have really seen, we might say, God at work and have seen the light and the truth in the Word of God. But they were not really Christians and so it is not talking about anybody who is saved at all. That is one view.

The second view is that it is talking about people who are saved. They would say that the Greek word used for enlightened means to be instructed. That is its ordinary meaning. To be enlightened means to have received the light of God’s truth and the Gospel. To taste of the heavenly gift means to taste and see that the Lord is good—to experience the goodness of God. “To taste” in the Bible usually means to really experience something. And to partake of the Holy Spirit means to be a partaker of or a participant in the Holy Spirit. To be a partaker is described in Hebrews 3:1 and 14 as to be united with. If you are a partaker in Christ, you belong to Christ. If you are a partaker in His Spirit, you belong to the Spirit. If you taste of the goodness of the Word of God, then that is kind of like 1 Peter 2:3: “Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good...” This phrase, “you have tasted that the Lord is good,” is a way of saying that you are a Christian. Therefore, some would say that this passage is about Christians who then fall away, apostatize, and cease to be Christians.

The third view is that this is describing somebody from the pastoral perspective. Remember that this is a letter by a pastor to a congregation; it was written from a pastoral perspective. As far as anyone can tell,

by every appearance and indication, they appear to be Christians. They look like and act like Christians and they have to be treated as such, but that does not necessarily mean they are Christians. Those are the three views of the matter. I want to modify it and be careful, but I do think the third view is correct. It is the person who by every indication is a Christian.

Now after saying this, he moves on in verses seven and eight to say, “Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.” This is a little like the parables of the good tree bearing good fruit and the parable of the sower. He is saying that if you really are a Christian, a believer, good fruit will come.

“But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end, it will be burned.” This is another passage that looks like it should instill fear. It is a very stiff warning. It says, “Watch out lest you apostatize.” But I want you to notice what comes next, in verse nine:

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you have shown to Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show the same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.

He has just given them a warning, but did you notice the way in which the language of the warning was phrased? It was all very impersonal. Look back at chapter 6, verses 4-8: “It is impossible for those who...” He did not say, “It is impossible for you.” He did not say, “You are like land that drinks in the rain and produces nothing,” but rather he said, “Land that drinks in the rain...” He is laying out some principles, but as for them, he says very plainly what he expects of them: better things. He expects them to persevere. He expects them to see things that accompany salvation. He expects them to show diligence and to have God attend them, carry them on, and recognize the love, faith, and work that they have shown in times past. Now what I am saying then is this: different views of this passage can be taken. One view can be called the rigorous view, which holds that you can be saved, but if you commit one big, bad, awful, ugly sin very deliberately, then you can never repent again. You are lost. This view was held by a number of people in the early church, most famously by a man named Tertullian. Tertullian said that sexual sin is unforgivable—it is the unpardonable sin. Some others said if you are persecuted and deny the faith, you can never, ever repent again. I call that the rigorous position because they have excessive rigor. They are too tough. They do not have enough mercy and love. The idea of this view, though, is that a deliberate, major sin amounts to a renouncing of the faith. My answer to that view is that what I read in the Bible is that anyone who turns to the Lord and repents can be saved, redeemed, and forgiven. God’s love and mercy are full and free.

A second view is to soften the passage a little. Proponents of this view say that when it says it is impossible to repent, it means that it is impossible *for man* to repent. Add two little words there. My response to that is, when you start adding two little words here and two little words there, pretty soon the Bible is your own Bible. We are really not free to start adding two or three little words. It says, “It is impossible to repent.” It does not say, “It is impossible *for man* to repent.” Those who hold this view will sometimes also say that what it means is that it is *almost* impossible to repent, but it does not say that. What it says is, “It is impossible to repent.” If we believe that God has spoken the Word, let us give it the dignity of not adding little words here and there that make life easier for us. If he had wanted to say, “almost impossible,” he would have said it. If he wanted to say, “It is almost impossible for a man, but God could do it,” he would have said that. But he did not say that. What he said is, “It is impossible.” Therefore, I do not accept this view.

The third view, which I believe is correct, says that this passage is looking at things with a pastor's eye. With a pastor's eye you will see people who by every conceivable indication are Christians. In fact, I would dare say that almost certainly there is someone in this room who was led to the Lord, disciplined, or nurtured along in a profound way by someone who no longer professes to be a Christian. Almost every time I ask a group of any size if that describes any of them, one, two, three, or four people say that it does. That is to say, there are people who by every appearance seem to have been enlightened, really taught by the Word, and partaken in the life of the Holy Spirit and the powers of the age to come. These people are kind of like Judas who probably performed some miracles and wonderful things may have happened through his ministry. By all appearances he was a disciple and then he rejected it all. For that person, repentance is impossible, the writer of Hebrews says. Now the question is, of course—I do not want to make it too easy on us—is that person really saved? This is where we say, God is the judge. We do not know. We can never know for sure the condition of anyone's soul. We can say that it sure looks like they belong to Christ and in every way we should treat them as such, assuming and not questioning their salvation, but we do not know the soul of another. Of course there are other people who look like they are not regenerate, but they are. There are people who actually look like they have apostatized but they have not. It may seem that this passage describes them, but it does not.

When I was a pastor, one of my friends in the church was a dedicated Christian for the first 28 years of his life and then he ceased practicing Christianity. He ceased reading the Bible or going to church and became a ruthless businessman. He made all his people work seven days a week and was proud of it. He was well known as an unsavory character in our small town. People would say, "Do not make Joe (not his actual name) mad because he is a nasty man. He will make you pay the price. Do not trust him; he will not keep his word." Then at the age of 54 he asked, "What have I been doing?" He came back to the church at that time and joined my church when he was 55. He has been walking with the Lord now for 15 years. His story is very strange and is not something that happens often. It looked like he had apostatized, but he had not. We cannot know people's hearts, but we do know this: there are people who look in every conceivable way like Christians and then turn away from the faith. If they really do turn away from the faith after coming that close, I do believe, my friends, that is part of what the unpardonable sin is about.

That is what he has been talking about here—the person who knows exactly what they are rejecting. They have seen Christ, they have seen the testimony, and they have been around Christians. They have had every opportunity. When they say, "I am not a Christian. I deny it, I repudiate it," that is not a sin of ignorance. They know exactly what they are doing. Now, we can never know who has done that, but there is such a thing. There is such a sin as definitively, violently and with full knowledge saying, "I want no part of God, I want no part of His grace or His Gospel." If somebody does that, then it is impossible for them to come to salvation.

What is this passage meant to do in our lives? It is meant to do a couple of things. First, it explains to us the way in which people sin. There are three kinds, or classes, of sin: sins of ignorance, sins of laziness or indifference, and deliberate sins. These are very different in their scope and in their consequences. So this passage teaches us something for our mind's sake. Second, it is an instrumental warning. The warning about the consequences of apostasy is meant for the Hebrews to keep them from committing that sin. It is meant to wake them up by basically saying, "You know, you are getting dull. You are being lazy and lethargic. You are not discerning. If you keep this up, this is where it could lead." But the writer is also saying, "I am convinced of better things for you" (6:9). But one of the ways in which he believes better things will happen for them is by heeding the warning: "Look where laziness can end! Do not go there. God will keep you from going there. Do not go there." That is what he is saying. The

warning is meant to deliver us by telling us of the danger of the direction in which we are headed. The warning, as harsh as it is, is a means of grace.

He presents to us, the real Christians, the possibility of apostatizing even though it will never happen. A real Christian will never actually apostatize. I say that because of clearer passages in the Bible. I will confess to you that I have wrestled mightily with this passage. I have not always had the exact same view of this passage. I keep on trying to read more and refine my understanding a little. This is a hard passage, and one of the rules of Bible interpretation is that you do not stake everything on an obscure passage. You go to clear passages to help interpret the obscure ones. I believe that the clear teaching of the Bible elsewhere is that God keeps His own so that they persevere to the end. His grace is such that He keeps us in His hand. All whom the Father has given to the Son will come to Him and none will be lost. God does keep His people. Mentioning the possibility of falling away can actually be good for them, even though it would never happen. I call it a real hypothesis. This is only hypothetical, but it is presented in very real terms in order to warn us. He is saying, "Beware, watch out, wake up! Especially in the midst of persecution, do not go down this path."

What should we say, then, when we teach on this passage? By all appearances there are people who seem to be Christians and then they repudiate the faith. If you minister long enough, you will meet somebody like this and it is a very difficult case. Ontologically, I am saying I do not believe there is anyone who is regenerated and is ultimately lost. People appear to be regenerated and then are lost. The warning prevents us from falling into sin and teaches and encourages us to persevere. There are people who do not persevere. You could think of some in the Bible who started off well but did not persevere. Simon the magician had a religious splurge, but he did not persevere. Alexander and Demus are two who are mentioned by Paul who did not persevere. John Mark, on the other hand, seemed to have given up on the faith, but then he came back. So that is a bit of good news. You never know the final end of the matter. There are people who receive the Word of God with joy, but they have no root (Matthew 13). There are people who say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesize and perform miracles in Your name?" Absolutely, but Jesus says, "I never knew you." So there is much teaching in the Bible about people who get a taste of religion, and even experience the Christian life, but who are never actually members of the body of the redeemed. But for all that, from a human perspective, it seems like people are saved and lost. But this is God's perspective:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son ... And those He predestined, He also called; those whom He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.

It is all one. If He calls, predestines, and justifies you, you will also come to glory. That is God's perspective and He sees things as they really are; we do not. He is the one who sees clearly that all whom the Father gives to Jesus will come to Him. And they will persevere to the end. That is a divine perspective, which we cannot actually, clearly ever see.

Pastorally speaking then, I am telling you to give up the idea of trying to read souls and determine where somebody's soul is. Rather, understand that you will have to deal with real problems like this. And many of you will have, indeed, the heartbreak of watching somebody step away from the faith. What do you do? Well, you distinguish between sins. This is one thing we can do. If you want to lead people to persevere—I am now talking to you as leaders—one of the crucial things is to distinguish between sins. If it is a sin of ignorance, what do you do? Instruct, as I did with my daughter. "You broke the dish. Let me talk to you about dishes; let me talk to you about obedience and disobedience." Teach people. If

somebody commits a sin by accident, do not say, “Oh well, it was an accident; it does not count.” Teach them and explain it to them so they can grow in maturity.

For yourself and for others, what do you do with a sin that comes from lethargy, laziness, and indifference? I have actually heard people say things like, “I am too old to give up that sin.” That is scary. I have heard this from Christians on the floor of a presbytery meeting. “I know I should not be talking this way, but I have been talking this way for too many years to stop now.” That is very sad. It is a very dangerous thing when people are indifferent. It was a small sin, he was speaking intemperately and a little judgmentally, but the fact that it is a relatively small sin does not matter. He knew he was committing a sin and he did not care—that is what he said—and that is a deadly thing.

Of course, we have to be very strong with people who are thinking about committing a deliberate sin. Unfortunately, I had a conversation with a man who was thinking about having an affair. He said, “Now, you know if I have this affair, God will forgive me because He has to forgive. He always has to forgive, right?” I said, “Well, sort of. But if you deliberately commit a sin like this, the truth is we would have to call into question even your understanding of salvation. If you are sitting here talking to your pastor saying, ‘I know I can get some goodies out of the Gospel of God’s grace. I think I can go indulge myself for six months and when I get tired of it then I will be forgiven,’ then I have to wonder if you have understood what your salvation is all about.” Be very strong with that. But even when we are strong with that, I tell you the last word is always grace. We saw this in chapters three and four. In that section it seemed like the climax was when he said, “Nothing in creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account.” But that was not the climax. The climax was, “So come to the throne of grace, for there is always mercy and grace for our time of need.” Then in chapters five and six he was working through all these sins and it kept getting worse and worse—they were not listening, they were indifferent, and they were in danger of crucifying Christ again and submitting Him to public disgrace! But then he says quickly, “No, that is not what will happen. I have better hopes of you. I know that God is not unjust. He will not forget. You will persevere to the end. God has sworn it and He will fulfill His covenant.” The word of grace, mercy, and love is always the last word. There is a place for warning and rebuke, but it is never the last word in the Christian faith.