

What does it mean to care for another Christian? And who is responsible to care for the believers in a church?

Most Christians typically answer both of those questions in a very limited way that expresses human sentiment, church tradition, and popular culture depictions of church—**more than** what the Bible teaches.

Today we are going to look at a specific example of how to care for another believer that will likely challenge many of your assumptions about what **care for others** looks like.

Please open your Bibles to **Hebrews 3:7-14**. (PP)

Our text today tells us (in **verse 12**) that hardness of heart eventually leads someone to fall away from the living God. The word for that is **apostasy**—abandoning the faith that you once believed.

2 Peter describes apostasy in clear terms:

*If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. **2Peter 2:20-21***

One well known Bible scholar summarizes this in simple terms:

"It is far more serious to commit apostasy after professing belief than to never have come to faith" P.T.O'Brien, Hebrews, p.145

Most of you probably know someone who have committed apostasy. Some of your children. Your parents. Your brothers and sisters. Your friends. They have turned their backs on the faith and no longer follow Christ.

Scripture says it would have been better for them to have “not known the way of righteousness”—in other words—it would be better if they were unbelievers and had never heard about Christ than to turn away from Christ.

At the great throne of judgement, it will be far worse to face God as an apostate than someone who has never believed in Christ.

I tell you this because we need to be reminded how serious it is when a believer in Christ starts to harden their heart.

Today I hope to expand your view of what care in the church looks like by examining this text that shows us how to care for people whose hearts are hardening—and may be on the road to full apostasy.

Our re-definition (expansion) of care from this text looks like this:

Definition of Care: An Urgent Appeal to a Professing Christian Who is Becoming Hardened

Today we want to look at :

1. The Danger of Hardness of Heart (3:7-13)
2. The Deliverance from Hardness of Heart (3:13-14)

So let's begin by looking at what the text says about the danger of hardness of heart.

1. The Danger of Hardness of Heart (3:7-13)

This text of Scripture is a wonderful example of how to use Scripture to try to retrieve someone who is falling away from the living God.

Verse 7-11 is a quote from the OT book of Psalms. It's lifted from the last part of Psalm 95 and is describing the generation that was rescued from Egypt by Moses but were denied entrance into the promised land.

Now think about this. Psalm 95 was written long after Joshua & the second generation of Israelites had already entered in the promised land—about 500 years later.

So not entering his rest couldn't have meant the land to the generation reading Ps 95—nor to these NT readers of Hebrew—nor to us today.

So what is the rest referring to? The rest promised is the new heavens and earth—something God is preparing for his people.

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:14-16

The rest is not of this world. It's our final rest in the city of God.

So not entering God's rest is another way of saying—not entering heaven & living with God in the future. That's why **verse 11** associates this with God's wrath.

This is serious. Heaven & Hell. Where people will find themselves in the end. What makes the difference?

Look with me at **verse 12** for a moment. Do you see how unbelief is described? Unbelief is **EVIL**. Another way to translate it is:

A heart that is evil because it is unbelieving" P.T. OBrien, Hebrews

What about you today? Do you have faith in Christ?...or are you more like the person described in **verse 10**—always going astray in your heart—someone who does not know God's ways?

The wrath of God referenced in **verse 11** is a short form way of describing eternal punishment in Scripture. For example:

But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. Romans 2:5

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Ephesians 5:6

Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1Thessalonians 1:10

Sometimes people refer to a Christian as someone who is "**saved**". **Saved from what?** Saved from God's wrath & the punishment for their sins.

The present online culture that shames people publicly when they are deemed to break cultural laws, and the cancel culture that punishes people who don't conform to their standards is a tacit recognition that wrongdoing should be punished.

This generation, however, forgets that they are not the judge but the judged:

*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? **James 4:12***

What is the danger of hardness of heart? It's that it provokes God's wrath, and if not repented of, will lead to apostasy and God's judgement.

It's very serious. It's a matter of life and death. of heaven and hell.

Verse 7 & 8 tell us that this hardening may be happening right now as I speak to you. Whenever Scripture is opened we are hearing God's voice.

Whenever we choose not to listen to the word, we are hardening our hearts. Our hearts are always either getting softer or harder—like a lump of wax or lump of clay in the hot sun. One softens—one hardens—under **the same sun**.

How is your heart responding to what I have said so far? Are you resisting these words, throwing up objections, excuses...or maybe just ignoring it altogether as you drift in thought?

Coming to church on Sunday is a dangerous thing. If you are not **actively believing the word** preached each Sunday and choosing to act on it (like a ball of wax in the sun), then you are growing harder and moving away from the Lord the more exposure to Gods word you get (like a clay lump in the hot sun).

So what can be done to reverse the effects of hardness in our hearts?

2. The Deliverance from Hardness of Heart (3:13-14)

Before we can effectively rescue each other from the damaging effects of hardness of heart, we need to understand how hardness begins & does its deadly work.

If you look carefully at verses 12-13 you will see a pathway towards apostasy. This pathway is discovered by examining the cause & effect relationships detailed here.

There are 4 cause & effect relationships revealed in these two verses. Can you see them there?

We could diagram it as 4 dominos that each lead to the next in line falling.

The last **domino (#4)** to fall is falling away from the living God—Do you see that at the end of **verse 12**? That is apostasy. Rejecting the faith that we once believed.

What makes that happen? **Domino #3** is an evil, unbelieving heart. **Unbelief always comes before apostasy**—an inability to acknowledge and recognize truth.

That's pretty obvious I should think. But here is where it gets interesting. What is behind this unbelief? We find that in **verse 13**.

Domino #2 is hardness of heart. So unbelief doesn't produce hardness—its the opposite. Hardness of heart produces unbelief.

So now we come to **domino #1**—the first cause of the domino effect that ultimately leads to apostasy. Do you see it there at the end of verse 13? **The deceitfulness of sin**.

Sin first deceives—then hardens. The mind is captured first by lies, then the emotions are dulled and become insensitive to sin.

Now look at this sequence very carefully.

Let's go back to **domino #3—unbelief**. What is unbelief? Not believing what is true.

Now look at **domino #1- deceit**. What is deceit? Believing what is not true.

If I come to believe a lie, I will not be able to believe the truth that counters it. In other words, **behind all unbelief is belief**.

Now this insight gives us valuable clues to how the deceitful pathway is undone.

Here we get to the heart of the matter.

Look with me at **verse 12**. Here we find something that challenges many people's view of church life. Whose job is it to make sure people in the congregation are not becoming hard? Notice what it doesn't

say: "Take care pastors, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart."

The word translated **brothers** refers to every believer in the church (including the pastors). Remember that what is being discussed here is believers with hardened hearts—a very difficult hard area, & life & death matter. But its not entrusted to the professionals (pastors) but every believer. That means you.

Church is not something you observe passively—its something you participate in actively. The true **ministers** of the church are the people of the church.

Let's be clear what this means. It means husbands & wives are responsible for caring for the spiritual condition of each other. It means you are responsible to exhort your children...it means you are responsible to speak to your brother or sister who has hardened their hearts.

Why this is so necessary? Because deceit is rarely recognized or forsaken on our own. Just like when we look in the mirror and don't see our back. We need others to show us what is hidden from us.

Parents—when your children show signs of hardening, the message they don't need to hear is, "I remember the day you believed in Christ—I was there when you prayed to receive Jesus"...BUT rather..."Son—are you trusting in Christ now? Who will cover your sins on the day of judgement? How do you plan on facing God, if not with Christ?!

If **verse 12** tells us who is responsible. **Verse 13** tells us how we are to take care for each other. Do you see it there in verse 13? "***exhort one another every day***".

This word exhortation means many things. But at its heart is an urgent appeal to the heart. It is speaking directly to someone—not in casual conversation—but with earnestness.

Exhortation can involve encouragement, comfort, or warnings.

The context of this passage clearly indicates the exhortation required to the hardened heart is **a word of warning**. If you lean too far over the cliff, you might slip over the side.

Some of you will say—"Well where's the gospel in that?". My friends, we sometimes forget that the gospel is good news BECAUSE there is bad news that we need saving from.

The Covid vaccine is good news because the threat of getting Covid is real. If they came up with a vaccine to prevent you from growing a second nose, I doubt very much if you would take it. If it's not a pressing problem, then it's not good news to get it.

Warning is part of gospel message. Have you forgotten that it was Jesus who told people to "**flee from the wrath to come**"? Have you forgotten what Peter said to the crowds at Pentacost?

And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, **Save yourselves from this crooked generation."** **Acts 2:40**

Verse 14 goes on to tell us that perseverance in the present is the best proof of genuine faith in the past. Not that somebody prayed a prayer beside their bed, but holding their "original confidence firm to the end."

And how do we perseverance to the end? **Verse 13** tells us—we keep on exhorting each other—day after day after day. **We deliberately involve ourselves in each others lives.** We take responsibility for each other—because we love each other.

The difference between hardening...and perseverance is what is inserted in **between**—exhortation. This is what it means to care for each other. But it's a part of care that is often missing in our interactions with each other. Warning is not only unpopular in popular culture—it become very rare in church life as well.

My friends—its the loving thing to do. It is Gods's prescribed way of retrieving those whose hearts are hardening. If we stay silent we will prove the old adage:

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Edmund Burke