



Strive for Rest. Wield God's Word.

Hebrews 4:11-13

The verses we're going to be looking at today are verses that probably many of you memorized in the past or you've heard many times if you grew up in church. If you went to some kind of Bible college, these were verses to learn when you were studying about God's Word and whether or not it was trustworthy. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." Now, I definitely believe these verses emphasize the importance of God's Word, but one of the things we have to be careful when memorizing verses is to remember the context. In other words, why are these words being stated in Hebrews 4? *Why* is the author emphasizing the importance of God's Word now?

Well, it's been a few weeks since we were in Hebrews, so we might feel a little rusty about the context. What has the author been talking about up to this point? As a refresher, the author is writing to a local church probably in or near Rome and they're facing mounting persecution. Some in the church have given up. Others are tempted to go back to the judaistic system. The author writes on the supremacy of Jesus over all things and then, beginning in chapter 2, the author lays everything on the line. He commands them to *not* drift away from Jesus. He challenges them to realize that if you ignore or forget Jesus, you will eventually go the way of the others who have left him. You can't have a relationship with Jesus and be in neutral. Drifting leads to shipwreck.

But what's interesting, in this command to not drift, the author of Hebrews emphasizes that his concern is not just about us individually, but his concern is that the local church doesn't shipwreck together. Think about a ship at sea with me. It must stay on course. Depending on the winds, people need to raise or lower sails. If there's a storm, all hands on deck! Think of the local church like people on a ship. I think in our Western culture, we tend to think that the Christian life is me in my little boat. As long as I'm moving forward in my boat, I'm good. I mean, I'm concerned about other people, but they have their boat and I have mine. Because we think we're in the boat alone, we think we're free to make whatever decisions we think is best for ourselves; so, we participate in this thing here and that thing over there. We get together with the people we like most and, of course, we go to church on Sunday. As long as we feel we are encouraged, we're good. And, if we get the chance to do something with other believers, great. But we really don't need them.

What if this is *not* how the Scriptures speak regarding the Christian journey? This local church in Rome was to recognize that they're all in the same boat. The author states that in order to *not drift from Christ*, they must have concern for one another. In 3:13 he commands them to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today. . ." (3:13).

Think of the boat illustration again – if we’re all in the same boat, everyone is essential, right? Whether there’s a storm or there’s peace on the waters, we all have roles in order to help one another in the journey to the shore. And, in the midst of storms, we cannot simply grab a hold of a piece of rope and say, “Well, at least I’m secure!” while you watch other believers in the church go overboard. We need one another and we must have a love for each other. If drifting is so dangerous and we must gaze on Jesus and listen to God, then we ought to have a deep and abiding concern (and love) for the community of believers with whom we’ve committed.

Why must we live this way, though? Well, the author of Hebrews tells us why – Jesus is superior, he is worthy of being followed, and he has saved a people to be part of God’s family, not merely individuals to be part of his corporation. Therefore, to deny Jesus is to reject all that is good, beautiful and best. To reject Jesus is to incur stricter judgment than even the Israelites in the wilderness wanderings. But to embrace Jesus is to know we have eternal rest and that we *together* are headed for that rest. So, we’re told in chapters 3 and 4 that we are to not harden our hearts against Jesus. He is worthy to be followed. Don’t harden your hearts!

This is the backdrop for the verses. So, let’s pray together and then we will read the passage together: (Pastoral Prayer to include prayer for another church: Emmanuel Free Church of Spring Lake. Pastor Justin Smith. Request: We are entering into a very busy season of doing evangelism in our community so participation from our church and souls saved are what I pray for. Also if you would pray for the preaching, our unity and our faithfulness to Christ in everything.)

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. ¹

Don’t harden your hearts. Superior rest is found in the superior Savior, Jesus! Then, in verse 11, we read, “Let us strive to enter it. . . . For the word of God is living and active. . . .” Wait, what? What does the Word of God have to do with striving to enter rest? Well, here are my two cents on this. The author is concerned that *no one* fall by the same kind of disobedience as the Israelites in the wilderness wanderings. And, what was their disobedience? Ultimately, they didn’t take heed to God’s word through Moses. They didn’t take it seriously. They took it so flippantly that it seemed that almost whenever God said something, they would say something opposite and offer their own perceived wisdom.

When I read these words and understand the context, I realize how practical and down-to-earth these words really are. Don’t raise your hand or respond out loud to this question, but how many of you regularly meditate on God’s Word? How many of you love God’s Word? How many of you long to know more of what God has spoken?

Did you know there’s a direct correlation between your embracing God’s Word and your obedience to God? This isn’t to say that if you don’t read your Bible everyday that you therefore hate God, but this is

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 4:11–13.

to say that the more the Holy Spirit reveals to your heart and mind about God, the more you are led in worshipful and zealous obedience.

Why else does the author say that we are to “strive to enter that rest?” Just to clarify, the rest he’s talking about is the rest found in Jesus – knowing that because of Jesus; we are forgiven of sins, reconciled with God and given eternal hope. Jesus took our punishment so that we could receive God’s acceptance! And someday, we will enter a land where we will live with God forever – a kingdom of no sin and a kingdom of ever-expanding delight.

But why does the author say, “strive to enter that rest?” I said it a few times in previous sermons, but I need to say it again. Those who are forgiven by Jesus are promised to *grow* in following after him. The author isn’t saying that you save yourself by your striving. In the previous chapter, in verse 19, he says that people didn’t enter because of unbelief. We are rescued through faith. When we depend on Jesus as our hope and forgiveness, we are saved. But Jesus doesn’t just leave us there. Salvation includes God increasingly conforming us to his heart until someday we see him. So, those who are saved will grow in their salvation until they actually experience the fullness of it someday when they see Jesus face-to-face.

This is where “strive to enter” comes in. If you have trusted Jesus, you experience hints of that rest in Jesus today. But we’re not yet fully experiencing it. Therefore, we are to *strive* until we enter that rest. This word for “**strive**” can be understood as being earnest. One person puts it this way, “**to concentrate one’s energies on the achievement of a goal**” (P.E. Hughes, p. 162).

Question, Christian. Have you been rescued by Jesus? Absolutely. Are you guaranteed the rest found in him? Yes! Then focus your eyes there and *run* to the goal. This is the flip-side of the command to not drift. In other words, “Don’t drift away from Jesus. Focus your energies on the goal of Christ!” But right here I think some of you could have your thoughts derailed. You aren’t thinking context. You’re not thinking of being on the same boat with other believers here. You’re simply thinking, “I will focus my energies on Christ.” But are you thinking about the people in this room, concerned that they’re focusing their energies on Jesus?

The command here is in the plural: let us strive. In other words, we are in this together, and I cannot be content with *just me* moving forward. David Pollard gave me a helpful illustration and I wonder if the children here will appreciate this one. There was a movie that came out a few years ago called *Monster’s University*. In that movie, there are these teams of monsters who are trying to win a prize. These teams have to go through various competitions. The first competition is where they have this obstacle to make it through. It even involves pain. Kids, remember when those balls get attached to them and the monsters get real big? But what happens at the end of the race. The one team that we’re all wanting to root for make it through the finish line, but they make it through at different times. But the rules said they had to finish *as a team*. So, they got last place.

God’s command reveals that we don’t make it to the eternal rest alone. We make it there as a team. Well, if that’s the case, then I should be concerned about my church family. I shouldn’t just be concerned about my closer friends, but by all the believers to whom I’ve committed. I should be concerned about the person who sits on the other side of the auditorium even!

Based on this then, we should ask ourselves, **How do we encourage the believers around us to not harden their hearts?** How can we encourage each other to not fall away by the same sort of disobedience? How can we help each other to be earnest in following after Jesus? Through the Word of

God. The Israelites didn't listen to God's word and a whole generation failed to enter God's rest. But, through God's Word, there is hope. Verses 12 and 13 emphasize to us that **We must embrace and wield God's Word with one another so that we do not fall away.** Now, just in case someone here says, "How do you come to that conclusion?" My answer is, "Look at the first word of verse 12: For. Ventura, every word matters. And the word "For" connects verses 11 and 12 together. So, when he says that we are to be concerned we don't fall in the same disobedience and then says "for," he's saying that the Word is essential for God's people and to dishonor it is to dishonor Jesus and to deny the Lord. So, with simplicity and clarity, the author gives three main reasons why the Word of God is essential to heed.

1. God's Word is active.

Verse 12 starts off saying, "For the word of God is living and active. . ."² Now, please understand that when the author of Hebrews is talking about the word of God, he was talking in context first about God's word through Moses. In the author's day, he didn't have all the New Testament in mind. However, the Bible tells us that all of Scripture is breathed out by God, and so I believe we can make the application to the Old and New Testaments that we have. This is God's Word.

For us then, we must recognize that here's one area where drifting from Jesus can begin. We can become bored with God's Word. Think of it from a different perspective. How many have ever been to a wedding before? I've officiated several, and I honestly love weddings. But as I sometimes go through premarital counseling with a couple and then I stand there on the platform as they exchange vows, I also have a smirk because I think, "They have no idea what's ahead of them!" I'm not trying to be pessimistic, but instead, I think about even the small things in marriage that become annoyances. And, this beautiful looking couple is going to have waded through all of this. By God's grace, they will and they will become stronger. But some seasons are harder than others, and there's often a complaint with married couples that they just don't have anything left to talk about. They share nothing in common, so they say. But I don't think that's the case as much as they have become bored with each other. The wife speaks, but the husband is doing something he likes. So, he doesn't listen. The husband talks, but the wife is concerned about other things and feels her husband is insensitive, so she doesn't listen. Both spouses have preferences and so they don't stop to hear. Imagine the wife who tries to talk to her husband and not only does he not listen, but then he says, "Honey, whenever you talk, I'm bored." What does that communicate to his wife? He communicates he doesn't value *her*.

Now, think about how you relate to the Bible. Do you think it's acceptable for you to be "bored to death" with the Bible? I mean, I get it. Personally, I've struggled at various points in my Bible read – especially in Leviticus. But, Ventura, if God's Word is GOD's Word, then my boredom with it reveals I honestly don't value God. If God says that all of this is necessary for life and godliness (and he does say that), then I need every aspect of it. My boredom doesn't excuse me. Instead, it actually indicts me. My boredom with God's Word reveals I don't value him.

The reason why I use the word "bored" is because of a common phrase we use. We say "bored to death." That phrase is in direct contrast to how the author refers to God's Word. He says God's Word is *living* and *active*. God's Word is not dead. It's alive and active. The word "active" can also be translated "effective." That word takes us back to the prophet Isaiah who quotes God as saying that his word "shall

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 4:12.

not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”³

If you believe God’s Word is dead, you’re missing it. And if you believe God’s Word is dead, then you’re missing Jesus, who is Superior! The psalmist prays to the Lord to revive him according to God’s Word. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the entire Bible and it highlights the beauty and value of God’s Word. Without God’s Word, we’re blind, we remain in our sins, we miss out on hearing God speak to us.

As I think about this statement of the Word being living and active, I’m reminded of the Reformation time. The church was facing bleak days. People were blinded and didn’t know the gospel, then God rose up a man named Martin Luther, but he did so through the Word. Luther was studying and studying the Bible. It seemed despairing to him until one day, the truth shone like a light piercing his heart. The living Word pierced him and then he proclaimed the Word. Others came to the knowledge of God’s truth and all of Europe and even the world was affected by that one monk. I want you to hear how Luther described his efforts: **“I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept. . .the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it, I did nothing. The Word did it all”** (as quot. in R.K. Hughes, p. 122).

Since the Word of God is living and active, what’s the application to us? We must remember the communal context. We don’t want to fall away. We are called to strive to enter his rest – to concentrate our energies on the goal! Since that’s the context then, I think the application is that we must wield the Word with one another and be committed to use it with one another. I need reminders from others of Jesus’ worth. I need to be reminded of what the Scriptures say or else I will drift. I need to be reminded that I live for a greater Kingdom than the USA. We must preach the Word, teach the Word, speak the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word to one another. And, we must believe that the Word is sufficient in one another’s lives. Obviously this has implications to us individually, too. You’re not going to wield the Word if you don’t care about it yourself.

There’s also a negative application here. When Isaiah said God’s Word accomplishes what it sets out to do – that includes condemnation. This fits the context of Hebrews, too. Just because you may say, “God’s Word is boring and I don’t feel it’s effective” doesn’t make it so. Instead, God’s Word is just as effective and active – but it’s effective and active in your judgment. Oh Christian, will you spurn Jesus and spurn God’s Word? Why not rather embrace God’s living and active Word and rejoice that God’s Words are greater than any other words ever spoken! They come from the One who is Life himself! But his words aren’t only living and active,

2. God’s Word is penetrating.

Verse 12 continues by say that the word of God is “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow. . .”⁴

Sharper than any two-edged sword? The word picture reveals that God’s Word is not blunt. It’s not like a hammer that smashes. It pierces with precision in order to open up and reveal things. And, by the way, God’s sword is not like a human instrument that loses its sharpness. God’s word is always piercing and penetrating, successful in revealing *everything* it cuts open.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 55:11.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 4:12.

I believe the emphasis of the phrase “division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow” emphasizes that God’s Word goes to the very core of our being. Those things which are indivisible are divided by God. There is nothing that can hide from God’s all-seeing eye. One commentator in the 16th century wrote, **“there is nothing so hard or firm in a man, nothing so deeply hidden that the efficacy of the word does not penetrate through to it”** (as quot. in P.E. Hughes, p. 165).

Now, how does God’s Word being like a sword apply to the Hebrew Christians and to us? Well, like Adam and Eve, we work really hard to try to hide. We sin and feel shame and our first response is to try to cover-up and make ourselves look better. But, like in the situation with Adam and Eve, no one can hide from God. So, as the author of Hebrews writes to these Christians who are debating going back to Judaism, they could say, “Well, Moses is worth listening to and angels are important, too, right?” They have their theological arguments to go back, and the author says, “God knows your heart. He knows what you really want.” You may sound spiritual or you may have told yourself that you’re fine and God understands – but God’s Word pierces your heart and sees exactly where your heart is. Will you submit to what the Word says or are you going to insist that your understanding is right?

How many times I’ve listened to professing Christians say something like, “I know God says to do this, but he knows my heart.” And they say that without any godly fear. Hold on a second! If you’re persisting in disobeying God, him knowing your heart should lead you to repent! Turn to him for forgiveness.

There’s more application, though. Remember this comes with the local church in mind. If God’s Word is what pierces that means that we are not ultimately responsible to “fix” someone. I’m not the Holy Spirit. Oh, how many times have I taken out my own sword – my human wisdom – and tried to help people? In the process I scar and tear and bruise those around me. How much better is God’s Word! The Holy Spirit works through the Word to reveal people’s hearts, and I can be confident in the living, active, penetrating Word to do what it is going to do. If we trust God’s Word, then what we are called to do is speak the Word to each other and minister His Word to each other so that hearts can be revealed. As a result, God draws his children closer to him, causing them to focus on the goal and strive towards the rest!

Christian, do you speak God’s Word to people? Are you filled with the Word, Ventura? This is one of the reasons why I emphasize the Fighter Verses week-in and week-out. Blessed in the man who meditates on the Word. Those who meditate have the Word in their hearts – and I can’t speak God’s Word if I don’t know it. But if it’s hidden in my heart, I can speak it to others. Praise God he gives us the opportunity to wield his sword with his children! Praise God for his piercing and penetrating Word! Don’t harden your heart. Don’t fall away. Together, let’s strive to minister to each other with the Word. But there’s one more point about the Word:

3. God’s Word is convicting.

Verse 12 ends with: discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.⁵

The word “discerning” doesn’t simply mean that God knows why you’re doing what you’re doing. The emphasis of this word is actually that God’s Word passes judgment on the thoughts and intentions or our hearts. That’s conviction.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 4:12.

Think of this statement in the context of people who are drifting from Jesus. They can feel all things are ok. They can think everything's fine. But what does God's Word say? Recently I watched a video that showed multiple "close call" situations. One was a guy standing by a railroad track, the train is coming down and the man has his back turned from the train. He obviously thinks things are fine, but then he realizes that he is too close to the tracks. Within a second, he moves. Have you ever had a close call? I hate those situations. And, in some ways, we can feel so stupid because we realize that we thought *everything* was fine until we saw that we could have lost *everything*.

The same is true in this world and with us. We can live our lives in sin, thinking we're fine. But God's Word tells us otherwise. Are you going to heed God's discerning Word or will you embrace the lie? Again, think about how this applies to us as a church. Since God's Word discerns, we will have to speak hard passages to each other at times. Let me ask you: are you in relationships with people who will speak hard truths to you? Do you welcome people lovingly confronting you? If God's Word pierces, then it's going to make sense that if I use God's Word with any of you, you're going to feel convicted at some point. And yet, often, as a defense mechanism, when someone confronts us, we say something like, "Well, you think that way, but I think this way. We'll just agree to disagree." But if my friend is quoting the Bible accurately, then we can't agree to disagree.

Ventura, we must welcome and foster relationships with people that are going to speak hard things to us. This is part of exhorting one another daily! But we don't do this simply in order to feel pain. If you're a Christian, then the penetrating Word is like a surgical knife that continues to grow us to be more like Jesus. No longer does God's Word condemn the Christian, instead the Word is a delight and is spoken to our souls to strengthen us. When God reveals sin to his children, he does it out of love. When he reveals sin, he's revealing his commitment to our eternal good. And when sin is revealed, we have the opportunity to turn to the Lord and experience more of his never-ending love and grace to forgive and strengthen us to obey him!

So, how do we help one another to *not* drift from Jesus? We can't turn to ourselves and our own plans. Too often, I think churches turn to special plans and procedures that are simply man's wisdom. I get it. But I have to realize that we can't do spiritual surgery with a Fisher-Price scalpel. Only God and his Word is sufficient. He's given it to us to know and share with others. Let's wield the sword. He has given it to us in his kindness to draw his children closer to Jesus and give them endurance until they experience the fullness of rest in Jesus! Because of things like this, one ancient author wrote of the Word: **"O thou elect blade and sharpest sword who art able powerfully to penetrate the hard shell of the human heart, transfix my heart with the shaft of thy love. . . . Pierce, O Lord, pierce, I beseech thee, this most obdurate mind of mine with the holy and powerful [sword] of thy grace."**

Immediately after the author talks about the power of the Word, he then says in verse 13, **"¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**"⁶ Quickly, we can separate God's Word for God himself – and we can never do that. Why is God's Word so important and vital and powerful? Because it comes from God – who is eternally and infinitely glorious. For those contemplating leaving the faith – remember you're not just leaving words on a page – you're leaving God himself. For those who are yearning to grow in the Lord – remember the Bible isn't just words on a page – they are words from God that he miraculously brought about through the agency of many human beings over the course of centuries!

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 4:13.

For those who want to leave the faith, there should be a healthy fear that everyone is naked and exposed to God. And the reason is because *everything and everyone* gives an account to him. You may not feel it today. Even though God's Words speaks today, God is showing mercy to you and delaying his judgment. But there is a day when judgment comes. Are you ready? Of this verse, one commentator wrote, ". . .to the sinning, self-righteous heart, apart from the grace of God this brings nothing but unmitigated terror." The term naked reveals utmost vulnerability. The word "exposed" is actually an interesting word that we're not quite sure as to the meaning. Often it referred to a knife being put at the neck of someone. Death is immanent. God knows every sinful desire, thought, action. All the worst thoughts and deeds you've tried to hide are before his eyes. He sees it all, and he would be just to punish you.

But he doesn't yet. Why? Because, as Paul said in Romans 2:4, "**God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance**".⁷ To repent is to turn from yourself and your ways and to turn to God for forgiveness and mercy. And, for those who turn to God for grace, do you know what God does? He takes away the sword of condemnation. That sword of condemnation was placed on Jesus at the cross – where he bore our sins. And not only does God take away the condemnation, he also clothes us. Remember what happened after Adam and Eve were punished? God killed an animal and clothed Adam and Eve. Later in the Old Testament, we're given a story of one priest who had defiled clothes and was before God's judgment. He could have been declared guilty, but the angel of the Lord gave him new clothes! In the New Testament, we're told that the new clothes are the righteousness of Jesus himself! Instead of being naked and ashamed, we are clothed and righteous in God's sight.

Oh, Christian, this is what the Word teaches us. Ventura, as a church, do we want to drift from Christ? How could we drift from one who loves us so dearly? With serious joy then, let's take God's Word seriously, meditating on it day and night. Let's learn it together in various contexts like Ladies Bible Studies and Sunday School. Let's encourage each other with it through congregational singing or even over lunch, speaking about what we're learning. Let's deliver the Word to one another as we are exhorting daily! And, even when we don't feel like the Word did anything, let's believe what God says – his word is active, penetrating and convicting. It will only cease to be these things if God ceases to exist! And that will never happen. **God is our eternal Father who promises to bring us into his eternal rest, giving us strength by his infinitely powerful Words. Let's strive to enter the rest and wield his words all the way until we enter the kingdom to come!**

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⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 2:4.