

Exhortation to Christian Maturity

TIME: About A.D. 67mm **PLACE:** unknown

Scripture Text: Hebrews 5:11-6:3, 9-12

Hebrews 5:11-14

¹¹ *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.* ¹² *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!* ¹³ *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.* ¹⁴ *But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

Hebrews 6:1-3, 9-12

¹ *Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,* ² *instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.* ³ *And God permitting, we will do so.*

⁹ *Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation.* ¹⁰ *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.* ¹¹ *We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized.* ¹² *We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

LESSON AIMS

1. Cite characteristics of spiritual immaturity and spiritual maturity.
2. Describe some of the risks of prolonged spiritual immaturity.
3. Identify one step or action he or she will take toward greater spiritual maturity.

INTRODUCTION

In an era before the most modern surgical techniques, a beautiful baby was born to a certain couple. The baby seemed quite normal and healthy in every respect. For the first few months he grew and learned to do the things that growing babies do. But after a few more months his parents noticed that his head was not growing in proportion to his body. Before long his cooing and laughter ceased and a blank look came over his face.

A medical examination revealed that there were no fissures in the bone structure of the baby's head. The cranial bones were fused together at birth and thus could not expand to accommodate a growing brain. With the brain so compressed, it could not develop, and the boy became severely retarded. Modern medicine might have been able to correct this problem, but in those days that was not a possibility.

The spiritual problems that the first readers of the book of Hebrews faced were rather like this. When they had first become Christians, there was every reason to believe that they would continue to grow and become mature Christians. But something had stunted their spiritual growth. One of the hardest things for any leader, whether a parent, a teacher, or an employer, is to figure out the right combination of admonishment and encouragement in his instruction of those under his care. If one or the other is neglected, the result may be stagnant complacency or crippling discouragement.

The author of Hebrews was concerned about a lack of spiritual maturity in his readers. As we have noted in previous lessons this quarter, the largely Jewish readership of this epistle faced the constant temptation to drift back into legalistic Judaism. In spiritual matters it is certainly true that a failure to move forward results in moving backward. The biblical

writer needed to confront the people about their failure to grow and at the same time encourage them not to lose their confidence in Christ's power.

The world's way to advance is to try to earn one's way into acceptance. But the Christian grows as he trusts in the victory that is already his in Christ. Increased maturity flows out of the sure hope that Christ will complete the work He has started in him (Phil. 1:6).

The Lesson

An Admonition about Immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Having just set forth the greatness of Christ's priesthood (vs. 5-10 which were in last week's lesson), the writer of Hebrews abruptly halted. It is as if speaking of Christ fired his soul to go on to richer and richer truths about Him, but he was afraid his readers were not ready to receive them. There is evident frustration in his words.

The truths the biblical writer wished to communicate, no doubt concerning Christ's priesthood and the order of Melchizedek (a subject he would take up again in chapter 7), would be "hard to be uttered" (5:11), that is, it would be difficult to make them understandable in the state the believers were in. His readers were spiritually lazy and sluggish. The problem was more a matter of the heart than of the mind.

The Christians being addressed here had evidently been professing believers for some time. They should have been reaching the point where they could teach others the things they themselves had been taught. The word "ought" (v. 12) indicates that this was not just an option. Every believer, not just the official preachers and teachers of the church, should over time grow enough in understanding to help younger believers in learning the truth.

Instead of being teachers, though, the people had to relearn the basic principles of the faith, no doubt reflecting the adverse effect of Judaistic ideas. They still needed to master "the very ABC of divine revelation" (Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans). Put another way, they could handle only milk, the food of infants, not the solid food that marks the diet of a maturing person (1 Cor. 3:1,2).

1. Why did the writer of Hebrews seem to be frustrated (Hebrews 5:11,12)?

The word "unskillful" (v. 13) means "untried" or "unpracticed." This probably connects with the spiritual sluggishness referred to in verse 11 (6:12). Because of their own reluctance to press on in the truth, the people had not gained in experience and maturity. They lacked the experiential understanding to apply to their lives the righteousness that springs from the gospel and godly teachings.

When a person trusts in Christ as his Savior, he is clothed in Christ's righteousness. He then is to grow in righteousness, becoming more and more like Him (1 John 3:2,3).

As a child grows up, he normally wants to be treated more and more like an adult. He wants to hear about those things he has been told he is not old enough to handle yet. In the spiritual realm as well, we need to reach a certain level of maturity before we can understand the truth as we should. Until then we are prone to be "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). The greater understanding we desire comes only with spiritual growth, and that growth comes only as we apply ourselves to study God's Word.

The body is built up by physical discipline and exercise, and likewise the mind grows more supple as it is trained. It is the same with spiritual judgment and wisdom. Those who are ready for the solid meat of doctrine are those who have done their spiritual workouts, who by steady practice have learned what is good and bad.

Unlike the people that the writer of Hebrews was so concerned about, they will not be tempted to leave behind the sufficiency of Christ and fall back into old, ineffectual ways of living. Their spiritual faculties and perceptions (the evident meaning of "senses" in 5:14) are oriented toward what is wholesome and good.

2. Why were the believers not yet ready for "solid food" (vs. 13,14)?

One reason for slow learning of Christian truths is that we sense no urgency for it. We intend to do it later. When everything else is done, then we will find time to study the faith. Of course, "everything else" is never done!

Another problem is that teaching these truths is a low priority in some churches. The study of Bible content is de-emphasized in favor of topical studies, current issues, or a program of support groups. As a result, many Christians get stuck at the elementary level. These Christians are never quite sure of what they believe. As a result, they remain "babies" in the faith.

Perhaps this is the reason that it is often difficult to distinguish non-Christians from Christians in lifestyle. Those who are not mature remain unable to discern good from evil, whether in their personal lives or in the culture that surrounds them.

3. Why do you think that many Christians are so slow to learn the truths of the faith? What ill effects result from Christians remaining in the "elementary school" of the faith for so many years?

A Call for Growth (Hebrews 6:1-3)

The "principles of the doctrine of Christ" refers to the most elementary truths (literally, the beginnings) about Christ. Of course, leaving these behind did not mean they were ever to forget their importance or value but simply that they were to build on their foundation and grow toward "perfection," which here means maturity and completeness.

The author of Hebrews then gave a list of what these elementary doctrines were. Their "repentance from dead works" meant that they had to turn away from Judaism that sought God's favor through observing the law. Instead, they had found God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That faith was the key to acceptance before God is clearly intimated in the Old Testament (see Gen. 15:6) and then fully explained in the New (Rom. 1:17).

4. What were the "elementary teachings about Christ" (Hebrews 6:1)? Why were they to leave them?

Take a close look at the four topics listed in this verse. If asked to explain them, could you do it? These are some of the "milk" issues of spiritual growth. Those who are still stuck on understanding these will have a hard time moving on to Christian maturity!

"Baptisms" here is plural, suggesting that a part of knowing basic doctrine is being able to distinguish between Christian baptism and the various ceremonial washings performed by Jews of that day. The concern in Hebrews is not so much the external rituals that are referred to but rather the spiritual truths to which they point. The cleansing power of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit are important foundational truths.

Concerning the "laying on of hands", the truth being emphasized is the conferral of blessings, in particular the power of the Holy Spirit. This action of the apostles by which the Holy Spirit was imparted to some first-century believers (Acts 19:1-7). The laying-on of hands was also used to recognize those who had been selected for offices in the church (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6).

The "resurrection of the dead" and "eternal judgment" are foundational doctrines that naturally go together. The resurrection mentioned here is the general resurrection of all the dead, who then must face the judgment. For Christians this will be a wonderful experience that brings joy. But to the unsaved it will bring only fear, despair, and condemnation (John 5:28,29).

Paul clearly pointed out that without the resurrection of the dead, all the teachings of Christianity would be pointless and vain (1 Cor. 15:12-19). The principle that every man will be called to account for his life is a cornerstone for morality and purposeful living (2 Cor. 5:10,11; Heb. 9:27). This is basic!

In verse 3 (today's lesson text) "And this will we do" the author now uses chapter 6 as a warning and admonition to move his readers on to maturity. "If God permit" acknowledges that when a man is going in the wrong direction, only God can change his life.

5. What is the significance of "baptisms" in (v. 2)?

Encouragement to Faithfulness (Hebrews 6:9-12)

If those who professed faith in Christ drifted away from Him and back into Judaistic legalism, it would be evidence that their faith was not genuine (vs. 4-8). This made moving forward in the faith a matter of vital importance.

After the sobering warning of the preceding verses, the biblical writer turned to words of encouragement. For the only time in the epistle, he referred to the people as "beloved" (v. 9). He called them that because he had confidence that they were truly regenerate and would not fall into apostasy. He said that although he had spoken some stern words, he had seen good evidence in their lives that they were truly redeemed, that they did indeed possess a living faith (James 2:17-18). He loved them as true brothers and sisters in Christ. In verse 10 we see spelled out what the "better things . . . that accompany salvation" (v. 9) are.

6. How did the biblical writer show confidence in his readers (v. 9)?

The recipients of this letter had been performing works that demonstrated their love for God and their fellow believers. That meant they were following the two great commands of God (Matt. 22:36-40). More precisely, they had shown their allegiance, honor, and love for God by serving His people. Even better, their ministry to the saints had been steadfast, reflecting the steadfastness of their love for God.

In light of their good work, they could be confident of God's love. God is more faithful than we could ever be, and He will never break faith with His people. Believers need never fear such unrighteousness from Him.

7. What was the evidence of true faith that the believers showed (v. 10)?

The believers had been steadfast in their faith, and now the biblical writer exhorted them to continue on this good path. A Christian lives by faith as he remains true to what he knows is his blessed condition in Christ, no matter what his outward circumstances may be. As they persevered in serving God throughout their whole lives, they would grow in the assurance that they were indeed His people (2 Pet. 1:10).

The original readers of this epistle, like all believers, led paradoxical lives. They were truly redeemed and bearing good fruit, but they also were still subject to temptation and sin. They were prone to spiritual laziness. The word for "slothful" in Hebrews 6:12 is the same word translated "dull" in 5:11. They were not to capitulate to this spiritual lethargy but rather to follow the good example of those who diligently lived out their faith (Heb. 11:1-40; 2 Pet. 1:3-9).

"Patience" (Heb. 6:12) or long-suffering, is a by-product of faith and the Spirit's work in a believer (Gal. 5:22). When we have confidence in Who God Is and what He has done for us, we are able to endure any circumstances (again see Hebrews 11) and joyfully seek to grow in our knowledge of Him. We thereby give evidence that we will inherit the riches of God's kingdom.

8. What would happen as the believers remained steadfast in faith (vs. 11, 12)?

CONCLUSION

Enduring—and Growing—to the End

Yogi Berra once observed that a game is "not over until it's over." What is true of a game of baseball is certainly just as true of a Christian life. Just as it is possible for a baseball team to lose the game in the last half of the last inning, the

writer of Hebrews warns the readers that it is possible to fall away even if one has made a good start in the Christian life. Life is much more like a marathon than a hundred-yard dash. We must persist to the end! The writer repeats this theme in Hebrews 12:1,2. Spiritual growth helps us endure.

The apostle Paul, imprisoned and facing execution, gives us an example of steadfast faith: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:7,8).

PRAYER

Most Holy God, we thank You for the wondrous promise of eternal life. May we grow in the knowledge that we need to achieve the spiritual maturity necessary for lifelong faithfulness. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

A crown of life follows a faithful life.