

The Case for Christian Maturity

Hebrews 5:11 - 6:12

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So, I have a confession to make. This passage uses a word that would describe my present life as an athlete. The text which we are reading this morning uses a word in the opening verse, verse 11, and then reuses that word in verse 12 of chapter 6. That word is “sluggishness.” And that’s no joke for me. Just only slightly a few years ago, I was regularly getting up at 4:30 in the morning. I was on my bike by 5:00 a.m., meeting my training partner by 5:15, and we had 30 miles done by 8:00 a.m. This was a regular practice for me. And I remember thinking in those wonderful days that, “You know, I really see myself as a cyclist until the day I die.” And I would see the athletes at age 80, and they’re still riding. And I’m like, “Yeah, the great thing about cycling is you can do it way into your older years.” But barely five years later, my alarm no longer goes off at 4:30. I barely get in a few hundred miles a year. I used to do thousands. And I recognize that I needed someone to come alongside, to text me, and to say, “What has happened to you? Did you forget where your bicycle is hanging?”

And so one of the things that I was actively involved in is a social media app for athletes. It’s called Strava. And what you do is you update your ride. There’s no sharing of, like, “Hey, how you doing?” It’s just—you post your ride or your run, whatever you do. And so you know you’re in bad shape when you post a ride and someone says, “It’s so great to see you back again.” This is an experience that I’m having regularly now. I’m grateful to those of you who have been reminding me I need to ride, by the way. You know who you are. But it has been a very, very real existential understanding of the threat of sluggishness. It didn’t happen overnight. It happened slowly. And so now I find myself—it’s really hard. It’s really hard. But I’m grateful for those who have spoken truth into my life, who have reminded me of what I once used to do. Though I don’t have to go back there, I can build on that foundation and have other goals. I know I need that.

Well, likewise, this preacher of Hebrews has just spent several paragraphs and a couple of chapters talking about the majesty, the glory of who Christ is. And as is his practice, he’ll go through long segments of declaring deep truths about who God is, who Christ is, and the nature of the gospel. Then he will transition into exhortation or application. This is just one of those segments. And it actually happens in the middle of the letter and comes just prior to what will be the longest section, where he seeks to exalt Christ in all of his beauty and complexity. But before he does, he dives deep into exhortation and is making a case for Christian maturity. And so he begins with sluggishness, and he ends with it. But what is in the middle is some of the most direct teaching that he does in the entire book. But it is written out of love. So I encourage you to receive it in that way. Hebrews 5:11 through 6:12.

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the

laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you might awaken us from any sluggishness in our hearts, our minds, our bodies. May you enable us to be awakened to it, but may you also remind us of the power that is ours who claim faith in Jesus Christ to move from sluggishness to renewal; to move from cynicism back to hope; to move from self-dependence to greater dependence on Christ. Help us move from sluggishness and dullness to the earnest work of the faith. Do this, we ask, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You see in your outline as we move through this passage together, the faith foundation, verses 1 to 3; falling away, verses 3 through 8; and full assurance, verses 9 through 12. Faith foundation being the first. As I said in my opening, what he says in verse 11 that is translated here, "Since you have become dull of hearing," that word *dull* can also be translated as it is in 6:12 as *sluggishness*. "Since you have become sluggish in your hearing." His concern is what? His concern is twofold. One, that they are simply still relying on and staying in only the elementary truths and are not yet moving on to taking in solid foods. Both of which form the foundation.

He tells us here in verses 1 through 3 that the foundation of our faith is built on what he calls here "elementary truths." And he lists them. And what he says to them is this. He says that they are simply things which are familiar to us—the foundation of repentance from dead works. What in the world does that mean? What it means is these are, if you remember—his primary audience is those who are Jewish who have now converted to following Christ. So they are Jewish converts to the faith. So when he says here "repentance by dead works," it means that you cannot achieve faith with Jesus Christ, you cannot receive enough grace, you cannot establish your righteousness by simply obeying the old laws thinking that that is what will make you acceptable to God or to Christ.

So what needs to happen is you need to repent of the ways in which you've tried to think that you can obey your way to being accepted by God. That is repentance through dead works. Meaning you can appeal to God, you can, in hopes of turning away from sin, simply give yourself to a bunch of rigid rules. Repentance means to turn from and to turn to. So in the hopes that you can turn from sin, simply by laying ground rules of activity and obedience, that somehow you're going

to be able to escape sin or receive acceptance before God—he says, no. We’ve learned that that doesn’t happen. It cannot happen. But rather, you ought to turn from those dead works into faith in Christ, which is what he’s saying. Faith toward God. And therefore, receiving what are the basic instructions of the faith. Baptism, why we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is a public profession of faith. But that it is also a public recognition that what saves us is not the washing, but what it symbolizes: God through Christ brought on through the working power of the Holy Spirit, having faith in what Christ has done, is the only thing that saves us. So baptism is an elementary truth.

The laying on of hands—that is when we are sick or we are in need of prayer, asking others to come alongside, laying on hands, asking others who are brothers and sisters in Christ—asking the church to lay on hands. Asking for healing. Asking for encouragement. Asking for them to pray that the Lord would be at work in your life. These are the laying on of hands. And of course, the reality and promise of the resurrection of the dead. And eternal judgment—that the resurrection of the dead will mean that we will either go into eternity with the Lord in his favor, enjoying eternal life face to face, knowing him perfectly, or we will go into eternal life completely alive, completely awake, recognizing who God is but being separate from his grace and only knowing his wrath.

So these are elementary truths. And what he’s saying is, “You’ve become sluggish in thinking that simply having a grasp of the foundation of these elementary truths means that that’s enough.” And so he’s reminding them that these are important, ground-laying—faith in Christ, baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit, activity in the body of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the fact that we claim that Jesus Christ will come again judging the living and the dead. It’s not that they are unimportant. It’s that they are the foundation. And any foundation is laid so that something else can be built upon it. And so he talks about what that building upon it is—that solid food.

He says this. He says, “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Now, in a fuller way we’ll come back to what this means. Because he does return to it. But what he’s talking about is that the idea of solid food means that Christian truth, the elementary truth, always leads to the application of what those truths ought to mean. Think of it this way. Paul lays it out in a very simple way when he writes to the Colossian church the following in Colossians 3 when he says this: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, forgive as the Lord forgave you, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, and have gratitude for God’s grace.” So he’s not going over again the elementary truths. No, he’s talking about what those elementary truths ought to lead to.

So when the preacher of Hebrews is talking about solid food, he simply means, “Are you applying what you know? Are you practicing the implications of being forgiven of your sin? Are you practicing what it means that while we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us?” What implications does that elementary truth have for how we ought to love and approach our enemies? He is seeking to wake them up, as it were, from their sluggishness by reminding them that elementary truths are just that. They are elementary. We cannot forget them. We cannot move on from them. But they are organically connected and ought to lead to greater maturity in the practice and implications of those truths.

But then he shifts to a warning. And this warning he gives in verses 3 through 8. Now, if you will give me your patience, I want to read this again, because it bears attention to what this is and what it means and what it doesn’t mean. Again, this is what he says:

And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

And then he gives a metaphor of a land that has drunk in water, for the seed to grow, and then when that land produces thorns and thistles, it is simply of no good at all. It doesn't mean the rain wasn't good. It doesn't mean there wasn't seed on the ground. It means that what was good was choked out of that which was allowed to grow.

So let's talk about, then, what this falling away is and what it isn't. Let me say with absolute clarity that this is a sincere warning on the part of the preacher. It is not hypothetical. He is simply laying it out and saying it is very possible to fall away from the faith. Now, why is this important? This is important because of to whom he was writing. This is a group of Christians who have known the Lord for some time, who have been living out their faith in the outskirts of Rome in house churches. They have sought to make Christ known. They clearly have walked with the Lord. They clearly know the elementary truths. But in their sluggishness, it seems clear because of the warning that it is very likely that some have already fallen away. We know that there are even some who—because later on in the letter, he says, “Some of you have already forsaken the gathering together.” So he recognizes that there are those who are on the precipice, very likely, of falling away. But I want to be clear. It is absolutely a serious warning.

So then, what is it? So let's talk about it in terms of ingredients. And here, I'm grateful for a mentor, Rob Rayburn, as he lays it out this way. First, this is talking about someone who has claimed that they are a Christian. They have thought of themselves as Christians. And they were taken by others as Christians. This is not for those who don't believe. This warning is not for those who have not claimed Christ. In fact, this is impossible for those who haven't yet known Christ. So what does he say?

The deepest, foulest sin that ever a man commits is that he can never, despite the foul nature of their sin, can never be excluded from God's grace or promise of salvation. Let me be clear. If you are not a believer, and if you are, all sin can be brought before the Lord, no matter how foul it is, and receive forgiveness. So here it's not talking about falling into sin. Here it's not talking about, if you will, what we actually confess earlier. We said these words, “We confess that we have frequently relaxed our faith. We have allowed ourselves to become cynical.” That's something, as I've mentioned to you before, I struggle with at times. Cynicism has often boiled over to slander, criticism, prayerlessness, and pessimism. These things we confess. These things receive forgiveness.

So what is the ingredient of falling away? The word that is used there that is translated as “falling away” has a particular verb tense in the Greek. And it's what we would call aorist tense. In layman's terms, it is this: it is a once decisive act. So what does that mean in the context of falling away? What it means is this: it is about someone who has proclaimed faith, someone who has thought of themselves as a Christian, and someone who is even known by others as a Christian, but comes to a point in their lives when they say the following, “I deny who Jesus is. I do not believe in him. I do not believe or accept that he has died on the cross for my sins. And I reject him as Lord and Savior.” It is a decisive act. It is apostasy.

Do you see the difference? On the one hand, all of us as Christians—indeed, all human beings—sin and fall short of the glory of God. That is a very different thing than what is being

talked about here. What is being talked about here is utter apostasy, where we turn our backs to that which we formally professed and say, "I do not believe." Now, there are some here who believe and feel that this is possible for them. And this is what the Bible and even Jesus has called the unpardonable sin. What is the unpardonable sin? The unpardonable sin is the ultimate rejection and denial of who Christ is.

In my own personal ministry and in my own personal life, I at one point as a relatively new believer thought that I had committed the unpardonable sin. It was in the middle of the night. I had stayed up too late. I had partied too hard. And I was drunk. And in the middle of the night, I got to a pay phone. And I called the man who had prayed with me, who had been discipling me. I woke him up at, like, 3:00 a.m. And I said, "Craig?" And he could tell by my voice I was—I mean, I was rocked to my core. Because at this point, I mean, I was, like, seriously backsliding. And so I said, "Hey, listen. This is what's going on." And he joggled himself out of sleep. He was very kind and remembers it to this day. And I said, "This is what's happened. This is where I am. This is what I'm doing. This is what's happened. And I don't know what to do." And I just fell apart. And I said, "I'm afraid that I'm not a Christian anymore." And he said the same thing which I've said to everyone who I've ever had the chance to counsel on this very same point. "Randy, the fact that you recognize yourself, the fact that you even care or you're worried that you have fallen away from Christ is evidence that you haven't."

I know of other young believers, I know of even mature believers, who I've had the opportunity to pastor and counsel who believe that they have gotten to the place in their lives where the Lord no longer will forgive them anymore, or think that he doesn't care, or think that they've committed the unpardonable sin. And if that is where you are or you believe that that is the case about you, I want to say to you with the full-throated nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ: that is not true. Because the person who apostatizes, who turns their back against Christ, will never say, "I think I have fallen." They don't care anymore. And my friends, I have seen this happen. Not frequently, but I have experienced it. And it has been the most painful thing—one of the most painful memories of my ministry.

A young man who I discipled, a young man who became an adult, a young man who became engaged, and I gave him premarital counseling, he and his wife—fiancée, rather. And they got married. I performed their wedding. I remember that very day. I remember what it felt like. It was like I was praying for them, and yet barely a year later, I was in their apartment and he was saying to me, "I want nothing to do with the Christian faith." This is someone who is one of the brightest people I had known. He understood philosophy at the deepest levels. He applied it to his Christian faith. He knew his Bible. He knew the reformed faith. He was a defender of the faith on his college campus. And yet here he is in his mid-twenties, and he's saying, "I want nothing to do with the faith. And not only that, I want nothing to do with her." And he divorced her six months later. He has never returned to the faith, doesn't want to hear anything, doesn't receive phone calls, will not respond to texts. This is a person who I believe has apostatized. But I also believe the following. I believe also what the Scriptures teach—that he was never really a part of us to begin with.

You see, we can have a lot of knowledge. We can have a lot of information. We can, according to this passage—though it is a mystery, we can experience even blessing and enlightenment. I even learned from him. And yet, it seems to me that his apostasy is evidence that at some deep level in his own being, that I will take his profession for what it is: that he never really knew it. He was never really of us. The seed had fallen on the ground. It had been watered. It had even been cultivated. But by this point in his life, it had been choked out.

But do not confuse that, friends, with serious backsliding. Do not confuse that with even years of that. We do not know what is happening in the life of another. We ought not to give up praying for those who once professed faith but who have in themselves made decisions that have

led them not to consolation in Christ but desolation and separation from the body. And they recognize that they still know the truths. They even recognize what they're doing is sin. And yet they're not ready to acknowledge it yet and come back. I've seen this, too. I've said it before, and I will say it again. And I know that his ex-wife wouldn't mind me saying this, and he wouldn't mind saying this if he were still alive.

This was a man who I thought was going to be an elder in the church. We went on missions trips together. He was a wonderful man coming into retirement, realizing—he was starting to write books. It was really cool to watch. And yet lo and behold, six months after our last missions trip, he suddenly decided that, "You know what? I married my wife when I wasn't a believer, so therefore God doesn't hold me to that vow, and I want to divorce her." And he did so. He moved thirty minutes away, found someone else to be in a relationship with, and then unfortunately he was diagnosed with stage four cancer. And in the waning months of his life, while in the hospital, he called his ex-wife, who is still a member of our church. And she went to his hospital room with now his second wife on the other side of the bed. And he looked at her, and he said, "Will you forgive me?" And in that moment, he repented, and he came back with the Lord. It was a mess. There was a lot of pain. A lot of damage. Serious backsliding. But he was restored. He did not apostatize. Do you see the difference?

And so I say to you: if you find yourself in this moment in a place of serious sluggishness or backsliding, and you've given up fighting your sin, today is a day of renewal. Today is a day of invitation to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. But also recognize that refusing to do so, that sluggishness will ultimately end up in hard-heartedness. Do not allow that. You can practice. You can come. You can confess and receive forgiveness and restoration. You can find accountability. You can find community. This is what is on offer. Why do I say that? Because that's what the preacher says when he says the following words. He says, "Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work." What is that work? Your work, first and foremost, is for all of us—my work, your work—every Sunday morning when we hear a prayer of confession, our work is to come before the Lord with open hands. "Forgive me, Lord, for I am a sinner. Have mercy upon my soul." The Lord is just, and he will forgive us our sins. And so he invites all of us to come again.

So the hope is that full assurance is on offer to those who have faith in Jesus Christ. And so he says this in verse 10:

For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

What does he mean? That full assurance isn't something that just suddenly happens. It is, if you will, a byproduct of doing the work we are called to do. That's the earnest work. And so he says the earnest work is to love one another and to serve one another. These are things we ought to put into practice. And he uses this phrase, "to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end." That means that as we earnestly, by God's spirit and God's grace, God's power—we seek to walk in obedience. And as we do, the byproduct is assurance. We don't seek assurance for the sake of assurance. No, we seek to imitate Christ. We seek to imitate those believers who are mature in the faith.

And I say this not to embarrass my brother George Walgrove. But my dear brother George Walgrove came up here earlier and read from Philippians 3. And as he began reading that passage,

I began to well up in tears. Because I realize that this is a man who has gone ahead of me in the faith. And I look at his life. He would say it's not perfect by any means. No, George is not perfect. But as he was saying these words, it was like he was living it for me. He says:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.
[Philippians 3:12-16, ESV]

It means we work hard. Work hard at what? I said it earlier in quoting from Paul. We work hard at forgiving others as we have been forgiven.

Christian, we work hard at forgiving others as we have been forgiven. We work hard to love our enemies as we were once loved while we were yet his enemies. We work hard to acknowledge that cynicism leads to resentment. But rather, we work hard by God's spirit to choose hope—the hope of love and grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. No one will write a testimony to how cynicism is so great and changes the world. No one will give an award and say, "They changed my life, because their resentment was sterling!" Leaning on my favorite poet, Bono: "Love is all that we have left." What will be remarked is the love that we left behind us—the love that we give away. The love that we give away to those who we want to wring their necks. The love towards those who did not forgive us, but we have been forgiven, and we will choose to forgive. And we will remember it, and we will forgive again. And we will embrace the reality that resentment squeezes our hearts. And cynicism is like a fine cup of coffee in the morning, but we will say no, because the aroma of heaven is hope.

This is what we practice. It doesn't just happen. We must practice it, believers. And so today, as you leave, as you depart, as you're on the phone, as you're walking around with others, as you're greeting your neighbors, ask the Holy Spirit, "Lord, what does it look like to practice love in this moment? What does it look like to practice love in this office or in this neighborhood or on this playground or in this classroom with these particular people?" The foundation of the elementary truths have been laid, but it is meant to be built on through the application of mature, solid food. This is the case for Christian maturity. Thank you for your patience. I want to pray for you, as I ask you to pray for me, that the Lord would awaken us to our sluggishness and move us to maturity for the glory of his name and for making the love of Christ known. Let's pray.

Father, I ask for your forgiveness for the places in my life where sluggishness has settled in, for how easily I am moved towards cynicism and judgmentalism. Father, forgive me. I pray on behalf of my brothers and sisters in Christ here this morning. I ask that your Holy Spirit would awaken them to places in their lives. And I ask that you would move us by your spirit on to maturity, that we would seek to lay hold of full assurance by the power of the Spirit walking in new obedience. We cannot do this on our own—only by your work. And yet, we still choose to do this work. Help us, O Lord, to be earnest, to give ourselves to it. Enable us to be renewed in it this very day and this very moment. Father, I pray for those believers here who have fallen into sin and backsliding. Father, may you bring them to renewal even this day. May you protect us, O Lord, from our own hearts. I pray for those, Father, who do not know you. May they see just how great your love is and just how flawed Christians are. Yet we acknowledge it. And we need your forgiveness. And may they know that that forgiveness is also for them. And may they know you in the newness of life. Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.