

Grow or Die Hebrews 6:1-9

Introduction

Last week our study in Hebrews 5 confronted us about spiritual immaturity. It is possible to have been a Christian for years and be stunted in our growth, still beginners at a time we ought to be teaching others. Marks of Spiritual Immaturity (Hebrews 5):

1. Being Dull of Hearing (11)
2. Failing to Teach Others God's Word (12a)
3. Lacking Skill in Using the Word (12b-13)
4. Not Practicing Discernment (14)

We learned some corresponding actions to cultivate our spiritual growth.

1. Listen Attentively.
2. Teach Others God's Word.
3. Develop Skill in Using the Word.
4. Use Practical Discernment.

Hebrews 6 turns up the heat. Failure to pursue these practices can do more than just stunt our spiritual growth. It can lead to our falling away from Christ altogether. You grow or you die. Or another way to put it, the best defense against apostasy (falling away) is a good offense. A genuine Christian cannot remain passive about his or her faith in Christ.

Early on in the history of the church Christianity was called “the way.” It is a way of living, a journey to our heavenly home. It is not just an event. It is not a monument to some experience long ago. It is ongoing.

This is not the first time Hebrews has warned us about falling away. It’s the writer’s recurring pastoral concern throughout the whole letter. A real and present danger for those who are part of the general Christian community but remain in a kind of neutral zone—neither hot nor cold.

Hebrews 2:1, 3a

¹ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

³ How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Hebrews 3:12-13

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 4:1, 11

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Perhaps you can think of individuals who at one time worshiped alongside of you who now want nothing to do with the people of Christ or for that matter, Christ Himself. How possible? What happened? Of course, they rationalize their departure, often blaming others for the path they've chosen. But at the root of it is usually a long period of decline at the heart level, long before the evidence of it broke out into public view. Apostasy—falling away—is rarely if ever sudden.

Whenever the Scriptures address this theme, conscientious Christians who struggle with assurance can find themselves in turmoil. My prayer is that this passage will strengthen true believers to keep going but will unsettle those who rest in a false security. May you who believe remain unshaken because you're holding fast to Christ. But may you who are letting go of Christ be warned. You are sliding into deadly danger.

1 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, **2** and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead,

and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits. ⁴ 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, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

1. Don't Stop with Just the Foundation. Build on it.
2. Don't Throw Away Divine Privileges. Treasure them.
3. Don't Neglect Cultivating a Good Harvest.

1. Don't Stop with Just the Foundation. Build on it.

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Elementary school is good and necessary, but it's designed to be foundational for further learning. Go on to maturity.

Note what the writer lists as the foundational truths:

- Repentance and faith
- Washings and laying on of hands
- Resurrection and eternal judgment

Repentance and faith

"repentance from dead works and of faith toward God"—we turn from sin—works of death—and turn to God in faith. Repent and believe was the cry of John the Baptist and of Jesus. God justifies—declares righteous—those who turn and trust. So these have to do with our past justification.

This is very basic theology, yet there are some who claim to be Christian who deny the necessity of repentance (easy believism) or who claim that we must somehow earn our way to God (legalism) rather than relying on God's provision of salvation through Christ alone. They need a refresher course on what Christianity even is.

Washings and laying on of hands

“instruction about washings, the laying on of hands”

Some see here a possible reference to Christian baptism, but the word used seems to point instead to the various ceremonial washings in first-century Judaism. These were ceremonial rituals communicating the idea of spiritual cleansing.

Laying on of hands in the New Testament is associated with blessing, healing, ordaining to a task or office. Much like anointing in the OT, these point to the Holy Spirit’s assigning a task to a person and empowering him to do it.

So both washings and laying on of hands relate to a believer’s present progress in sanctification—purity of life and empowering for service

Again, basic truths both Old and New Testaments.

Resurrection and eternal judgment

“the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment”

These have to do our destiny, what is to come. The resurrection of our bodies, our accountability to God. His judgment has eternal consequence.

We must not forget the basics, but we must not stop there either. We need to “go on to maturity.” Such growth is crucial to our assurance that we are really born again and have life from God. Where there is life there will be growth, fruitfulness that comes from the Spirit’s transforming work in us. We are called to use God’s gifts to us to cultivate growth from God. Not just knowing the basics, but ministry to others, wisdom, and discernment.

2 Peter 1:3-11

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks

these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

If you have known Christ for some time, in what ways have others seen you grow in Christ?

Was the high point of your Christian experience when you first believed, or have you grown from infancy to adulthood?

What patterns have you intentionally built into your life to cultivate your spiritual growth?

Are you drifting? Slipping backwards? How are you doing to reverse that downward trend?

2. Don't Throw Away Divine Privileges. Treasure them.

⁴ 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, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ 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.

Privileges from God: enlightened, tasted heavenly gift, shared in Holy Spirit, tasted goodness of God's Word and powers of coming age

Enlightened—you've been exposed to the light of God's revelation. God speaks in human languages that we can understand. None of us understand everything, but what we need to know is clear.

Tasted the heavenly gift—you've experienced blessings that are connected to God's gift of salvation. You are part of a community where people have been transformed and you benefit from the goodness of God that comes through them to you.

Shared the Holy Spirit

Like Simon Magus of Acts 8, you've experienced the Holy Spirit's presence. God is real, and even those who aren't believers can feel His presence when He chooses to make Himself known. Yet according to the apostle Peter, Simon was still in the bond of iniquity and became one of the early false teachers. His attempt to buy the ability to give the Holy Spirit to whomever he laid hands on revealed his greedy, self-centered heart. He wanted to

use God to glorify himself. He had it completely backwards.

Tasted the goodness of God's Word

It is better than gold and sweeter than honey, it is water, it is wheat, it is bread, it feeds the hungry soul. I can experience its goodness and still not rely on it and submit to it. And never come to trust in the Savior the Scriptures reveal. Even Bible scholars can end up in hell (John 5).

Tasted the powers of the coming age

Powers—often translated miracles, points to the miraculous ability of God—*dunamis* (plural of *dunamis*)—word we get “dynamite” from; healings foreshadowed the day when all illness is gone; resurrections when death is swallowed up by life. Jesus and the apostles proved that the gospel promises were real and that human beings could actually experience them.

God authenticated the gospel Christ and the apostles preached with miracles, signs, and wonders. The readers of Hebrews would have been well familiar with them not as ancient history but current experience. That foundational age is done, but the eyewitness record remains. Furthermore, God has not ceased to work miracles whenever He chooses to perform them. Miracles are His

stock and trade. Nothing is too hard, too amazing for God.

These are the kinds of gifts from God those in a community of believers experience. Not just true believers in Israel benefited from God's blessing on the nation as He miraculously freed them from bondage in Egypt and led them through the wilderness. It was a mixed multitude. You could argue that the majority of the people were not really trusting God—at least not enough to take His word for it that He would help them conquer the promised land.

Israel's rebellion in the wilderness when they refused to believe God and thus refused to enter the promised land to conquer it. That refusal was the final straw. They could not enter God's rest because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:19

19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:12

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

When they saw the consequences of their unbelief they decided to go on into the land. But still it was in rebellion. God told them not

to go in. It was too late. They did it anyway and were defeated.

There will be those at the judgment who have preached the gospel and even performed miracles who are not true followers of Jesus. Matthew 7:21-23

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Even among the twelve apostles was an unbeliever at heart, Judas Iscariot. From the beginning Jesus knew Judas would betray Him, yet He still included him right up to the very night Judas participated in the arrest of Jesus. The act of offering Judas a morsel of bread was an act of kindness that at the same time identified Judas as the traitor.

Unlike Jesus, we don't fully know another person's heart. We don't know whether we are dealing with a Peter who has denied Jesus, or a Judas who has betrayed Him. So we continue to extend the gospel to people. But we must understand for ourselves that

there is a point only God really knows when the offer is the final offer, and beyond that there is no return. When it is impossible to restore a person to repentance. Don't play games with God.

Those Hebrews has in mind are those who like the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus as the Messiah and crucified Him instead, also reject Jesus as their Lord and Savior despite all He's done to prove His reliability. They, as it were, participate in crucifying Him rather than believing in Him. They commit deicide. But they One they rejected and murdered would one day be their Judge.

You are not God's judge. He is yours. He is not obligated to prove anything to you. He has already revealed all you need to know. The question is whether you will submit your own will and thinking to His. Now is the time. And once you lay hold of Christ, never let go. Don't let anything or anyone be more important to you than He is.

Despite our best efforts to make sure the members of our church are born again believers, our congregation both on and off the church roll, will be in part a mixed multitude. Tares growing up among the wheat. Judgment day will reveal who really belongs to Christ.

Hebrews 10:35-36, 39

35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. **36** For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Perseverance of the saints—God’s true people keep on believing. They are what the NT calls “the believing ones.” They keep on battling sin because they have hearts of repentance and faith. The indwelling Spirit of God enables them to keep on living this way.

3. Don’t Neglect Cultivating a Good Harvest (7-8).

7 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. **8** But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

God causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Many of His blessings fall on those who believe and those who do not. The difference between land that bears thorns and thistles, which spring up on their own, and land that produces a crop is cultivation.

Someone has taken God's gifts and used them for what He gave them for.

This marks the difference between false and true, those who profess salvation and those who possess it.

Matthew 7:15-20

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **16** You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? **17** So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. **18** A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

What does spiritual fruit look like in a professing believer?

Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:22-23

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Essentially a description of the character of Jesus Christ.

What marks him or her as a mature believer?
Christlikeness

Ephesians 4:13

¹³ Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

How do we make sure we are among those who produce good fruit?

John 15:4-6

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

A harvest grows because there's life in the seed. Fruit grows on branches connected to the vine. The life force is in the vine. Our life and fruitfulness comes only through our connection with Christ. Don't ever let go. Abide in Him.

Conclusion

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

It's not that those who fall away have lost a salvation they once had. No, those who really have it demonstrate that they do by their perseverance. They keep holding on to Christ. They keep growing. So let the warning in our passage spur you on to endurance, looking to Jesus throughout your earthly race till you cross the finish line.

Richard D. Phillips, 241: "The only way Christians can have joy in our salvation and full assurance of hope is through practical godliness that flows from our relationship with Christ."

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Discussion questions

1. In what ways have you seen failure to keep growing spiritually erode the foundational truths of repentance and faith or purity of life and power for service in a person's life?
2. What effects have you seen such failure have on a person's hope of the

- resurrection and of his/her confidence regarding eternal judgment?
3. When have you found it most common for you or others to struggle with assurance?
 4. What are some divine privileges even unsaved people connected with a community of believers commonly experience?
 5. Given Scriptural passages like this one and the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23), why is persevering in the faith more significant than one's early response to it?
 6. Jesus identified producing good fruit to be the test of spiritual life from God. Why do you think this fruitfulness reveals more than other markers people often look to for security?
 7. Since abiding in living connection to Christ is essential to fruit-bearing (John 15:3-5), what patterns have you put in place that help you keep close to Jesus?