

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS

Message #10

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

When I first trusted Jesus Christ back in 1976, I listened to Christian radio and heard some songs that at times made me cry. I actually went to a Christian bookstore and bought some of the albums that featured the songs. Years later when I had studied the Word and the doctrines of the faith, those songs almost brought me to tears for another reason. I could not believe how shallow and theologically wrong they were. When I was a young believer I thought they were wonderful, but years later I realized it was pretty music but bad doctrine.

One goal that almost every child has is to grow up. Growth is important to most children. Children see those who are bigger and older and they want to develop in the same way. When our children were small they rode a tricycle and then a bicycle and eventually a motorcycle. If we were to see a grownup riding a children's tricycle, it would be bizarre.

When it comes to the spiritual life, the growth of God's children is very important to God. God does not think it is funny to see a believer of many years still riding theological tricycles. It has been observed that perhaps the greatest scandal in the Church today is the scandal of Christians who do not have developed Christian minds. We are supposed to have the mindset of Jesus Christ and most Christians who go to church couldn't care less if they even hear God's Word accurately taught. **Jesus Christ was always passionate about knowing God's Word.**

When we come to this portion of Hebrews, we come to a very sad portion. What we learn here is that the condition of the believers to whom this Epistle was written was not pretty. Most were still riding tricycles.

On two previous occasions, the writer warned these believers against stopping short of where and what God wants them to be (Hebrews 3:12; 4:1). Now at this point he confronts them again. The primary point of the text is this:

THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF THE BELIEVERS WAS NOT HEALTHY AND IT WAS TIME FOR THEM TO GROW UP TO MATURITY, AND THEY NEEDED TO START FOCUSING ON GOD'S WORD AND FUNCTIONING IN SUCH A WAY THAT GOD WOULD PERMIT THIS GROWTH TO TAKE PLACE.

It is possible for God to actually sentence a person to spiritual infancy and immaturity because he/she does not grow up. Every single one of us needs to go to work on applying God's Word when we hear it. When the Bible is expounded and the Holy Spirit convicts, we need to respond.

When a person is supposed to have been a believer for many years, he ought to be mature enough to give accurate instruction to others rather than having to take in basic instruction for himself.

Now this text breaks down nicely into two main parts:

PART #1 – The problem of a believer's immaturity. **5:11-14**

In these verses the problem is clearly presented, which basically is a problem of immaturity as it relates to God's Word. These believers had not grown the way they should.

There are four main symptoms of believers who are immature.

Symptom #1 - An immature believer cannot grasp difficult and deep Biblical teaching.
5:11a

The writer of Hebrews had much to say about Melchizedek. He wanted to address the priesthood of Melchizedek and connect, compare, and contrast it to Jesus Christ. If he chooses not to present this instruction and they do not grasp it, they will be greatly lacking in their understanding of God, His Son, and His Word.

Actually, the writer will present a lengthy and deep discussion of Melchizedek in the next chapters (Hebrews 7:1-10:18), so apparently he decided this section was enough to wake these people up.

Immature believers do not like and do not seem to grasp deep teaching. They want it shallow and simple. It is serious business to handle God's Word. It is not a light matter and it is not an easy matter. God's Word is to be feared and revered (Isaiah 66:2). God's Word is deep and there are things in God's Word that are difficult to study and explain. This is true for even the best of teachers and students (II Peter 3:15-16).

In fact, the words "hard to explain" do mean that the details and explanations of many Biblical subjects, such as a comparison of Melchizedek and Jesus Christ, are very difficult. It is doubly difficult if you are speaking to a group who is in an immature state.

William Newell said that passages that are hard to interpret may be due to one of three things (*Hebrews*, p. 165):

- 1) It may be due to a teacher who isn't properly instructed so he doesn't know the text.
- 2) It may be due to the subject which is truly deep and difficult.
- 3) It may be due to the audience which is dull of hearing - this was the problem here.

What becomes very clear here is that elementary teaching is not enough for one who will finish with a great inheritance.

Symptom #2 - An immature believer has become dull of hearing . **5:11b**

The matters concerning Melchizedek were not really difficult to strong, spiritual, believers who loved the Scriptures, but they were difficult to these spiritual sluggards.

The word "dull" (ῥωθρός) is one that means these believers had become sluggish and slothful when it came to wanting to know God's Word (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 307). In fact, this very word is translated "sluggish" in Hebrews 6:12. W. H. Griffith Thomas said that these believers "had become sluggish in their capacity for listening to the truth" (*Hebrews*, p. 67).

The verb “have become” (γεγονατε) is perfect tense which means this spiritual degeneration started at some point in the past and was continuing at the present and could continue into the future. This was not an overnight process. They had become spiritually dull. These believers had acquired this condition over a period of time. This spiritual laziness started when they didn’t care if they carefully heard God’s Word, and over a period of time they regressed into a spiritual dullness. This was a “culpable negligence or sluggishness.”

One old Bible expositor, who had preached in hundreds of churches, said that when he preached in churches the actual numbers of people who really wanted to hear God’s Word with eagerness were small. He said he saw many people at church who were more interested in what was going on in the building than in the pulpit. He said some people were more interested in whether a dog or cat wandered into the building rather than hearing God’s Word.

Kent Hughes cites an interesting illustration from Church History. He says that during the Great Awakening in the 1700s in America, there was a sudden rise and interest in shorthand because people wanted to hear the Word of God from preachers and take accurate notes so they could understand it (*Hebrews*, Vol. 1, pp. 146-147). It was this passion to know God’s Word that woke up America.

If we truly want to become a mature believer who gains a full inheritance, we must give it our best effort to hear and apply the Word of God.

Obviously, the intensity for wanting to know the Scriptures had dwindled in this group to whom Hebrews was written.

Symptom #3 - An immature believer needs to be retaught elementary principles. **5:12a**

Now the writer of Hebrews does not believe that every believer had the gift of pastor/teacher or the gift of teaching God’s Word. In fact, in this very context, the writer knew they needed his instruction. So this text is not saying believers do not need a teacher. In fact, that seems to be part of the problem here; they didn’t have a good teacher instructing them in the deep things of God.

However, this writer did expect that believers, who have known the Lord for awhile, should be able to navigate their way through an accurate grasp of the Gospel and of key doctrines related to it. **Every believer who has known the Lord for some time, ought to be able to have enough basic knowledge to share with others, especially in matters pertaining to the superiority of Jesus Christ.**

The problem here is that these believers needed to be retaught basic, elementary things from the Scriptures. The word “elementary” (στοχεια) is one that refers to the elementary sounds pertaining to letters of the alphabet (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 418).

The adverb “again” indicates that at one point, they were beyond the basic level, but they were no more. So the charge against these believers is that they had reverted back to infant levels in their doctrine and spirituality. They had to be retaught the most basic of doctrines.

One of the wonderful things many of us have had the privilege to see is the recovery of a person who has had a stroke. When they first have the stroke the rehabilitation process seems almost depressing. They have to learn to talk and walk all over again. You watch a man or woman trying to learn to pronounce words and put round and square pegs in the right holes. It is sad. But then you see the person rebound. They progress and they get healthy and it is a wonderful joy to see. That is what the writer of Hebrews wanted to see. These believers were back to the basics of spirituality and they needed to learn all over again, and he was hoping that this letter would bring them back to full health.

Symptom #4 - An immature believer needs milk level teaching, not solid food. **5:12b-14**

These believers had no appetite for the deep things of God. They went to church, but they did not go to hear the deep things of God expounded. I believe that the vast majority of people who go to church fall under the same rebuke. Let me share with you some of the reasons I have heard for people going to church:

- 1) We go because our kids like it; their friends are there.
- 2) We go because it is so laid-back; you can take pop or coffee right into the sanctuary.
- 3) We go because we like the contemporary music.
- 4) We go because the pastor is a nice man.
- 5) We go because this is where our family goes.
- 6) We go because we are never made to feel guilty.
- 7) We go because we feel we can really help.

What I don't hear very often is we go because we know we will be taught the deep things of God.

It is very clear from this text, that there is a milk level of understanding the Bible and there is a solid food level of understanding the Bible. I believe this is true pertaining to every verse, every chapter and every book of the Bible. What this describes is a capacity for discerning God's Word. A milk level believer has a shallow capacity, whereas a solid food level believer has a mature capacity for discerning truth.

The tragedy of the spiritual condition of these believers is that they "needed" milk level instruction rather than solid food level instruction. **That word "need" (χρειᾶ) is one that refers to some thing that is a necessity** (*Ibid.*, p. 483). These believers had gone backward in their knowledge.

Now I want you to understand what this text is saying. If you are not interested in solid food from the Word of God, you are not pursuing a Biblical righteousness. **True Biblical award-winning righteousness demands taking in solid food and applying it to one's life.** The ability to grow deep in understanding God's Word will be commensurate with a holy, righteous lifestyle.

The process of becoming mature is clearly spelled out in **verse 14**, take in solid food and practice it. Train your senses to discern good and evil by applying God's Word to your life. The participle "train" (**v. 14**) indicates a continual training that starts at a point in time and consistently develops by allowing God's Word and Spirit to develop us. This is not teaching sinless perfectionism, but it is teaching a consistent discernment of good and evil in light of a solid food level of understanding.

W. H. Griffith Thomas said that he knew of a great pianist who claimed that he believed in a “use or lose” principle. He said that if he did not practice one day, he realized the loss; if he did not practice for two days, his friends realized the loss; and if he did not practice for three days, the public recognized the loss. He said it was critical that he use his skills every day (*Let Us Go On*, p. 69).

All of us can testify of seeing someone who once seemed to be on fire for God who now has fizzled. Stop applying Scripture to your life for one day and you will sense the loss; go two days and others will probably sense it; go three days and the whole church will probably see it. But even if no one else does sense it or see it, God does and growth is stifled.

PART #2 – The solution to the problem of a believer’s immaturity. 6:1-3

The solution to the problem was straight forward and simple - **leave the elementary teachings about Christ and move forward and press on toward maturity through a solid food intake.** One must make a focused effort to leave the sphere of shallow teaching and get into solid food teaching that can take one to maturity.

I believe this text actually promotes the idea of leaving churches that are not feeding them solid, meat level meals and getting into a church that does. Maturity in the things of God comes by leaving elementary level teachings and moving to a solid food teaching church.

I find it intriguing what the writer considers to be infant level immature stuff. Some have said the things in the list are specifically things from a Jewish list and others suggest the things in the list are things from a Christian list. I agree with Ray Stedman who said both are true. Here is a list of things that present the barest beginnings of a Christian.

Infant Level Matter #1 - Repentance from dead works to faith in God. 6:1b

For a mature believer the works/faith controversy should be long over. Believers should be fully indoctrinated in the Gospel of God’s grace by faith. Dead works are law works because the law works death, and believers should be way beyond the point of trying to mingle law into grace. They should know the great truths of Romans and Galatians. They should understand the difference between Matthew and John.

It is one thing to turn from dead works, but it is another to turn to God.

Infant Level Matter #2 - Instruction about baptisms. 6:2a

The word “baptisms” (βαπτισμῶν) is plural and refers to all the ritualistic rites that use water. It would include certain ceremonial washings and cleansings and baptisms.

The point is that the mature believer should be way beyond ritual righteousness. It is not a bunch of religious rituals that makes one right with God; it is faith that makes one right with God. Mature believers ought to know that. They should want a careful, accurate deep understanding of Scripture and not a bunch of religious rituals.

Infant Level Matter #3 - Laying on of hands. **6:2b**

In the O.T. economy, the laying on of hands was associated with the sacrificial offerings. One would lay his hand on the offering, thus identifying himself and his sin with the blood sacrifice. For the mature believer, he realizes everything he has is in Jesus Christ.

For the mature believer, he does not need any consistent physical laying on of hands. He does not need a bunch of people laying hands on him. **He doesn't need initiatory rites to prove his status.** The laying on of hands was practiced by the early Church and often was used in connection with the imparting of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17) and for healing (Acts 28:8) and for commissioning (Acts 13:3).

However, a mature pneumatology should be way beyond any of this. We receive the Holy Spirit the moment we believe, and no man can heal by a laying on of hands anymore, and it is time some believers get beyond this.

Infant Level Matter #4 - Instruction about the resurrection. **6:2c**

Make no mistake about this; the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a crucial doctrine of our salvation. This doctrine presents Jesus Christ as the only living Savior, and this sets Jesus Christ apart from any and all false religious leaders. This doctrine needs to be carefully understood at a depth level.

But how many ritualistic Easter services do you really need? If you have to be reminded year after year of the importance of the resurrection, something is lacking in your spiritual and doctrinal development. I do not think it pleases God to see people who have to be reminded over and over again about the importance of the resurrection. We should be way beyond that now.

Infant Level Matter #5 - Instruction about eternal judgment. **6:2d**

The future judgment of God is a given. It is something every believer should know about and think about. This is basic to a believer's faith. One day we will give an account of ourselves to the Lord and that will determine our eternal inheritance. We should be way beyond the basics of this now; in fact, this book says we need to reflect on this fact and make adjustments in life.

It is time for believers to grow up and become mature. **But carefully notice verse 3, "And this we shall do, if God permits." Growth to maturity is a God-permitted growth.**

Why wouldn't God permit one of His own people to grow up and become mature and strong? Because they do not want solid food from His Word, and they do not use their senses to discern between good and evil and His righteousness.

This book of Hebrews says growth is not an automatic guarantee and neither is a full inheritance. If any believer will get serious about understanding God's Word and yielding to God's Spirit, he will go on to maturity. God will permit it.