

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews

SERMON: **Grow Up!**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 5:11-6:3

SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black

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My son Abe is really cute! But there's no hiding the fact that he's also fat and bald. When you're a baby it's cute to be fat and bald. A lot of people say that I look like Abe. I disagree; I think Abe looks like his grandpa. The only things I have in common with Abe are his fatness and his baldness. The challenge is this: when you grow up it is not cute to be fat and bald.

When you grow up not only is it not cute to look like a baby; it's not good to act like one. As you get older you need to go on to maturity; you need to grow up. The same is true in our spiritual lives. After we receive Jesus, we need to grow in Christ-likeness. But the fact of the matter is that there are a lot of people in the church who are living as spiritual infants. Our text this morning calls us to grow up; to mature in our Christian life.

**5:11-6:3** *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.*

<sup>12</sup>*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!* <sup>13</sup>*Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.* <sup>14</sup>*But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

<sup>1</sup>*Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,* <sup>2</sup>*instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.* <sup>3</sup>*And God permitting, we will do so.*

Two weeks ago Mike introduced the first major section in Hebrews on the high priesthood of Jesus. In this morning's passage the writer of Hebrews begins by telling his readers he has much more he would like to say about this topic. But before he can do so he must address a serious problem in his readers – they need to grow up! The writer gives us a diagnosis of this spiritual problem in 5:11-14 and a prescription for remedy in 6:1-3.

***Diagnosis: Lack of Spiritual Growth is due to laziness and disobedience to God's Word.***

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This past June, 20/20 aired a segment on a girl named Brooke Greenberg. This is a picture of Brooke and her younger sister Carly (Figure 1). What might surprise you is that Brooke is the girl being held in this picture. She has baffled doctors because she doesn't age. She has essentially remained an infant, but is 16 years old in this picture. Doctors can't explain her condition - they don't know how long she will live or whether or not she will ever age, but I don't think anyone would deny that something is wrong.



Figure 1

In a similar way there was something wrong with the original readers. Let's look at the symptoms of their spiritual immaturity.

***Symptom #1) Their age didn't match their maturity.***

This first symptom is true for Brooke and it was true for the original readers. It is not normal for a 16 year old to have the physical and mental capacities of a toddler. And it was not right for the readers addressed in this letter to be immature in their faith, for they had been Christians for many years. Look at verse 12:

**5:12** *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!*

These early Christians weren't new to the faith. They had been Christians for some time. They had been Christians long enough that they should have been teaching others. That's kind of the natural sequence for Christians. They should learn God's Word and grow in their love and application of it. As they grow in their love of God's Word and their application of it they should naturally share God's Word with other people. One mark of maturity is involvement in ministry.<sup>1</sup> We shouldn't keep our faith private; we should go public with our faith in our church and in our community, through service and teaching.

These early Christians weren't sharing God's Word with other people. This was an indication that they weren't growing in their love of God's Word or their application of it.

***Symptom #2) They had regressed.***

Brooke Greenberg is not *progressing* physically. The original readers on the other hand weren't only failing to progress, they had *regressed* spiritually. We see this in verse 11.<sup>2</sup>

In Bible study it is helpful to compare translation. I'd like to do that this morning. Look at the difference between the NIV and the NET Bible<sup>3</sup>.

**5:11** (NIV) *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain **because you are** slow to learn.*

**5:11** (NET) *On this topic we have much to say and it is difficult to explain, **since you have become** sluggish in hearing.*

The differences between the two translations are subtle but important. The NIV says, "*You are slow to learn,*" while the NET Bible says, "*you have become sluggish in hearing.*" One implies a failure to progress, while the other emphasizes a regression. Regression is what's being

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<sup>1</sup> J. Piper, September 29, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> W. Lane, 135-136.

<sup>3</sup> New English Translation, NET.Bible.org

described here. It's not that these Hebrew Christians never grew up; they had grown up, but were now starting to act like infants in the faith.

I know a lot of Christians who grew in their faith like wildfire during high school and in college, but have become stagnate as adults, when the pressures of life get to be too much. When I was in the car business Scott Pitman use to always say, "Use to bees don't make no honey." He was trying to get us to see the need to be growing daily as professionals. The same is true in regard to faith; we're not given the option of being "use to bees." If we have true faith we will be bearing fruit; we need to be making honey.

Now let's look at what was causing this immaturity. Why were the original readers regressing in their faith?

***Symptom #3) They had become lazy with God's Word.***

Brooke Greenberg's lack of progress is not her fault in any way. But that was not so with the original readers of this letter; their spiritual immaturity was their fault. Look again at what verse 11 says about them.

**5:11** (NIV) *you are slow to learn.*

Sometimes when we think someone is lacking in intelligence we say things like, "They're not the sharpest tool in the shed," or "They're a couple fries short of a happy meal." Sometimes we also say, "They're a little slow." I don't want you to be thrown off by the word "slow" in verse 11; intelligence was not the problem with the original readers; the problem was complacency with the Word of God; the problem was laziness.

Look at the NET Bible here, which is a more literal translation.

**5:11** (NET) *you have become sluggish in hearing.*

They had become lazy or sluggish with the Word of God. We see this same word again in chapter 6 translated as "lazy" and it becomes more plain that the issue here is one of laziness, not incompetence.

**6:11-12** *We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

They were no longer growing in their understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures. They had heard the gospel, but were no longer mining the depths of the gospel and thinking about its far reaching implications on life. They were "slow to learn," or "sluggish in hearing."

We are called to love the Lord our God with all of our minds. However, I hear a lot of people in the church almost mock any type of serious use of their brain as it relates to their spiritual development. We need to be challenged to think difficult thoughts about difficult passages in the

Bible<sup>4</sup> (you'll have a chance next week as we look at more of chapter 6). One of the reasons it is important to think deeply is because the way that we think about God is intimately connected to the way that we live for God. You can't separate orthodoxy (correct belief) from orthopraxy (correct action). If your mind is not growing then your faith is probably not growing.

But there are a lot of people who are constantly growing in their knowledge about God, but not growing in their application of what God's Word says. That brings me to the fourth symptom of immaturity found in this passage.

***Symptom #4) They were disobedient to God's Word.***

**5:11** (NIV) *you are slow to learn.*

Look at how the NET Bible translates this.

**5:11** (NET) *you have become sluggish in hearing.*

Notice the word "hearing." This word has been recurring in the book since chapter 2.

**2:1** *We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have **heard**, so that we do not drift away.*

**3:7-8** *So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you **hear** his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert,*

**4:1-2** *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they **heard** was of no value to them, because those who **heard** did not combine it with faith.*

Hearing the Word must be accompanied by faith. And faith must be accompanied by action, not rebellion and drifting. Hearing and obedience are clearly linked in the book of Hebrews.

The original readers had become lazy with the Word of God. They had not put the Word of God to good use. Their laziness had something to do with their minds, but more importantly it had to do with obedience. This is confirmed in vv. 13-14.

**5:13-14** *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. <sup>14</sup>But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

As I study this passage my simple conclusion concerning milk and meat is this: milk is the basic content of God's Word, but meat is application of God's Word. A lot of people think that meat has to do with difficult things in the Bible, like prophecy or predestination, but difficulty in

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<sup>4</sup> A. Davis, February 6, 2005.

understanding alone doesn't make something meat; those who apply the Word of God are those who eat meat; application is the main thing in spiritual maturity.

As you get to know the Word of God better you should become better at distinguishing good from evil. And why would that be important? So you can grow in your application of God's Word; so that you can grow in Christ-likeness. The "teaching about righteousness" in v. 13 is anything that makes you more like Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

These Christians were not growing in Christ-likeness; they were not growing in the teaching about righteousness. If they were, they would have been standing firm in the face of persecution like Jesus himself did. What about us? Are we growing in Christ-likeness? Do we hunger for God's Word; both to know it and to grow in obedience to it?

The sad thing about Brooke Greenberg is the doctors don't know what's wrong with her; they don't know why she isn't growing up. She doesn't have a diagnosis and they don't know how to treat her. Thankfully that is not the case in our passage this morning. We know exactly what was wrong with the original readers; they were immature in their faith. And we know why they were immature; because they were lazy and disobedience to God's Word. Our passage also tells us how to be healed from spiritual immaturity.

***Prescription: Be diligent to grow in your knowledge and obedience to God's Word.***

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**6:1-2** *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

The main command in our text this morning is found here, we are to leave the elementary teachings about Christ and to go on to maturity. But what are the elementary teachings about Christ? The writer lists six things: repentance, faith in God, baptisms, the laying on of hands, resurrection, and eternal judgment.

But none of these six things are necessarily Christian; meaning you could hold to all six of these things and still be a Jew. The original readers of this letter were Jewish Christians living in Rome during the first century. They were tempted to leave their distinctive Christian faith and to revert back into Judaism. Judaism was accepted by the Roman government. But Christianity was not accepted by the Roman government and those who professed faith in Christ were in danger of being persecuted for their faith. The writer of Hebrews was urging his readers to move on past the Jewish elements in each of these six categories and to fully embrace a distinctively Christian faith even if it meant persecution.<sup>6</sup>

Let's look closer at these elementary teachings and how we can build on them.

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<sup>5</sup> A. Davis, February 6, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> L. Duncan, April 16, 1996.

1. The Jews taught repentance. But if we are to go on to maturity we need to embrace a distinctively Christian repentance that turns away from our old life completely and puts trust in Jesus and live lives marked by Christian repentance.

2. The Jews taught faith in God. But they didn't teach faith in Jesus, because they didn't believe he was the Messiah. If we are to go on to maturity we need to put faith in the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf and live lives marked by that faith.

3. The Jews taught baptisms or as other translations say "washings." Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes had to be baptized. John used baptism as a symbol for repentance. There were also various types of ceremonial washings associated with the priesthood and the sacrificial system of Israel. But Jews didn't believe that baptism symbolized the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If we are to go on to maturity we need to embrace a Christian baptism; we need to be publically identified with Jesus and live lives that shows the fact that we have been crucified with Christ and therefore raised with him. We can't live our lives in fear, even of persecution, if we really believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus; for the work of Jesus destroyed the power of death and frees us from the fear of death.

4. The Jews taught the laying on of hands. When a priest in the OT was anointed they would have hands laid on them. When someone was commissioned they would have had hands laid on them. But the laying on of hands in a Christian sense is associated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. If we are to go on to maturity we need to embrace the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives.

5. The Jews taught the resurrection. The Pharisees especially believed people would be resurrected at the end. But they didn't believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. If we are to go on to maturity we need to put our faith in the fact that Jesus was raised! And we need to live lives that are marked by hope in our future resurrection.

6. The Jews taught that there would be an eternal judgment. But they didn't believe in the second coming of Jesus and they didn't believe that their judgment would be dependent on whether or not they had faith in Jesus. If we are to go on to maturity we need to live lives that keep in mind the fact that Jesus will return to vindicate the faithful and to judge the unfaithful.

The writer wasn't urging his readers to get past these things; after all these things were foundational to the Christian faith. As 6:1 says, you can't "*lay again the foundation.*" You don't ever get past the gospel but you can grow in your understanding of the gospel and your obedience to it. The writer isn't urging them to go on to something new; he's urging them to build upon the foundation that was already established.

Romans 11:33 I think illustrates the point that you can't get past the gospel. After Paul spends 11 chapters unpacking the gospel and right before he starts to launch into the practical implications of the gospel in chapter 12, he says this...

**Romans 11:33** *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

We don't ever fully mine the depths of the gospel, but we can grow in our understanding of it and our obedience to it. One way you grow in your understanding of the Word of God is actually *by* obeying it.

**5:14** *But solid food is for the mature, who by **constant use** have **trained** themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

As we constantly “use” the Word of God we mature. One pastor has said we should follow a “learn and live” cycle. We should be diligent to learn more about what the Bible says, and then we should seek to live out what it says. As we live out the teaching of God's Word we grow in our understanding of God's Word.<sup>7</sup>

Another way verse 14 says we grow in our understanding of God's Word is by training. I suggested a few weeks ago six disciplines you should adopt if you really want to know what God's Word says.<sup>8</sup> You should 1) read it, 2) hear it preached, 3) study it yourself, 4) memorize it, 5) meditate on it, and 6) obey it. The more we live within the “learn and live” cycle and the more we apply these training disciplines, the more we will grow in our understanding of God's Word. And the more we grow in our understanding of God's Word the more mature we become in our faith.

I've stressed hard work a lot in my last few sermons. But I don't want you to come away thinking that you will earn God's favor by working harder or that you will lose your salvation if you don't work hard enough. I'm not saying that at all, we are saved by grace alone; however, God's Word is a “means of grace.” It is one way God works his grace into our lives. And while it is true that we are called to be diligent in order to mature in our faith we have to remember that it is only the work of God in us that will ultimately bring us to maturity.

Look at 6:1 again:

**6:1** *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity,*

I want to deal briefly before I close with the grammar of this verse. Notice the first part of this verse is an imperative; we are commanded to leave the elementary teachings about Christ. But the second part of this verse is a divine passive. Let me explain. Although all of the translations translate the phrase “go on to maturity” as an active verb it is actually a passive verb. Most of the commentaries acknowledge that this is a passive verb and say a literal translation would read, “*let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and **be carried along to maturity.***” That's very different than “go on to maturity.” But if we're going to be carried along to maturity, who's

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<sup>7</sup> A. Davis, February 6, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For further explanation you can access this sermon, *Rest for the Weary* - December 06, 2009, on the church website ([www.firstfreewichita.org](http://www.firstfreewichita.org)).

going to carry us along? The subject of this passive verb is not stated, but God is the implied subject. Verse 3 confirms this.

**6:3** *And God permitting, we will [go on to maturity].*

We do have a part to play in our spiritual maturity. We are called to be diligent. We are called to make every effort (Heb 4:11; 2 Peter 1:5). But at the same time we will make no progress in our spiritual development without God's work in our lives. We will not mature unless "*God permits.*" We will not go on to maturity unless God "carries us along." Philippians 2:12-13 articulates this paradox well.

**Philippians 2:12-13** *"...Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

So, we're called to work, but it is God who works in us.

**Philippians 1:6** *"And I'm sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."*

That word translated completion (in Philippians) and the word maturity (in Hebrews 6:1) are the same. God did the work of providing salvation for us through Jesus Christ and God will do the work of bringing us to complete maturity. The gospel is good news because God has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves; Jesus lived the life we failed to live and paid the penalty for our sin and failure on the cross. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. We need that power of God at conversion, but we need that power throughout our lives. God has to do the work that we can't do – he has to bring us to maturity, but he also calls us to be diligent.

Many of you will make resolutions for the New Year. Will you make a resolution to grow in spiritual maturity this year? I challenge you to make that commitment. But in the same way that we urge people to not take Christ out of Christmas I urge you to not take Christ out of your Christianity for he is the only one who can bring you to maturity.

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