

HIGH STAKES

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

By Steve Zeisler

Last Friday I played golf in the pouring rain with a few of our pastors and elders. It's somewhat embarrassing to admit that the leaders of our church do not know enough to come in out of the rain, but there it is. After tramping around in the rain and wind for three hours, I was doubly dismayed to find I had developed a sore throat yesterday. I felt embarrassed that my dumb decision to play golf in the rain would probably result in croaking my way through the message this morning. But the Lord is gracious. Whatever soreness there was yesterday is gone today.

That episode reminded me again of the truism that our choices always and inevitably lead to results. Our choices are extremely significant. When we can foresee the outcome of them, of course, we are all the more responsible. If we evidence of that, we only have to think of the national debate going on over the effects of illegal drugs in our country. We hear warning after warning to avoid dangerous drugs. Cocaine, heroin and other illegal substances can result in sudden and painful death, and they should be avoided. The choice to indulge in them can result in consequences that cannot be reversed. That should be enough to scare off anyone who is tempted to use them, but it obviously is not.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. We are responsible for the choices we make. We finally reach a point of no return, when the choices we made in the past cannot be reversed. That is the subject we will consider this morning as we continue our studies in the book of Hebrews.

We have noted that the message of Hebrews alternates between words of encouragement and words of warning. In our last study, for instance, the distinction was made between hard-heartedness and weakness. We saw that there is always available the ministry of our High Priest to us in our weakness and ignorance; but there was also sounded the stern note that those whose hearts are growing hard should fear. The point I would like to leave with each one of us today is that God takes our need as Christians to grow in Christ very seriously. If we are not growing in our Christian walk, if we stagnate, serious consequences will result. It is supremely important that we grow. We must be willing to hear the word of God that urges us forward. Hebrews 5:11-14:

Concerning him 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 have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14)

The "him" in that opening verse is Melchizedek, who was mentioned in Hebrews 5:10. We could render the verse, "Concerning Melchizedek and his ministry we have much to say." Here, the writer digresses again, this time because his hearers have become "dull of hearing." Although he wants to talk about Melchizedek, he must digress and issue another warning. Frankly, I, myself, am somewhat encouraged by Hebrews 5:11 because these things are hard to explain! And I

now have the word of God on the matter! But it is not just because the material itself is difficult. In the case of the recipients of this letter, at least, there was an unwillingness to learn; their hearing had grown dull.

Encountering stunted or unnatural growth should cause consternation. If your body is healthy and vital, your hearing should be sharp. If it is not, there is something wrong; you should be warned. In Hebrews 6, we will come to another appropriate question about growth. There the writer makes a statement concerning land, which although it has been cared for, produces thorns and thistles rather than an edible crop. That kind of growth is rejected; something needs to be done about it.

However, here in these verses, the issue of failing to grow spiritually is compared with a child who fails to advance from his desire for milk to his need for solid food. What a tragedy it would be for a child to continue wanting milk only and insist on rejecting all offers of solid food! Imagine his parents' distress at his inability to gain muscle fiber and strength because of his refusal. Living things must grow or else they will die.

I have two sons, one ten years old and one six. There is absolutely nothing the six-year-old wants more than to grow up and be like his brother. He would be outraged if he discovered that something might possibly prevent him from doing that. On occasion he even tries to act like he is ten, and cannot understand why his brother is allowed certain privileges that are denied him. He has a passion to grow, to get on with the next stage of life. Yet the word of Hebrews is that some believers, sadly, are content to remain spiritual infants.

The issue is given pointed analysis in Hebrews 5:14. Why were these Christians remaining in spiritual infancy? Because they had become “dull of hearing” is the answer. And they became “dull of hearing” because they failed to practice obedience to what they had learned. Our senses are sharpened by use and dulled by lack of use. In the same way, our spiritual senses grow dull if we do not practice what we have learned; if we do not trust God for new truth he has revealed to us, if we do not fight the battles he calls us to fight. When we practice what we learn, increasingly our hearing is sharpened and our understanding grows deeper.

Thus, the problem with continuing immaturity is an unwillingness to obey what has been learned. “You ought to be teachers but you are still children...” the author is saying. Not everybody has the gift of teaching; not everybody will have a formal teaching ministry. But every Christian ought to increasingly understand his or her faith, and have something to offer those who are in need. They should be capable of imparting a word of hope, a word of encouragement. They should have a depth of reality in their prayers. They should have advanced beyond “the elementary principles of the oracles of God”—beyond baby talk.

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. (Hebrews 6:1, 2)

Let us not go back again to the basics, the author warns. He goes on to list some of the “elementary teachings” to which his readers kept returning instead of moving on to maturity.

The recipients of the book of Hebrews were either Jews or Jewish proselytes who had come to Christ. For them, many of the early issues in their Christian life consisted of discovering the differences between real Christianity and their Jewish traditions because many of their symbols were the same. They had to learn to distinguish between what was really Christian and what was merely religious and familiar, what was part of their cultural heritage and what was part of their new life in

Christ. They needed to learn the difference between works—offered to God in order to gain his favor and faith—and faith works, whereby they trusted God to provide as a free gift what they could not earn themselves. That was a key issue for Jewish Christians. In fact, it is a key issue for all of us.

Let us consider some of the works which Jews felt were pleasing to God. For example, take the Sabbath and the incredible lengths to which they went to *keep* it. Jews would not spit on the ground on the Sabbath. Spittle made mull, which might be used as part of a building and that was work which of course was forbidden on the Sabbath. They went to incredible lengths—piling up restriction on accomplishment in order to *please* God

But one of the first things Jews had to learn in the new economy was that God did not care about all of these legalisms. Jesus' followers picked corn on the Sabbath and he declared to all who objected that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (cf Mark 2:27). He healed on the Sabbath, and felt totally unbound by their restrictions. So these people had to learn to trust God and give up their bent towards works.

Another major concern for the Jews was their fastidiousness about cleanliness and ritual purity. Here is one example of this taken from the gospel of Mark:

The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” (Mark 7:2-5)

They ate their bread with impure hands according to the Pharisees and that was an affront to God But here is our Lord's response to this charge:

...there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. (Mark 7:15)

Impurity comes from something inside of you It has nothing to do with how dirty your hands are or how you wash pots These people had to learn the difference between Judaism and Christianity, which views cleanness as an issue of the heart. They had to distinguish between their traditions and what was distinctively Christian.

Another familiar symbol for Jews was the “laying on” of hands. Jews laid hands on a scapegoat to have their sin pass from them, and the laying on of hands was a Christian practice as well, but for a different reason. Jews had to learn the difference between their old life and what was familiar to them, and what was really Christian. The Pharisees and the Sadducees debated as to whether the resurrection would take place and whether there would be eternal judgment. Converts needed distinctively Christian answers to those questions

The point of the things that are raised in Hebrews 6 is that they are all “doorway” issues (in this case for Jews)—the things one learns on first coming to faith. If they had come from a Hindu background, for instance, the issues would be different A walk of faith replacing religious works would still need to be learned, but the works might have to do with spinning a prayer

wheel instead of keeping the Sabbath. Hindus might have to learn the difference between offering flowers to an idol and “faith toward God.”

The point being made here is that all of us had some religious sensibilities before we became Christians—all of us come to faith bringing with us some legalistic baggage. But one of the first things we have to learn as new Christians is to stop trusting our old habits and patterns and begin living Christianly. We must seek to understand the world with the mind of Christ, especially in areas where our former thought patterns and symbols may seem so close to the real thing that we are contused.

When I was a young Christian the Jesus movement was in its heyday. Tremendous numbers of counter-culture people were coming to Christ—we had many here in this congregation. They tended to live in communes before they were Christians, and once they came to Christ they gravitated toward Christian communes. Before they became Christians they were into rock music and after coming to faith they invented Christian rock music. They tended to get high on LSD before they were Christians; afterwards they got high on Jesus. But now that they had become Christians they had to go through the process of looking at their old involvements, anti-interests in light of their new commitment. Giving their old way of life a Christian paint job was not an option any more

Christians must forsake the old living patterns and move on to what the Lord is calling them to. They can't remain forever hanging around the door, as it were, at the entry point of their commitment. Perhaps some of you came to Christ through the ministry of a Christian athletic group. If so, you will have noticed that one of the main concerns of the newly converted athlete is how well he will do in his sport now that he is a Christian. Christian athletes don't have prayer groups, they have prayer huddles. Many of their first prayers are offered for protection from injury. Their concern is geared toward the world they have come from and how Jesus fits into it. But with maturity they move beyond that. There are more serious issues to pray about.

Many new Christians try to retain some of their old involvements by giving them a Christian blush of one kind or another, but eventually we all must go through the door and get past the entry point while learning to distinguish between biblical thinking and our old way of life. It is then that we move further into the deeper things of Christ

It is not enough to baptize your old way of life with Christian language. You have to enter the door at some point and move on. The people to whom this letter was addressed, however, stayed near the door. They were still debating the difference between Christianity and Judaism, “of instructions about washings, and laying on of hands.” They were fighting, again and again, all the early battles over the elementary principles. They wanted milk, not solid food. The writer fears that something tragic is indicated by this unnatural refusal to grow.

This thought takes him to one of the most debated and difficult passages in the Bible:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

The problem with this passage is that it raises a category of people most of us would prefer not to think about—people that cannot be made right with God. This same unsettling issue was mentioned by Jesus when he said that a word spoken against the Son of God could be forgiven, but blasphemy of the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven (cf Matthew 12 31-32).

It ought to be disquieting for us to know that there is a certain category of people who cannot be renewed to a right relationship with God. Let us look further into this. We must recognize at first that the people being described here are those who have had a profound life—giving close association with the heart of God. They have been enlightened; they have tasted the world to come; they have been partakers of the things of God. They have come to the very heart of God and have received from him a form of life

Let us be clear on one point—these people I have just referred to are not in the category of people who once were exposed to a caricature of Jesus and responded by saying, “I want nothing to do with this Jesus.” Rejecting such a caricature may be a positive sign. The writer is not referring to people who oppose Christianity merely because at heart-level they never really understood Christianity to begin with; but these others had been given a clear understanding of the love of God. That is the distinction made in Matthew 12 between opposition to the Son and blasphemy of the Spirit. If the Spirit of God himself had penetrated all the way to their hearts and testified of Christ, and they responded by calling the Spirit a liar, their blasphemy made their condition unforgivable.

Why is it impossible to renew them again to repentance? Surely it is not because God is unwilling to grant them repentance and have them back. The problem is he doesn't have any weapons left once he has allowed them to see the cross of Christ in all its beauty—once he has told these that he loves them and they are in no sense mistaken that he does. Once he has given them a taste of his life—once he has humbled himself and exalted these by saying he cares for them—what else could he say that would persuade them? If they came that close, and rejected his offer, there is no persuasion left that would persuade these, and therefore there is no possibility of renewal because there is nothing more they can learn. All the obstructions have been removed; there is no confusion left to be cleared up

Further, it is important to realize that this rejection leads to hatred of Christ. Later, in Hebrews 10, we read that such people have trampled under foot the Son of God and regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace. Here, in Hebrews 6, we are told they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put him to open shame. This is the kind of rejection that leads to hatred of Christ. Such people would crucify him again were they able to. They spat upon the grace of God, and in thoughtful rebellion actively worked against the God who had given himself for them. They took the best he had to offer and turned their backs on it, becoming, as a result, his avowed enemies

It is important to make this clear. There have been times in my own life when I feared I had committed the unforgivable sin. Perhaps you, too, in times of weakness when you felt depressed and abandoned have felt that you would never be able to find God again—that he wanted nothing to do with you. Satan is capable of raising those kinds of fears in us. But it is extremely important to remember that anybody who regrets his sin, and fears he has lost his relationship with God, has the most certain evidence that he is not in that condition. The very fact that he feels pain over his perceived loss of his relationship with God is the best evidence imaginable that he still loves God! But the people under discussion here put him to open shame and delight in doing so. As long as there is any note of sorrow of loss or longing for Christ left in us, no matter how grievous we see our sin to be, then we are not in the condition described here. We are depressed, perhaps under attack certainly, but we are not in the category of those who cannot be renewed to faith. The very concern we have to know him is the surest evidence that we are renewable—that we can be made right with God. The remainder of Hebrews 6 goes on to speak more personally to those who first received this letter.

But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU.” And so, having patiently waited, [Abraham] obtained the promise. For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Having raised the dire warning, the writer now says we “are convinced of better things as regards you.” There are two reasons for this conviction—their lives and God’s promise. First, the author says to these people, “I have seen evidence of Christian reality in your lives. God will not forget the things that you have done. There is clear evidence that you followed him and trusted him, that you are alive in Christ.”

The other thing he offers them, as a reason for hope and encouragement, is the impossibility that God should fail. It is possible, as we have seen, for people to understand the gospel and yet reject it. But it is impossible that anyone who has fled to the gospel for refuge should be abandoned. God will never reject us—He swore by himself. He underlined it—He virtually wrote it in the sky—He will certainly keep his promise! He will not abandon us. That hope is an anchor for our souls. If there is evidence of Christian reality in your life, God will never abandon you. That is the tremendous promise first given to Abraham and renewed to each one of us.

When we took communion today we were asked to examine ourselves in light of this passage. Refusal to grow is a serious issue. Are we the kind of Christians who have walked across the threshold and yet stayed so close to the world that we still think primarily of the first issues of the faith? Is our Christianity so filled with worldliness that we are still asking the baby questions? Is there an unnatural refusal to grow? Living things should grow. Are we refusing to grow?

Sixteen hundred years ago this month a young man from North Africa stopped dabbling with Christianity. He is perhaps the most remarkable Christian teacher to have followed the age of the apostles. Augustine had some Christian knowledge—he displayed some interest in it, but he merely played with it. Finally, at the age of 32 he heard the voice of God and believed. He stopped dabbling with Christianity and gave his whole heart to the Lord. “You should be teachers by now....” When Augustine heard and obeyed the word of Romans 13:14: “...put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts,” he became an extraordinary avenue for the grace of God. He has affected every generation of Christians since.

Perhaps we are still babies, still dabbling with Christianity, refusing to grow. We are still lingering by the doorway—our Christian witness unchanged from those early first days. The concern that Christians grow is a proper and severe concern. Beyond that is an even more severe concern: having raised the issue of what happens to believers who do not grow, we

see beyond that the dark condition of people who end up laughing at the grace of God and delighting in the shame of Christ. We need to hear again the alternative: "...we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end..." (Hebrews 6:11). We need to continue being diligent, taking seriously the things God wants to teach us: "...that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:12).

Let us be diligent, not sluggish, not becoming bored so that we are open to other voices. Let us be enthusiastic to grow as is natural for living things to grow. Let us allow the Lord to give us joy and diligence once again so that we may be valuable to him in service to others.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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