

Time to grow up

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we're turning again to the letter to the Hebrews, and this time we're in chapter 5, on page 1003, and we're going to read from chapter 5, verse 11, to chapter 6, verse 12.

Just a quick word about it to fit it into context. It begins about this. The author has just been talking about Jesus, the great high priest, and how he resembles that figure from the Old Testament, that mysterious figure, Melchizedek, the priest and king of Salem, who met him. And that's the this in verse 11. Clearly the author had intended to continue to talk about Melchizedek, and he takes that up later. But he's something more important is to be talked about before that, and that's the this. So chapter 5, verse 11.

About this, he says, we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you've 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 work 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 towards 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 to restore again to repentance 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 power of the age to come, if they then fall away, 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 be incursed, 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 unjust as to overlook your work, and the love that you showed for his sake 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. Amen. This is the Word of the Lord.

Now, could I ask you to turn again to that passage, please, on page 1003, and we'll have a moment of prayer to ask the Lord's help. Father, as we approach your Word and tremble on its threshold, difficult, challenging, uncomfortable words, pray indeed that you will take my words and use them faithfully to unfold this part of your written Word.

And so lead us to the living Word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. If you look around at quite a number of church websites, there's a word that occurs over and over and over again.

[4 : 31] That word is lively. We are a lively church. Well, it's so likely that anyone's going to put on their website, we are a boring moribund church.

And if you come to us, you'll lose the will to live after half an hour. On the other hand, let's explore this word lively a little more closely. What is the most lively place on earth?

Surely it's the nursery. Life squeaks, crawls, jumps, somersaults there. There is no livelier place on earth than a nursery.

And of course, it's wonderful for those of nursery age. Our author is basically telling the Hebrew believers and us, it's time to grow up.

That's my title for this evening. It's time to leave the nursery behind. It's time to grow into maturity. That's what he's saying to us.

[5 : 36] And he's saying, first of all, this is not just for the enlightened few. This is for the whole church. Probably this church is now a third generation church.

And the teaching over the years had been faithful. That's very obvious from chapter 13, verse 7. Remember your leaders who spoke to you the word of God.

That has been characteristic of this church. It's not been heresy or unbelief. There has been faithful teaching. Well, does that mean everyone ought to go to Cornhill?

Everyone ought to do a degree in theological education. Everyone ought to join the teaching programs of the church. Now, of course, it doesn't mean that.

It doesn't mean that at all. But what it does mean is that everyone needs to grow in the faith.

Everyone needs to help those younger in the faith. And all of us to be able, as Peter says in his letter, to give a reason for the faith that is within us.

[6 : 39] C.S. Lewis says, we can't express our faith clearly. We either don't understand it or don't believe it. I've often thought about that.

This phrase, or don't believe it. That's very often the reason why people cannot express their faith clearly, because they're muddled. They don't really know what their faith is.

And the importance of responsible listening. You have become dull, sluggish of hearing. As I said a moment or two ago, our author could have gone straight from 510 to 613, which is the beginning of the passage on Melchizedek, and developed this idea.

But he realizes that people are not ready for this. They have listened to the teaching. The words have simply swept over them. They haven't made them their own. There's been no real engagement.

There has been no real progress. So he's saying to them, it is time to grow up. Time to leave the nursery. Time to develop as mature and growing Christians.

[7 : 52] And the argument develops in three stages. First of all, there is a wake-up call from 511 to 613. Our author is concerned with responsiveness and lack of responsiveness.

As I've said, churches die if they have bad teaching. If there is heresy taught, very soon people fall away. There are no converts. No one's ever converted to a heretical teaching.

The church simply dies. But you know, if there is good teaching which is taken for granted, and nothing done about it, the church soon becomes moribund.

I've once heard Don Carson say that every church is only one generation away from extinction. Every new generation has to learn.

Every new generation has to develop. Every new generation has to pass on. And if there is no progress, then life dies, or at least. Well, you see, we don't want to be a nursery.

[8 : 51] We don't want to be an even-tied home either, do we? We want a living church that is growing. Those are the words. So, he says maturity is vital, and it depends what we feed on.

You need milk, not solid food, he says. We know that baby is growing when she, still enjoying her milk, starts to take solid food.

And we know that spiritual babies are growing once they start enjoying solid food. This is related to training about the basic implications of the gospel.

Solid food, he says, is for the mature, to those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Distinguishing good from evil, of course, is the very basis of the gospel.

That, of course, is what caused the trouble at the beginning. You will be like God, knowing good and evil. Point is, sinful people, including forgiven sinners, don't think the way that God thinks.

[9 : 57] We easily slip into wrong ways of thinking and, therefore, into wrong ways of living. Other voices continually clamor for a hearing, encouraging us to be self-centered.

Encouraging us to be inward-looking. Encourage us to be complacent. Encouraging us not to grow. It's many years ago, but I remember a really sad experience in a very well-known church in a university city.

I'm not going to tell you which one. And the preacher was preaching on this letter, the letter to the Hebrews. And, indeed, if I remember rightly, preaching in this very passage, I'll never forget the words he says.

He says, if you're teaching, all you need to do is to be a chapter ahead of the learners. This passage, talking about the importance of maturity and growth, all you need to do is to be a chapter ahead.

Now, that is simply not true. We need the searchlight of the Word of God. But otherwise, we'll simply become complacent. A church that doesn't listen to the Word of God, what are we going to listen to?

[11:05] We're going to listen to our own voices, aren't we? We're going to listen to voices that call us to something less than the radical challenge of the Gospel. That's the first thing.

Maturity is vital, depends on what we feed on. But the other thing, and this is very important, he is not dismissing elementary teaching. When he says, let us leave, 6 verse 1, he doesn't mean we go on to some higher teaching, which is for a privileged elite.

It doesn't mean that we forget what we have learned when we first came to Christ. It means that we go deeper into the implications of that.

Let me illustrate it this way. A child learning the alphabet is obviously not in the same situation as Shakespeare. But the only reason Shakespeare was able to write his plays was because the alphabet remained valid.

If the alphabet had ceased to be valid, if he had forgotten the alphabet, then the plays would never have been written. Similarly, Einstein, I imagine, this is not my field, I was never any good at counting and still am not.

[12:17] Einstein, I imagine, was not continually thinking about the elementary principles of arithmetic. But once again, these elementary mathematical and arithmetical and scientific principles he had learned as a schoolboy were still valid.

In all, however deeply and however further he went. And perhaps an even better example. A child learning at their mother's knee not to tell lies is in a very different position from a world leader who makes decisions that affect millions of people.

But only in so far as that world leader remembers not to tell lies, remembers the elementary principles he learned at his mother's knee, will his decisions be good and valuable ones.

Leave doesn't mean leave behind in the sense you abandon it. It means leave in the sense that you grow more deeply into it, develop from it. And similarly, in Proverbs says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

It doesn't mean that we leave that behind. It means that's the guiding principle which underwrites everything else. And of course, here we've got, in many ways, a summary of the principles of the gospel.

[13:35] The foundation of repentance from dead works and faith towards God. The basic door by which we enter the gospel, the gospel blessings, faith towards God and repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can never, ever, ever forget these. Or if we do, we're in danger. If we do, we'll go back to good works. We'll go back to trying to earn our salvation. That's not what our author is saying.

That's where you began. You can't lay another foundation. If you try to lay another foundation, you're not going deeper. You're not going higher. You're simply departing from the faith. By instruction about washings, there's some dispute about what this means.

Some think it may refer to baptism. Baptism more often simply referred to as washing in the singular. But I'm almost certain it refers to Christian initiation.

The first teaching when you become a Christian. When you become part of the family of Christ. These early teachings.

[14:45] And similarly, the laying on of hands. Often in blessing. Sometimes associated with a particular Christian service. See, all these things are introductory things.

Introductory doors. Repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands. And then he comes on to the fundamental realities.

The resurrection of the dead. And the eternal judgment. This is what the Christianity is. This is what the gospel is about.

It's eternal. And because it's eternal, it's unchanging. These remain fundamental. In verse 3 says, this we will do if God permits. Probably referring to the rest of the letter.

And indeed to Christian teaching throughout our lives. But generally speaking, the inexhaustible riches of Christ. Now, let's reflect on that for a moment.

[15:44] I know what some of you are thinking. Some of you are thinking, I am far, far, far too busy to do any more than I'm doing. And it has to be said, an awful lot of Christian teaching sometimes gives this idea.

You're not doing enough. You ought to be going to more meetings. You ought to be attending more things. You ought to be doing this and doing that. A harassed young mother. Three kids under four. But eventually she gets the last one to bed and it collapses exhausted. Are you expecting her to start reading Berkhoff's systematic theology? The overworked, middle-aged, middle-aged couple trying to bring up teenage children.

How can they fix something else in a crowded life? At all stages of life there are pressures. And we misunderstand this if we imagine that something else has to be added.

I want to say this to you, and it doesn't sound very profound. Do what you can at different stages in your life. Keep on listening. Keep on reading.

[16:49] Keep on reflecting. Use those moments when, for example, in prayer, use these moments. Say you're walking to get the bus or the train. You're driving the car. Washing the dishes.

Doing things that don't actually need your whole mental attention. That's so important. Now, of course, it is right for some people to go more deeply into Bible teaching and so on.

And you hardly expect me to deny that that is important. Indeed, maybe the Lord is nudging some people in that direction here tonight. But that's not the main point.

The main point is the inexhaustible riches of Christ. The growth into maturity is something that we need to... It's true, isn't it?

Just as I am without one plea. That's how we come to Christ. That's how we continue with Christ as well. I've long believed evangelicals believe in justification by faith.

[17:48] But we do believe in sanctification by works, sadly. We believe that our grace saves us through faith. But grace only sanctifies us through works.

Of course, works matter. I'm not saying that for a moment. What I'm saying is that it's all of grace. So a wake-up call. Grow to maturity. Leave the nursery.

And dig more deeply. As you can. When you can. Whatever stage in life you may be. And then follows this terrifying passage. Really a stern warning.

Verses 4 to 8. Now the letter to the Hebrews has a number of these passages. Already we've come across chapter 2, verse 3.

How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? 3, verse 12. See that none of you have an evil and unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

[18:46] And in other passages there are as well. How do these fit with Romans 8, for example? Whom he called, he justified. And them he glorified. The eternal security of the believer.

I to the end shall endure. Assures the promises given. More happy, but not more secure. Glorified spirits in heaven. We sang that, didn't we?

I want to say two things. First of all, there is a real danger of falling away. Or apostasy. But always, now, when you speak about this, to any group of people, there are always going to be the timid who are terrified and saying, am I one of those who are going to fall away?

Let me say this straight away. If that's what you fear, then you are not in the situation here. This is deliberate, calculated, persistent rejection of Christ.

This is not fearing. You're not going to make it. That's the first. On the other hand, there are also complacents who boast of their standing in Christ and feel, and almost in a kind of cold-blooded way.

[20:00] Many cases of where this kind of thing's happened. In the 19th century, there was a man called F.W. Newman, the brother of the man of J.H. Newman, who became Cardinal Newman.

wrote the great hymn, Praise to the Holiest in the Heights. As a young man, he was converted and became a member of the Brethren, in those days, a flourishing, vibrant group of people.

And for a number of years, he continued that way. He preached. He lived a vibrant Christian life.

Then unaccountably, he fell away and spent 40 years denouncing what he had believed in.

Not, as I say, just falling away and becoming careless and ignoring the gospel. At the very end, on his deathbed, by God's grace, he came back.

Well, was he accepted? Not for us to say, is it? Christ will not deny himself. I wonder if this is a case which 1 Corinthians 3 talks about, saved as by fire.

[21:08] I mean, that's happened. That does happen. The work's burned. I will come back to that at the end. There is a mystery here. The danger of falling away.

Not, we're not here talking about slipping away. We're not here talking about sins through carelessness and negligence.

We're talking here about deliberate, persistent rejection of Christ. And that, of course, leads us to the point, the question, what is a true believer?

How do we know we are a true believer? This is the heart of the question. Look at verses 4 and 5 of chapter 6. It's impossible to us. Those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away.

Now, clearly, this is the one event of salvation looked at from different angles. Look at what it says. We're being enlightened. The people on whom the light has shone.

[22 : 15] Remember how often this is used in the New Testament. John, in one of the ways of describing a Christian, is somebody who walks in the light. Somebody who had shared in the Holy Spirit.

Somebody who had felt the power of the Holy Spirit being in the sphere where the Spirit operated. Someone who had enjoyed the Word of God and its preaching, had glimpses of the world to come. Now, think about that for a minute. This is fairly impressive stuff. I imagine if we saw this kind of thing happening, we might well feel that something akin to revival had broken out.

This is wonderful stuff. Enlightened by the Word. For taking the Spirit, tasting the powers of the world to come. See, as I say, this is a warning against complacency.

It's not an attack on assurance. You see, this is deliberate turning away. Now, let me develop that a little bit. Take somebody like that man, F.H. Newman.

[23 : 25] If you were to meet somebody like that, towards the end of their life, and they wanted to return to the place they had left, what are you going to say to them?

Well, there's two things we could say. One thing we could say is you never knew Christ at all in the first place. You must come to him now. Well, you see the problem there.

How do we know that the second conversion is going to be any more valid than the first? I think we need to say, you may have turned your back on Christ.

He has never left you all those years. You've turned your back on him. He has never turned his back on you.

And he never will. You see, the very fact the person comes back is a sign that Christ has not let them go. Now, you may well feel that's unsatisfactory, and it may be.

[24 : 31] But remember, the foundation of the Lord stands sure. The Lord knows those who are his. We don't know. And sometimes we even doubt it in our own hearts, don't we?

One of the verses in the Bible, which I return to over and over and over again, the verse in 1 John 3, verse 20, whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.

We need to remember, God is greater than our hearts. So, you see, what I want to say to us all this evening is this. If you recognize yourself as someone who is crucifying once again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt, then this is the time to turn back to him, isn't it?

But you see, this person, the kind of person mentioned here, is somebody who will not come back to Christ, who will not return.

So, it is a stern warning. So, you see, you've got a wake-up call, a stern... And finally, we have a reassuring message, verses 9 to 12. It's no accident.

[25 : 46] The sternest passage in the letter is followed by the most affectionate passage. This is the only place in the letter where the author refers to his heroes...

Not his heroes, his hearers as beloved. Though we speak in this way, verse 9, yet in your case, beloved. And two things.

First of all, a real work of grace has happened in their lives. I think that's so important. And we feel sure of better things.

Now, that's a conventional phrase. Usually, I expected better things of you. But I don't think that's what the author is meaning. The author uses the word better over and over and over again.

And what is he referring to? He is referring to Jesus Christ himself. He is better. And later on in the letter, when Abel offers a better sacrifice than Cain, he offers a sacrifice that is pointing to the sacrifice of Christ.

[26 : 52] So, when the author says better things, he's saying, I've seen the work of Christ in your lives. Christ in you, the hope of glory, as Paul says in Colossians.

The things that belong to salvation. You really are Christ's people. Well, you may be immature. You may be annoying. But there is evidence of grace.

Now, we need to hold these two things together. I've said we cannot be sanctified by works. But if there is no evidence of grace, no works, no fruit, then we really have to ask questions.

There is evidence of grace at work here. That's why we sang these two hymns earlier. The top lady hymn about the eternal security in Christ, my name from the palms of his hands, eternity will.

And that other one, we have not loved or served you as we ought. And that's the second point, the need to persevere. Having made that positive and reassuring point, the author now returns to what is his persistent theme, the need for progress and perseverance.

[28 : 08] Notice how he uses the word sluggish, dull again. You're floating along, he essentially says. You're drifting. You're not, though they may not be headlong, turning away from Christ, but they're drifting.

The danger of being sluggish, a word that's often used, the frozen limbs. You're paralyzed. You're not dead, but you're paralyzed. You need life, the life flowing once again in your veins. And the two great themes of the letter, faith and perseverance, at the very heart of this. Remember, I've called this series, Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus.

Better things look to the better one who made the better sacrifice. As we finish, I want to say this. I think one of our problems with a passage like this, particularly the terrifying warning passage, is that behind it lurks another question.

Also, we're saying, how far can we go and still get away with it? How far can we turn away from the faith and still be saved? Our author is not really addressing that question.

[29 : 20] Our author is doing something far more powerful. Our author is saying, you don't need to do that. The reason you don't need to do that is because you have a great high priest who has gone into heaven, Jesus, the Son of God.

Because of him, you will keep on going. He has reached the goal. Keep your eyes on him. Not only has he reached the goal, but he is alongside to help.

He is able. So the letter of Jude ends, to him who is able to keep us from falling. Now, that may simply mean stumbling, but I think it means something more, since Jude has been talking about false teaching and falling away.

To him who is able to keep us from apostasy and present us faultless before the presence of his glory with shouts of joy.

Our author is saying, take your eyes away from your own striving, your own imperfection. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the one on whom faith depends from start to finish.

[30 : 28] Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things.

Lord, save us from the sin of complacency and pride. Save us from sluggishness. Save us from taking you for granted. Help us not to depend on ourselves and our changing feelings, but on the unchanging hope.

The hope, which is like an anchor for the soul, is fixed surely behind the veil. And we praise you, Lord. Even when we forget you, you do not forget us, and you will never leave us.

And we praise you for this. Amen.