

GROWING UP TOWARD MATURITY

HEBREWS 5:11-6:1

Good morning! My name is Ben, I'm one of the pastors here at Summit. It's a privilege to be opening up God's word with you this morning.

We are in the middle of a series in the Book of Hebrews. Hebrews is this letter written to Jewish Christians who are going through somewhat of a crisis of faith. These believers have left their extended families, their friends, their jobs, they've lost much of their community and cultural context in Judaism, all in order to follow Jesus. They're facing some difficult stuff - challenges, opposition, persecution, all because of the name of Christ. And so because of this social pressure cooker they are in, some are considering going back to their old life, going back to the way things were before they became Christians.

And the entire book of Hebrews is written to these believers to encourage and exhort them to endure in the faith. And the author gives that exhortation in two ways. The first thing he does is that over and over again he shows them the beauty, the supremacy, the worth, the "betterness" of Jesus. Jesus is better than the angels. He's a better Moses, he's the better rest, he's a better priest, and he's a better King. The author is really putting these carrots out in front of the church saying, "keep going, persevere, keep your eyes on the glory of Jesus,"

And then running right alongside these great promises, in parallel with them, are these warnings, these prods keeping God's people on track. Out of his love and affection for these believers, the author wants to keep them from running off the rails, from train wrecking their faith.

"Don't drift," he says. "Don't neglect this great salvation, don't harden your hearts." Then we get up to the end of Chapter 5, where we are this morning, and the author gives us his sternest warning. The prod in these verses is like a taser to our souls. He wants to wake us up out of our spiritual laziness and drive us toward Jesus.

How many of you had the wonderful privilege of going to public school? That explains much more about all of you now. Totally joking.

One of the challenges of public school, well really most schools, is as 15-16-17 year old kid, is trying to fit in. What group are you going to be in? Are you going to be a redneck, or are you going to be one of the preppy kids, or a punk. Who are you going to be in with?

And when I was in high school, I kind of toed the line between jock and nerd. You see I played basketball, but I got straight As and hung out in the science room at lunchtime just enough to be in with the nerds. But I wasn't one of those kids with a 99% average and 1500 on their SATs. I did just enough to squeak into the A category. I think an A started at 86%, and rarely did any class on my report exceed 88%.

When I got to college, that tender balance to my ordered universe didn't work so well, and I failed my first year biology class. You see, the lecture hall was packed with 300 students, and it wasn't so noticeable if one of those students was missing. The class was just a bit too far from my dorm, my bed just a bit too cozy at 8:30 in the morning, and the content just a bit too

boring. Needless to say I failed because I hardly ever went to class. But there is one thing I do remember from the handful classes I did attend, and it is this biological fact: *living organisms grow*. I know you're thinking, isn't that kind of obvious? It's Canadian university, ok...

There are certain distinguishing marks that help define something as being alive. Defining factors. Living organisms have organization and structure, they are responsive to their environments... now according to that checklist there might be some question as to whether I was actually alive at 8:30am during my biology lectures, but what is clear is that living organisms do certain things. And one of the most important things they do is they grow. This is a universal principle. And if something isn't growing, it's what? It's dying, or it's diseased. It's not functioning the way it should. If something has stopped growing, it's started dying.

This principle is exactly what the author of Hebrews wants us to get. Living things grow, and for Christians, growth is the evidence of spiritual life spiritual vitality. So if a Christian is not growing it is either because they are diseased or because they are dying. New birth in the Christian creates new spiritual life, if you aren't growing there is a danger that you are either dying, or you are not really alive. This is what Hebrews is saying.

Now where we're going, what we are going to cover today, as well as next Sunday, is tough sledding. This passage in Hebrews from 5:11-6:12 is the most difficult passage in Hebrews, if not the entire New Testament. So we can't take this lightly. Over the next two weeks there is going to be some heavy stuff, the themes in these verses are weighty. This morning I am going to plead with you, and I may even raise my voice at you.... b/c in some ways that is what the author of Hebrews is doing here. If you saw a child running out into the street about to get hit by a bus, you wouldn't gently warn them. The author sees danger ahead for some in the church, and he does everything he can to warn them. So there is going to be some weight to this. But I know that the Holy Spirit will guide our minds and our hearts as we put our trust in him.

PRAY again.

Alright, let's dive in and start to unpack these five verses. Verse 11, follow along with me - "About this we have much to say,"

What does he have much to say about? Look back at the passage we studied last week. The author has been telling us how Jesus is better. He's better than Moses, better than Aaron, he gives his people a better, more ultimate rest, and then he says he is a better high priest, because he's not just a priest, but like this shadowy Old Testament character named Melchizedek, Jesus is the King-Priest. He's not just a priest among us, but he's King over us.

And then there is sort of this pause here at verse 11 - we've mentioned before that Hebrews is probably a sermon put into written form, and from here until the beginning of Chapter 7 there is a parentheses, an aside before the author picks up this theme of Jesus' royal priesthood again in 7:1.

This pastor-author has been telling us all about the amazing reality of Jesus, our King-Priest, and as he is exhorting our hearts to worship this Jesus, to see him as better than

anything else, he suddenly he stops..... and he looks up from his notes, steps to the side of the pulpit, takes off his glasses, and starts to address us directly from the depths of his heart.

So so he says here in v. 11, "About the glory of Jesus our King-Priest, about this incredible truth about who Jesus is and what he has done, we have much to say, but it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

Here's what he's saying. He's saying to us - "There is so much more about Jesus that I want to tell you. There is so much more for you to know. There's a deeper reality to walk in, there is more life, there's deeper water, there's more beauty, there's more to be in awe of, and I would love to teach it to you, I would love for you to get it and be captivated by it, I'd love for you to be caught up in the might and worth and beauty and greatness of God and his gospel and for that to fill your soul, but I can't even begin to explain that to you. I can't even start to tell you about all of that, because you've become dull of hearing."

The NIV puts it this way, it says, "you are slow to learn." But the reason all of this is hard to explain, is not that the content is too difficult, the concepts too lofty for them to grasp. It's not because their IQ isn't high enough, or they have a learning disability, or they're too uneducated. The problem is that somewhere along the way, somewhere from the time they started coming to church and professed their trust in Jesus, they stopped growing and became stagnant. They developed a spiritual lethargy, a laziness toward spiritual truth. The phrase literally means they became sluggish in the ears. They had become dull to the truths of the gospel.

I hate having ear infections. I've had several, and if you've ever had one you'll agree that they are not enjoyable. When you have an ear infection, they are incredibly painful right? Your ear canal is literally inflamed, and usually you can't hear anything. It's like being in a tunnel. But there is something about an ear infection that seems to affect the experience of every other piece of sensory information your body takes in. Your sense of taste, touch, sight, smell, all seemed dulled when you aren't taking in the auditory dimension that your body is used to.

Brothers and sisters, this is exactly the author's point here. When you become dull to the glorious truths of the gospel, when you stop intentionally cultivating your hunger for God's word, when there is an ambivalence that forms in you and you become spiritually lazy, there is actually a dullness that sets in in your spiritual senses. An apathy that seeps in to every other dimension in which you experience the reality of Jesus. Church becomes boring, community life becomes a burden, the Bible an afterthought, and prayer non-existent. The gospel becomes white-noise around you, rather than the soothing strains of a musical masterpiece. When you become dull to the gospel, you stop growing and you start dying.

The author is saying, "There are things about Jesus that are going to absolutely blow your mind and set your heart on fire, but your own spiritual laziness makes it impossible for you to get the depths of what I want to say to you."

For every one of you there are deeper implications of the gospel in your life which you have yet to work out, corners of your heart that remain unconverted, that you've kept for yourself. There are places you've allowed to remain unconvinced by the truth of Jesus and unaffected by his beauty.

I want to prod you in love as the author of Hebrews would, when you allow yourself to become dull to the person and work of Jesus, when you become dull to the gospel, spiritual growth stagnates and you're in danger of dying.

And here's how the stagnation of spiritual growth shows itself... v. 12

"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."

There is a progression in the Christian life that moves us from being babies to mature adults. We should be progressing from childish understandings and outworkings of our Christian faith to more mature understandings.

This isn't a growth toward perfection, or a growth away from need, in fact far from it. Growth in our knowledge of God and understanding of his work only exposes us to how much we actually don't know and leaves us in awe of Jesus.

Growth in the Christian life doesn't move us into a state of perfection, beyond the need for God's grace, instead we start to realize how deep our sin and our need for grace really is.

And this progression of spiritual maturity from babyhood to adulthood, this doesn't conflict with Jesus' word to us that we should be childlike in our faith - we should walk with the innocence and faith of children, but over time, in our understanding and practice, we need to GROW UP.

So what does growing up look like? What are we growing up in to? Well, look what he says here in verse 12: *"by this time you ought to be teachers."* In this progression toward maturity, all of us should eventually move from only being taught, to becoming teachers of others.

Now that doesn't mean that everyone who follows Jesus eventually stands up here behind the pulpit and preaches a sermon, but it does mean that all of us should be able to give to others what we've been given. You should be able to sit with another person over coffee and teach them, explain to them the basics of the gospel: who Jesus is, what he's like, what he's done, and what it means to follow him.

Life begets life, and so one of the marks of living things is that they reproduce. And so as you grow, instead of just having your own needs met, instead approaching life as a consumer, the way that babies naturally do, you begin to pour into the lives of others, showing them Jesus in word and in deed, and what happens? Disciples create disciples, and the family of God grows.

It's easy to indulge yourself in the luxury of an isolated immaturity. You may recognize your spiritual stagnation, but you think "well at least the only person it ever affects is me." But here we're seeing that that's not true. Your lack of spiritual growth affects others. There are places you ought to be having influence for the gospel and your spiritual laziness has a cost.

Dads, are you cultivating in your kids a wonder for the gospel? Are you leading your families? Would your children recognize you as their shepherd, their teacher, or do *you* need to be taught the basics all over again?

Ladies - are you walking as Titus 2 instructs, teaching what is good and training women younger than you?

All of us should grow toward a maturity where teaching and discipleship, investing spiritually in our families, our children, younger brothers and sisters in Christ happens naturally out of the overflow of what God has already done in our hearts. Genuine spiritual growth in us leads to spiritual growth in God's family, but spiritual stagnation in us begins to result in spiritual apathy in those around us.

And so it was this spiritual stagnation and failure to give away what they'd been given that was happening for many in the Hebrew church, and the author doesn't shy away from using sarcasm to prod these believers out of their spiritual lethargy.

You should be teaching others, he says, but instead you need a remedial class yourselves. "You need someone to teach you again the basic principles, the ABCs, of the word of God. You need milk, not solid food." He's saying, you're acting like babies when you should be grown men and women.

Stanley Thorton is an adult baby. He's 29 years old, lives in northern California and spends half his life pretending to be an infant.. He sleeps in a crib, sucks on a binky, and gets spoon fed by his aunt in his gigantic high chair. For quiet time he drinks from his bottle and plays with legos in his oversized playpen.

When babies wear diapers, suck on a binky, and drink from a bottle, it's cute right? We love that! But when adults do those things, its dysfunctional.

And this is what the author is saying. It's not cute anymore. You should be adults, but you're acting like babies. You see he isn't saying that babies in God's family, should act like adults. That would be an unrealistic expectation. There are some of you that are new to Jesus. You've only been a Christian for a few months, maybe just a year or two - you do need milk and that is wonderful and we actually celebrate that!

What the author is saying is different. He's looking at the church and saying, "somewhere along the way your growth got stunted, and even though you should be an adult and should be contributing to family life, walking responsibly with wisdom and understanding, even having children of your own, making disciples, the reality is you're still acting like a baby. You're still on the bottle, you're still trying to live only on milk, and that's a problem.

For newborns there is nothing better than a mother's milk. That milk gives them all the nourishment they need. But as babies grow they start to need other nutrients. They can't live on milk forever. If growing adults continue to try and sustain themselves on milk they'll be malnourished. And this is what he's saying. Look at v. 13 - "for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child."

What is the word of righteousness? Well, track back for a second, because there are connectors going backward in the text that show us what this is. This word is the solid food that he's talking about in verse 12. And that solid food is also the thing that he's said is hard to

explain in verse 11, which is connected to what he has much to say about. And what did we already say he has much to say about? Well it's all he has been saying about Jesus as our great King-Priest earlier in chapter 5, which he is going to spend the next several chapters after this unpacking -

So this word of righteousness, or teaching about righteousness, is the reality that in Jesus God has provided a righteousness that is not of ourselves and done everything necessary to redeem and rescue us out of sin and death. He's accomplished everything to bring us into right relationship with him, make us his kids, bring us together into community as God's family, utterly transform us, and send us out on mission as his ambassadors in the world.

And it's this word of righteousness that is the solid food that nourishes and sustains us. It's these truths of the gospel that will utterly wreck us for anything else in this world and cause us never to even think of returning to life as it was before we knew Jesus.

So what he's saying to you Christian, is that if you continue to just live on milk, just live off of the basics, just live at this very superficial level of the Christian life, you aren't going to truly get Jesus or what he's done for you, you aren't going to get the depths of the gospel and its implications in your life, and so you are going to be malnourished and in fact in danger of dying.

These Hebrew believers aren't mature, they're not healthy. They started off well, but somewhere along the way something happened, something stopped for them.

What was it that stopped? Look at v. 14 - *"But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."*

So immaturity begins when you become dull to the gospel. Instead of growing and maturing and teaching others, you end up needing to go over the basics again and again. You don't give and serve and reproduce... you consume. Your faith remains superficial and instead of going deeper in the implications of the gospel in your life, you stay on the surface and you become malnourished.

But maturity looks different. What the author is saying is that mature people apply the truth they've known. Mature Christians believe by faith the truth they're taking in and apply it in their lives. This is what the Hebrews had stopped doing. Truth was going in one ear and out the other. They'd stopped applying truth. They still acknowledged it, but they'd stopped acting on it.

Some of you have been confronted by the gospel, have even professed belief in the gospel, you get the bigness of God and his plans, you know his greatness, that all of creation exists for his praise and his glory, but on a functional level the reality of your life is that everything exists for your praise and your glory. You may not say it, but what plays out everyday functionally is that Jesus has come and taken a role on the pages of your story, rather than you taking your place in his. Life is not all about him, but all about you. And so you live life for your goals, and your dreams, and your aspirations, and your agenda, rather than God's. You've stopped applying the truth you know.

Others of you, God has convicted you of sin in certain areas but the reality is you love your sin more than you love Jesus. And so you'll obey God in every other area of your life, but that one thing... where you hold on to bitterness against that one person who has wronged you,

where you escape pressure and stress and fear by indulging in pornography, where you steward your time and your resources selfishly, where you control and manipulate other people to get what you want.... those areas you'll hold onto as tightly as possible and bury them deep in a back corner of your heart. And in refusing to yield those areas to the grace and love and goodness of God, they begin to master you. You've stopped applying the truth you know.

But the mature, Hebrews says, take in the solid food of the gospel. They plumb the depths of the love and grace and mercy of God, they yield themselves to it, they obey it, they practice it, they rehearse it, they are trained by it, and it transforms them.

This is how growth happens. A science website I was reading this week defined growth this way.

Growth requires living organisms to take in material from outside of themselves and organize that material into their own structures. During growth, a living organism transforms material that is unlike itself into materials that are like it. A person, for example, digests a meal of meat and vegetables and transforms the chemical material into more of himself.

Brothers and sisters, this is exactly the message of this passage. To grow we take this reality of the gospel, a faith and a righteousness provided for us that as Ephesians 2:8 says, is completely not of ourselves, and we receive it into our inmost parts. We take in truth of Jesus in a way that it penetrates the deepest recesses of our hearts, a reality that is outside of us becomes so inseparable from us, it becomes part of us. That is how we grow and mature.

Take stock of your own life for a moment.

How would you compare your level of spiritual maturity today to your level of spiritual maturity a year ago? How would you compare where you are at right now in your love for Jesus, your love for his gospel, your desire to obey and follow him in your life, how would you compare that to where you were at a year ago?

Some of you aren't even able to answer that question because a year ago you weren't a Christian. And God has done a work in your life, and you still feel like a baby in Christ, but that's ok.

There are some of you that look at your life and you say, you know what - I love Jesus, I trust him more, I love his word more, I love others more than I did twelve months ago.

But there are others of you that look at your life and there has been no change. Things have stayed pretty much the same. In fact, some of you its probably been that way for years. There are some of you that have been a Christian for a long time, and you think, I've had 20 years of experience as a Christian, but what you really have had is one Christian experience repeated for 20 years. There has been no growth.

And some of you look at the last year, and to be honest its been a disaster. You're holding things together on the outside, but on the inside you feel like you're spiritually dying. The Christian life has moved from delight to mere duty. In fact, if it wasn't for Sunday mornings, you're not sure you would ever open your Bible.

Well, if you are in one of those latter two groups, I want to address you. How do you grow. Well, there is something that happens on a practical level. Values.

Gospel- Community-Mission =— practical helps for growth.

But, you might say to me, Ben - I've tried that and it hasn't worked. And you're right, it shouldn't work, because resolution isn't enough to change us. There's something deeper that has to happen, and that is repentance. Resolution isn't the same as repentance. You see resolution is being carried by your own ability to change and transform you. Repentance is given up on your own ability to change you and being carried by God.

And this is where the author ultimately points us. To the grace that actually changes us. Look at chapter 6 and verse 1.

"Therefore, let us lead the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity..." He's not saying, let's leave behind the doctrine of Christ, he's saying, let's leave the basics about Jesus and go on the richer, more glorious truths about Jesus. Let's go beyond the surface waters down into the deeps. Let's go on to maturity.

And the verb here where it says, let's go on, reveals something about how we move toward maturity. It's actually a verb in the passive voice, which means that it's not something that you do yourself, but something that's done to you. The author is saying, let's leave behind babyhood, let's build on the foundation of basics you already have, let's start obeying the truth you already know, but ultimately you need God to carry you on to maturity. It's God that does the work. The answer isn't in resolving to do more, resolving to be better. All that we need to bring to this is repentant hearts and a fresh and personal surrender to the work of God.

We say to God, I want this spiritual apathy to stop. I want to move from immaturity to maturity. *more of what this prayer might look like.*

Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Pray.