

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Consequence of Rejection (Part 2)

Hebrews 5:11-14

11 Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 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. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

This morning I begin by giving you a bit more of an idea of where we are headed in this current section of the book of Hebrews. The text we just read stops at the end of Hebrews chapter 5, yet the theme of the author's thoughts continue on into Hebrews 6:1-8. In this section we have what I have entitled "The Consequence of Rejection." By this, I mean, what are the reasonable expectations or outlook for the person who becomes characterized by the descriptions contained here in this text. I would like to offer you a revised outline of this text so that you might see how it is all connected together.

- I. Dullness of Hearing (5:11-12)
- II. Dullness of Heeding (5:13-14)
- III. Dullness of Heart (6:1-8)

These then are the characteristics of the person who is rejecting the truth of God's word, and, as we will come to learn in Hebrews 6:1-8, such a person will ultimately reveal to themselves, as well as to the believing community, that they never really were part of the believing community themselves, but were in effect, "along for the ride." These will be revealed as those who may have given striking evidence of true conversion and commitment in Christ humanly speaking, and yet the reality of faith never took hold in their hearts.

If I could sum up the teaching of Hebrews 5:11-6:8 in a phrase, it would be this: "the perseverance of the saints." Many of you are familiar, and perhaps comfortable with this phrase, "the perseverance of the saints." It is truly a most wonderful and biblical doctrine, but one that is also somewhat misunderstood or improperly defined, even by those who profess it. The doctrine or teaching of "perseverance of the saints" is often defined as this way: "They whom God has accepted in His Beloved Son Jesus Christ, effectually called and sanctified by

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His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” (adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith). Or in other words, “those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost, that while they may fall temporarily into sin, they will eventually return and yet be saved.”

Now you may say, “Pastor, who are you to argue with the Westminster Divines who prayerfully painstakingly composed a statement that says in effect, ‘God will finish what He started.’” Is this not the teaching of passages like Philippians 1:6?

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

While I have no problem with the idea and teaching that “salvation is from the LORD” (Jonah 2:9) and that ultimately it is by the grace and power of God alone that anyone be saved, for this is truly what Scripture teaches; I yet say to you that such a teaching is not “perseverance of the saints” nor is it exactly what the Westminster Divines had in mind, but rather such a teaching is what I would call, “the preservation of the saints.” God will and does most certainly carry on to completion and perfection the work of salvation He begins with every true believer. But we are not talking about the preservation of the saints, which is an action performed by God upon the saints; but rather we are speaking of the “perseverance of the saints,” which implies an action upon the part of the saints. The word “perseverance” is made up of the prefix “per” which means “through” and the root word “severe” referring to trying or adverse circumstances. So, perseverance means “to persist through, or in spite of severe or trying circumstances.” Biblically speaking then it is not God who is called to persevere, but the saints. We have seen this already in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 3:14

For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,

The apostle Paul also teaches this idea of the saints persevering in the actions of their lives.

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1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

The perseverance of the saints then refers to the efforts and actions of God's people to manifest and maintain, by the power of God's Spirit, the evidences of true conversion. Do not misunderstand, this is not teaching that man labors to manifest and maintain such evidences for the purpose of earning or even of keeping salvation. Salvation is and always will be from the LORD. Rather, we are to learn from the Scriptures that true believers, because God is at work in them, will manifest and maintain the evidence of true conversion to Christ. In fact, we have a verse that perfectly unites the idea of a person purposely making every effort to manifest the reality of God in his life while at the same time recognizing that such efforts are ultimately the effort of God. In other words, the teaching of the perseverance of the saints and the preservation of the saints are linked together.

Philippians 2:12-13

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling (perseverance of the saints); 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (preservation of the saints).

So then, let us simply define perseverance of the saints this way: *“All the elect will persevere (make every effort to manifest the reality of their conversion to Christ) to the end in faith and be glorified with Christ.”* Perseverance of the Saints affirms that the truly converted person will desire nothing more than obedience to Christ. Holiness and hatred of sin will be a natural desire. But, if a person “gets saved” and then remains or returns to unrepentant carnality, then this person was possibly never saved in the first place. True conversion means that the body of Christ will be filled with those who love holiness. Perseverance of the Saints teaches that works are necessary, not to save, but to *prove* salvation. Also, please note that perseverance of the saints does not mean that a genuine believer will never sin, and that he may even sin critically at times. But the true believer will not only come to a time of remorse for such sin, but will also repent

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and seek forgiveness of such sin, once again pursuing holiness of life and conformity to the Word of God.

What does all this have to do with Hebrews 5:11-6:8? Again, I submit to you that this passage warns all who read about persevering in the faith. Listen, beloved, it is only as a person perseveres in the faith that he can have assurance of salvation and therefore protection against apostasy, which means ultimately falling away from the LORD because such a person was never truly made new by the LORD. And just what are the warning signs that ought to concern any person of their standing with God? I have already outlined them for you. We must be wary of growing dull in hearing, dull in heeding and dull of heart.

Dullness of Hearing Revisited and Expanded

Last week then we began our look at Hebrews 5:11-12 and this issue of being “dull of hearing.” We noted that this term “dull of hearing” was the author’s way of firmly, yet lovingly chastising his readers for allowing their spiritual lives to grow static, stale and sluggish. To be in such a condition was the first warning sign that one may be on the road to forsaking the Lord. For in contrast to being “dull” a genuine believer is to be what? Diligent – diligent in hearing and therefore responding to the Word of God? The author reminds us that there is “much to say” concerning Christ and His office as Priest, so we must become diligent hearers of the Word of God, eagerly taking in the teachings, pursuing to know the meaning of what is heard so that it might affect our lives. Remember our key question from last week was this, “Are you growing in your understanding of Christ and in your practice of His Word?”

This morning then I would like to expound on this, even as the author of Hebrews does, by asking this question, “*What is a reasonable expectation to be placed upon every believer who diligently hears the “much to say” concerning Christ?*” Should this person be able to pass a biblical knowledge aptitude test? Should such a person be set apart from all others as having obtained something special? No, none of these. Read again Hebrews 5:12 as we come to note the reasonable expectation of the author, an expectation about which I suspect will cause some to cringe –

For though by this time you ought to be teachers,

The reasonable expectation is that the genuine believer, the one pursuing the perseverance of the saints, ought himself have “much to say” and therefore be saying it. Let us dissect this phrase a bit more. Our author begins by saying,

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“For by this time...” This means that because of one’s length of time in exposure to the truth of Christ and engaged in a relationship with Christ, there ought to be a level of maturity. I know that we Christians like to excuse our sometimes menial levels of spiritual growth on adverse circumstances. Issues of health, work, family, school, or any other item that can be justified as a reason for not growing in the knowledge and practice of Christ are so often appealed. Yet I submit to you that length of time in a genuine relationship with Christ must yield increasing measures of maturity. Now I know you have heard this before, but think about it – humanly speaking. If you came across a woman pushing a stroller and noticed her baby, even commenting on how cute he is, and then asking how old the baby is, only to hear that the baby was twenty-one years old, what would you then think? That baby would not be as cute. Something had gone dreadfully wrong. For length of time in biological development must yield increasing measures of maturity. Now I know that things like mental development and in the case of our text, even spiritual development do not occur at the same pace for each individual. Some come to Christ and grow rapidly in wisdom and stature concerning the things of God. Others grow at a slower pace. But the key in all this is that they yet grow in the knowledge and practice of Christ and length of time in a genuine relationship with Christ must yield increasing measures of maturity.

According to the author, what is the level of maturity he expected of this group of believers? He says that they **“ought to be teachers...”** Here comes the part where some of us cringe – who wants to be a “teacher”? But not the directive, **“you ought to be teachers...”** The verb “ought” is in the present tense. This is a present and ongoing expectation upon these believers. They “ought” or “have a debt, or duty” to be “teachers.” By “teacher” our author is not suggesting that they should all assume the office or position of teacher or pastor in the church, but rather, instead of being **“dull in hearing”** and therefore having little to say concerning Christ, they “ought” or “must” be so diligent and attentive to learning of Christ that they will be unable to remain silent, having something to say to others concerning the truth of God’s Word. There is a little saying that I am sure many of you are familiar with. It says, “You may be the only Bible a person reads.” Let us modify that just a bit, for the implication is that the other person has to “read” you. Perhaps we ought to say, “You may be the only Bible a person hears.” Do you see the difference? The first saying places the obligation upon the other person to read you. The second saying places the obligation upon you to communicate the truth.

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It is in this sense then that we all **“ought to be teachers.”** If we are in Christ, we have something to tell others and are duty-bound to such a communication. So we must not allow ourselves to “become dull of hearing” for such renders us unable to become the truth communicators God intends us to be. Jonathan Edwards made a keenly insightful comment to this end that is worth hearing: *“If God have made it the business of some to be teachers, it will follow, that He hath made it the business of others to be learners; for teachers and learners are correlates, one of which was never intended to be without the other. God hath never made it the duty of some to take pains to teach those who are not obliged to take pains to learn.”*

Now, with all this said, it is obvious that many of these first readers were deficient in their hearing of the truth, perhaps to the point that they had forgotten all the wonder and greatness of such truths. So the author continues to chastise this congregation, almost to the point of insult or humiliation, saying, **“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.”** Do you want to hear this in plain, contemporary language? He is saying, “You all have become a bunch of big babies and need to start all over in your maturing process.”

This is harsh criticism to say the least and some may even find it almost mean-spirited, yet the truth can often crush us. And there are times and circumstances in our lives in which we almost “start over” if we are going to proceed. I have mentioned before that in my college days at UCSD, I had a rather difficult time with calculus (I praise the Lord that He called me to ministry where calculus is not so readily needed). However, I have always been desirous of conquering calculus, considering to someday take some classes to do so. But, I know that it has been so long since I have seriously considered calculus or any other form of higher math, that if I were to be sincere in my effort, I would have to go back and relearn some of the more basic aspect of math. In other words, my time away from maturing in math has actually caused me to digress in math. Such happens to those who are “dull of hearing” the things of Christ. The more you put off Bible reading, the more you tune out in hearing God’s word preached, the more likely you are to digress in true spiritual knowledge.

This was the plight of many of these readers. For while they had enough time to know the person and practice of Christ in their lives, they rather needed someone to teach them the **“elementary principles,”** that is the beginning or fundamental instructions of the **“oracles of God.”** The **“oracles of God”** are simply referring to the doctrines taught in God’s Word. What we must note here

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is that God's Word contains both truths that are simple and easily grasped as well as more complex and harder to grasp. The simple truths are referred here as "milk" while the more complex truths are called "solid food." Sadly there is a large segment of the Church that believes it is not only okay to partake only of this spiritual milk, but also call the church to unify around spiritual milk. In other words, there is an effort to keep the church bound to the sustenance of infants while the Scriptures clearly call us to **"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"** (2 Peter 3:18).

Again, we must not misunderstand. The author of Hebrews is not belittling or condemning the simple truths of the faith. They are the absolute beginning teachings that must be understood and applied to life. They are foundational in nature. But, just as anyone who has built a house knows, a foundation, as good as it may be, does not make for an adequate house, and in this case a spiritual house that will serve as a protection against the winds, storms, cold and heat that will assail themselves against this house of faith. The "elementary principles" here are not a stopping point, but rather the starting point from which we must push ourselves to move further and higher in our understanding of Christ and His Word. Anything less than this exposes the profession of our faith to the damaging elements of unbelief and, without progress, would reveal us as never truly possessing the right foundation of faith in Christ, for, as we noted, true faith in Christ always seeks to progress and will not give up until he has been perfected by Christ. To be sure, there may well be a time that he slips and fails, but the genuine believer will not ultimately give up. Is this not the experience of the Apostle Paul and therefore the testimony of Scripture. Philippians 3:12-14 says -

12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Beloved, do you yearn and aspire to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ? Let it not be just a wish or vain desire. Do not confuse a passion with coming to so know Christ with comparing yourself to the level and desire of someone else. For the truth of the matter is that someone will always be growing faster than you and someone else will be growing slower than you. But the

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question this morning is yet again, “what kind of progress are you making in your pursuit of the knowledge and practice of Christ?” Is it measurable? Is it present? Are you diligent in your hearing of God’s Word to the point that you are having something to say about Christ to other? Or, could it be that you have become “dull of hearing” and therefore in danger of falling away? Do not think that falling away from the Lord always means immediate withdrawal from the church. Many have gone to church for many years, all the while being in a state of apostasy, having fallen away from the Lord. Do not look upon the deeper mysteries of Christ as something to be avoided, or as something to which only theologians ought to be concerned. Ask the Lord to help you partake of the solid food of Jesus Christ and ask Him as well to allow you to see your progress and become a “teacher” to those who need to hear what you have heard and learn what you have learned. Then you will be fulfilling the great commission of Jesus, going into the world, making other disciples, or learners of Jesus Christ, teaching them to obey all that He commanded. Then you will prove yourselves persevering saints, diligently pursuing the knowledge of the Holy to the glory of God. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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