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GROW UP!

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

By

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Hebrews Lesson 16

Grow Up!
Hebrews 5:11-6:3

Just about every home that has small children has a growth chart somewhere in the house. We sometimes used the inside of a closet doorjamb to mark the height of our kids and the date. Then, perhaps each year on their birthdays, we would measure them again. They were always excited to see how much they had grown!

But can you imagine how shocked and concerned we would have been if, instead of growing up, one of our children had grown *down*! We would have scheduled an immediate doctor's appointment to find out what was wrong. Growth is normal and a cause for joy. Shrinkage would have been bizarre and a cause for alarm.

Many of the Hebrew Christians to whom our author wrote had grown *down* in their Christian walk, not up. He says that they had come to need milk again, not solid food. Imagine a teenager who quit eating regular food and went back to formula and Gerber's pureed peas! Instead of being able to teach others, they now need someone to teach them the ABC's of the Christian life all over again. The author wants to talk to them about Jesus being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, but he fears that it will be over their heads. So before he plunges into that subject, he issues the strong warning that runs from 5:11-6:20. In our text, he is saying, "Grow up, folks!"

Believers must move beyond the basics of the Christian faith
and grow up in Christ.

You have no doubt been in a situation where an adult was acting like a child: throwing a temper tantrum, or not dealing with a frustrating situation in a mature way. You want to shout, "Grow up! Act your age!" That's what the author does here with the Hebrew Christians.

There are several thorny interpretive matters in the text. I do not have time to deal with each issue, but will present things as I understand them based on the context and the words used. I invite

you to study more on your own and come to your own conclusions. There are five lessons here on Christian growth:

1. It is possible to be a Christian, but to be slow to grow.

If there is spiritual *life*, there will be spiritual *growth* of some sort, but growth rates vary. Some become Christians and instantly drop the sins that have plagued their lives for years and never fall back. Others struggle to get rid of those sins for decades. I have a pastor friend who got saved in his early forties. He was a night club entertainer, addicted to alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. He instantly dropped all of those habits and began to follow Christ. But I know others who have struggled with those habits for years after making a profession of faith. They make a break from them, but then keep falling back into them.

The author hits the Hebrews with the fact that they “have *become* dull of hearing” (5:11). They didn’t used to be that way, but they have developed this spiritual malady. “Dull” is used only here and in 6:12 in the New Testament, and has the nuance of sluggish or slow. It is used in the Greek papyri of someone being sick and therefore lacking energy. So the word has the idea of spiritual laziness or lethargy. When there is an opportunity to get into God’s Word, this person says, “Nah, let’s see what’s on the tube.” When there is occasion to go and hear the Word taught, he says, “I’m tired. I think I’ll stay home and go to bed early.”

Verse 11 shows that teaching God’s Word is a two-way matter. There is the knowledge and ability of the teacher to explain things clearly and in an interesting manner. But also, there is the receptivity of the hearers. It is significant that the best teacher who has ever lived used to exhort His audience, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” “Take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him” (Luke 8:8, 18). If Jesus is the preacher and the message isn’t coming through, guess who is at fault? When hearers are dull, teaching is difficult.

I’m talking here about motivation. Motivation is the key to learning. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Hunger and thirst are strong motivators! When you’re hungry or thirsty, there is

only one thing on your mind, to satisfy the craving for food or water. If you are driven by the hunger or thirst for righteousness, you will be satisfied (Matt. 5:6). If you think, "Ho hum!" not only will you not grow; you won't even know what you're missing!

There is one other lesson in 5:11: There is no neutral in the Christian life. Either you are growing or you're shrinking. Which is it for you right now? We fool ourselves into thinking that we're just treading water, but the strong current of the world, the flesh, and the devil carries us backwards if we're not striving to move ahead. Let me shoot straight: if you're not making time daily to spend in God's Word and in prayer, you're not growing, you're shrinking! You're going from eating meat back to the formula and pureed peas. That stuff is great for babies, but it won't sustain a growing teenager or adult.

2. Christian growth means moving on to deeper levels of understanding.

The author wanted to teach them about the significance of Jesus being a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, but they can't handle it. It's like trying to get a student to read Shakespeare, but he can't even recognize the letters of the alphabet! In terms of their years as believers, they should have been capable, but they needed to go back to spiritual kindergarten.

He says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles (the Greek word means, the ABC's) of the oracles of God." The last phrase is parallel to "the elementary teaching about the Christ" (6:1), and refers to the basic truths about the Christian faith: who Jesus Christ is, what He came to do, how we enter into a relationship with Him, how we live the Christian life, etc.

But beyond these basic truths, there is much in Scripture that is deep and nourishing. Someone has said that the Bible is like an ocean, deep enough to drown an elephant, but shallow enough at the shore for a toddler to play. If you want to see how spiritually dull you really are, read the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Keep in mind that all *children* in Reformed homes used to be required to memorize this before they could be confirmed and join the church. You all know the first question and answer: "What is the chief end

of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." There is a lifetime of practical content in that short answer!

But do you know Question 4: "What is God?" Answer: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." Question 5: "Are there more Gods than one?" Answer: "There is but One only, the living and true God." Question 6: "How many persons are there in the Godhead?" Answer: "There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God the same in substance, equal in power and glory." Could you have explained the nature of God and the Trinity so well? Question 7: "What are the decrees of God?" Answer: "The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."

The Shorter Catechism has 107 questions like that. I dare say that if we Baptists learned that sort of thing, we would be light years ahead in our understanding of sound doctrine, and we would not be tossed around by all of the foolish things being taught in the Christian world today. I recommend, *A Faith to Confess*, subtitled, "The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Rewritten in Modern English" [Carey Publications]. It is essentially a modification of the Westminster Confession in accordance with a Baptist understanding of the ordinances. Teach these things to your children!

When the author says that by this time, the Hebrews should have been teachers, it does not mean that he was writing to a select group of leaders in the church. Rather, *every* Christian who has been a believer for a few years should be knowledgeable enough in the teachings of Scripture to instruct a younger believer. Not all are gifted as teachers for the whole church (James 3:1; Eph. 4:11-12), but all should know enough to present the gospel, to teach the basics about God, man, salvation, and the Christian life. If you cannot do that, either you are a relatively new believer, or you're one of the older believers that this section of Scripture confronts. Grow up!

Let me add that we live in a day of dumbed-down Christianity, where we have an aversion to sound doctrine. The mantra of our day, even among evangelicals, is, "Doctrine is dead head knowledge that just leads to arguments and division. So be careful not to get

into doctrine too far!" But the fact is, every believer has doctrines! They may be *sound* doctrines, in line with Scripture, or they may be screwy doctrines that are inconsistent with Scripture. Theology is simply the process of synthesizing and harmonizing the teachings of the whole Bible on the major subjects that it discusses. So if you are a Christian, you can't avoid being a theologian. The question is, are you growing to be sound in your theology, or are you shallow, mixed up, and unbiblical in your theology?

I just read Dave Hunt and James White's *Debating Calvinism* [Multnomah Press]. In addition to hundreds of blatantly false and misleading statements, Dave Hunt, who denies Calvinism, says shocking things like, "It is not loving—period—for God to damn for eternity *anyone* He *could* save" (p. 260, italics his). In other words, if God has the ability to save a sinner, but He doesn't exercise that ability, He is unloving. The only conclusion, then, is that God is impotent to save anyone without that person's cooperation, which is what Hunt actually teaches. That sort of attack on basic Bible doctrine shouldn't even need to be debated! But what is more disturbing, in Hunt's earlier similar attack, *What Love is This?* [Loyal Publishing], Christian leaders like Tim LaHaye, Chuck Smith, and Chuck Missler endorse this blatantly false teaching! I finished the book wanting to shout, "Grow up, people!"

3. Christian growth is directly related to obedience to the truth that we have already learned.

The author says, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness" (5:13). He describes the spiritually mature as those who eat solid food, "who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." He uses the phrase "word of righteousness" for the Scriptures, which are designed to produce God's righteousness in those who believe and obey. The author may be referring to the doctrine of imputed righteousness, taught in Genesis 15:6, and repeated by Paul in Romans 3 & 4. But also, those who are counted righteous by faith in Christ will also progress in practical righteousness, learning what is pleasing to the Lord (Eph. 5:10).

You may think that righteousness and good and evil are obvious, but that is not so. These things need to be learned through practice and training. "Accustomed" means lacking in experience.

It is used in Numbers 14:23 (LXX) to refer to "*inexperienced youths,*" who have not yet learned good and evil. "Good and evil" (5:14) refers not only to ethical conduct, but also to true and false doctrine (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 193). Both require discernment, although ethical behavior is usually easier to discern than sound or false doctrine.

But even behavior needs to be discerned according to God's Word. Our culture bombards us with immoral behavior as if it were neutral, or even desirable. As a result, many evangelicals currently believe that homosexual behavior is okay, as long as the couple is "committed" or "in love"! I read recently that "55 percent of evangelical Protestants have very unfavorable views of homosexual men, compared to 28 percent of mainline Protestants and Catholics" (from *The Washington Times*, 11/19/03, p. A14). That means that 45 percent do *not* have "very unfavorable views of homosexual men"! That's alarming! But when evangelicals watch the same TV shows and movies as the world does, and read their Bibles only occasionally, is it any wonder?

But the point is, Bible doctrine is not just to fill your head or help you defend some theological system. It is always intended to make you a more godly person. In his introduction to Calvin's *Institutes* ([Westminster Press], p. lii), John McNeill points out that to the modern mind the word "piety" has lost its proper implication and status. But to Calvin, piety was "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces." "It exists when men 'recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good.'" Then McNeill quotes A. Mitchell Hunter, who says, "Piety was the keystone of his character. He was a God-possessed soul. Theology was no concern to him as a study in itself; he devoted himself to it as a framework for the support of all that religion meant to him." McNeill adds, "Since we 'owe everything to God,' in Calvin's pages we are everywhere confronting God, not toying with ideas or balancing opinions about him." (Keep these comments in mind if you read Dave Hunt's vitriolic and baseless attacks on Calvin!)

So when you study the Bible or theology, always study with an aim to obedience and godly living. We've seen that it is possible to

be a Christian, but be slow to grow. Also, Christian growth means moving on to deeper levels of understanding. It is directly related to obedience to the truth that we have learned. Next,

4. Christian growth requires laying a foundation of doctrine and then building on it.

In 6:1, the author exhorts his readers to leave “the elementary teaching about the Christ” and “press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation....” Then he mentions six things that comprise the foundational, elementary teachings. By leaving these things, he is not suggesting that they are no longer important and should be left behind. Rather, he is saying that once you lay a proper foundation, don’t go back and dig it up again and again. Move on, building your life on that foundation.

There are differing views of how to interpret these six things. Some argue that they refer solely to Jewish, Old Testament issues. Others say that they relate to the basics of Christianity. Still others mix these categories. They are arranged in three pairs.

**Repentance from dead works and faith toward God*—The phrase “dead works” occurs only here and in 9:14, which talks about the blood of Jesus cleansing our consciences from dead works to serve the living God. All spiritual works of the unbeliever are dead works because they either originate from souls that are spiritually dead or they result in final spiritual death if the person trusts in them for eternal life. In a Jewish setting, *dead works* refer to “external and self-righteous compliance with the requirements of the law” (P. Hughes, p. 197). If the Jew boasted in his keeping the ceremonial law, or even in his outward compliance with the Ten Commandments, and thought that those works would gain him eternal life, he was in for a rude awakening (Mark 10:17-22; Matt. 5:27-48).

Repentance from dead works and faith toward God are at the heart of the gospel (Mark 1:15). You cannot separate the two. You cannot trust Christ as Savior without turning from sin. The person who turns from sin trusts Christ as his only hope. As to why the author says, “faith toward God,” rather than “Christ,” Philip Hughes answers, “the purpose of Christ’s coming was to bring mankind back to that attitude of spontaneous trustfulness toward God, departure from which led to our condition of fallenness and

alienation. It is through the mediation of the Son that we return to the Father..." (p. 198).

Instruction about washings and laying on of hands—These phrases are difficult to understand. Some say that "instructions about washings" (Greek = *baptismon*) refers to teaching about the various ceremonial cleansings in the Old Testament, along with the various baptisms in the New (the baptism of John, of Christ, of the apostles, of the Holy Spirit). "Laying on of hands" would then refer to the conferring of spiritual blessings or gifts early in one's Christian experience. Charles Simeon (*Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 19:227) has a different view, that these two phrases are parenthetical and explanatory of the first two. By "washings," he understands the various cleansings of the law, which pointed ahead to cleansing from sin and dead works through repentance. By "laying on of hands," he understands the laying of hands on the head of the sacrificial victim before it was offered, pointing ahead to the believer's faith in Christ as his sacrifice for sin. I would not be dogmatic, but it is an interesting possibility.

The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment—These are basic teachings of the gospel, that everyone will be raised, either to eternal life or to eternal judgment (John 5:24-29). As Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 15, if the dead are not raised, then Christ is not raised and our entire faith is in vain.

But the point is, as a believer you must learn basic Bible doctrines and then build upon the foundation. Studying one of the classic catechisms or statements of faith will help you lay a foundation. But then go deeper. Read some books on doctrine or theology. Finally,

5. Christian growth does not happen automatically; it takes deliberate effort along with God's enabling.

"Practice" (5:14) refers to a habit that is formed by deliberate effort. "Trained" is an athletic term that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 4:7, where he tells Timothy to "*discipline* himself for the purpose of godliness." No athlete excels by casual dabbling at his sport. He has a goal and he works at it for hours every day, denying himself other pleasures that may detract from his goal. For the Christian, the goal is godliness or holiness. We should cut everything out of

our lives that detracts from godliness and do everything that we can to move us towards godliness. If you need help in this area, I recommend Donald Whitney's excellent book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* [NavPress].

In 6:3, the author says, "we will" move on to the deeper teaching, "if God permits." Leon Morris says, "We should take the words not simply as a pious nod in the direction of God but as coming out of the author's realization that without divine aid the plan he was suggesting was impossible" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:54).

The command, "press on to maturity" (6:1), is a passive verb that has the nuance of "being borne by God toward maturity." It is the same word that Peter uses (2 Pet. 1:21) when he says that the men who wrote Scripture were "*moved* by the Holy Spirit." This word was used of a ship at sea being borne by the wind in its sails. It means that while spiritual growth is our responsibility and requires our effort, beneath the whole process is God's power. As Paul finely balances it, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

Conclusion

I realize that spiritual growth is more difficult to measure than your children's physical growth. But you can be sure that you're *not* growing if your spiritual life is running on autopilot. You are *not* growing if you are haphazard about Bible-reading and prayer. You are *not* growing if you are not making a deliberate effort to discipline your life for godliness. If you're not growing, you're shrinking! The author of Hebrews says to you, "Grow up!"

Discussion Questions

1. How can we tell, as believers, whether or not we're growing?
2. What should a professing Christian who lacks the motivation to grow do about it? How can he get motivated?
3. Discuss: If doctrine doesn't help you to be more godly, you're not using the doctrine properly.
4. How can an undisciplined person learn discipline?

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