

BACK TO SCHOOL

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

13th Message

Bernard Bell

September 3, 2023

It is Labor Day weekend, the traditional end of summer. But the end of summer has been moving earlier and earlier into August. Many students have been back at school for some weeks now. Students have done various things over the summer. Some have taken extra classes, and so have stayed in learning mode. Others may have gotten a little out of practice in paying attention in class.

We spend a significant portion of our lives in school. I am sure for young folk it may seem like forever. It can indeed seem never-ending: preschool, pre-K, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school, college, grad school. That's twenty years at least! Parents and teachers have high expectations that their charges will progress from learning the ABCs all the way to advanced topics. Therefore parents feel under pressure to pick the right preschool so their kids end up in the right grad school.

It was very different for my parents. My father walked two miles to a one-room schoolhouse in the next village. He left at 14, as far as the school went, and started work. My mother left school the week she turned 15, and likewise went to work. No preschool, pre-K, or kindergarten. No high school or beyond.

The Christian life is also a school in which we are expected to advance from infancy to maturity, from milk to solid food. Yet this is a surprise to some Christians who think that after you have said the prayer and made a decision for Christ, that is it. They don't see their Christian life as life-long growth and development. But we should grow and develop in our maturity throughout our Christian life. This certainly is the expectation of the author of Hebrews.

In our study of Hebrews we have moved into the central section of the letter, about Jesus as our great High Priest (4:14–10:25). Last week's passage (5:1–10) contrasted the old order of high-priesthood established in Aaron and the new order of high-priesthood established uniquely in Jesus after the order of Melchizedek. The preacher has much more to say about this, but first he takes a break to issue some exhortations and warnings (5:11–6:12). We have seen that this is a characteristic feature of Hebrews: exposition about Jesus is interleaved with exhortations and warnings to the readers. The preacher will return in chapter 7 to a detailed exposition of Jesus as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The lengthy break can be divided into several sections. Today we look at just the first section (5:11–6:3), then will return to the rest in February. This first section in turn has two parts: 5:11–14 and 6:1–3.

I. Milk or Solid Food? (5:11–14)

For this first paragraph here is Eugene Peterson's rendition from *The Message*:

I have a lot more to say about this, but it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby's milk, when you

should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God's ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong. (Heb 5:11–14 *The Message*)

Now as we work our way through the text I will, as usual, follow the NIV.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. (5:11 NIV)

We have much to say about this: the preacher wants to expound the high-priesthood of Jesus in considerable detail. He has much to say, but he faces two impediments: the topic and his hearers. Firstly, the topic itself is difficult to explain. If any of you have tried to study this letter in depth or teach it, this may amaze or amuse you, because the letter so far has been hard to understand and explain. Is he really saying that the hardest is yet to come?

The second and greater impediment is the preacher's audience. They "no longer try to understand." Literally, they have become sluggish or lazy in hearing. Eugene Peterson puts it so well: "you've picked up this bad habit of not listening." I am sure some teachers have been thinking this of some of their students returning after the summer break.

Again and again we have seen that hearing is a major theme in this letter. Specifically, hearing means to pay attention to what God has said: the living word of the living God. God spoke in the past through the prophets, and that word still speaks as the Scriptures—Israel's Scriptures, our Old Testament. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." But we have seen that the wilderness generation did not listen, and they did harden their hearts. They failed to enter God's rest; they did not enter the Promised Land. Their example hangs over this letter. God has now spoken more fully in his Son, to whom we all should pay attention. The preacher does not want his current hearers to be like those who died in the wilderness. They failed to complete their journey. The preacher is determined to keep his brothers and sisters moving towards their destination, moving towards that goal of entering into God's presence, where Jesus already is. So he tries to shake them out of their stupor by shaming them:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (5:12)

He shames them by comparing them to babies. None of us likes that! They have been Christians for a considerable time. They should by now have mastered the basic material about Christ and already be teaching others. But they have regressed. They have gone back to the milk stage. They are just infants. Instead of teaching others, they themselves need a teacher. They need to go back to the beginning and go over the ABCs again. They need to go back to preschool.

The metaphor here of milk and solid food is a familiar one, used elsewhere in Scripture to contrast immature and mature Christians.

The preacher contrasts the two diets:

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (5:13-14)

These two verses present four contrasts. The life-stage: infant vs. mature. The diet: milk vs. solid food. The learning method. And the capability or skill acquired. We expect milk-drinking infants to have limited capability. But we don't expect them to stay in that state. We rejoice in their expanding capabilities. We delight when they take their first step. We capture it on video, even if it is immediately followed by an abrupt sitting-down. But we expect that they will develop to taking two steps, then three... But we would be very concerned if, having learnt to walk, they went back to a single step then sat down. Teachers may now be faced with students who have regressed over the summer. The preacher is concerned that his hearers have regressed in their capabilities.

So what are the capabilities that he is looking for in his hearers? His observations about the milk-drinking infants and the solid-food-eating mature adults should be taken in parallel, the one being the negative counterpart of the other.

The milk-drinking infant “is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.” We don't expect an infant to be acquainted with astrophysics. We don't expect a new believer to be acquainted with sophisticated theology. We don't expect young children to have a finely-tuned sense of right and wrong, of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They have to learn that it is not alright to hit Annie, or take Jonny's toy. They have to learn that it is good to share.

Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (1986) became a surprise best-seller. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Don't take things that aren't yours. And more.

As young children grow up we expect them to attempt these simple rules. Don't take things that aren't yours. Initially they may fail more often than succeed, but with practice they will learn how to share their toys and not take the toys of others without asking. They will thus become acquainted with the rules of good behavior not just mentally but, more importantly, experientially. They will not just know the rule, but actually do it. Parents hope that they will come to do it automatically, instinctively, without thinking, because it has become ingrained in them. It has become part of their being.

The milk-drinking Christian can initially be excused for not being acquainted with certain teaching. But we expect them to progress and become acquainted by doing. The preacher expects experiential acquaintance with the teaching about righteousness. What is this righteousness? This is not abstract systematic theology. It is not righteousness as the word is used in Romans, for example. It is not Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Its meaning is clarified by the companion verse (14).

The mature have moved on to solid food. They “by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” So, the message about righteousness is the discernment of good from evil, or, more generally, of the good thing from the bad thing. This can apply at a basic level: it is a good thing to share your toys; it is a bad thing to hit your brother. It can apply at an advanced level in all the moral choices which we face as Christians. How do we develop this skill of moral discernment? It takes practice.

Whether or not Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule is true, it

takes practice to learn anything. Often prolonged practice. Repetitive practice builds up muscle memory, whether for a sport or playing a musical instrument or some other skill. We train our bodies until they instinctively behave a certain way. A few years ago I watched Shawn and Ryan Hinn throwing a baseball back and forth to each other. I marveled at their skill, at how effortlessly, accurately, and far they threw the ball. A lot of muscle memory remained from their days playing college ball. I am sure some of our youth spend many hours practicing a skill, training themselves by constant use until it becomes habitual.

Similarly, developing moral character takes practice. We develop moral muscle memory by repeatedly doing the right thing. But if we repeatedly do the wrong thing we become inured, we become insensitive to right and wrong.

The milk-drinking infant is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness, has not even started such learning. Though the preacher is speaking in generalities here, it is clear from his rhetoric that he expects his hearers to have moved beyond this stage. They have been Christians long enough that they should have advanced.

Teaching about righteousness is equated with discernment of good and evil, of right and wrong. It is about making the right moral choices. It is about living righteously, the way that God intends us to live. The way he intends us to live, first, as human beings created in his image. Then, more particularly, how he intends us to live as followers of Jesus.

The mature are those “who by constant use have trained themselves.” More literally, this is “by constant use have faculties trained.” *Faculty* has a wide range of meaning. The meaning here is of our senses. We have the faculty of hearing, of seeing, of tasting. It then means our capacity to discern. We taste whether something is sweet or sour or salty. We discern the sounds we hear as a recognizable language. Sadly, Covid has impacted some people's faculties: loss of taste, loss of hearing, including some in our own body. This capacity for discernment extends to the ability to make moral decisions, to discern whether something is good, beautiful, and true, or whether it is bad, evil, and wrong. Indeed, from the Greek word for faculty we get our English word *aesthetic*, meaning the sense of what is beautiful and good.

Our faculties need training. We are born with them untrained. It is a wonder to watch young children develop their faculties—the faculty of language, for example. They start by imitating what they hear. Sue and I know children who are being raised bilingual and trilingual. We have watched them grow up. We have observed them learn to differentiate the various languages. At first, they get the languages mixed up in a single sentence. But over time, with practice, they learn to sort them out, to differentiate them. The human brain is amazing. Its neuroplasticity makes it responsive to training.

Our moral faculties need training. The mature person has faculties that are trained. The word translated *trained* here is the word from which we get gymnasium. I am sure that some of our youth are doing serious training workouts in the gym. Others of us are just trying to hang on to a modest level of fitness. I log my bike rides on Strava and track my deteriorating times as I age.

Life is a gymnasium in which our faculties get a work out. This training is gained through constant use. The goal of such training and practice is so we can discern and make the right moral choices. Through this we become mature.

Our faculty of moral decision-making develops through training

and constant use. How do we gain this training? We are trained by being tested by the circumstances of life. This includes trials and temptations. We have already seen in Hebrews that testing and tempting are the opposite sides of the same coin. They are an expected part of life. Even Jesus was tested. He was tested or tempted in every way, just like us, but without sin (4:15). He suffered when he was tempted (2:18). He learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8). Through testing we become mature.

The milk-drinking infant's lack of acquaintance with moral decision-making is due to a lack of testing. Our moral character requires testing in order to develop. Adam and Eve lived in blissful innocence in the garden. They knew what was good and true and beautiful. They didn't know anything else. They had a perfect aesthetic. The liberating innocence that Eve had is beautifully imagined by C. S. Lewis in *Perelandra*, the second book of his sci-fi trilogy. They knew what was good, including that the fruit of one tree was off-limits. Eve "saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye" (Gen 3:6). In this she was correct, because this was true of all the trees that God had planted in his garden (2:9). But God had spoken, and his word said that they should not eat of this one tree. They did not need to eat of it. They did not need the knowledge of good and evil. They had God's word to simply keep. And they had an abundance of trees from which to eat fruit.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart." But Eve listened to a different voice, and she chose to do what was not good. The Bible traces humanity's confusion over good and evil, right and wrong, noble and base to this primeval act of disobedience, the failure to hear God's word.

Ever since, humanity has been in need of developing the ability to distinguish good and evil. God gave Israel his Law, which was a great gift. It told them what was good and evil, right and wrong. The other nations did not have this gift. Under the new covenant God has put his Spirit in us to sanctify us. We are already sanctified, set aside as holy, when we come to Christ and are in him. But there is also an ongoing lifelong process of sanctification as God's Spirit transforms our character to make us more and more like Jesus. This includes restoring the ability to differentiate right from wrong, good from evil, and the resolve to choose and do the right. As we grow into maturity we develop faculties trained by constant use to distinguish good from bad. We develop the habits to persevere in what is good, hearing the living word of the living God. We persevere in faithfulness.

Moving on to Maturity (6:1-3)

In the second paragraph the preacher pivots from a description of those who are mature to exhort his hearers to themselves move on to such maturity:

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so. (6:1-3 NIV)

The preacher gives a two-fold exhortation, and, as usual, he includes himself: let *us*. Let us move beyond the basics about Christ and let us be taken forward to maturity. Eugene Peterson colorfully renders this as "let's leave the preschool fingerpainting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art" (*Message*). Parents are

proud to put their pre-schooler's finger-painting on the fridge, but we expect to see great works of art in a museum—though in some museums one does wonder! Here at PBCC we are pleased to feature the work of both children and adults in our Art in the Auditorium.

There is nothing wrong with the elementary teaching about Christ. It is good and beautiful and true. But it comes time to move on from preschool to kindergarten and far beyond. The use of the passive in "let us be taken forward" suggests that it is God who moves us on towards maturity as we hear his voice and follow in obedient faithfulness.

We move on from the foundation that has already been laid. We don't need to lay it again. A foundation is essential for any building or other project. It needs to be strong and well-set so it can properly support what is built on top of it. But there comes a time to move upwards from the foundation to the structure itself. The preacher lists six items that form this foundation, which we can equate with the elementary teachings about Christ, the ABCs. They are given as three pairs, referring to three stages of the Christian life.

The first pair is "repentance from dead works and faith in God." Repentance and faith. This two-fold call lies at the heart of the gospel. We hear the good news of what God has done in Christ. In response we turn *from* and we turn *to*. In repentance we turn *from* our existing ways, our works and deeds that lead to death. In faith we turn *towards* God, hearing and accepting his good news and placing our faith in Jesus, giving him our allegiance and loyalty. Repentance and faith: this is the very start.

The second pair is "baptisms and laying on of hands." There is debate about the first item here. Why is it baptisms plural? Many translations, including NIV, interpret this to mean cleansing rites for ritual purification. These were of major concern to Jews. Alternatively it can be understood as Christian baptism. We read many times of Jesus or the apostles laying hands on people for various reasons. The apostles did so to invoke the Holy Spirit or to initiate or confirm someone for particular service. It seems to me best to understand these two terms as initiation rites. These are rites of passage which mark the transition from outside to inside the household of faith. In the Orthodox church baptism is followed immediately by chrismation, anointing with oil to seal the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is viewed as a continuation of the apostolic practice of laying on of hands. So these two practices mark our incorporation into the family of God in Christ Jesus.

The third pair is "resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment." We believe that Jesus, whom God raised from the dead in the middle of time, is the firstborn of all his followers who will be raised from the dead at the end of this age. Also at the end of this age God will sit in final judgment. These two events, together with the return of Christ, usher in the new age, the final age in which all evil has been dealt with and removed, when God and his people dwell together. We affirm these two items in the creed: "from where he shall come to judge the living and the dead...I believe in the resurrection of the dead."

These six items are vital truths; they are fundamental; they are foundational truths. But we move on to learn more. And as we learn more we are taken forward to maturity. This is a lifelong process.

It might seem that the preacher is harsh on his audience, that he has little confidence in them. He has shamed them by calling them infants who have reverted to drinking milk. But it is better to take these verses as a serious wake-up call. He is actually confident that his beloved hearers can rise to the challenge: "God permitting, we

will do so" (3). *We will* move on to more difficult topics and, doing so, be carried forward to maturity.

In 6:9-12, after a severe warning, he will express more fully his confidence in them: "we are convinced of better things in your case" (9). And he will tell why he feels the need to shake them up: "We do not want you to become lazy," where *lazy* is the same word used in 5:11 of *sluggish* hearing. He has accused them of being lazy in hearing, then says he did this so that they not become lazy. He has hit them hard because he is confident that they will respond to his challenge. That they will show him that they really are moving on towards maturity, that they really are listening. He stirs them up to faithful perseverance. To not be like the wilderness generation that stopped listening and hardened its heart. This is the mark of a good teacher. He motivates them to advance: let us move on. He doesn't ridicule them so as to plunge them into discouragement or anger or resentment. He has shamed them in order to motivate them to move forward.

Our Scripture reading (Eph 4:11-16) includes the same metaphors of infant and mature. This passage that has been of great significance in the self-understanding of the PBC churches, both in Palo Alto and here in Cupertino. Among the gifts that Christ has given the church, his body, are pastors and teachers. Their role is to equip his people for works of service. The word translated equip here is to get something or someone ready for service in its intended purpose. For example, it is used for the disciples mending their nets by the Sea of Galilee so they can go back out fishing that night. We all have different gifts, given by the Spirit. We all have a part to play in ministry. When we are each playing our part the body will be built up. Indeed, as it is rooted in Christ, the body builds itself up in love. As we grow in faith and knowledge of Jesus we become mature, and are no longer infants.

The preacher wanted his audience to go back to school. He feared they had regressed in their transition from infancy to maturity. This schooling was not simply to give them head knowledge. It was to shape their character.

As followers of Jesus we are in a lifelong school. One of our PBCC family values is Devotion to the Word. Devotion to the Scriptures which are God's word. What God spoke in the past through the prophets was written down in Israel's Scriptures, our Old Testament. What God spoke more fully in his Son has been written down in our New Testament. Together they form God's word which still speaks: the living word of the living God. We seek to hear this word.

We have many opportunities here at PBCC to pay attention to this word. Women's and men's Bible studies will soon start up again. We have a long history of people being raised up in these groups, starting as students and maturing into teachers and leaders. The pur-

pose of these groups is not just to learn more about the Bible, not just to build community. They do serve these purposes well. But they also should be growing us into maturity. They should develop our character.

It has been my privilege for over thirty years here at PBCC to be involved in a teaching ministry. I have seen over and over again the transforming effect of sitting as a group around the Scriptures in a slow, unhurried manner. Not looking for quick nuggets or slogans. But slow and steady transformation. This is the shaping of character. This is spiritual formation, which has become a popular concept but is embedded in the New Testament. We are formed into Christ-likeness. And our faculties become trained through constant use to live life wisely and well as we become like Jesus.

Capacity for spiritual formation has no necessary correlation to educational level. You don't have to have gone all the way to grad school to be able to be shaped by the Scriptures. My father in Thailand, for example, ran a Bible School for lepers, then developed a training program for rural farmers and fishermen. At most they had a rudimentary four years at the village school. Many were functionally illiterate, but when they came to know Jesus they were powerfully motivated to learn to read so they could read their one book, the Bible. They were devoted to this, and their lives were transformed. They moved from infancy to maturity.

Above all in Hebrews, the preacher wants his hearers to persevere in the faith. He wants them to remain faithful to Jesus whom they follow. He urges them to look to Jesus, and he urges them to encourage one another because they don't make this journey alone. Yes, they face trials and temptations. Yes, they are suffering. So did Jesus. He learned obedience through what he suffered. With trained faculties they can remain faithful, and choose the good, the beautiful, and the true. They can persevere faithfully in following Jesus all the way to the end.

I close with another Collect from the Prayer Book:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.¹

1. Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.