

WELL DONE! CARRY ON

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 6:9-12

15th Message

Bernard Bell

February 25, 2024

Each weekday evening Sue and I watch the PBS Newshour. Every few weeks the program closes with “Brief but Spectacular,” a short five-minute segment featuring someone talking about their passion. Last Monday’s speaker was a high-school teacher. She started with why she loves being a teacher. Everyone can name their favorite school teacher and in doing so they usually smile. She loves being in a profession that puts a smile on someone’s face. A good teacher leaves lifelong memories.

I still remember the names of all five of my teachers during my four years at mission boarding school in Malaysia. I can still see their faces in my mind’s eye. I think of them with fondness. But that is not the case for the two half-year stints either side at school in Edinburgh when I was 5 and 10. I remember neither names nor faces of those teachers. Indeed I remember very little at all of those times.

What makes for a good teacher? A good teacher is excited about both their subject and their students. A good teacher believes in their students, and in their capacity to learn the subject. A good teacher inspires, challenges, encourages. A good teacher draws out the best in their students, inspiring them to aim higher. I hope that we all had some good teachers whom we still remember, and that the thought of them brings a smile to our face. We have some wonderful teachers here at PBCC as part of our church family.

The writer of Hebrews calls his work a “word of exhortation” or encouragement (13:22). It is essentially a written sermon, so I have been referring to him as the preacher. But he shows the characteristics of a good teacher. This is especially so in the section we have been working through, 5:11–6:12, on which this is the third and final sermon. Throughout the book, the preacher alternates between exposition and exhortation. Exposition of the superiority of Christ and his work: he is better. Exhortation to his readers to remain faithful and continue their spiritual pilgrimage to the end. 5:11–6:12 is one of the longer sections of exhortation.

The preacher identifies with his readers, the teacher with his students. Throughout he refers to himself in the plural *we* to enhance the rhetorical effect. Sometimes *we* refers just to himself. Sometimes he includes his readers in the *we*; at other times he addresses them as *you* plural. Only at the very end does *I* appear (13:19, 22–23). It is clear throughout that the preacher cares deeply about his readers. He has high aspirations for them. But this does not prevent him from challenging them with some harsh words.

He is excited about his material but is concerned about the abilities of his readers. He began this exhortation segment thus:

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

What is he so excited about that he has so much to say? In the previous paragraph (5:7–10) he has described how Jesus remained faithful and obedient through suffering all the way to death. He was made perfect, that is he attained the final goal set for him. He finished his course. He completed the mission for which God sent

him into the world: to be the one true human who remained true to the very end. Thus perfected or completed, he became the fount of salvation, and “was designated by God to be high priest” (5:10). It is this high-priesthood of Jesus that the preacher wants to expound.

The high-priesthood of Jesus is in general a much-neglected topic. More attention is paid to his two other offices as king and as prophet. But his high-priesthood is the major theme of Hebrews. Indeed, it is only in Hebrews that this part of Jesus’s identity and ministry is presented.

After his current exhortation the preacher will reiterate that “Jesus has become a high priest forever” (6:20). And finally, more than half-way through his sermon, he will get to his main point:

Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest. (8:1)

We won’t get to his main point until July, in what should be our 19th sermon on Hebrews! He then gives a lengthy exposition of the high-priestly ministry of Jesus. Meanwhile he is preparing a foundation and clearing the way. Part of this means preparing his readers with an exhortation prior to the next round of exposition.

We looked at the first part of this exhortation (5:11–6:3) six months ago. He seems disappointed in his readers. They are slow of hearing: “you no longer try to understand” (5:11 NIV), or “you’ve picked up this bad habit of not listening” (Message). Literally it is “you have become lazy of hearing.” How many teachers have thought that of their students!

His readers have failed to make progress:

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. (5:12)

The phrase “elementary truths” could be translated the “basic principles of the beginning,” or “the ABCs of the beginning.” They are not even at the beginning, but need to start again at the beginning of the beginning! They can’t stomach a meaty diet, because they have gone back to the milk stage. They have regressed to infancy. All because they have stopped listening.

But still the preacher wants them to progress from milk to solid food, from infancy to maturity or completion. He has the same framework as any good teacher: to take students forward from the beginning to the end, all the way to the final goal. And so he says, “leaving behind the beginning, let us be taken forward to maturity” or to completion (6:1). Despite his seeming exasperation at their poor attention, he is determined to get them moving forward all the way to the finish line. Again, just like any good teacher.

It is in this context that we had last week’s severe warning (6:4–8), which begins with “for.” Let us keep moving forward *for* if we don’t you are at risk of drifting away, or even falling away completely. He wants to keep the forward momentum going.

So we come to today’s text (6:9–12), the third section of this unit.

It is in two parts. First the preacher expresses his confidence in his readers (9-10), and then his further aspiration for them (11-12). He is pleased with their progress, but wants them to go further. Just like any good teacher.

First, he expresses his confidence:

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. (Heb 6:9-10)

Despite the severe warning in vv. 4-8, and the seeming disappointment in his readers expressed in the paragraph before that, he does actually think well of his readers. He addresses them as beloved, “dear friends” (NIV), the only time he does so in the entire book. How a teacher addresses their students is of great importance: it conveys whether or not the teacher has goodwill towards the students. This preacher realizes that, after his harsh words, he needs to reassure them of his kind intentions. Even though he has spoken like this, with the most severe warning in the entire NT, they remain his beloved readers. He has goodwill towards them. He is *for* them.

Likewise, how a parent addresses their children is of great importance. There will be times when discipline or warning is necessary. But afterwards, children need to be assured that they remain their parents’ beloved. So parents, continue to assure them so.

The Father beamed with pleasure on Jesus and said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I well pleased.” He did so when Jesus was baptized. He did so again at his transfiguration. I think he continued to think the same as Jesus was on the cross, though there no pronouncement from heaven. I think he looked down with pleasure and satisfaction as his beloved Son remained loyal to the very end, even to death. Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” He had reached the goal, finished the race, arrived at journey’s end. I think the Father was profoundly satisfied in the faithfulness of his beloved Son. Now we are the Father’s beloved, adopted into his family.

The preacher is convinced of better things for his beloved when it comes to salvation. In Hebrews salvation is not so much about getting “saved” at the beginning of our spiritual journey; it is about faithfully reaching the end. As I said last week, salvation is not transactional; it is relational. Throughout our earthly pilgrimage we are in relationship with God in Christ his Beloved and through his Spirit. And we are in relationship with one another as the Beloved Community. The preacher knows his beloved readers and their lives; he is reassured by their behavior.

They are the beneficiaries of God’s love and favor. And they have reciprocated this love back to God. The preacher has evidence of this reciprocation. Their work is evidence of their love. They have shown this love for God by how they have treated the saints, their fellow believers in God’s household. They have helped and are continuing to help their fellow Christians. The Greek verb translated “help” here is *diakoneo*, from which comes our English word *deacon*. They are engaged in acts of service, of ministry. Their vertical love for God is expressed horizontally in their love for others in the household of faith. And that love manifests in tangible acts of service, of help. Their love is more than simple verbal expression. It is love expressed in concrete action.

Last week I talked about reciprocity. Here we need to expand our model of reciprocity. God has initiated relationship with us in Christ and through his Spirit. True relationship requires reciprocity. We

love God in return, but God desires that we show reciprocity to him by loving and serving others. The early Christians referred to one another as brothers and sisters. They belonged to a new family. Family love is perhaps the strongest love: we will do anything for our close family members, whether children, parents, or siblings. The bonds between early Christians were of similar strength.

Alas, many families today are dysfunctional, filled with drama and relational breakdown. Sometimes this is the result of harsh parenting, or fragile mental health, or oppressive expectations. There are many reasons why families fail to be safe places, where family members do not feel secure.

At the age of five my mother went to live with her grandmother when her mother had a mental breakdown, and was institutionalized. I don’t know if I ever met her mother, my maternal grandmother. I never heard my mother talk about her. But she talked often about her grannie. She had a secure home where she was loved. And she talked often about her two youth workers. I grew up knowing their names: Miss Smith and Kathy Brown. It was clear that they had a lifelong impact on my mother. Like good teachers.

The Christian family is a beautiful thing. Paul in his epistles is quick to address the various people who helped him as *beloved*. We form the Beloved Community. My mother always started her prayers, “Our loving heavenly Father.” Hearing this so often helped shape my view of God as Father who loves us. Filled with his love for us, we love him back by loving others in the Beloved Community. I am grateful to those who have loved me by pulling me into their families in various places I have lived around the world. I am grateful to those of you who offer this love to others.

Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). The early church became known for its love for one another. The non-Christian world found this very odd. Why would you love people this way with whom you did not share family connection? It was beyond their comprehension.

Thirty years ago a prominent sociology professor wrote a book, published by a major university press, about the sociology of the early church, *The Rise of Christianity*. At the time of writing Rodney Stark was an agnostic, but came to faith afterwards. He wrote of the early church:

The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to “all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.¹

In the fourth century the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate tried to revive paganism to compete with Christianity.

[He] agreed that Christians “devoted themselves to philanthropy” and urged pagan priests to compete. Julian soon found that the means for reform were lacking. Paganism had failed to develop the kind of voluntary system of good works that Christians had been constructing for more than three centuries; moreover, paganism lacked the religious ideas that would have made such organized efforts plausible.²

Paganism lacked a sufficient engine to drive such loving behavior to those beyond immediate family. But among Christians there was the engine: the Holy Spirit coupled with the understanding that fellow believers are kin, close kin, brothers and sisters.

The preacher knows of the acts of service of his readers in the past and in the present. He knows that this is the outworking of their love for God, and that they are doing so unto God's name, that is, for God's name's sake. God's name is exalted and honored by their love expressed in acts of service towards their new family. Seeing this, the preacher is confident of their standing and their future. You can sense him beaming with pride and pleasure, like a teacher delighting in evident transformation in her students.

He writes that God will not be unjust. God sees their behavior, he knows what is motivating it. He will not forget or ignore it. It is a great comfort to know that God sees what others may not see. Your service to others may be unseen, done in secret. But God sees. You may feel under-appreciated. But God sees and appreciates.

So the preacher is confident about his readers, and pleased about their love for God and for Christian neighbor. But he also wants to spur them on for the future. He next expresses his further aspiration for them:

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (6:11-12)

"We want" is a little weak for a verb that means intense desire. A good teacher doesn't simply want something for her students. A good teacher has passion: "we passionately want" (NET) is more like it! The preacher has a deep passion for his readers that they keep doing what they have been doing.

He wants them to show the same diligence. Perhaps this also is the wrong word. "Diligence" conveys the sense of duty. What the preacher is calling for is "eagerness" (NET), an earnest looking for opportunities to fulfill a responsibility. Eagerness is about joy not duty. Eagerness sees an opportunity rather than an obligation. Eagerness is delighted to serve, not burdened. Many of you have shown great eagerness to lovingly serve, both within the household of faith and beyond. You have served at Grace Village, where the renovation of a third unit is well underway. It looks like there might be a fourth. Many of you have volunteered to serve when we host Rotating Safe Car Parks. You have helped with Abrahamic Alliance projects serving the poor and unhoused. You have been eager to participate in acts of service and love. Thank you so much.

Ramadan begins in two weeks. Come on Wednesday March 3 and hear Fouad Masri of Crescent Project share with us how to love our Muslim neighbors, especially at Ramadan.

The preacher deeply desires that his readers continue their eager service. He qualifies this call with three forward-looking clauses. There is a forward horizon in the future to their present acts of service.

The first forward-looking element is "so that what you hope for may be fully realized." Our hope, which is as yet unrealized, will become reality. Meanwhile we have full assurance of our hope. We hold on to the conviction that God will fulfill his promises. Eager service to the saints is thus an eschatological activity. It is action that has a foot in the future, because the church is an eschatological community. It is a colony of the future living now in the present, as well as a colony of heaven living here on earth. This is a striking way

of thinking about our loving service to one another as our reciprocation of love to God. It is actualizing our hope, bringing the future into the present.

The second forward-looking element is "to the very end." Again we have this word "end" which the preacher has used throughout this exhortation. Several times now he has expressed his desire that the readers keep moving forward from the *beginning* to the *end*, where the end is the goal, the terminus. The Christian life is a journey from beginning to end; it is a pilgrimage. We continue in loving service to others all the way to journey's end. Journey's end is also the realization of our hopes, the day when God's promises are fulfilled.

The third forward-looking element is a purpose or result clause: so that you do not be or become lazy. *Lazy* is the the same word the preacher used at the beginning of his exhortation (5:11), where he despaired of his readers' ability to understand because they had become lazy of hearing. The "diligence" or eagerness he is urging upon them is the opposite of laziness.

Instead of being lazy he wants his readers to be imitators of those who are ahead of them, those who are already entering into the realization of hope, those who are inheriting the promises.

Jesus told his disciples, "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). Western individuality prizes originality and authenticity. Ancient education valued conformity to an acknowledged master. Paul received a rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel, where he absorbed all that he could so as to become just like his master. No doubt he would have become a rabbi himself, a rabbi after the pattern of Gamaliel. But a new master encountered him, one whom he spent the rest of his life seeking to imitate. He sought to conform his life to Jesus. In turn he became a model for others. He told the Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1 NASB). A truly authentic human is one who is conformed to Christ, for he is the true human.

The preacher calls his readers to imitate those who are inheriting the promises. Entrance into the inheritance and fulfillment of the promises lies at the end, the end of the spiritual pilgrimage. In Hebrews this is salvation. We do not immediately attain the promises when we start the journey.

The journey itself may be difficult. There may be suffering and hardships. There may be temptations to give up or we may lose focus and drift away. The preacher says that inheritance of the promises is "through faith and patience." When the going is smooth it is easy to be faithful. It is another matter when the going is tough. That is when faithfulness is really called for. We remain loyal to Jesus even when it is difficult and we might doubt. We persevere. We can put the two words together: throughout the days of our earthly pilgrimage we show *faithful perseverance* and *persevering faithfulness*.

Who are these people that are inheriting the promises? A prominent example is Abraham. God's promise to Abraham is the topic of the next paragraph (6:13-20) which we will look at next week. Later the preacher gives a long list of these people, chapter 11, often called the Hall of Faith. He brackets that chapter with a call for endurance or perseverance:

You need to *persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (10:36)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, ...let us run with *perseverance* the race marked out for us. (12:1)

The faithful saints of chapter 11 are a great cloud of witnesses, a stadium full of spectators. They have finished the course, and are now watching us run the race and are cheering us on. I attended a memorial service yesterday at PBC in Palo Alto. These familiar words were read, written by Paul at the end of his life:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim 4:7-8)

How do we nurture such faithful perseverance and persevering faithfulness? The preacher continues in Hebrews 12:

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2)

Christ before us. Christ before us as the object of our gaze and devotion. And Christ before us as the one who has gone before us and finished the course. He has entered into God's presence. And we meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep moving forward in this journey to the finish line.

Last week we noted that the severe warning (6:4-8) has implications for the doctrines of eternal security and perseverance of

the saints. The preacher is determined that his readers persevere all the way to the end. In this current exhortation he has taken his readers on a roller-coaster: initial doubt about their capacity for learning, a challenge to move forward with him, an extreme warning of the consequences of not doing so, ending with confidence and passionate desire for them to continue their current progress. He loves them dearly and believes them capable of faithful perseverance. The saints will persevere.

Well done, Beloved Community! Let us carry on together.

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... Amen.

Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28

1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 86.
2. Stark, *Rise*, 189.

© 2024 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino