

The Dangers of Spiritual Laziness

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

When I was in high school our basketball coach had interesting ways of exposing whether or not we were in shape. One year, the first day of practice Coach Hurt (that was really his name) put us in a bus, drove us out into the country about 7 miles, dropped us off, and told us, “Run back to the gym.” Believe it or not, I had no problem running 7 miles; as a matter of fact I got back to the gym before anybody else. But you know what? I don’t think I’ve run 7 miles this whole year. I occasionally do some other types of exercise, but I don’t jog/run.

If somebody asked me, “Are you a runner? Are you in good running shape?” what should I say? It wouldn’t exactly be accurate to say, “I can run 7 miles without stopping. . .” It would be more accurate to say, “I could run 7 miles without stopping 37 years ago, but now I jog around my neighborhood 2 or 3 times a year. . .” The point I’m making is that if you really want to evaluate some area of your life, you don’t look at what used to be true of you years ago. You take an honest look at that area of your life right now.

The book of Hebrews depicts the Christian life as an endurance race. In that race there are things that can slow you down and trip you up. Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who at one time were running the race well. They were so passionate about Jesus that they gladly endured persecution. But somewhere along the way they had become spiritually lazy. In the passage we’ll consider today the author diagnoses them and confronts them about their spiritual condition. It’s as if he’s saying, “You used to run with strength and stamina, but now it’s like you’re running in quicksand.” He wants them to know that spiritual laziness is incredibly dangerous. And so he challenges them to be diligent in their walk with God.

As I teach through this passage today, would you invite God to show you your true spiritual condition? Back in chapter 4 the author pointed out that the word of God is living and active, that it penetrates to the deepest part of our souls, and that it can judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. I’d encourage you to invite and allow the word of God to diagnose your true spiritual condition this morning.

A Description of Spiritual Laziness (Hebrews 5:11-14) In the previous paragraph the author launched into a discussion of Jesus being a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (5:6, 10). But he breaks off this discussion about Melchizedek in order to address the spiritual condition of his hearers.

11 Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

He had a vast amount of insight about Jesus as our great high priest to communicate, but it was “hard to explain”; some of the truths we’ll read about in chapters 7-10 are rather complex theologically and conceptually. But the real problem was the Hebrews had “become dull of hearing.” The phrase is literally, “sluggish of hearing”; the term

sluggish has the connotation of being lazy and negligent. The Hebrews weren't merely immature; you can be immature and also be eager to learn. The problem was that they were spiritually negligent and unwilling to hear the Word of God. Significantly, in the last verse of this passage (6:12) the author will use this same term and challenge the Hebrews to **not** be "sluggish." And so the term sluggish serves as bookends of this passage, letting us know the topic of everything in between (a literary technique - *inclusio*). The author diagnoses and warns them against spiritual laziness. He continues:

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.

When he says that "by this time you ought to be teachers" he wasn't talking about having the gift of teaching or having a formal position as a teacher. His comment reflects the expectation that if you soak in the word of God over time you should grow in your knowledge and experience to the point where you can now teach others what you've learned. But the Hebrews never progressed to that point; they needed to be taught the most basic truths about God all over again.

The author introduces the imagery of needing "milk" and not "solid food." Sometimes the term milk is used in Scripture to refer to the Word of God as rich and nourishing; 1 Peter 2:2 speaks of "longing for the pure milk of the word." But here milk is contrasted with solid food. The Hebrews were like a baby that can only drink milk and not eat solid food. They were in a perpetual state of immaturity.

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.

People disagree about the exact meaning of "the word of righteousness." I think it refers to the deeper teachings about righteousness - the sort of things that the author of Hebrews teaches in this book (Jesus as our high priest, walking by faith, experiencing God's rest, etc.). The word of righteousness is analogous to "solid food." The person who drinks only milk remains a spiritual infant. The person who is accustomed to the word of righteousness eats solid food and grows up.

Verse 14 is one of those verses I'd encourage you to memorize. It gives us a very tangible, practical description of spiritual maturity. A mature person receives the deeper truths of Scripture and and puts them into practice (s/he is a "doer of the word"). A person practices specific teachings long enough will eventually find that their senses are trained to discern good and evil; in specific situations they instinctively know what course of action is good and what is evil. This is true in every area of our lives: our speech, our thoughts, our prayer life, our spiritual gifting, etc. Maturity is the byproduct of practicing the truths of Scripture.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, how would you evaluate yourself based on what we've seen so far? Do you receive spiritual truth (through personal devotions, sermons, conversations, etc.) and do you put it into practice? Or are you spiritually lazy, unwilling and unable to receive nourishment from the Scriptures? Most believers can identify some areas of maturity and some of immaturity. Whatever the case, hear what the author says in chapter 6.

A Call to Press on to Maturity (*Hebrews 6:1-3*) Some people remain in a condition of spiritual immaturity because they have never understood that God expects them to grow up. In these verses the author of Hebrews calls his readers to grow up. We don't have time to look in detail at everything in these verses. I'll make a few summary comments.

1 Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do, if God permits.

He mentions six things that constitute "elementary teaching about the Christ." When he speaks of "leaving" these teachings he isn't talking about leaving them behind or abandoning them. These are foundational teachings which need to be built upon in order to "press on to maturity." It's not obvious what the author means by each of these terms; they seem to be things that his readers would have learned in Judaism but which came to have a fuller meaning in the new covenant.

The author gives three pairs of teachings. The first pair involves **conversion**: repentance from dead works (turning away from sinful works/deeds which leads to death) and faith toward God (putting trust in the living God). This is essentially what happens at conversion when a person turns **from** sin and **toward** God through Jesus.

It's a bit less obvious what the author is talking about with the second pair of teachings: instructions about washings and laying on of hands. "Instructions about washings" is probably a reference to old covenant ceremonial washings (Numbers 19 - red heifer ritual) which foreshadowed our cleansing in Christ. The "laying on of hands" was utilized when someone was commissioned for public office and was carried over in the new covenant (in prayer for the sick and commissioning elders).

The third pair involves **the believer's final destiny**: the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead; the NT consistently teaches that the dead will be raised bodily at the return of Christ. The OT taught that at the end of the age God would judge every nation and every person; the NT teaches that this judgment happens at the return of Christ.

When he makes the comment in verse 3, "And this we will do, if God permits," he's acknowledging that God had to bring them to maturity. The author and others could teach the deeper truths about Jesus as our great high priest, but God was the One who brought about their spiritual maturity.

The big idea from these verses is that (by the grace of God) we are responsible to press on to maturity in the Christian life. This morning I wonder if you live with the conviction that God expects you to grow up spiritually. It's not that you can "muscle" your spiritual growth and take charge and force yourself to grow. It's more a perspective that says, "I need to quit making excuses. I need to quit blaming my immaturity on my circumstances and my past and my weaknesses. I believe that God has provided everything I need to grow up in Christ." Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and exaltation are sufficient to do more than make us spiritual infants; what Jesus **has done** and **is doing** is sufficient to make us mature.

A Warning against "Falling Away" (Hebrews 6:4-8) These are some of the most debated verses in the entire New Testament. I'll give my understanding of what the author is saying, but I readily acknowledge that there are other ways to understand these verses. Listen to verses 4-6. He's describing why spiritual laziness is so dangerous and why it's so important to press on to maturity.

4 For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

Verses 4 and 5 describe a deep spiritual experience.

- They had been enlightened; in some sense their eyes were opened to spiritual truth.
- They had tasted of the heavenly gift; they had experienced a gift from heaven (i.e., from God).
- They had been made partakers of the Holy Spirit; they had experienced a work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They hadn't merely heard about the Holy Spirit; they had experienced His work in their lives in some way.
- They had tasted the good word of God; in the past they had been receptive to the word of God when it was presented to them.
- They had tasted the powers of the age to come; we were told back in 2:4 that the message about Christ was confirmed by signs and wonder and miracles.

The author says that those who have experienced everything described in verses 4 and 5 and then have "fallen away" **cannot** be brought back; "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance." The expression "to fall away" is used only here in the NT and simply means to go astray. In light of the description at the end of verse 6, I think it refers to full-blown apostasy - someone who has completely renounced his/her faith in Christ. Such persons (internally) treat Jesus the way the Roman soldiers did: they crucify to themselves the Son of God, and they put him to open shame. He is describing people who have experienced "the real thing" (i.e., genuine Christianity) and then rejected Jesus Christ with "eyes wide open." Such persons cannot be brought back to a place of repentance and faith. He's not describing a kid who grows up in the church and then walks away from Christianity for a time; he's not describing someone who's never really encountered genuine, biblical Christianity; he's not describing someone who runs far from God through sin and rebellion. He's talking about someone

who has experienced the real thing in a believing community and then becomes spiritually lazy, experiences the deceitfulness of sin, a hardening of heart, and ultimately ends up in unbelief, rejecting Christ altogether. This is the progression the author warned against in chapter 3 (vv. 12-13).

The question that immediately comes to mind is whether or not such persons were ever genuinely saved. Scholars and theologians answer that question differently. Nobody answers a question like that in a vacuum; we answer that question in light of our insights and convictions from the rest of Scripture.

Those who believe you **can** lose your salvation see verses 4 and 5 as describing someone who was genuinely saved but has come to a point of no return and loses that salvation. Those who believe that you **cannot** lose your salvation will see verses 4 and 5 as describing someone who has had genuine experiences with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit but were never genuinely saved.

This second view is the one I hold. I admit up front that my conviction that a person cannot lose his/her salvation informs how I interpret this passage. This passage reminds me of the parable of the four soils which describes four responses to the good news of the kingdom. Initially all four soils looked the same, but only the “good soil” ended up producing a crop. The other three soils describe people who weren’t ultimately saved; they each **initially** received the word, but eventually their faith was overwhelmed by Satan or affliction or worry or riches or “other things” (see Mark 4). Scriptures suggests (and experience confirms) that people can have deep spiritual experiences before they come to a place of solid faith in Jesus Christ that leads to salvation. I think that’s what the author is describing in these verses. People like Judas and Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-24) are biblical examples of people who looked like true disciples of Jesus but weren’t.

I have a deep, abiding conviction that when a person experiences genuine salvation through faith in Christ that s/he enters into a permanent, eternal relationship with God that He sustains and protects. There are ups and downs along the road, but ultimately those who are saved persevere to the end of their lives (Hebrews 3:6, 14). I think that this is the teaching of Scriptures such as John 6:39-40, John 10 (“no one is able to snatch them out of My hand” - vv. 27-30), Romans 8:38-39, etc. God uses warnings such as this one in Hebrews 6 to jar us out of our spiritual laziness so that we will persevere to the end.

In verses 7 and 8 the author gives an agricultural metaphor which reinforces the importance of persevering and bearing fruit.

7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; 8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

If the ground drinks the rain which falls upon it and produces the desired crop, it is blessed. If the ground drinks the rain but yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless for the owner; fields like that are burned, not harvested; fields like that are cursed not blessed (reminiscent of the “ground” being cursed after the Fall - Genesis 3:17-18). This metaphor illustrates the fate of those who have been part of a believing community and experienced everything described in verses 4 and 5 and yet ultimately renounce their faith in Christ. At the return of Christ they experience God’s judgment, not God’s blessing.

Before we move on to the final paragraph I want to mention one more thing that (I hope) gives some perspective. In the 90s I met weekly for about 6 years with three pastors from other churches to study the Scriptures. One year we studied the book of Hebrews. When we got to this passage in Hebrews 6 two of us understood this passage as I’ve described today; the other two pastors understood this passage to describe genuine believers losing their salvation. What was interesting, though, is that we all agreed on the ultimate implication of this passage: a person who renounces his/her faith in Christ isn’t saved; only those who endure to the end are saved.

A Challenge to Diligence (Hebrews 6:9-12) This is the opposite of spiritual laziness.

9 But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.

The author really didn’t think that his readers were in the category of those who “fall away” and “crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.” He didn’t believe that they were the ground that didn’t bear fruit and ended up being burned. Even though he had given them a stern warning he was convinced that they would experience “better things” - the ultimate blessings of salvation. This conviction flowed from what he’d seen in their lives in the past:

10 For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.

Notice how he moves from his own confidence in their salvation to a statement about God’s justice. When it comes to things that are beyond our scrutiny (such as who is saved and who isn’t), we rest in the fact that God is just (a statement found throughout the Bible). God certainly wouldn’t forget the love they’d shown for His name and their track record of ministry to other believers (see also 10:32-34). Their love for God and for their neighbor was evidence of a genuine faith.

In verses 11 and 12 he issues a challenge to be diligent and persevere in their faith; this is a restatement of his call in chapter 12 to “run with endurance the race set before you.” Notice again his concern for every single person (as in 3:12-13 and 4:1).

11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

He wanted them to “**show** the same diligence” that had characterized their lives in the past. He wants them to return to loving God and loving their neighbors as themselves. This was Jesus’ message to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2. They had “left their first love” - they didn’t love others the way they did at the first. He told them “Remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first” (Revelation 2:2-7).

The Hebrews’ renewed diligence in serving others would result in “the full assurance of hope.” Instead of losing hope and giving up, they would have full confidence that God would do for them what He had promised. The goal was to be diligent and have full assurance of hope **until the end** of their lives. Those who “endure to the end will be saved” (see Mt. 24:13).

In verse 12 the author returns to the issue of spiritual laziness. If they renewed their diligence, they would no longer “be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Next week we’ll look at the rest of chapter 6; there the author points to Abraham as someone who embodied what he’s describing; Abraham lived with “faith and patience” and “obtained the promise.” In other words, Abraham “ran the race with endurance.”

The presupposition behind this whole passage is that spiritual laziness doesn’t have to be a permanent condition. By the grace of God, the Hebrews could turn from their sluggishness and become diligent again. That diligence would involve living their lives the way they once did.

At the first of this message I asked you to invite God to show you your true spiritual condition. If God has convicted you of spiritual laziness (either in specific areas of your life or in a more comprehensive sense) I would urge upon you the same thing that the author of Hebrews urged upon his readers. In light of the dangers associated with spiritual laziness: by the grace of God **press on to maturity** (“grow up”), show the **same diligence** you once had, **do not be sluggish** when it comes to seeking and serving God.

What exactly does this look like in your life? Honestly, I can’t tell you that. Your diligence will probably look different from mine - depending on temperament, gifting, and stage of life. I could give you a list of ways you can be diligent; they would involve Bible reading and meditation, building service/ministry into your schedule, having serious spiritual conversations with people (almost) every day, worshiping like you mean it, etc. But you really need to hear from God on this. I’d encourage you to ask God directly, “How do **You** want me to put away my spiritual laziness, be diligent, and press on to maturity?” I know that “hearing from God” is a huge topic. But if you hear from God, you will pursue maturity/diligence in a way that “fits” your life and in a way that will be fruitful and satisfying.