

Pursing Maturity with God’s Help: A Sermon on Hebrews 5:11–6:12

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As you find Hebrews 5 in your Bible, I wonder how zealous you are about Jesus and about pursuing his ways. Would your spouse or roommate or parent or sibling characterize your spiritual life as lazy and halfhearted or as passionate and intentional? My prayer in this sermon is that God would awaken new passion for his supremacy, new zeal for his glory, and new hunger for holiness. Our Sovereign Joy mission statement asserts that “we exist to glorify God ... by making mature disciples.” This commitment to maturity should mark our lives as we turn from the lukewarm, lax, or lackadaisical ways of worldliness and embrace that fact that we are to grow into spiritual adulthood. The main point of the passage is this: *Having turned from spiritual halfheartedness, Christians must pursue maturity with God’s help.* Follow along as I read Hebrews 5:11–6:12.... Pray with me....

Having turned from spiritual halfheartedness, Christians must pursue maturity with God’s help. Our passage today has two parts, so if you are taking notes, here are the points: (1) the challenge to pursuing maturity: spiritual halfheartedness (5:11–14); (2) the call to pursue maturity with God’s help (6:1–12).

The Challenge to Pursuing Maturity: Spiritual Halfheartedness (5:11–14)

The book of Hebrews majors on magnifying Jesus’s representative role as high priest on behalf of his people. Look at 5:9–10: “And being made perfect [or mature through his withstanding temptation and enduring suffering, Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.”

But now we come to our passage this week. Beginning in verse 11, the author opens, “About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Spiritual deafness.... You’ll recall that the book opened in 1:2 by stressing that “in these last days [God] has *spoken* to us by his Son.” Then in 2:1 the author urges, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have *heard*, lest we drift away from it.” He pleads with his audience in 3:7, “Today, if you *hear* his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Yet perhaps like some in this room, the original audience included those who had become sluggish or halfhearted in their hearing, and this was impacting their spiritual lives.

He now provides the rationale for this claim. Verse 12: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.” Every true believer in this room, whether man or woman, boy or girl, is expected to grow spiritually and to become one who can instruct others in the faith. There is a point at which you should no longer have to be taught what 6:1 calls “the elementary doctrine of Christ.” In the first church I pastored were many men and women who had been a part for over 30 years yet were still not mature enough in their Christianity to teach a Sunday School class or women’s Bible study. May it not be so in the community of Sovereign Joy. Mature disciples are disciple makers themselves, and this is my prayer for every member of this church. Indeed, this is God’s revealed will for every member of this church.

Yet there are some who, in the words of 5:12, “need milk, not solid food.” Or, as verse 13 says, they are “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” Righteousness is about right living as God defines it and about right order in God’s world wherein he is at the top. To be “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” then, would likely mean being ill-equipped to walk in a way that honors God.

Table saws and guns are tools for the trained, and when the game is on the line, the sports’ field is for only the strongest, most equipped players. As it says in verse 14, “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (cf. 2:10; 5:9).

These initial four verses describe spiritual infants as those dull or halfhearted in hearing who need to be taught again and again the basics. “Don’t touch that wall socket.” “Come when Mommy says so.” “Don’t throw your food on the ground.” The spiritually immature are unskilled in right living, and they must be taught, taught, and taught again because they are unable to discern good from evil, right from wrong. The spiritually immature lack control in their parenting, lack ethics in the workplace, lack discipline in their school, and lack character on the sports field.

In contrast, the spiritually mature are eager to hear, able to teach others, skilled in what God’s word says and in how to live it out in practical ways. Why? The text says it’s because they have the awareness and ability to differentiate good and evil, having trained their spiritual senses through “constant practice.” They make schooling decisions for their children based first on the priorities God sets for their parenting. They consider job changes or moves asking what would bring God the most glory. They evaluate leisure and purchases with a mind to stewardship rather than entitlement. They vote in elections based on the values God prioritizes like life and justice and family. Spiritually mature people feed on deep truths and see them applying to everyday life.

However, the spiritually immature rarely even pause to consider whether their desires or actions are good or evil because their spiritual senses are dulled. Spiritual halfheartedness or laziness is a direct challenge to spiritual maturity.

The Call to Pursue Maturity with God’s Help (6:1–12)

The Call Itself (6:1–2)

“Therefore,” says 6:1, “let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.” The author here draws an inference from his stated challenge to maturity. Against spiritual halfheartedness, let us grow up, leaving the elementary aspects of the faith to pursue maturity.

He then gives six features associated with “the elementary doctrine of Christ” that every Christian needs to grasp early and then build upon. But the sting comes in seeing that in both 5:12 and 6:1 the audience is “again” having to be taught “the basic principles of God” or “elementary doctrine of Christ.”

Foundational to all Christian teaching is the need for “repentance from dead works” and “faith toward God.” “Dead works” are likely works done in the flesh that lead to death, and 9:14 teaches that it is only “the blood of Christ” that can “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (cf. Eph 2:1, 4). To enjoy salvation from God’s wrath, people must repent from their sin and draw near to God through faith in Christ. To draw near through faith means to believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb 11:6) with forgiveness of sins (9:22; 10:17–18) and the fulfillment of all his promises, even salvation (2:3; 9:28) and rest (4:1, 10).

Matching this foundational doctrine is next “instruction about washings” and about “the laying on of hands” and about “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” (6:2). First, the old covenant through Moses demanded “various washings” and purification rights, which 9:10 tells us were “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.” Elementary to Christian doctrine is an understanding that we are a part of the new covenant, not the old, and this informs our ethics. The history of redemption has progressed, and Baptism is the only “washing” that new covenant saints need to practice.

Next, we have “the laying on of hands” (6:2). In the New Testament, hand imposition accompanies prayers (Matt 19:13, 15; Acts 6:6; 13:3; 28:8) in contexts of blessings (Matt 19:13, 15), healings (Mark 8:23; Luke 13:13; Acts 28:8), appointments to office (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6), and the bestowal of

God’s Spirit (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6). By laying our hands upon someone we operate as conduits of heaven and as agents of God’s presence, signifying God’s commitment to provide for and protect all who trust in him. Secondly, we also display our own love in Christ for the one we pray for, and we symbolize that the person’s hopes and longings are ours.

Finally, we consider teaching about “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” (Heb 6:2). To be a Christian you must “believe in your heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead” (Rom 10:9; cf. Heb 13:20) in order that we might be freed from “fear of death” (2:15) and be raised to better life in heaven (11:35; 12:23). Hebrews 9:27–28 declares, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” Later, in 10:25–30 we also learn that on the final “Day” (10:25), “the Lord will judge his people” (10:30), supplying “eternal salvation” (5:9), but he will also “consume the adversaries” with “a fury of fire” that will never end (10:25–27; cf. 13:4).

These are six of Christianity’s foundational principles. Repentance and faith address our conversion, when we move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Various washings and laying on of hands relate to our public initiation—the time of our healing, the time of our baptism, or the time of our commission. Then our resurrection and final judgment are at the conclusion. It’s as if the foundational principles address the boundaries of our journey, the dates on the tomb stone, between the promise of rest at the beginning of new life and the rest itself at the end. But the call of the text is to consider the dash between the dates and to press into life’s journey. Having left Egypt and passed through the waters, we must now move ahead in obedience through the wilderness of life in route to the promised land. Thus, the author urges in 6:1, “Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” We must grow up.

The Commitment to Pursue Maturity with God’s Help and the Need to Persevere (6:3–8)

Having stated the call in 6:1–2, the author now in verses 3–8 commits to pursue maturity with God’s help and then warns his readers of the need to persevere. He says in 6:3, “And this we will do if God permits.” That is, we will pursue growth in holiness if the Holy One makes it possible. Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5; cf. 17:17; 1 Cor 15:10; Phil 2:12–13). In our book’s conclusion, the author blesses his audience, declaring, “May the God of peace ... equip you with everything good that you may

do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight” (Heb 13:20–21). We can only pursue maturity with God’s help. We get the aid, and he gets the glory (cf. the passive in 6:1). God’s grace doesn’t make our pursuit of maturity unnecessary; God’s grace makes it possible. “If God permits....”

Now the author offers his reason for this qualification, and it relates to how God has structured reality. The author here switches perspective from what “you” ought to do (5:12) and what “we” will do (6:1–2) to what “those” and “they” can do. This shift makes what follows less an accusation and more a warning, and this warning includes a lot of parts that must be taken together. Look at verses 4–6. We will pursue our journey toward godliness, if God permits....

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

In Hebrews, it is “impossible for God to lie” (6:18), “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4), and “impossible to please [God]” without faith. Thus, the term “impossible” here means not just difficult but “beyond the bounds of possibility” within the universe as God has created it.

What is impossible is then clarified in verses 4–6. What is “impossible” is to “restore [certain types of people] again to repentance.” We get six qualifying phrases to describe those who cannot be restored—the initial five clarify what has already been done in the past and the last clarifies what is being done in the present. All six must be operative for the warning to stand.

As in 3:15–19, all the initial five qualifiers are worded in ways that recall the exodus generation’s experience of God’s greatness matched by their failed journey through the wilderness to the promised land. (1) Like Israel encountering the glory cloud (Exod 13:21; Neh 9:12), it’s “those who have once been enlightened” (Heb 6:4), with “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” overcoming their darkened hearts (2 Cor 4:6). (2) Like Israel enjoying manna in the wilderness (Exod 16:4), it’s “those who have tasted the heavenly gift” (Heb 6:4), having their pallets transformed in some measure to savor new graces and enjoy what they never used to enjoy. (3) Like Israel relating with the very presence of God at the mountain and through the tabernacle (Isa 63:10–14; Hag 2:5), it’s “those who have shared in the Holy Spirit,” even seeing some of the fruits of the Spirit evident in their lives (Heb 6:4; cf. Gal 5:22–23). (4) Like Israel receiving God’s word through Moses (Exod 20:1–17) and being motivated by

promises of the coming land (6:4; 20:12; 32:13; 33:3), it's those "who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:5). (5) Yet also like the exodus generation turning to the golden calf (Exod 32) and dying in the wilderness due to lack of faith (Num 14:11, 22–23; cf. Heb 3:17–18), it's those who, after enjoying so many divine mercies, "have fallen away" (6:6).

The text describes those who initially receive God's word with joy, endure for a while, but "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away" (Mark 4:16–17). Or perhaps it's "those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (4:18–19). Regardless, Hebrews 6:6 says, "It is impossible ... to restore again [such apostates] to repentance, since [or while] they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt." This last present qualifier is important to understand the author's point. It is not just those who professed to be believers and then who fell away that can't be restored. It those who professed to be believers and who fell away *and* who are presently rejecting Jesus as Savior who cannot be restored.

Those engaging in lust, in rage, in apathy, in greed cannot repent, for they are in those moments joining the Roman soldiers and Jewish leaders in crucifying God's Son and treating him as guilty (cf. Acts 2:36). And the caution in this text is that God alone is the one who permits people to break free from sinning, and only those who have stopped sinning can repent and pursue maturity. So long as you are engaging in sin, it is "impossible" to repent, says the author. And people should never assume that God will permit you to stop your sinning. As in Romans 1 where God "gave [people] over" to impurity, to dishonorable passions, and to a debased mind (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), sin was not only worthy of judgment; sin was the judgment. So, take heed and guard yourself from sin.

Hebrews 10:26–27 says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." So long as people are practicing sin, repentance is impossible, and where there is no repentance, there will be no saving mercy.

Verses 7–8 add, "For the land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned." Some lives bear fruit, whereas other lives bear thorns and thistles. The former receive God's covenantal "blessing," whereas the latter get covenantal "curse." I recall the wording of 3:12–14:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Persevering faith shows that we truly share in Christ. True Christians will heed the warning, stop sinning, and find God permitting them to repent and pursue maturity.

Confidence and Responsibility (6:9–12)

The words have been heavy as the author has stressed more generally the need for perseverance. But in 6:9–12 he turns to address his audience directly, emphasizing both his confidence for their future and their responsibility. “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation” (6:9). At the end of chapter 5 the author stressed that some in the church were immature, but now he states that he believes God will permit his listeners to pursue maturity, turning from sin and embracing God.

“Better things . . . that belong to salvation” clearly associates the readers with Christ, who is “better” than angels (1:4) and supplies “better” access to God (7:19), a “better” covenant (7:22; 8:6), “better” sacrificial cleansing (9:23; 12:24), “better” inheritance” (10:34; 11:16), and “better” life after resurrection (11:35). As in 5:9, the “salvation,” therefore, relates to the eternal state and the end of life’s journey. The author feels sure his listeners will endure to the end.

Why? 6:10 says, “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.” Already fruitful growth rather than thorns and thistles have been displayed in their lives. Their demonstration of love for the sake of Christ’s name and the good of the saints in the presence of persecution suggests God will indeed permit their pursuit of maturity. Some of what the author refers to is captured in 10:32–34:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

I think of how the Ackmanns have stepped out in faith, leaving a long-time position at The Road to help lead this new work. I think of the Smith’s initiating the prayer walk around Liberty Square, and the Snider’s opening their home to the Eat, Read, and Be Merry evangelistic gatherings on Thursday nights. I think of the

way so many have arrived early to help set up for worship gatherings, been quick to provide food for families with new babies, and interceded for one another through crises or pain. Such realities make me feel sure of better things for you.

Now in 6:11 the author adds his desire that each listener persist in showing “the same earnestness” that you have demonstrated in the past so as “to have the full assurance of hope until the end” (cf. 2 Pet 1:10). Sustained fruit through the seasons of life does not make us alive, but it does prove to us and others that we are alive. As noted in 3:14, “We have come to share in Christ, *if* indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” By earnestly pursuing maturity, verse 12 says you will not be spiritually “sluggish,” which is the same Greek term rendered “dull” or “halfhearted” in 5:11.

So long as you remain on the journey, pursuing spiritual maturity by working and loving others for Christ’s sake, 6:12 says you will also be imitating “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). That is, you will not be like the wilderness generation that fell away and turned from God (4:11), but you will instead be like Christ, who “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2). And you will also be like the great cloud of righteous witnesses throughout history who bore witness to Christ’s worth (12:1–3) and who have now joined “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” in heaven (12:23).

Brothers and sisters, having turned from spiritual halfheartedness, pursue maturity with God’s help. Do not allow an evil, unbelieving heart to rise that leads you to fall away from the living God, but exhort one another daily that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Let us pray....

Spiritual Child	Spiritually Mature
Dull/halfhearted of hearing (5:11)	Eager to hear
Still need to be taught the basics (v. 12)	Able to teach others (v. 12)
Need to live on milk since you're a spiritual child (vv. 12–13)	Need solid food since you're spiritually mature (v. 14)
Unskilled in the word of righteousness (v. 13)	Skilled in the word of righteousness
Untrained to discern good from evil	Have your powers of discernment trained to distinguish good from evil (v. 14)
Elementary doctrine of Christ (6:1)	Maturity (6:1)
Foundation (v. 1)	Construction
Unproductivity and lack of love	Work and love toward the saints (v. 11)
Little assurance	The full assurance of hope until the end (v. 11)
Halfhearted (v. 12)	Not halfhearted but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (v. 12).