

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

“Being Taken Seriously By God”

April 18, 2021

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Third Sunday in Easter

The portion of God’s word that is given for us today is Hebrews 5:11-6:12, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

I invite you to listen carefully now to God’s holy and inerrant Word.

*11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 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. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. 6:1 Therefore 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, 2 and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits.*

*4 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, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 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. 7 For 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. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*

*9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things — things that belong to salvation. 10 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. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Depending on how you count the people and how big you draw the circle, there are somewhere between 6.5 and 8 million people today who live in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

6.5 million people is basically an unimaginable number. There's no way to conceptualize it that really fits in our brain. I mean we can sort of wrap our mind around a thousand people or even a hundred thousand. There are football stadiums that fit a hundred thousand people. But 6.5 million? That's basically impossible.

And of course, it gets exponentially harder to conceptualize when you consider that there's something like 8 billion people alive in the world today. I mean, at this point, once you're counting people in the billions, numbers have basically lost all meaning. It's unfathomable.

And in the context of that mass of humanity, it is remarkably easy to feel lost in the crowd. To wonder - does my life matter? What difference does my existence make in the world?

But, here's where the gospel of Jesus Christ comes to bear.

You see, The triune and living God is not overwhelmed by the sheer number of human beings in the world. 8 billion people are no more difficult for our infinite, eternal and unchangeable God to hold with his particular and specific attention than 100 would be. Or 3. Or 2. Or 1.

And this means that one of the most fundamental claims of the Christian faith is God takes you seriously as a person. He knows you. He has no difficulty separating you from the all the rest of living humanity and giving you his special, focused attention.

What I mean to say, beloved, is that God takes you seriously. At times, it may feel like no one else in this world does - and I understand that. You're not crazy for feeling that way. But God takes you seriously.

And one of the most substantial ways that God takes us seriously is that he speaks to us directly and pastorally in his word.

And he treats us always as though our choices and decisions in this world actually matter. What you do or don't do in this life matters.

Because, friend, God takes you seriously. He dignifies you with his attention and his instruction.

And in fact, that is just what he is doing today in the passage that is before us.

This passage in Hebrews 5 and 6 pretty easily breaks into three sections.

First, 5:11 - 6:3. Here, in this section, we see that God takes us seriously enough to call us to maturity.

Second, 6:4-8. Here, in this section, we see that God takes us seriously enough to warn us about the danger of falling away from Christ.

Third, 6:9-12. Here, in this section, we see that God takes us seriously enough to encourage us in our faith.

Let's work through each of these sections in turn.

First, in verses 5:11-6:3, the apostle writes:

*"11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 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. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

*6:1 Therefore 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, 2 and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits.*

There are a number of things going on this section.

But the first thing I want you to notice is how candidly and how personally the apostle is exhorting his readers, and by extension, us as well, with these words.

He is, without a doubt, taking them seriously. He is speaking to them as if their lives and their decisions matter.

And this is how God has always spoken to his people. We heard it in our Old Testament reading this morning from Deuteronomy, where Moses pleads with the second generation of Israelites to choose life instead of death as they enter the promised land.

We heard it in the epistle reading from Ephesians, where Paul exhorts his readers to grow up in maturity in Christ, putting off the old man and embracing righteousness.

And we heard it in the words of our Lord Jesus, who warned his apostles about the persecution that would come soon after his resurrection and encouraged them to persevere until the end.

Friends, the whole of the Scriptures is full of the kind of exhortation that we find in this passage. And it is here again and again because God takes you and your life seriously. He believes that you matter, and what you do with your life is important to him. And he desires good things for you.

Here, in this section, the Apostle instructs us regarding Christian maturity.

Remember, he has just spoken of how Christ himself, the Son of God, learned obedience through what he suffered and was made mature by his Father.

And here, he expands that vision of maturity to include you and me. All of us, the apostle urges, are to grow up in Christ and become mature. The opposite of maturity, according to the apostle, is childishness.

Like the fool in proverbs, to be childish is to be hard of hearing and unwilling to listen to the voice of wisdom.

Often, we think of maturity and wisdom as inherently possessing the answers ourselves and not needing to listen to the voices of others. But biblically speaking, the opposite is true.

It is the fool and the child who doesn't listen well. It is the mature and wise whose ears are open, who know that they need instruction to live.

To be mature, according to the apostle, has to do not only with listening, and receiving the solid food of the Scriptures, but also with learning the power of discernment by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

This, beloved, what it means to be wise and mature: to know what is good and what is evil and to allow our perception of goodness and evil to be trained not by our inherent instincts, but by the solid food of the word of righteousness - the Scriptures themselves.

Maturity, according to the apostle, is something we are meant to pursue actively - "Let us *go on* to maturity," he says.

And this we will do, he says, "if God permits." We press on to maturity in our lives, we pursue wisdom, but we do it always in a way that is fully dependent on the grace and mercy of God.

The clear implication of what the Apostle is saying here is that each of us who are Christians should be able to look back on our life five years ago or ten years ago and see growth in our maturity and wisdom in Christ.

Yes, certainly we may struggle with similar sins as we did a decade ago, but we should be struggle with them differently - with more practice, more skill, more progress than we did before.

If our capacity to distinguish between good and evil is no better today than it was five or ten years ago, it's worth asking the question - what kind of food am I partaking of? Am I really feeding on the solid food of the word of righteousness - the whole counsel of the Word of God?

It's a question we should ask ourselves.

In the next section, in verses 4-8, the apostle warns of the danger of rebelliously remaining immature in our faith - which is the danger of apostasy, of falling away from Christ.

*Listen again to what the apostle writes: 4 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, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 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. 7 For 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. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*

Beloved, if you read the Scriptures carefully - if you do not content yourself with milk, but you submit yourself of the solid food of the Word, you will find, again and again, that this is a crucial aspect of what it means to be taken seriously by God.

For God will not only assure you of his love, and the glorious redemption won by his Son in his death and resurrection. He will also warn you of the danger of falling away from him.

God has always spoken this way to his people. In the Old Testament, God spoke warnings to his people through his prophets, beginning with Moses and continuing with Isaiah and Jeremiah and those who participated in their ministry.

God spoke this way through his Son, who spent much of his teaching ministry warning against the danger of false righteousness.

And God speaks this way through the apostles, who again and again in the New Testament warn their readers about the danger of falling away from the faith they have been given.

In this passage apostasy is a real danger. It is not just a fictional possibility.

The Apostle says clearly that it is possible to taste of God's goodness and yet to ultimately reject him.

And here the apostle uses remarkably visceral language to warn his readers against falling away.

He says that those who fall away are crucifying the Son of God again to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

He warns us, just as Jesus did, of the danger of judgment for those who do not repent and cling to him.

These are chilling words. And they are meant to be chilling, because God wants us to hear them.

Friends, make no mistake. Apostasy is a real danger. There are some who profess Christ who fall away and do not persevere until the end.

But God takes you seriously enough to warn you about this danger, so that you may, as our confession puts it: "Tremble at his threatenings" and embrace faith and repentance in response and turn away from whatever temptation might exist in your heart to reject Christ and to grow sluggish in your commitment to him.

It is actually dignifying to be told the truth in a straightforward way. It is an act of love. And that is exactly what is happening here in this passage.

And friends, if this passage frightens you, that's ok. To some extent it should frighten us, in a proper sense. And if you have questions about what the Apostle says here, I would love to meet with you and talk about it.

But we cannot ignore this warning against falling away from Christ. It is present here, and truly, it is present throughout the Scriptures.

However, the Apostle in this passage does not only urge his readers to embrace maturity and he does not only warn them against the danger of falling away. He also takes them seriously enough to encourage them to continue in faith and patience.

Listen now to the last section of this passage, in verses 9-12.

*9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things — things that belong to salvation. 10 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. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

How gentle the Apostle is here, in this last section!

Notice first, the name by which he calls us. Beloved. Loved by God. Even in the places where we are immature, even in our weakness and continuing sin, this is who are: Beloved by God.

And in verse 10, the Apostle assures his readers that their faithfulness is seen by God. He says God does not overlook your work, and the love which you have shown for his name in serving the saints.

Friends, this also is what it means to be taken seriously by God.

You are not swallowed up by the mass of humanity. You are not lost in the crowd.

No, God sees you, and he calls you beloved.

God sees you, and he affirms your faithfulness.

I love the way the apostle puts it. God does not overlook your work and the love you show the saints.

All of us, friends, know what it is to be overlooked. We long for recognition, and none of us fully receive it. And in that place, it's possible to feel like our hunger to be recognized is a sign of spiritual weakness.

But that is not how the Scriptures speak. The Scriptures actually speak as though your life is more important and valuable than you can imagine.

And they speak as though it is not wrong to hunger to be seen, to be known, to be understood, to be acknowledged.

Because the Scriptures promise that God does not overlook us. He sees our faithfulness, even when it feels unacknowledged and unseen.

He knows of the love we show for his name when we serve our Holy brothers and sisters.

It is not forgotten. It all matters. This is the promise of God.

Beloved, I hope, if you take nothing else today from this portion of God's word, that you remember how dignifying it is to be addressed by God.

Because in this passage, God is taking you seriously. He is saying to you that your life matters to him.

In fact, you matter to him so much that he is intentionally speaking you and encouraging you to grow up in maturity, to pursue wisdom and the solid food of His Word.

And he takes you so seriously that he is willing to speak bluntly to you, to warn you of the grave danger of falling away from Jesus and squandering the birthright you have been given.

And he takes you so seriously that he is affirming that your desire to be seen and recognized and acknowledged is a desire that he himself intends to satisfy.

For you are not overlooked by God. You are seen. And you are called beloved.

This is the seriousness with which God takes your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.