

Sermon 28, You Should Be Growing Faster, Hebrews 5:11-14

Proposition: You need moral maturity to learn more about the priesthood of Christ.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our author has expounded some preliminary information on priests and the priesthood of Jesus. But now, rather than plunging ahead with his explanation of who Melchizedek is and what Psalm 110 means when it declares that David's Lord is a priest in his order, the author pauses to warn his readers solemnly. He has been warning them throughout not to fall away, and one of his sternest warnings is coming right up. But his method of launching into that warning is to take a quick break from theological exposition and begin to discuss his readers' maturity or lack thereof. In other words, he suddenly gets personal. This isn't about intellectual enjoyment of knowing a lot about Jesus and Christian things. It's about you, whether you are able to take the teaching or not able to take it because you are morally immature. The writer declares that you need maturity, and then he defines what maturity looks like, because you need moral maturity to learn more about the priesthood of Christ.

I. Why You Need Maturity, v. 11a-b

We begin with why you need maturity. Now, the harsh words the writer uses on his original audience may not apply directly to you. I trust that they don't. As far as I can tell, most of the people in this congregation are not dull of hearing; rather, you are remarkably mature. But that is no reason to rest on your laurels. Because if we strip out the part that is directly applicable only to the original audience, we still see three straightforward points.

A. Scripture Has Much to Teach You, v. 11a

The first is that scripture has much to teach you. Rhetorically speaking, commenting that you have a lot to say is a classic technique used by speakers of all stripes. It helps wake up the

audience and breaks up the discourse. And it also warns people not to think that the end is particularly close. Speaking of which, I have a lot more to say as well. . .

So, instead of preaching about how the Hebrew writer has a lot to say, let me boil it down: Scripture has much to teach you. Regardless of how long or short you think this book is, the word of God as a whole has a great deal to say. Each verse is freighted with a barge load of theological truth.

And so if you are going to be a Christian, you need maturity because there is a lot to learn. Just as a human child cannot stay a child forever, because there is too much to learn about the world, so a baby Christian can't stay a baby forever, because there is so much to learn about God. Scripture has much to teach you; about this we have much to say. And you need to buckle down to learn it.

B. The Priesthood of Christ Is a Difficult Doctrine, v. 11b

Not merely is there a great deal of material here in the Bible; a second reason you need to buckle down is that some of the material is difficult. We have already spoken about our general lack of cultural familiarity with priesthood as an occupation and institution. You have probably heard of a priest, and possibly even met one. But in terms of understanding what a priest does, that knowledge is long gone from among us as a people. For that reason, and several others relating to how glorious our Lord is, learning about his priesthood is a tough doctrine. It takes some significant work.

C. Learning Requires Listening Requires Maturity, v. 11c

The work it requires is the work of thinking. If you are not used to making your brain function, following the Hebrew writer's teaching about the priesthood of Christ is going to be beyond you. And of course, that's exactly what he says about his readers: they are dull of hearing. To put it simply, learning requires listening, and listening requires maturity. You can't learn if you don't listen. That was the Hebrews' problem; their ears were closed, and their ears were closed because their minds were closed. They had embraced spiritual babyhood, and they were quietly playing with rattles and singing "I'll never grow up" from Disney's *Peter Pan*. They were immature.

Have you ever tried to explain a complicated point to an immature person? It doesn't necessarily have to be a theological point. It could be something about how to operate a piece of machinery, or how to feed a certain animal. There are people who are too immature to take care of a dog because they are too immature to listen to your instructions on how to do so. Brothers and sisters, the Hebrew writer has had enough. He is not interested in pandering to the immature. He won't explain the basics to those who don't care. Of course, he believes that among his audience are some who do care, who are mature. And he is speaking ultimately to them. The warnings are for the spiritual babies who want to stay that way. But the teaching is for those who are ready to press on to maturity.

Are you ready to press on to maturity? Are you ready to grow out of your comfort zone and draw closer to Christ in faith, hope, and love? If so, the Hebrew writer has just the teaching you need.

II. What Maturity Looks Like, vv. 11c-14

Before resolving to go on to maturity with his audience (6:3), the writer first spends some time telling us about maturity. He especially focuses on what maturity isn't. By the way, this negative approach has some major benefits. One of the things it does is help you say "Oh, that. That's one of my habits, but I guess it's really immature. Whoops."

A. What Maturity Isn't

So let's look at what maturity isn't. Understanding this will help you go on to maturity. You can grow up better when you understand what is merely human vs. what's definitely immature.

1. Being Dull of Hearing, v. 11c

The first mark of immaturity is the one we already mentioned — being a poor listener. If you let instructions pass in one ear and out the other, you are not mature. The word for "maturity" here could also be translated "perfection." That is, it refers to the state of being completely what you ought to be. It is the difference between the larva and the adult. The maggot does not have the incredible skills of the fly, if I can dare to use so humble a comparison. Indeed, I think that as repulsive as most of us find flies, we can agree that maggots are worse. At least the flies are mature!

So an unwillingness to listen is a mark of not having arrived where you need to be. A Christian who can't listen, and especially not to the word of God, is an immature Christian. Paul used the word "carnal" or "fleshly" to describe that Christian.

Would your spouse say you're a good listener? How about your children? Are you adept at receiving and assimilating new ideas? Or are you like the one guy I met? I said to him, "What evidence do you have for your claim?"

"Oh, I've talked about it a lot," he said.

I immediately asked whether I had heard what I thought I had heard. "Did you say that everything you know about this subject you learned by listening to yourself talk?"

He instantly denied that he had said any such thing, but when pressed he still had not a shred of evidence for his claims.

Regardless of whether that particular individual actually claimed to have learned by listening to himself talk, the basic phenomenon is alive and well. We all have a propensity to be dull of hearing, to be better talkers than listeners, to be more impressed with our own fantasies than with others' hard-earned knowledge. And if you give in to that propensity, you are not displaying maturity. The ear that listens to rebukes of life will dwell among the wise; the ear that rejects them will dwell among the fools.

2. Being Unable to Teach Christian Truth, v. 12a

The second mark of immaturity is an inability to teach Christian truth. The writer is convinced that his audience has been studying long enough to teach others, but that their studies have been fruitless. They need someone to teach them.

The mature Christian is able to explain the word of God. He is able to give a basic explanation of the core doctrines of the faith, to explain what a Christian is, what the ten commandments require, who Jesus is and what He did, and how that relates to us today. The

mature Christian knows his way around the Bible to the extent that he can, with the help of a concordance or Bible search engine, explain from the text what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.

You may say “I’m not called to be a teacher.” That’s fine; the writer is not saying that the Hebrew church was somehow made up entirely of members of one profession — teacher. He’s not saying every Christian should be a professional teacher. He’s saying that any mature Christian should be able to impart the basics of the faith. If you can’t do that, you need to ask yourself “Why not?” What has prevented you from going on to maturity in this area of the Christian life?

3. Being Ignorant of the Basics of God’s Word, v. 12b

Whatever it is —laziness, spiritual dullness, sluggish self-satisfaction with your own attainments — it probably relates closely to this next one, which is ignorance of the basics of God’s word.

The writer uses the word *stoicheia*, which Paul uses to refer to the basic principle of all human (false) religion. He defines this as the principle of taboo, “touch not, taste not, handle not.” And sure enough, this principle of taboo recurs throughout all world religions. Certain things are impure, unclean, and to be avoided by the practitioners of the religion. Well, anyway, that shows us that the word means the most basic underlying principles. What are the basic underlying principles of God’s word? We can say that they are something like this: God is, God spoke, God came. Therefore, we are creatures, we are dependent on a God and a Word outside ourselves, and He has not left us on our own to figure it all out.

The *stoicheia* are the foundational elements. Several authors compared them to the alphabet. You can’t go further in your studies without knowing the alphabet. If you can’t use all your letters and know their sounds without even thinking about it, advancing further in knowledge is going to be all but impossible for you. In the same way, if you don’t know for a certainty that God is the self-existent one who spoke authoritatively in His word and came to earth in the person of His Son, none of the rest of the Bible’s teaching is going to make sense. If I approach an evolutionist and argue against gender confusion on the basis of God’s creation design, my argument won’t make sense to him. He doesn’t have the elementary principles to understand it.

In short, the less of God’s word makes sense to you, the more ignorant you are of the basic principles needed to understand it. If you hang out there, living in ignorance, you won’t be able to teach others because you won’t understand what’s going on yourself.

By the way, brothers and sisters, what is the biggest obstacle to learning the basics of God’s word? I’d say it’s the world’s propaganda. If you are trying to figure out your place and what you ought to believe, the world is right there with a ready-made set of basic principles. These principles sound very moral. They are designed to feel very right — sympathy for the victim, anger at the oppressor, the need to reject all the wrong thinking and hurtful words from your own past. But these principles are actually diametrically opposed to the elementary principles of God’s word. If you are a good Marxist, you can’t be a good Christian. If you insist

on reading the world through the lens of critical theory of any stripe, racial or gender or anything else, then by the same token you are rejecting reading it through the lens of the Logos.

In other words, even if you spend a significant amount of time in God's word every day or every week, you may not be getting anything out of it if you're functioning with a Marxist paradigm. If you buy the propaganda, you sell the truth. Don't do that. Buy the truth, and sell it not. How do you do that? By immersing yourself in God's word, and checking your thinking against it. By earnest and deliberate prayer that the Spirit would reform your thinking. And by submitting to the elders of your church. Do all three, and you can be fairly sure that you have in fact found the genuine elementary principles of the faith.

4. Needing a Diet of Spiritual Milk, v. 12c

Another sign of spiritual immaturity is needing a diet of spiritual milk. The writer is using a metaphor taken from human development. For the first six months or so, infant humans can only digest milk. Their stomachs are not yet developed enough to draw nourishment from anything stronger. Give pork ribs and chocolate cake to a two-month-old and he won't do very well.

In the same way, reading *Our Daily Bread* or other one-page devotionals that contain one or two sentences of scripture, and feeling that that is enough spiritual food to keep you all day long, is a sign that you are living on milk and not spiritually ready for anything richer and more nourishing. If you can't read more than two verses of Scripture without feeling bloated and overfed, or if you think that a chapter of Joel Osteen is a solid spiritual meal, you are the person described here — the baby who lives on milk. Don't do that, brothers and sisters. I will say that if you are living on milk, you are likely not going to like this church for long. I try to feed you with the most nourishing meat that I can.

What would you think of an adult who told you "I drink a quart of milk for breakfast and another one for dinner. If I get extra hungry, I add four ounces of half-and-half, and that's my food for the day. I've been living like this for years"? I'm sure you would conclude that this person had a major digestive disorder, and you would probably be expecting him to keel over any time. Well, there are countless Christians in America who live on one mainline or megachurch sermon per week, with perhaps the amount of Scripture found in twenty minutes of CCM per day to eke out their scanty meals. That is what the apostle means by living on milk.

He could also be referring to reading the Bible but not understanding and remembering what you read. In this case, it would be more like having horrible diarrhea. You can eat whatever nourishing thing you want, but it all runs out the back end in liquid form twenty minutes later.

Don't consume God's word like an infant or a sick man. Eat large meals from it, daily. Take in its basic principles and build your understanding on them.

5. Being Unskilled in Moral Reasoning, v. 13

The final sign of immaturity that our author brings forward is being "not accustomed to the word of righteousness." What does this phrase mean? It consists of three big words — inexperience, *logos*, and righteousness. Suffice it to say that the best way of translating the phrase is to relate it to moral decision-making. Logos can mean reason or judgment. Someone who has no experience of making righteous judgments is immature. This person is not skilled in moral reasoning, in

looking at a situation and cutting through the lies, the cultural baggage, and the yelling to arrive at God's prescription for what needs to be done. This can relate to high-stakes ethical dilemmas, of course. But far more often it simply relates to everyday life. Do I honor my father more by helping him with every little thing, or by telling him no, I need to care for my children and my wife right now? Do I love my neighbor better by picking up the trash he left on the street or by waiting for him to do it? Should I say something to my pastor about the congregant who's pushing false views around town, or let it go?

Brothers and sisters, my recent experience as a pastor has led me to believe that most Christians are unskilled in moral reasoning. They truly do not know how to take their situation to the Ten Commandments, look through the commandments for the principle that addresses it, and then apply that principle. In many cases, they don't even know that they ought to be doing that, much less how to do it. Do you genuinely believe that the law of the Lord is perfect — meaning that it addresses every conceivable situation and explains what your duty is in that situation? And do you have confidence in your ability to enlist the Spirit's aid to apply the text to the situation?

B. What Maturity Is: Habitually Distinguishing Good from Evil, v. 14

You see, the writer goes on to affirm, positively speaking, that the essence of maturity lies in moral reasoning. The first distinction in moral theology is the distinction between right and wrong. The Christian who can unerringly and habitually make that call, and then follow through by doing what's right, is the mature Christian. That's the one who is able to live on a steady diet of raw Scripture and R.C. Sproul and John Owen, Puritans and church fathers, Spurgeon and Calvin and the rest of the heavyweights.

How do you get there? How do you go on to maturity? You have to habitually train your moral sense to distinguish good from evil. This can't be an occasional thing. "I make tough moral judgment calls every six to eight months." No. It has to be an ongoing, daily thing, and it has to start with the evaluation of your own thinking.

I ransacked Scripture for verses about controlling the mind. I came up with three:

Evaluate my thoughts: are they mature or childish?

Evaluate my thoughts: am I thinking highly of myself or thinking with sound judgment?

Evaluate my thoughts: Am I envying sinners' pleasures or zealous for the fear of the LORD?

The habitual moral decision-making refers in the first instance to living in a godly fashion day in and day out, evaluating each thing you do in terms of whether it is good or evil and then consistently going after the good.

Are you ready for this kind of maturity? Do you want to be a grown adult who lives on solid food and distinguishes good from evil? Then practice this habitually. Do it for the sake of your great high priest. He died to deliver you from evil. Now work to stay delivered from it. Don't go back to being dull of hearing. Grow up, my friends, into the measure of the stature of Jesus Christ. Amen.

