

The Danger of Being Close

Selected Scriptures

80-99

As we prepare for the Lord's Table tonight, I draw your attention to Hebrews 5 and 6. Just to take you through a text of Scripture that, perhaps, the Spirit of God will use not only in your life but perhaps, through you, will use it in the life of someone that you know.

You heard the testimony of a young man being baptized tonight who admitted to being involved in a church like this for 17 years; who had attended a Christian school. All through his school years had been, I suppose you could say, over exposed to Christianity in one sense. That kind of person is in a very dangerous position.

You heard the young man giving his testimony say that he was at a crossroads and he had to decide whether he was going to commit his life to Christ or whether he was going to go the way of the world. By God's grace he made the right choice. Not everybody does.

Churches invariably and inevitably are filled with people who get very close to salvation and make the wrong choice. The Book of Hebrews addresses that very issue. Early on in this book there is a familiar verse that you probably have heard, Hebrews 2:3 that says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" That would be the question asked by someone who would say, "I understand salvation, I understand the Gospel, I know it is true, I believe it factually but I might choose to neglect it. If I do, what makes me think I can escape judgment?"

All throughout Hebrews you have that kind of warning; a warning to the person who knows the truth of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who not only knows it but even believes it or affirms it historically, understands the theology of it but won't let go of sin and come fully to follow Christ, confessing Him as Lord. And that is the ever present danger of being close to salvation. It's kind of like being vaccinated or inoculated with a small dose so that you never catch the real thing.

But of all the warning passages in the Book of Hebrews and, in fact, for that matter, in the Bible, none is more straight forward and none is more potent than the one in Hebrews 5 and 6; this was directed to Jews. As indicated by the title of the book, this book was written to Hebrews, to Jews, a Jewish community of people who actually were involved with a church. Some of whom were Christians and some of whom were not; some were close but unsaved. This passage is directed to those who were close. They had heard the Gospel, they had seen it confirmed by signs and wonders; that is they had been exposed to apostolic powers, they even understood it, they affirmed it as truth. They were on the edge but they would not turn from their sin, their false religion, their self-righteousness, their works, as a means of salvation and come to Christ.

The problem facing such a person is indicated in verses 11-14. As you come to verse 11, the writer

of Hebrews has been talking about Jesus Christ, in particular, talking about the priesthood of Christ as being the Great High Priest. The Priest that is better than the priesthood of Aaron; priesthood of Melchizedek, an Old Testament Priest, as the only one, that could in any sense, be compared to the priesthood of Christ, but He is the unsurpassed Priest.

He's been talking about some deep things regarding the priesthood of Jesus Christ and here he stops. He has much more to say about the priesthood of Christ and he will, in fact, pick that theme up when he gets to Chapter 7 and start off on it again. But it's very profound and so, he stops at this point because he knows that some of his readers cannot handle this profundity. They cannot handle the richness of what he is saying. Why? Notice verse 11, "Concerning Him", that is Christ the High Priest, "we have much to say and it is hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing." He says, "I know there are some of you who are not really being able to receive this, who are not comprehending this, who are not digesting this and the reason is you're dull of hearing." A more contemporary word would be stupid, sluggish, slow. "It's very difficult to teach you."

These are people who once responded to the message with, at least, an emotional response. Maybe like the seed, you remember, that went into the rocky soil and it spurted up for a little while, that kind of emotional response and the Lord says, in Matthew 13, "There was joy there and then it died away." There was some kind of initial response, some kind of initial belief that the Gospel was true. But these people, not acting upon that initial belief and not fully yielding to Jesus Christ, had lapsed into a settled state of sluggishness, a settled state of dullness and were no longer able to bear or understand the rich truth about Jesus Christ. They were still in the flesh, they were still natural and the natural man does not understand the things of God.

Now, further describing their condition he says in verse 12, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers." What does he mean by that? Well, "by this time", in other words, "You've had enough exposure for a long enough time, that the length of time is sufficient for you to be teaching this. You've been in the church, you've been around the message, you've been exposed to it, you ought to be teaching it. You've had that much time. Instead, 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." He says, "Instead of being teachers, though you've had enough time to be teachers and enough exposure, you're still needing to be taught the basics. You still haven't grasped the elementary principles of the oracles of God."

What does that mean? Basically, Old Testament teaching; simple ABC's about God, about the Old Testament Law, about standards of morality. "You don't even understand the basics. You've had full instruction in the Gospel but by your indecision and your hard-heartedness, you have become stupid and you need to go back to square one. You're like some baby that has to be fed milk and can't be fed solid food."

Verse 13, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he's a babe." When he says, "not accustomed", he means that, "You're without any experience. You have no experience in the deep things and the rich things. You can't comprehend them, you are spiritually ignorant; the deep, rich things of the word of righteousness." That is, biblical teaching about righteousness. "You have no experience in these things, you can't comprehend them. You're just like a babe."

Now these are not Christians, beloved, these are not Christians. They don't even understand the

basic doctrines of

righteousness, which means how to be right with God. They should but they don't. And they've been around for a long time. And believe me, this is not something that was isolated to this time and place.

There are people in churches today, even in ours, who for the time they have been around the teaching, should be teaching themselves but have yet to learn the elementary truths because they have never truly, personally experienced or comprehended the truth about righteousness; being right with God, because they're not saved.

In verse 14 he says, "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice, have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Mature people know about righteousness. They know what's right and they know what's wrong. They know what God tolerates and what He doesn't. They understand the righteous standard of God. So he says, "You're like a baby that can't handle solid food and you should be a mature person, who having practiced the truth of righteousness understands it."

So here are unsaved people who once listened, who once understood the basics of the Gospel, who once understood some facts about the path to God, have heard it long enough to have been able to teach it if they had truly believed. But by rejection of Christ, by hard-heartedness, by sitting on the fence, by being close but never coming to Christ; they have fallen back and they have regressed to being babies who need the most elementary teaching all over again. That's the problem.

And I, frankly, never cease to be amazed at how many times, even in our own church, I hear a testimony like we did tonight about someone who has been here for years and somewhere along the line after many, many years, came to understand the basics for the first time. It's also tragic for me to note how many people were with us for a long time and left, never to return but to walk permanently away from Christ.

That was the problem to which the writer of Hebrews addressed this text. People who understood the basics of the Gospel but in rejecting Christ, personally, had fallen to a level of comprehension that basically made them babies who needed to understand the very elementary things. And he's saying, "I can't go on teaching these deep things about the priesthood of Christ, which are so thrilling and so life changing and expect you to comprehend them because you're not capable."

That's the problem. The solution is offered in Chapter 6 in the first three verses, "Therefore," he says, "therefore" pulling us back to the prior passage, "since this is your condition, let me suggest that you leave, that you forsake, that you separate, that you abandon the elementary teaching about the Messiah." Here is a call to salvation and his call to salvation is consistent with the terminology all through the Book of Hebrews. Perfection or maturity in Hebrews is salvation. In Paul's terminology and his Epistles, it has to do with spiritual maturity; in the writer of the Hebrews vocabulary, maturity or perfection has to do with salvation. So he says, "Look, you need to leave the elementary teaching." What is that? Old Testament basics; ceremonies, types, sacrifices, pictures, shadows, "All of that Jewish religion that you are familiar with; you need to leave that elementary teaching about the Messiah, the Christ."

And you know that the Jews understood the Messianic prophecies. And that the sacrificial system pointed to a coming Savior, and that the sacrificial Lamb pointed to a coming Lamb. And there would be a King and there would be a Kingdom and One would come who was a Deliverer out of Zion and

so forth. They understood that and they could see the shadows and the types and the pictures of Christ or the Messiah. He says, "You've got to move on from that. And you need" in verse 6, "to press on to perfection. Or to press on to maturity or to press on to full understanding of righteousness or" that is, "a solid understanding and experience of salvation." He's saying, "Let's go on to salvation, get off the fence." And then he gets specific, he says, "Don't lay again, a foundation of repentance from dead works," and he's going to give six features of the Old Testament elementary principles.

The first one is the Old Testament did teach repentance from dead works; that you needed to repent from your self-righteous efforts to earn your salvation. You need to repent of works as a way of salvation because it only leads to death. So, you need to repent. The Old Testament said that, but he said, "You need to move beyond just repenting from dead works."

The second thing he says is, "You need to move on from the simple truth of faith toward God." That was a basic Old Testament teaching; you're to believe in God, you're to affirm God, acknowledge God, trust God. But there's something more than that.

In verse 2, he adds, "You need to move on from instructions about washings." Some translations say, "baptisms", that is not the word for baptism in the New Testament, it is the word translated every other place for washings and it has to do with Old Testament ceremonial washings. They washed their hands in water; they went through purification processes in the sacrificial system. He says, "Yes, the Old Testament taught repentance, yes, the Old Testament taught faith in God, the Old Testament taught certain ceremonial washings but you need to move beyond that."

And then he mentions laying on of hands. What does he have in mind there? Very clearly, whenever a Jew took a sacrifice to the Temple, he laid the sacrifice on the altar to be offered as an offering for sin and here's what the sinner did. The sinner walked up to the sacrifice and he put his hands on it. Why? He was identifying with that sacrifice. He was saying, "This sacrifice, with which I identify by putting my hands on it, is the substitute for my sins. Let this sacrifice die as my substitute." And so, the sinner was identifying with the sacrifice. You see that in Leviticus Chapter 1 and again in Chapter 16. The writer of Hebrews says, "That's what the Old Testament taught but you need to go on from that."

The Old Testament also taught, verse 2, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, basic Old Testament hope was resurrection; read Daniel Chapter 12. And the Old Testament taught eternal judgment, many places. And so, what is the writer saying? He's saying, "Look, repentance from dead works, that's Old Testament. You need to move on to repentance toward Jesus Christ who is Life. Faith toward God? That's wonderful but you need to put your faith in the Living Christ."

Ceremonial washings need to be replaced by the cleansing of the soul, by the washing of the word through faith. Laying hands on an animal sacrifice needs to be replaced, by as it were, spiritually laying hold of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. A simple belief in the resurrection of the dead needs to give way to a full blown hope in Jesus Christ, the hope of eternal glory. A simple belief in eternal judgment needs to give way to the complete truths about judgment and all that are involved in that discussion in the New Testament.

So, he's saying, "All those parts of the Old Testament are fine; Christ is better. You need to move on.

Repentance in the Old Testament was only a start; it is completed in the New Testament. Faith in the Old Testament is only a start; completed in the New Testament. Purification, external in the Old Testament becomes internal in the New Testament. Laying hands on a sacrifice is replaced by embracing Christ. Simple understandings of resurrection and eternal judgment become full orb and complete in the New Testament." So he says, "Your problem is that you need to come all the way to Christ, all the way to Christ."

You see, what you have here are religious people. They were even involved in the right religion, at least it was right at one time. He says, "You've got to come on to the new covenant." In verse 3, he says, "And this we shall do if God permits." And there he acknowledges that this is a work of God, this is a work of God.

Then in verses 4-6 he gives a warning. This warning is to motivate the people with the problem to come to the solution; the people who were stuck in an Old Testament kind of religion to come to the New Testament. Here's the warning, verses 4-6, "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, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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 through open shame."

Now this is quite a statement. He's saying, "Look, you've come so far, if you don't commit your life to Christ now and you fall away, it will be impossible for you to be saved." You say, "Why?" Because they had reached the point of complete revelation and if you turn away when you've heard it all and seen it all and understood it all, then you're hopeless because there's no more revelation. There's nothing more to give you.

Notice the advantages these people had had. Verse 4, he says, "You have once been enlightened." Enlightenment is intellectual knowledge, natural understanding. They had heard the Gospel preached, they had probably read some of the letters of the Apostle Paul and maybe some of the Gospels which were already in print. And so their minds were enlightened about the facts of the Gospel, they were enlightened.

Secondly, he says, "You have tasted of the heavenly gift." What is the heavenly gift? Christ; the power of Christ, salvation in Christ. He says, "You've tasted it." He doesn't say, "You've eaten it," doesn't say, "You've taken it in," "you've just gotten the taste of it. You've tasted of the power of Christ. You've tasted of His saving grace. It's all around you; you see it in your friends and acquaintances. It's there and you've had a taste of it."

Then he adds, "You've been made partakers of the Holy Spirit. You really haven't had the Holy Spirit dwell in you. You have not partaken of the Holy Spirit by possession but by association. You've seen the Spirit's power, you've seen the Apostles with their signs and wonders and what they did, they did by the power of the Holy Spirit, you've seen healings, you've seen miracles, you've seen all of that; you know the Spirit's work of enlightenment, you know the Spirit's work of conviction in your heart.

And these Jewish people had experienced the Spirit's power, they had experienced miraculous power. They had been healed, they had eaten food that Jesus created by the power of the Spirit, they had seen the dead raised and the blind given sight and so forth.

And then he adds, in verse 5, "You have tasted the good word of God." In other words, "You have heard teaching; solid, biblical teaching." And then he adds, "You have also tasted the powers of the age to come." Again, you notice that three times he uses this word "tasted". What are the "powers of the age to come"? Kingdom power, miracle power and as I said before, they had seen the signs and wonders. Chapter 2 verses 3 and 4 makes that clear, it says that, "God had born witness with them with signs and wonders and miracles by the gifts by the Holy Spirit."

So here were people who had had every exposure to the truth. They had been enlightened intellectually about the facts of the Gospel. They had tasted the power of Christ and his saving work because they had seen it in the lives of people all around them. They were made partakers of the Holy Spirit as they watched the power of the Spirit of God on display through the Apostles. They tasted the tremendous power of the word of God as they sat under profound apostolic teaching. And they experienced the miracles and signs and wonders that would characterize the kingdom age to come. Let me tell you something folks, no generation since has had such an opportunity. No generation has had such an opportunity.

Now one footnote, not one of the terms in verse 4, 5 or 6, not one of those descriptive phrases is ever used any where in the Bible to describe salvation. These people are not saved. None of these expressions is ever used any place in the Bible to talk about salvation. Doesn't say they were "born again", doesn't say they were "regenerated", doesn't say they were "redeemed", doesn't say they were "made new", doesn't say they were "recreated", doesn't say they were "adopted", doesn't say they were "justified", doesn't say they were "sanctified". It doesn't use any term ever used in Scripture for salvation. They just had this great exposure to the truth. And he says, "Look, if all of this," and verse 6, "you fall away, you go back instead of coming to Christ, it is impossible to renew you through repentance."

Why? Because you couldn't get any more revelation, you couldn't get any more opportunity, you couldn't see any more, hear any more, experience any more of the power of Christ than you've seen and heard and experienced. There's nothing more that God can do and if that doesn't bring you to Christ and you turn and go the other way, you're done.

That's why I've said to people through the years in our church, "Coming to a church like this, where you are so intensely exposed to the truth of the word of God, works two ways. As Paul called it, "It is a savor of life unto life to some and a savor of death unto death to others." While hearing intense proclamation of the truth brings people to salvation, it also gives people such a full exposure to truth that when they walk away from it, it may spell the final end. For, if after hearing all that could be heard, you still reject, how could you ever be saved?

And so, he says in verse 6, "If you've fallen away from the opportunity, you've fallen off the edge, it's impossible to renew them again to repentance." Why? Since they, "again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame." What does he mean by that? Simply this, that if you don't at that point accept Christ as Lord and Savior, then you are affirming that He deserved to be killed as a criminal. You either stand with those who affirm who He is or with those who reject Him.

That's the point, you made your choice and you have declared openly by rejecting Christ that Jesus was guilty as charged. He is not God, He is a blasphemer, He is not the Savior, He does not deserve

my worship, He does not deserve my homage, He does not deserve my life; He deserves death. That is the verdict of anyone who rejects Jesus Christ.

Can I bring this down to a very practical illustration? Everything in this passage could be said about Judas, right? Everything. Everything here could be said about Judas. He was enlightened, he tasted the heavenly gift, experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, sat under the great teaching, saw the power of the age to come and concluded that Jesus should die and sold Him to be crucified.

Anyone coming to the point of full revelation and walking away is a Judas. The punishment for such defection is the most severe. Hebrews 10:29, "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace." This is the one who will get the severest punishment for we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine and I will repay" and again, the Lord will judge His people. Verse 31, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

You see it's very dangerous to be this close because when you get this close to Christ and you turn your back and walk away, you will serve your eternity in the hottest hell with the severest punishment because you sinned against the fullest revelation.

Of course, the great anxiety of the pastor's heart, of my heart, is that there would be in the congregation of this church, people close, so close. And yet people who turn their back and go away from Christ to the severest eternal judgment that is suited for a Judas, who had the greatest opportunity and turned his back.

And so, the problem was identified at the end of Chapter 5 with the solution of come to Christ. The warning if you don't, with all the revelation you've had, you may fall away never to be renewed to repentance because you've made your final choice.

And then he closes this passage with an illustration, verse 7 and 8, "For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned." There's a graphic illustration. When the rain falls, vegetation that is useful grows but when the rain falls, so do weeds and thorns and thistles.

And he's saying, "When the Gospel is preached and the word of God is proclaimed and the Spirit is at work and you witness His power in the conversion of other lives and you see His transforming work first hand and you hear the truth and you understand the truth and you're exposed to the truth; that's the rain. When you believe it brings forth the useful vegetation and you're blessed. When you reject, you bring thorns and thistles and you are burned." And that's speaking of hell. The same rain, two kinds of ground. One piece of ground brings forth good vegetation, the other thorns and briars, only to be burned. This is a solemn warning.

Verse 9, the writer turns to Christians and he says, "But beloved, we're convinced of better things concerning you and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way." This is a little aside because the Christians are reading this and saying, "Boy, who's he talking about here?" And he says, "Beloved, we're convinced of better things concerning you. We know where you stand;

we know that you're saved." But the writer also knew that there were people who were not. It's as if he says, "I'm not trying to frighten all of you, I just want to speak to those of you to whom it applies."

The beloved are not infants, they're mature. The beloved don't need milk, they can take solid food. The beloved are not inexperienced in righteousness but have reached righteousness through faith in Christ. The beloved have not just experienced repentance from dead works but repentance toward God through Christ. The beloved have not just exercised a belief in God but faith in Jesus Christ as God. The beloved are not just involved in external washings but in internal transformation by the word. The beloved are not just identifying with animal sacrifices but identifying in union with Christ the Lamb. The beloved are not just aware of the ABC's of resurrection and judgment but live in the full understanding of the Blessed Hope of believers. The beloved are not just enlightened, they're regenerated. The beloved do not just taste of saving power, they feast on it. The beloved are not just partakers of the Holy Spirit, they are possessors of the Holy Spirit. The beloved do not just get a taste of God's good word, they drink it in. The beloved do not just see the miraculous power of the age to come, they experience it.

And so this passage warns anyone of the danger of being close and falling the wrong way. Many people in the church are at that very crossroad and no more fitting place to deal with that reality than here at the Lords table as we contemplate His death for us.

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