

A Greater Goal

JESUS IS GREATER #9 - Pastor Gary Combs - September 22, 2024 - Hebrews 5:11-6:8

INTRO: Good morning church! We're returning with Part 2 to a series that we began last Fall. It's entitled, "JESUS IS GREATER: An Exposition of Hebrews." Our theme verse is:

Hebrews 1:4 (NLT) This shows that the Son is far **greater than** the angels, just as the name God gave him is **greater than** their names.

That's the theme of Hebrews: Jesus is greater. Hebrews is an unusual book. It's an epistle, a letter with a benediction and a final greeting, but no salutation, it lists no recipient(s) and contains no author's autograph. Yet it's clearly aimed at first century Jewish background Christian believers immersed in a Hellenistic culture. Thus, the title: "Hebrews." For it was certainly aimed at believers with a firm grasp of the Old Testament and familiarity with Temple worship. This internal evidence lends itself to an early date of 65 AD (before the Temple destruction in 70 AD). Hebrews is the only truly anonymous book in the NT. The majority view is that Paul was its author. Others have proposed Barnabas, Apollos or Clement. However, I'm of the viewpoint that it was written by Luke. For it contains astounding similarities in grammar, writing style and high classical Greek found in Luke's other books: The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Each of these three books opens with a four-verse prologue written in Classical Greek. However, though we may not know with certainty the name of its human writer, we can be confident that its true author is the Holy Spirit that inspired it!

Last Fall, we covered chapters 1-5:10 of Hebrews. We saw that in Christ Jesus we find a greater name, greater salvation, greater help, greater glory, greater calling, greater rest, greater access and a greater priest. Now today as we look at the last part of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 6, we'll discover that we have a greater goal for our lives in Christ Jesus. What is this greater goal? The greater goal is to grow up into maturity in Christ Jesus.

Need: From the time of our birth, parents and doctors begin to measure our physical growth. Educators measure our intellectual growth. Banks and credit agencies measure our financial growth. They all have goals for where we should be in order to be considered healthy or to graduate or to qualify for a loan. But what about spiritual growth? Does God have a goal for our spiritual growth? Many in the church today seem to be unaware of this greater goal.

"A fundamental mistake in much of the Western church is that it takes as its basic goal to get as many people as possible ready to die and go to heaven. It aims to get people into heaven, rather than get heaven into people. And this requires that these people, who are going to be in, must be right on what is basic. And you can't really grow with that. But it turns out to be that to be right on what is basic is to be right in terms of the particular church or tradition in question, not in terms of Christlikeness. So actually, the project is self-defeating because the way to get more people into heaven is to get heaven into more people. And if you don't do that, then you wind up with a group of people that are testimonies against heaven." — Dallas Willard

So the greater goal is not to just make converts, but to make Christ-followers, to make disciples of Jesus who grow up to maturity becoming like Him in every way. Because as Dallas Willard warned...

"The way to get more people into heaven is to get heaven into more people. And if you don't do that, then you wind up with a group of people that are testimonies against heaven." — Dallas Willard

Trans: What's your goal in life? Is your life a testimony for heaven or against heaven? Are you growing spiritually? Since becoming a Christian, are you growing more like Jesus?

BODY: In the epistle of Hebrews, the Jewish background believers were warned not to fall away from the goal of growing to maturity in Jesus. We can heed the warning not to fall away from the goal of growing to maturity in Jesus. How can we heed the warning not to fall away from the goal of growing to maturity in Jesus? The text gives three ways for pursuing the greater goal of maturity in Christ.

Read text: Hebrews 5:11-6:8 (ESV) 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.

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Pursuing the greater goal of maturity in Christ ...

1. We can overcome our tendency for spiritual dullness.

EXP: (5:11-14) Notice the phrase “dull of hearing.” This was not a physical problem with their ears—it was a spiritual problem with their hearts. The author had much to say about deep spiritual truths, specifically about Christ’s high priesthood in the order of Melchizedek (5:1-10), but the audience wasn’t ready to receive it. Why? They had become spiritually stagnant. They were not growing. They were still in a state of spiritual infancy, as evidenced by their need for spiritual milk instead of solid food.

This is the 3rd of 5 warning passages in Hebrews:

- (1) Hebrews 2:1-4 - Warning against neglecting salvation
- (2) Hebrews 3:7-4:13 - Warning against a hard heart
- (3) Hebrews 5:11-6:12 - Warning against not pursuing maturity
- (4) Hebrews 10:19-39 - Warning against deliberate sin
- (5) Hebrews 12:14-29 - Warning against rejecting him who warns from heaven

“**Dull of hearing**” (5:11) (νωθρός, *nōthros*) - sluggish, lazy, slow to understand. Not active, but apathetic.

“**Basic principles**” (5:12) (ἀρχή στοιχείων, *archē stoiceion*) - Lit., “first principles.” The ABCs. You keep repeating kindergarten when ought to have already graduated and started teaching!

“**Solid food**” (5:12, 14) - Lit., “strong meat.” You need to grow teeth to eat meat.

“**Unskilled**” (5:13) (ἄπειρος, *apeiros*) - inexperienced in, without experience of, ignorant, unskillful

“**Word of righteousness**” (5:13) (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaio sunē*) - Lit., “teaching on righteousness.” Not the justification, but it ethical application. You haven’t learned to apply the teaching to your life.

“**Mature**” (5:14, 6:1) (τέλειος, *teleios*) - brought to its end, or to its goal, finished, complete, perfect, mature.

“**Powers of discernment**” (5:14) (αἰσθητήριον, *aisthētērion*) - faculty or capacity of the mind for perceiving, understanding, judging. This capacity is said to be “trained” by...

“**Constant practice**” (5:14) (γυμνάζω, *gumnazō*) - to exercise vigorously, either the body or the mind.

“**Distinguish**” (5:14) (διάκρισις, *diakrisis*) - distinguishing, discerning, judging. Knows good from evil.

ARG: Jesus gifted the church to build up believers to maturity in Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-14 (ESV) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

ILL: I know several who tell me that the trainers and group accountability of Crossfit has helped build them up. That’s one way of looking at the church. It’s God’s gym!

APP: How many of us have become spiritually dull? We may attend church regularly, but are we growing in our understanding of Christ? Have we become too comfortable, unwilling to dive deeper into God’s Word? The first step toward spiritual maturity is recognizing our need to move beyond spiritual milk and crave the solid food of God’s Word and apply it to our lives.

2. We can press on with God’s help for spiritual growth.

EXP: (6:1-3) It’s unfortunate that there is a chapter break here as it continues the maturity theme from 5:11-14. In Hebrews 6:1, the writer urged believers to “leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” This isn’t about abandoning the basics of the faith, but building on them. We are urged to “press on to maturity!” (See NASB translation)

A Greater Goal

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Ephesians 6:1 (NASB) Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us **press on** to maturity...

“Let us leave” (6:1) (φέρω, *pherō*) (PPS) - Lit., “leaving while carrying a burden.” With the suggestion of force or speed. Not leaving the basics behind, but carrying them with you.

“Elementary doctrine” (6:1) (τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) - Lit., “The first things of the word of Christ.”

“Not laying again a foundation” (6:1) (καταβάλλω, *kataballō*) - not constantly going over the foundations, beginnings, first principles or system of truth that is the “elementary doctrine” of Christ. The author then names three categories (in three couplets) of this basic Christian doctrine :

- (1) **Conversion** (“repentance from dead works and of faith toward God”). “The ambiguous phrase “dead works” could mean our deeds of the flesh that characterize those who are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-2), or they could refer to the useless, dead works of self-righteousness that can never bring salvation (Matt. 5:20)—that is, “man’s futile attempt at self-salvation.” We are called to repent from both of these and instead be saved by faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9).” (Swindoll, *Insights on Hebrews*, p.87).
- (2) **Church practices** (“instruction about washings, the laying on of hands”). “Some take “washings” as a reference to Jewish purification rituals or instruction concerning the difference between Jewish washing and Christian baptism. The Greek word is *baptismos*. Here it occurs in the plural—literally, “instruction of baptisms.” The reference to “laying on of hands” would have brought to mind ordination—the rite of appointing a person to ministry (Acts 6:6; 13:3)—conferring the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17; 19:6), or receiving some kind of spiritual blessing such as healing (Acts 9:17). (Swindoll, p.87).
- (3) **Prophetic future** (“the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment”). “Many may be surprised that issues of prophecy are among the “elementary principles” of the Christian faith. However, the author wasn’t talking about the order of end-times events, details about the future Tribulation, or characteristics of the Antichrist. The matters here are simple: the resurrection of the dead, which is the basic hope of every Christian (Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:21-22), and eternal judgment, which Paul tied to the proclamation of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-18; 2:16). (Swindoll, p.88).

“If God permits” (6:3) (ἐπιτρέπω, *epitrepō*) (PAS) - to permit, allow, give leave. “Let us be carried on into perfection, and this we will do, God granting us mercy that we may be so enabled” (As translated by R. T. Kendall).

ARG: Paul emphasized his goal was for Christ to be fully formed in the Galatian believers, indicating a deep, transformative relationship with Jesus that manifests in their lives.

Galatians 4:19 (ESV) “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”

“Christ is formed in you” refers to the process of spiritual maturity where believers grow to embody the character and nature of Christ. This involves transformation in their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors to reflect Christ’s presence and influence in their lives.

God’s purpose for believers is that they “become like His Son.”

Romans 8:29 (NLT) For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

ILL: Have you heard the phrase, “Failure to thrive?” It is a medical term typically used to describe a condition in infants and young children who do not gain weight or grow as expected. It can refer to both physical growth and developmental progress. This was the concern. That the Hebrew believers wouldn’t thrive and grow.

APP: Maturity in Christ is a lifelong journey. We are called to continually learn, grow, and apply our faith. How do we do that? By immersing ourselves in the Scriptures, by prayer, by being part of a community of believers that challenges and encourages us, and by putting into practice what we’ve learned. Always asking the Lord to grant us grace and mercy to grow. Are we willing to be stretched? Are we willing to grow?

A Greater Goal

JESUS IS GREATER #9 - Pastor Gary Combs - September 22, 2024 - Hebrews 5:11-6:8

3. We can avoid the danger of spiritual dereliction.

EXP: (6:4-8) Now we come to one of the hardest warnings not only to hear, but to understand in Scripture. Ray Stedman, called it “the knottiest problem passage in Hebrews, if not the whole Bible.”

“Heb. 6:3 serves as a transition that looks forward with confidence to the ability to move on to maturity with God’s help. However, the “if” in 6:3 suggests that there are cases in which God will not permit one to move on to maturity” (Swindoll, p.89). The following verses describe such a case. Notice the phrase, “fallen away” (6). This describes a case of spiritual dereliction. It describes someone who has willfully neglected the practices and devotion necessary to maintain and grow in their relationship to God. It’s not a momentary lapse, but rather a persistent, deliberate straying away from following Jesus on the path to maturity.

“**Impossible**” (6:4) (ἀδύνατος, *adunatos*) - without strength, impotent, powerless, impossible. Why? Because they have “fallen away” (6). Notice the change from 1st person plural (“let us, we will”) to 3rd person (“case of those, restore them, since they”). It is impossible for these to “restore... to repentance.”

“**Enlightened**” (6:4) (φωτίζω, *phōtizō*) - to give light, to enlighten, illumine. Enlightened by the gospel.

“**Tasted the heavenly gift**” (6:4) (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου, *dōreas tēs epouraniou*) - received salvation.

“**Shared in the Holy Spirit**” (6:4) (μέτοχος, *metochos*) - sharing in, partaking in the Holy Spirit

“**Tasted the goodness of the Word**” (6:5) (ῥῆμα, *rēma*) - they had understood the goodness of the Word.

“**Powers of the age to come**” (6:5) (δύναμις, *dunamis*) - strength, power. They have caught glimpses and had a foretaste of the kingdom age to come by the Spirit’s present activity.

“**Have fallen away**” (6:6) (παραπίπτω, *parapiptō*) - to fall beside, slip aside; to deviate from the right path.

Two important questions:

- (1) Who are these who “have fallen away?” Genuine believers or mere pseudo believers?
- (2) From what have they fallen away? Have they fallen away from the faith? or have they fallen away from pressing on to maturity?

The two major interpretations are (Both views answer the 2nd question with “fallen from the faith.”):

- (1) They were once saved, but have lost their salvation. (The Armenian view)
- (2) They only appeared to be saved, but actually never were saved. (The Reformed/Calvinist view)

I don’t believe this passage is about salvation. It’s about maturity. These that have fallen are saved, but carnal and their life is marked by being unrepentant, a terrible testimony for Jesus, and thorns and thistles for spiritual fruit. Prof. David Allen calls this the “Loss of Rewards” view (Robert L. Allen, *NAC Hebrews*, p.377).

“**Restore them again to repentance**” (6:6) (ἀνακαινίζω, *anakainizō*) - too hardened to repent

“**Crucifying once again**” (6:6) (ἀνασταυρόω, *anastauroō*) - Fig., “crucify afresh.” Bad testimony.

“**Contempt**” (6:6) (παραδειγματίζω, *paradeigmatizō*) - to hold up to open shame. Bad testimony for Jesus.

“**Thorns and thistles**” (6:8) - not a useful crop like wheat, but instead worthless weeds.

“**It is worthless**” (6:8) (ἀδόκιμος, *adokimos*) - not standing the test, not approved, unfit for, worthless.

“**Near to being cursed**” (6:8) (κατάρας ἐγγύς, *kataras engus*) - near, imminent and soon to be cursed.

“**End is to be burned**” (6:8) (καύσις, *kausis*) - as was the agricultural practice of the day in order to rid the soil of the “thorns and thistles.”

ARG: The “thorns and thistles” reminds me of the “wood, hay, and straw” in 1 Corinthians...

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 (NLT) ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. ¹² Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. ¹³ But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person’s work has any value. ¹⁴ If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

A Greater Goal

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ILL: My grandfather used to burn off a field to kill all the weeds right down to the root for a new seed bed.

APP: This is a serious warning to all of us. It shows the consequences of spiritual dereliction, where instead of producing fruit, we allow sin and apathy to take root. This leaves us vulnerable to falling away to such a degree that we harden ourselves to all calls to repentance and to God's loving hand of discipline.

Instead of abiding in fellowship with Christ—the true Vine—and producing fruit, we fall out of fellowship (John 15:1-6).

Instead of bringing forth bountiful spiritual fruit useful to the Father, we produce thorns and thistles that are worth nothing.

Instead of experiencing the blessing (6:7) of God in this life, we will be “near to being cursed” by our sin.

And instead of standing before the Master's eternal throne and hearing “Well done, good and faithful servant” and receiving His reward, we will enter in “like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames” (1 Cor. 3:15).

But here's the hope: if we are growing in Christ, if we are pressing on toward maturity, we don't need to fear falling away if we are sincerely pursuing Christ.

CONCLUSION: Remember the Dallas Willard quote?

“The way to get more people into heaven is to get heaven into more people. And if you don't do that, then you wind up with a group of people that are testimonies against heaven.” — Dallas Willard

We want to get heaven into people! We want to see people receive, follow, and become like Jesus. We don't want our lives to be “testimonies against heaven!” We want people to see heaven, to see Jesus in us!

Will you heed the warning we have heard from God's Word today?

Pursuing the greater goal of maturity in Christ. Will you decide to:

- 1) Overcome spiritual dullness?
- 2) Press on with God's help for spiritual growth?
- 3) Avoid the danger of spiritual dereliction?

Allow me to pray over you the prayer that Paul prayed over the believers at Philippi:

Philippians 1:3-6 (ESV) ³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

And now allow me to pray for those of you that have never given your life to Jesus. We invite you to answer His call to follow Him today.

Let's pray.