

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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On the Way to Maturity

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Most of the time, we preachers like to begin our sermons by building bridges to you the hearers. We often introduce an idea, tell a story, or raise a question that will help close the gap between speaker and listener. Something that will help forge a connection between the pastor and the people. But in today's text, the preacher in Hebrews takes a different, more provocative approach. He begins his sermon by creating some tension-filled space between himself and the congregation. "We have much to say about this," announces the preacher, "but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn" (v. 11).

You can quickly sense the resistance building in the pews. In their minds, some begin to protest. "Slow learners? Who does he think he is, criticizing our aptitude? We've been studying under him for months now. Sure, we've struggled to keep up with some of our Bible reading assignments, and have flunked a few of his pop quizzes on doctrine, but that doesn't mean we're stupid. We didn't come here to church to be called out publicly for not always making the pastor's honor roll."

The good news is that the congregation takes this preacher's words and tries to make something positive out of them. Instead of storming to the front of the sanctuary and removing him from the pulpit, the worshipers tell the preacher that they're brighter than he thinks. One of the church's leaders rises from her pew and shouts, "Go ahead, bring on the theological meat!" Then others start to chime in: "Yeah, we're ready to move up to the next level of learning. Give us a shot, and we'll prove that we can handle a more advanced curriculum."

That's when the congregation realizes that the preacher has actually been using some reverse psychology on them. He didn't really mean that they all need to sign up for remedial theological education. He was just being provocative in order to get their attention, to stimulate their comprehension, and to whet their appetite for a larger, more substantive serving of gospel truth. So now, convinced that his rhetorical strategy has worked, the preacher says, "Alright then, let's leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity. . . (6:1).

Spiritual maturity. That's the destination where the preacher wants to take them. Or better yet, the destination where God wants to take them. The Lord doesn't intend for them to stand still in the Christian life. He doesn't want them to remain spiritual infants. A few years ago, one of our former day care staff members had a baby girl. From time to time, she came by to visit, and brought her young daughter with her. During those visits, the little girl was in her mother's arms. But eventually she was up, standing and walking some on her own. During one visit, some of the children in our day care center looked at the little girl and asked their former teacher, "Where's your baby?" To which she answered, "That is my baby." She wasn't so much of a baby any more.

The preacher in Hebrews acknowledges that there's a time for spiritual infancy. There's a time to take baby steps and to master the basics of the Christian faith. Core teachings like repentance and faith, the meaning of baptism, the resurrection and final judgment. But eventually you have to move from baby formula onto more solid food. That's because God

isn't satisfied with just spiritual birth. He intends and desires spiritual growth as well. And to that end, he has given us the church, which serves not only as a maternity ward but as a spiritual home, a community for Christian development and learning, promoting spiritual maturity among believers.

Certainly not a perfect home, or an ideal community. The preacher in today's text, and the congregation he serves, know all too well the travails of the life of faith and the struggles of being the church. There are some in the fellowship who are satisfied with just skimming the surface of the Christian faith, and have no desire to go deeper in their knowledge of God's word. There are some who linger on the margins of the congregation, refusing to make the kind of commitment that will take them to the next level of growth and maturity. There are even some who have previously experienced the mercy and love of God in Christ, but for various reasons have turned their back on the faith and left the community of believers. There's no need to pretend that the path to spiritual maturity is a simple, pain-free process of advancing from one grade level to the next. On the contrary, growth in righteousness, in the setting of the church, can be a complicated, messy, and frustrating journey toward what God plans for his people to be.

But God's promises are reliable, and his purposes will not fail. God is continually at work to bring forth growth and flourishing. Persistently and patiently, he labors to shape us and develop us into people whose lives reflect the way of Jesus Christ. Julie Masters Bacher tells about a friend who was having part of her property landscaped. As she waved her hand over the acreage, she told the landscape gardener, "I want a picture of how it will all look when it's finished—fish pond and rose garden included. Could it look like this sketch in *Better Homes and Gardens*?" The gardener replied, "Hard to say, you know. . . . We're dealing here with living things. I can show you a pattern, I guess, but these things grow. Okay? So you're going to have to keep on planting, cultivating, and trimming. Who's to say what it will look like some day? It's just never going to get finished growing!"¹

That's the way it is with the church. A congregation is a living thing, comprised of living individuals. We can't just hold up a picture of Christlikeness, declare this is what it should look like, and within a few days have the project complete. No, tending a fellowship of believers, cultivating it, and enabling it to flourish is a long-term, non-stop task. It takes patience and perseverance, from you and from me. So day in and day out, we answer God's call to labor on with him, knowing that there's always some more spiritual growth, some more spiritual development, that needs to happen in our lives, individually and together.

Today, I would say to you what the preacher in our text says to the Hebrews: "God is not unjust: he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (v. 10). Whatever your current stage of spiritual development, one of the major reasons you have reached that point of progress is because of the encouragement of fellow believers. I'm still striving to grow in Christlikeness. You're still striving to grow in Christlikeness. We need to continue to encourage one another toward greater growth and increasing maturity in Christ. I myself have seen and heard and experienced the ways that God has worked and is working in your lives and in our life together as a congregation. I believe in the effectiveness of God's word and the reliability of his promises. So I'm confident that you'll continue to persevere and endure and make progress in the way of Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean it's going to be easy. Spiritual maturity, growing further into the fullness and holiness of Christ, takes time, and usually passes through hardship, trials, and troubles. Pastor John Ortberg tells about being part of a survey on spiritual formation. In the survey, thousands of people were asked about when they grew the most spiritually, and what factors contributed to their growth. The number one contributor to spiritual growth wasn't

transformational preaching or teaching. It wasn't being part of a small group, or reading lots of books, or being in dynamic worship services, or serving in meaningful ways. Though all of these were certainly important and essential, the number one contributor to spiritual growth was suffering. People said that they grew more during seasons of loss, pain, and crisis than at any other time.²

Left to ourselves, we would prefer some other way to reach our spiritual goal. But thankfully, we haven't been left to ourselves. God has spoken to us, has come to us, through Jesus Christ the Son, who has joined himself to the full range of human experience, especially our limitation and suffering. In the Son, God has shown us what his objective is for us. And the Son's path to that objective is summed up right before the beginning of today's text: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. . ." (5:8-9). "All who obey him." In other words, all whose lives are joined to him by faith, faith that doesn't yield to despair but perseveres to the end.

Ruth Bell Graham, wife of evangelist Billy Graham, once wrote, "I saw a sign on a strip of highway once that I would like to have copied on my gravestone. It said, 'End of construction. Thank you for your patience.'"³ Moving toward maturity in Christ always takes patience. God's patience. Your own patience. The patience of fellow believers. No wonder the preacher here in Hebrews says, "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised" (vv. 11-12).

Staying on the way toward maturity in Christ means moving deeper into the faithfulness of God. It means growing up in your sense of God's patience and mercy. C. S. Lewis wrote a series of children's stories called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the second book, *Prince Caspian*, Lucy enters the magical land of Narnia again, and sees Aslan, the lion figure who represents Christ. Because she hasn't seen Aslan in a long, long time, they have a wonderful reunion. Lucy says to him, "Aslan, you're bigger now." And Aslan says, "Lucy, that's because you're older. You see, Lucy, every year that you grow, you will find me bigger."⁴

Shouldn't this be true of the way that we see Christ? One of the signs that you're growing up spiritually is that the grace and goodness of Jesus are becoming larger to you. True, there are other indicators of deepening maturity. You've gained a solid grasp of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. You've developed spiritual disciplines and holy habits that help strengthen your bond with Christ and his people. You've sharpened your skills of discernment, so that you can more clearly distinguish good from evil and right from wrong. You've developed stronger relationships with fellow believers. You've given yourself more generously to various forms of service and ministry.

But undergirding and informing all these things is your growing, deepening sense of the grace and goodness of God. Over time, and through all sorts of experiences, you find our promise-making, promise-keeping God bigger and bigger. Bigger in his faithfulness. Bigger in his love. Bigger in his mercy. Bigger in his compassion. Bigger in his devotion to finishing the saving work that he has started in our lives through Christ. So let's patiently put one foot in front of the other and go on toward fuller and fuller maturity.

¹ Julie Masters Bacher, in "The Quiet Heart." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 12.

² John Ortberg, "Don't Waste a Crisis." *ChristianityTodayLibrary.com*. January 31, 2011. March 24, 2011 <<http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2011/winter/dontwastecrisis.html>>.

³ Ruth Bell Graham, *A Hearing Heart*.

⁴ Included in "Rejoicing in Our Suffering." *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 74.