

THE EPISTLES TO THE HEBREWS

HEBREWS 4:14-10:18, THE SUPERIORITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

- A. Outline of Hebrews (to be finalized at completion of Hebrews study)
1. The superiority of the person of Christ (1:1-4:13)
 - a. Christ has the superior message (1:1-2a)
 - b. Christ is the superior person (1:2b-3)
 - c. Christ is superior to angels (1:4-2:18)
 - d. Christ is superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)
 2. The superiority of the priesthood of Christ (4:14-10:18)
 - a. A superior confession (4:14-16)
 - b. Superior qualifications (5:1-10)
 - c. A warning to keep moving forward (5:11-6:20)
 - 1) A dangerous spiritual condition (5:11-14)
 - 2) A call to spiritual maturity (6:1-12)
 - 3) The foundation of spiritual security (6:13-20)
- B. Review of Hebrews 5:1-10
1. Zane Hodges, *Before enlarging on the ramifications of the priesthood of Christ, the writer took the logical step of showing Christ's qualifications for that role. Though His priesthood has already been assumed, its validity must now be asserted if the admonitions based on it are to carry full weight.*
 2. Charles Spurgeon, *How clear it is that we have a suitable High Priest, of tender heart and loving soul!*
- C. Comments on Hebrews 5:11-14
1. Raymond Brown, *At the end of 5:10 he has stated that the eternal priesthood of the Lord Jesus is 'after the order of Melchizedek'. His reference to this Old Testament character leads him to reflect on this congregation's inability to benefit by the 'solid food' of deep Christian teaching. So he digresses to discuss three closely related spiritual problems confronting some of his readers. In studying these verses we shall find that we are considering issues which have a strangely modern ring about them.*
 2. Donald Hagner, *Before continuing his argument concerning Melchizedek, the author pauses for an exhortation to maturity which is followed by remarks on the seriousness of apostasy. This digression is important particularly because of the information it provides concerning the character and situation of the addressees.*

HEBREWS 5:11-6:20, A WARNING NOT TO KEEP MOVING FORWARD

HEBREWS 5:11-14, A DANGEROUS SPIRITUAL CONDITION

- A. Introductory note (11a), *About this we have much to say,*
1. The writer is referring to more information to be added concerning Jesus Christ and His relationship to Melchizedek (5:9-10).
 2. Zane Hodges, *As it turned out, his subsequent discussion was indeed lengthy (7:1-10:18) as well as deep.*
 3. Raymond Brown, *It is the whole subject under discussion, and not simply the priesthood like Melchizedek's, that requires the skill of the writer and the attention of the community.*
- B. Marks of spiritual immaturity (11b-14)
1. Dullness toward the Word of God (11b), *and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*
 - a. *and it is hard to explain*
 - 1) This verb is only used here in the New Testament.
 - 2) In non-biblical writing, *it* speaks of the complexity of the issue, not lack of ability on the part of the speaker or listener.
 - 3) Here, it is based on the condition of the readers.

- b. The writer's concern is that the readers *have become dull of hearing*.
 - 1) *dull of hearing*
 - a) The word means *lazy, sluggish*.
 - b) William Barclay, *It means slow-moving in mind, sluggish in understanding, stupidly forgetful*.
 - b) Raymond Brown, *Instead of giving their best mind to sound doctrine and its practical application, many of these early Christian readers have become dull of hearing. The word really means 'sluggish'; it is used in the Septuagint of 'slothful men' who refuse to tackle hard work, and occurs again later in this letter describing 'sluggish' people who need a good shake-up (6:12)*.
 - 2) R. Kent Hughes, . . . *their problem was an acquired condition characterized by an inability to listen to spiritual truth. They were not naturally "slow," they were not intellectually deficient, but they had become spiritually lazy*.
 - 3) Warren Wiersbe, *One of the first symptoms of spiritual regression, or backsliding, is a dullness toward the Bible. Sunday School class is dull, the preaching is dull, anything spiritual is dull. The problem is usually not with the Sunday School teacher or the pastor, but with the believer himself*.
 - 4) William L. Lane, *Deafness or dullness in receptivity is a dangerous condition for those who have been called to radical obedience. . . If this apathetic attitude was not checked, it would lead to spiritual inertia and the erosion of faith and hope*.

2. Inability to teach the Word of God (12a), ***For though by this time you ought to be teachers,***

- a. It is a privilege and responsibility to teach the Word of God.
 - 1) 1 Peter 3:15, *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,*
 - 2) William L. Lane, . . . *teachers," which refers specifically to an ability to communicate the faith to others.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *Every Christian becomes capable of instructing others when he or she learns the elementary truths of the faith. This is true whether one has the gift of teaching (i.e., the ability to communicate with unusual clarity and effectiveness) or not.*
- b. The readers of Hebrews were not able to instruct others.
 - 1) Zane Hodges, *Others who had been in the faith less time than they should be profiting from their instruction. Instead they needed someone to instruct them again in the basics.*
 - 2) Raymond Brown, *Turning their backs on strenuous study and diligent application to spiritual teaching, they remain like babies when they ought to be adults, pupils when they might be instructors, Christians in need of help when they could be offering it to others.*
 - 3) R. Kent Hughes, *Some in the tiny storm-tossed church should have become teachers (not necessarily preachers as such, but able to instruct others in the faith due to the progress of their own faith), but they had tragically failed. And they were losing their own grip on the truth to boot!*
 - 4) Charles Spurgeon, *How many are quite unable to bear arms against the foe; for they need to be themselves guarded from the enemy!*
- c. The writer expected more from the readers.
 - 1) Raymond Brown, *It is not merely that they do not benefit personally but, even more serious, other people are denied the help which they might have received from them had they been strong and resourceful believers. . . Their own faith is far too insecure to be able to communicate confidence and assurance to other people.*
 - 2) Ray Stedman, *If they had been growing as they should, they ought by now to be able to pass the great truths of the faith along to others.*

3. The need to be continually taught basic principles (12b-13), *you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.*
 - a. There is danger in not maturing spiritually.
 - 1) Thomas Constable, . . . *when we fail to pass on what we know we begin to lose what we know. Eventually we may need to relearn the most basic teachings of Scripture. When we stop growing, we start shrinking. We do not just stay the same.*
 - 2) Raymond Brown, *Many people casually drift into a low standard of Christian life simply because they minimize the importance of Christian instruction and disciplined Bible study. Quite possibly on most days they quietly ponder a few verses and say a quick prayer, but it does not occur to them that this is not nearly enough. Failing to acknowledge their need of it, they slowly lose their desire for it.*
 - b. There is the need to relearn *basic principles of the oracles of God.*
 - 1) *Basic principles*
 - a) It means *fundamentals* or *letters of the alphabet, ABC's.*
 - b) Louw-Nida's rendering of Hebrews 5:12, *again you have need for someone to teach you how to understand the simple truths about God's message.*
 - 2) *Oracles of God*
 - a) They are Old Testament sayings, especially those pointing to Christ.
 - b) Donald Hagner, *This probably refers to the basics of the Christian gospel, but as contained in the OT. If the readers still need elementary Christian exegesis of the OT, how will they move to such exegesis at the more advanced level?*
 - 3) *Comments*
 - a) Ray Stedman, *The high priestly ministry which Jesus wants them to learn represents an advance on the introductory truths of the Christian faith.*
 - b) R. Kent Hughes, . . . *the great scandal of today's church is Christians without Christian minds—those who ought to be teachers, but need someone to teach them the elementary truths of God's Word all over again.*
 - c. The writer compares spiritually immature Christians to babies who are not ready to take meat in addition to milk.
 - 1) The Corinthians had a similar problem, 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, *But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,*
 - 2) Ray Stedman, . . . *they are spiritual infants who need to be taught over and over the elementary truths as a baby needs to be fed milk and is not ready for solid food.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *This is a picture of Christians who have been content to know and practice only the most elementary lessons of their faith. They are too lazy to do what is necessary to grow.*
 - 4) Warren Wiersbe, *The "meat" of the Word is the teaching about our Lord's ministry now in heaven as our High Priest. The writer wanted to give this "meat" to them, but they were not ready for it. . . The "milk" of the Word refers to what Jesus Christ did on earth—His birth, life, teaching, death, burial, and resurrection. The "meat" of the Word refers to what Jesus Christ is now doing in heaven. We begin the Christian life on the basis of His finished work on earth. We grow in the Christian life on the basis of His unfinished work in heaven.*
 - 5) There is nothing wrong with continuing to drink milk as long as one eats meat with it.
 - d. There is the need to keep moving forward in learning and applying truth.
 - 1) Ray Stedman, *The cause of their immaturity is clearly described in 5:13. They are not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.*
 - 2) *Concerning righteousness*
 - a) The writer may be referring to positional righteousness, salvation which comes through faith in Christ alone.
 - b) Also, he may be referring to practical righteousness, or sanctification, the process of being conformed to the image of Christ.
 - c) I believe the passage can and does refer to both. Consider how immature many Christians are because they don't have assurance of salvation. One's positional righteousness is all of Christ. Consider those who choose not to tie position to practice. There is no spiritual maturity for those who never properly apply doctrine to personal responsibility.

d) Another position has been proposed by William L. Lane, *If the community had begun to avoid contact with outsiders because they were unprepared for martyrdom, a social setting is established for the rebuke of v 12, for the reference to the sharpening of one's faculties in the arena of moral decision in v 14, and for the prospect of crucifying the Son of God again and exposing him to public shame in 6:6.*

3) Comments

a) Zane Hodges, *It is not so much that a spiritual "infant" lacks information—though at first he obviously does—but rather that he has not yet learned to put "the teaching about righteousness" to effective use. He lacks the skill which goes with maturity and which results in the ability to make appropriate moral choices.*

b) Raymond Brown, . . . *what is most serious about their spiritual ignorance is that, being unfamiliar with God's word, they do not know his mind on important doctrinal, ethical and spiritual issues. His truth is a word of righteousness and those who master its message learn how to distinguish good from evil. This does not come to anybody without effort.*

c) R. Kent Hughes, . . . *it is noteworthy that St. Augustine, the towering intellect of the early church, understood that the knowledge of the deep mysteries of God's Word came not just through the mind but also through holy living. . . if we intellectually understand the doctrine of righteousness, but are not growing in God's Word, it may well be that we need to confess our sins and ask the Holy Spirit's help in experiencing righteous living.*

d) Douglas Mangum, *They are unfamiliar with the message of righteousness, not because they have not heard it but because they have not put it into practice, as the next verse goes on to clarify.*

e. Ray Stedman's points to consider on how to be able to understand the teaching about righteousness.

1) *Begin with truth you already know but have not been obeying. Does God want you to stop some activity you know to be wrong? Does Scripture exhort you to change your attitude, forgive someone, reach out with help to another? No further light will be given until you begin to obey the light you already have.*

2) *Review the promises of God for help from on high to obey his word, for example, Hebrews 2:18; 4:14–16; 2 Timothy 2:7.*

3) *Claim those promises for yourself, do whatever you need to do, and count on God's grace to see you through the consequences.*

4) *Follow this procedure whenever you become aware of areas of your life and thinking that need to be changed.*

4. Difficulty in applying the Word of God (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.***

a. *solid food is for the mature*

1) The writer identifies *solid food* as *the word of righteousness* in verse 13.

2) Thomas Constable, *In this context the "solid food" must refer to instruction about the high priestly office of Jesus Christ (cf. 7:1–10:18).*

b. *discernment*

1) This word is only used here in the New Testament.

2) It means *sense, ability to make moral decisions.*

3) Walter Bauer, *have one's faculties trained to distinguish between good and evil.*

c. *trained by constant practice*

1) Each word carries the meaning of *exercise*. Together, the emphasis is on repeated activity.

2) The word *gymnasium* is derived from the Greek verb *to train*.

3) The purpose is to develop the ability *to distinguish good from evil.*

4) Douglas Mangum, *The way one moves from immaturity to maturity is through practice that trains one's faculties for wise ethical judgment.*

5) Comments

- a) Thomas Constable, *The readers were in danger of not comprehending what the writer had to tell them because they had not put what they did understand into practice in their lives. Instead, they were thinking of departing from the truth.*
- b) Warren Wiersbe, *As we grow in the Word, we learn to use it in daily life. As we apply the Word, we exercise our 'spiritual senses' and develop spiritual discernment. It is a characteristic of little children that they lack discernment. A baby will put anything into its mouth. An immature believe will listen to any preacher on the radio or television and not be able to identify whether or not he is true to the Scriptures.*
- c) Zane Hodges, *Once more the writer betrayed his concern about his readers' ability to reject the false ideas which confronted them. Had they been sufficiently mature they would be able to "distinguish" those ideas as "evil" over against the truths they should have known were "good."*
- d) R. Kent Hughes, *Life, as we know, perpetually faces us with the problem of telling good from evil. Our spiritual perception is daily taxed. But a righteous life that feeds on the solid food of God's Word will be able to exercise mature judgment between what is good and what is evil.*

CONCLUSION

- Raymond Brown, *Somehow or other, however busy he or she may be, every Christian needs to find a regular opportunity for serious study of the Bible.*
- R. Kent Hughes, *Spiritual maturity—being full-grown—is possible if we simply take God's Word seriously: by listening with all we have, by becoming fully acquainted with its "teaching about righteousness" and living it out, by constantly applying God's Word to the decisions of life.*
- Warren Wiersbe, *I once heard a preacher say, "Most Christians are 'betweeners.'" "What do you mean by that?" I asked. "They are between Egypt and Canaan—out of the place of danger, but not yet into the place of rest and rich inheritance," he replied. "They are between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—saved by the blood but not yet enjoying newness of resurrection life." Are you a "betweenner"?*