

Christ Community Covenant Church
"A 2 x 4 and a Hug" - Hebrews 5:11 - 6:12
Pastor Gloria Merritt - October 20, 2013

Introduction

How many of us would admit that we're pretty stubborn? Slow to change? Slow to accept life-transforming truth? Sometimes we say, "God had to hit me over the head with a 2 x 4," but even after that, obedience can come slowly. Today's message is called "A 2 x 4 and a Hug" because in our Hebrews 6 passage it feels like God is doing just that -- giving a hard scolding or even a whack, but then He gives a sweet word of encouragement, or a hug, if you will.

My husband Gary has some pretty funny stories about growing up with his 3 brothers and how they loved to watch the 3 Stooges. In fact, let's take a glance at the **Three Stooges (video clip)**. Gary says that he and his brothers tried several times to imitate what they saw and found out that the results were pretty painful. One time Gary was in a cardboard box and wiggled his finger up on top of his head. Well, his older brother took a tack hammer and in 3 Stooges style, whacked him on the head, which resulted in an emergency room visit. Yeah, OUCH.

But, my husband also has stories, and you all probably do too, of times when they knew they were in trouble with their dad because of the threat of severe discipline. Thankfully, their dad wasn't wielding a 2 x 4, but let's just say that the fear of God was near to their hearts.

It seems that the writer of Hebrews was pretty intent on whipping into shape those who would read its content. So, before we read, let's spend some moments in prayer...

"Our heavenly Father, you inspired the writer of Hebrews so long ago to say that Your word is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, and it's able to penetrate our souls, our spirits, and it judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. We believe that and we are grateful for your word. Please use this time to show all of us exactly what's in our hearts, and help us to respond exactly as You would have us to. We pray all things through our great high priest, Jesus. Amen."

Let's get out our Bibles and turn to Hebrews 5 and 6. And while we're reading, keep in mind that those who heard these words for the first time were a lot like us: struggling believers. Some had been around awhile, some had not. But, for the most part, they're "church goers" just like us.

Warning Against Falling Away (NIV)

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Let's stop there for a moment. This first part is part of the 2x4 section. Basically, the writer is saying, "You guys are a bunch of babies. You're lazy! You're spiritually immature!" The language is pretty strong. Picture a locker-room after a brutal first-half when the score is w-a-a-y-y-y lopsided. You can see their heads hanging down.

Let's continue:

6:1 *Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, 2) instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3) and God permitting, we will do so.*

Let's pause again.

Here the writer is listing some important foundational religious practices: the ABC's of Judaism. These practices were common ground between Judaism and Christianity, the kinds of things that would enable the new Christians not to stick out so much. But they were also a way for someone to "look" religious, but to actually deny Jesus in the end. But, the writer is saying, "Let's move on from these. This is not my main focus here." In fact, this whole passage is what scholars call a "parenthetical" passage -- something in parentheses, a bit of a divergence from the whole topic at hand. These words are a scolding to any of us who love to focus on religious activity and make a list of the practices we have in our favor.

Let's continue on, and here's the BIG 2x4!

4) It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5) who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6) and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 7) Land that drinks in the rain often failing on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8) But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

These are statements and verses that should make us say, "What?" They should get our attention. This passage has been debated and discussed and pulled apart by Christian scholars for a very long time. And, sometimes this verse has been taken out of context and done damage to struggling believers. So, what does it mean that it's **impossible** for those who appear to be "one of us" to be brought back to repentance if they fall away?

The original Greek word used for impossible is also used elsewhere in Hebrews when saying that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18). It is Impossible that the blood of bulls and goats can take away sin (Heb. 10:4). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

It's important that these statements are considered in light of the whole context. Scholars -- people who are a lot smarter than I am -- who have studied this forwards and backwards propose a few thoughts about WHO this is talking about:

- 1) Some suggest that these verses are proposing a hypothetical situation to a group that doesn't even exist -- but what good is a warning, if it's not really needed?
- 2) Some suggest that this is addressed to people who are NOT saved, but who are associated with the Gospel and the things and activities surrounding the Gospel. After all, in the end God really knows and tests the heart.
- 3) Some suggest that this is a proof text for those who are saved, but have lost their salvation. But, there are so many words from Jesus himself that assure us that we belong to Him!

So, I pick "door number 2" and I'll tell you why. You see, because this book is addressed to the Hebrews, and because the writer spends much time in this book describing the Old Testament Israelites, temple worship and priestly activity, and things with which they were so familiar, I think he is using this STRONG, strong statement to remind them that they are like the children of Israel during their exodus from Egypt and their wanderings in the desert. Because many had seen a demonstration of the power of God through the miracles, they had felt the stirring of the Holy Spirit, received the goodness of the word of God, and yet they had not gotten to enter the Promised Land because of the hardness of their hearts. That's an impressive list of experiences - and it looks good on a resume! One can have great spiritual experiences and still not be saved. One can even do many religious things and still not be saved. The perfect example of this are the Pharisees.

Then why does it say that it's impossible for them to repent? Because, if they do retreat back to Judaism the religious repentance will do them no good. Their forsaking of Jesus is virtually the same as crucifying Him all over again, especially if they return to animal sacrifice, which denies the total work of Jesus for them on the cross. That's why it is stated earlier in chapter 4 of Hebrews, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience."

There's a strong threat here for everyone to listen to and to not miss the saving grace of our Lord Jesus! Just like the times when we were kids and we got the scolding of our lives, knowing we were gonna get it, we should tremble and examine ourselves to make sure we aren't in the same danger of missing the point!

In our culture with all of the Bible studies available to us, the online sermons, the many translations of the Bible, the visible aspects of the church, we are conditioned to be disobedient and indifferent to God's word! There is the danger of that even right now: to shrug off the power and strength of these words of warning...don't do it!

Many have said that maybe later they'll decide to repent, but for now they want to pursue the things in the world. Young people, you especially are tempted to say to yourselves, "Yeah, for now I've gotta come to church to keep my parents off my back, but in a few years I'm outta here. I'm gonna taste what the world has got to give -- those advertisements about living the good life are calling my name!"

And, it's not just the younger ones who say that. Some of you in this room are still on the fence, counting on giving your whole self to God when you determine it's time. Hebrews reminds us that the time is now. It's today.

You know what the problem is? There is an error in evangelical Christianity -- we often teach it to our children, and then we never grow out of it. We say that we "accept" Jesus into our hearts. We accept Him. But, actually, if you study and believe God's word, it's the other way around. He initiates. He pursues us. He calls us. He raises us from death to life. He calls us out of darkness and into his light. All we can do is respond -- fall to our knees before a Holy God, repent and cry out for mercy! We act as though we are the ones doing the saving, not God. We just sang, "Savior, you are mighty to save! Mighty to save!" Do we believe it? Or, have we made God small in our own eyes and acted like the mighty ones! We can participate in a lot of religious activities and still not know the power and the mercy and the grace of our loving Lord. It has been said that sitting in the garage doesn't make you a car any more than sitting in a church makes you a Christian.

Today. Today is the day and we have to remember that there might not be a tomorrow.

Now, here comes the hug, the much-needed hug after hearing the scolding of our lives:

9) Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case -- the things that have to do with salvation. 10) 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. 11) We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. 12) We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

"We are convinced of better things in your case." God is not unjust. God comforts us with these words. Words that show us that he sees and he remembers. One of the ways our salvation, our "saved-ness" is demonstrated is by the way we love God's people and care for them. God wants us to keep on keeping on. Not be sluggish or lazy, but to look at others who are walking the walk, fighting the fight, holding onto faith, persevering. Some of those who have already gone before us, and some are those who are here right now.

Let me challenge all of us in this room. Take a minute and look around. This is Christ Community Covenant Church -- a family of believers. I believe with all my heart that we are going to need each other more than ever in the days and months and years ahead. We need to be in community groups. We need to be in Sunday school classes and book studies and Male Call and Youth Group. Young people, you need to be imitating the faith of these older believers. That's why we have combined our services: because there is life and faith beyond high school and beyond college. It continues into adulthood, and you need these adults as examples. But watch out. They're not examples of perfect human beings who never sin. Proverbs 24:16 says, "even though the righteous fall seven times, they get back up again." Yes, Christians fall and fail, but they persevere to the end – by God's GRACE! There are beautiful, blessed, godly people in this room who have been tempted and challenged in their faith in ways that younger people need to hear about. And, I'm just gonna say it, "Old people" you need to reach out to people who are younger than you in faith and in practice and encourage them to keep going. Your journeys and experiences with Christ are valuable and valid.

Ultimately, Hebrews 6:4 speaks of missing and rejecting the One who is mighty to save – Jesus.

I'd like for all of us to take some time to reflect on what we've just discussed. Let's invite the Holy Spirit to have full reign over our hearts in the next few minutes. Please listen. He will speak to you.

It's quite possible that in this room today there are some individuals who are in danger of missing out on the salvation and the eternal life that God has prepared for them. I am confident that today is the day that God wants you to answer His call on your life. And, there are some who feel they want to be confident and sure that they haven't fallen away, and today is an appropriate day to respond to what God is saying to you. And there are others who have been encouraged today to continue being diligent to the very end so that their hope is fully realized. And so that you may say "we have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony."

Before our offering is taken today, let's give our hearts first to God, and then let's respond with our gifts and tithes. If you are responding today, not letting your hearts be hardened any further, please be willing to let me catch your eye or raise your hand a bit before we pray.

PRAY

Benediction:

Let's be assured by these words from John 6 – and read them together:

<p>³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. Amen</p>

If you have answered God's call today, go in that hope and assurance.