

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 2, 2024)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

Warning: NOT Progressing in Jesus **is Dangerous**

(Hebrews 5:1--68)

Study #6

Introduction: How my garden grows...

Could I have a moment to let off a little steam?

Over the years, I've told you repeatedly (and boringly), about my garden. I enjoy growing and tending a garden. I find it therapeutic to plant and till and fertilize and weed and harvest.

Of late, though, my gardens have been disappointing. Fall and winter gardens are OK, but they're inconsistent. And my spring and summer gardens are pathetic.

The same plot of ground that in some years has produced lots of tomatoes and peppers and beans is not now. It's producing a bumper crop of weeds, and I'm discouraged.

There are, no doubt, some things I could do to improve my garden's output. But I've tried lots of things, and my garden is still trending toward useless.

I'm on the verge of following the lead of the farmers of southern Mexico and Central America who set their fields on fire. I could just be done with the whole thing.

Thanks. I feel better. Now let's turn to Hebrews.

Orient this passage to the flow of the letter...

This morning we're moving into chapters 5 and 6 after finishing off the first major section of the letter.

Throughout the first four chapters, our author has focused, first, on Jesus, God's unique King-Son. Jesus has been appointed the Heir of all things.

Second, he has focused on the rich inheritance that believers in Jesus who faithfully follow Him in this life will receive in the life to come.

Today, we begin a major new section of the letter. Here, the author focuses on Jesus' role as our High Priest.

We have already seen that Jesus has become, for us, a **[2:17] merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God.**

And last Sunday, Charlie showed us that in Jesus we have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses and who has been tempted in all things as we are, but without sin. Understanding THAT frees us up to come to Jesus with confidence, knowing that we'll receive mercy and will find grace to help when we are in need.

The pattern we have seen so far in Hebrews of the author giving some teaching and following that teaching with a warning holds here. First, the teaching.

Competing Priesthoods (5:1-10)

The Levitical Priesthood (vv. 1-4)

What is a high priest? (v. 1)

[5:1] For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of people in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Here, he could have just written, “*As you all know...*” because he writes about things his readers already know.

They understood that a Jewish high priest didn’t audition for the role, didn’t compete for it, didn’t volunteer for it, didn’t aspire to it. He was appointed.

A high priest was in the role of high priest IF he was of the tribe of Levi, and IF he was from a certain sub- and sub-sub-tribe of Levi AND IF he was personally appointed by God for that role.¹

The high priest’s role was to represent people to God by offering sacrifices for their sin.²

And, since the high priest was “*taken from among men*” (5:1), he knew the weaknesses of those he represented, since he himself had the exact same weaknesses.

A high priest is compassionate (vv. 2-4)

[5:2] he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided,³ since he himself also is clothed in weakness [3] and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins for himself, as well as for the people. [4] And no one takes the honor for himself, but receives it when he is called by God, just as Aaron⁴ also was.

The high priest dealt with and served ignorant and misguided people who sinned.

What kept him from being impatient or harsh with these people was that he himself was prone to failures of ignorance, moving in wrong directions, and committing sins.

So, the high priest was gentle with the people he represented to God because he was aware of his own weakness.⁵

Now, we turn our attention to our High Priest: Jesus.

Jesus and the Priesthood of Melchizedek (vv. 5-10)

Jesus became a high priest (vv. 5-6)

Christ was appointed High Priest by God (v. 5)

[5:5] So too Christ did not glorify Himself in becoming a high priest, but it was He who said to Him, (Also, Hebrews 1:5; quoting Psalm 2:7) “YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE FATHERED YOU.”

Just as it was for the Jewish high priest, Jesus didn’t volunteer to be the High Priest or try out for the role. He was appointed High Priest by God.

On a certain “*Today*” - after He was crucified, resurrected, and ascended into heaven - He “*sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high*” (Heb. 1:3) and became “*Heir of all things.*” (Heb. 1:2)

On that “*Today*” He became “*Son*” in a special, royal, Messianic sense He had not been before. It was also on that “*Today*” that He became a High Priest.⁶

¹ It is important to know that while every priest was a Levite, not every Levite was a priest.

² This, in contrast to the prophet, who spoke to the people on behalf of God.

³ The reference here to “*ignorant and misguided*” reminds us that the OT sacrificial system made provision for the restoration only of sins of ignorance or human frailty. Deliberate willful sin (often referred to as “*high-handed sin*”) as was committed by King David against Uriah (murder) and Bathsheba (adultery) was not provided for. See Numbers 15:28-30 for this thought.

⁴ Aaron was a descendant of Levi and was the first Jewish high priest.

⁵ Compassion / Gentleness is the capacity to moderate one’s feelings to avoid the extremes of cold indifference and uncontrolled sadness. It is the golden mean between indifference and sentimentality.

⁶ As many have pointed out, this “*Today*” united in one Person the offices of Priest and King. Psalm 2:7 and 110:4 declare the Royal Son to be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Combining these two passages affirm what is at the heart of Hebrews about Jesus. He is King and Priest rolled into one Person. (The first-century desert community of Jews who lived at Qumran expected two Messiahs, one priestly; one royalty.)

But there was a huge difference between Jesus' High Priesthood and that of the high priests his Jewish readers knew.

Christ is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

[6] just as He also says in another passage, (Psalm 110:4) "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."

Jewish priests and high priests were always from the order - the genealogy - of Levi, more specifically, of Aaron.⁷

Jesus, though, became a High Priest from a whole different line. It was from the line of a man named Melchizedek, and we'll learn more about Melchizedek later.

So, why was Jesus qualified to serve as a High Priest in this special priestly line of Melchizedek?

Jesus is qualified for the priesthood (v. 7)

[5:7] In the days of His humanity, He offered up⁸ both prayers and pleas with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His devout behavior.

So, think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He cried out to God and His sweat dropped off Him like great drops of blood.

Or, even better, think of Jesus on the cross, praying to the Father for those who were crucifying Him.

The text doesn't say, "He was heard because He was the second Member of the Trinity." No. God heard Him "because of His devout behavior."

And we know that God heard Him because He did save Jesus from death. Not from dying. He died on the cross. But after dying, God the Father delivered Jesus from death by resurrection.

We learn so much about Jesus here in Hebrews. For instance, we learn that He, the eternal Son of God, learned. He grew. He matured.

Growing Jesus (vv. 8-10)

Jesus was perfected as He learned (vv. 8-9a)

[5:8] Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. [9a] And having been perfected...

Again, let's make no mistake. Jesus was God in the flesh, perfect in every way...AND He was human.

He wasn't a pretend human. He was actually human. And just like all actual humans have things to learn, so Jesus had things to learn.⁹

From Bethlehem forward, Jesus gained experiential knowledge about the human condition He could not have learned any other way.

Jesus learned exactly what obedience to the Father's will could bring. Obedience led Him to drink the cup of God's wrath on the cross.

And then, having learned from His suffering, Jesus changed. He became something He had not been.

Jesus is the source of eternal salvation (v. 9b)

[5:9b]...He became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey Him.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the source of forgiven sins / adoption into God's family / justification before God / reconciliation / and more because He died on the cross for you and me and rose from the dead.

⁷ In the days of the united monarchy, the sons of Zadok, a descendant of Aaron.

⁸ The Greek word (*prosenekas*) was the word used to describe the priestly service in the tabernacle of offering sacrifice to God.

⁹ There is mystery in this. But see Luke 2:52 where Jesus is described as "increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people."

But that is NOT what the author is talking about here.

Remember that in Hebrews the term “*salvation*” refers to the rich inheritance we who believe in Jesus will have in His future kingdom IF we live faithfully for Him here and now.¹⁰

And here, we know that he is not speaking of justification before God because he ties “*eternal salvation*” to obedience. And justification before God is a gift, not a result of obedience or our works.

Because of what He learned by His own obedience to God, Jesus is now the Source for all the blessings that come our way as we are obedient to Him.

Jesus also became our High Priest because of His obedient life.

Jesus was appointed High Priest (v. 10)

[5:10] being designated by God as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

We have already learned that Jesus was a merciful and faithful High Priest. (2:17) So, of course He is gentle with us.

But Jesus doesn’t identify with our weakness and ignorance and sins in the same way that the typical Jewish high priest did because He (Jesus) was not weak, ignorant, or sinful.

Being without sin, Jesus is a High Priest who can help us in ways that the typical high priest never could.

And that’s part of what is implied in the reference to His being a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

And right as our author is set to dig deep into the Melchizedek story, he pauses. Then he comes to a hard stop.

Yes, his readers need to learn more about Melchizedek. But he wonders if they are up to it.

A couple of times so far in this letter he has given them warnings. Now, for the first time, he charges them with failure.

The Tragedy of Immaturity (5:11-14)

Addicted to Milk (vv. 11-12)

[5:11] Concerning him we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become poor listeners. [12] For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the actual words of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

There is so much more to say about Melchizedek - and he will say it. Next week, God willing, we’ll all learn more about this Old Testament character.

But to go deeper into the life and times of Melchizedek would be pointless now because his readers have become lazy listeners.

We don’t know for how many years these readers had been Christians. I would suspect a few years. Whatever it was, they had been in the faith long enough to have by now been teachers.

Others who had been in the faith for less time should have been benefitting from their instruction in the basics of the Christian faith.¹¹

They should be passing on the torch of the faith to others.

They themselves should have been advancing, making progress, growing in maturity, taking next steps. But they’re not. They are stuck.

They’re stuck in spiritual pre-school, rehashing elementary truths, and focusing only on their Spiritual ABC’s. Or, the way the author puts it, they eat baby food.

¹⁰ See Hebrews 1:14; 2:3.

¹¹ They need not have had a teaching gift; all Christians who are maturing are able to impart truth to those coming after them.

A Maturing Palate (vv. 13-14)

Spiritual infancy (v. 13)

[5:13] For everyone who partakes only of milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is an infant.¹²

Our youngest grandchild - Felicity - was born late in December. She is exceptionally cute. But to be quite honest, she is very immature.

She can't do very much. Can't walk. Can't talk. You know the type. At mealtimes, she can't even eat what everybody else is eating.

And, of course, that's ok. She's a baby. Babyish behavior is appropriate for babies. We don't begrudge them their immaturity.

But if a child doesn't mature as they age, we get concerned.

And a brand new Christian needs his or her ABC's. They need elementary education. They need milk.

But if, after having been a Christian for some time, they continue to need spiritual picture books, don't put the knowledge they have to good use, don't deepen their understanding of how to walk with Jesus, and how to serve Jesus; if they remain baby-ish in their faith, we're concerned.¹³

Young children should be making progress toward maturity. So should Christians. And here we get a picture of what marching toward maturity looks like.

Spiritual maturity (v. 14)

[5:14] But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.

Maturing Christians eat "**solid food.**" Meaning? They are growing in their ability to make wise, morally excellent, God-honoring decisions.

Maturing Christians are learning to put into shoe leather the truths they are learning. They work hard at discerning what they hear on podcasts or in conversations and in what they read.¹⁴

Maturing Christians translate the truths of their faith into practical service, fervent prayer, love, and generosity.

Maturing Christians move from step to step to step. Each step forward equips them to take future steps into maturity.

But when we don't make God-honoring choices, advance ceases.

And we don't just stay static. If we don't progress, we unavoidably regress. We move away from maturity. Childishness returns. Babyhood resurfaces.

And all of this regression occurs because of a failure to live out the truth we know.

The solution for someone stuck in immaturity is to press on to maturity.

First, though, a warning. He tells them about the damage that is done when they don't pursue progress in their lives with God.

And these warnings are given to us as much as to them and are as relevant to 2024 as they were in the first century.

¹² It is [almost] universally acknowledged that the author's burden here is for Christians to grow to maturity, to move away from milk to meat. The "infants" of Hebrews 5 are not unbelievers, but Christians who have refused to grow despite having had plenty of time to do so.

¹³ See 1 Corinthians 3:1-2.

¹⁴ Informational deficiency is NOT what is in the writer's mind. It is, instead, actual capacity to make good moral choices. Maturity is not to be equated with great knowledge. It is possible to be highly educated and foolish; to know a lot about Scripture and immature. Exhibit A? King Solomon, the wisest man whoever lived (except for Jesus), chose foolishness late in life.

The Danger of Falling Away: (6:1-8)

Elementary Things to Put Aside (vv. 1-3)

What we read at the beginning of Hebrews 6 is a focused, intense, energetic exhortation to grow in Jesus. It's time to leave the ABC's behind.

When a home builder lays a house's foundation, he doesn't repeatedly go back to add another layer of concrete to the foundation. No! He lays the foundation once and then moves on to build the superstructure of the house on top of the foundation.

The Christian foundation had been laid. It is now high time to stand on that foundation - and build the house.

The foundation stones that have been laid (6:1b-2)

[6:1b]...not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, [2] of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

The elements of the foundation listed here are exactly what we'd expect for Jewish Christian readers who had grown up believing that obedience to the Mosaic Law was necessary to get right with God.

They put that belief aside. (They repented from those "**dead works**") We also have put aside any belief that any good works could commend us to God. We've repented of that notion, having put our faith in God (Jesus Christ),¹⁵ not our works.¹⁶

¹⁵ See John 12:44, where believing in Jesus equals believing in God the Father, the One who sent Jesus.

¹⁶ Repentance often occurs as someone is sensitized to their sin and need for a Savior. So, a season of repentance is not unusual on the way to coming to faith in Jesus. But repentance is not faith. Repentance may lead to faith, and it may not. If it does not, the repentant sinner is not born again. If it does lead to faith he or she is born again.

They had learned about the various washings and baptisms, like the unique purpose of the baptism of John the Baptist, Christian baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the "**washing of regeneration**" by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5) We know all of this, too.

They knew that on certain, special occasions, people received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands by the apostles. (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6) And sometimes hands were laid on those who were singled out for special service for Jesus.¹⁷ We get all of this, too.

Among the very first things they would have learned concerned the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and their co-resurrection with Him, and life after death in glory for those who believe and in condemnation for those who don't. We know this, as well.

All of these are the foundation stones for building a vibrant life with Jesus. They're great. They're in place. The call now is to move on. Take your next step.¹⁸

Let us "press on to maturity...if God permits" (vv. 1a, 3)

[6:1] Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity...[3] And this we will do, if God permits.¹⁹

The writer desperately wants to move forward with us into maturity.²⁰ Then he adds, "**if God permits.**"²¹ And with that phrase, he prepared them for the warning that follows.

¹⁷ The leaders of the church (and perhaps, the congregation itself) laid hands on Paul and Barnabas before sending them out on the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:3). Paul and others laid hands on Timothy when designating him as fit for pastoral ministry. (1 Timothy 5:22)

¹⁸ The author does not offer to go over old ground. This makes sense, for to re-hash what they already knew or to retrace old steps would only keep them where they were. It wouldn't pave the way for progress or advancement.

¹⁹ The author doesn't presume that he has arrived at this perfection and so includes himself in the exhortation. He also is pursuing this goal.

²⁰ He seems to me to be saying, "*I intend to go on to maturity. Come with me!*"

We'll give attention, first, to getting a clear view of who he is writing about. Five experiences are shared by these he has in view.

The Tragic Result of Falling Away (vv. 4-6)

The experience of those in view (vv. 4-5)

[6:4]...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, [5] and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.

Their eyes have been opened to understand the truth about Jesus. They have been spiritually enlightened.²²

We read that they have *“tasted”* three things. Earlier, he told us that Jesus *“[tasted] death.”* (2:9) Jesus died. To *“taste”* is to have a genuine experience of something.²³

- They have genuinely experienced the *“heavenly gift”* of eternal life.
- They have genuinely experienced the life-changing effect of the good word of God in their lives.²⁴
- They have genuinely experienced the powers of the age to come, probably referring to miracles and spiritual gifts, and other expressions of the Spirit's power.

And they have been made *“partakers”* (or as the word - *metoxoi* - is translated elsewhere in Hebrews *“companions;”* 1:9) of the

Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God has caused them to be born again and now indwells them.²⁵

These are the experiences of Christians.²⁶ And it is these Christians who have taken a drastic and tragic turn away from Jesus.

These have then fallen away (v. 6a)

[6:6] and then have fallen away...²⁷

They have fallen away

He is envisioning a Christian - someone for whom the five elements of verses 4 and 5 apply - who has stopped following Jesus.

In their case, they have reverted to Judaism. In the case of other people, a “falling away” might involve reverting to Islam or going back to materialism or to immorality. It could involve returning to anything that lures us away from Jesus.

A big part of “falling away” will almost always involve abandoning the community of fellow Christians.

For us to *“fall away”* is to abandon the resources that helped us when we did walk with Jesus. It is to remove ourselves from resources that would help us return (repent) to follow Jesus again.²⁸

Christians who do this - then or now - put themselves in a horrible position.

They have put themselves in a hopeless position (v. 6b)

Of these Christians our author writes, ***[6:4] For it is impossible...[6]...to restore them again to repentance.²⁹***

²¹ God may not permit it (or He may not permit it under certain conditions) as He did not permit the Exodus generation to enter into their inheritance-rest, the land of Canaan.

²² Could an unsaved person be said to have been *“enlightened”*? I think not. See 2 Corinthians 4:3-6.

²³ To “taste” is a common metaphor for having a genuine experience of something. In Hebrews 2:9 we read that Jesus *“tasted death.”* Meaning? He died.

²⁴ Has to do with an experience of appropriating the power of God's Word in one's life. For an example of this, see 1 Peter 2:1-3.

²⁵ Robert Nicoll: This expression, perhaps even more than the others, appears to lend support to the view that true Christians are described here.

²⁶ All five are united under the same article. Grammatically, they are referred to as adjectival participles. These are not conditional.

²⁷ Not *“if.”* Not hypothetical. The people the author has in mind have fallen away.

²⁸ The author introduces an alien thought here. The idea refers to apostasy. The total context of the letter supports this idea.

People who come to this passage may walk away with different understandings of some of the particulars. But everyone agrees that whatever he's saying, this is serious.

But it isn't like this is the only place in the New Testament where a writer addresses this kind of a serious matter.

Consider the time that the Apostle Paul dealt with a member of the church in Corinth who had fallen into terrible sexual sin. His sin brought disgrace to the church and to the Name of Jesus in Corinth.

So, Paul instructed the church members to deal severely with this brother. He told them to cast him out of the church. He called that action *"turning him over to Satan."*

Normally, when someone drifts away, spiritually speaking, or falls into sin, it is the community of faith that rescues and restores.

But in Corinth, the situation was so severe that Paul removed the resource of the Body of Christ from that man. That guy *"fell away."* But Paul joined in *"felling [him] away."*

In other words, Paul did to that man what the Christians in view in Hebrews did to themselves. (See 1 Corinthians 5:1-5)³⁰

The action Paul took in Corinth was a severe judgment, and that is what I believe was going on in Hebrews.

The difference was that in Hebrews the judgment of an impossible restoration to repentance was self-inflicted.³¹

²⁹ The verb is active, not passive. We cannot translate, *"It is impossible for them to be restored..."*

³⁰ This situation may be under consideration in 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul explains that some Christians in the church are sick or have died because of having taken the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Also, in 1 John 5, where John writes of a "sin that leads to death."

³¹ To have *"fallen away"* - which, by definition involves *"again [crucifying] to [himself] the Son of God"* and to have *"put Him to open shame"* (v. 6) - is serious enough that judgment must follow.

Here's the point.

When a Christian has *"fallen away"* of their own volition and has removed himself or herself from all support and faith-building resources on purpose - especially the support of the Christian community! - to attempt to rescue them is futile.³²

But notice that in the Corinthian story WHY Paul had delivered the immoral man over to Satan.

He delivered him over *"for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."*

The judgment was for a redemptive purpose. And in that case, the judgment brought about restoration.

There was nothing anyone in the community of faith could do to restore the man. That would have been, to use Hebrews' word, *"impossible"* because he had been removed from that community.

Eventually, the consequences of that judgment were so severe that he did, in fact, repent and was restored. (See 2 Corinthians 2 for the rest of that story.)

So, here in Hebrews 6, as long as a Christian is *"fallen away"* from Jesus, there is nothing anyone can do to restore him.

But God...

That's right. It was impossible for the community of faith to restore the *"fallen away"* Christian, but God can still kindly work to bring the brother back. (Romans 2:4)

³² The one doing the restoring is unexpressed. The context would suggest either, "It is impossible for us / for anyone to restore them to repentance." But the subject is certainly not God. The author would not say that God cannot restore the *"fallen away"* to repentance. That He would not is conceivable, but not that He could not.

Just as in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, God is able to and may well graciously work in creative, painful, or even miraculous ways to bring the "*fallen away*" Christian back to "*his senses.*" (Luke 15:17)

Which brings us back to my garden.

Conclusion: The parable of my garden...and yours (vv. 7-8)

[6:7] For ground that drinks the rain³³ which often falls on it and produces vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; [8] but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.³⁴

I'm irritated that my home garden is producing a bumper crop of weeds and not a rich harvest of vegetables.

"The Parable of the Ground" (vv. 7-8) tells us, *"Pay attention to your life with Jesus, your 'ground.' Soak in the good rain of God's rich gifts. Don't drift away. Don't harden your heart. Don't become a lazy listener. Don't linger in babyhood. Don't fall away."*

No! Press on to maturity, bearing good fruit as you take as many spiritual next steps as you can.

³³ We cannot say that the author is talking about two different parcels of land. Only one plot of land is mentioned. What is in view is two differing crops resulting from different responses to the blessings of God (rain) which falls upon them. The "rain" are those elements mentioned in vv. 4-5.

³⁴ The Christian who produces thorns is not in danger of damnation. But his disobedient life will disqualify him at the judgment seat of Christ for reward and makes him useless for the purposes of God here and now.