

“Leaving the Elementary for the Mature”

Heb. 6:1-3

- INTRO. - Two weeks ago we began going through this third exhortation in the Book of Hebrews. Throughout this “sermon” the author moves from exposition to exhortation. He moves from explaining doctrine to making an appeal to his readers to respond in some way.
- This is the third time he has done this, and this particular exhortation runs from 5:11-6:12. It is comprised of four distinct paragraphs, and I am doing a separate message on each one.
- I also mentioned that this is a very difficult section to interpret, and that there is *not* full agreement by Bible scholars. The biggest challenge is in identifying the audience he is addressing.
- Most commentators see this as an admonition to immature believers to become more mature in the faith, but I have to agree with John MacArthur (at this point), that at least this middle section deals with unbelieving Jews who are being admonished to leave Judaism and fully embrace Christianity.
- Now, I *know* that is *not* the traditional understanding of this passage, so I am going to walk you through all the reasons for understanding it this way.
- I have said that I believe the author is addressing a mixed audience, and the first and last paragraphs of this exhortation may be focused more on immature believers that needed to move on to spiritual maturity – but these middle two paragraphs are definitely directed to unbelieving Jews who were *not* willing to make a break from the old covenant to embrace the new one.
- In fact, the *first* paragraph is (likely) more targeted to this group than most would admit. So the warning (here) is for those who have heard the gospel (perhaps over and over again) – they know the truth – but they have *not* made a commitment to it. They have *not* put their faith in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation.
- In fact, in *this* case, the pull back into Judaism is so strong, they are in danger of missing eternal salvation completely. So this paragraph (and the next one) will be an urgent plea to them.
- There was a time when the message of the gospel was “news” to them, but they had *not* committed themselves to it, and now they were becoming numb to it. That’s why the author of Hebrews used the terms “dull” or “sluggish.”
- They had gotten to the place where they were no longer open to the gospel, and the pressure of returning to Judaism was putting them in great peril. If they didn’t recognize the superiority of the

new covenant over the old (and forsake Judaism for Christianity) they might forever miss God's eternal salvation.

- This is clearly (as we will see) what is being addressed in this paragraph and the next one. They are being admonished to leave the elementary for the mature – to leave the picture book of the old covenant for the eternal salvation of the new.
- We're looking at Heb. 6:1-3 and we will take it in three parts. First of all, we see:

I. THE PRESSING ON (v. 1a)

- Look with me at v. 1, "Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity..." (Stop right there.) The key word (here) is the word "leaving."
- It is "aphiemi" (in the Greek) and it means "to forsake, to put away, or to put off." It is important that we understand, this means a total separation from something. It can mean "to let go of" or "to keep no longer."
- *The Expositor's Greek Testament* translates this verse like this: "Therefore let us abandon [give up] the elementary teaching about [the] Christ." A well-known Greek scholar says it means, "Therefore leaving (as behind, and done with; in order to go on to another thing)."

- In 1 Cor. 7 this word is used in connection to "divorcing" a wife. It is translated into the English as "sending her away." This, of course, means total marriage separation and a giving up of the relationship. In fact, the word "aphiemi" comes from the root word "hiemi," which means "to send."
- Now, in 1 Cor. 7 we're told that it is wrong to do that in regard to marriage, but here in Hebrews we see where it is necessary in regard to leaving Judaism. The unbelieving Jew needs to completely divorce himself from Judaism and embrace Christianity.
- The same Greek word is often used in the NT to refer to what God does with our sin through His forgiveness. God completely removes it from us as far as the east is from the west. In fact, the word for "forgive" is the same word (aphiemi) and it means "to send away."
- In Matt. 15:14 this word is used to admonish believers to totally separate themselves from false teachers. In Mark 1:20 it is used of James and John leaving their father Zebedee to follow Christ. As far as their life's work, they were totally abandoning their father and the fishing business.
- Now, why is this important? Because most commentators want to say that this doesn't really

mean “leaving” here, but it means “to build on top of.”

- Since the author of Hebrews mentions laying a foundation (in this verse) most miss the significance of the term “aphiemi” and think this just means going on to greater maturity.
- One commentator wrote (for example), “He wants them to leave the foundational principles, but *not* in the sense of abandoning them.” What’s the problem with that? The problem is, the word “aphiemi” *does* (in fact) mean “to abandon.”
- So, while he *does* talk about “not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,” what he is admonishing them to do, is (in fact) to *leave* (in the truest sense of the word) the elementary things and to move on to the mature.
- Now, this is one important reason why we would conclude that he is *not* addressing believers here. Believers are never commanded (in Scripture) to abandon the truth of the gospel to go on to spiritual maturity.
- No, the truth of the gospel remains an essential part of Christian doctrine, no matter how mature one may become in the faith. But it *does* make sense that the author of Hebrews would be calling upon

unbelieving Jews to *totally leave* Judaism to find eternal salvation in the new covenant.

- You can’t get around the fact that the word “aphiemi” means “to put away one thing and to take up something entirely new.” That doesn’t fit with the idea of an immature Christian going on to greater maturity (because nowhere in the Word of God does it suggest that we are to drop the basics of Christianity for something else).
- Now, someone might say, “But Pastor, don’t you see what it says there? It says, ‘the elementary teachings about Christ’.” That’s *not* what the Greek says. The Greek says, “the elementary teachings about the Christ.” A definite article is used. So this means “teachings about the Messiah.”
- Again, this points to all the elementary teaching concerning the coming of the Messiah in the OT. That’s the baby stuff. That’s the picture book. They need to let go of that and move on to the real thing.
- This passage is all about leaving the ABCs of the Old Covenant, and moving on to embracing the full revelation (and blessings) of the New Covenant.
- John MacArthur writes, “It is the provisions and principles of the Old Covenant, of Judaism, that are to be dropped. It is *not* a question of adding to what one has. It is a question of abandoning what you have for something else. This is precisely what the

HS asked the Hebrews to do—to abandon the shadows, the types, the pictures, and the sacrifices of the old economy and come to the reality of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.”

- By the way, notice that this first phrase of v. 1 is somewhat surprising. He has just finished telling them (in the previous section) that they are unable to handle solid food, so we might expect him to say something like, “Since you can’t handle the meat, I’ll just keep giving you milk.” But he doesn’t say that.
- He says, “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.” In essence, he is saying, “You can do this. You can move on to maturity. You can get to the place where you can handle solid food.”
- In fact, in the *last* paragraph of this exhortation, he is going to tell them he has confidence in them to do exactly that. And he is going to go ahead and give them the solid food about Melchizedek in chapter 7. (Pause) So we’ve seen the *pressing on*, but we need to move on (now) to:

II. THE PARTICULARS (vv. 1b-2)

- In the last part of v. 1 and on into v. 2 he gives us a list of elements that comprised what he referred to as “the foundation.” And it is significant that one Bible scholar points out that all these things are

completely consistent with Judaism – and in fact “belonged to the creed of a Pharisaic Jew who accepted the whole of the Old Testament.”

- John MacArthur writes, “These are *not*, as is often interpreted, elementary Christian truths that are to be abandoned in order to go on to maturity. They are Old Testament concepts.”
- Did they prepare the way for the gospel? Of course they did. But now they are to be abandoned because the New Covenant has superseded the Old.
- When he says, “not laying again,” he is saying (essentially), “You don’t need to keep going back to these foundational things.” What is Judaism? It is a constant re-hashing of these foundational concepts. The message is, “Let that go, and go on to the real.”
- So what does this “foundation” consist of? What are the “arche logos” (the first teachings) they are to leave behind? Six things – and he gives them in three pairs. First of all, we see the particulars:

A. In Regard to the Foundation (v. 1b)

- The last part of v. 1 says, “not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God...” That’s the first pair – the concepts of repentance and faith are always connected in Scripture.

- But notice the first element (here) is “repentance from dead works.” This is the Old Testament concept of repentance.
- The Old Testament concept of repentance was incomplete because Messiah had *not* yet come. The true object of saving faith was not yet available – the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Therefore, the best a person could do (under the Old Covenant) was to turn away from evil deeds and have faith in God. Under the New Covenant the doctrine of repentance became much more complete.
- The phrase “dead works” probably means “works that bring forth death” – or a better way to say it is, “works that cannot bring forth life.”
- They are works that issue in death because they belong to the way of death rather than the way of life. These are the kinds of “dead works” the Apostle Paul repented of, in order to obtain Christ.
- These are the “dead works” of the Jewish Pharisees, who were trying to earn their own salvation. Westcott sees this as referring to the Levitical system as incapable of producing spiritual life.
- But the message of the New Covenant is, to turn away from these “dead works” and turn to the saving grace of God.
- Of course, the message of the gospel is, that it is *not* enough to merely turn away from evil deeds – you also have to turn *to* Christ – that is, to put your full faith in Him alone to save you.
- The Old Covenant concept of repentance was only the first half of the equation. The New Covenant brought the other half. With the coming of Christ, this important doctrine became full and complete.
- In chapter 9 we’ll see these words, “For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”
- The sacrifices of the Old Covenant could deal with those “dead works” in a temporary and incomplete way, but Jesus Christ dealt with them for good. The blood of Christ was the ultimate source of cleansing and atonement.
- This is why they needed to let go of the elementary principles of the Old Covenant and fully embrace the New. Why settle for the incomplete when the

complete is here? The Old Covenant provision could *not* “cleanse the conscience” but the New Covenant provision could.

- The system of self-righteousness under the Old Covenant could never cleanse from sin – only the saving grace of God in the New Covenant could do that.
- The Pharisees had been taught to trust their own good works, but what these Jews needed to come to understand is, these are “dead works.” They don’t produce life.
- So what is needed? “Repent and believe the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) Dead works of self-righteousness cannot save you. Only faith in Jesus Christ can save you. And that leads us to the next element, which is “faith toward God.”
- In the old dispensation the Jewish people were to have faith in God (and we see many great examples of that in the OT). But with the establishment of the New Covenant there was a *new* object of faith: the Lord Jesus Christ.
- It is one thing to have a general faith in God – it is something else entirely to put your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. *Some* of the Jews addressed in this book believed in God but were *not* committed as followers of Jesus Christ.

- This is why the message of the Apostles in the Book of Acts was “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” (Acts 2:38)
- In Acts 11:18 we see where the only repentance that leads to eternal life is repentance that is coupled with faith in Jesus Christ. The only faith toward God that is acceptable *now* is faith in God’s Son.
- So what is the author of Hebrews calling for here? He is admonishing these unbelieving Jews to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. As we know, the message of the New Covenant is that “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.” (That’s Acts 4:12.)
- Well, these are the particulars in regard to the foundation, but secondly we see the particulars:

B. In Regard to Formalities (v. 2a)

- The second pair has to do with religious formalities connected with Judaism. These are found in the first part of v. 2. The NASB has “of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands.”
- Let’s think through these, beginning with “instruction about washings.” The KJV has “the doctrine of baptisms.” This has led many to think

that this is a reference to Christian baptism. It is *not*. It is the Greek word “baptismos,” which is translated everywhere else in Scripture as “washings.” It is *not* the Greek word that is used in the NT for the Christian ordinance of baptism (which is the word “baptizo.”)

- Even in this very book, (in Heb. 9:10) we see the word “baptismos” translated as “washings.” In fact, the NIV has “various ceremonial washings.” And notice, this word is plural. It refers to a number of different ceremonial washings that were part of Judaism. In Mark 7:4 the same term is used to describe the washing of “cups and pitchers and copper pots.”
- John MacArthur says, “Every Jewish home had a basin by the entrance for family and visitors to use for ceremonial cleansings, of which there were many. It is these washings that the readers are told to abandon and forget.”
- Everything in the Old Covenant was a mere symbol of the coming New Covenant reality – and these ceremonial washings were a picture of the spiritual cleansing that would come.
- In describing the New Covenant, the prophet Ezekiel wrote, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”

- The real thing was to replace the shadow – the true spiritual cleansing of the New Covenant was to replace the symbol of physical washings.
- MacArthur writes, “The old washings were many, physical, symbolic, and temporary; the new washing is once, spiritual, real, and permanent.”
- So again, the author of Hebrews is calling his fellow Jews to let go of the symbol and embrace the real thing. He is calling them to abandon these ceremonial washings and to experience “the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (as Paul wrote in Titus 3:5).
- Well, going back to Heb. 6:2, he also mentions “laying on of hands.” Those who see this as being addressed to believers would point to such things as the appointment of elders, etc.
- But again, this is related to Judaism. Under the Old Covenant a person who brought a sacrifice would lay his hands on it as a point of identification. It is likely this idea that is being conveyed, and it is as if the writer of Hebrews is saying, “Forget about laying your hands on a sacrifice that will never fully atone for your sins, and lay hold of Christ who will save you forever.”
- So we see the particulars in regard to the foundation and the formalities, but thirdly he gives us some particulars:

C. In Regard to the Future (v. 2b)

- We see this in the last part of v. 2, “and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.” These are phrases that describe typical Jewish eschatology.
 - The “resurrection of the dead” was given in very veiled ways in the OT. The doctrine of the resurrection was unclear and incomplete under the Old Covenant.
 - There was a general idea of life after death (and rewards for good and punishment for the wicked), but there are only a few veiled hints at the reality of the resurrection.
 - In contrast to that, the resurrection was a major doctrine in the NT – and (in fact) you *could* say it was THE MAJOR DOCTRINE of Christianity. Christianity is built on the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – and on the promise that all those who are “in Christ Jesus” will one day be raised from the dead to eternal life.
 - This was a key theme of the preaching of both Jesus and His Apostles. So the message (here in Hebrews) is, “Let go of the shadow and embrace the clear. Stop hanging on to the nebulous conception of afterlife and claim the assurance of resurrection in Christ Jesus.”
- Lastly, he mentions “eternal judgment.” The Jewish concept of “eternal judgment” was also very vague and incomplete. There are general statements about it in the OT, such as Eccl. 12:14, “For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”
 - There was this general idea (under the Old Covenant) that punishment would come to the wicked and blessing for the good, but it wasn’t until the NT that this doctrine of “eternal judgment” was fully developed.
 - In fact, the NT tells us more about “eternal judgment” than most people want to hear. But a key point of clarification in the NT, is that “eternal judgment” is *not* based on who is good and who is bad – it is based on who has repented and believed the gospel, and who has *not*.
 - Yes, those who are punished eternally will be punished for their sin, but those who are saved will be saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. It has nothing to do with whether they are good or bad – it has to do with whether their sins have been forgiven and cleansed by Christ.

- So these are the particulars he has in mind, but there is one more thing we see in this passage, and that is:

III. THE POWER (v. 3)

- Look with me at v. 3, “And this we shall do, if God permits.” The phrase “this we shall do” (I believe) points back to the admonition to leave the elementary things and press on to the mature.
- The phrase “if God permits” may be better understood as “if God enables.” This is a recognition that the salvation of these unbelieving Jews ultimately rested in the sovereignty of God.
- This points to the biblical truth, that anything that happens, is ultimately dependent upon the permission of God. So this is a statement of acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God, and of his hope that God would make it possible for them to reach this new stage of maturity.
- I like the way Peter O’Brien puts it. He says, “The qualification *and God permitting*...is *not* a pious convention without real substance, but underscores the author’s utter dependence on the blessing of God, *not only* to help them understand the important teaching about the person and work of Christ, but also to attain the goal of spiritual maturity.”

- Both salvation and spiritual maturity are of God. He *not only* wants them to come to faith in Christ, but to also grow to full maturity in Christ (as he would want all believers to do).
- CONCL. – So what is the bottom line (here) and how does all this apply to us today? The truth of the matter is, that there are many people today who are in the same condition these Jews were in.
- They may *not* be Jewish, and they may *not* be tempted to turn to the old trappings of Judaism, but they have heard the truth of the gospel (perhaps many times) and have *not* yet committed their lives to Christ.
- You can go to church faithfully, year after year, and you can even become a church member without ever truly being born-again through faith in Jesus Christ.
- The next section contains a very strong warning to anyone in this condition. The warning is that anyone who persistently says “no” to Christ will eventually come to the place where it is no longer possible to be saved. The danger is losing forever the opportunity for eternal life.
- There are many (in our day and time) who have embraced a form of Christianity without the reality of it. In fact, one of the most frightening passages in all of Scripture says this: “Not everyone who

says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'”

- People in the church. People who have made a so-called “profession of faith.” People who are doing things in the church – even performing miracles in Jesus’ name – cast out forever because they have never really committed themselves to Jesus Christ.
- MAKE APPEAL
- PRAYER