Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 6, Hebrews 5:11-6:20: No Turning Back

At Hebrews 5:11, the author pauses the forward movement of his exposition about Jesus' priesthood and introduces what is often called a digression. In this instance, however, the digression is vitally important to the sermon because in this passage, 5:11 to 6:20, we find the author again confronting the hearers with the principal challenges before them and exhorting them to meet those challenges appropriately. Hebrews 5:11 to 6:3 exhibits a rather complicated argumentative flow, which I want to be sure to outline clearly at the outset.

Hebrews 5:11 to 14 interrupts the argument the author has been developing in order to shake up the hearers a bit. He goads them by expressing doubt about their ability to process what the preacher is feeding them since, he suggests, they appear neither to have fully digested and incorporated into their lives what they've been taught so far nor to have lived up to the responsibilities of adults in the faith by keeping one another on track. After this brief attempt to evoke shame, he proposes, in Hebrews 6:1, perseverance as the natural consequence of the course of the journey begun by their conversion and traveled thus far.

The preacher then moves into what is one of the most hotly debated passages in this sermon. Hebrews 6 verses 4 to 8 underscores the necessity of embracing the course of action that he proposes, the necessity of persevering on toward completion, toward maturity, toward perfection. Since to do otherwise would be to show rank ingratitude to God for the gifts God has already given the audience and thus to exchange the experience of God's ongoing favor with the experience of wrath at God's visitation.

In 6:9 to 12, however, the author quickly turns to affirming the hearers insofar as, up to this point, they have mirrored the good soil that receives a blessing from God by making a good return on God's gifts by investing in one another, thus cementing their commitment to continuing in this course of action. The question the preacher puts to the audience in this portion of the sermon is, what kind of beneficiaries will you prove to be? Will you be base or honorable, ungrateful or reliable? Will you continue to prove to be fruitful soil and, therefore, receive the greater gifts yet to come as fit recipients of God's ongoing favor? Or will you prove to be bad soil, which brings forth an unpleasant and even hurtful response? In 6:13 to 20, the final portion of this digression, the author works his way back toward the main topic. He introduces the example of Abraham, a primary example of one who, through faith and endurance, inherited the promises, as the author writes in 6:12. Here he

introduces the example of Abraham, however, more for the purpose of emphasizing the reliability of the promises God has made.

The preacher here focuses on the oath God swore to Abraham to support Abraham's trust and then refers elusively to another oath that God swore in regard to the hope that the believers have in Jesus, to which he will return in the following chapter. Hebrews 6.20 then bring the hearers back to the topic of chapter 5, verse 10, with Jesus having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, thus returning the sermon exactly to the place where the preacher left off for this strategic digression. In 5 verses 11 to 14, we find the author upbraiding the congregation.

Having just mentioned the thesis statement of his sermon again, in effect, that Jesus was appointed a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, he steps back and says, Now the word before us about this is long and difficult to explain since you have become sluggish in your hearing. For although by this time you ought to be teachers on account of the time that has elapsed, you again have need of someone to teach you the rudiments of the fundamentals of the oracles of God, and you have fallen in need again of having milk and not solid food. For everyone partaking of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness because he or she is an infant.

But solid food is for the mature, for those who, through constant exercise, have their faculties trained for the discrimination between what is noble and what is base. The preacher challenges the hearers here rather directly and unexpectedly. What I have to say will be difficult to understand since you have become sluggish in regard to your listening.

Not only that but though you ought to be teachers by this point, you again stand in need of someone to teach you the fundamentals. He accuses the hearers, essentially, of regressing in their maturity or perhaps of never having grown up in the first place. You're at a place where you require milk rather than solid food.

This sort of language, especially in an exhortation to get on with it, to live up to what you have received, is familiar from Greco-Roman philosophical discourse. For example, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus is rather fond of these metaphors of children and mature and milk and solid food, as he urges his listeners to get on with enfleshing what they have learned. And so, Epictetus writes, how long will you wait before you demand the best of yourself and trust reason to determine what is best? You have been introduced to the essential doctrines, and you claim to understand them, so what kind of teacher are you waiting for, and why do you delay putting these principles into practice until he shows up? You're a grown man already, not a child anymore.

Decide at last that you are an adult who is going to devote the rest of your life to progress. In another place, Epictetus writes, are you not willing at this late date, like children, to be weaned and to partake of more solid food? The author of Hebrews uses these metaphors in a manner very similar to what we find in Epictetus, shaming the hearers for not measuring up to where they ought to be and motivating them to prove themselves mature by their readiness to meet the expectations articulated by the author for the mature. And here specifically, the mature will function as teachers, taking it upon themselves to reinforce their fellow believers in the worldview and in the commitments that they have accepted together as Christians.

The mature will also correctly distinguish between what is noble and what is base or vicious. They will consistently choose what is noble, the noble course of action in all circumstances. In the pastoral context of Hebrews, this sermon will mean, of course, always living with a view to honoring and remaining loyal and obedient to their divine patron rather than violating this bond out of fear for the temporary consequences in terms of their relationship with their neighbors.

The goal of this section and its mild shaming tactics is to cause the addressees to want to acquit themselves of the charge that they are not ready for mature instruction and to direct them forcefully toward behaviors that show themselves to be indeed mature and grounded in the faith, even to the point of helping their sisters and brothers remain so grounded as well. With the opening of chapter six, the author outlines the path to recovery for the spiritually sluggish. He proposes a course of action in 6:1. Therefore, leaving behind the foundational principles of Christ, let us be carried along to the end point of our journey.

Once again, he is urging the hearers to press forward on the path of commitment as opposed to shrinking back, turning away, or abandoning the assembly of the church. He urges them to do this in verses two and following, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God, the teaching about baptisms and the laying on of hands or resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. We examined these teachings, this intense socialization into the worldview, and the ethos of the Christian group that the author knows the addressees have received in some depth in our opening presentations.

The author reminds them of these foundational teachings that lie behind them, and that should now continue to impel them forward on their journey. As he calls them to live up to what they have learned, he adds the words if God permits. With this subtle if clause, he reminds the hearers of their dependence upon God for every step of the journey from conversion to the unshakable realm of God's eternal dwelling.

Thus, if God's favorable disposition is required for progress on the journey and for arriving at the goal of the journey, alienating oneself from God's favor by insulting the benefactor becomes the most inexpedient course of action. This is precisely

where the author is heading in chapter six, verses four to six, with the solemn warning that follows. This warning itself is offered as a rationale in support of the course of action that the author has just urged in verse one of chapter six.

The presence of the Greek word gar, typically translated with the conjunction for in English at the beginning of verse four, signals the role that this paragraph plays. It is more precisely an argument from the contrary. That is to say, the preacher is urging the hearers to commit themselves to being born along to the end of the journey, and he supports that course of action by showing what happens if they don't.

So he goes on to write, for it is impossible to bring once again to the starting point of repentance those who have been decisively enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age and who fall away since they crucify Christ afresh to their own hurt and hold him up to public disgrace. One of the problems in much discussion of this passage is the tendency of interpreters to try to decide whether they should describe the individuals here as people who are saved or who are not saved or were they really saved or just appeared to be saved. As we saw earlier, however, in Hebrews 1 verse 14, the author of Hebrews really thinks chiefly of salvation in terms of something that still lies ahead.

This is what we await at Christ's second coming, as he will say in chapter 9, verse 28. The author would not consider himself to be describing individuals who might or might not have been saved here. Rather, he's describing individuals who have been the recipients of repeated benefactions from God.

God has lavished favor after favor upon them. They have been decisively enlightened, which is a common term in the New Testament for receiving the gospel message and its positive effects on the hearers. They have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit, referring no doubt to their reception of the Holy Spirit, which was a prominent facet of religious experience in the Pauline mission.

As one sees in Galatians 3 or 1 Corinthians 2 or even in this very sermon at Hebrews chapter 2, verses 3 to 4, they have tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, probably referring again to their reception of the Holy Spirit and their experience of the power of God working in their midst, as the author explicitly recalled in that earlier passage. The repetitive use of plural participles in Greek to designate these people as those who have been enlightened and have all these good things creates the impression first of the wide variety of benefits they have enjoyed from God and also the rich supply of those benefits. The repetition serves to underscore the extent of God's generosity and the care and persistence with which God, by his repeated favors, has cultivated their gratitude.

Therefore, it also serves to amplify the disgrace and the injustice of shirking the obligations of the patron-client bond that God's generosity has created with this audience. Incidentally, much of the author's language here resonates loudly with Old Testament texts. For example, you have tasted the good word of God, and you have been enlightened, which resonates with Psalm 34, where the psalmist says, Draw near to God and be enlightened.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. For people who have received such valuable gifts which came at such cost, all of these were, in fact, secured by the death of God's own son. To then act in a way that brings dishonor to the giver or to the mediator, Jesus, of such favor would be an unthinkable injustice, one that would typically lead to an exclusion from any future favor.

Here, the favor of a second chance. We read in, for example, the writings of Dio Chrysostom, a philosopher and statesman who lived from about A.D. 50 to A.D. 120, all people will regard those who honor benefactors as worthy of favor, but those who insult their benefactors will be esteemed to deserve a favor. The ungrateful person, while not punished by law, is punished by the public court of opinion and by his or her own awareness of being branded as ungrateful.

As we read in another text from Dio, what then, you say, shall the ingrate go unpunished? Do you imagine that the qualities that are loathed go unpunished, or is there any punishment greater than public hate? The penalty of the ingrate is that he does not dare to accept a benefit from anyone, that he does not dare to give one to anyone, that he is a mark, or at least thinks he is a mark, for all eyes, that he has lost all perception of a most desirable and pleasant experience. Just as a person refuses to have dealings twice with a dishonest merchant or to entrust a second deposit to someone who has lost the first one, it is typically accepted in this culture that a person will exclude from future favors those who act ungratefully. Such popular sentiments, as we read in Dio Chrysostom, were also shared by the addressees of Hebrews, no doubt, and this would lead them to accept the author's claim that a second chance at such favor is impossible after one has offered a front, an insult, and brought public shame upon so noble a giver.

Thus, the preacher would have them be fearful of going down that road of dishonoring Christ. If the addressees were to do anything other than to press forward to the end of their journey, they would bring public disgrace upon their benefactor and show contempt for his costly gifts. Defection from the Christian group to the arms of their neighbors bears a witness to Christ, but it is a negative witness that says to their neighbors that Jesus' mediation and benefits are not worth the cost of keeping them and that the acceptance of human beings is of more value than acceptance by God and welcome into God's presence.

To give such a witness, the preacher suggests with strategically stark images, would be to crucify the Son of God all over again to their own hurt and hold him up to public contempt. Not persevering in loyalty to Jesus and to Jesus' people then should be unthinkable from the perspective of having been so gifted and at such great cost to such a giver. The author goes on to support the stark warning of Hebrews 6, 4 to 6 with an argument from analogy in Hebrews 6:7, and 8. For this argument from analogy, he moves to the realm of agriculture, to the common practices of what farmers must do and in the expectation of what they put such labor into the ground.

So, he writes, ground that drinks in the rain that keeps falling upon it and bears vegetation that is useful to those on whose behalf the ground is being cultivated receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is proven worthless and on the verge of being cursed. Its end is to be burned over.

The author has used several Old Testament texts as resources for the language here. For example, thorns and thistles in connection with a curse rather directly recall the language of the primeval curse in the story of the fall in Genesis 3, verses 17 and 18. Also, the opposition between blessing from God and curse in this passage recalls oppositions of the same throughout the Old Testament but particularly in Deuteronomy.

In that book of the covenant, we read about curse and blessing. I place before you today blessing and curse. The blessing if you hear the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today, and the curses if you do not hear the commands of the Lord your God as many as I command you today and if you wander from the way which I commanded you are going off to serve other gods which you do not know.

These resonances no doubt have a meaningful impact on those who hear them. The analogy stresses the fact that ongoing obedience to the Son, ongoing loyalty, and gratitude toward the Son is an essential component distinguishing between those whose fate is blessed and those whose fate is cursed. However, the analogy also resonates rather strongly with texts that speak about the social context of reciprocity quite directly.

Writers like Seneca, in his book On Benefits, frequently turn to agricultural imagery to illustrate the giving of benefits and what is expected when benefits are given. For example, Seneca writes that we do not pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts. In context, Seneca explains why benefits given do not always eventuate with benefits received and returned.

He explains that it's our own fault because we don't always pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts. He continues, we don't sow seed and worn out and unproductive soil, but our benefits we give or rather throw away without

discrimination. Later in the same book, Seneca writes that we ought to take care to select those to whom we would benefit since even the farmer does not commit his seeds to sand.

Again, we never wait for absolute certainty concerning whether or not a recipient will prove grateful since the discovery of truth is difficult, but we follow the path that probable truth shows. All the business of life proceeds in this way. It is thus that we sow for those who promise to the sower a harvest.

And finally, Seneca cautions that the farmer will lose all that he has sown if he ends his labors by putting in the seed. It is only after much care that crops are brought to their yield. Nothing that is not encouraged by constant cultivation from the first day to the last ever reaches the stage of fruit.

In the case of benefits, the same truth holds. Here, Seneca encourages benefactors to continue to cultivate their clients with favors if they hope to nurture the kind of loyalty and gratitude that they seek in such relationships. Similar imagery shows up in Hellenistic Jewish texts as well.

For example, the unknown author of the Sentences of Pseudo-Faucilities writes, do no good to a bad person. It is like sowing into the sea. In these passages, we find the authors looking at the image of planting seed in the ground and cultivating it with care as an analogy to givers in their treatment of beneficiaries.

We should choose soil carefully, the soil that is more likely to bear the fruit of gratitude. We should commit ourselves not to just put in the seed, but to keep investing in that relationship. This resonates strongly with the dynamics of Hebrews 6:4 through 8. For God has not just planted the seed of the word in the addressee's hearts.

He has richly poured out gift after gift upon them. He has invested himself like a good farmer, not just planting the seed but watering it, tending it, nurturing it, taking care of the young saplings, and trying to bring them to the point of consistent fruit bearing. The analogy that the author devises here also resonates in interesting ways with another Old Testament text, namely the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5, verses 1 to 7. There, we find Isaiah also speaking of God's investment of time, resources, and energy spent in God's people and the vineyard, as well as God's expectation that such a well-tended vineyard should produce a crop of good grapes.

Instead, of course, Isaiah complains that Israel's vineyard has produced bad grapes. The vineyard dresser's responsive destruction of the vineyard is radical and final in the Isaiah text. God's care in tending Israel led naturally to God's expectation, so says the prophet, of a harvest of justice.

Instead, Israel's response, allowing violence and oppression to spring up in the vineyard, offended and affronted the God who commanded justice among his people, calling down divine punishment. Here, not only the cessation of his tending but even the destruction of the community that has brought forth so noxious a return. Our preacher's audience would, therefore, immediately recognize the point of the agricultural analogy in Hebrews 6, 7, and 8. God's beneficent investment of himself and his gifts in the converts must bear the fruit in their lives that God would find pleasing.

As the author writes, ground that drinks in the rain that often falls upon it, recalling wave after wave of benefits just named by the preacher in verses 7 to 5, and bearing vegetation that is useful for those on whose behalf the ground is being cultivated, anticipates where the author will be going in the following section in verses 9 through 12. God is cultivating the ground, the soil of each hearer, not, of course, for God's own benefit, since God needs nothing but for the benefit of each hearer's sisters and brothers in the community. The author will make this clear in verses 9 and 10.

Their investment in each other is the fruit suitable for those for whose sake they themselves are being cultivated. But those who instead join in crucifying the Son of God afresh in the court of public opinion will not merely lose the reward but will become objects of divine vengeance. Hebrews 6, 8 hints at this as the preacher says, the end of such soil is burning.

But Hebrews 10 verses 26 to 31 will make this even more explicit. Immediately following his stern warning in chapter 6, verses 4 to 8, the author presses on in verses 9 through 12 to point the way forward to deliverance instead of disaster. And so, he writes, we are persuaded concerning you, beloved, of better things, things holding salvation, even though we speak in this way.

By following up his stark warning with this statement of confidence in the hearers, the author appears to be following the good advice given to rhetoricians found, for example, in the textbook on public speaking known as the Rhetorica ad Herenia. In this text from the first century BC, we find precisely this advice given. If frank speech of this sort seems too pungent, there will be many means of palliation, for one may immediately add something of this sort thereafter.

I appeal here to your virtue. I call on your wisdom. I bespeak your old habit, so that praise may quiet the feelings aroused by frankness.

As a result, the praise frees the hearer from wrath and annoyance, and the frankness deters him from error. This is precisely what the author accomplishes with Hebrews 6:4 through 12. The frankness of the danger of their situation in 6:4 to 8 achieves its purpose, but the reassurance in verses 9 through 12 also then restores the hearers to

a place of confidence, of solidarity with the preacher, and of a sense that the preacher really does think the best of them, even though he has upbraided them in chapter 5:11 to 14, and just launched so stern a warning.

The author's expression of confidence alternates again with an appeal to fear in 6:4 to 8. We observed the same alternation earlier in chapter 4, verses 12 to 13, which appealed to fear, and chapter 4, verses 14 to 16, which appealed to confidence. And we will see the same alternation again in chapter 10, verses 19 through 34. Confidence and fear are two emotions that the author strategically uses and applies in tandem in order to keep distancing the hearers from the course of abandoning their commitment to Jesus and to keep urging them to identify with the response of perseverance, loyalty, and gratitude.

The author goes on to spell out the reason why he is confident that better things await the hearers than he has just described. For God, it is not unjust to forget your work and the love you showed in his name, serving the saints and continuing to serve them. But we desire each one of you to show the same zeal unto the full flowering of hope to the very end in order that you might not become sluggish but rather imitators of those who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises.

The preacher specifically identifies the hearer's work and love that they have previously shown in Christ's name by serving one another and continuing even now to serve one another, which gives the believers ground for confidence before God. This is the yield of the crop suitable for those for whose sake God has showered so many gifts upon each convert. These acts have been part of the manifestation of a just return to God for all of the investments and gifts that God has given to them.

These are the investments and the practices that the just God will not forget, that is, that God will honor and reward in regard to the preacher's audience. By affirming their past progress in this course of action, the author gives them the grounds for a most welcome confidence after the appeal to fear and encourages them to persist in that which gives them this confidence, namely the love that they showed in God's name serving the saints and continuing to serve them. The author has, by this point, shown his hearers the way to avoid being sluggish in response to what they have heard and indeed believes that they will not prove sluggish in regard to their response to the word that God has spoken in the as well as the more immediate word that the author is speaking to them in this sermon.

As he wraps up this paragraph, he urges them to become imitators of those who, through faith and patience, have become inheritors of the promise. This anticipates the marvelous parade of exemplars of faith that will come in Hebrews 11:1 through 12:3. The general mention of such figures here, though, is also a subtle reminder that perseverance in faith is possible since many have thus persevered before. The way forward, though difficult, is nonetheless feasible.

This mention of those who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises is also a handy lead-in to the transitional paragraph that follows in chapter 6, verses 13 to 20, which leads off with a consideration of Abraham, a paragon of faith and perseverance and a famous recipient of divine promises. In the final verses of chapter 6 then, the author provides the hearers with yet further reasons to move confidently forward to perfection, on to the end of the journey that they began with Christ. The cardinal point of this paragraph is to impress upon the audience the reliability of the message that they have received and the reliability of the mediator in whom they have placed their trust.

Not only God's promise but God's oath stands behind that mediator and guarantees the efficacy of Jesus' priesthood to secure God's favor and benefits for Jesus' clients. The preacher begins by considering how God also provided such an oath to Abraham. For God, having given a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, swore by himself, saying, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.

And thus, having persevered in patience, Abraham received the promise. The preacher refers to and partially recites Genesis chapter 22, verses 15 to 18, where we read this oath at greater length. The angel of the Lord called out to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, by myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

In the following verse, our preacher goes on to make a general observation about oath-taking in the human sphere. Human beings swear according to someone greater, and an oath serves to settle all contradictions. This general observation about oaths is that oaths are taken to confirm the trustworthiness of speech or of testimony given.

Oaths are, for example, frequently used in law courts as a form of evidence. Philo of Alexandria, a prolific Jewish exegete from the first half of the first century AD, writes this about oaths. Uncertain things are confirmed, and things lacking conviction receive confirmation by means of oaths.

Now, the audience would know that human beings occasionally might use oaths deceitfully. However, God's oath surely provides certainty. The addressees would be reluctant to question the truthfulness of God when God takes an oath.

The example of the wilderness generation previously invoked in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, where the ancient Hebrews provoked God on precisely this point, would weigh heavily against distrusting God or alleging God's untrustworthiness or the

unreliability of God's promises. That God should take an oath at all is somewhat problematic. Oaths are administered on account of the possibility of deceitful speech, but God's every word must be received as true and reliable, even without an oath.

When Philo of Alexandria commented on Genesis 22, he also recognized this problem, and he concluded that God gives an oath not because God might otherwise be thought to be lying but because he wanted to make it easier for human beings to trust him fully. This is precisely the purpose that the author of Hebrews also invokes to explain God's taking of an oath. God, wanting all the more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of God's will, interposed an oath in order that through two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to prove a liar, we who have fled might have strong confidence to seize the hope which lies before us.

The promise to which the author is referring here would likely be heard as the promise uttered in Psalm 95, verses 7 to 11, which the preacher distilled in Hebrews 4:1, let us be afraid then, lest while a promise to enter God's rest remains, any one of you think to fall short. The promise in mind here, then, is the promise that God gives of welcoming people into the unshakable divine realm, the realm where God rested after his work of creation. The oath to which the author refers is the oath of Psalm 110, verse 4. The author has already quoted this verse in part, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, but he has deferred reciting the opening words of this verse where we would read, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.

You are a priest forever. Indeed, our author will not recite this part of the verse until Hebrews chapter 7, verse 21. The author wants the hearers to hold on to both divine oracles, the promise of Psalm 95, and the oath of Psalm 110, as sure signs that the message of the gospel that they have trusted is reliable.

The author strategically describes the hearers along with himself with the words, we who have fled. He is reminding the congregation, especially those who are contemplating a return to their former lives, trying to find a way to re-enter the larger society, that they formerly fled from that world to the church as if from some great danger. He reinforces for them their identity as refugees fleeing from the catastrophe of eschatological judgments, recalling again two pillars of the audience's catechism, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment recited in Hebrews 6, verse 2. They have come together in the Christian assembly under the aegis of Christ, seeking protection and deliverance from that day of judgment.

This section of text closes with the author speaking of this oath, this hope, as quote, an anchor which we have for our souls, secure and firm, one that enters into the inner side of the curtain where Jesus entered on our behalf as a forerunner, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. In these two brief

verses, the author introduces the figure of an anchor, which invites the addressees to regard the assurance of a heavenly homeland as the fixed point in their lives, as that which keeps them from the danger of drifting, to which the author had alluded in chapter 2, verses 1 to 4. This hope is their anchor, their point of stability in the midst of their current storms, as well as their social instability and marginalization. This aligns very well with the author's cosmology, according to which the divine realm is the unshakable one, such that there can be no anchor, no sure fixedness in the things of this created, shakable realm.

The description of Jesus here as a scout, a military figure who goes ahead of the main body of troops, recalls the preacher's presentation of Jesus earlier in chapter 2, verses 9 to 10, as the one who has gone ahead of the main body of God's sons and daughters, leading them to their God-appointed destiny of glory. Where Jesus has gone, the many believers will follow. For the present, however, hope is the only part of the believer that has entered into that secure place along with Jesus, behind the curtain, into the heavenly tabernacle of God's real presence.

Thus, it is only as long as the believer holds on to that hope that he or she holds on to the lifeline by which to enter the eternal, unshakable realm. The author thus urges the hearers to find their stability, their rootedness in their hope in God's promise rather than in acceptance by their neighbors or in reclaiming their place in the world, which is passing away. With the concluding words of chapter 6, verse 20, Jesus has become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, and the preacher has brought his discourse right back to where he left off in chapter 5, verse 10, completing the bridge back to the main topic of the long and difficult word of Hebrews 7, 1 through 10, 18, which shall make the priesthood established by God's oath and our proper response its focus.

The digression of Hebrews 5:11 to 6:20 has advanced the author's rhetorical agenda for his hearers in several important ways. In 5:11 to 14, the author presents expectations that the audience should be living up to and shames them for not doing so more and more. This is a strategic way to get their focus off the expectations of their non-Christian neighbors if their attention has been drifting in that direction and to refocus their attention on the expectations not just of the preacher but, of course, of the God whose message the, preacher represents.

In 6:1 through 8, the author has set before the hearers again the course of action that he so much wants them to embrace wholeheartedly, namely to commit to perseverance in living gratefully and loyally and obediently to Christ and to the God with whom Christ has connected them. He supports this with an argument that particularly draws upon the shared social knowledge of gift-giving and response, of grace and gratitude, of reciprocity that is practically hardwired into the residence of the Mediterranean basin, whether they are primarily located in Jewish, Greek, or Roman culture. This is part of their fundamental thinking.

Those who give gifts merit gratitude. Those who do good ought not to be insulted or dishonored. And so the preacher harnesses this cultural logic, this almost visceral ethical commitment that the audience would share to impel them forward toward that path of perseverance, to make them truly fear making a bad return to God for God's lavishing of such costly gifts upon them.

The preacher also, having aroused the hearer's fear of reneging on their relationship with God, redirected the hearers toward their cause for confidence, particularly in chapter 6, verses 9 through 12, to the extent that they continue to invest in the community of faith and in one another's perseverance. To that extent, they may be assured of remaining in favor since they are bearing the fruit for which God has rained upon them such blessings, and they may be assured thus of arriving at God's promised future benefits. In the final paragraph then, the preacher returns from this very relevant digression to a more discursive mode as he hints again at the ground his hearers have for certainty about their hope, namely God's oath in Psalm 110 verse 4, which confirms God's promises and Jesus' own attainment on their behalf of what they themselves still press on to attain, namely entry into God's eternal realm.

This passage also continues perennially to challenge Christians in every setting in some important ways. The author's shaming of his audience in 5:11 to 14 also challenges us to live up to what we have attained and to accept our responsibility toward our sisters and brothers in the faith. The author challenges us to become more active sources of encouragement and reinforcement for the faith and perseverance of others rather than merely passive receptacles waiting for constant encouragement and reinforcement ourselves.

One of the areas in which Christians often fall short here is that we give much attention to gaining information about God or about the faith, about Christian belief, or about the scriptures, but we don't give proportional time to the formation, both our own and that of our sisters and brothers. The author would encourage us to take more time moving from what we know about God, what we know about Christ, and what we know God desires to bring about in and among us, to thinking very clearly about how to enflesh this and how to allow that knowledge to shape how we're going to live. This is just one way in which we can close the gap between what we know on the one hand and what fruit we bear on the other.

The author also encourages us in our congregations to give due attention to the teaching and to the socialization that our new members receive. Hebrews 6 verses 1 through 3 lays out a rather wholesome and fulsome curriculum for a new members class, as it were, as it was practiced in the author of Hebrew's first-century congregations. Those teachers, those leaders of early Christian churches, gave a lot of attention to helping converts think about the view of the world that their

acceptance of the gospel means they also accept and think about the implications of that worldview for how they're going to live out their lives.

The preacher would challenge us to make sure that we make joining a church mean more than becoming members. Rather, it needs to mean becoming people in whom the basic contours of the faith, of the creed, are going to be well-founded and well-formed, such that it becomes the foundation and starting point for these new members thinking about their practice, their attitudes, and their ambitions ever after. The author quite centrally challenges us to make it our aim, indeed our overriding goal, to give back to God as God has given to us.

The ethos of reciprocity that we have been exploring is not some socially limited or culturally limited facet of the text. The author of Hebrews has woven this ethos into the very fabric of the foundational logic of his sermon. We encounter it also in other New Testament writers.

Paul, for example, appeals to this dynamic quite forcefully in one of his epistles, in 2 Corinthians 5:15, making a very bold statement about the purpose of Christ's death. Paul writes there that Christ, quote, died on behalf of all in order that those who continued living should no longer continue living for themselves, but rather for him who died on their behalf and was raised up. There we hear another New Testament voice asserting that the fitting and necessary response of a grateful heart, which seeks to return a favor as fully as that favor was given, is to live for Jesus, to give the rest of our lives over to advancing Jesus' interests in this world through us, rather than continuing to live for ourselves and advancing our own interests with the life that we have left.

The author of Hebrews urges us to recognize that one essential venue for giving back to God as God has given to us is investing ourselves in the support and encouragement of our sisters and brothers in the faith, putting ourselves and our own resources at the disposal of providing whatever they need to facilitate their own perseverance in faith. In today's context, I think particularly of persecuted Christians in nations where to be a Christian is either outright illegal or certainly socially frowned upon such that Christians find themselves marginalized, harassed, sometimes the victims of illegal but nonetheless effective mob violence, or the victims of more limited, single, one-on-one acts of violence, or even the victims of state-sponsored persecution. The author is encouraging us as we live out the global reality of being the church to continue to invest ourselves in works of love and service, continuing to serve our sisters and brothers wherever they have need, and in many ways being God's answer to their prayers, serving our great patron precisely by bringing aid to those who are seeking help from God in this way as well.

In the concluding verses of this segment of Hebrews, the author brings up again the fundamental issue of where we look to find an anchor for our souls. The collection

for the fifth Sunday of Lent in the Book of Common Prayer is this prayer. Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise, that among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.

The author of Hebrews resonates with such a prayer in that he urges us to fix our hearts on being with God forever and to make the foundation for our security in the midst of the changes and chances of this life, our connection with Jesus who has gone before us to that place where true joys are to be found. This continues to be a challenge for us, who are increasingly encouraged by the world in which we live to regard the material and the visible as the only real world. The author reminds us that the contrary is, in fact, the case.