

Hebrews 5:11–6:20: No Turning Back

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Session 6

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Hebrews, Melchizedek, Warning, Maturity, Perseverance, Reciprocity, Abraham, Hope, Anchor

Abstract

This session examines the strategic digression in Hebrews 5:11–6:20, where the author halts his exposition of Jesus' high priesthood to address the spiritual sluggishness of his audience and exhort them to Christian maturity. The preacher combines severe warnings against apostasy—framed within Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish frameworks of reciprocity—with agricultural analogies of fruitful versus cursed soil to stress the danger of falling away. However, he quickly balances this warning by expressing strong confidence in their ongoing acts of love and mutual service, which serve as evidence of their commitment to salvation. Finally, the author points to Abraham's patient endurance and God's unshakeable oath as the ultimate anchors of hope, urging believers to remain secure in Jesus' eternal priesthood.

Outline

I. Upbraiding the Congregation: Sluggishness and Regression (Hebrews 5:11–14)

A. The Charge of Spiritual Sluggishness

1. Strategic pause in the exposition of Jesus' Melchizedek priesthood to confront hearers
2. Explanation is "long and difficult" due to the audience's sluggish hearing
3. Reprimand for their inability to teach others despite the time elapsed

B. The Metaphor of Spiritual Infancy vs. Maturity

1. Infant status: needing milk rather than solid food, unskilled in the word of righteousness
2. Mature status: partaking of solid food, faculties trained to discriminate between noble and base

C. Parallels in Greco-Roman Philosophical Discourse

1. Similar metaphors found in Stoic philosopher Epictetus regarding weaning and adult progress
2. Use of constructive shaming as a rhetorical tactic to evoke responsibility
3. Re-enforcing community obligations and loyalty to the divine patron over neighbor pressure

II. The Path to Recovery and Perseverance (Hebrews 6:1–3)

A. Pressing Forward to Maturity (Perfection)

1. Leaving behind foundational principles and beginning-level teachings
2. Commitment to forward progress rather than shrinking back or abandoning the assembly

B. Six Foundational Worldview Doctrines (Catechetical Core)

1. Repentance from dead works
2. Faith toward God
3. Instruction about baptisms
4. Laying on of hands
5. Resurrection of the dead
6. Eternal judgment

C. Theological Framework: "If God Permits"

1. Complete dependence on God's grace and favorable disposition for spiritual progress
2. Alienating oneself from the divine benefactor is shown to be the most inexpedient path

III. The Solemn Warning Against Apostasy (Hebrews 6:4–8)

A. The Impossibility of Renewal to Repentance

1. Argument from the contrary (indicated by the Greek conjunction *gar*)
2. Relates to those who have experienced profound, multiple divine benefactions

B. Five Spiritual Benefactions Received

1. Decisive enlightenment (reception of the gospel message)
2. Tasting of the heavenly gift
3. Sharing/participation in the Holy Spirit
4. Tasting the goodness of God's word
5. Tasting the powers of the coming age

C. The Severe Consequence of Falling Away

1. Re-crucifying the Son of God to their own hurt
2. Holding Jesus up to public contempt and disgrace
3. Cultural dynamics of reciprocity: persistent ingratitude results in permanent exclusion from favor
4. Parallels in Dio Chrysostom: public hatred and internal torment of the ungrateful client

D. The Argument from Agricultural Analogy

1. Good soil: drinks in frequent rain, bears useful vegetation, receives blessing from God
2. Worthless soil: produces thorns and thistles (Genesis 3 resonance), faces cursing and fire
3. Parallels in Seneca's *On Benefits*: farmers do not waste seeds on sterile sand, requiring constant cultivation
4. Parallels in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7): destructive judgment on unproductive soil

IV. Pastoral Reassurance and Exhortation to Love (Hebrews 6:9–12)

A. Rhetorical Transition from Fear to Confidence

1. Expression of confidence: "persuaded of better things concerning you, things holding salvation"
2. Alignment with classical rhetoric (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*): following frankness with praise to restore solidarity
3. Strategic alternating rhythm of fear (6:4-8) and confidence (6:9-12) to guide behaviors

B. The Ground of Christian Confidence

1. God's justice: God will not forget their work and love
2. Tangible fruit: their past and ongoing mutual service to the saints (beneficial soil)

C. Exhortation to Patient Endurance

1. Desire for each member to show same zeal to the full assurance of hope to the very end
2. Command to avoid sluggishness and imitate those who inherit promises through faith and patience (transition to Chapter 11)

V. The Anchor of Hope and God's Reliable Oaths (Hebrews 6:13–20)

A. The Exemplar of Abraham

1. Abraham as a paragon of faith and patience who inherited the promise
2. God's oath to Abraham in Genesis 22:15–18 ("by myself I have sworn")

B. The Purpose and Function of Oaths

1. Human oaths settle disputes and confirm trustworthiness (Philo of Alexandria parallels)
2. God's oath is not because He might lie, but to accommodate human weakness and build trust
3. "Two unchangeable things" in which it is impossible for God to lie: His promise and His oath

C. The Soul's Secure Anchor

1. Hope as a stable anchor holding fast in the midst of storm and social marginalization
2. Believers as "we who have fled": eschatological refugees seeking safety in the assembly
3. Anchored in the heavenly tabernacle behind the curtain (God's real presence)

D. Jesus as Forerunner and Scout

1. Jesus as prodromos (military scout) going ahead of the main body
2. Hope acts as a lifeline; where Jesus has entered, believers are guaranteed to follow
3. Strategic completion of the digression: returning to the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:10/6:20)

VI. Modern Application and Challenges

A. Intellectual Knowledge vs. Spiritual Formation

1. Intellectual acquisition of information about God must lead to active formation

2. Moving from passive reception of encouragement to actively reinforcing others

B. Effective Congregational Socialization

1. Utilizing the catechetical topics of Hebrews 6:1–3 for robust new member instruction
2. Ensuring deep integration of the Christian worldview into daily behaviors and ambitions

C. The Ethos of Reciprocity in Modern Action

1. Giving back to God by investing in sisters and brothers in the faith
2. Global church investment: aiding persecuted, marginalized, and suffering believers
3. Pauline parallel (2 Corinthians 5:15): living no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose

D. Anchoring the Heart in a Materialist Culture

1. Resisting the modern cultural assumption that only the material and visible are real
2. Fixing hearts on Jesus in the unshakeable divine realm amidst swift changes in the world