

GROW UP**HEBREWS 6:1-12**

Some years ago, journalist Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in which he reported on a conversation he had with a Hindu priest on a trip to India. The name of the priest was Satis Prasad. Mr. Prasad told Cousins he wanted to come to the United States to work as a missionary. Cousins assumed he wanted to convert Americans to Hinduism, but Mr. Prasad said, "Oh, no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It doesn't need membership, but believers. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity, but from what I read at a distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that either you accept the teachings of Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

What an interesting critique – Christianity in America is more of a custom than anything else! The man who wrote the New Testament book of Hebrews was trying to warn a group of Christians against allowing the Christian faith to become merely a custom with no real impact on their everyday lives. We're in the midst of a message series considering several passages in Hebrews all of which contain at least one exhortation, challenge, or word of encouragement to start or to stop doing something that impacts your spiritual life enormously. The signature phrase is "let us." Let us start doing this or let us stop doing that. There's just one "let us" in the passage we consider today and it's right at the beginning. "Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity...." (Heb. 6:1 NIV) That's the "let us" challenge we consider today. It's all about growing up.

Here's one way to get right into today's subject. How many of you believe in eternal security? How many of you believe that Christians are "once saved, always saved"? Now, I realize some of you understood exactly what I asked and others of you are saying, "Huh?" Do you believe people who have genuinely put their faith in Jesus and are now children of God saved by grace can lose that standing before God for any reason? Do you believe that a person who is born again can lose the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and become spiritually lost all over again? I grew up in a Christian environment that believed you could lose your salvation. So I believed that as well. These were sincere, godly people, but their beliefs created at least two very large negatives for me. One, it created great spiritual insecurity and a lack of assurance about my relationship with God at any given moment. Two, the biblical teaching that I am saved by grace and grace alone didn't ring true for me. Maybe getting saved was by grace, but staying saved was a matter of my being relatively free of sin in my life and serving the Lord wholeheartedly.

Over time my views changed. I now believe that a person who has been truly born again by the Holy Spirit can never lose his or her salvation. Why? The most important reason is I believe the Bible teaches it. But logic pushed me in that direction as well. The only alternative to eternal security is eternal insecurity. If it's up to me to stay saved by being a good person, by not sinning too much, or by working hard for God, then a

relationship with God is no longer a gift of God's grace. It's something I earn. And that, for me, is just completely contrary to what the Bible teaches. Furthermore, the Bible says that those who put their trust in Jesus become God's children. We're adopted into His family. The God I see revealed in Scripture never disowns any of His genuine children. Sure, we sin against our Heavenly Father, anger Him, sadden Him, and grieve Him deeply, but He doesn't kick us out of His family as a result.

But what about people who claim to be followers of Jesus, but whose lives frankly deny it? I'm convinced many people who claim to be Christian aren't truly born again by the Spirit of God. They may believe all the right things, they may have responded to an invitation to receive Jesus as Savior, and they may have even been baptized, but they aren't truly born again. Scripture tells me that's the critical issue. As important as outward, spiritual rituals or acts might be, they don't make a person a child of God in and of themselves. That only happens when deep in the human spirit the Holy Spirit joins my faith and my repentance with God's grace, mercy, and love. Spiritual life begins and I become a new person. I'm born again. But, interestingly, what I just told you I believe appears to be contradicted by the Scripture we just read. At the very least, I hear both a warning and an invitation in the passage we read a few minutes ago.

A WARNING AGAINST AN INADEQUATE FAITH

Look again at 6:4-6 (NLT). "For it is impossible to bring back to repentance those who were once enlightened—those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come—and who then turn away from God. It is impossible to bring such people back to repentance." Isn't the author describing genuine Christians who gave up their faith? They'd been "enlightened" meaning they understood the good news about Jesus and responded positively. They'd experienced "the good things of Heaven." That's probably referring to having their sins forgiven and receiving God's grace. They'd "shared in the Holy Spirit." At some level, they'd genuinely experienced God. They'd "tasted the goodness of God's Word" meaning they'd valued the Bible's message at some level. They'd also "tasted the power of the age to come" meaning they'd experienced the supernatural or miraculous. Sounds like a pretty good description of a follower of Jesus, yes? God's Word says here that if people who have experienced all of that turn away from God, that's pretty much it for them spiritually.

A distinction is important right here. There's a difference between backsliding and apostasy. On the one hand, backsliding is when a genuine follower of Jesus falls into habitual sin or loses interest in God and spiritual matters for a period of time. An example is King David in the Old Testament. We're told he was in a spiritually backslidden condition for a year because of the Bathsheba nightmare he got himself into. But eventually he was restored. True believers can commit terrible sins and be out of fellowship with the Lord for a long time. But eventually they repent and return to the Lord. On the other hand, apostasy is the hostile, total, and irrevocable rejection of God and the good news about Jesus forever. I'm not willing to admit that a born again believer who has been made a child of God can commit apostasy. Backsliding,

definitely; apostasy, no. I believe the writer of Hebrews is referring to apostasy in these verses not backsliding. Bible-believing Christians differ, but that's my position.

Two analogies help me understand the warning here. The first is vaccination. When you get vaccinated against a specific disease, you're actually given a shot with a small amount of the virus in it. If you get a measles vaccination, a little bit of the measles virus is put in the shot. A mild dose prevents you from getting a full blown case of the measles. Now, think of the Christian faith being a spiritual virus. We want everyone to get the full blown disease, right? That's a good thing! But some people get such a mild dose of the Christian faith that it acts like a vaccination spiritually. It's a very weak, very inadequate, very shallow form of Christianity, but it kind of immunizes you against the real thing! As a result, some folk might look Christian in outward appearance, in lifestyle, in what they believe, but it's only skin deep or temporary at best. There's no real transformation that lasts. They might even attend church for a while and learn a few Christian vocabulary words, but then they just return to their old sins and their old ungodly lifestyles. God is once again completely irrelevant to them.

A second analogy is human conception, development, and birth. Jesus Himself uses that image when he spoke about being born again. You know there's a nine month period of time between physical conception and physical birth. Tragically, sometimes something goes wrong during that period of development and the mother miscarries. It's sometimes called a natural abortion. If the child isn't alive at birth, he or she is sometimes referred to as a stillborn. Can something like that happen spiritually, too? Yes, I believe it can. At some point, spiritual life begins in a person (conception). It continues to develop over a period of time like an embryo develops in the womb. But then a critical moment comes. Maybe a tragedy occurs in that person's life. Maybe he or she is unwilling to turn away from a specific sin that has a grip on his or her life. Regardless, at some level, that person says, "If this is what it means to follow Jesus, forget it. I'm out." In a sense, a kind of spiritual abortion happens before true saving faith is exercised. It's a stillborn faith. There was something wrong about it even from the beginning. Yes, there was faith, but it was a stillborn faith - dead on arrival.

Myer Harris Cohen was known by friends and enemies as Mickey Cohen – a major gangster in Los Angeles last century. By 1949, Cohen was the top man in the Los Angeles mob handling half a million dollars every day from a wide range of gambling enterprises. Eventually he was indicted for tax evasion and sent to jail for five years. Before Cohen went to jail, a friend introduced him to an influential Christian layman named Bill Jones. After Cohen got out of jail, Bill Jones took him on as a spiritual project. He urged Cohen to commit his life to Jesus. He explained God's plan of salvation. Mickey liked what he heard. To Bill's surprise and delight, Mickey Cohen repeated the sinner's prayer. He was convinced Cohen's conversion was genuine. As the word spread through the Christian community, Cohen became something of a Christian celebrity. What a testimony! He even appeared at a Billy Graham crusade in New York City. But once Cohen got back to Los Angeles, he started to avoid Bill Jones. He started hanging around with his old mob buddies. Bill Jones finally confronted him and told him that as a new Christian he ought to be putting as much distance between

himself and his mob connections as possible. Cohen said, “You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, and Christian businessmen. So, what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster? If I have to give up all that – if that’s Christianity – count me out.” Mickey Cohen died in 1976 completely and utterly alone. His public flirtation with Christianity was largely forgotten.

Maybe you giggled at Mickey’s Cohen’s absurd question, “So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster?” What’s just as alarming is what so many other so-called followers of Jesus apparently believe by what they say or do. For several hundreds of years, many white Christians said, “So what’s the matter with being a Christian and owning slaves?” Still today, we have self-proclaimed Christians who more or less say by their words and actions, “So what’s the matter with being a Christian racist? So what’s the matter with despising poor people? They’re all a bunch of welfare freeloaders, aren’t they?” The same mind-boggling absurdity stretches into many other areas of our lives. “So what’s the matter with being a Christian and having sex outside of marriage? So what’s the matter with being a Christian and being content to remain ignorant of the Bible? So what’s the matter with being a Christian and having a prayer life that never gets beyond saying grace at meals? So what’s the matter with being a Christian and never sharing with a lost person how he or she can have a relationship with God? So what’s the matter with being a Christian and being content to be a pew potato? So what’s the matter with being a Christian and seeking happiness through career advancement, financial success, and material possessions like everyone else? You mean being a Christian means radical and continual change of my attitudes, my lifestyle, my relationships, and my ambitions so that they become more like those of Jesus? You mean being a Christian demands transformation of my life?”

I suggest we put the question of whether you can lose your salvation or not to the side. What is an all too possible and scary reality according to God’s Word is that you can have an inadequate faith. It’s a little bit of Christianity, but never the full “disease.” Or, it just dies off before it’s ever truly born. An inadequate faith is a tragic possibility. Be warned. But God’s Word today also offers an invitation to you and me.

AN INVITATION TO A STEADFAST FAITH

God’s Word says today, “Dear friends, even though we are talking this way, we really don’t believe it applies to you. We are confident that you are meant for better things, things that come with salvation.” (Heb. 6:9 NLT) In other words, grow up! Get after it! Each of us start living the Christian life like a baby. We’re spiritual newborns. We can’t be anything but immature. But when that immaturity becomes entrenched and willful, something very abnormal and dangerous has occurred spiritually. Spiritual maturity has little to do with how long you’ve been a follower of Jesus. Time itself doesn’t produce spiritual maturity. You might have heard of the principal who had an administrative post to fill at his school. He promoted a teacher with ten years of experience to the job. Another teacher at the school was incensed. She said to him, “Why did you give her that position? I’ve had 25 years of experience and she’s only had ten years.” The

principal said, "I'm sorry, but you're wrong. You haven't had 25 years of experience. You've had one year of experience 25 times." That can happen spiritually. Instead of moving forward, we end up marking time. I heard about one person who did some honest analysis of his life. He concluded that he was suffering from prolonged adolescence evolving into premature senility! Spiritual growth doesn't just happen over time all by itself. Growing up spiritually demands intentional effort.

What does spiritual immaturity look like? "You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding." (Heb. 5:11-6:1 NLT) Immature Christians are never able to instruct others. They never learn how to disciple anyone else. They never learn how to point someone to Jesus or pass along anything of spiritual value. Immature Christians never learn how to discern right from wrong. They're kind of morally illiterate. They stand for very little if anything. Immature Christians never get beyond the most basic Bible doctrines. There is a God. He created the world. He sent Jesus. Jesus died on the cross and rose again. All important, foundational stuff, to be sure, but maturity demands we learn to live out the implications of all those great truths. Get after it. Grow up. Grow up and into a steadfast faith.

What does spiritual maturity look like? Putting into practice what you believe. Those truths about God and life that you say you actually believe you make the effort to live out. Hang in there, persevere, and endure - no matter what comes your way. "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (Heb. 6:11-12 NIV) Despite heartaches, discouragements, tragedies, and disappointments, you still hold on to God's goodness and grace, you still follow Jesus, you still live by faith, you still allow the Holy Spirit to convict, challenge, and change you. Spiritual maturity just perseveres and endures regardless. We all go through times of spiritual fatigue. We all struggle against becoming spiritually lazy. The Bible doesn't speak to us. The persons we're praying for get worse. The ways we serve the Lord feel like a chore more than a joy. Church is just OK. We look at our own lives and see mediocrity. That's when you've got to take yourself by the scruff of the neck, give yourself a little shake, and say, "Get after it! Grow up! Endure. Be intentional. Persevere no matter what."

Spiritual maturity demands an expanding sense of being involved in God's mission. You can't be spiritually mature and be living to and for yourself. You want your life to count for Jesus. You want to make a difference in the lives of others. I hear that mark of maturity in our passage. "For God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do." (Heb. 6:10 NLT) Of course, good deeds and good works don't make

you right with God, but a life that doesn't find a way to serve God and serve others is deeply unsatisfying. Discover your spiritual gifts and use them. Find a ministry and do it faithfully. Do you know what happens to Christians with little or no sense of mission? They sit, soak, and sour. Because they're not on mission, they get critical of the church or dwell on the weaknesses and failings of other believers. They just sit week after week after week, soaking up worship services, teaching, and fellowship, but they never find an outlet. When you sit and soak for too long, you just get spiritually sour. Get after it. Grow up. Get busy for Jesus. If you're content to just sit and soak, go sit and soak somewhere else. We don't need sour people at KRBC! We need people who have a sense of mission and want their lives to count for Jesus.

Let me close by asking us a personal, pointed question. If you died today, would anyone miss your Christian influence? I'm sure you have family and friends who would miss you as a person. That's not what I'm asking. Would anyone miss you because of what you contributed to their lives spiritually? Would anyone say, "He went out of his way to say something so encouraging to me when I went through hard times. She shared Jesus with me and led me to put my trust in Him. He faithfully taught me in that church school class when I was kind of a bratty kid. She was there during kids@ worship to help me learn more about Jesus. He came to visit me at the nursing home when I felt so alone. She helped me with my homework at After School Clubs or Reading Buddies. He reminded me to worship and praise God even when I didn't feel like it. She invited me to come to church with her. He came alongside of me in a triad and helped me become a disciple – not just a believer. She accepted and loved me even when I failed the Lord and myself." There are so many different, great ways to be an influence for Jesus. Would anyone miss your Christian influence?

Let me close with a story about a woman named Joyce Page. She spends her lunch hour almost every weekday at the St. Louis County Correctional Institution. She's been doing it so long, the guards just wave her through the front gate. Prison officials stop to ask her how work is going or how her kids are getting along. Joyce began going to the prison with her supervisor, a fellow Christian also concerned about the spiritual lives of prisoners. When the supervisor got transferred, Joyce continued on by herself. Every day, she eats a peanut butter sandwich on the way to the prison. Each day, Joyce meets with a different group of inmates. "What we do is up to them," she says. "Sometimes we have a worship service, or a time of testimony or singing, or in-depth Bible study and discussion. It depends on their needs." When she slips back to her desk, she hears co-workers moaning about their lunch choices that day. Joyce just laughs to herself. She knows exactly what she'll have for lunch tomorrow – another peanut butter sandwich at the wheel of her car on the way to prison. For many followers of Jesus meeting with prison inmates almost every day in the middle of a hectic work schedule would be unthinkable. Joyce Page sees it differently. "For me, it's a real answer to prayer. You see, I don't have time to go after work – I have six kids of my own that I'm raising by myself."

Would anyone miss your Christian influence? Let's get after it in 2017. Let's grow up. Let's avoid a stillborn faith. Let's live out a steadfast faith.