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Sermon Notes

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By Now, You Ought to Be...

Hebrews 5:11-14

I want to take you back over fifty years in time, to a historic moment in the history of sports...

On May 6, 1954, English middle-distance runner Roger Bannister became the first man to run the mile in under four minutes. The location was Iffley Road track at Oxford University, and over 3000 spectators gathered on a blustery, overcast day. The wind was gusting up to 25 miles per hour, and Bannister felt that the conditions were unfavorable for the attempt. But just before the race was to begin, the winds dropped to almost zero and the decision was made to go for it.

Roger Bannister was a full-time medical student, but he had also been an Olympic athlete in 1952, coming in fourth at the Helsinki Summer games and setting a new British record in the 1500 meters. He had been bitterly disappointed at the outcome, and had wrestled with the idea of giving up running altogether. However, he was soon motivated by a new goal: to be the first man in history to run the mile in under four minutes.

This was seen by some people to be an impossibility:

Neal Bascomb wrote:

The number had a certain mathematical elegance – “four laps, four quarter-miles, four-point-oh-oh minutes—that it seemed God himself had established it as man’s limit.” For decades the best middle-distance runners had tried and failed. They had come to within two seconds, but that was as close as they were able to get. Attempt after spirited attempt had proved futile. Each effort was like a stone added to a wall that looked increasingly impossible to breach.

Running the mile was an art form in itself. The distance--unlike the 100-yard sprint or marathon--required a balance of speed and stamina. The person to break that barrier would have to be fast, diligently trained, and supremely aware of his body so that he would cross the finish line just at the point of complete exhaustion.

Roger Bannister made a scientific study of training techniques and race strategies and began turning in times that got closer and closer to the seemingly impenetrable barrier:

the four minute mile. Other rivals were also getting closer, and the time had come for Bannister to make his supreme effort.

On May 6, 1954, Bannister lined up at the starting line. But he was not alone in his effort. He had two other runners whose sole purpose was to serve as PACE-SETTERS for Bannister. A pace-setter is a runner who has no interest in winning the race, but who is seeking to help someone set a new world record. The two pace-setters for Bannister that day were Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway. Brasher ran the first 2 laps as pace-setter, then Chataway took over and took Bannister on pace for the sub-4 mile through three laps... then Bannister did the rest. He finished the race in 3:59.4, and collapsed in the arms of his coach. History was made by Roger Bannister... but he could not have kept the pace needed without Brasher and Chataway.

Since that time, the use of PACE-SETTERS has become standard practice for track athletes who are trying to set world records... they are frequently called “rabbits” (similar to the mechanized rabbit) used to lead greyhounds around the dog track. A good pace-setter or rabbit can be paid thousands of dollars if they help in setting a new world record. They carefully map out their strategy, setting a time goal for every 200 meters of the race, leading the runner who is trying to set the world record to keep the necessary pace. When they have achieved their preset goal, they drop out of the race.

The Book of Hebrews presents the Christian life as a race to be run...

And Hebrews 5:11-14 gives a strong sense that there is a RIGHT PACE for this Christian race...

The author, like a pace-setting coach, is yelling over his shoulder at the Hebrews saying “Pick up the pace! By now, you ought to be further ahead than this!!!”

This sermon stares us all in the face with the question, “Are you growing in Christ at the proper pace? By now, should you be further ahead than you are?”

I. The Pace of Constant Progress: By Now You Ought to Be Further Along

A. The Context: Melchizedek

Hebrews 5:11 We have much to say about this...

About what??

Hebrews 5:6 And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

Hebrews 5:10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

1. The author has more to say about Jesus as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek
2. He will devote all of chapter 7 to that grand and glorious theme
3. He will display the glories of Jesus as a Priest-King
4. He will explain why Jesus could never be a priest in the Old Covenant, and so there had to be a New Covenant so Jesus could be BOTH Priest and King
5. He will draw out some amazing and even mystical comparisons between Melchizedek... how he suddenly appears in Scripture and in a mysterious way is like Jesus in his eternity
6. He will do all this to show the infinite superiority of Jesus to all the Aaronic priests of the old covenant
7. He yearns that these Jewish professors of faith in Christ would realize how great is the priestly ministry Jesus is carrying on for them

B. The Author's Frustrations: We Would Like to Say More, But...

1. Here, the author stops himself to give these people a stern rebuke
2. You sense some frustrations in the author...
3. Every good teacher knows his students... he can tell when he's lost the class, when their attention is wandering, when they are not getting what you are telling them
4. BUT he blames THEM... their inability to grasp the deep things he wants to tell them is THEIR fault... it is a moral failing on their part

C. A Strong Rebuke: Your Lazy Listening Makes it Impossible

ESV Hebrews 5:11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

1. The reason the author CANNOT immediately say everything he wants to say is two-fold
2. First: the subject matter itself is deep, spiritually powerful, not easy to grasp
 - a. He says it is "hard to explain"
 - b. It is of the "meat" of the word

c. More on this in a moment

3. Second: the Hebrew Christians have BECOME *dull of hearing*

a. Literally, lazy listeners

Lit. “one who is not easily stirred or moved, heavy, slothful, dull” as opposed to someone who is quick, sharp diligent in his business

b. The Greek word used here is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in the Book of Proverbs about the sluggard

c. The focus is on the EAR... the listening to the word

D. Context: This is an Extended Pastoral Aside

1. Solemn warnings: 5:11-6:8

a. Impossible to renew some people to repentance

b. People who crucify the Son of God afresh and subject Him to public disgrace

c. Author likens them to a field producing thorns and thistles and is in danger of being cursed... in the end, it will be burned

2. Gracious encouragement: 6:9-20

Hebrews 6:9-10 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case-- things that accompany salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

3. Return to Melchizedek in Hebrews 7

E. Central Issue Here: The Need for Constant Progress

1. The author wants these people to continue to grow in their Christian lives

2. Failure to grow and to make progress is very dangerous in the Christian life

F. Implications: There is an Acceptable PACE for Progress

1. The author is VERY CRITICAL of these people, of the fact that they still can't handle the meat of the word!

2. He uses this expression:

Hebrews 5:12 ...by this time you ought to be teachers

3. This implies very clearly that there is an acceptable PACE for spiritual growth
4. It is not acceptable for spiritual babes to STAY spiritual babes; nor is it acceptable to grow VERY SLOWLY toward spiritual maturity
5. There is a RACE to be run, and there is a specific PACE for that RACE

II. The Proof of Constant Progress: From Milk to Meat

A. By Now, they Ought to Be Teachers

Hebrews 5:12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

1. The author says there has been sufficient time since their conversion to complete their training to be teachers of the word of God

Luke 6:40 A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

2. "Fully trained" means a suitable course of doctrinal and life instruction
3. Teachers are essential in the Christian church... and it is expected that a healthy church will produce the teachers it needs for the future
4. When the author says "by this time, you ought..." he is speaking of a suitable pace of growth and development so they could instruct the next generation of Christians

B. Instead... they Still Need the ABCs of the Faith

1. The Author mentions the "elementary truths" and says they need them taught to them "again"

Hebrews 5:12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

2. The Greek word refers to the first item of instruction, the ABCs of the faith
3. I believe these are listed in the next paragraph:

Hebrews 6:1-2 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ² instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

C. Why This is So Shocking... and So Dangerous

1. They had been converted long enough to be of help to others
2. Instead of being useful, they were useless, needing to RECEIVE rather than give; and needing to be grounded again in the ABCs of the faith
3. They were really like newborn babies rather than fully grown adults
4. This left them vulnerable to unrighteousness... to going astray in their lives

D. Milk vs. Solid Food: Not All Scripture is Equally Clear or Easy

1. The Author makes a distinction between “milk” and “meat”
2. Milk refers to the aspect of the word of God that is simple to digest... easy and straightforward principles
 - a. “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for or food”
 - b. God made all things
 - c. God loved us and sent His Son into the world for us
 - d. Jesus died for sins to bring us to God
 - e. If we repent and believe, we will go to heaven when we die
3. Not all Scripture is equally accessible

2 Peter 3:16 [Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand

4. The more difficult teachings are called “meat”... they take some digesting, some chewing to be able to accept them
 - a. The doctrine of eternal predestination... of God’s sovereign choice of the elect before the foundation of the world
 - b. The doctrine of providence... how God’s sovereign will overrules all things, even disasters, to accomplish His mysterious purposes
 - c. The doctrine of God’s use of evil, of Satan, of demons, to accomplish His ends without condoning their evil practices
 - d. The doctrine of future things, laid out with great mystery in the Book of Revelation... of Christ’s Second Coming, of the mystery of the anti-Christ and the Abomination of Desolation
 - e. The doctrine of the symbolism of the Old Covenant shadows as they pointed to Christ

E. Infancy vs. Maturity

1. The Author makes a clear distinction between spiritual infants and spiritually mature people

Hebrews 5:13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

2. Peter also says there is a time for milk... when you are a newborn baby

1 Peter 2:2-3 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

3. But the goal is spiritual MATURITY... “So that you may grow up in your salvation...”

F. Proof of Progress: The Ability to Digest Solid Food, and Discern Good from Evil

1. Spiritual babes cannot handle the full doctrine of the Word... they struggle with complex concepts and recoil from them
2. BUT spiritually mature people have learned by constant use to make distinctions between good and evil, and to harmonize what they have learned

G. Solid Food Here: The “Teaching about righteousness”

^{ESV} Hebrews 5:13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

1. The Author here speaks of being “unskilled in the word of righteousness”
2. “Unskilled” means “inexperienced”... the Greek word relates to a trial or testing by experience
3. These babes in Christ have heard the word but not tried its truthfulness by experience and become skillful in applying the word
4. Specifically, the author calls it “the word of righteousness”... it has to do with SANCTIFICATION... growth in holiness... learning by experience and by the WORD what is pleasing to God and what is not

III. The Need for Constant Progress: Individually and Corporately

A. Individuals MUST Make Progress

1. “Become” Lazy Listeners or “Become” Mature

- a. The Christian life is DYNAMIC, constantly shifting, constantly changing
- b. If you're not growing in Christ, you're regressing

2 Peter 1:5-8 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- c. Only as you possess these virtues of the Christian life IN INCREASING MEASURE are you healthy in Jesus
- d. Only these qualities will enable you to be effective and productive (fruitful) in the Christian life
- e. The author here is accusing the Hebrews of being LAZY LISTENERS; they had received a steady diet of good solid food, but had failed to CHEW IT and DIGEST IT

2. Food Analogy: The Need for Constant Intake of God's Word

- a. The clear implication here is that solid intake of the Word of God is as essential to spiritual health as food is to our bodies
- b. If we stop eating, we get weak; if we fail to chew and digest our meat, it does us no good
- c. The Author to the Hebrews is charging all Christians with the need to make constant steady progress in the word

SO... each individual Christian needs to make steady progress in doctrine for his own soul's sake

B. The Church Needs Teachers

- 1. Not everyone is called on to be a formal teacher of the church (James 3)

James 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

- 2. BUT every mature Christian is called on to teach in some way or other

- a. Parents in the home: Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Proverbs 1:8-9 Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. ⁹ They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.

Proverbs 4:1-4 Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. ² I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. ³ When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, ⁴ he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.

Application: Fathers... you are to be the primary theologians and teachers of the word of God in your home; this passage charges you most strictly to GROW UP in doctrine... to be able to lead your wife and your children into the MEAT of God's word, you need to learn it yourselves

b. Older women to younger women: Titus 2

Titus 2:4-5 [Older women] can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

c. Mature disciples to the new converts: 2 Timothy 2

2 Timothy 2:2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

d. Careful handling of the word of truth is essential to this

2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

3. The church's future depends on this constant progress...

a. The previous generation is dying off

b. The next generation must be prepared to step in and assume their roles

c. Young men must be trained to be the next generation of ELDERS in the local church

1 Timothy 3:1 Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.

IV. The Goal of Constant Progress: Spiritual Maturity

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil

A. Maturity: Ability to Discern Good and Evil

1. The essence of maturity is DISCERNMENT... able to distinguish between right doctrine and wrong, between wise courses of action and foolish
2. Paul makes this very plain to the Philippian Christians

Philippians 1:9-11 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God.

3. So the mature man or woman is able to see through Satan's smoke and mirrors and deceptions to determine God's will

2 Corinthians 2:11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

B. Teaching About Righteousness = Understanding Sanctification

Hebrews 5:13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskillful/inexperienced with the teaching about righteousness.

1. The more a Christian grows, the more he/she will see the INFINITE JOURNEY of righteousness in Christ laying out ahead
2. The more a Christian grows, he/she will learn how to put sin to death by the power of the Holy Spirit
3. He/she will become a skilled warrior against temptations, able to fight off each of the flaming arrows of the Evil One

C. Manner of Growth: Constant Use of the Deep Word of God

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

1. There is a "training" in this verse... a pattern of training that produces Christ-like maturity
2. The key here is "CONSTANT USE" of the meat of the word of God
3. Listen to some other translations:

^{ESV} Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

^{KJV} Hebrews 5:14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

^{NAU} Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

4. What is this “constant use” in the Word of God? What is this “constant practice”? It is literally a “power or skill acquired by custom or habit”
 - a. This implies a daily saturation in the word of God
 - b. Memorization of Scripture... meditation on the lessons of the Old Testament and the fulfillments of the New
 - c. Able rightly to divide the word of God... handling it accurately: whether the Laws of Moses, Old Testament history, Old Testament poetry, Prophetic writings; New Covenant works—the four gospels of Christ, the Book of Acts, the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and John; the mysteries of the Book of Revelation
 - d. As you read these powerful living words, you put them into immediate practice in your struggle for holiness
 - e. A putting on of the full armor of God
 - f. And a standing of your ground day after day in battle against Satan and His evil Kingdom

D. The Goal of Our Salvation: Total Conformity to Christ

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

V. Applications

- A. Come to Christ to Begin with
- B. Grow in Grace and in the Knowledge of Christ
- C. By Now, Where Ought You to Be?
- D. Repent from Lazy Hearing, Missed Opportunities
- E. Resolve to Grow in Obvious Ways in 2011
- F. Teachers... TEACH!!
- G. “Constant Use”

H. Discerning Good and Evil