

Better Things from Us

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 6th of April 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Better Things from Us and is based on Hebrews chapter 5 verse 11 through to chapter 6 verse 12.

And you may like to have open the Black English Bibles at page 973. As I said at the beginning we're continuing our sermon series through the letter to the Hebrews and we're up to chapter 5 verse 11 through to chapter 6 verse 12 today.

Let's pray. God we thank you that you're a speaking God and you speak to us through the words of the scriptures testifying to your son the Lord Jesus Christ our great high priest.

And we pray that we'll be attentive to your word today that we'll not only believe it but obey it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Mrs Richards is your hearing age turned on.

Well Mrs Richards is deaf. I apologise if there is a Mrs Richards here. It's not you. Mrs Richards is deaf. Mrs Richards was also a guest at a hotel.

[1 : 2 8] A hotel called Fawlty Towers in Torquay in England. Mrs Richards. Mrs Richards, with apologies to English people here, was the archetypal English person. A whinger.

A complainer. She complained about the view, the bar, the service at the hotel, though there was a lot to complain about for that. The radio and the toilet paper amongst other things.

And you can imagine John Cleese as Basil Fawlty getting very quickly, very impatient with Mrs Richards. So one of the tricks that he did on Mrs Richards... That is, he would mouth words and she would think that her hearing aid wasn't working.

And so she would turn it up to the very full at which she'd say, Can you hear me? Mrs Richards had selective hearing.

She chose to switch off her hearing aid at various points because she didn't want to wear the battery out. And there were things that she didn't want to hear, so she'd pretend not to hear them.

[2 : 3 2] But she was able to hear certain things. For example, when her sister rang her on the phone and told her the price that was offered on her house, she heard perfectly well the amount of money that was being offered to her. Her ears were attuned to what she wanted to hear, but she was deaf to what she didn't want to hear.

Now, of course, being hard of hearing has its serious side. And deafness, as some people know here, can be a very severe handicap indeed. But even more importantly than physical deafness, spiritual deafness is a great problem.

Indeed, it can be fatal. The letter to the Hebrews is written to a people who were to some extent spiritually deaf. It was written to people to urge them to see and hear that God spoke.

And that God spoke through the Scriptures, through the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament, testifying to Jesus Christ. For God is a speaking God. He's not a silent God.

And if God is a speaking God, we need to be a hearing people. That we hear His Word and heed His Word. And the original readers of this letter were vulnerable to spiritual deafness and therefore vulnerable to drifting in their faith.

[3 : 52] And so this letter is written to bring them back on track, back onto the path of hearing God's Word, because they had become hard of hearing.

And that's particularly the problem that's addressed in this passage today. About this, he says in verse 11, we have much to say that is hard to explain.

And the reason why it's hard to explain is that the people have become dull in understanding, literally hard of hearing. That is, their ears have become deaf to the Word of God.

And because they've become hard of hearing the Word of God and God speak, then they've become dull of understanding God's Word. And as we see, they're tuning out to God's Word and it's becoming a form of spiritual suicide, so to speak.

The readers to whom this letter was written ought to be more advanced in the Christian faith than they are. But their spiritual deafness has left them way back at the beginning, at the starting blocks, at the ABC, at the elemental principles of the Christian faith.

[5 : 03] Though by this time, verse 12 says, you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. That is, the basics of the Christian faith of what God has said and revealed.

You need milk, not solid food. And so, as a result, verse 13, for everyone who lives on milk being still an infant is unskilled in the Word of righteousness.

That's why it's hard to explain these things to the readers because they're unskilled in the Word of righteousness. They're unskilled in the Scriptures. And the reason for that is their deafness to hear God's Word.

What's your spiritual diet? Are you drinkers of spiritual milk? Or are you eaters of spiritual, solid food or meat?

To be absolutely honest, I fear that there are too many of you who are still stuck on spiritual milk, who are still at the starting blocks of the Christian ABC.

[6 : 13] You've been Christians for years and yet have not moved on to spiritual food, stuck at milk. Maybe attended church all or most of your life, for decades perhaps, and yet unskilled in the Word of righteousness, unskilled in the Scriptures.

You see, spiritual maturity does not go hand in hand with older age. Spiritual maturity comes from eating spiritual, solid food.

Now, some might react to that and say, well, all this Bible stuff, it's all a bit of, it's a bit hard, it's a bit of head knowledge. It's not really for me. I'll leave that for other people. It's not what interests me.

But not at all, the writer is saying. For each and every Christian, our obligation is to move on from spiritual milk to spiritual, solid food. And that comes through the Scriptures, not all of which is easy.

Because it is in the Scriptures that God is speaking to us to train us in righteousness. It's in the Scriptures that God is speaking to us to correct us and rebuke us. It's in the Scriptures that God is speaking to us to keep us on the right path of Christian life.

[7 : 24] It is in the Scriptures that God is speaking us to tone up our spiritual muscle, so to speak, so that we can endure in this life to the very end and receive the promised eternal rest that God has in store for us.

Verse 14 says, Solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. And the word trained by practice there is the word from which we get our word, gymnasium, gym.

Not that necessarily that's what's meant, but the idea is that the Scriptures are what trains us spiritually, like a gym is the place you'll go to to train physically, to tone up muscle so that you can run a race.

The Scriptures, God speaking to us, is what tones us up and strengthens us up so that our faith has got muscle to withstand the various things that this life has before us.

If I was to set out on a marathon now, I wouldn't get round the first lap of an oval. I've got no physical fitness at all. But spiritually, some of us are just like that.

[8 : 27] We've got no spiritual muscle. And so we're much more vulnerable not to last the distance as Christians in our life on earth.

God is speaking to us in the Scriptures so that we do not drift away from faith and drift away from God. And those who are spiritually mature are much more likely to last the distance.

Christians who are attentive to God's Word are much more likely to finish their lives as Christians full of faith. Because listening to God speak to us in the Bible leads to strength of moral character, resilience against opposition.

It leads to discernment to resist temptation, steadfastness through disappointment and grief. It leads to endurance to persevere in the faith. And as verse 14 says, to distinguish good from evil.

Not at a basic elemental level, but at every point in our life where there are moral dilemmas and temptations before us. And every opportunity and encouragement to give up on God.

[9 : 43] Spiritual muscle that comes through grappling with God's Word of righteousness in the Scriptures as God speaks to us is what will lead us to Christian maturity and to last the distance.

And the writer here is using almost sarcastic language to shame his readers that they're stuck on spiritual milk. They are spiritually hard of hearing. They're just at the basics.

They're at the prep school of the Christian life, but they ought to be already teaching other new Christians the Christian faith. They're dull and they're sluggish in Christian matters and therefore they're in danger of drifting away from God, drifting away from the faith and that leads to the point of spiritual suicide.

Now that's a strong warning and strong language and we do well to heed it, I think, because it could be written to many of us too. But from a negative point of view in those verses, the writer switches to a slightly more positive view in the next few verses.

It's the stick and the carrot, the stick we've just seen to cajole us, now perhaps a little bit of warmer encouragement. Therefore, he says in chapter 6, verse 1, let us go on toward perfection, to maturity that is, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, not leaving it behind in the sense that that's old, that's out of date, fuddy-duddy, we've passed that, let's move on to something new and novel, but rather that's the foundation.

[11 : 12] Let's leave behind dealing with the foundation and build on the foundation, our Christian life, to the end. The foundation, he says, at the end of verse 1 and in verse 2, repentance from dead works, faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead and eternal judgment.

Six things, he lists there, which he regards as the basics or the foundation of the Christian faith. Repentance, firstly, from dead works and faith towards God.

The first two, a pair, if you like, of things. They're the basic responses to the Christian faith that results in people becoming Christians. Jesus' first words, recorded in Mark's Gospel, repent and believe the good news and here they are here, repentance and belief.

Repentance is turning away from wrong behaviour, turning away from wrong belief, turning away from dead works as it's described here, that is, practices that lead to death, sin that is, turn away from it.

That's repentance and at the positive side, faith in God, trust in God, trusting the promises of God for forgiveness, salvation and eternal life and so on.

[12 : 27] They're the first two things, the very basics, how to become a Christian. Repent of your sins and trust in God. And then the next pair associated, it seems, with some form of Christian initiation, teaching about baptisms, what baptism is about, maybe by comparison with Jewish ceremonial washings and so on, as an outward form of initiation into Christian community and laying on of hands.

Well, there are various roles in which laying on of hands have in the scriptures but in the context here, clearly it's about Christian initiation, becoming a Christian. And so it seems in a number of places in the Acts of the Apostles where people became Christians, they were baptised, one of the apostles laid hands on them and they received God's Holy Spirit and so began their Christian life.

For us in our practice today, we might have infant baptism but at confirmation the hands are laid on by the bishop. Same sort of symbolism. But again, it's about the basics, about becoming a Christian.

Inwardly, repentance and faith, outwardly expressed by baptism and hands being laid on. And then the third pair of these six basic elements, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement.

That is, our basic destiny as Christian people is resurrection of the dead, facing God's eternal judgement but doing so with confidence because our sins are forgiven and we will go on to heaven, to resurrection life.

[13 : 57] That's the basics of Christian faith. The foundation, if you like. And the readers of this letter, many of them at least, have not moved beyond that.

They are infant children, toddler, spiritual children. All they can cope with is spiritual milk. The very basics and that's it. And they've shown little sign of progression to Christian maturity and grappling with God's word of righteousness.

So, come on, he says, verse 1, let us go on toward maturity. And we will, verse 3 says, do this if God permits. So, there's the warm encouragement, the invitation, come on, you've been spiritual infants for too long, come on.

Now's the time to make progress to spiritual maturity and grapple with the deeper things of God if you're going to develop spiritual muscle that will last to the end of your life.

So, having begun with a warning and then had some warmer encouragement, he goes back to perhaps the sternest warning of this letter and one of the sternest warnings in the whole of the New Testament.

[15 : 05] He says in verses 4 to 6, for it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come and then have fallen away since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.

The readers of this letter as it was originally written and addressed were in severe danger of drifting away from the Christian faith. The path of drifting may start innocuously enough veering off course gradually but its destiny is apostasy the giving up of faith the rejection of God and the gospel of God and therefore the rejection of Jesus Christ that's fallen away and that's the destiny where drifters are heading towards.

That is the point of no return and so he says it is impossible if somebody goes down to the end of that path in effect to be restored to repentance from that place.

Now it seems that such people have started out as Christians the language that is used here is clearly describing people who are Christians.

So verse 4 says that for those that it's impossible they've already been enlightened that is come to faith seeing the light of Christ they've tasted the heavenly gift that is they've experienced God's forgiveness and the eternal life that begins here and now they've shared in the Holy Spirit God's Spirit given to each and every Christian only to Christians they've tasted the goodness of the Word of God found in their mercy and forgiveness at least in the start of their Christian life they've even experienced the powers of the age to come the in-breaking of heaven into lives now perhaps by God's Holy Spirit but then they've fallen away fallen away completely and now for them it's impossible to be restored to repentance now over the centuries these words have troubled many Christians it's made some fearful has my sin meant that I'm now unable to be restored to repentance have I crossed the Rubicon beyond which

[17 : 41] I cannot return to repentance where is the line beyond which I cannot go and find forgiveness and why is it impossible for such people to be restored to repentance is it impossible psychologically on their part or is it impossible somehow for God to repent to forgive them well these verses imagine somebody who has gone down the drifting path that leads to apostasy the rejection of the gospel and God they've begun as Christians they've experienced something of the Christian life and then they've death of God's word or dull of understanding drifted away from it and ended up far from it and so they've rejected the gospel and rejected Jesus Christ and his death this is not talking about somebody who just drifts a little otherwise this letter wouldn't be written it's written to drifters so that they stop drifting and come back before it's too late so it's not addressing Christians who might just drift for a while or be dry in their spiritual life for a while nor is it addressing Christians who might accidentally or just here and there lapse into some sin that's not beyond the point of repentance either remember

Peter's example the apostle of Jesus who denied Jesus before the cross and then was restored to repentance by Jesus after the resurrection and there are cases of people in history and maybe even here of people like that it's not talking about those people it's addressing the situation that if you continue down the path of drifting you will end up rejecting the gospel and God and Jesus Christ that's the point of apostasy that is the point of no return that is the point at which it is impossible to be restored to repentance and the writer you see is warning his readers who are Christians here don't drift because if you drift you're heading down the path that leads to the point of no return it is dangerous don't go too far imagine that you're at the top of some mountain or cliff top maybe a child and the parent is saying to you don't go near the edge how near can I go near the edge don't go anywhere near the edge and that's in effect what the writer is saying in this letter you Christians are drifting you're off the safe path and you're coming to the edge of a spiritual precipice if you get to the edge and fall it is too late it is beyond the point of no return to be restored to repentance so keep away from the edge don't even explore the terrain near the edge it's too dangerous territory to go stop drifting come back to the path that is marked by attention to God's word that's the severity of warning here it's not about trying to define where is the line where is the point it's saying don't go down that path because it leads to destruction it's spiritual suicide it is falling away beyond the point of being able to be restored don't go down that path and the way to ensure that you don't go down that path is attention to the word of

God becoming attuned to God's word and not deaf to it or hard of hearing to it the reason that's given for being unable to be restored to repentance is in the second half of verse 6 the person who has started as a Christian but drifted into apostasy and gone beyond the point of no return is on their own crucifying again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt that's where they've ended up in effect crucifying Jesus again an unthinkable thing and showing contempt to him that's why it's impossible to come back because the very thing that they're showing contempt towards is the only means of finding repentance that is the death of Christ and by going down a path of apostasy they're showing contempt to Jesus' death and Jesus himself so there's no hope for them to come back because the very means of coming back is repentance of sins through his death which they're showing contempt at there's nowhere left to turn you see to find repentance the only place for finding forgiveness as a result of repentance is in

Jesus' death and show his death contempt and you've cut off your one chance of rescue he uses an analogy from farming in verses 7 and 8 ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it's cultivated receives a blessing from God well that's the positive side that's the analogy that is meant to be reflected in Christian life we receive the rain if you like through God's word to us if we respond to it aright then we'll bear fruit in our lives and a blessing from God as a result but on the other hand if that ground produces thorns and thistles it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed its end is to be burned over that's the point of no return that's the impossibility to be restored to repentance receiving rain metaphorically from God through his word but only as a result producing thorns and thistles they are the ones that face the judgment of

God and not forgiveness as a result of repentance we ought to take these words seriously and there is a right sense in which they ought to make us tremble it is a fearful warning that if we walk further down the path of drifting we will end up in apostasy and a point of no return that is why the warning not to drift is so serious that is why we must pay all the more attention to the word of God to ensure that we don't drift because the path of drifting leads to death there comes a point down that path somewhere where is it impossible to receive again the mercy of

[24 : 37] God don't even approach such a point says the writer it's not an issue of defining where is that point beyond which we go don't even approach it don't see how far you can go you're courting danger don't try to explore where that line is crossed you're playing with fire don't be hard of hearing God's word stop drifting get off your baby food diet and grow up in faith that's what he's saying to us that's what God's saying to us but this tender writer doesn't just leave it there tremble yes we should but he finishes this section with some tender encouragement like the fruitful ground of verse 7 that soaks up the rain and produces fruit and ultimately receives a blessing from

God he recognises that his readers still show some fruitfulness in their life fruit they may be in danger of drifting may even have drifted somewhat but still there is some fruit and so he urges them to cultivate it further to produce even more fruit as a sign of not drifting anymore he sees their fruit of love not just love as an abstract concept sitting in their hearts but love that is manifest in their service of each other verse 10 tells us God is not unjust and he'll not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints as you still do that is a love that serves fellow Christians they're the saints they're not specially holy people all Christians are saints in the Bible and so their service of each other acts of love for each other are evidence of some fruit and he's encouraged by that and he urges them to keep on at that and indeed to produce more fruit of love as well but not just love love might be the most evident of the fruit but he urges them also to have hope that is sustained and realised verse 11 says and we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end that is he wants them to get to the end the goal of the

Christian life the eternal rest that's promised that we saw a couple of weeks ago he wants their hope of that rest to be realised one day and so as a result of that hope will be displayed by diligence in the Christian life not just idleness or complacency that hope will never be realised that slackness and dullness of understanding and hardness of hearing but rather if there is Christian hope it will be manifest by diligence in the Christian life so that the end is realised and also their faith he doesn't want them to become sluggish verse 12 says but rather to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promise later on in this letter he'll give us examples of faith which we are to imitate but again faith will be demonstrated by patience as we await the inheritance of the promises of God faith hope and love that triad of

Christian virtues not just abstract concepts in our hearts love demonstrated in practical service hope demonstrated by Christian diligence faith demonstrated by patience awaiting the inheritance of God's promises and imitating the heroes of faith faith hope and love evidence to some extent in the readers of this letter but yet looking for more for better things verse 9 says even though we speak in this way of harsh warning beloved we are confident of better things in your case things that belong to salvation faith hope and love yes he sees glimmers of them evident in their lives but is urging them to keep on and produce more fruit rather than drift how is faith increased by the scriptures of God speaking to us reiterating his promises and showing

God's reliability to keep those promises how is hope sustained by the scriptures of God speaking to us telling us of the glories of heaven to stimulate and nurture and nourish our hope so that we produce diligent Christian lives to the end how is love produced through the scriptures of God speaking to us of his love for us in Christ that stimulates our own love for him and our love for the saints in practical service faith hope and love stimulated by being attentive to God's word moving on from spiritual milk to spiritual solid food moving on to becoming skilled in the word of righteousness growing up in God's word Christian milk may sustain Christian infants but Christian infants do not develop the Christian muscle that is needed to sustain this Christian life to the end Christian infants don't have the moral resilience to withstand the temptations that our world throws at us all the time Christian infants are not trained for

[30 : 29] Christian endurance and perseverance yes Christian milk may sustain Christian infants but it makes in the end Christians weak and inadequate diet weak Christians vulnerable to drifting vulnerable to temptation vulnerable to caving in vulnerable to apostasy vulnerable to losing hope and losing faith and not practicing love and coming to the point of no return let us then heed the warnings of these verses let us move on to maturity building on the foundation with spiritual solid food so that our faculties are trained to distinguish good from evil so that we are skilled in the word of righteousness so that we realise the full assurance of hope to the very end of our lives so that we don't become sluggish but so that we imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises of God Amen that we are implementing our mission to affirmation amen that we lack ■ a bond absolutely good yeah■■■■■