

The Necessity to be Skilled in the Word of Righteousness Hebrews 5:11-6:12

I. Intro

- A. The author of the book of Hebrews in the first 5 and a half chapters, as David mentioned a couple of weeks ago, spoke to his audience about the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is the superior revelation of God; he is superior to the angels; he is superior to Moses and Joshua and in chapters 4 and 5 he is superior to the OT Levitical priests.
1. Then all of a sudden he pauses his teaching on the priesthood of Jesus and says his readers have become dull of hearing (5:11)– sluggish (6:12). He implies they are immature in their faith and like children (5:12-14). In other parts of the book he says they are “drifting” (2:1); he quotes an OT passage that talks about believers who “shrink back” (10:39); and they are near to the point of apostasy (6:6,9).
 2. The author of the book pauses his teaching on the priesthood of Jesus and gets after his readers because their hope in Jesus is not what it should be. They no longer seem to be living by faith, but rather under the pressures of society, they are living more by sight. They were living by what was immediately in front of them rather than what God promised would be theirs down the road.
 - a. Look at **Heb 12:11-12** – “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees”
 - b. The author is calling them to start living by faith again. They were living by what they saw and what they felt. They let the temporary difficulties they were facing take precedence over the eternal benefits of the gospel. And that is not what faith is.
 - c. These Hebrew believers saw the world around them. They saw and experienced suffering. They did not see Jesus and his kingdom and all of its glory (2:8). They did not see the promised rest. They were living by sight and feelings rather than faith.
- B. Now how does something like that happen? How do Christians get to the place where we live by sight and feelings rather than faith? Well, I think the author tells us in Heb 5:13-14. His readers were unskilled in the world of righteousness. They were unable to distinguish between right and wrong.
1. When they were challenged in their faith by their experiences or by the society they lived in - they did not know **how to take the Scriptures** and reason their way through the challenge. They did not know how to **take the promises and character of God** and see how reliable God truly is. They did not apply themselves to see just **who Jesus is and how who he is and what he did** makes a difference in our life and gives us hope. And so when the challenges of life came to them, they were like children who just did not know what to do.
 2. The threats and promises in the early part of chapter 6 were not given to tell the Hebrews they were in danger of losing their salvation. We mentioned that a few weeks ago. Instead they were given for the single purpose of motivating the Hebrews to faith – to maturity in their faith. And that is what they needed.

3. They needed to mature in their faith so they could take God's word and their knowledge and relationship with Jesus and figure out how to face the challenges before them. .
- II. Gwen and I watched a movie on Netflix a few weeks ago. (Also available for free on Pluto TV and \$3.99 through other streaming services.) The name of the movie is "God's not Dead". The movie is fiction. The story line is that a college philosophy professor requires his students to sign a statement at the beginning of the class that declares "God is Dead". One student said he could not sign it, and so he is required to defend his faith.
- A. Now, I don't think a professor has ever required his class to sign such a statement or defend his faith like the movie portrayed. But, the whole idea that God is Dead or that belief in God is no longer credible today is very much a belief of the culture out there and an influence in the thinking and lives of people. It even pushes Christians and some end up like the Hebrews in our text. The result is that their faith succumbs to the idea that God just might be dead and our faith is nothing more than a baseless wish.
 - B. The reason Christians sometimes find themselves floundering in their faith – sluggish as our author says – is because we have not become skilled in the word of righteousness – we are not able to discern right from wrong when our culture challenges us. We have simply reached the entry point of our faith – repentance from dead works, baptism, a general belief in heaven, but have not gone any further with God's word.
 - C. The author of our book wants his readers to grow and be ready to face the challenges we find in the world around us. He wants us to maintain and grow in our faith even when we face opposition and things get tough.
- III. Now, while the Netflix movie is fiction, the notion that there are some college professors who teach that God is dead or he never existed is certainly not fiction. (There are also many college professors who believe in God and profess faith in Jesus. We have some in our class.) But, I watched a YouTube video the other day of a Harvard professor, Steven Pinker and his lecture was titled: Can Science Tell Us Right From Wrong?¹ I mentioned this video last week. And he answers the question with "Yes and No".
- A. Right after he gives that "yes/no" answer, he asks if religion can tell us right from wrong. And he has in mind specifically and mostly Christianity based his examples. And his answer here is no. Not even a "yes/no". He says no. He gives the following reasons.
 1. He begins with a definition of faith. He says if our religious knowledge is faith based and he defines what faith is - "faith is believing something for which we have no good reason to believe it" - if that is what faith is then we should not believe what faith has to say about right and wrong because there is no good reason to believe it.
 - a. And the audience applauds.
 2. What he has done here is define faith. What do you think of his definition? His definition would mean that we believe that there is a God and Jesus rose from the dead without any good reason to believe such a thing. That is not at all what our faith is. None of us believe that God exists unless we have some good reason to do so. Who believes something is true without some good reason to do so?
 - a. That audience believes it would be us. I wonder what evidence Pinker has for his belief about what our faith is or what good evidence the audience has for their belief about our view of faith.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sJ9YFGP8vw

- b. None. That is a false definition of faith. When Hebrews 11:1-3 says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” our author does not mean by this that our faith creates realities. Pinker is saying by his definition that we Christians walk around saying to ourselves – “I believe something for no good reason, therefore it is true.” “I believe that there is a God, but I don’t have any good reason to believe that, but my faith makes God real.” That is not at all what our faith is. That is ridiculous.
 - c. Our faith is not a wish projection. It has evidence and sound reason behind it. When we say we have faith that God exists we have good reason to believe that.
 - (a) The author to Hebrews by his definition of faith gives us a number of evidenced reasons. Here is one from Heb 11. When he says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” he does not mean that there is no reason to believe in God, but, hey, I have faith and that assures me that he exists.
 - (b) No. It is the other way around. God exists and where we in the rebellion and sin in our hearts don’t want to believe it, God sends his Holy Spirit into our life and convinces us by sound reasoning and evidence that he exists and as a result of that we have faith. That is how faith is an assurance. The reality – God - gives us the faith to believe.
 - d. How many Christian testimonies have you heard or read where the person whose life is changed and they now profess faith in Christ begins with them being opposed to the gospel – opposed to God – an atheist? CS Lewis. Just to name 1 we are all familiar with.
 - e. I was given a book a couple of years ago from Garrett. It was written by Anthony Flew – the world’s most notorious atheist. He changed his mind about the existence of God. He corresponded with NT Wright about Jesus and found what he had to say as new and fresh. I don’t know where he was with the Lord when he passed away. But to get to this point – for the most notorious atheist to change his mind about what had been his life’s work – and believe that the world around us “can only be explained in terms of the existence of God”² is not natural. Such belief – such a change – is best explained by God’s existence and work in his life.
 - f. And that is the same with each of us. When we humble ourselves and repent and ask God to forgive us and we believe that Jesus Christ makes it possible for our sins to be atoned and we see our lives changed – the best explanation is God is at work in our life. Our faith is the result of God’s work and is the assurance for us that Jesus Christ is who he says he is.
- IV. A second objection that Pinker has to the Christian faith and why he believes that we cannot go to the Bible to discern right from wrong is due to the fact that he says the Bible sanctions all kinds of barbaric and immoral behavior. One of the practices that he mentions in passing is slavery. He does not go into depth here, but he implies that the Bible teaches that “Africans are innately inferior and subservient” and goes on to say, “we know from a scientific mindset that that is incorrect.”
- A. Pinker is not the only one who makes this argument. It is a common argument against Christianity by non-believers. The charge is basically this – How can we believe in a sovereign God who would sanction slavery and the belief that Africans are innately inferior creatures and therefore it is ok to enslave them?

² There is A God – Anthony Flew p.161

- B. The first response to this objection has to be that some in the church, particularly in the South where we are from and even our state of SC through such theologians as James H. Thornwell, who lived prior to the Civil War and died in its midst, taught such things. And others did too. There is no backing out of that. No getting around it.
 - 1. And many in the church bought into this theology and some still do.
 - 2. There is a good deal of repentance that needs to take place.
- C. However, there is a distinction between what some Christians believe and what the Bible actually teaches. And there is a distinction between what the Bible teaches and what non-believers say it teaches.
 - 1. Here is where we need to become skilled in the word of righteousness. Set aside our preconceived ideas and let the word of God direct our thinking and lives.
- D. Pinker is right in saying that segments of the church taught that Africans are innately inferior. But that is not what the Scripture teaches.
 - 1. I think the clearest place to see this is in **Job 31:13-15** where Job says if he rejects the cause of his manservant or maidservant when they complain against me what will I do when God rises up? Did he not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?
 - 2. Job is covering a lot of ground here. Male and Female. Male servants and female servants. And notice what he is saying. The God who made me in the womb also made them. There is no distinction. No inferiority.
 - 3. Instead there is a sameness – a unity that exists between male and female; between those who serve and the one who is being served. Job says: Did not one fashion “us”. There is no distinction between male and female. Servant and free. We don’t have to wait until we get to Gal 3:28 to get that. Job was probably the earliest OT book that was written. So, right from the start the idea is that we are all made by God and made in his image.
 - 4. Christians need to be able to make the distinction between what some Christians teach and what the Bible actually teaches. Pinker might know from a scientific mindset that Africans are not innately inferior. But the Bible said it long before science ever figured it out. Part of maturing in our faith is knowing what the Bible actually teaches so we are not tossed around by people who tell us things that simply are not true.
- E. There are other passages dealing with this subject that non-believers say gives us reason not to trust the Scripture, but I have run out of my time this morning to deal with them. One of those passages is Exodus 21:20-21. I will let you look at it. The charge is that the Bible condones the beating of a slave and that is barbaric – immoral. Therefore the Bible can’t be trusted to tell us right from wrong.
- V. Here is my point this morning. When we go out into the world, when your kids and grandkids go out into the world as Christians, it is our responsibility to see to it that they go out prepared and we go out prepared so we don’t find ourselves where the Hebrew Christians found themselves – immature and unskilled in the word of righteousness.
 - A. I Peter 3:15 tells us to always be ready to make a defense of our faith to anyone who calls us to account for the hope within us. And to do it with gentleness and reverence. The “to anyone” part of that means that it is not just an intellectual defense, but a personal one.

1. I hope our SS class does not end and we just leave and wait until next week, but rather it encourages each of us to think and grow with hearts of compassion so we can minister Christ to those around us.