

12 October 2008

GET OUT OF THE DANGER ZONE!

Reading: Hebrews 5:11-6:12

It is possible to get stuck in your Christian life. You come to know the Lord and you make progress. Then, for one or other reason, your progress is arrested. "Stagnation" may be too strong a word for it, but one simply settles down and stops moving forward.

Oliver Cromwell had a motto, written in Latin, in his pocket Bible. It read, "*Qui cessat esse melior cessat esse bonus* – Whoever ceases to be better ceases to be good." We cannot be certain why he chose to carry that particular statement with him wherever he went, but it makes a valid point. In a way, that maxim goes to the heart of the teaching of the passage before us.

When we see the passage in context, it is both sobering and encouraging. I think we can sum it up in four terse, two-word imperatives:

- Grow up!
- Move on!
- Watch out!
- Take heart!

I. FIRST OF ALL, "GROW UP!"

Of course, this can be said in a scathing, insulting way, like "Grow up!" Then it means something like "Act your age," or "Don't be so pathetic!" But that's not the way the Writer was using the term or the way we are using it this morning. It is rather a plea, an appeal to people about whom the Writer cared deeply.

A. Hindered

He is getting into full stride. Step by step he has built his case. Now, he has reached a crucial point in his explanation, and he has something wonderful to explain to his first readers and to us. But he stops. Listen to him:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand (5:11).

I want to tell you more, but (literally) "dull you have become in the hearing."

B. Infancy is great . . . for infants.

One of the things I am enjoying is seeing children develop. There are quite a few who come forward at the Kids' Moment, and they seem to grow so quickly. I don't want to single any out, but I probably know Judah best of all, because he is the son of one of my colleagues. It's been a real treat to see him and now to hear him as he begins to talk. (I have particular sympathy for preachers' kids because they are expected to be paragons of virtue. How can they possibly be perfect when they have to play with the deacons' kids?) I can see that it is music to Andrew's ears when Judah comes looking for him, announcing his presence as he calls out, "Daddy, Daddy!" I guess we can all remember how special it was when we first heard "Momma" or "Dada." But Judah is growing up. One day his voice will break and he will grow stubble on his face. At that stage, a low-pitched, "Dada" will not sound so charming. Infancy is all right for infants, but it would be disconcerting to hear the same infantile tone from a fifteen-year-old.

C. A holistic approach

The Writer here adopts a holistic approach. He knows his readers need to be encouraged and warned, but he will not settle for a superficial exhortation and admonition. He is so balanced. He knows they need teaching. And the same holds good today. There are unhelpful extremes. Some want to accumulate knowledge as if it were an end in itself. Far more want a superficial "hand to mouth" Christianity. They would rather not think about their faith. Their approach is: "Tell me what to do. Help me with my immediate problem."

John Stott, as many of you know, is one of my favourite authors. In his presidential address, at the 1972 in the Intervarsity Fellowship Annual Conference, he commenced his address with the words:

Nobody wants a cold, joyless, intellectual Christianity. But does this mean that we should avoid intellectualism at all costs? Is it experience rather than doctrine that really matters?

In this outstanding address, he argued that we should neither disparage intellect nor neglect it, but that we should keep it in its God-appointed place, fulfilling its God-appointed role. The full text of address is contained in a booklet entitled, *Your Mind Matters*. In it he argues for a balanced Christianity, in which we love the Lord, our God, with all our heart and all our soul and all

our mind (Matt 22:37). We need to know what we believe and why we believe it.

D. “Now I understand”

One of my previous colleagues impressed me as a pastor, but I was unaware of what had happened to him at theological college. Before embarking on his theological studies, he'd had a warm, experientially-rich faith. He loved God and God was always there for him. Studying theology was a shock to his system. English was not his first language and the core textbook in our Systematic Theology course was a thousand-page tome that contained small print and long words. It seemed to complicate unnecessarily what had always been straightforward. The admixture of philosophy left him stone cold. So he went to see the principal and complained. The principal told him that the study of theology could actually be enjoyable, but he wasn't buying that. So he explained to him that feelings come and feelings go, and that a day may come when he needed to know not only what he believed but also why he believed it.

Little did he know how soon that day would arrive. A week later, Pieter (the student) received a call from the play school that his five-year-old daughter attended. There had been an accident; she had been hit on the head by a swing. Shortly after his arrival, despite efforts to revive her, she was gone. This distraught dad stood over the body of his little daughter in shock and in disbelief. Alongside him was the principal, holding him as his sobs caused his body to convulse. At a time like that, words can do more harm than good. After a while Piet looked up at the principal and said, through his tears, “Doc, now I understand what you were talking about.” In his pain and confusion, he needed to know the basis on which he believed.

Please God, may you never have to face such a crisis, but there are times when we need to be grounded. The day comes when your circumstances change and a mindless Christianity will not suffice.

E. There are other reasons as well. Listen to the passage:

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! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (6:12-14).

When we grow up:

1. We move from milk to solid food.
2. From mere consumption to contribution,
3. From vulnerability to stability.

This enables us to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and truth from error. In the words of Paul,

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ (Eph 4:14-15).

So, in the best possible sense, we need to “grow up.” This flows naturally into the next terse imperative.

II. “MOVE ON!”

A. Relaying the foundations and getting “stuck”

As a child I tended to go through numbers of coloring-in books. The reason for this is that the moment my crayon moved across the line I, I figured I had spoiled the picture and discarded the page. I tend to do the same with languages. Instead of moving on and making mistakes I keep going back to the early chapters. I’ve had to do Hebrew and Greek and that was a time-consuming exercise. I’ve had a crack at Zulu, Latin, Dutch, German, and even at French, and I’m not too good at any of them. My French is even worse--much worse--than Stephan Dion’s English. That’s because I kept re-laying the foundations instead of moving on.

B. Again and again

Some of the readers were doing in their spiritual lives what I was doing with my coloring-in books and languages. They were not moving beyond the basics. They emphasized factors that belong to the *beginning* of the Christian life. They focussed on matters such as “repentance from acts that lead to death, faith in God, instruction about baptisms (cleansing rites), the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”

These “foundations” are the foundations of *the Christian life*. It has been argued, quite correctly, that they could refer to aspects of Jewish religion, since all of the things mentioned here were known to religious Jews. But it is more natural in this context to see them as the

rudiments of Christian life. Some Jewish Christians could well have found it congenial to stay with those aspects of their faith that most resembled their previous Jewish practice, instead of moving on and increasing the distance between themselves and their compatriots.

They were a little like some of the sincere people I observed as a young Christian. On every Sunday night we had a "Gospel service," complete with an altar call (appeal). Sunday morning was more of a teaching service. A number of people regularly went forward almost every Sunday night. The "omnibus" appeal made this possible, since some were coming for salvation (and many did), others re-dedication, a few as backsliders, and many for "a fresh touch from the Lord." One could not help but feel that some, at least, were relaying the foundations again and again, instead of moving on and "being taken forward to maturity."

C. Listen to the strong appeal

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (6:1-2).

D. There's more

These rudiments are, of course, essential. But there's so much more. Why should we confine ourselves to the shallows? If that's where you are, let me encourage you to move on. Embark upon an exciting journey of discovery. Learn more about God's character, his plan of salvation. Experience the riches of his Word. Be amazed at the great saving purpose unfolded from the first book of the Bible to the last. As you integrate God's truth into your life, you can grow in wisdom and discernment as well as in graciousness.

There's an exciting world of discovery when we venture on. *We often hear a verse quoted at memorial services. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him . . ."* If we read it carefully, we realise that it refers to the present. The passage continues: *but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9).* As we discover God's truth and integrate it into our lives, we can and should go from strength to strength.

There are several reasons that we need to move on. One is that by dallying in the shallows, we expose ourselves to unnecessary danger. So the Writer issues a chilling warning (third imperative):

III. "WATCH OUT!"

A. This is admittedly a difficult passage.

There are, at least, three ground rules that we should apply when we seek to interpret *any* passage of Scripture, especially one that is open to more than one interpretation:

1. Each passage should be read and understood *in context* (the immediate context of the passage; its place in the book as a whole; the Bible in its entirety).
2. We should not resort to "*hermeneutical acrobatics*" (an unnatural interpretation that imposes our general conclusions on the passage at hand).
3. *The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.* If we have to do all sorts of contortions, it is usually because we are on the wrong track. Many a convoluted explanation is occasioned by the fact that we read Scripture as if it were a text book of doctrine, treating isolated statements as if they were stand-alone assertions of doctrine. Balanced doctrinal conclusions are the result of a study of the whole of Scripture

A. Pastoral concern (the readers were feeling the pressure)

It is clear that the Writer feels pastoral concern for his readers. They are under huge pressure to compromise to their own detriment. The consequences of following Jesus were all too evident. Under such circumstances, one can easily get things out of perspective. Temporal considerations loom large. So he wants them to step back with him and see their situation for what it is.

B. Intense pressure: then and now

While pastoring in Cape Town I met a Jewish Christian student. She had come to accept Jesus as her Lord and Messiah during her university days and had grown remarkably as a Christian. Her move back to her parental home in Durban (about 1500 km. away) coincided with our move to the region. A few weeks after our arrival, she came to visit us. She had reached a crossroads in her life. It was relatively easy for her to follow Christ as a student in residence, surrounded by Christian friends, and nurtured in a good church. When she returned, her parents and old friends were horrified and insulted to discover that she had been influenced to turn her back on her entire

network of family and acquaintances and had denied her very identity (that's how they saw it, not how she saw it).

She was having second thoughts. Her parents had taken her to see the rabbi of the synagogue that the family attended. He had explained how Christians misapplied Old Testament passages and had deceived her. He was well educated and articulate, as most rabbis are, and he presented Christianity as a dangerous perversion, all right for Gentiles but tantamount to idolatry for Jews. It was, in effect, a false religion.

Well, Sharon was in reassessment mode, and we agreed to go to a symposium conducted by the Ramakrishna Society at the University of Natal. The subject: "Mysticism as the means of discovering the commonality in all religions." The multi-faith panel comprised a Hindu swami, a Muslim imam, a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi. And, to our surprise, the rabbi was none other than the rabbi who had attempted to talk her out of her Christian faith. In this pluralistic context, he cut a different figure; he was Mr. Tolerance, accepting the validity of all religions as legitimate ways to the Creator. The contrast between his approach in private and in public helped settle matters for Sharon. He would not have seen the inconsistency, but she did.

But the conflict she had felt was very real. Her situation was not that different from that of the early Hebrew Christians. And, in different ways, many of us feel the pressure and are tempted to compromise. How important it is to be established in the faith!

C. For those having second thoughts, it is important to understand the implications of renouncing Christ.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

D. The Writer is not saying: "God takes umbrage and writes us off."

It's not as though we cross a line, God gets fed up with us and says, "Now, you've had it. I am so offended that I am not going to let you

come back because of the insult I have sustained." The impossibility of repentance is on account of the fact that we have consciously renounced and rejected the one way of salvation God has provided.

E. Get out of the Danger Zone!

1. The danger zone is the area of compromise.
2. When, for whatever reason, you decide to stay where you are, you are in the danger zone. At the very least, you make life difficult for yourself

Fortunately the passage doesn't end here. He encourages us to:

IV. TAKE HEART

A. Having considered the most frightening consequence of repudiating one's faith, the Writer expresses the conviction that his readers will not take this disastrous course of action.

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with 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. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

B. He is, in effect, saying, "You have already given evidence that your faith is genuine."

C. So, why make your own life difficult? And why confine yourself to the shallows? There is so much to discover and so much to enjoy.

D. Resolve to do whatever is necessary.

1. You may need to join a small group.
2. It may be time for some of us to purposefully do something that will help your head as well as your heart, to deepen your understanding of the faith.

3. This may mean finding a mentor, enrolling for a course, getting back to that Bible reading program, rearranging your schedule to make time for your devotional life.
4. Whatever you do, *get out of the danger zone*.
5. Never think you have "arrived."
6. There's always more, more to learn, more to experience, more to enjoy.

Conclusion

"Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity."