

Hebrews - Part 3

by Richard Owen Roberts

A Christ-centered church must maintain its focus on Christ and beware of Satan's attempts to draw attention away from Him, lest it drift away and become dull of hearing.

Duration: 1:21:09

Scripture: Hebrews 6:4

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Gratitude"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of gratitude and thanksgiving in all circumstances, highlighting the need for a spirit of gratitude even in times of great difficulty. It also discusses the extraordinary work of the Spirit of God in a church in Little Rock, urging listeners to seek a Christ-centered life and church. The sermon delves into the warning passages in Hebrews, addressing the dangers of drifting away, hardening the heart, and being dull of hearing, emphasizing the need for repentance and true growth in Christ. It concludes with an exhortation to be diligent, imitating those who faithfully follow Christ.

Transcript

We need to thank the Lord whenever extraordinary blessings occur, and we need to thank him whenever great difficulty is upon us. We need to thank him in everything, and none of us are very good at that. Some of us are learning the spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving, but I doubt that any of us would like to stand to our feet and boast at how well we've been doing in the area of gratitude.

But we are living in truly extraordinary times, and we don't know what is really going to take place over the long haul. But just in the event some of you have not been alert to it, I want to share a simple truth about the church in Little Rock, the summer church, which has been experiencing an extraordinary stirring of the Spirit of God over the last month. Some of you are aware of this, and others of you perhaps are not.

But wouldn't it be wonderful if in addition to the regular blessings received here in this place on a day-to-day basis, there should come that extraordinary quickening of the Lord that begins then to impact the community and the region in a powerful way. Some of you know that my tie with this church came about principally because of the tie with Pastor John. John was in attendance at a conference in Little Rock years ago at the First Baptist Church, at a meeting called NACOR, the North American Convocation on Revival.

John and I in those years had numerous talks and serious talks about the immense need of a movement of the Spirit of God. Now the pastor who was at First Baptist resigned because of some of the incredible built-in difficulties in that church, and he started this new church called the Summer Church. But the first of the year they began holding first Monday night prayer meetings, and the fourth month God met with them in an extraordinary way.

So they have been meeting prayer every night, three, four hours each night, and many have been wonderfully converted, and the genuine work of grace is underway. I hope that all of you who are burdened and concerned that the Spirit of God might once again be poured out on our land and on our churches. I've been thinking about this simple question.

What does a really healthy church look like? Well, we could think in terms of the Book of Acts, and we'd have a wonderful picture, but I'd like to ask you to take hold of that question now. What does a really healthy church look like? Well, certainly we would have to say a healthy church is a church where Christ is at the very center. And isn't it wonderful, and thank God for this truth.

That has been the vision of this church from the beginning. A Christ-centered church. Now many churches think they are Christ-centered, but indeed often the choir is the center, or the preacher is the center, or the recreational center of the church is the center of everything.

Relatively few churches actually have Christ as the center, and maintaining the centrality of Christ in the church is not a simple matter. When the entire life of the church is built around Christ himself, where no program, no activity has any focus whatsoever, just Christ, Christ alone. No methods utilized, no messages proclaimed, just Christ, Christ alone.

Where all the leaders are Christ-centered, all the people Christ-centered. That has been the vision of this church, and by the grace of God to a significant degree. God has permitted that to be the focus.

But I wonder how many of us realize when that is the focus, you become the enemy, or the devil's greatest enemy. The devil has no problem with religion. Religious people and religious institutions are his greatest ally.

But Christ is his greatest foe. And the people who are centered in Christ are his greatest foes. That means that the church that is truly centered on Christ is sooner or later in for a lot of trouble.

If Satan can turn the eye away from Christ, it doesn't much matter what else takes place. It's not going to be very consequential. So it appears to me that while every church and every believer ought to be incredibly interested in the book of Hebrews, I believe Christ's church, this church, has more reason to be deeply concerned about Hebrews and about the warning passages in Hebrews that we are looking at this week.

Now as I mentioned to you yesterday, it doesn't really matter whether you count 5 or 6 or 7 and each of those numbers has been thought to be correct. What matters is that we get the message. Now yesterday morning we were looking at the first warning passage about drifting away.

And God's, this church, has not drifted away. But it could very easily. It appears to me that you're at a very precarious point.

You've got this lovely building well underway, perhaps very soon it will be completed. There will be the danger of more focus coming to the building than to Christ. It's very easy to drift away from a Christ-centered life and a Christ-centered church.

So all of us have got to be deeply burdened about maintaining the centrality of Christ in the life of the church. Last evening we were looking at the second warning passage. The warning about hardening the heart.

The Iphio autobiography were written. Your spiritual autobiography. How many times in the course of your spiritual life up till now have some measure of hardness of heart entered again? These are obviously not times that we boast about.

These are times that we're ashamed of. And yet, hardness of heart does happen. Some of you are aware that some 35 years ago I was asked by the Billy Graham Association to move to Wheaton, Illinois and to participate in the putting together of what at that time was being called the Graham Center.

That invitation I accepted. I had been earlier invited by the Graham Association in fact the year that Maggie and I were married. I was invited to become the ghostwriter for Billy Graham.

I thank God that didn't come about. But when the second invitation came to join the work at Wheaton I felt it was appropriate and I went there. Certain agreements were made between the Graham Association, Wheaton College, and myself.

Those agreements were violated. And as a result of the violation of those agreements I lost my own personal library. When that happened I grew very, very angry.

First, with the men who deceived me. Then I became very angry at God for letting them deceive me. Then I became even more angry at myself for being angry with men and angry with God.

I was just in a huge turmoil and gripped with this terrible spirit of anguish and anger. I learned hardness of heart. This subject is not one that I know nothing about.

I know more about the subject of backsliding than anybody ought to know. I've joked about it but many of the places I go insist on referring to me as doctor which is totally invalid. I have no degree.

And many times I have spoken up and corrected them, urged them to stop using that term in connection with me. Finally, one time I said, I've only got one earned doctorate. That's in backsliding.

I thought maybe that would head off, that continually attaching a degree to me that I do not deserve. But I'm asking you folks to be honest. Things happen to us that we do not anticipate.

And we do sometimes grow very angry at God and angry at others and angry at ourselves. Personally, I thank the Lord for that experience. I did not at the time.

But soon thereafter I learned what an incredible experience of benefit it was for me. Because you see in the process of that I realized something that I had not had any notion of. When I was a boy of 12, I was profoundly converted.

And almost immediately felt a call to preach. And the call that I felt in particular was to preach as an itinerant and to focus on the subject of revival. Which I did, the yearning.

But when this incident happened to me that I have just made brief reference to, I realized that while I was still talking about revival, a deep interest and burden that had started in my heart had risen to my head. I was, in a certain sense, a walking encyclopedia of revival information. But if two of you had gotten together and said, let's invite Mr. Roberts to a prayer meeting on revival, I would have found some way to sneak out of that.

The hardening of the heart often happens in a way that we are completely unaware of. If someone said to us, it looks to me like you've got a hard heart, we would deny it with the evidence. We'd be certain that it would be an unfair statement.

And yet it might very well be true. I'm simply trying to emphasize the fact that these warning passages are relevant to us. As we noted in the passage last evening, there is the corporate responsibility for one another.

And thank God that there are situations where courageous people are confrontational and do urge others to take a careful look at their heart. And certainly a week of special meetings like this is a splendid time for us to be challenged and to ask ourselves with honesty, has any hardness of heart happened in me? The third of these warning passages, one that we read this evening and will focus upon now, deals with the issue of our hearing. The opening verse of the warning, verse 11, chapter 5. Concerning him, we have much to say.

And it is hard to explain, since you have become dogs of hearing. He's making particular reference to Melchizedek. And the portions dealing with Melchizedek are immensely consequential.

But we will not deal with them tonight, because they are not really consequential to our facing this warning. But let me put it to you in the form of a question addressed to your own heart. Are you in any fashion suffering from dogmas of hearing? I mentioned last evening, just in passing, that my own hearing physically is not as sharp as it used to be.

And often when my wife and daughter are visiting together in my presence, it would take a very considerable strain on my part to hear what they're saying. So I just tune them out. And then, very often in the midst of that, they'll ask me what I think about that.

And I will have to go, oh, I wouldn't pay any attention to what they're saying. Well, I couldn't hear without straining. There are times in our lives when spiritually we can't hear without straining.

Our Lord spoke to that issue in a very significant way. He spoke twice about hearing. On one occasion he said, take heed how you hear.

On another occasion he said, take heed what you hear. Let's look at those two urgent statements. Number one, take heed how you hear.

There are times when you can't help yourself. In fact, there are times when the conversation is going on that we don't even want to listen to, that the people who are engaged in the conversation are talking in such a loud voice, we can't miss it. We'd have to run and hide.

I had the most perplexing illustration of that come to my attention. In a conference for pastors, the pastor asked if he could speak with me personally. And so we found a quiet place.

And he said to me, I am in an incredible difficulty. I need some help. I said, what's that? Well, he told me he was a pastor somewhere here in the south and that the leadership of the church hated him and were making his life very difficult and miserable.

Then, to his utter astonishment, in a leadership meeting of the church one night, they announced that they were going to send the pastor and his wife on a tour to Israel at their expense. He could not imagine what provoked that change of heart. But he felt this deep gratitude, well, at last, they're over this mean business spirit.

But shortly after they made that public announcement, he was in the cult room at the church, hanging up his coat. And he realized two of these men were in conversation on the other side of the partition. And they were saying, shall we let the entire deacon board know or shall we limit it just to those that we can trust? He had no idea what they were talking about.

And one of the two said, well, we are hoping that both the pastor and his wife will be killed on their trip to the Holy Land. But it might not be safe to tell everybody that and to ask them to pray with us. It would probably be safer just to tell the men that we can trust.

And that poor fellow was asking me, what am I supposed to do in a situation like this? Well, we often hear things that are astonishing, things we wish we didn't hear, but nonetheless, it happened. But also, often, when we should hear something of incredible importance, we're not paying attention. We have our minds somewhere else.

So our Lord says, take heed what you hear. To what extent would you say concerns the Son that you pay very strict attention to what you hear, that you never miss what the Lord is saying to you, that you are very careful indeed about what you listen to. Obviously, there are things we need to hear.

There are things that if we hear them, they will do us damage. A great deal of what is on the television cannot possibly profit us. It is guaranteed to do us harm.

To what extent are we paying attention to what we hear? In all of life, are we following the command of our Savior? Take heed what you hear. And clearly, if you're taking heed to what you hear, if it includes the command from the Lord himself, then you're not just hearing the command, but doing it. But this is how he also used the expression, take heed how you hear.

And I believe that that means that when we hear a word from the Lord, we diligently seek to know the precise application of what the Lord has said to us. Again, being utterly candid, there have been times when I've listened to very provocative sermon. Shrugged my shoulders, did nothing about that.

I'm simply urging you to get now into gear in thinking about the passage in front of us. We are faced with the question, Have I in any realms of my life been dull of hearing? When there have been critically urgent things that I should have responded to, have I in any fashion been careless in my response? Now let me take a moment just to outline what we have in front of us, and then let us pay close attention to this passage before us. So, with your Bible open, clearly the last few verses of chapter 5, are verses focused on the impact of dull hearing on a person's life.

If you are dull of hearing, at that time in your life when you should have been a strong believer and a teacher of others, you might still be in an infant stage. You might still be on the bottle long after you should have been regularly nourished by strong meat. That's the theme of verses 11 to 14.

The impact of dull hearing on the growth of the believer. What we really have in front of us is the problem of stunted growth because of dullness of hearing. So be honest and ask yourself now, have I grown in Christ to the level of strength that I should have given the circumstances of my life? Now you've been blessed with an incredible amount of truth in this church.

Have you been responsive to the truth that you have heard? Or have you been stunted in your growth because of dullness of hearing? Then in chapter 6, the passage opens by a simple statement that the author does not believe it appropriate for him to do what many churches do today. He says, I am not going to be going back over the elementary issue. Now there are churches that never leave the elementary issue.

As some of you know, Maggie and I have not only been considerably moving out of the Chicago area, but we desperately need to do so. Just our real estate tax is \$26,000 a year. We're having a hard time.

Then our utilities run upwards of \$35,000. I mean, we've got fixed expenses so great that we're sinking. We're wanting debt to be paid.

But we're not clear where we're supposed to move. But this much is absolutely clear to us. We dare not move somewhere where there isn't a strong church.

And you realize that there are thousands of towns in our country where there is no strong church. Why do you think my friends, Mitchells, come over this way? You think it's because they're mad at their pastor? They're being starved to death in the area of the country where they live. And that's true in multitudes of places across the country.

Multitudes of places that still believe the gospel but focus on the elementary principles and never get beyond them. Thank God in this church you've got a whole lot more than the elementary principles. I trust that you appreciate it to the level that you are.

But several verses devoted to that. Then he moves into an area which has tripped up an awful lot of people. And one that we must look at this evening.

Starting at verse 4. In the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come and then have fallen away it is impossible to renew them again to repentance since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put him to an open shed. And that passage, perhaps more than any other passage in the New Testament, has aroused both curiosity and confusion. We'll have a look at it this evening.

But then the next part, verses 7 and 8, describe through the illustration of nature the impact of those who profit from the word and those who do not. And then the warning ends at verse 9 through 12 with an exhortation. So let's look as carefully as time permits at this passage.

I said to begin with that a church that is deliberately Christ-centric is the specific enemy of Satan. And therefore extraordinary care must be taken so that Satan has no impact upon the church. A few of you have read the first book that I wrote, Revival.

And in that book I described a very significant issue which is relative to what we're faced with tonight. I ask the question in the book, what does Satan have to do to destroy a revival? And the answer, very simply, a

revival is a time when all eyes are focused on Christ. To destroy a revival, all Satan has to do is to draw the focus away from Christ.

It doesn't really matter where the eyes turn. Once they're off of Christ, the revival is over. Well, you can see the relevancy now to this passage.

If the eyes of everyone in this fellowship are fixed on Christ, this, by God's grace, is a Christ-centered church. But if the eyes can be drawn from Christ to somebody or something, then the church is no longer healthy. It no longer has the blessing of God upon it.

So again, let me probe a little. May I ask you, as if we were in a one-on-one conversation, to what extent your own eyes are fixed on Christ? That is an answer of incredible importance. Now, as indicated, the last portion of chapter 5, starting at verse 11, let's read it again.

Concerning him, we have much to say. And it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God.

And you have come to need milk, and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a beggar. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good or evil.

So a fundamental question that ought to be asked in connection with the passage is, why are there believers who do not grow up, who remain in the infant stage? Now, many of you are trans, and you personally could probably not imagine anything sadder in your home than to have a newborn infant who week after week, month after month, year after year, remains just that, an infant. When a child remains an infant, it is not only provocative of true sorrow, but inquiry. We ought to ask, why? Why is this child not growing and developing in a normal way? And just as children grow, so believers grow.

And when believers do not grow, then there is this urgent matter to be faced, the question to be asked, the answer to be laid hold of. Is there someone here, who if they spoke with absolute honesty, would acknowledge I haven't grown at all for years? There are lots of those in the church. Is there a possibility that right here, in this lovely congregation, there are those who are still infants, long after they should have become mature, fruit-bearing Christians? And if indeed that's true of anyone here, then it is urgent to know why.

And the answer is clearly, because of dullness of hearing. So I don't want to unduly focus upon this, but yet it would be sheer carelessness on my part to fail to ask, how carefully do you listen to the Word of the Lord? Are you obedient to those two commands of Christ, of which I've already spoken? Do you take care what you hear and how you hear? I'm simply saying, that when the Word of God is proclaimed, and in this church I know that the Word of God is proclaimed. Now some of you I have never seen before this week.

And that says one thing, absolutely. You're relatively new to the church. Because I've been coming here since soon after the church started.

And I have watched with care many of you, and have seen the growth, and have expressed joy and gratitude to the Lord that this is happening. But what if one of you, who should be a mature, fruit-bearing Christian, is still in infant stage? For if that's such a sad thought, so crucial, so absolutely grievous, that we must ask that those here who have been remaining on the bottle, who should have long ago began to

feast on the meat of the Word, will be shaken to the core, and will take heed how they hear, that the accursed blight of their infantile approach to Christianity will cease, and that they will grow up and be strong in the Lord, and grant extraordinary grace to any of those who have been stalled at an entry level in the Christian life. Do a work that brings you glory, in them we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Now friends, I am deeply aware that some people are stalled in an entry level position in the Christian life, because they really have never come to true repentance. I must speak a word about that.

For many of us, our first approach to Christ began out of a very self-centered motive. I regularly talk with people who came to Christ because they heard a sermon about hell and didn't want to go there. Now that's less common today than it used to be, because there are fewer preachers who actually believe the gospel.

And there are some preachers who are peddling atrocious lies, suggesting there is no such thing as eternal punishment, but there is. If you came to Christ out of a selfish motive of seeking to escape hell, you need to be aware of the fact that the true motivation for repentance is not self, but Christ. Let me try to spell this out carefully out of concern for some of you stuck at an entry level position.

If you were to ask seriously the question, what is at the very heart of sin? Have you ever asked that question? What is at the very heart of sin? Suppose that you were to actually set aside some time this week to get alone with the Lord and to ask him, Lord, I want you to show me every sin that has ever existed in my life. I want you to show me, not so that I can torment myself over past sins, but so that I can ask this question, what is at the very heart of my sin life? If you've never done that, I recommend that you do so. I will tell you in advance what you will find.

You will find that the very essence of sin is self. Self is at the center of all of our sin life. Sin is me versus Tracy, or Tracy versus me, or Tracy and me versus you.

Sin has as its center self. Now if my repentance is an act of selfishness, I turn to Christ to escape hell. I turn to Christ to gain heaven.

I turn to Christ because my spouse was unfaithful and deserted me and I'm alone and my life is heavy and weary and I'm tired and I can't go any farther. Those are all selfish motives. Now don't misunderstand me.

True repentance must, for every one of us, begin somewhere. And if it begins on the wrong foot, at least it has started. So the great concern is not what foot did it start on, but where did it start? For this passage is dealing with those persons who, because of dullness of hearing, have been stalled in an entry-level position.

Therefore, it is my duty and my privilege to appeal to you to be sure that your repentance has moved from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness. Every one of us should be able to say, I live a repentant life for Christ's sake, for his glory. But those who are stalled in infant stages are normally those persons who, if they have any repentance at all, have a repentance that has stalled at that point of self-centeredness.

So again, the probing question, are there any persons here who should be mature, fruitful believers, who are still on the gospel, still acting like infants? Now look, let me just spell it out in the plainest terms. This passage is speaking about dullness of hearing. If after tonight you remain in an entry-level position, then it is clear you have not paid attention to the word of the Lord.

The Lord is present in self, pleading with us to get altogether serious about the abandonment of self and to become completely Christ-centered in our life. And the failure to do so will mean that you remain in a position which for a mature person is truly deplorable. So be honest with yourself about the possibility of stunted growth.

Now some of us do not grow because while we have a nature of hearing, our hearing is selective. I'm often in conversations with people who clearly have only heard those things they wish to hear. And there are some who are so utterly ridiculous that they make a big fence about being positive.

I've had any number of rebukes in my life. Don't be negative. Just be positive.

Christ is not just positive. The Holy Spirit is not just positive. We're told concerning the Holy Spirit when he comes he will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

People get stalled in an entry-level because they only hear the things they want to hear. So again, I'm hoping and praying that that will not be you. I don't know how many of you have experienced this, but candor requires me to acknowledge.

There have been times when I've been in church and I've been so bored that I haven't heard anything that was said. That's not to my credit. But somehow that's the way we are.

There are times when we just simply are paying no attention whatsoever. There are other times when we're in such a careless spirit that we act as if we have the right to determine what is important and what is not. Well, I'll not push this matter any further tonight except to plead with you to be sure that dullness of hearing has not harmed your spiritual life.

Let's go on to this statement in verses 1, 2, and 3 about the elementary teaching. Now he's already made reference to the elementary teaching in chapter 5, verse 12. He simply says now he is not going to go back and lay again the foundations of the elementary teachings of the doctrine of Christ.

And he makes reference to repentance from dead works, to faith toward God, to instruction about washings, to laying on of hands, to the resurrection of the dead, and to eternal judgment. I'm going to join the author of the epistle tonight in doing exactly that, refusing to go back to the elementary principle. We move then to the next section, which is, as I've already acknowledged, a difficult section, one that has caused unnecessary alarm in some, and others who should have been alarmed somehow managed to escape the alarm.

Let's read it and then give some attention to it, starting at verse 4. In the case of those who had once been enlightened and had tasted of the heavenly gift and had been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and had tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put him to an open shed. Now, friends, this passage is not referring to a person who falls into sin. And then feels guilt and shame and repents.

This passage is talking about those who reach that place where they refuse to allow the only Savior there is to save them. We know personally well that there is salvation in none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. So this passage is not speaking about mere backsliders or those who have become dull of hearing.

The way I have spoken tonight, I hope is evident to you that I believe that a person who has been stalled for a long time in an entry-level position can repent and start to grow and bear fruit. But this passage is talking about those who cannot because they have rejected the one and only means that God has provided for their salvation. Now, the language itself, I expect, is partly what confuses some.

So let's take moments to look at the various expressions of this portion. First, those who have once been enlightened or quickened. In Ephesians chapter 1, at verse 18, the Apostle Paul said, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance.

And the author of the Hebrew picks this matter of enlightenment up again in the 10th chapter, verses 26 and 27. If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. And again, chapter 10, verse 32, remember the former days when after being enlightened you endured a great conflict of suffering.

Now, friends, I want to be careful. I certainly don't want in any way to be responsible for confusing anyone. I'm going to make a statement that you may never have heard.

In the book of Hebrews, salvation is an eschatological term. It refers to what is to happen in the church in Jerusalem where I've been preaching for the last 14 months I gave a lengthy series of 25 sermons on the subject of salvation, and at the end he talked about that time when the trumpet will sound, and the angels will gather, and suddenly the Lord will appear in the air, and we shall be changed! We shall be caught up, and mortal will put on immortality, and we shall be made like the one whom we have grown to love. That's salvation, when indeed the Lord gathers us up and carries us to our eternal home.

Our danger is that we refer to a single incident in our life as salvation. We pray a prayer and we say, no, I'm saved. But correctly, if we were to speak with any care, we would say that we are being saved.

I don't like the expression, salvation is a process, because that seems to speak of Roman Catholic notions and things like that. But nonetheless, it's true. Now is our salvation nearer than when we believe, says the Scripture.

So a person who has been enlightened is a person who has had a glimmer of their need, a sense of the importance of Christ, of the urgency of knowing him. But they refuse to go on with the second term that's used here. Those who've been enlightened, those who have tasted of the heavenly gift.

Most of us who've lived in it quite a time have known people well who have tasted of the heavenly gift. I made reference yesterday to an acquaintance of mine of nearly 60 years who stood in a church lobby in Virginia not long ago with tears crossing down his face. He himself, having been first a chaplain in the United States Air Force and then pastor of several of the largest churches in the world, stood there weeping and said to me, is there any hope for me? And I told you last night that said to him, I don't know.

But I do know this, there is no hope unless your plan is broken, unless you are penned before the Lord. Now that fellow has tasted the good things to come. He and I walked and shared the pulpit.

I heard him say many remarkable things that were valid. But it's been a very long time that I've questioned whether he was a true believer because he maintained a perpetual life of sin. I've never known a time when he was not engaged in some adulterous relationship.

So the thrust of this passage is to have had an enlightenment, to have tasted all the good things to come, to have had a measure of the Holy Spirit, but to persist in sin. No, it's impossible, it says, to renew them, to repent them. If I have not really repented of my sin and refused to do so, Christ is not going to come a second time and offer his life.

God is not going to invent some additional way of salvation for the exception. No, one Savior, one crucifixion, one hope. Now personally, I sincerely hope that there's not a single person in this room whose situation is described in these verses about tasting, about partaking, about having to learn at least a notion of the power of the age to come.

But because I don't know, I have to at least beseech everyone to be absolutely certain that you have not to stop at that position where you've had nothing more than a taste. But I want to go to the next portion, and I told you that there is an illustration of nature in verses 7 and 8. The ground that brings the rain, which often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God. But if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

So that brings the issue of the preceding verses right into focus. How do I know if I'm one of those who has merely been enlightened, had a measure of the Spirit, had a taste of the good things to come in the life eternal? How do I know if I'm one of them, or if I am a true Christian? Well, the rain of God's blessing has been falling on your life. And the rain of God's blessing was intended to produce fruit in your life.

Is the fruit there? If, season after season, the blessing of God has fallen upon you and there is no fruit, what, in the name of common sense, is the good of calling yourself a Christian? When a person has truly been born of the Spirit of God, when they have repented and in faith embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as their own Lord and Savior, they produce fruit. Now, we could be silly and suppose that every true believer produces the same level of fruit. But that's what it would be, silly.

No, that's not true at all. There is a huge variation even in opportunity of producing fruit. I want to say the next thing carefully.

My mother was the most proudly woman I've personally, since I proposed to her. She was radically transformed by Christ when I was eight years of age, and she lived out her life as a godly person. But I have seen her deeply troubled at times because there was so little apparent fruit in her life.

Now, dear friend, my mother was precisely that, a mother. She was a quiet and a retiring person. She never preached a sermon in her life.

She had relatively few contacts in the world. It could hardly be expected that she could have produced the same crop of fruit that my father produced. My father was converted at the same time as my mother.

He immediately launched into ministry. He started a ministry in the county poorhouse. The first preaching I did was under my father's auspices as a boy of 12 and 13 in the poorhouse.

My father had already talked. My father was very personable and touched countless lives. He bore more fruit than my mother.

But did that make him a superior Christian? No, of course not. Each of us bears fruit in that region where Christ is placed. Some have conspicuous fruit.

Some have fruit that is very difficult to find. The issue before us is not quantity. The issue is if the blessing of God is falling like the rain upon your life, then there will be fruit.

And it could never be said that my mother bore no fruit. My brother has been a missionary in Africa in the stalwart of the faith. My two sisters have become fervent believers.

My mother bore fruit. I'd say again it was simply not conspicuous that it was there. So I'm asking you, have you been bearing that level of fruit appropriate for the place that God has put you? Is the rain of God's blessing falling upon your life and producing that fruit appropriate to the second? Or has the blessing of God been pouring down upon you in vain? That's what the passage is talking about.

Let's look at the last verses of this warning. Verse 9, Beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, things that accompany salvation. We are speaking in this way.

For God is not unjust, so as to protect your work and the love which you have shown toward his name in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience have had the promise. What a lovely way to end the warning.

To what extent have you deliberately been an imitator of those who have followed Christ with all their heart, with tremendous zeal, have listened with great care, have paid close attention to what they heard and acted upon? It is my deep hope for this church that it will long remain a Christ-centered church. I praise the Lord for the level of Christ-centeredness that is here and has been here. But it's up to us now to see that the Christ-centeredness not only continues but increases so that soon this whole region of the country will know that Christ is truly God, Lord, Savior, blessed Redeemer.

So I end by simply appealing once more, take healing, wipe your hair, and take your heart, you hear. Don't be sluggish, but be a full imitator of all those who inherit the promise. Isn't it wonderful? No matter how far God has enabled us to progress, we can still move on from here.

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