

Sermon 15: Hebrews 6:1-3: Back to Basics

OUTLINE

Repentance and faith
Washings and laying hands
Resurrection and judgement

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard of being an Anonymous Christian? This idea of an anonymous Christian was developed by Jesuit Theologian Karl Rahner in the 20th century, and was influential in Vatican II, and makes up part of modern Catholic belief. The idea is that there could be people who are not Christians, have never heard of Christ, in fact could be practitioners of another religion like Islam or Hinduism. The claim is that these people if they follow the light they have, are actually worshipping God, God saves them by His grace in Christ, and they are in fact Christians though they do not even know it. In other words, you can be saved by Christ without even knowing the basics of the faith. Hence the name anonymous Christian. That you do not need to know God as Trinitarian; or Christ as the sacrifice who pays for your sins. This is a Liberal attempt to try and get around the exclusivism of the Bible, that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, that there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved, that He is the way the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him. And that there is a basic necessity for information of biblical truths to be able to believe. The author of Hebrews does not believe in this idea of someone being able to become a Christian without knowing the basics of the faith. In the portion before us, Heb. 6:1-3 the author is rebuking these Jewish believers for their wavering. In calling them to maturity he talks about the milk they all received when first converted, the elemental and foundational teachings that each one of them heard, that they are not applying to their present problem of feeling pressured to return to Judaism. In these verses he gives us a sample list of what every believer would have been told as part of their coming to faith. The truth is, reminding these believers of what they have in the basics is sufficient to help them ward off the lies, the sense of inadequacy and inferiority, and fears they have due to being persecuted and pressured to going back to the synagogue and departing from Christ. Properly applied remembering these things will help any believer in any situation. So today we are going to do what would be the equivalent of a catechism class that any believer in the early church would have been taught before they confessed their faith in baptism. Our sample list has six items. It is likely that any young convert would be taught on more than this, but these basics have been cherry picked because of their relevance to the particular questions related to Judaism that these believers are facing. As we go through this list, we will take the traditional approach of seeing them as pairs, that repentance and faith are a pair, washings and laying hands are a pair, and resurrection and judgement are a pair.

Repentance and faith

V1, 'Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.' As stated before Christianity is not simply about getting saved and staying where you are at. No, we are saved to grow, to develop in character, good deeds, to the place where we can minister the truth of God to

our own doubts, encourage ourselves with the truth in our trials, standing up to persecutions and hardships by leaning on God and His supplies. Maturity looks like those who know and can apply the truth; who can self-feed; in fact who are able to teach and feed others. Immaturity looks like not being clear about what the basics are, what is repentance, what is faith, etc. Immaturity looks like not being able to apply the truth to the various challenges that come, why should I not go back to temple worship; why do the OT laws concerning cleanness no longer apply, etc. Let's get these basics under our belt then that we can be stable and able to support others. We never leave the basics behind we build on them gaining increasing returns from them, but immaturity is marked by never getting past the basics.

Repentance and faith are the obvious starting points for this list as this is where the Christian life begins. Paul summarizing his gospel preaching in terms of repentance and faith, Acts 20:21, 'testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' Although we do see in the various narratives and summarized sermons of the book of Acts that sometimes, faith is mentioned without repentance and repentance mentioned without faith. These are two sides of one coin. You cannot have true faith without repentance, nor true repentance without faith. The Holy Spirit who effectually calls us and brings us to Christ does two things in every true believer's heart. There is a turning away from sin in returning to God. Those who claim that they are believers and are still clinging to their sin, they have not been born of the Spirit. Likewise the Holy Spirit who is given to glorify Christ always draws our faith to rest on the finished work of Christ. He does not only convict us of sin to leave us to try and make ourselves righteous by how well we repent, no we are drawn to rest upon Christ's finished work for salvation.

Now this list has been calibrated to apply to the pressures this church is facing. So the repentance is explicitly said to be a repentance from dead works. What are these dead works? Sin is something that leads to death, so it would not be far off to say that dead works is another way of speaking about sin. But given the problem with a return to Judaism with its sacrifices, and washings, we cannot exclude acts of religion as dead works. After all Jesus when denouncing the sins of the Pharisees did not denounce their adultery but rather their adultery of the heart; they were not murderers but haters in heart. They were white-washed tombs who kept all the rules outwardly, even adding and keeping some of their own rules. They were hypocrites who were not pure in heart and serving from love, but addicted to the praise of men looking for loopholes in the law. But I would go further and say that dead works is not only talking about religious sins, but the now fulfilled use of the ceremonial laws of the OT. Paul says as much to the Galatians calling the OT feasts they were tempted to return to under the influence of some Judaizers weak and worthless, 'But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years!' now that Christ has come, these are indeed dead works. The OT saint would have benefitted by them, God would have used them as means of grace to bless them, but now they are barren and empty husks replaced and fulfilled by Christ and the New Covenant.

Have you left these dead works behind? You cannot be a Christian, in other words, you cannot be someone filled and influenced by the Spirit if you have not turned your back on your past sins. We are not saying you are perfect, but we

are saying that you see them as rebellion, are ashamed of your heart that loves them, that you are in a constant state of sorrow and war against them. What about repenting of religious works? It is quite fashionable to become a Christian in these days as the political right is rehabilitating Christian faith as a mainstay against the advance of liberalism in the culture wars. I have heard atheists say 'go to church,' as a way to save civilization. What this means is that there can be some who are coming to Church and claiming to be Christian not because the Holy Spirit has convinced them of their sin and turned their hearts to faith in Christ, but they are simply going along with this cultural moment. Have you repented of your sins? If you have a religious background have you repented of trusting in those religious works to save you, even Christian works? Have you repented of hypocritical religion and are serving God in love from the heart?

Secondly, 'faith toward God.' The author is not addressing past atheists, but once OT practicing Jews. It is likely that the author is alluding to the fact that every OT Jew was a monotheist who confessed faith in YHWH as the one true God, they would recite Deut. 6:4, the Shema everyday as part of confessing their faith toward God. But with the revelation of Christ, the Jewish convert would have his mind expanded as he would now see that Jesus, was God the Son come in the flesh, that there is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The OT is full of these allusions, Is. 9:6-7. The letter of Hebrews has been repeatedly making this point as Jesus is the Son who is Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, the radiance of God's glory, who is greater than angels, who receives their worship. Now that things have been made clear you cannot go to a unitarian monotheism. John is clear those who deny the Son deny the Father as well, 1 Jn. 5:9-12. Muslims, Jews, JWs, any who deny the deity of the Son, the Trinity have denied what is basic and definitional to the Christian faith. Do you confess God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, co-equal, co-eternal, worshipped as One God in three persons?

Washings and laying hands

V2a, 'and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands.' The first pair have to do with entrance into the Christian life; the last pair have to do with the end of all things; what is the second pair about? There are differences of opinion about what these are talking about. Is the washings a reference to baptism or to Jewish ablutions? Is the laying of hands referring to a symbolic act for receiving the Spirit or some Jewish practice? Given the fact that the context is Jews thinking about returning to Judaism, it is likely a reference to the teaching they would have received as Christianity was contrasted with and did away with these various things.

Firstly, ablutions/washings. Two issues arise from this word, firstly, the word *baptismos* is not the usual word the NT uses for baptism, *baptisma*, but is commonly used for the ceremonial washings of the Jews like in Heb. 9:10, 'but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.' Secondly, the word is in the plural. This has led some to think that it is merely describing the multiple washing practices of the OT like when there were bodily emissions, priestly cleansings, the cleansing of houses, etc. but others think that it was teaching on the varieties of Christian baptism of water, Spirit and blood (martyrdom); or differences between the baptism of John and Jesus.

I think the best understanding is this: now that Christ has come and fulfilled all the various types and shadows as it related to cleansing and washing through His death, we no longer need those rituals of the OT. This links to baptism not directly but by inference because baptism speaks outwardly of this washing that we have received by our union with Jesus. Where washings were repeated, we are baptized once. This is why we don't rebaptize those who were already believers when baptized. We only rebaptize those who were not believers. Baptism speaks outwardly of our dying with Jesus. His death paid the price for our sins, our violations of God's law. He took that penalty, paid in full and our identifying ourselves with Christ in His death speaks about His death being credited to us. We are also united with Christ in His resurrection. Christ died condemned under the guilt of our sin, but once that sin was paid for He was raised, death had no right to keep a perfect man, for the wages of sin is death, and He having paid for our sins was sinless, and so must be raised. We are united with Christ in His perfect life and righteousness, and just as surely as He was raised because of His sinlessness, we too will be raised as we are united to His perfect righteousness. Because His righteousness is reckoned as ours, we are righteous as He is righteous. Imagine giving up the truth of the gospel as it is shouted to us in our baptism and going back to the repeated rituals of OT cleansing. Rewashing, recleansing, resacrificing, but Christ has died once for all of our sins. Don't renounce your baptism and what it stands for, for these incomplete things.

Are you applying the truth of the gospel spoken in your baptism to your heart?
Are you trusting in what He has done for your cleansing?

The laying on of hands. The laying on of hands was used for many things. Imparting blessings, like Jacob his sons in Gen. 48; when confessing sin over a sacrifice Ex. 29; commissioning for office in the OT and NT; and for healing, and the impartation of the Spirit at times. It is difficult to be certain what is in view. Given that this list is deliberate in order to show how Christ changes how these would have been believed or practiced in the OT; and given that the context of these verses is the priesthood of Christ. I am inclined to think that it relates to commissioning and in particular to how Christ has been appointed as our prophet, priest and king. Just as ceremonial washings are fulfilled and done away with so is the OT priesthood.

Resurrection and judgement

We come now to the final pair, v2b, 'the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.' The Jews we know were divided on the matter of the resurrection. The Sadducees denied it, and the Pharisees believed it. The Pharisees were correct and orthodox on this matter. The teaching of bodily resurrection is clearly taught in the OT, remember the words of Job, 19:25-27, 'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' Ps. 16:10, 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' And then after this will come the judgement. You will notice no mention of a 1000 year reign on the earth. Where many had a good understanding of future physical resurrection studies have revealed that many Jewish teachers of this time had very wrong ideas about judgement. The views were mixed and not all believed the same thing. None believed that perfection in obedience to the law was possible, so God weighed up the majority of your deeds, and as long as you had

not committed any 'bad' sins like idolatry, God would be gracious. They believed in the idea of scales that weighed your deeds, some were more good and saved, some were more bad and entered everlasting contempt, and they even allowed for those who were 50/50 who went into Gehenna and were purified and then raised up. Here the teaching of Christ and the NT is quite different. Jesus taught that a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is required, Matt. 5:20. That we are to be perfect in our righteousness as God is, not just a majority of good deeds. James reminds us that to break one law is to be guilty of all of it. Paul teaches that by the works of the law no flesh will be justified. The purpose of the law is to reveal we are incurable and lost sinners, it is not a Jacob's ladder into heaven. Jesus made the problem of our sinfulness worse than we realized, so that the bad news was worse than we could have conceived. But then He also told us that those who are broken hearted and poor in Spirit, those who mourn, those who like the tax collector and the prodigal son repent and seek forgiveness will find it, that He has come for those who see they are sick not those who think they are righteous. More amazing still is that He who was God in the flesh, who cannot sin, who deserves to judge us, He is the one who gave His life as a ransom to set the sinner free. He took our judgment day verdict and the judgement of God against our sin and died in full payment.

If you were a Jew you would have believed that the resurrection was at the end of time, and that those who are lawkeeping Jews with no major sins will be saved and everyone else will be condemned with maybe some half righteous experiencing a type of purgatory first. When you were confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ your views would be turned on their head. Firstly, your view of the resurrection. There you were thinking that the resurrection was something that only happened at the end of time. But now you are told that in the middle of history, the God-man Jesus Christ died and was resurrected in a new creation body, so that the future invades the present. This invasion of future life in Christ is something that you get added to by the Spirit through union with Him. His resurrection now becomes a glimpse, a promise, a guarantee, that just as surely as He was raised. Because you are righteous in Him, you too will be raised. And the judgement, there you were thinking that being Jewish and mostly good was enough, then the rug got pulled out from under your feet, you then realized you had no hope to be justified. But then you learned that the Judge Himself stepped into our flesh, lived our life, died our death, and took our judgement day punishment. And He not only got you off the hook and got your sins forgiven, He unites you to Himself so that your eternal standing is as unchangeable as He is right now. There is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, God has justified you, the judge has ruled, who can accuse those who are in Christ? No one. The great looming threat of judgement, the lack of surety, you have been put beyond judgment on the other side of the grave and judgement in the resurrection of Christ.

These then are the basics that every converted Jew would learn in becoming a Christian. In becoming a disciple of Christ you would repent of all sin, and that included every self-righteous and hypocritical use of religion, including a deliverance from the ceremonial law of the OT itself. Your faith in God would be deepened to be Trinitarian. You would be baptized as a sign of your oneness with Christ in His death and resurrection, a sign of your having been washed, and that all your sins have been washed away. You do not need any other washing but by what Jesus has done. You need no other prophet, priest or king, He has been appointed by God and has fulfilled all offices for us. Because He has been

resurrected you too will be resurrected, and because He has taken your judgement there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Is this the bedrock of your faith?

V3 says, 'And this we will do if God permits.' The author has called us to be mature, He has rehearsed the doctrines we need to know in our hearts and obey to gain maturity, but please notice that it is ultimately God that gives the growth. Spiritual maturity is not something that we manufacture, but it is by the Spirit and is ultimately something that God performs. All we can do is apply ourselves to the truth, and the Spirit will increase our faith, dispel our fears, strengthen our obedience, and bring about the fruit.