

STARTING OVER

Hebrews—Chapter 5

Study 6

A Better Obedience

Can God relate to the weaknesses of fallen human beings? How can a perfect and holy God understand the temptations that draw our fallen human natures to sin? In chapter 5, we are reminded that Hebrews was first written as a letter with no chapter breaks. It opens with a continuation of chapter four's focus on the Levitical priesthood and how it relates to Jesus Christ our great High Priest in heaven. One of the key words in this first section is "compassion." Paul's focus is that Jesus can have compassion on us because He subjected Himself to our human weaknesses.

"For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.' As He also says in another place: 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek,' who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear" (Hebrews 5:1-7).

Tempted Like We Are

Here Paul reaffirms the humanity of Jesus Christ and His ability to have compassion toward us, because He was to become like us. Christ did this by taking upon Himself our fallen nature—meaning our fallen will, one that had to be surrendered to the Father (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44). During His mission on earth, Christ was led into the wilderness where He was tempted by the devil in three specific areas: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (Matthew 4:1-9). All temptations that assail the human race proceed from these three areas. There is no temptation that does not originate from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes or the pride of life (1 John 2:15). Jesus faced those three temptations in human form on our behalf. Each temptation brought Christ's human nature into an intense battle against His own human will. Satan attacked Christ again and again with the question, "If you are the Son of God. . ." In His first assault, Satan sought to undermine His identity. Christ was tempted to prove His relationship to God by performing a miracle of turning stones into bread. Christ did possess divinity in His humanity, and He could easily have turned stones into bread because He was God in human flesh.

At first glance, this seems to make Christ's temptations quite different from ours. When was the last time you were tempted to turn stones into bread? Since we are not divine, there is no such power as Christ possessed hiding inside us. So how was Christ tempted like we are?

Despite this difference, Jesus was tempted in exactly the same way you and I are. Christ had been without food for forty days. He was weak and His physical body was craving satisfaction on a level that few, if any, of us have ever known. In addition, when tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread, Satan was appealing to Christ's own power, His inner self. He was tempting Christ to trust in what He could do without the directive and help of the Father and Holy Spirit.

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"God having provided something better for us." —Hebrews 11:40

All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

You may think, “I have never been tempted like that because I don’t have the power to turn stones into bread.” True, but you have been tempted to rely upon yourself, and go your own way; to turn from God’s help and be self-sufficient. When Satan tempted Christ, he appealed to self just as he does with us. In this situation, the temptation for Christ was to rely upon His divine self instead of God. The temptation for us is to rely on our human self instead of relying upon God. Either way, self-sufficiency is the basis of all of our temptations. The battle against self is the essence of all our struggles.

Jesus didn’t need to possess all of humanity’s propensities to sin in order to be tempted like we are. He simply needed to have our fallen will, the essence of our human nature.

Besides, is there anything inherently wrong with turning stones to bread? Satan often appeals to us in the same way. We are tempted to do something that does not seem inherently wrong in itself, but is, at its core, an act of self-reliance rather than God-reliance.

Learning Obedience

“Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’” (Hebrews 5:8-10).

Jesus learned to be obedient. The Son of God, God Himself learned to be obedient. We can only understand this idea in the context of the fallen human will. Christ came to this earth in human form, taking upon Himself the will of fallen humanity. He then learned how to obey God and not follow His own will. He learned how to surrender to God anything that was out of harmony with the directives of the Holy Spirit. He learned through suffering because the human will of man does not like to submit to anything or anyone. It is not natural for our human nature to do God’s will and, therefore, it involves a real struggle. For all who choose to follow Christ, many hard, stern battles with self are to be fought (Matthew 16:24).

“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God” (1 Peter 4:1).

At times it will take agonizing struggles to put the self-dependence of our fallen nature to death. This is the essence of our suffering, but it produces peace with God (see 1 Corinthians 15:31; Romans 5:1).

Speaking Bible

Do you know a foreign language? Are you conversant in another tongue? If you, are you know that it only comes after spending a lot time in study and practice. It is the same with the Bible. If you speak Bible or are fluent in Bible knowledge, it is because you have taken the time to study the Word. Paul’s concern in this next section is that believers will neglect time exercising in the Word.

“Of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first 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 unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14).

In these verses, Paul is speaking to believers who have forgotten the Word of God. Like someone who forgets how to speak a language they once knew fluently, these professed believers have become babes in understanding Bible truth due to lack of exercise. Let’s read these verses again in a different version of the Bible:

“God having provided something better for us.” —Hebrews 11:40

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“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 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” (Hebrews 5:11-14, NIV).

Discerning Good From Evil

Here Paul explains that we will find it hard to distinguish between good and evil if we are not in the Word connecting with the Holy Spirit and establishing a close relationship with God. Even Eve, in her perfection, had a difficult time discerning evil. As she listened to Satan’s lies about God, she fell victim to his subtlety (2 Corinthians 11:2). Eve was led to think that eating of the forbidden tree was not such a big deal after all. Like Eve, if we haven’t trained ourselves by “constant use” of the Word, we will find it hard to discern sin in its true character. The evil of sin will become less and less of an issue to us until we find ourselves in open rebellion against God.

The opposite is true of those who are in the Word and practice righteousness. They discern evil, but find that it is impossible to give this experience to those who are not connecting with God through the Holy Spirit. (This is illustrated in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25.) When you train yourself in the Word, your sense of evil is increased and you discern the danger of sin more clearly. It’s the same thing with eating of the tree of the knowledge of “good and evil.” The evil it contains compromises the good God is working in you.

In the same way we can lose our mastery over a foreign language due to lack of use, we can lose our Bible literacy. And through this transition, we may still look and act, to some degree, like Christians. We may know some basics, but we are Bible illiterates. We may think we are rich and increased with goods and need nothing because we have a semblance of knowing the Bible, but it’s all a sad façade, or worse (Revelation 3:17). We can know enough of the Bible to bring us guilt, but not enough to lead us to the guilt bearer. We can know enough to make us feel like sinners, but not enough to give us the power over sin. We may have done some intense study, perhaps we were even raised in the Word. Our parents may have always longed for us to experience a life of joy and power, but maybe it’s been a long time since we personally exercised ourselves in the Word.

Have you lost the ability to discern between good and evil? Have you allowed evil to surround you, and you don’t even see it? Look around, in your home, in your room, in your mind—what’s there? Take a moment to ask yourself in the context of all that evil—are you happy? Are you really happy? Do you love life? Do you even like it? Don’t you long for something better? All that evil in your life—lust, selfishness, greed, gossip, hatred, prejudice, emptiness, vanity—it all serves a purpose if it can lead you to understand how empty sin really is. If you feel dazed and you’re falling asleep in this cold world of sin that leads to death, wake up! Please wake up. God wants you with Him for all eternity. This life and its temporal pleasure or suffering, is nothing when compared to eternity. Let it go.

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12).

“Awake, awake! Put on your strength, O Zion; Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city! For the uncircumcised and the unclean shall no longer come to you. Shake yourself from the dust, arise; Sit down, O Jerusalem! Loose yourself from the bonds of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion! For thus says the Lord: ‘You have sold yourselves for nothing, And you shall be redeemed without money’” (Isaiah 52:1-3).

Spiritual Training

If you’re a babe in spiritual exercise, start with milk because you could choke on solid food. Everyone needs the basics, even the spiritually mature still need a

little milk now and then. And no matter how much you know intellectually, if you haven't been exercising yourself in the Word, it's best to start with milk.

When Paul says we need "training," he means we need to "exercise" ourselves in the Word. When it comes to beginning an exercise routine, it's good to start slowly and build up gradually. Here are some pointers from physical exercise that can be applied to help us develop a good spiritual exercise program:

1. Begin with a decision or a commitment to incorporate exercise into your life. You were created by God to give glory to Him by being spiritually active. Body, mind and spirit are at their best when you do what you were created to do. "Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him" (Isaiah 43:7).
2. Build slowly (milk before meat). Don't try to tackle the deep issues of doctrine before you have laid a foundation in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11). Begin your spiritual exercise program with the basics—love, repentance, forgiveness, faith and hope. This will nurture and prepare you for the more solid (deeper) food of the Word. "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready" (1 Corinthians 3:1-2, NIV).
3. Be consistent. Incorporate spiritual exercise (study, prayer and meditation) on a daily basis into your life, no matter what. Prioritize time for spiritual food as the cares of this world can easily crowd Christ out. Choose a time for daily spiritual training with Christ. Mary chose Christ over household chores and no matter how much her sister Martha insisted on Mary's help, Christ honored Mary as making the better choice.

"Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.' And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-42).

There are many things in this world that are important, "but only one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:42, NAS).

"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Summary

Jesus came to this planet, God as a man, to obtain obedience for us. Though He took upon Himself our fallen human nature, He overcame every temptation to sin by the surrender of His will to God's will. As our High Priest in heaven, Christ knows how to deliver us from the strongest temptations. At the same time, He asks us to cooperate with Him in His high priestly work. If we are not in the Word or exercising ourselves in spiritual truth, it can be difficult, even impossible, for us to discern our need of Christ and respond to Him. Spiritual strength comes as we commit ourselves to Christ and slowly build a consistent relationship with Him. Through daily partaking of the Word, prayer and meditation, we will find ourselves growing stronger and stronger in spiritual strength and love for God—moving from the milk of the Word to solid spiritual food.

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