

Sermon Summary #15

Can You Hear Me Now? Hebrews 5:11-6:3

I have to suppress the urge to laugh out loud when I hear Christians tell me how great it would be if we could only return to the glory days of the early church. They appear to believe that in the first century the church was far better off than it is today, that it knew little of division or false teaching and knew a lot of power and purity. I have to be entirely honest and say that this sort of spiritual nostalgia is horribly misinformed.

The church of the first century was just as dysfunctional and riddled with problems as we are today. Need I remind you of the church at **Corinth**, a city where the apostle devoted more time and energy than anywhere else? In spite of his having spent 18 months there, the church turned on him, embraced false apostles, wallowed in childish immaturity, tolerated a man sleeping with his step-mother, divided up into factions, and badly abused spiritual gifts, just to mention a few of its problems. The church at **Galatia** was in danger of denying the gospel of justification by faith alone and following after legalists who insisted on good works as essential to complete one's acceptance with God. The church at **Philippi**, although perhaps the most mature of all in the first century, was still given to disunity and selfishness. The **Colossian** church had come to close to embracing a false philosophy and had tolerated in their midst a group who advocated the worship of angels. And if these examples aren't enough, go read **Revelation 2-3** where six of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which Jesus sent letters through the Apostle John were on the verge of coming under severe divine discipline because of their moral and theological errors.

I say all this simply as a reminder that the church in **Rome**, to which the letter to the Hebrews was most likely addressed, was a mess. Surely by now you've picked up hints to that effect. Some evidently were elevating angels above Jesus, the Son of God. The author warned them in Hebrews 2:1 not to "drift" away from the gospel and to be careful lest they "neglect" this great salvation provided by Christ. They had to be exhorted to "consider" Jesus (3:1) and not to abandon their original confession of faith in him (3:6, 14). They were warned lest there be found in some of them an "unbelieving heart" that might lead them to fall away from the living God (3:12). In Hebrews 4:1 our author appears concerned that some in this church might fail to enter God's rest. And in Hebrews 5:11 he urged them to strive to enter God's rest lest some "fall by the same sort of disobedience" as those did in the Old Testament.

Simply put, there was a problem in this church, just like there were problems in every other first century church, which probably differed little from those problems that have reappeared in virtually every church in every century over the past two-thousand years.

But finally, here in Hebrews 5:11-6:3, we find out what the problem was in this particular church. Perhaps the best way of identifying it is by appealing to the title to my message. We've all seen or heard those commercials for a certain cell phone provider where a man is speaking into his phone and repeatedly asks: "**Can you hear me now?**" Well, the author of Hebrews could easily himself have asked the people in this church the same question: "Can you hear me now?" And the answer from many of them would have been: "**No. Still can't hear you. What's the problem?**"

I say this because of what we read in Hebrews 5:11. Some, perhaps many, in this local church had become "**dull of hearing**" (5:11b). Notice what our author says in v. 11. He has just introduced the great high priesthood of Jesus and declared that unlike all the priests of the old covenant, Jesus is not a descendant of Aaron or the tribe of Levi. He is, in fact, a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. As much as our author would love to dive headlong into an explanation of what that means, he can't. You can almost hear him *sigh deeply with a measure of frustration* as he writes: "I have much to say about it. But it's hard to explain. And you people are in no condition to hear it or understand it or respond to it the way you should."

That was the problem in this church. *They were spiritually immature children who were still living off milk. They were incapable of digesting the meat of God's truth concerning Jesus, the great high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

Of course, there are often times several reasons why people can't understand a particular biblical truth. Sometimes the subject matter is too deep. Sometimes the Bible simply doesn't give us much information. It's always possible the teacher himself can't teach very well. But in the case of these people, they were spiritually dull of hearing.

In saying this he's not accusing them of being by nature slow-minded. He's not saying that these people were *intellectually inferior* to other Christians. There could well have been in their midst many who were the ancient equivalent of our Ph.D. as well as numerous so-called "rocket scientists"! Neither is he saying that they were *recently converted*, new-born believers; after all, he says in v. 12 that "*by this time*" they ought themselves to be teachers. In other words, their current state is inexcusable. There had been plenty of time for them to have grown up in Christ. Neither is he saying that they lacked the necessary *education* to understand his teaching. And of course he's not saying that there is something *physically* wrong with their ears. To be "dull" of hearing does not mean they stood in need of a cochlear implant!

The problem was with their hearts! They could "hear" the truths he was teaching well enough, in the same way you can "hear" my voice right now. But they didn't embrace the truth and treasure it and allow it to build in them faith and hope and joy and peace and obedience. There was no passion in their response. They weren't inclined to cherish the message about Jesus Christ.

They were "listening" to the Word of God and the message of the gospel the same way you "listen" to the flight attendant on an airplane who gives instructions about your seat belt and the air bag and the oxygen mask. It's the same way you listen to the music on the elevator or perhaps even the music we play here at Bridgeway in between services. There was no attentive devotion to what they heard.

Notice that they "*have become*" dull of hearing, which is to say, *they formerly were capable of receiving such instruction and for a time had been progressing in spiritual insight, but for some reason they have become dull of hearing, spiritually slack, inattentive, and lethargic.* They were suffering from spiritual inertia. They had reached a plateau of growth and then simply refused to go any higher. In fact, they had actually begun to go backwards; they were regressing and shrinking spiritually, for our author says in v. 12 that they needed to be taught yet "*again* the basic principles of the oracles of God." It's as if he says, "I almost feel it necessary to start all over again with you people and teach you the ABC's of the Christian faith!"

What precisely was their problem? What does he mean by the word "dull"? The word here is used only one other time in the NT, in Hebrews 6:12, where it is translated "sluggish"! The point is that their problem wasn't physical; it was moral. That is to say, they weren't lacking the necessary grey matter to understand and apply God's Word. It wasn't that the author was using big words that exceeded their educational or intellectual capacities. Rather, they had simply stopped listening. They had stopped caring. They had stopped meditating on biblical truth.

They had become *passive* in their approach to the revelation of God. They had become uninterested, bored spectators. Instead of energetically extending their minds and hearts to hear and embrace the truth of God's revelation of himself in Christ, instead of joyfully prizing it and applying it to their lives, they had become lazy. For whatever reason, they no longer found the Word of God appealing and appetizing and something worthy to be pursued and probed and studied and trusted.

And the tragic result is that they were still *languishing in spiritual infancy*. They were little more than babies who neither desired nor could stomach anything more than the milk of God's word. Notice that he says they were "*unskilled*" (5:13) in the word of righteousness. To use another analogy, it's as if today you just turned 21 but are still pedaling around OKC on a bicycle with training wheels! It's as if you have developed a vast vocabulary and can read 200 words a minute but the only thing you ever cast your eyes upon is either a worn out comic book about Superman or a collection of Charlie Brown and Snoopy cartoon strips.

It's time to grow up, says our author. It's time to take seriously the serious matters of God's word. It's time to move beyond spiritual infancy and start sinking your mental and emotional teeth into the sizzling sirloin of God's revealed truth!

So what can be done about this condition?

We are told in v. 14 that what is needed is ***“training”*** that comes from ***“constant practice”*** in learning how to discern between good and evil and between truth and falsehood. And the only way that will ever happen is when you ***actively pursue God's revealed truth*** and in doing so have your spiritual senses sharpened. You must engage regularly with God's revealed truth so that your moral mind will gradually undergo refinement and you will begin to understand and discern and evaluate what is good and true.

By the way, isn't it interesting that ***our author defines for us what it means to be spiritually “mature”*** (v. 14a)? How do you define it? What criteria do you employ to determine if you yourself are mature or if someone else is? Here we are told that ***“maturity” is seen in one's hunger for the “solid food” of God's word. The “mature” Christian is the one who has remarkable “powers of discernment” and can recognize evil for what it is and run from it and recognize good for what it is and lay hold of it.***

The “powers of discernment” that he mentions here in v. 14 is not primarily the ability to read the Bible and determine from it what is right and wrong. Anyone can do that. Anyone can read the 10 Commandments and know that committing murder or adultery is morally wrong. A child can figure that out.

What he's talking about are ***those countless decisions that you and I have to make every day for which an explicit answer can't be found in the Bible.*** In other words, the “mature” believer is that man or woman who is deeply immersed in biblical truth and has their mind shaped and informed by biblical truth and is continually growing into greater and more intimate conformity to Christ himself so that they are trained and skilled to make the hard decisions on which the Bible *doesn't* speak.

For us today, that would be things like whether to watch TV and what you will allow yourself to see and hear. It would include knowing what vocation to follow in life, where you should live, how you are supposed to discipline your children, what you are to wear and whether or not it is modest or immodest. What movies do you attend? Do you drink alcohol and if so, how much and where and in whose presence? What kind of friends do you make and to what extent do they influence you or do you influence them? He's talking about how much you choose to give financially to the work of the local church and the basis on which you make such a decision.

Haven't you ever watched someone as they make such choices throughout the course of life, and you find yourself saying: “My goodness. They're clueless! They lack wisdom. They need a healthy dose of common sense. They keep making the same stupid mistakes over and over again and never seem to learn from them. Why do they run with that crowd? It only gets them in trouble. Why would he/she ever have chosen to visit that place or to read that book or to have taken that job? It has only served to undermine their own integrity and to diminish their witness for Christ.”

Of course, there are certainly other elements that are essential if we are to walk in Christian maturity. The ***fruit of the Holy Spirit*** must be in evidence. And I would never consider someone spiritually *mature*, no matter how discerning and doctrinally educated they may be, if their lives were not increasingly ***conformed to the image of Jesus***. In other words, spiritual maturity encompasses a variety of things: a depth in one's understanding of biblical truth, a humility that leads to the service of others and sacrifice for their sakes, the sort of love for the unlovely that Jesus has shown toward us, deferring to one another, the sharing of one's faith with the unsaved, and the list could go on endlessly.

So what can be done to overcome this spiritual lethargy and to grow out of spiritual infancy? A couple of things are worth noting.

First, be sure that you have actually understood the “basic principles of the oracles of God” (v. 12). There's nothing wrong with them. You have to start somewhere. You must learn the alphabet before you can read. Start at the ground level and slowly work your way to maturity.

If you're wondering what some of those "basic principles" are, our author mentions several in 6:1-2. There he calls them "*elementary*" doctrines, things such as repentance from dead works and faith in God, those two crucial experiences that come when we are first converted. The word "washings" most likely refers to the many ceremonial purifications with water that were called for in the Old Testament. He also mentions the laying on of hands and the doctrines of the resurrection and eternal judgment. These are all wonderful things. Don't think for a moment that repentance and faith and laying on of hands and the final judgment aren't important. But they are merely the foundation on which we are to go on and build the super-structure of Christian growth. So our author is not telling us to "abandon" those fundamental truths but rather to build upon them and grow up in Christ.

Second, don't despise the "milk" of God's revealed truth. It is, after all, still God's revealed truth! Let the milk of God's word have its way in your heart and mind. But don't settle for it! You weren't built or redeemed to live on such a minimal diet.

Third, begin to dig deeply into the meat or "solid food" of God's word. Read good books. Find a mentor who can direct your steps. Ask for recommendations from those who have already walked down this path. Hang out with others who share your passion for the "solid food" and will encourage you in your pursuit of it. Memorize the word. Pray the word. Sing the word. Preach the word back to your own soul.

Fourth, be consistent and faithful in exposing yourself to the teaching and preaching of God's Word and to corporate worship and to prayer, both with others and alone. Don't distance yourself from the Lord's Table. Refuse to let anything take precedence over it. Immerse yourself in community. Make yourself accountable to other Christians and be honest when they ask you how you are getting along in life and in your marriage and in your relationship with God.

Fifth and finally, examine your hearing! Ask yourself: "Am I listening well? Am I studying and exploring what I hear? Am I increasingly fascinated by God and the revelation he has made of himself in Jesus? As we make our way through the book of Hebrews, *am I finding that Jesus really is better?* Is he increasingly beautiful and more satisfying to my soul? Or do I find myself losing interest? Is my spiritual hearing growing dull?"