

SERMON
SERIES

AND WITHOUT FAITH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE HIM, FOR WHOEVER WOULD DRAW NEAR TO GOD MUST BELIEVE THAT HE EXISTS AND THAT HE REWARDS THOSE WHO SEEK HIM.

HEBREW'S



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HEBREW'S
VERSE BY
VERSE STUDYLET US DRAW NEAR IN
*Faith***SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 5:11-14**

To understand what it means to be spiritually mature and why it matters.

Read the Text:

"About this, we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." (Hebrews 5:11-14, ESV)

Study the Text:**An Intervention**

Beginning in Hebrews 5:11, the author launches what we might today consider a sort of "intervention" with his readers. Hebrews 5:11 through 6:12 form a unit of thought that begins with a severe charge: some of the readers had become "dull of hearing." The underlying Greek term is *νωθρός* (*nōthros*), and depending on the context, it can hold a variety of meanings. Generally defined, it means "slow, sluggish, or lazy," but in the context of hearing, it can mean "hard of hearing." In the context of the mind, however, it means something like "unresponsive." Given that the context of Hebrews so far has overwhelmingly centered on the risk of disobedience, it is likely that "dull of hearing" means something like, "unwilling to obey."

This is a serious charge. To be unresponsive would essentially imply that they are not genuine Christians. However, the same word used in Hebrews 5:11 is also used to close out this unit in Hebrews 6:11-12, in which the author expresses his desire that the readers would have "the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The term "sluggish" is the same underlying term as "dull" in Hebrews 5:11. In other words, it seems they are not fully unresponsive after all! Why then does he say they have become unresponsive to begin with? New Testament scholar Sigurd Grindheim notes: "The author concludes this unit with an assertion that he does not

want them to become unresponsive, implying that their situation is not yet that dire, even if there is a risk it may become so. This address may, therefore, be understood as a *rhetorical device*, a *form of hyperbole* intended to stir the emotions of the audience, alert them to the seriousness of the situation, and provoke a reaction. It is a kind of *reverse psychology*, intended to make the audience demonstrate that they are not unresponsive.”¹

So, consider that the following sections act as a kind of intervention. We are to take seriously what he says to us because we run a real risk of falling into unresponsive, faithless disobedience. We must heed his warnings well. Below is a breakdown of some of the key ideas in this text.

UGHT TO BE TEACHERS

There is a surprising expectation mentioned in verse 12: “For though by this time, you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.” There seems to be an expectation in the mind of the author that spiritual maturity inevitably leads to becoming a teacher of God’s Word to some extent. It clearly doesn’t mean to be a “pastor” or even vocational minister, since James makes it clear: “not many of you should become teachers” (Ja. 3:1).

How then are we to take this? It is likely to be understood in at least two ways. For one, it’s a bit of hyperbole, akin to saying in today’s world: “I’ve done ____ so many times, I’m considered an expert in it now.” The audience had sat under such consistent biblical teaching for so long that they should be able to actually teach it to other people now, and yet that is precisely the issue - they can’t. While they should be well-versed in the “basic principles of the oracles of God,” they need to be taught the basic principles themselves. This dispels the idea that you are a mature Christian just because you go to church consistently for a long time. Attending church for many years doesn’t make you a mature believer any more than sitting in a garage for a long time makes you a car.

However, in a broader, non-authoritative sense, all Christians should at least become “proclaimers” of the basic principles of the oracles of God (i.e., basic Christian doctrine). 1 Peter 2:9 picks up on the language of Exodus and applies it to Christians: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,” but for what purpose? He tells you: “That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” In other words, all Christians are both priests and preachers of Christ. We are to be His witness, proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15). And yet, the issue being addressed here is the same issue the church faces today - many Christians should be able to do this, and yet they can’t. In fact, they themselves need to be taught.

In light of this, the author begins this section by stating: “About this, we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (Heb. 5:11). About what, though? Likely what was just being addressed in the previous section - the greater priesthood in Christ Jesus. Such a discussion requires a basic understanding of how the priests were selected, and yet, for the audience of Hebrews, even that proved to be difficult.

SPIRITUAL MILK AND SOLID FOOD

The ideas of “milk” and “solid food” are common metaphors for “beginners” and “advanced” stages in any discipline. Paul uses this same language in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2: “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you

¹ Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 297.

were not ready for it. And even now, you are not yet ready.” Paul, like the author of Hebrews, likens the unlearned and immature of the faith to babies unable to eat solid food.

Verse 14 further adds clarity to what the spiritually mature are like: “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Those who are able to discern what is good and evil are those who should be able to teach, and therefore should be able to eat solid food.

This brings up an important point concerning what spiritual maturity is and what it is not. Often, we equate spiritual maturity with knowledge of the Bible, but that is not the whole story. It is true that the spiritually mature should have a good working knowledge of the Bible, but it is also important to be able to recognize the difference between right and wrong. This seems obvious, but it is not always. Often, Christians are drawn to the magnetic personalities of the pulpit who can communicate Bible stories in compelling ways and fail to notice their lack of character or integrity. James likens the immature to one who hears the word but does not actually do what it says (Ja. 1:22).

What About Now?

When all the details of this passage are put together, the beginnings of an intervention emerge. The author is calling you, who consistently attends church (and maybe even Bible study), to consider whether you are “dull of hearing.” How do you know? Several indicators have been given. One, you should be able to teach others the basics of the Gospel. If, after years of consistency, you still don’t have a grip on the basics of the faith, Hebrews is calling you to pay more attention. Or perhaps you do know much about the Bible, but you are not living in consistent obedience to it? Again, this is cause for concern. You, for all intents and purposes, are not able to discern between good and evil. Either that, or you are willingly choosing evil. Either way, Hebrews is calling you to action.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Hebrews 5:11. What does “about this” refer back to?

2. Read Hebrews 5:11. What does “dull of hearing” mean? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 5:12. What does it mean that the audience “ought to be teachers?” How does this correspond with James 3:1?

2. Read Hebrews 5:12. What do “milk” and “solid food” refer to?

Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 5:13. What is one “who lives on milk” like?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-2. How does this passage add to what Hebrews 5:11-14 is saying?

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 5:14. According to this passage, what does it mean to be spiritually mature?

2. Read James 1:22-25. How does this passage add to what Hebrews 5:11-14 is saying?

Discuss the Text!

Session 12 Discussion: Discernment

Hebrews 5:11-14 begins an intervention for us, the reader. While we ought to be ready for solid food, some of us still require milk. However, when explained further, we learned that solid food is for those specifically who can discern between good and evil. Talk as a group about discernment and what your ability to discern says about your spiritual maturity.

1. Icebreaker: What is discernment?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 12:10. How does the gift of discernment differ from what Hebrews is talking about?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 2:14. What enables a person to understand spiritual things?
4. Would other people describe you as “discerning?”
5. How important is community in the context of this discussion? In other words, how can the community of faith help you when you are unable to discern things yourself?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): A great ongoing way to talk about discernment with your kids is to ask them questions in the moment when they are trying to decide how to handle something: “What would honoring Christ look like? What would disobedience look like?” Let them answer, and then correct along the way.

Takeaways:

1. There is a real danger for Christians to become “dull of hearing,” and therefore should be actively engaged in the Christian life.
2. The spiritually mature are those who not only know the Word, but can discern between good and evil.