

Spiritual Dullness and What to Do about it (Heb. 5.11-6.2)

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Hebrews 5: ¹¹ 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.

6:1 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, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

Introduction

In Hebrews 5.1-10 (our previous study), the writer directed our thoughts to Jesus as our unique high priest. He told us that He is a true man, a spiritual mediator, a representative sinner, and an appointed Savior. Jesus is what every high priest is but He is such in a unique way. One thing that makes Him unique is the fact that He is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, and not in the tradition of Aaron within the history of Israel. Melchizedek is the priest, by the way, to whom Abraham paid tithes (Gen. 14). That fact puts the nation of Israel in a distinct position in relation to Melchizedek. The nation as a whole is subservient to this priestly order because it has its beginning in God's covenant with Abraham who was subservient to this priestly order.

Thus, the preacher to the Hebrews tells us that he wants to elaborate on the Melchizedekian order of priests, but he catches himself, and delays this discussion until chapter 7. So, from 5.11 to the end of chapter 6, we have a section in the book that, among other things, prepares the way for a more developed treatment of Jesus as a high priest in the pattern of Melchizedek. Our text for today (5.11-6.2) begins that preparation by explaining the detour; the focus of this explanation is on dullness of hearing. Thus, the writer *explains* spiritual dullness in a way that *calls for change* in his readers, before he moves on to the fuller discussion.

Accordingly, my title today is "spiritual dullness and what to do about it" and the message breaks down into two main parts (explanation/exhortation, problem/solution, or dullness and what to do about it).

1A. The problem of dullness in relation to the gospel

We begin with the problem of dullness cited in 5.11: **you have become dull of hearing**. Dullness makes understanding difficult. It is an inability to hear. It is like hearing something far away, distant, and faint. It means to be hard of hearing. In this condition, sound does not penetrate easily and when it does get through, it fails to sink in deeply. This is a problem of listening, reading, and understanding. We can speak of it as a problem of hindrances (of three hindrances).

1B. Dullness hinders gospel explanation

In verse 11, the author says, **About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing**. Spiritual dullness makes explaining the doctrine of Christ difficult. It leaves the minister in an awkward position with much to say that he cannot presently voice. Expansion on the priesthood of Christ must wait until chapter 7. It is fundamental that explanation has to be done in stages. Therefore, there is important preparation that must come first.

I have experienced this kind of thing in gospel ministry and it is similar to what I have experienced in teaching logic. It seems that every semester I have logic students who start out good, but who fall behind. Mid-semester, I will be teaching and they will look at me with their eyes glazing over. If I ask questions of them, they retreat into a dead silence or they speak up and reveal that they are miles away from the food on the table. I struggle to know how to teach them. When I review, they will stumble and mumble partial truths and reveal limited grasp of the basics. The cause is usually twofold: a) they have neglected the weekly work at home, and b)

doing the homework is difficult for them not only because they have not been doing it (not keeping up), but also because of a lack of capacity to do it. It is a vicious circle. On one hand, they need to study to keep up and grow in their capacity. On the other hand, the lack of capacity to understand hinders their study and any profit they may get from it. Sometimes a student must fail the course and start over to lay again the foundation of elementary things. I have had some students tell me after the fact that failing them was the best thing I could do for them at the time, because they were not serious about learning in the first place. Now they know better! I can only say “amen” to that renewed perspective with thankfulness to the Lord.

Students and teachers meet in the classroom traveling different journeys in life and with diverse perspectives on life. Sometimes, the meeting is good for both and sometimes it is not. It is likewise the case in the ministry of the word. You and I are on different levels, at different stages in our learning as disciples of our Sabbath king. My prayer is that God will grant us His blessing so that we all continue to go onward, forward, and upward in walking together with God. However, dullness hinders this process and it can lead us into a vicious downward spiral.

2B. Dullness hinders gospel communication

This seems to be the basic idea of verse twelve: **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.** The text tells us that after we have been Christians for a while, there comes a point when an important duty falls on our shoulders: **by this time you ought to be teachers.** Clearly, the teaching task in view here is a generic one. That is so because not all have the same gifts (1 Cor. 12.4). The Holy Spirit gives the gift of public teaching (as in the role of pastor-teacher) to some, *not* all. But helping other disciples learn, *teaching in that sense*, is a basic Christian duty. This goes hand in hand with one anothering mutual exhortation (teaching and receiving instruction from each other). Here, each believer has a role to take up in gospel communication: (¹² **Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.** ¹³ **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,** Heb. 3.12-13).

In 5.12, the need of milk is equivalent to the fact that the readers of this book need the elementary things again (**you need someone to teach you again the basic principles**). That is, they need the ABC’s (so Hughes: the reproachful implication here is that those addressed “need to start again not even at chapter one, but as it were, with the elements of the alphabet that precede chapter one,” *Hebrews*, 190). Thus, they cannot understand, grasp, or hear full gospel sentences and paragraphs because of their dullness. Hence, they need a refresher course at the pre-school level. They need to learn again the letters that make up words before they can hear the words clearly and make sense of them. How can they understand the brief exhortation *in writing* (the book of Hebrews, 13.22) *if they cannot read*? How can the author explain steps eight, nine, and ten if the readers do not have a grasp of even steps one, two, and three?

This describes a truly serious and shameful state of affairs. It has to lock us into the previous warnings that the author addressed to some in the church (3.12; 4.11; 2.1-3). We need to heed the warnings, be on the alert and vigilant with regard to our presuppositions and biases about ourselves and what we believe. That is the hardest nut to crack. Having presuppositions is not a bad thing; it is actually inescapable, but we need to be aware of what they are and we need to be very open to Holy Scripture to have our biases tested, challenged, reconsidered, and changed where necessary. To do that, we need the help of one another in an active engagement of Scripture with open-minded humility. If we come at it this way, we can ask ourselves an important question, and reflect awhile before we answer it: “am I approaching x, y, or z improperly because my biases keep getting in the way?” We ought to have this attitude always with open-hearted submission to the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

3B. Dullness hinders gospel edification

This is just to say that dullness hinders growth in the Christian life: **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,** 12b-13). Of

course, milk is a good thing when we are babies. The problem here is that the need of milk reflects a sad stagnation in the growth of some professing Christians. “You need milk” he says, and this is a problem because the lack of growth leaves you unskilled in the word, and inseparably, unskilled in righteousness that comes by the word.

The person who has to live on milk is a little child. The word “child” here is often used for infant. The idea is that the readers, some of them at least, have retrogressed. Instead of moving forward in their knowledge of God and in their walk as professing Christians, they have moved back again to a position where they need milk when they should crave solid food.

2A. What to do about dullness in relation to the gospel message

The writer tells us what to do about it indirectly then he tells us what to do directly: **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. 6:1 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, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (5.14-6.2).**

His direct exhortation (in 6.1) fans the flame of the duty he presents implicitly or indirectly (in 5.14). Pointedly and directly, he exhorts his readers (back then and now, them and us) to go beyond the elementary sketch of the basics of the gospel: **let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity** (6.1). He tells us how we go about doing this implicitly in 5.14. It is by training your powers of discernment through constant practice so you can distinguish good from evil (**solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil, 5.14**).

We have to think of ourselves as athletes who are always in training for regular competition in the race of life. There is no sitting back and folding of our hands that is without consequence. The lack of study will leave us on milk with the incapacity to handle strong food. In turn, this lack of healthy reflection, chewing, and digesting of the word of God will render us weaklings in a race that demands muscle and endurance. We need spiritual muscles; we have to discipline our flabby brain cells, toughen them up, and turn them into muscular brain cells.

You see, we cannot simply stay with the status quo of what comes easy and of what we are used to and comfortable with. We must leave the basics in the sense that we must build upon them and move up the building from the foundation to the superstructure.

We are to strive after perfection, the perfection of full maturity.

The fact that it is perfection toward which we extend our reach does not excuse us from effort. We cannot argue that it is impossible to attain so why try. We aim at perfection because that is the best guide to real and meaningful progress in what is absolutely the right direction. We strive after the image of Christ in love for Him because He first loved us. We can do nothing less than our best if we have our heads on straight. If we have any grasp of the work of this great great-priest, then we will stop at nothing to fellowship with Him in His word with thankful hearts and with deep devotion to glorify His name.

Conclusion

1) Take up the duty of this text

You have the duty to go on to maturity in your learning. You cannot stop pressing for this goal just as you cannot stop trying to eat right and exercise properly for your physical health. It is a daily goal that unfolds weekly, monthly, and life-long. How true it is with respect to physical health that a balanced diet and good exercise are required of us no matter how old we are and no matter how sick we may be at times. Even in sickness, eating and exercise are essential to make progress.

If you are dull of hearing, and this could be the case, then you will have great difficulty hearing and discerning the fact that you are dull of hearing! That could be, even should be, a

frightening thought. Therefore, you have to turn to the Lord in prayer knowing that dullness is a real possibility for you. You must turn to Him for His help so you can see yourself in the mirror of Scripture. It becomes the prayer: “Lord, help me to see myself in the light of Christ.” This is prayerful learning, learning on your knees, and learning at the feet of Jesus in humble and open submission to whatever He has to say to you.

As a church family, we have to turn this into one-anothering prayer, lest any of us fall behind (like the group of soldiers Phillips cites: running and slowing down to help those who fall behind, encouraging them to pick up the pace). Meeting this need is one of the benefits of “making miles out of sermons.” By taking the sermon home for something to chew on and discuss, we help each other learn and get past our blind spots (discussion with others is necessary).

2) Carefully note the interplay between having teachers and teaching.

There is no downplaying of teachers or of the role of the teacher across the board of life from beginning to end. Thus, one of the ways that you “go on to maturity” is by having the right attitude toward teachers in the church, and by giving them a fair hearing with due submission: **Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith** (Heb. 13.7), and **Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you** (Heb. 13.17).

3) Learn in order to live the truth

From the teacher texts in Hebrews 13.7, 17, note that both doctrine and life are important. The duty to learn is very much life oriented. Note how important it is to emphasize the balance of doctrine and life *that develops by learning through pastors and mutual exhortation*. Our text stresses the knowledge of right versus wrong as true versus false in matters that affect conduct (Heb. 5.13-14, **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**). Theology is for practice; learning is from a deep well of knowledge that overflows into the river of a godly life. The word is the word of righteousness and it is for godliness. That is what ought to be the case. Ethics is first a matter of truth; true doctrine is the foundation of Christian righteousness of life. We cannot minimize learning the truth; nor can we forget living it.

One thing you ought to do as a regular practice is to prayerfully ask questions like this: how much of what I understand from the Bible is slanted and biased by my baggage of past thinking and living? How much of my belief system is governed by what I want Scripture to say, rather than what it actually says? Remember the lesson that if you react emotionally to challenges to your beliefs, you will tend to entrench in old ruts of thinking. You will miss the benefits that come by a hearty submission to the working of the Spirit by the word (recall how Paul states that we quench the Spirit when you fail to give due respect to pastoral care, 1 Thess. 5.12-22). Whatever opposing view comes your way, you need a spirit of openness (not gullibility; even if you do not accept x, you will still find some good by openness to it).

4) Note the learning to which Jesus committed Himself for you

Especially apropos in this connection are these verses in Hebrews: **because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted** (2.18) and ⁸ **Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered** (5.8). What an amazing bond of truth and life!

How then could you look lightly at the call to learn on your shoulders in contrast to spiritual dullness?

Now may we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble, open, and whole-hearted submission to the teaching of the word by the Holy Spirit through the means Christ has appointed as our great, great-priest. May the Spirit enable us to study to show ourselves approved of God as we move on from milk to the meat of His holy word. To the triune God be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.