

Hebrews 5:11-14
“The Problem of Spiritual Immaturity”

Introduction:

In the previous passage the author was teaching his readers about the high priestly role of Christ. Having finished that, the author was planning to once again address the core issue that motivated the writing of this epistle, the temptation that his readers were entertaining; the temptation to abandon Christ in order to escape persecution. But before he went on to do this, the author addressed his readers' capacity to grasp the seriousness of what he had been writing to them, and the further things he wanted to convey. In doing this the author employed language from the educational philosophy and practice of his day to address what he understood to be a fundamental problem that was plaguing that fellowship. He was concerned that spiritual lethargy had taken hold of them, and because of that it had dulled their sensitivity to spiritual truth. And it was this dullness that was preventing them from recognizing the implications of his warnings. The author stopped to write these things to prepare his readers for the most chilling warning that he would give thus far in the letter about the consequences of professing faith and yet falling away, something he would go on to write immediately after this passage.

I. The Obstacle to Ministry: (vs.11)

This verse explains why the author's warning was necessary. It was necessary because *“of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing”* (vs.11). The *“whom”* that the author referred to here was Christ, and specifically he was expressing that he had a great deal more to say about the implications of Christ's High Priesthood. However, the author wrote here that he could not go on to address those things because what he wanted to write was hard to explain. One might assume at this point that the author meant that the profound and complicated nature of the theological truths he wanted to convey were extremely difficult to put into words. However, that is not what the author meant. Instead, he went on to express that the reason that it was hard to explain what he wanted to write had nothing to do with the subject matter, it was due to the fact that these believers had *“become dull of hearing”*. That they had *“become”* dull indicated that it was not a matter of natural inability, for in the past they had not been characterized by such dullness. The Greek word translated as *“dull”* means slow, or sluggish and when paired with hearing it means that one is slow to receive new information. It is a description of mental laziness brought on by indifference. At some point they had lost their passion for the things of God. Having lost their passion, they no longer saw the pressing necessity to learn things about God as these things may have appeared to be unimportant for living out their lives. In light of this, now facing renewed persecution, they no longer had the spiritual perspective to see that clinging to Christ was more important than seeking physical safety or comfort. If this was to change, they needed not only the information that the writer was giving them, but a heart motivated to learn and obey.

II. The Source of the Obstacle: (5:12-14)

Simply stated, the problem that the original recipients of this letter were facing was that they were spiritually immature, and that immaturity was making them less discerning.

The author then wrote, “*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*” (vs.12a). The idea is that in all spheres of life, growth, maturation, and development represents the healthy pattern. Therefore, in any area of life, where one is not growing, there is something wrong. In this case, due to the significant time that they had been followers of Christ, they should have been able to teach others the basic elements of the faith; but instead, they still needed someone to teach them. The point is not that all believers are intended to have formal teaching roles, but all believers are intended to master the faith well enough so that in informal settings they can pass on what they know to others who are inquiring about the faith, whether they are new believers or unbelievers. The author referred to the content that these believers should have mastered as “*the first principles of the oracles of God*”. The expression “*first principles*” refers to the basic building blocks of something, and when applied to learning information it would be equivalent to saying they had not yet even mastered their abc’s. The expression “*the oracles of God*” emphasizes the idea of a message from God that is given orally, and in context, it is a reference to Christian truth. Therefore, the author was saying that by this time in their Christian lives, these believers should have had a thorough understanding of basic Christian theology.

The author then described this symptom of their immaturity with another metaphor, saying “*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.*” (vs.12b-13). The author, in using these words, was employing a metaphor related to how a person’s physical diet changes as they mature out of infancy. It is normal for an infant to feed on milk rather than on solid food. But it is abnormal for one who is physically mature to continue on such a diet. This metaphorical illustration was a common one in the culture of the day to confront various manifestations of childishness or immaturity. In essence, the author was saying that his readers were spiritually infantile in their ability to digest truth and given their spiritual age it was abnormal and spiritually unhealthy that they were in this state. This arrested development made them “*unskilled*”. This word refers to being unable to do something well because one is uninformed and inexperienced. Their inability, due to their inexperience, was in relation to their understanding of “*the word of righteousness*”. This was a reference to the Scriptures, but with emphasis upon how it teaches us about the righteousness that is meant to define those who have been regenerated and made new creatures in Christ (Tit.3:5; II Cor.5:17). These readers were thus incapable of properly interpreting and applying the Word of God to their lives.

The author next observed that “*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 (vs.14). His point was that just as it is normal and healthy for a person to begin eating solid food at a certain point in their lives, it is also normal and healthy for someone who has been a Christian for a while to have an understanding of the deeper and more complex truths of God's Word.

At this point there is a translation problem with this verse. The author was not referring to this mastery coming through "*use*", but through "*maturity*" (the emphasis being more on time than on practice). He was expressing that it is the mature who have learned to discern. To "*discern*" means to distinguish between things and make judgments about them. In this case whether they are "*good or evil*". The scope of these adjectives is very broad. The author is referring to the cultivated skill of the mature that allows them to distinguish between that which is ethically virtuous and that which is ethically wicked, but also between what is true and what is false, between what is genuine and what is inauthentic, and even between what is good and what is better. This is what the author's readers should have been able to do, but they could not because of their immaturity. And the lack of this ability is what had made them susceptible to false and immoral beliefs. Meaning, that if they truly understood the Christian Gospel, they would have already understood that departing from Christ would have tragic consequences.

Conclusion:

The passage presents a warning to us. The dangerous thing about mental and spiritual laziness is that it comes upon us gradually and we are often unaware that it is happening to us. At the same time our choices not to give thought to God's Word can seem justified in light of this apathy about spiritual things. We may see ourselves as too busy, or we may find the material boring, because we either think we know all we need to, or because we don't see the relevance that Biblical truth has to what is happening in our lives. But these sorts of conclusions and choices reveal a very superficial orientation to the revelation of God. They reveal a degree of unbelief that has emerged due to the cooling of our love for and interest in God. These in turn make us dull and unresponsive to the teachings of Scripture. Therefore, we need to see that such dullness is a symptom that there is something profoundly wrong in our heart that is keeping us at a distance from the God of our salvation. And that distance will make us vulnerable to spiritual dangers.