



Dull of Hearing

Hebrews 5:11-14

As a parent of five children, I've seen many things that my children have attached themselves to. They have loved cars, Legos, dolls and stuffed animals. But then there have been blankets and pacifiers – those comfort objects when they cry or feel tired. All of my children have loved pacifiers, except for one child. He loved his middle two fingers. I wonder if he just thought that was more convenient than finding a pacifier. After all, pacifiers can be lost. But fingers, well, they're with you all the time. So, he would walk around his house with those two fingers comforting him. This habit lasted a few years. And then there was this one day when Tracy was talking with some of the kids and she commented on how our son sucked his fingers – to which he corrected her and said he didn't do it anymore. Tracy thought about that and then realized he was right. One day, he just decided he was done – and that was it. I think we've all had scenarios like that. Maybe your parents told you that you were too old for something or maybe you thought to yourself, "I'm a big girl or a big boy. I shouldn't do this anymore." Either way, with growing up, you gave up things that were meant for children.

Every human being has a desire to grow up. Adults, if someone said to you, "You're acting like a five year-old," I don't think you'd say, "Well, thank you! That's what I've been striving for!" Yet, from a spiritual perspective, I think many Christians are content with spiritual infancy. I can't speak for other cultures, but I can say that in our culture, I'm very concerned. I'm not trying to be unfair or sinfully judge others when I say what I'm about to say. Please understand that in what I'm about to say. It feels to me that many churches in our culture don't really care about doctrine – and many leadership in churches cater to the anemic state of their congregation.

You can pick up a book or listen to "experts" regarding how to attract people to the church, and there will be comments on sermon length and how many songs. And, while I get some of it, I'm also concerned that pastors don't try to challenge their people. They simply try to find where their people are at, and they stay there. Sadly, I think that many in the American church want a cool Christianity and not a costly one. And, when talking about doctrine, many professing Christians find it to be a drudgery and not a delight.

The spiritual laziness in the American church is seen even more when you compare it to other cultures around the world. For example, when you hear Christians in China praying for us that we would experience persecution because maybe that's what will wake us up. Or, when you have a Christian pastor from another country coming to America and being amazed at how much the church can do without the Holy Spirit – and that pastor is commenting on the prayerlessness of the local churches themselves.

But even if you compare the church today to the church 500 years ago, you see a dramatic contrast. During what was referred to as the Reformation time-period, when God awakened many to the glorious truths that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone – God revealed his work through people longing to know more of him. This is what God's grace does. God's grace gives us a thirst for him. Right here, before me now, I have a two-volume theology treatise written by a Reformer who was also a pastor – the pastor I spoke of last week who was kicked out of his town and then invited back. This two-volume work is almost 2,400 pages, and you want to know who the general reader of this work was? The average person in the pew. It was written for the congregation. Yet today, that work is read in the seminaries. And, I would imagine if I handed you that book, you'd either say that's too deep or maybe that you just don't have the time. Maybe both of those reasons are true, but it still concerns me. Even recently, I came across a statistic on television viewing. The average person spends more than 70 hours watching television per month. If that's you, did you realize that if you exchanged that time with reading the Bible, you'd read the Bible through in *one* month?

As you hear me say all of these things, don't simply hear me speaking to you and not to myself. Over the last couple weeks especially, I've been concerned about my time spent with social media and how it affects the other priorities in my life. So, this past week, I took one significant step in being more proactive with my time. And I also told my wife and David Pollard what my plan was. You see, I was concerned that I was getting all these social media snippets, but my brain was turning to mush. As a result, I was concerned my mind wasn't engaged when I'd read the Word or read other books. I was concerned about my priority with family and the church and others. Then I realized, the only way things are going to change is if I take proactive steps to change. Novel idea, right?!

Then, on Tuesday, I began to study for the message for this morning. As I began to study, I realized how God merged my life-situations with the text at hand. Here, in this text, the author of Hebrews takes a break with talking about theology and Melchizedek, and he confronts the Hebrew Christians. If you remember, last week, the author talked about how the high priests dealt "gently" with the Israelites. That term was a term to indicate a gentleness while still dealing with sin. As you hear that, you could have been confused and thought, "What does this look like?" Others could have thought the author was thinking sin can't be dealt with firmly. Well, these verses here (and in chapter 6), reveal that dealing gently is not opposed to being firm. As I read these verses, I think of the people and preachers I've known who could confront me and yet I was confident of their love. I'd listen to a sermon and think, "That hurt so good." While I felt I had been cut up, I knew it was with the precision of a surgeon in order to remove sin. I pray this sermon functions that way for you.

You see, the author has been urging this struggling Christian church to not drift from Jesus, to exhort one another daily as long as it's called today, to gaze at Jesus and see his superior worth. And finally, the author essentially says, **"I'm not simply warning you to not drift. You have drifted, and if you keep going, you're going to shipwreck your faith."** As you hear the words from the text, I pray that they would convict you as they convicted me, and that where the Spirit calls you to repentance, that you would turn to the Lord for forgiveness and also for grace to obey.

With this in mind, let's pray together for us, for the churches around the globe and also for another church in our area: Grand Haven Community Baptist (Ray Paget: preach the Word with power, clarity, confidence and expectation. That I would love and shepherd God's people and not neglect praying for the Lord's work and mercy in their lives. Pray for a wonderful servant of the Lord who has non-treatable cancer. She continues to serve others, without thought of her own impending demise. Please pray the

Lord would allow her to bring glory to Himself, either through her healing or through her ongoing care and concern for others as a life-changing example of servanthood.)

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. ¹

About Jesus and Melchizedek, the author has a lot to say. That's true. He picks up the topic again later in Hebrews. Then he says "it's hard to explain." And some of you may have felt it was hard to understand last week. Why in the world is this guy talking to a persecuted church about the order of Melchizedek. Maybe you thought that the author seems to be pulling something out of nowhere to try to give encouragement. So, you turned your brain off. The author, while not being with the Christians as they read this, anticipates that the Hebrew church is probably not going to track with him here; so, he takes a step back and admits this is hard to explain. But then he states the reason why it's hard to explain. It's not because the information itself is so difficult to grasp. It's because the church is dull of hearing.

Finally, the author brings his concern to the forefront. The church isn't just in danger of potentially drifting. They have drifted. And, instead of thinking, "Well, they're going through persecution, I'll tell them my concern when circumstances get a little easier." No, the author knows that painful circumstances can be precisely the moments when we are drawn away from God and shipwreck. Out of love for the church, the author confronts. This here is dealing gently with them. So, what we see here in these four verses, the author's concern for the people and then he gives them a solution so they can address the concern. Again, I pray we'd heed these words ourselves and take proactive steps to apply the solutions. So, let's start with the concern.

The Concern:

1. The Christians have become dull of hearing (v. 11).

Verse 11 says, "¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."² Notice the words "have become." Underline or circle those two words. It's a scary and frightful reality. The emphasis in the Greek seems to indicate that their dullness has come over a process of time, which they themselves have allowed. This word for "dull" means "lethargic" and "sluggish." And, we see here that this is not how a Christian is to act with any of God's Word. All of God's Word is God's WORD!

This past week, I came across a quote from a man named F.R. Webber. He authored a three-volume history on Preaching in Britain and America. In part of his writing, he talks about the *Awakening*. This was a time period where people came to trust and follow Jesus and also where people who did trust actually were spiritually revived. In talking about this time, he writes about a result of the Awakening in

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 5:11–14.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 5:11.

the people's lives. He said, **"Men and women studied shorthand in order that they might take down the sermons that were stirring the English-speaking countries. This had happened once before in Scotland, and it made its appearance once more in all countries where the influence of the Awakening was felt. It was not at all unusual to see men with a portable inkwell strapped about them, and a quill pen thrust over an ear, hastening to join the throng assembling on the village green"** (as quot. in R.K. Hughes, pp. 148-149).

A couple years ago, I was reading about a revival that broke out in Quebec where, as a result, the church gatherings were full. People would come out during the week, to hear the Word preached and to pray together for hours on end. It wasn't forced or coerced. The people's hearts longed for it.

I think of the Reformation where people met together regularly to talk of the new doctrines they were hearing. Or, I think of Great Britain in the early to mid-1900's with a preacher named Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He simply preached and God chose to work through his preaching. People flocked to hear the sermons. But it's not just in those scenarios. I think of the Bereans in Acts or I'm even amazed by the theology that Paul teaches the Roman Christians who were relatively new to the faith. Have you ever pondered that? The book of Romans was given to *young* Christians!

But I give these examples because they reveal what Scriptures teach: if you ever hear of revival, you see people *thirsting* for the Word. And, if you're a Christian, you've had those times in your life. But the question is: what about now? Are you yearning for it and growing in it? Oh, how many people I've known who have been excited for Jesus for a few months or a few years and then something happens. Things change. Zeal for the Lord decreases and excuses come in: maybe it was just a phase. I recognize that we're not always going to feel the same every day, but please heed God here. If you have become dull with the Word, something is gravely wrong. If you're lethargic with the Word, you've backtracked. Since God's Word gives life, and you're dull in receiving it, you're missing his life!

I feel the need to press this just a little bit further to ensure we get the point here. One translation takes the phrase "dull of hearing" and translates it as "you no longer try to understand." You're not working at understanding the Scriptures. This is what I've seen in many who profess Jesus. They say things like "Who needs doctrine. I just need to love Jesus." Or, they'll say, "Well, that's deep. I just know that I'm supposed to be nice." Or, "Doctrine divides. Love unites." We create these false dichotomies between knowing God and serving God. The Scriptures just won't give us that allowance. We must know God and obey God. And, if you're closing your ears to the Word, you need to know that you've already drifted. The Spirit is speaking, but you've drifted so far that you can't even hear – or, better put, you don't even want to listen. You're too lazy to process the words that have come out of God's mouth.

How much better would it be if we as Christians prayed that the Lord would return our hunger for the Word. Instead of trying to be content with our lack of desire, why don't we address that laziness? Why not admit our spiritual deafness and pray the Lord open our ears? This is what the author longs for this church. But he goes on and reveals a second concern, a concern that many of us may not think is very concerning.

2. The Christians ought to be teachers by now (vv. 12).

Verse 12 says, “¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again. . .”³ Because they have backtracked into deafness, they can’t teach others. Now, the author isn’t saying that all of them ought to be able to be preachers. But he does say that they all ought to be able to be teachers. The Scriptures tell us there are various ways we can teach – and we recognize that. When we fellowship, we are to teach one another. When we parents, we are to teach. Sometimes teaching takes on a formal form. Other times, it’s informal. But in either scenario, it’s teaching.

This is an indictment against the church. In one commentary I read, the author stated that this church was probably around or at least 7 years old. Seven years old and they *all* should be teachers?! In our day, it seems like we can have people who say they’ve been saved for decades, and all they continue to do is sit in the pew. They don’t teach. They don’t get together with Christians to encourage Christians. To the author of Hebrews, this is a travesty.

What about us here? The Bible tells us that *we all* are ministers, and we’re responsible to minister his grace to *one another*. But you may hear that and think, “But I can’t. I’m just not smart. I don’t know anything.” Listen carefully, Christian. The Bible tells us we are to love God with all our mind, and in 1 Corinthians 2:16, we’re told that we “have the mind of Christ.” By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can have God’s thought regarding all of life. The great travesty is that Christians aren’t using the minds that the Spirit has given to them. And if we continue to not use God’s mind, we’ll never make it through this life. The world will swallow us whole! And, by the way, this doesn’t just affect *you*. The conversation here is with the whole church. If the church isn’t healthy, the *church* isn’t healthy. Individuals affect the whole. Think of a body with a virus. This past week, our family came down with sickness. Then the sickness got into another and another person. We can say that in large part, our bodies were working, but that doesn’t mean everything was fine! Listen, Christian, if you’re not loving the Word and teaching the Word to fellow believers, you’re harming the body of Christ. Not only are you drifting, but you’re helping us drift.

In writing about the Hebrew situation, R.K. Hughes wrote, “**How aggressive the writer has been with his readers in the storm-tossed little church! The reason for this is his loving compassion for his friends, because he knows that spiritual babies will be overwhelmed by the storm**” (R.K. Hughes, p. 150). The same is true for me towards you, Ventura. If I sound firm, I pray you know it’s because of love for God’s glory and your eternal good.

But the author doesn’t want the people to feel eternally caught in their sinful drifting. He now moves on to what needs to happen. And, while discouraging, it’s still helpful.

The Solution:

1. The Christians must be taught the basics (vv. 12-13).

Let’s read verses 12-13 again. Start with the middle of verse 12: you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.⁴

Verse 12 is more of a continuation of his concern, but I also see here words of exhortation that lead to a solution. They need someone to teach them again. This brings up the idea that they’ve already been

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 5:12.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 5:12–13.

taught things, but as a result of their own laziness, they need to be taught again. But in saying they need to be taught again, there's encouragement. They can be taught again. The question now is, "Will they listen?"

You know, amid confrontation, we generally seek to defend ourselves. Most of the time, we believe we're right and the other person (or people) are wrong. And so, when the author says all of this to them, they could be thinking, "We're not that bad off! Seriously. We've just drifted a little and we'll be fine." The question amid legitimate confrontation is whether you're going to listen and apply. And, in order to apply, you must admit how far you've fallen. Here is where the author tells them how far they've fallen.

He uses two basic illustrations: one regarding school and another regarding physical development. Start with the school illustration. The church needs to learn the basic principles again. What are the basic principles? The Greek indicates something like the "ABC's" of God's principles.

If you're in a state where the Bible is boring you and you don't listen to it, you're in a state where you can't even read it. You need someone to come alongside of you like a teacher with a child helping them to know what the alphabet is, what letters are which and how to pronounce them. Some of you here this morning might hesitantly have admitted that maybe you're in the same position as the Hebrew church. But when you hear you have to go back to the ABC's, you kick against that idea. You think you're not that bad. And maybe the reason you think that is because you don't want to admit that you've gone that far off course. Maybe it's pride keeping you from admitting it. The author says here that you're so backward that you *need* someone else in your life. And don't find someone else who is just as broken. Find someone else who can *teach* you the basic principles. Is your pride worth drifting further from Jesus? Will you talk to someone else who is godly and pursuing the Lord? Maybe you have admitted, but you haven't admitted it with seriousness. In other words, you've couched your dullness by saying, "I struggle with this," but in reality, you've allowed this to happen. Either way, I don't say these things to shame you. Instead, I say these things so that you will come out into the light. Admit your sin and find freedom in Christ – find joy with other believers as we work together to grow in the joy of the Lord! Let others remind you again of the ABC's of God's Word.

But what do the ABC's entail? If you're wanting to encourage someone to get back on track, what's the information that is essential and basic? I think he answers that with the next illustration of physical development. Again, while it's an indictment, it also brings some answers.

To bring the Hebrews to the light of humility, he says it's not just that they've regressed to pre-school basics, they've regressed to infancy. Ouch. Is it that bad to not love the Word? Yes. If I go back to my one son sucking his fingers. Imagine he started sucking those two fingers again. At a minimum, we'd say, "Why is he going back?" But take this further. Imagine a 30 year-old parent, sucking his thumb, drinking from a bottle and wearing diapers! Is that a problem? Absolutely. You'd say, "grow up!" But here, the author says that they've actually not eaten solid food for so long, they can't even handle it. So, they've gone back to infancy, and must be treated like infants. They have to drink the milk of the Word.

So, what's the consistency of the milk? If we are to help infants grow, we can't put meat in the milk. So, what's milk? Chapter 6 and verses 1-2 talk about faith, repentance, baptism, resurrection and judgment. These are the Christian basics. Do you remember salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Do you remember that at one time in your life, your heart rejoice when you heard about Jesus and the gospel, but now you say "I already know that." But when someone talks about more complex things, you think, "That's too deep." If that's you, let someone talk to you again about the beauty of the

gospel and don't be content with where you're at until God unites your heart with the teaching. Drink in the gospel. Drink in the truths. Pray that it nourishes you and gives you strength so that you can eat meat and rejoice in truths like the eternal priesthood after Melchizedek!

A lot is on the line here, Christian. Don't play games with the exhortation in this text. Verse 13 says that if you remain mature, you will be unskilled in the word of righteousness. Some people tend to think that this phrase "word of righteousness" speaks of how one is made righteous in God's sight. The Scriptures teach us that all of us are unrighteous in our very person and in our behavior. Even our best efforts are tainted by self-glory. And so, the Bible states that the world is condemned before God. But then, as we read the Bible we see that some are called as "righteous." How can that be? How are they righteous when we see that even the best of them still sinned? Think of Abraham, Moses and David. The Bible answers the question. Jesus has become our righteousness. He fulfilled the laws demands and then, on the cross, he took the law's curse. Now, the Bible calls everyone everywhere to turn to Jesus and trust in him for forgiveness of sins and for reconciliation with God. If you turn to Jesus, you are then credited with his righteousness and God declares you righteous in his sight! What a glorious truth, amen?! Our salvation doesn't rest in our works, but in Jesus!

Other people hear this and, while they believe what I just said is true, they do not believe this is what Hebrews is talking about here. They think this is referencing a Christian's righteous living. So, there are Bible verses that talk about the need for holiness in our lives and that we can't continue in sin that grace may abound. Jesus has set us free to live unto righteousness and good works!

I believe this "word of righteousness" refers to both. I don't think we can separate the two. We need a righteousness outside of ourselves so that we can be completely assured of our standing before God the Judge at all times. And we need to then live righteously in our lives as we grow in our relationship with God our Father. We need both doctrine and practice. But, if you're a spiritual infant, you can't move much. You need the basic doctrines of the gospel and the teachings of how we are to respond to the gospel. These basic doctrines will begin to feed you with the milk you need, and once you have strength, you need to start taking steps and growing spiritual muscles. As you grow, you'll become hungrier for the Word and as you eat the Word, you'll have more strength to move and live out the Truths that are feeding you. So, this leads to the final point in this chapter:

2. The Christians must know and live the truth (v. 14).

Verse 14 says, "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."⁵

Is Jesus superior to all? Is Jesus all-glorious and supreme? Did Jesus rescue you from death and hell and did he give you eternal hope? Then you ought to want to know him more and more and even to know those things which might be deep. Think of this food illustration that the author gives. Personally, I resonate with food illustrations. You've probably picked up on that if you've been here for at least six months. But, don't we generally prefer solid food over baby food? I am a steak fan. If someone said, "baby peas" or "steak," I'd take the steak! I actually have a friend who makes some of the most delicious steak I've ever had. He and his family come to visit us in Holland each year and the last two years, he's made steak for us. It's delectable. With each bite, I'm taken aback by the flavors. I have to close my eyes

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 5:13–14.

to fully enjoy each morsel. I'm so grateful my body can handle the steak because then there's greater enjoyment!

This is what God's Word should be like to the mature. Recently someone asked me if I didn't like it that I don't know certain things about a certain theology. And, my response was that I used to hate *not knowing* answers to certain doctrines. It would drive me crazy and sometimes I'd get very angry. But now, when I think about the vastness of God, and I think that Heaven is eternal – I get excited. I will always be learning about my infinite God. And, since God is so glorious, every moment I'll be experiencing God's joy as I revel in him.

I believe God gave that to me even through hard lessons of pride and lethargy in my life. But through his truth and through circumstances, he increased my joy. This is what it means when the author writes, "who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." Through the Word and practice, we grow in understanding and applying the Word. Right here, the author links us with Jesus himself. Do you remember in chapter 4, the author said that Jesus learned obedience? He was not saying that Jesus was disobedient and then learned to obey. Instead, in every circumstance, he learned what it looked like to apply what he knew. If we are followers of Christ, we will learn obedience as well. We study the Word and then we go out and do it.

A year or two ago, I believe I gave an illustration I heard from a man named Francis Chan. He painted this scenario: What if I told my daughter to go clean her room and she immediately went to her room and closed the door. A little while later, some friends came over and they go up to the room. After about two hours, the daughter comes down and says, "Dad, I've been thinking about your statement, 'Go, clean your room.' It's a beautiful sentiment, and I even invited my friends over and we had a small group discussion over it, taking each word, seeking to figure out what each word means. Thank you for loving me and wanting me to clean my room." To that, you ask, "Did you clean your room?" And she says, "No, but I know what you mean now!" What would you think as a parent? Your child hasn't learned obedience, right? Sure, you want your children to listen, but you want them to obey!

How many Christians simply listen and don't follow through? I'll say this. If you know the information, but you don't follow you, you honestly don't know the information. Many of you here are young parents, and do you remember when you didn't have kids? Do you remember judging parents before you had kids? Then you had a child. You realized that the information you had in your head was limited. It's not to say that the information was wrong. It's to say that your counsel with the information as wrong! Same with Gods' Word. If you don't apply it, you don't know it in more of its beauty. This is pharisaical.

At times I've counseled people before who struggle with certain Scriptural truths. They've been angry or bitter at something, trying to figure God out. And, I've found that sometimes, those doctrinal struggles are directly related to specific sin habits in their lives. God has kept them from knowing certain truths because they're keeping their heart from the Lord. Could that be you today? You're holding on to sexual sin habit or gluttony or lust for power or anger or wrath or bitterness. You want God to bless you with spiritual insight, but you won't rely on him. You just want the information or you just want a feeling of peace with God, yet you're really at war with him. Listen, to grow in maturity, you must trust the Lord and his ways – and then seek his mercy to follow him (and actually live it out by his grace)!

Jesus calls to a greater righteousness – a righteousness that he gives to you so you can be declared righteous in God's sight. And then, Jesus as the Great High Priest also is by your side, through the Holy

Spirit, to both forgive and empower you to obey! Do not quench the Spirit, but instead walk in the Spirit. Believe the promises of God and savor the Word. Take steps forward. Jesus has given you victory – even if you have backtracked to infancy.

Therefore, if you know you're growing and maturing the Word and obedience, rejoice in the Lord today. That's his grace. The essence of the author's exhortation here is to **drink the gospel, feast on the Word, apply the Truth to your life, and teach others**. If you have drifted, humble yourself and ask for help. We love one another here. And, only because of Jesus, are any of us rescued. Let us encourage you and grow with you. If you haven't trusted Jesus (and maybe even this text has confronted you in that), I urge you to call on Jesus right now. If you have more questions, please find me out or talk to another church member here. They would love to sit down with you to talk to you more and tell you why Jesus is so good and how he can set you free from the bondage of sin.

Have you listened to this challenge? Will you humble yourself? If you are growing in maturity, are you going to teach others? If we truly pursue Jesus together, we can face whatever obstacles that may come our way in this world – even persecution. Let us together rejoice in the Superior Savior, together revel in the Word of God and together rely on the Holy Spirit to grow in righteous living.

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