

“The Character of Immaturity”– Hebrews 5:11-6:3

Brandon Holiski
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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 5...

Hopefully, you have found our text for this morning. I'll read the same section I have the last couple of weeks, beginning in chapter 5, verse 11, and down to the third verse of chapter 6. Please follow along attentively as I read. This is God's Word...

“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 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.³ And this we will do if God permits.” (Hebrews 5:11-6:3)

If you have been with us the past couple weeks then you know we have examined much of this passage already. We began by exploring the cost of spiritual immaturity, namely, that it is detrimental to us and others because it renders certain truth in God's Word inaccessible and leaves us incapable and ineffective at passing on the faith to others. Last week we considered the cause of immaturity, which our writer describes as being in a state of dullness of hearing. This, as we have seen, is a moral issue for the original readers because it has to do with their laziness, not their intellectual capacity. Today, I want us to focus a bit more on the character of immaturity. Then next week I hope to consider the cure (which is what I thought we'd look at today). Then in two weeks we will look at an interesting condition for our maturity. Lord willing, when all is said and done, we will have ended up with a nice little mini-series within our series:

The Cost of Immaturity
The Cause of Immaturity
The Character of Immaturity
The Cure for Immaturity
The Condition for Maturity

So that's the plan. But if you haven't figured it out yet...this could change. In any case, let's turn our attention to...

The Character of Immaturity

Look again at verses 12 to 14, at the end of chapter 5.

“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 5:12-14)

I won't belabor the point because we have touched on it a good bit these past two weeks, but there are a few things he says here that are true of those characterized by spiritual immaturity, those marked by dullness of hearing. There are at least three characteristics of the spiritually immature here. First, they are...

Unable to Teach the Basic Principles

These are not new believers. These are men and women who have been around the things of Christ for some time and certainly long enough, in the writer's estimation, to be teaching the things of Christ to others. He doesn't mean, necessarily, that they ought to hold a teaching office in the church wherein they instruct the congregation publically and formally. He doesn't expect them to be elders (i.e., pastors) in the church. But as believers they ought to be growing up and part of growing up is sharing with others what you have received from God's Word.¹ Maturity is marked by ministry. But they have not been doing this and cannot do this because they have not grown up spiritually. The writer says they need someone to teach them *“the basic principles of the oracles of God”* all over again. They don't even have the basics of God's Word and the Christian faith down yet. And one further evidence of this lack of progress is seen in the second characteristic of their immaturity. They are...

Unskilled in the Word of Righteousness

After telling his readers that they still *“need milk, not solid food,”* he tells them, in verse 13, that *“everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.”* The *“word of righteousness”* has been understood in various ways, but its usually taken as having something to do with the Gospel. It's the Word of God *about* righteousness, the message that leads to salvation.²

The Bible tells the story of the Gospel. It tells us of a righteous God. It tells us how we fell away from God through unrighteousness. It tells us how this righteous God makes sinners right with Him through the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. It tells us that *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21; NIV). It tells us that *“a person is not justified [i.e., declared righteous] by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...because by works of the law no one will be justified”* (Galatians 2:16). This is the way of righteousness—the free gift of God through faith in Christ alone. We believe God and it is credited to us as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6). This is what the Word of God teaches us. It teaches us how to be made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and was raised for our justification, and it teaches us to live righteous lives in Christ, who left for us the pattern and teaching that shapes the Christian experience.

As we mature we begin to apply what God's Word teaches. We begin to live in step with the Gospel, in a manner worthy of the Gospel. But they lacked this lifestyle so the writer has no choice but to describe them as *“unskilled in the word of righteousness”* and children (Hebrews 5:13).³ The Christian life should be marked by a “learn and live” cycle. We are eager to learn more from God's Word and then diligent to put what we learn into practice. But the first hearers weren't showing enough evidence of either. They were evidencing a lack of skill in the word of righteousness, so the third characteristic of their immaturity probably shouldn't surprise us. They are...

Untrained in the Practice of Discernment

Look at verse 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.*” Moral discernment is a mark of spiritual maturity. We increasingly are able to discern right from wrong, good from best. We increasingly live according to what is right and best as a result.

This is true broadly, of course, but the writer of Hebrews is most concerned with his audience lack of discernment as it relates to Judaism. Instead of seeing their Jewish roots are pointing naturally to Christ and His work, they were being tempted to turn back to their former system of Judaism. Instead of recognizing that Christ’s work inaugurated a New Covenant, they had begun to flirt with turning back to the Old Covenant. They lacked the spiritual discernment to recognize that such a decision was foolish and would put their souls in danger of eternal peril.⁴ And this was proof of their immaturity because, as he says, “*the mature*” are those who are able “*to distinguish good from evil.*”

They had not matured enough for “*solid food*” because of a lack of effort.

“They have not taken the word of righteousness and exercised with it. They have not worked out fully the practical, moral implications of the knowledge they do have. And so they are not ready for the meat of advanced teaching.”⁵

By contrast, the writer of Hebrews says that the mature “*have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice*”. The word translated “*trained*” is where we get our English word “gymnastic.” You don’t become an Olympic caliber gymnast without paying close attention to your instructor and engaging in constant practice. So also, you will not go the way of Christian maturity without listening carefully to the Word of God and putting it to practice in your life. Growth requires effort. Spiritual growth requires obedience. We learn and then live according to what we learn. Learn and live. Learn and live. And our spiritual growth is marked by having our faculties trained to apply moral wisdom in the world and make choices consistent with that wisdom because our consciences have been shaped by the Word of God.

But this doesn’t mean that Christians ever outgrow their need for the Word. When the author says the mature are ready for “*solid food*,” he’s not talking about something *other* than the Word. He’s talking about “the weightier matters of God’s Word.” Al Mohler, president at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, reminds us,

“All Christians, even maturing ones, always need the Bible. Discernment simply means that we find ourselves in familiar territory when we open the Word of God. Discernment means the Bible doesn’t disorient us. We know how to read, study, understand, and reason the Scriptures. When Christians possess discernment and can distinguish between good and evil, they have the capacity for spiritual reasoning. They can see how one doctrine relates to another and can logically apply those doctrines to aid decision making in all areas of the Christian life.”⁶

That is correct. But that has some interesting and overlooked implications. For starters it means we have a responsibility to pursue spiritual growth. Mohler continues:

“[T]he author teaches Christians two important lessons about our responsibility to mature in the faith: (1) It is an individual believer’s responsibility to grow in spiritual understanding so that the congregation as a whole is better equipped to faithfully minister the gospel to those in need. (2) It

is the church's responsibility to teach the individual believer. Sadly, many congregations drink nothing but milk because that is all their pastors are feeding them. In other cases, congregations stubbornly refuse the solid food their pastors are offering. Christians cannot accomplish what the author of Hebrews envisions if both of these barriers are not overcome. Healthy Christians serving in healthy congregations are essential to spiritual maturity."⁷

It is hard to say where the breakdown occurred for the original audience of Hebrews. What is clear though is that they had previously received good teaching. But this teaching didn't seem to have the desired affect on them. It was intended to grow their spiritual muscle, or, more accurately, their spiritual mind (cf. discernment). But that wasn't the outcome. Why? It wasn't because there was some flaw in the teaching. It was because they were not making use of the teaching. They were not "exercising with the milk they have."⁸

If they made proper use of the sound milk they had received it would have cultivated a discerning mind in these Christians, one that could readily "*distinguish good from evil.*" They wouldn't be entertaining the possibility of going back to their old Judaism. That should have been the outcome of a proper use of milk. And, if it was, then they would have been ready for the meat of God's Word. They would have been ready to transfer from the bottle to solid food. And that's really the goal: "to gradually move from a diet of milk to a diet of solid food."

But if the mature, who are ready for the solid food of God's Word (like what the author wants to say about Melchizedek and the priesthood of Jesus), demonstrate their readiness by moral discernment, then perhaps a lack of comprehension of the deeper truths of God's Word is owing not to our intelligence (or lack thereof) but to our moral character (or lack thereof). Maybe we stumble over the meat of God's Word because our spiritual lives have yet to develop the kind of discernment to make proper moral choices between good and evil alternatives. The milk hasn't produced in us a new mind yet. For some, then, a lack of understanding of the deep truths of God is a moral issue, not an intellectual one.

Here's how John Piper teases out the implications of verse 14:

"The startling truth is that, if you stumble over Melchizedek [i.e., meat], it may be because you watch questionable TV programs. If you stumble over the doctrine of election, it may be because you still use some shady business practices. If you stumble over the God-centered work of Christ on the cross, it may be because you love money and spend too much and give too little. The pathway to maturity and to solid biblical food is not first becoming an intelligent person, but becoming an obedient person. What you do with alcohol and sex and money and leisure and food and computer have more to do with your capacity for solid food than where you go to school or what books you read."⁹

Have you considered the fact that your dullness of hearing, your laziness and inattentiveness to God's Word, and therefore your immaturity in the things of God, may be owing to seemingly unrelated sinful tendencies in your life? Maybe the best thing you could do to help you understand God's Word better is to repent of those sins in your life that God has already made you aware of. You know what they are? What would happen if you did?

This reminds me a bit of what Paul said to the Corinthians:

"But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Did you catch that? He just said what the writer of Hebrews said. And he's even using the same metaphor. "I want to give you meat, but I can't because like infants you still need milk." But how did he know that they were not ready for meat? Because they were still operating in the flesh. They were still behaving in a human way. In particular they were fighting with each other about trivial things springing from jealousy. That's the reason Paul says, "*I fed you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.*"

Think about that. Do you really believe that the Corinthians didn't know that fighting, and quarreling, and divisions, and jealousy were wrong? Of course not. They knew those things were wrong. That's milk stuff. You don't need discernment for that. That's just basic. But they didn't make proper use of the milk. They heard it. But they chose to go a different way, the way of sin. The way of the flesh. They needed to get back to the milk and be reminded that they must cut out all the bickering and divisions. If they do, Paul would give them meat because they would then be ready for meat. As it stood, they were not ready. They were dull of hearing and in need of repentance.

So next week we will get to the cure for immaturity that the writer of Hebrews lays out (though I've been saying that for a couple weeks now... But next week it could happen), but in the meantime maybe you should consider what areas of your life you need to go the way of repentance.

What is repentance? Well, it's not simply feeling sorry for our sin, or confessing our sin, or getting religious. It's definitely not perfection. One of the main biblical words for repentance means simply "to turn." When God's Word exposes some area of sin in our life, we are meant to turn from that sin and turn to Jesus Christ. That's repentance. The Christian life is a life of repentance, not merely an initial act. It doesn't mean that we don't struggle with sin as we mature. We will always struggle with sin this side of heaven. But I love the way J. D. Greear puts it—"Repentance is not the absence of struggle, but the absence of settled defiance."

"Repentance is acknowledging that Jesus is Lord of everything as a matter of who He is. Whatever your disagreement with Jesus, He is right and you are wrong—be that your position on abortion, sex before marriage, homosexuality, generosity, or anything else. While you may not understand all of His ways yet, you recognize that He makes the rules. Period. It means you do the things He says. Jesus said, 'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and not do the things which I say?' (Luke 6:46).

While we continue to wrestle with divided hearts, the trajectory has been set and the winner of the argument has been declared. We struggle toward the goal. We fall more than we stand, especially at first, and crawl more than we run. We often find our hearts consumed more with unbelief than belief. Underneath the struggle, however, is the understanding that Jesus is right and we are yielded to following where He leads. While our flesh resists His authority, our heart consents."¹⁰

That's what the repentant look like. They are not perfect. But they have a new disposition toward sin and the Savior. We turn from the former and to the latter when we stumble.

But, interestingly, one of the other primary words for repentance in the Bible means "to change one's mind." *Metanoia*. So we must recognize that repentance "is not merely changing your actions; it is changing your actions because you have changed your attitude about Jesus' authority and glory."¹¹

When we repent then we evidence a "new mind" about Christ and our sin. You might say to repent requires a kind of discernment (cf. new mind) that can distinguish between good and evil and act accordingly (cf. trained by constant practice). A lack of repentance is a sign of immaturity. It's a sign

that we still need milk. And it may be the thing that best explains why some of us have so much trouble with the meat of God's Word.

So if God has revealed some area of your life where you are walking in sin, count it as milk. You need to make proper use of that knowledge, repent, and thereby grow into maturity. If this becomes your constant practice, don't be surprised when your palette for the meat of God's Word begins to develop...

To be continued...

Let's pray...

¹ "The text could easily be misread. The author does not believe there is a permanent state of spiritual infancy that believers can occupy. The entire purpose of the book is to warn believers about the danger of falling away. Indeed, this text segues into one of the strongest warning passages in the whole of the NT. What worries the writer about the spiritual infancy of the readers is the danger of slipping into apostasy. He doesn't contemplate the possibility of drinking spiritual milk for years and years and still obtaining eternal life. It is urgent, rather, to leave spiritual infancy behind, for one is either drawing nearer to God or falling away from him. Their spiritual slackness is a matter of greatest concern to the author... There is no idea here that we can be confident of the salvation of those who remain 'spiritual infants' for years and years." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTC; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 171, 173.

² "The message about righteousness' essentially means 'the message that leads to salvation.' While there is a moral element to this message about righteousness, the context points us toward the gospel and God's saving purposes. Believers who are childish are unskilled in the gospel because they lack the ability to turn to Scripture and see how God's plan to save culminates in the priestly work of Christ. They lack the maturity to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Christians are not to be ignorant of the gospel. Nor are we to be untutored in the Scriptures. We are called to be skilled in the message about righteousness and to walk in ways we have been taught." R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 82.

³ "The hallmark of spiritual infants, he says, is that they are 'unskilled in the word of righteousness,' or as the New International Version puts it, 'not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.' This could refer to moral rectitude, our need for righteous conduct, but it more likely refers to the righteousness that comes from God in the gospel through the work of Jesus Christ and is received by faith. This is what he was writing about before launching into this reproof. In Hebrews 5:8-10 he wrote about Christ's obedience that perfected him for the role of Savior. By means of his righteousness, Christ became "the source of eternal salvation" and was consecrated as our high priest. The point is that these perpetual infants were not able to articulate the basis of their salvation. They formed a community identified with Jesus Christ, but they didn't grasp how the Christian faith works. Perhaps that doesn't matter, as people say, so long as you are saved. But the writer shows just what the problem is: 'But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:14)." Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 178.

⁴ "Those who are mature and able to discern what is good and what is evil perceive that returning to the Levitical cult isn't the pathway of righteousness. They understand that such a move is actually deleterious, even if on first glance it seemed to be helpful... those who are spiritually mature, those who have eaten solid food, will choose what is good rather than evil. Their 'tastes' and desires will incline them to what is good, just as wisdom brings delight to those who pursue it." Schreiner, 172.

⁵ Piper, "The Doctrine of Perseverance," preached to Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, on April 17, 1988. Accessed online as of September 2018 at the following web address: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-doctrine-of-perseverance>.

⁶ Mohler, 83-84.

⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁸ John Piper, "By This Time You Ought to Be Teachers," a sermon preached on September 29, 1996, to Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. Accessed online as of September 2018 at the following web address: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/by-this-time-you-ought-to-be-teachers>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know For Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 64-65.

¹¹ Ibid., 56.