

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

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
August 26, 2018

[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...

Occasionally I will preach a text that seems to strike a nerve more than I expected and so we linger a bit longer on the passage than I initially planned. This is one of those texts. We saw last week that the writer of Hebrews interrupts his train of thought in these verses to speak directly and somewhat harshly on the spiritual immaturity of his audience. So what we did last week is consider the cost of such spiritual immaturity. We saw how our immaturity negatively affects us and others. They should have been blessing others with what they had received, but instead they were rendered ineffective because of their immaturity. That may be true for many of us as well. So there is a horrible cost of spiritual immaturity.

What I had planned to work through today was what the writer says about the cause of and cure for such immaturity. However, we are going to linger. So we'll get to the cause today and, Lord willing, the cure we will consider next week. That means we will really only be considering one phrase this week...Yup...a sermon on one phrase...

I asked you to consider a couple of questions: Who is discipling you (or who is teaching you?) and who are you discipling? I'm convinced that, as Christians, we need to have other, more mature believers, pouring into us (whenever possible) and we ourselves should be pouring into others. We may not know a lot, but we know some truth about the Gospel and the Word of God and the teachings of Jesus that someone around us doesn't know, so we can at least teach that. Our text is more concerned with the second question—who are we teaching? The audience should have by now been teachers in some sense, passing on what had been passed on to them, but they weren't because they hadn't been paying attention.

So if they (or we) are going to get where the author wants them to be (i.e., able to teach and pass on what they've learned), then they must first understand why they haven't pressed on to maturity. That's what we will consider today—the cause of their immaturity. With that in mind, let's read the text. I said we will only consider a phrase today, but I want to read the whole section so you'll have more of the context in mind. So I'll begin with Hebrews 5:11 and work down to 6:3. Listen closely. This is the Word of God...

“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)

What a rich text! Now then, the topic at hand is simple enough...

The Cause of Immaturity

What is the reason the original audience had not grown up spiritually? The author answers this for us in verse 11. *“About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”* They have not matured because they had become *“dull of hearing.”* This was not always the case. Presumably there was a time when they were hearing just fine and believed the Gospel. They were probably much more attentive and growing at the start. But things had changed. How they operated back then is not how they were operating now. And, as someone once said, *“Use to bees don’t make honey.”* They were a bunch of *“use to bees”* and they had stopped making honey, stopped applying the Word and pressing into the truth of the Gospel.

But what exactly does it mean to be *“dull of hearing”*? I think giving a little attention to each word and how they’re used in this book will help us answer this. There are two words in Greek. Both words lead to the same basic answer. Let’s think about the word translated *“dull”* first. It means *“lazy”* (HCSB; CSB) or *“sluggish”* (NET) or *“lethargic.”*¹

*“The problem isn’t the readers’ lack of intelligence, nor is it even the case that the subject is intellectually stretching. The entire problem lies in the spiritual inclination, or better disinclination, of the readers.”*²

They had *become* *“intellectually sluggish by their own negligence.”*³ And, thus, their immaturity was their own fault because it was the fruit of their own laziness. But their laziness or sluggishness is particularly tied here to their hearing, so what does it mean to be lazy or sluggish *of hearing*? I agree with Raymond Brown, who writes, *“It here describes those who develop a ‘couldn’t care less’ attitude to the study of holy Scripture, and have failed to give themselves to a regular, methodical, and painstaking study of the teaching and its relevance in everyday life.”*⁴ Their lack of intentionality has led to their indifference, their indifference to immaturity, and their immaturity to ineffectiveness (cf. *“by this time you ought to be teachers”*).

Scripture teaches us that ignorance and immaturity is often a moral issue, not an intellectual one. When we are lazy and inattentive with the Word of God, we sin against the Lord. The writer of Hebrews is holding his readers responsible for their own stunted growth owing to their own lazy ears. He seems to be suggesting, in the words of Tom Schreiner, that the readers *“won’t understand the truth if they don’t want to understand it, and so the fundamental issue facing the readers isn’t intellectual but moral.”*⁵ The translation in the NIV captures this succinctly: *“because you no longer try to understand.”*

The word for *“dull”* is used again in 6:12, where it’s translated *“sluggish.”* We read,

“And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end,¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:11-12)

Connecting these verses with the verse we are studying today helps us to understand what the opposite of dullness of hearing looks like. One preacher explained it like this:

“The opposite of dullness is diligence or earnestness to turn the message of hope into the assurance of hope; it's the imitation of people who hear the promises of God and then respond with faith and patience. So dull hearing doesn't mean there is anything wrong with your physical ears. It means there is something wrong with your heart. The heart is not eager and diligent to embrace the promises and turn them into faith and patience. Instead, the Word comes into the ears and goes down to the heart and hits something hard or tough—or starting to get hard. That's dullness of hearing. The promises come to the ear, but there is no passion for them, no lover's embrace, no cherishing or treasuring; and so no faith and no patience and—if things don't change—no inheritance of eternal life. Which is why he wrote this book. And why I preach this sermon. It is an incredibly dangerous disease, this dullness of hearing.”⁶

But just as the word for “dull” occurs one other time in Hebrews (which helps us understand the meaning), so also the word for “hearing” occurs one other time in Hebrews (which also sheds light on its meaning here). The other time is 4:2. Look there...

“For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard [Literally: “the word of hearing”] did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.” (Hebrews 4:2)

So the Gospel came to them. That's the message they heard. The “word of hearing.” It came to them but it didn't profit them because it was not wed to faith. That's what dullness of hearing looks like. The Word goes and it bounces off the heart. This is why the people disobeyed and failed to enter the promised rest. Back up a few verses and look at what the author said of these folks in 3:18 and 19.

“And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?”¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” (Hebrews 3:18-19)

Did you catch the shift in the language from disobedience to unbelief? He does that because the author of Hebrews understands that the root of all disobedience is unbelief. It's hearing the Word and not uniting it to faith. That's dullness of hearing. “It's a kind of hearing with the ears that is unresponsive in the heart” because it does not “embrace the word of God with faith.”⁷ The opposite, then, of dullness of hearing would be hearing with faith that leads to obedience.

That's not what the original audience had been doing. They were hearing the Word the way you might hear the air-conditioning unit in your house. You might notice it here and there, but it's pretty easy to drown out. It doesn't impact you. It doesn't change your behavior. That's dullness of hearing. You come to church. You sit in the pew. You hear the sermon and the Word of God without really engaging with them, so they just go in the ear and bounce off the heart leaving you more or less the same person as when you came in or, perhaps, harder in heart than before. There's no active listening. There's sluggishness. Laziness. Dullness of hearing.

Now isn't it interesting how we attempt to deal with this dullness of hearing in churches? Think about how we got here and by “we” I don't mean our church in particular (though we at Southern Oaks are by no means immune), but “we” more broadly, in the sense of Evangelical churches in America. Let's take youth for example. We begin to realize that attention spans are decreasing in this digital age and with shrinking attention spans the willingness and, perhaps, ability to lock in and engage is increasingly going by the wayside. So how do churches address that? How do we address it with our youth?

Frankly, we often lower our expectations. We decide to water down the teaching a bit. More and more entertainment begins to replace the sound discipleship that the church has employed for centuries. And the end result? Is it more mature youth? Youth prepared to engage the world through Gospel-lenses? That was the goal, right? Was it the outcome? Nope. We send them off ill equipped for what they will encounter in the world and the few that remain in the church very often turn into the kind of adults that the writer of Hebrews is addressing. They're not active listeners because they never had to be. The church doesn't expect them to be. We become dairy farms where nothing but milk is served. And so we've conditioned them to be sluggish hearers. Sure, they've been in church. But they are still nursing spiritually. Maybe the strategy that many churches adopt of entertaining and watering down the Word to the lowest denominator is not working?

Now, of course, our teaching must be age appropriate and the nature of the audience shapes how the teaching is packaged. But maybe instead of lowering our expectations, churches should be raising their expectations and give the kids more credit. Maybe the solution for shorter attention spans is not shorter sermons but more biblical ones. Instead of assuming that our young people are not going to take serious the things of God, we should start expecting God (and praying for God) to move in their hearts even at a young age. We should not judge what they are capable of based on what we see in the adults around us because the adults around us might be spiritual babes. You may be a spiritual toddler. But that doesn't mean your children have to be at your age. Just because our adult generations are largely characterized by biblical illiteracy, doesn't mean their generation has to be. Raise the bar. Give them more credit. Expect more of them because God expects more of them.

Is that not what we do in every other area of their lives? Like if you go and you read the "philosophy of education" sections of the Tyler ISD administrators you will read things like (and these are actual quotes):

"By setting high expectations I believe we can watch students rise to the level of excellence... Only by demonstrating that we all value education will we be able to take students as far as we can academically, socially, and emotionally."

"...we believe in community, team work, family, and high expectations for all."

"My belief is that all children can learn and must play an active role in the classroom and in their own education. Our goal... is to provide an excellent instructional program where high expectations are set for all students. We want to teach children to be responsible, respectful, and independent so that they can become contributing adults in our community."

You get the idea. Those are real statements from principals in our community. They all read alike. They all contain words like "high expectations," "academic rigor," "challenge," "standards," "leadership," "make the most of every opportunity," etc. You start talking to the coaches at our school and you won't hear them say things like "We run if the kids feel like running" and "It's cool if they're late to practice" and "Oh, did you get a boo boo. I'm so sorry that mean grass hurt you." And as parents, we're cool with that. We don't expect them to coddle our kids. We expect them to challenge our kids so as to bring the best out of them. We expect them to help us prepare them for the real world. Now, I know some parents want their kids babied even in those settings (and every educator in the room has had conversations with those parents), but in general we've learned that lowering the bar with kids doesn't help them in the long run. It hurts them.

And then there's church...

And it's like the mindset, for many parents, goes right out the window. If your kid is like, "I don't really feel like going to school this week," what are you going to say to him or her? Let me tell you what you are not going to say, "Well, that's cool. You've had a busy week. You're pretty tired, I'm sure. Plus I don't want to force you to go to school because then you might grow up not liking school, so don't sweat it, go ahead and sleep in." What about athletics? "Mom, I don't want to go anymore. I'm no good at volleyball. I keep hitting the net. And I know it's only like the second week, but I just want to quit." What do you say? Chances are you don't say, "Okay then." You say, "Look, it may not be easy, but we're going to try. Life is going to be challenging and we are not always going to succeed, but we need to give it our all and remember that our identity is not found in how good we are at sports."

But what happens when the kid wakes up and says, "Mom, Dad, I don't really want to go to church today"? Many parents don't put up much of a fight here. They don't press to see where that's coming from and why it's misguided. We don't take the time to help our kids understand why corporate worship and bible study and fellowship and gathering together are important for our souls. In short, we don't parent. I'm not saying we ought to be legalists and providence might never keep us away. But some parents handle those kinds of objections from their kids quite a bit differently than the others.

And our kids are smart. They process the information. They begin to sense that the things of God are more negotiable and not as important for their lives as things like academics and athletics and their extra curricular activities. They move out of the house and parents scratch their heads and wonder why their kids are no longer attending a church around their new college. Could it be that we spent 18 years teaching them that other things are more important to their well-being and futures and stability? And the depression epidemic multiplies because for years we have unconsciously trained up a generation to find their identity in things like academics and athletics and giftedness, only for them to discover in the real world that they are not as academically brilliant or athletically talented as they thought. The existential crisis ensues. Their sense of identity is shattered and they go spiraling because their identity was not anchored to Christ. Why would it be? The things of Christ were just electives and optional add-ons for years... And our kids don't need us to fail them to fall away from church and the things of God. They can do that on their own. No parents are perfect, but we can be as close to that as possible and still watch our kids go the way of the prodigal or the older brother, neither of which is a good thing. There is much that is outside of our control. But as parents we should consider if we bear any responsibility for the trajectory...

[Commercial: Parenting Conference in November]

I once saw a recorded interview of Cameron Cole, author of *Gospel Centered Youth Ministry*, who was asked the question, "Why are our expectations for teens in the church way too low?" Here was his answer:

"People have very low expectations for teenagers in the Christian context and it's absurd. We have such high expectations for kids in terms of school—kids are learning foreign languages, taking college-level physics, and holding important leaderships roles, like being team captains or leading service projects. And yet in the church we regard teenagers like they're toddlers. I think we need to elevate our expectation of what kids can actually do in a church.

Historically, one of the failures of youth ministry is that kids have not been viewed as potential contributors in the church, and that is a disservice to them and to the church as a whole. We need kids to learn how to be real church members, and we need kids to have good ecclesiology—a good theology of the church.

One of the best ways churches can do that is to give kids meaningful roles in their church where they're actually contributing in a real way. That helps kids understand that to be a member of a church is to be a *servant*—it's contributing to God's ministry in this parish or in this congregation.

Some examples of that are training high school kids to be Bible study leaders for junior high kids, training them to have a central role in vacation Bible school, and training them to be part of the worship team. The goal in my own church is when a kid is nineteen years old, and they go off to college, they can join another church and say "Hey, I can actually do something valuable for your church," because they've had enough experience contributing in our church, they've had enough training, and they've had an opportunity to fail and learn from that failure.

There's a great resource in young people that we often leave on the table.

Another way that kids can be a blessing to the church—and we strive for this in our own congregation—is to form kids that have a maturity in their faith and a knowledge of Scripture and theology such that older people say, "Wow, this is a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old who can really articulate the gospel and apply God's Word to the way they think about their life." This can become something that spurs on the adults in the church to go deeper in their own discipleship, their study of God's Word, and their understanding of Christian doctrine."⁸

I love that. Young people are a gift God has given to the church. They were meant to be contributors not consumers. They were meant to be educated and educators, not merely entertained. They are part of the body. We are stronger because they are here and active. We suffer when they aren't. And so do they. So let's welcome their contribution and expect more of our kids and youth because our expectations tend to set the limits of what they deem is possible. If you lower the bar, they aren't likely to go over it. If you raise it, they might not hit it but they'll likely rise higher than the constraints of your lower expectations. If you lower it, we will excuse laziness and sluggishness in our young people and eventually that affects how they engage with God's Word. We end up with youth groups and eventually churches where dullness of hearing is the rule, not the exception.

If our mindset on such things can shift a bit more old school (and I mean like "New Testament" old school, where the concept of "adolescence" didn't exist, not "back-when-I-was-a-kid" old school), then I suspect we may find a new generation of Christians who is less likely to be "*dull of hearing*" when they encounter the Word of God.

But what about us? Are we dull of hearing? Is there hope for us, if we are? Absolutely. The writer of Hebrews has shown us the *cost* of immaturity (i.e., it's detrimental to you and others) and the *cause* of immaturity (i.e., dullness of hearing), but he also offers us a *cure* for immaturity. Unfortunately, we will have to consider what he says about that next week because we don't have time this morning...

Still, some of the answer should be a bit obvious to you by now. If dullness of hearing has something to do with inattentive, slothful, and lazy listening, then we ought to approach the Word of God and the preaching of His Word with the most mental engagement that we can muster. Did you come to church with the laser-like focus that you would give a love letter or a sporting event or some school material you thought would be on the test? Well, it will be on the test, brothers and sisters. Not a paper exam. We aren't giving any exams (don't panic!). But life will be full of tests and God doesn't waste words. "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*"(2

Timothy 3:16-17). If God said it, it matters for your life. So do you engage the Word of God with that sense of desperate need, knowing that a test in life is likely to come?

Do you listen to the Word with the expectation of hearing the voice of God? These are not just words of men. They are the word of God. And *“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account”* (Hebrews 4:12-13). Do you hang on every Word? Do you live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3)?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, then perhaps your immaturity is owing to your own negligence. Confess it to the Lord as sin in your life and receive God’s grace and mercy in Christ anew. You see, when we regress in our walk with Christ or fail in some way, Christians will often feel a sense of conviction. That’s a good thing. It’s evidence of the Spirit’s work in your life. Thank God for it. It’s there because He loves you.

But the evil one is likely to tell you in those moments, “You’re a loser. You’re too far gone. What does it matter? You squandered all these opportunities, so what’s the point anymore? It’s hopeless.” You can believe that lie. And if you do it will drag you into the same patterns of laziness and dull hearing. But there is another way...

Confess your sin and unbelief at the foot of the cross and then move on. There’s no sense in wallowing around in despair. That doesn’t help you or anyone else. Beating yourself up will do you no good. Remember the Gospel instead. Christ came for sinners—sinners who were dull of hearing. He laid His perfect life down on the cross for such sinners. His life for theirs. *“For our sakes [God] made him to be sin who had no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). You could paraphrase that verse, if it would help, “God made Jesus, who never was dull of hearing and was always attentive and obedient to God’s Word, to be like one dull of hearing, inattentive, and disobedient, like us so that in him we might have ears to hear.” So turn to God’s promise of forgiveness through faith alone in the person and work of Christ alone and step forward in faith. If faith is a gift, then pray like the man in the New Testament, *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* (Mark 9:24). He will forgive. He will help. He will fill those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6).

So don’t swim around in guilt and shame, people of God. Christ has something better for you than that. There’s a joy for you in Christ. Believe that. That’s not taking your sin lightly. That’s taking God’s Word seriously. So I guess what I’m saying for those of you feeling a bit uneasy today and last week, there is a better way. Go to Jesus with it. We will get to the cure next week. But go to Jesus with it in the meantime. As the writer of Hebrews has commanded us...

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Let’s pray... [Lord’s Supper].

¹ “Incidentally, the word ‘sluggish’ (ῥηροί, NET) frames this section, appearing in both 5:11 and 6:12. The readers *are*, so to speak ‘sluggish’ (5:11), and he writes so they won’t *be* ‘sluggish’ (6:12).” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTC; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 168.

² Ibid., 169.

³ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 79.

⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 104.

⁵ Schreiner, 169.

⁶ John Piper, “By This Time You Ought to Be Teachers,” preached to Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, on September 29, 1996, and accessed through <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/by-this-time-you-ought-to-be-teachers>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The video clip and transcript can be accessed, as of the day of preaching, at the following website: <https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-our-expectations-for-teens-in-the-church-are-way-too-low/> .