

Sermon 14: Hebrews 5:11-14: Spiritual Immaturity

OUTLINE

Bad listening
Forgetful minds
Undeveloped skills
Undiscerning lifestyles

INTRODUCTION

On the television series, *My Crazy Obsession*, there is a story about Stan. At the time of the episode he was a 31 year old man, weighing in at 130kgs, and he would spend several hours a day role playing as a baby. He would dress in an adult onesie; turned his queen sized bed into a cot; wears diapers; drinks milk from a bottle; and sleeps with a pacifier, he at the time of article was looking for a full time 'mum' to take care of him.¹ Someone like Stan features on a series like *My Crazy Obsession* because we all know that something is wrong with someone who should be a grown up acting, and living, and dressing, and eating like a baby. It is this kind of shock factor that the author of Hebrews is looking for as he addresses a lack of spiritual maturity among these Jewish believers in 5:11-14. The tone in our text is not one of entertainment about an odd curiosity, but a strong warning about conditions that lay the foundation for apostasy. What does the beginning of apostasy look like? It looks like the picture we have described in this section. The author paints a picture of spiritual stagnation where these believers have gone backwards, reverting to the mental and physical equivalents of being a baby. The author reminds us in this text that if we are not moving forward, if we are not growing, we are not merely standing still, but we are going backwards, going with the flow away from Christ. The end result of what the author is observing is not a long spiritual childhood, but an incurable turning away from Christ, 6:4-6. Some commentators have called these verses an attempt to shame the hearers, that may be too strong, but what we have here calls for a strong sense of alarm and self-examination. Our author highlights four points of immature behavior that help us evaluate ourselves. Spiritual immaturity consists in bad listening; forgetful minds; undeveloped skills; and undiscerning lifestyles.

Bad listening

V11, 'About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.' The last thing that was spoken about in 5:10 was the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ, v10, 'being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.' The book of Hebrews is all about the glory of Christ, but in order to fully appreciate the glory of Christ there are some technical ideas that you have to spend some time thinking about. You have to think about the person of Christ as both God and man; there are many dimensions to the work of Christ as well, so we have to think about Jesus as prophet, king, and priest. But as we drill down into the priesthood of Christ we realize it is a unique priesthood which has two stages, humiliation and exaltation and it is unlike the priesthood of Aaron, it is a high priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. To get at the depths of the glory of Christ you do have to work

¹ <https://www.nine.com.au/entertainment/latest/stan-my-crazy-obsession-stanley-man-grown-up-baby/bb1d522f-98b0-4cce-890d-d484f5c4403d> accessed 13/02/2025

hard at some of these less than simple ideas. The author realizes that trying to open up the glories of Christ by getting into the details of Christ's priesthood won't help those who have a heart problem that leads to a hearing problem.

The condition of your heart impacts how you listen. This is obvious. Sometimes we fail to learn because the preacher is himself incompetent and confused, that is true. But so much of our inability to benefit from the preaching at church, from our bible reading at home, and the reading of Christian books is because of the state of our hearts. So before the author sets out to detail the nature of Christ's priesthood, even though it is technical, we see this as he launches into a discussion of Christ's priesthood in chapter 7 and covenant theology in chapter 8. And please notice he does get technical. Before he sets out he addresses our hearts about how we listen.

He notes a change, 'you have become dull of hearing.' Those who once delighted in the hearing of the glories of Christ have become dull of hearing. Sluggish, slack, lazy, these are good alternate translations. Please notice that the author is not insulting their intelligence. The matters he wants to raise are not for clever people only. Christians have a high capacity for meat, for deep theology, for technical discussions, if their hearts are in it. The deep truths about Christ are precious to every believer, but if our hearts are impacted by sin we resemble a child that is not feeding itself. How do we get to this spiritual 'failure to thrive' scenario?

We are facing an 'attention' pandemic. Due to the way in which technology has come to rule our lives. We are hard wiring our brains to be constantly seeking distraction. We are able to keep pushing the dopamine button in our brains as we inundate ourselves with algorithm based media. Your marriage can be in trouble, you can have deep communication problems, there can be deep hurts that are not being addressed; there can be developments at work where you could lose your job if you don't change, there could be a serious collapse in your school work; but you tune out, and create a habit of tuning out by constant digital distraction and learn to numb your heart to the urgency and alarm as you flood your brains with dopamine. We are seriously hurting our hearts and our ability to engage with what is important, and take the time to think deep and long on issues. We are treating the bible and preaching like we treat our news feeds, if we are not given what we want in a few seconds we scroll to the next feed. Apart from the regular challenges to hearing we face as sinners, we have an added problem of digital addiction hurting our ability to listen. Personal device free childhoods, schools, good modelling from parents, will help protect our kids. But how can we protect our kids if we aren't protecting ourselves?

Business and feeling overwhelmed can hurt our ability to engage. I can imagine a scenario where you have been fighting with teenagers all week; you have had a pattern of having a sharp tongue towards your spouse; you are feeling your own spiritual coldness, and now you walk into church and the preacher wants to talk about the Melchizedekian high priesthood of Christ as it compares with the Aaronic priesthood. And you may be shouting out on the inside, 'So what, who cares?' In desperation many Christians think that what they need is a nice practical sermon where the preacher gives them 5 things to do. 'Tell me what to do, I am too busy to think, just spell it out and make it simple!' This is not going to fix your problems, because unless your heart is addressed, no matter how many points we give to manage your life better, you won't want to implement them until your heart is addressed. Right thinking about Christ will win your

heart to Christ and having your heart He will have your life. I appreciate the pastoral method of the author as he seeks to address a dire situation, not with a five point plan but a reminder of the glories of Christ.

A good question to ask is why these hearers were dull of hearing? They were not negotiating life in a digital world, no they were Jewish Christians facing severe persecution and having the Chinese water torture of a constant verbal abuse, pressure from family, and relentless criticisms levelled at Christ, their loyalty to their faith, culture, family and nation. It is hard to have a calm conversation about technical points of doctrine when you are in a war zone, when alarms are going off, when you are jumping at every loud noise. I imagine that these believers are undergoing the psychological warfare that comes from shunning, persecution, and polemical attacks. Leaning into the glories of Christ and finding peace through worship is how we weather this storm.

Sin also hurts your ability to hear. When you are cherishing sin, arguing for it, you shut out voices that convict, you do not sit under the word to receive it, but over it to answer it anytime it seems to be threatening the sins you hold dear. And since so much of what we hear in church is based on the Bible which is written by the Spirit. If we grieve the Spirit through our sins, we should not be surprised when our hearts don't light up at the truth, when we are impatient towards doctrine that are intended to deepen our worship. This is often a cause for why things are 'boring' it is because the Spirit is being quenched by your grip on sin. Keeping short accounts with God helps on this front.

Some were not only dull some may have already checked out. The process of apostasy does not happen overnight. It is a slow fade. At some point the decision is made, and after that whenever the truth is preached instead of agreement, there is argument. The heart is closed to the beauties of Christ and the gospel and open to any outside criticism. Some may have already apostatized in their hearts, and the implications of that choice are just waiting to work themselves out.

What sort of a listener are you? How is the state of your heart? Are the distractions, addictions, business, fears that are holding your attention? Jesus warns about those who hear without hearing.

Forgetful minds

V12a, '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.' In one ear and out the other is what we say about children who are not paying attention. This would apply well to these hearers. Toddlers have a good excuse for not knowing anything, but the problem with these Christians is that they are converted Jews, who have a robust knowledge of the OT, and have all they need to see the glories of Christ and the redundancy of the Judaism they are tempted to replace Christ with. In fact they should be teachers by now. But no, they need to go back to basics, to the spiritual ABCs, they have forgotten what they have learned and its relevance. What are the basics they are forgetting? 6:1-3 has a sample list of gospel truths as they interface with their questions and concerns about Judaism which have already been answered. Repentance, faith, baptism, etc.

Have you ever had to give instruction to someone over and over again about the same thing. They don't want to do their own thinking, they just want you to hold

their hand and walk them through it every time. Think about how much time gets wasted in the classroom when teachers have to reteach the alphabet, and how to read, and the difference between a verb and a noun. As someone has put it, these Christians have become 'high maintenance toddlers.' Not able to self-feed; not able to apply the basic building blocks of their faith and problem solve issues like should I leave Jesus to go back to Judaism; why is Jesus better than Moses; is the OT sacrificial system enough, etc.

What we need to appreciate from this picture is that the ordinary Christian life is one of constant growth. It is fine for a young Christian to need a bit of hand holding, but every young Christian needs to grow, learn how to apply the same truths that saved them to other problems, learn how to feed themselves from good books and their bible reading, think deeply about how to overcome sin in their lives without always having to have someone spell it out. In fact, we see that the expectation is so that we can teach others. This does not mean that every person should be ordained. No, but it is the expectation that we should all be able to serve others instead of always being served. We receive in order to grow and be able to give. Are you a giver or a taker? The younger a child is, the more it takes, the older a child gets the more it is able to give. Are we coasting in the Christian life or are we living to grow so that we bring benefit to others?

Undeveloped skills

V12b-13, '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.' The author uses a well known contrast between milk and solid food, to contrast someone immature who is like a new born and can only drink and digest milk, versus someone older who has teeth, can likely feed themselves and eat a diversity of foods, as a picture of mature person. Solid food, it seems, in the mind of the author is understanding the OT's teaching on Melchizedek and how he connects with Christ; along with how the Aaronic priesthood anticipated and was superseded by Christ. Milk in his mind are the foundational truths that every young Christian would have learnt.

It is interesting that the measure of maturity is how well someone is skilled at handling the scriptures. The scripture lies before us like a large steak, we need to cut it up and chew it making manageable mouthfuls of it to derive nutrition. Some are able to do this themselves as they are old enough to chew and negotiate the steak, others are helpless unless someone else feeds them with liquids. It should be the goal of every pastor to ensure that every sermon has a variety of milk and solids. The problem is not there are young Christians who need milk, the problem is when those who have been Christians for a while have gone backwards and need to be babied. Can you handle meat? How is your proficiency with the word of God. Are you familiar with all its parts, places and people? Can you summarize the storyline of the bible and the basic point of what God is revealing? Are you able to move between the OT and the NT smoothly knowing what to bring through and what to leave behind? Are you able to see how Christ is the center scripture and how to rightly interpret the OT in Christ centered ways? In all honesty I don't understand it when Christians are not growing in their knowledge of the scriptures. We have more than any other generation before us in terms of being able to access information. We have more pastors, study bible's translations, search engines, on line tools, apps, etc. to help us than any other generation that has lived up until now. Once again the issue is not intelligence but diligence.

But please note the throw away description of God's word, the word of righteousness, God's word about righteousness. The Bible as God's word defines what is righteous and what is sin. It gives us directions in how to be righteous laying out God's commandments. This description is telling because it reminds us that we are instructed and called to be righteous. The bible is not a book about prosperity, or self-fulfillment, but righteousness. The orthodoxy of the bible should translate into orthopraxy. The mature believer is not only able to manage the theological content but outline the righteous life that needs to be lived.

This is further underlined in our fourth point.

Undiscerning lifestyle

V14, 'But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.' The mature believer is able to choose the path of good over evil, to know what the will of the Lord is. Maturity consists not in the fits and starts of inconsistent holiness, but those who live in a self-controlled fashion, who are constant in the obedience, who can negotiate the numberless ethical situations that a fallen world throws up in our path as we seek to be the witness, by word and life in a fallen world.

In the scenario in the text, the mature believer who knows the Bible, who has perceived its Christ-centered focus, who has understood the gospel, believed and repented. This type of believer who is now confronted with an aggressive persecution, under the guise of biblical arguments. In other words, not a straight forward presentation of evil, but hiding a rejection of Christ by an embracing of the OT without Christ. Those who have forgotten the first things they were taught, who are not ministering the glory of Christ to themselves, who are not feasting upon the meaty ways in which Christ's person and work is lauded in the Bible, they are the vulnerable ones, who need to have their hands held, whose confidence is shaken, who give serious consideration to the doubts and questions brought in criticism of Christ. These young and immature Christians feel conflicted not knowing that they are no longer bound by the OT civil and ceremonial laws. But the mature, they know that Christ is enough to pay for sin; that He has fulfilled the law and the types and shadows that pointed to Him can now be put away; their consciences are clean and are not vulnerable to being manipulated by a call to even OT religious activity; they are able to see that God's will also takes them into difficult and unpopular paths that can provoke persecution, even from those who claim to be God's people; they are able to speak comfort to their fears from the fullness of Christ's work on their behalf. This is what a mature, constant, trained and discerning life would look like in that situation.

In our situation an immature Christian would be confused and rattled by talking to the JW's or a Muslim apologist, a Roman Catholic, or some on-line phenomena like Christian Nationalism. But a mature believer would know their salvation is secure in Christ alone, and how the life of holiness that is lived in response to God's saving grace and be undisturbed by the shifting landscape of ideas. Those who stop growing, who are moving backwards are forgetting and not applying the resources they have in Christ and the gospel to help them weather life's storms, resist temptation, and answer challenging religious ideas. They are in danger of the apostasy Hebrews warns us of. The best immune system to these

spiritual dangers is digging into your spiritual growth. Plugging into your church to avail yourself of the teaching, the fellowship, the means of grace, the opportunities to serve and be served, to unite in our gospel witness. Pondering the glories of Christ, reading your bible to see all that it tells you of your Saviour. Treasuring every aspect of His person, every aspect of His work. Falling deeper in love with Him for who He is, God; and what He has done. Digging deeper into the riches of God's word, where there is milk for the young Christians and the most satisfying of meat for the oldest believer. And as your heart overflows with the wonder of Christ that this would translate into the righteous life that glorifies Him.

The challenge of our text is simple. Are you spiritually mature or immature? If you are growing up or down? How are you as a listener? Have you forgotten the first things you were taught? Are you skilled in the word of righteousness, its beliefs and practices? Are you stable and constant, able to pick out the path of holiness no matter what temptation or lie is thrown at you?