

## Hebrews 5:11-14

### Danger of Spiritual Immaturity

Something tragic had happened in the spiritual development of some Jewish people who were being pastored by the author of the book of Hebrews. The author wanted to teach them the great truths about Melchizedek, the priest-king who represented the great High Priest-King, Jesus Christ. However, he could not teach them because it was over their heads; they were too lazy, childish, and immature. They were slow learners, unable to comprehend the advanced study. The problem was not with the subject, but was hard to present so they could understand it because they had become spiritually dull. He will pick up the theme once again in Hebrews 7:1 after he addresses the spiritual condition of some of his readers.

We do well to keep in mind the theme of Hebrews is the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. These Hebrews are tempted to return to the rituals in the Temple worship. They are encouraged to put off their dependence upon the Levitical sacrifices and trust in the all sufficient sacrifice of Christ. The shadows and types of the old covenant were only pictures of the real object of their faith in Christ. To return to the old rituals would be to re-crucify Christ, the Son of God.

The death of Jesus Christ fulfilled the types in the Old Testament that foreshadowed the perfect atoning sacrifice for sin. Jesus fulfilled the Aaronic type of sacrifice for sins. Moreover, the author of Hebrews goes on to stress that Jesus is also the great royal High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

At the heart of the Jewish religious culture was the covenant, the temple and the priesthood. In Christianity it is the great High Priest under the new covenant who ministers in the heavenly sanctuary, interceding on behalf of the sinner. The author writes, "Of whom we have many things to say" in Hebrews 5:11. He is referring to Christ as the fulfillment of the Melchizedek type of priest-king. He has much to share with his readers, but there is a problem.

This passage contains the strongest words of rebuke against spiritual immaturity. These individuals are described as hard to teach because they are "dull of hearing" (Heb. 5:11), should be able to teach others by now (v. 12), are spiritual babes (v. 13), and in the need of "solid food" (v. 14).

Many scholars view these some of these Jewish readers as still unsaved and needed to be convinced that Jesus is superior to Aaron and the old covenant. The context stresses the superiority of Christ over the prophets, angels, Moses, Aaron, the covenant with its law and sacrifices, etc. The atoning sacrifice of Christ is superior to the Levitical sacrifices. I think it is a mixed congregation of believers and seekers or sympathizers. The majority of his readers are saved. They have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their great God and Savior. They need to go on to maturity. There are some, as in churches today, who are sympathizers. They enjoy the religious emotional experiences, have seen the evidences for Christ, but have never been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. They are lost; religious, but lost.

Why haven't they responded properly to Jesus Christ?

### Dull of hearing

"Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5:11, NASB95). All Scripture references are from New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update unless otherwise noted.

The author of Hebrews wants to take his readers deeper into their understanding of our great High Priest and King Melchizedek, but he cannot because of their spiritual immaturity. His readers are "dull of hearing."

"Dull of hearing" (*nothros*) means lazy, slow or sluggish, stupid. At one time they were eager to hear the Word of God and obey it. They are now dull, no response to its message. Their minds have wandered off on something else of lesser value. They were hard to teach.

John Brown wrote, "When the Gospel was first preached to them, it aroused their attention, it exercised their thoughts; but now with many of them it had become a common thing. They flattered themselves that they knew all about it. It had become to them like a sound to which the ear had been long accustomed—the person is not conscious of it, pays no attention to it."

The perfect tense in the original suggests hardened in unbelief. At one time some of these readers were keen of hearing, sharp, ready to learn, but have fallen into a dulled condition. That is their current state. They had not always been in that state. The process was completed in the past time that results in the present dullness of hearing. They have acquired this mental and spiritual state over the course of time. They cannot shake it off now. Unbelief closes the ears and hardens the hearts. Over time it makes the spiritual understanding impossible.

In the past these Hebrews understood the basic truths sufficiently, were "once enlightened." However, as a result of past neglect they became hardened against the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Remember Hebrews 3:7-8? "Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, As in the day of trial in the wilderness'" (Hebrews 3:7-8). They had received the pre-salvation work of the Holy Spirit. However, the dullness became hardness to the point of completion. They neglected the truth of the gospel and as a result they came to a settled state of mind. They settled into a state of spiritual stupidity. The process of spiritual laziness settled down to a state of sluggish laziness.

They have become mental and spiritual loafers who are too lazy to make any effort at improvement. The writer wants to build them up spiritually, focus their minds on Christ, but they are like the spiritually dead. They are non-responsive.

These readers to some extent have been instructed in the gospel truths. By confronting them with the truth he hopes to sharpen their hearing and reestablish the learning process. Take inventory and consider where you are spiritually. Their spiritual condition reminds us of Galatians 5:7. "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?" Was it because they got off to a false start? Were they focusing on themselves and not on Christ? Faith looks away from self and is occupied with the Savior. They needed to be told that Christ, not faith, not baptism, not the church, not religious fads, but *Christ* is the sinner's Savior. Faith is simply the open hand that receives the gift of saving grace from the Savior.

## You ought to be teachers

"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Hebrews 5:12).

They have had time to accept Christ and grow spiritually. By now you should have become spiritually mature teachers. Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples. The apostle Peter wrote: "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15).

His readers are like spiritual children. They can handle only the very simplest doctrinal matters. The "elementary principles of the oracles of God" (*stoicheio*) are the rudimentary principles, the basics, the ABC's, the basic elements. They need someone to go back and teach them the ABC's of Christianity. I know churches that are full of ABC Christians. They have very limited understanding of spiritual truths, and they are the first ones to whine and complain if you try to lead them into deeper truths of God's Word. Some of these Hebrews can only handle spiritual "milk," the simplest teachings. They did not have a mature grasp of basic Christianity. They still needed someone to teach them the ABC's of Christianity. The teachings about Melchizedek are beyond the ABC's. The instructions on Melchizedek are solid food.

How tragic indeed for any pastor who faces an immature congregation who is incapable of going beyond the most elementary basic understating of spiritual truths.

The apostle Paul faced similar circumstances in the church at Corinth. Those who thought they were the elite Christians were indeed spiritually immature. "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

"Milk" is for infants who are unable to understand anything except the very simplest spiritual truths. The perfect tense which speaks of the process finished in time past with present results tells us they can handle only milk. They have gradually turned away from the truth over a period of time until now they are at the place where they can only assimilate spiritual milk. They cannot handle the deeper things of the Word of God. Keep in mind in the context the deeper things is the all-sufficiency of Christ.

What happened to these listeners? How did they get into such a state?

They have become so sluggish that it would now take an excellent teacher many lessons to teach them again the basic truths. They “ought to be teachers,” but now they need someone to teach them in an ongoing process the ABC’s.

They were spiritual babes, immature in their spiritual understanding.

The spiritual babes need some solid food. They need some “meat” so they can grow up. Yes, adults drink milk, but it is not their exclusive diet. Observe the contrast between the immature with those of full age, spiritually mature.

### **You should be mature by now**

"For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:13-14).

The author stresses the ability to discern right from wrong as the distinctive characteristic of spiritual maturity.

The Greek word “babe” does not imply spiritual birth or salvation in any way. We often refer to new believers in Christ as “babes in Christ,” referring to their relationship “in Christ.” In this passage in Hebrews the context requires us to refer to them as unbelievers.

They are so immature they cannot discern right from wrong. The mature “have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” The “righteousness” in this verse refers to what characterizes every believer. Christianity changes us from the inside out. We are to live transformed lives because Christ lives in us. The evidence that we are saved is a changed life. No, we are not perfect, but Christ is changing us.

We have noted the perfect tense in previous verses. We encounter it again in verse fourteen. The mature person has over time practiced or exercised their senses to discern good and evil. The mature can distinguish between good and evil.

They have become “dull of hearing” through religious fads, emotionalism, legalism, lack of doctrinal discernment, personality followers, and will jump on whatever movement that comes to town. They have no depth. They are emotionally gullible. They will follow whatever snake charmer who comes on the scene. We are describing spiritual children who cannot distinguish emotionalism from the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

They cannot distinguish true Biblical theology from religious fads. They fly by their emotions and have no depth of Biblical knowledge.

Paul’s goal was for the church to be built up "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:13-14).

### **Time to grow up**

Believers reach maturity through “the word of righteousness.” This is the most basic issue the Hebrews are in danger of rejecting. They are tempted to go back to their self-righteousness or works-righteousness instead of trusting only in the imputed righteousness of Christ. No one is ever saved by self-righteousness. We are saved by grace and it is received as a free gift from God based upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). If rejecting the Son of God these individuals were in a terrible position of rejecting completely the grace of God and eternal salvation.

"But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:21-26).

Again, the apostle Paul declared: "Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

"He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

The apostle Paul in his own testimony made it very clear that He wanted to be found "in Christ," not having a righteousness of his own derived from Law keeping and self-righteousness, but "that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:9).

Everything in the Christian life is built upon this righteousness imputed to the believer. We do not come to God with any earned or merited righteousness. We come with empty hands stained with sin and guilt. Christ alone is our righteousness. He alone has lived the perfect sinless righteous life. He exchanged His perfect righteousness for our sinfulness and imputes His perfect righteousness to us. This is our perfect righteousness, but it is alien righteousness. He provides us this standing before God. We do not earn it.

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

But even the apostle Paul stressed that he had not arrived after being a Christian for many years. "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12).

The writers of the New Testament tell us this is mature solid food. This is what produces mature believers in Christ. Based upon this relationship with Christ we have the faculties trained by everyday experience to distinguish between good and evil. It comes from putting into practice daily the principles of the Christian life.

We live the Christian life by putting into daily practice the principles of the Word of God by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is a place for milk. It is for infants. But if an adult lives only on milk he is diagnosed with arrested development. It is a terrible spiritual disease for a Christian to have arrested development. It is time to grow up spiritually. It is time to go on to "solid food." Age does not produce spiritual maturity. These readers had been acquainted with the ABC's for a long time, but they had not matured. One pastor said recently that people come to church and sit, soak and sour, but discipleship does not take place.

You need some "solid food." The word for "solid food" (*teleios*) is translated "perfect" in the King James Version. The idea is to be "full age," "full-grown man." Let's get some spiritual meat. "Solid food is for the mature." Observe the contrast between the immature who cannot appropriate spiritual truth and those who are full age, mature.

It should be noted here the word "babe" in this passage does not imply salvation. If the author had said "babe in Christ" it would connote new birth, but that is not the case here. A person can be a forty year old Christian and still be as immature as the day they were saved. It is tragic when there is no spiritual growth. The context in which the passage appears would indicate they are not true believers.

These believers refuse to grow up. They want to stay where they were many years ago. They refuse to open their minds to new biblical truths. They only want to listen to familiar passages of Scripture and repeat what they learned as children. There is no hunger for a deeper, more profound knowledge of God.

These readers are not habitually exercising their spiritual abilities in discerning between good and evil. They have become dull because of lack of use of their spiritual perceptions.

You read a passage such as this and the question comes to the mind, Where is the evidence, where is the proof that you have a vital relationship with Christ?

For a Christian to increase in the knowledge of God he must give himself wholeheartedly to the truth of God's Word. Remember, we live the Christian life by putting into practice the promises of God's Word by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus must be Lord and Master or there will be no progress in the Christian life.

As we will see in the next chapter the question is, are you saved? You are either saved or lost. You either have eternal life or you do not. There is no middle ground. You are not working at attaining eternal life. You have it or you do not. You have either put your faith in Jesus Christ as your personal savior, or you have not. In whom or what are you trusting for your salvation? If you have eternal life, you have it for all eternity, not for a fleeting moment of time.

Is there a hungering for spiritual things? Has God put a hunger in your heart for Himself? Is there spiritual life? That is the operation of the Holy Spirit. If there is a half-hearted desire for Christ and spiritual growth, perhaps you should ask if you have ever been born spiritually. For the professing Christian the critical question is where is the evidence, where is the proof that I am what I profess? You are either saved or lost, there is no middle ground. You are either trusting in Christ and His atoning sacrifice or you are not. In whom or what are you trusting for salvation?

### **SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

1. Are you on milk or solid food? The babes who desire only mild doctrinal study are immature, whereas the mature desire solid food. Are you feasting on the Word of God, or do you go to listen only to what you already know. Is there a passion not for the religious fads, but for Christ and a greater knowledge of Him?
2. How do you grow up? How do you mature in the Christian life? You grow by the use and frequent study of the Bible. You study it and meditate on it and put it into daily practice.
3. Are you teaching others the Word? These Hebrews had been converted long enough to be ministering to others. Instead of teaching basic Biblical truths, they need someone to teach them. They are so spiritually dull they need someone to teach them the same truths over and over again. They cannot grasp the simplest Biblical doctrine because they have no interest in it. How tragic when you have a teacher who has never grown beyond the basics and cannot take the class deeper into God's Word.
4. When we make ourselves available to Him the Holy Spirit equips us to teach others. He nurtures us so we can build up the body of Christ. Every true Christian ought to be a teacher.
5. A. W. Pink said it correctly: "The elements of our faith are that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners; that His salvation is perfect and complete, leaving nothing for us to add to it; that the only fitness He requires from sinners is the Spirit's discovery to them of their need of Him. The greater the sinner I know myself to be, the greater my need of Christ, and the more I am suited to Him, for He died for 'the ungodly' (Rom. 5:6). It was the realization of my ruin and wretchedness which first drew me to Him. If I cast myself, in all my want and poverty, upon Him, He has received me, for His declaration is, 'him that comes to Me, I will in no wise cast out.' Believing this, I go on my way rejoicing, thanking Him, and praising Him, living on Him and for Him."
6. If these believers had been feeding on the milk of God's Word as spiritual infants, they would not have remained babes. If you are a spiritual baby feed yourself on the Word of God. Begin with Romans or the Gospel of John and read and study it each day. Obey it. Put it into practice. Refuse to be caught up in the current popular religious fads that come your way. Get into the Word of God. All spiritual progress is made by putting into practice what you already have received. Manna not eaten breeds worms. Milk undigested turns sour.

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Series: Hebrews

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