

The Danger of Dullness

Hebrews 5:11-14

Introduction

Sometimes preaching and teaching and instructing people in the Bible is amazingly hard work.

- Sometimes it is hard because *there is much to say*. The simple truth is that Truth is not simple. Tozer reminds us that those who bleat for simplicity usually get fed error. So we have this massive body of Truth in 66 books written by numerous authors in two major languages all expressing the mind of God. The writer of Hebrews faced this. There is much to say.
- Sometimes it is hard because *it is difficult to explain*. Literally, it is hard of interpretation. In other words, the author is proclaiming the truth of the Word by interpreting, explaining and applying what it means for Jesus to be our Priest in Melchizedek's order. Any of you who teach know how this is. You have what is so clear in your own mind, but it just doesn't come across. (Frankly, this is why I have followed the counsel of men I mentor under to write a manuscript- "Write yourself clear..." [Kent Hughes].) A great number of the nourishing truths of the Bible are not easy to explain.

The Author here faces an even more difficult situation. He has much to say and it is difficult to explain *because his readers and hearers are so dull of hearing*.

The author of the Book of Hebrews is deeply concerned about our response to the Word. His first warning was that we must not **drift** from the Word and neglect the greatness of our salvation. Now, he warns us about **dullness** in our hearing of the Word and our neglecting the importance of maturity. I have reflected much on these two terms in relation to Christian living—drift and dullness. I'll share some of that at the end.

The Problem – Disease

(v.11)

The author has been laboring to exhort and warn his hearers. The promises of God are great because of the supremacy of the person of Jesus, so we must hear and hope and hold fast. We must believe them in an obeying way. And frankly, this has been argued, not because it is good for us or will make us into better people or even get us anything. No, it has mostly been argued because Jesus is superior.

But I hear the Author sort of sigh. He is like many preachers—what he has in mind and in his heart is going to simply not going to be clear as it should because people are slow to learn or dull in their hearing. This is what all the exhortations and admonitions have been about: Pay close attention! Consider! Don't harden your heart! Fear! Be diligent! Hold fast! All of these are the doctor's prescription for the disease of drift and dullness.

So I have an urgent question: Do you have this disease? If so, how do you cure it? Well before we cure something, we need to understand it as thoroughly as possible. So let's take the two key words here: dullness and hearing and see what they mean.

Dullness

Slow (NIV)

The word itself means, “sluggish or slow”. It is connected to the word lazy. It is used one other time in the New Testament and that is in Hebrews 6:11-12., “*We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. We do not want you to become lazy.*” Same word.

The opposite of dullness or sluggishness, is diligence. The opposite of dullness of hearing is diligence in turning the message of faith into the assurance of hope. The problem is not with your physical ears but with your heart. You do not treasure nor prize nor value the Word and the promises it brings and so you do not give your time and energy to pay attention. And so, there is no faith and no patience. There is not a trusting obedience that looks like rest. And ultimately, there will also be no inheriting of eternal life—which is why the Author wrote this book and why I preach this sermon. It is an incredibly dangerous disease, this dullness of hearing—this slowness to learn.

Hearing

To learn (NIV)

The second of these words used to describe this disease occurs one other time in Hebrews 4:2, “*For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard [same word] was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*” The same problem there: a word of good news—the message of the promises of God, a hearing but no faith. The word goes into the ears, and comes to the heart, and meets dullness and slowness and hardness. So the opposite of dullness of hearing is hearing with faith—believing in an obeying way.

We can see this same thing in Hebrews 3:18-19, “*And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest if not to those who **disobeyed**. So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their **unbelief**.*” See the switch from *disobedient* to *disbelieving*? The root of all disobedience is unbelief—a lack of trust in the promises and person of God.

So, which ever way you look at it—whether “dullness” or “hearing”, you come to the same conclusion, “dullness of hearing” is, in John Piper’s words, “*hearing without faith and the moral fruit of faith*. It’s hearing the Bible or preaching of the Bible the way you hear the freeway noise of [I-75], or Muzak in the office or the recorded warnings at the airport. You do, but you don’t.” We all know this, those of us who have children. Children have a remarkable capacity to even acknowledge what you say to them without their truly hearing what you said. And so do Christians.

We have “grown dull to the sound. The Word heard does not awaken anything or produce anything.” (Piper) At the end of the parable of the four soils in Luke 8, Jesus gives us this very serious warning in verse 18. “*Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him.*” These are serious words. It means that if you hear the

word with careful diligence to obey, then you will receive further grace for even greater believing obedience. But if you are dull and negligent you will find even what little you have taken away.

Listen to me loved ones. I beg of you to be diligent and earnest in how you hear. Lazy, drifting, passive—dull—listening is massively dangerous. Jesus and the Author are making the same point. If you want more grace to hear better, begin to listen with careful attention and diligent commitment to obedience. (Piper)

The Proof — Symptoms

(v.12-13)

How does the author know that they have this disease? What symptoms is he observing that causes him to make this diagnosis?

Their Lack of Sharing God’s Word

(v.12a)

His meaning is quite clear. The symptoms are right there for all to see. There has been the proper passage of time for them to have become familiar enough with the Bible that they can comfortably share its truths. Careful now. He is not saying that at some point, every believer can mature into becoming a skilled, formal teacher of the Word. That is a spiritual gift. But every believer can reach a point of maturity in which he can comfortably instruct the lost and new believers in the basics of Christianity.

Now there are two possible failures that have led to this: they may have never been adequately taught or they have been slow to learn. The failure is quite evident. They have been adequately taught. But they have been dull and slow and sluggish in their hearing and learning of the Word.

Their Lack of Mastering God’s Word

(v.12b)

I get this from the phrases “you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” They were unable to take the Word in and to master it. I am well aware that all of us are in different place on the line from ignorance to glory. But have we diligently applied ourselves to gain a working knowledge of the Bible and have as an attainable goal the mastery of the Word? Do you even care to go on to the deep truths and the solid food?

Their Lack of Experience with God’s Word

(v.13)

Someone may object that I have been comparing this to a disease when the Author compares it to being infants or immature. We would all recognize that anyone who was old enough to eat meat and was still being bottle fed *has a serious problem*. In other words, there is a disease that causes older believers not to mature and that disease is called *dullness of hearing*.

So we have a third symptom. The NIV renders the key phrase “not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.” That leaves us the impression that they were just simply ignorant. That is not quite what the Author has in mind. The ESV has it right. They are “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” The idea here is that they have had no *experience* with the word or message [*logos*] of righteousness.

This is easy to illustrate. I am trying to improve my golf game. I have a very good instructional book at home. I love to sit in the evening and read that book. It tells me all about the components of a good swing. It tells me how to hold to club, how to position my feet, to keep my knees bent and my eye on the ball. It gives all sorts of neat aides that can correct all sorts of nasty ruinations of a pleasant day on the course. I can hear Alister Begg, who is an avid golfer, say, “Let the club head do the work.” But when does all this really profit me? When I am sitting in my lounge chair dreaming of not double bogeying every hole on the course? NO. All of this is profitable to me only when I go out to the driving range or out to the course and begin to experience what all those wonderful techniques really mean when a club head traveling at, in my case at best, 50 miles an hour, impacts a loaded golf ball on an effective surface of less than ¼ square inch. It is when that happens that I am acquainted with the word of instruction about golf.

So it is here. They had become arm chair believers. They were exposed to the Word and were being instructed in the Word. They just had not gone out onto the golf course and gotten some real experience with life. They were living on the milk.

I do not want this message to discourage those of you who are new to the faith or you who have been inadequately taught over the years. May this message challenge you to sharp and focused and obedient listening that hungers to move from milk to meat. But to many of you who have been believers for years and ought to be able to instruct others and ought to have a good mastery of the Word, I want this message to shake you to the depths of your soul—to so pierce hard, dull and slow hearts that the Word begins to awaken desire in you and begins to bear fruit in you.

You must not respond to this with such excuses as “I don’t have time. I am not well educated. I am a simple person.” Because as we will see next, being slow to learn is not a mental problem, but a moral issue.

The Prescription – Cure

(v.14)

So what is the remedy to this disease? Why are some Christians stuck at the baby stage of development with disease of “dullness of hearing” and what is the cure?

The Way Healthy Christians Are

(v.14a)

The Author tells us what healthy Christians look like. They are mature in their experience and taking in the meat of the Word. There is a grown-up-ness to them. They regularly feast on difficult doctrines and can hear them with profit and share them with clarity and use them with confidence. So this is what we are striving for. Mature saints who hear the greatness of the promises of God and the glories of the person of Christ and love them, and embrace them and believe them in obeying ways.

So how do we get there?

How Christians Become Healthy

(v.14b)

Well, we do not get there by jumping immediately from milk to meat. This is a very common mistake. There is a bent to the old nature that thinks that education and information can solve everything. “The solution for immature Christians is to begin eating meat.” But that is not what this text says.

You become mature with milk. The question is, do you become mature with meat? Or do you become mature with milk so that you can eat meat?

The problem is not that milk is weak or that babes can’t eat steak. The problem is that the babes are not exercising with the milk they have. See in the verse? “The mature, *who by constant use* [of milk] have trained themselves [spiritual senses] to distinguish good from evil.” It is not that exercise with milk produces spiritual muscles. Exercise with milk produces spiritual minds: minds that can discern between good and evil.

As one writer expressed it:

Now this is amazing. Don’t miss it. It could save you years of wasted living. What verse 14 is saying is that if you want to become mature and understand the more solid teachings of the word, then the rich, nutritional, precious milk of God’s gospel promises must transform your moral senses—your spiritual mind—so that you can distinguish between good and evil. In other words, getting ready to feast on all God’s Word is not first an intellectual challenge; it is first a moral challenge. It is not a matter of mental ability, but of moral obedience. If you want to eat the solid food of the Word, you must exercise your spiritual senses so as to develop a mind and heart that discerns between good and evil.

The startling truth is that, if you stumble over Melchizedek, it may be because you watch questionable TV programs or movies. If you stumble over the doctrine of election, it may be because you use some shady business practices. If you stumble over the God-centered work and supremacy of Christ in 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 with where you go or went to school or with what books you read. (Piper)

So the key to maturity and the remedy to dullness of hearing is the way you drink milk. So let me close with three steps that Piper unpacks in how to grow with milk to maturity.

- Conclusion**
- **You drink in the milk.** That is, you listen to the milk of the Word—the message of God’s promises in the gospel. You read them for yourself in the Bible and you sit regularly under the expository exultation of the Bible and the systematic teaching of the Word. And you give heed. You are alert and earnest and diligent to apply your heart and mind to what is being said. You are not passive or cavalier or indifferent. Babies long for milk and are incredibly focused when they are thirsty.
 - **Savor and swallow and digest and are satisfied.** This is vital. If this stage does not happen then the next will not either. God gives you by grace a love for the milk: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8). And when the promises of God and the God of the promises are tasted, the milk satisfies. And when it satisfies, it transforms your values and priorities.
 - **With a heart satisfied with God, discern good and evil.** There are hundreds of decisions you must make day in and day out which are not spelled out explicitly in the Bible. You are not told what TV to watch, what political positions to take, what vocation to enter, where to live or vacation, what to drive, how much to own. It doesn’t take discernment to know what’s wrong if you have a list from God. Knowing when to murder and steal and lie and commit adultery and worship idols takes no discernment. So verse 14 is talking about decisions that are not laid down specifically in a list.

How does this discernment, this ability to distinguish between good and evil come? It comes from habitually (by regular practice) nourishing and shaping your spiritual senses by the Word of God until that word is to you a discerning power, a word producing righteousness in the mature. Discernment is what you do when the milk of God’s promises is so savored and so satisfying that it gives you the mind of Christ. (End extended quote from Piper)

May God firmly anchor us that we will not drift from the Word and fully enable us that we will not be dull in our hearing of the Word.

Let us seek and savor the milk of the Word.

Let us become satisfied with God and His promises.

Let us regularly distinguish good from evil with the truth we know.

Let us become mature with milk of the Word so that we can enjoy and profit from the meat of the Word.