

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part twenty

Sunday, June 25th, 2017 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #1976

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DULL OF HEARING AND UNSKILLED IN THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Hebrews 5:11-14 - "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."

This is a text that should be of great comfort to all teachers and preachers. At the very least that phrase, "*...it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing*" (12), means at least *some* of those times when we find texts hard to understand it *isn't* the teacher's fault. It means at least *some* of the times someone leaves a church saying he or she wasn't being fed they may be saying more about *themselves* than their *church*.

This is a great text. We'll study **verse 11** this week and **12-14** next:

1) **BIBLICAL TRUTHS REQUIRE DEEP, FOCUSED ATTENTION AND WE NEED TO BE REMINDED OF THAT**

Hebrews 5:11 - "About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

Those two words, "*about this*," have a surprising reference point. They obviously refer back to **Hebrews 5:10** - "...being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek."

This is one of the descriptions our writer gives of Christ's priesthood. It's a comparison. And I'm suggesting most of us don't care beans about Melchizedek. And the reason we don't care is Melchizedek obviously has nothing to do with my walk with Jesus. I can live and die and never hear of Melchizedek and it will change nothing about my spiritual condition.

And our writer is at pains to point out that kind of thinking reveals something important about the way - the all too *common* way - Christians form habits for *hearing* God's Word *selectively*. In other words, we are quick to *create categories* - *our own self-created categories* - about what is helpful and relevant from God's Word and what isn't.

And then I bump into humbling texts like this one. And I'm told by the Spirit of the Word it isn't my *desire for relevance* that's forming my selective appetite for Biblical truth. It's *spiritual dullness and laziness*.

It's hard for me to hear that. This text paints a very different picture of my indifference toward hard texts. It forces me to look into my own Bible-reading heart and admit there's a big difference between being *busy, time-pressed, and hungry for practical truth* and being *too lazy or too distracted to dig for truth toward which I'm not automatically inclined*.

That word "*dull*" is the Greek word "*no-thros*" - most commonly translated "*slothful*" or "*sluggish*." We all know what slothfulness is. We picture a person who may have a goal in mind but will not do the necessary work to reach it. We picture a person who may have a loosely formed inclination, but remains inactive in terms of achieving it. He will incline to things that are easy and immediately appealing but shun what is difficult and more gradual in terms of benefit and the production of lasting joy.

So the big initial idea in our text is it's going to take *energy* to hear many parts of God's Word. The "*dull*" hearer described in our text doesn't lack *intelligence*. What he or she lacks is *effort*. Somewhere along the way this dull hearer got the idea - perhaps from the church itself - that all Biblical truth should be easily attained.

Bible translations should be contemporary and breezy. Books should be short and tantalizing. Preachers should show video clips from movies and tell funny stories. Church services should be energetic and not too long. And they should be scheduled so I can have most of Sunday for my own use. And they should be specifically geared to my own personal taste in terms of worship style. Perhaps above all, the fruit of deep spiritual understanding should just fall off the tree. It should never be complicated or involved.

Probably this idea found momentum in the logic that because *salvation* is *free* and even a *child* can be saved, then *everything else one can learn* from God's Word must be *equally simple*. And in this very text our writer tells us this is patently untrue and life-quenching.

So our writer sets out the call - let's face the truth. Our text makes it clear there are things *"hard to explain"*(11) in the Scriptures. This in no way detracts from their *value* or *importance*. *Hard truths* are not, due to their challenge, *optional truths*. No. These things call for our holy *effort and study and consideration*. Our writer says to write them off as irrelevant or unnecessary is only an evidence of our own *spiritual dullness*. Simple honesty with this verse demands the exposure of one of the church's very common sins.

And if that assessment seems harsh bear in mind the Scriptures offer only one path for the reception and nourishment of divine faith - Romans 10:17 - "**So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**" *Your faith* - that's what's at stake in your hearing those *hard to explain* truths. They are not some *elective side issue for theologians*. This learning is your Christian faith. It is your life.

I need to explain. This *doesn't* mean I have to know everything to be a Christian. That's not how God *grades* us. And that's not what this text is all about. What this text *is* about - and this is the *crucial* issue - is our tendency to rest on levels of spiritual understanding that were perfectly adequate for *children living on milk* (13) but will never sustain an *adult who ought to be teaching others*(12). It is a Satanic cop-out to use the *simplicity of the gospel* to justify a *lazy, non-maturing walk with Christ*.

Make no mistake. The only thing about your faith Satan attacks is the *depth and sincerity of your Word-hearing*. Satan wants to change what you listen to. He labors for nothing else but to pull your ears and thoughts from the deep things of God's Word. From *dullness* of hearing spring all other forms of spiritual decline.

2) WHERE "DULLNESS OF HEARING" COMES FROM AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

Hebrews 5:11 - "**About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.**"

I hope we can all find the treasure of a blessed grace-filled warning in this verse. We need to treasure its message *before* dull hearing sets in. Our writer sees his Christian audience. These were people who treasured saving grace in Christ Jesus. They were gripped by divine light. They were turned from their lesser joys to treasures eternal in a kingdom not of this world.

But now they aren't as *interested* as they were earlier. Time has passed. We know this from words we'll study next Sunday - *"...by this time you ought...."*(12). They were being *measured* by where they *should* have been in their faith according to how long they had been disciples. But they hadn't remained motivated. They weren't *unbelievers*, for sure. They hadn't *denied* Christ. But, like a knife used over and over again through the years, they lost their edge. That's what *dull* means.

When does a sharp knife become dull? Well, it's very hard to say. Not in any one instance. It's a *time* process. Dullness just happens.

But here we have hope from the revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Word. We can actually *see* where this dullness of hearing comes from and how we can be pre-emptive in *resisting* it.

I want to look at three aspects of dullness of hearing and how they can be resisted. *First*, I want to study *preparation* for hearing the Word. *Second*, we'll look at *the act of properly hearing* the Word. And *third*, we'll examine how to *hold on to the Word after we've heard it*.

3) THE HEART MUST BE PROPERLY PREPARED TO HEAR THE WORD WITHOUT DULLNESS

I have three thoughts here:

- a) *In preparing to hear the word without dullness I must turn my heart from competing affections.*

It can hardly be exaggerated in emphasis that a love for this world does more to alienate the mind from the penetrating power of God's Word than anything else:

1John 2:15-16 - "Do not love the world or the things in the world. *If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world."

We're meant to see the opposite pull of two great sources of affection and satisfaction and influence. Each draws unto itself. Each crowds out the other. The things of this world - and I don't mean this in any cruel sense - make me **dumb** to the things of God. They keep my mind **distant** from the effect of God's Word and God's house. If I don't admit this and come to terms with it I cannot help but be **dull of hearing** as far as the Spirit of God is concerned.

You see things in a church after 35 years. The hardest thing for church-going people to handle well is great and sudden success. I can't tell you the number of times I've driven home from church and said to Reni, "We don't see so and so around much anymore. I know they're here now, but material success is filling up the center of their lives. You won't see them six months from now unless it's Easter."

I'm talking about multiplied scores of people. It's just a law of the opposing loves of God and the world.

b) ***In preparing to hear the Word without dullness I must create desire for the Word in advance of hearing it.***

And lest you think we're powerless over our desires the Word tells us this isn't the case:

1 Peter 2:2-3 - "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— [3] if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

Please notice what's happening in this text. It's surprising - **....long for the pure spiritual milk....** "Do you see it? **Desire** is being **commanded**. We're being told what to **long for**.

How shall we obey this? Peter is giving us the clue in the comparison he makes between spiritual nourishment and the desire a baby has for its mother's milk.

In other words, to prepare your heart for resistance to **dullness** remind yourself of this comparison. Mother's milk for an infant **answers to** spiritual food for the believer - **....that by it you may grow up into salvation....** (2).

Here's what Peter is laboring to say. Recognizing the **end** to which we **hear the word** has much to do with creating a **desire of heart** for the Spirit's goal in our duty. And it is not automatic that we all do this. There are people here in this service right now who come quite regularly but have never mapped out why they come. Some come because their friends are here. Some come because they think it's good for their kids. Many come because this is where their parents brought them long ago.

But we need to nail down Peter's point here. **Process why you're here Biblically**. God's Word answers to your growth in Christ the way mother's milk answers to the physical life of the infant. Tell yourself that whenever the church doors are unlocked. Fight blind religious habit.

c) ***In preparing to hear the Word without dullness I must ruthlessly eject unrighteousness - especially cherished unrighteousness - from my heart:***

James 1:21 - "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

Sins in the heart **repel** the Word. It can still be audibly **heard** but can never become **implanted**. When the mind is filled with things of another nature there is no room for the seed of the Word to germinate. Cherished sin will always make the Word feel either **unreasonable** or **ridiculously unnecessary**.

There is an established order here - **"Put away all filthiness....Receive the implanted word...."** If the first is not

done the second cannot be.

4) THERE ARE THINGS I MUST REMEMBER IN THE ACT OF HEARING THE WORD - THE MOMENT I HEAR IT

Perhaps the most important thing here is to listen to the Word in recognition of its *original nature*, not in accordance to the *means* by which you heard it. Preachers are all *fallible fools on different levels* and churches are all *corrupt and imperfect*. And none of that changes the *original nature* of the Word you hear from them both:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 - "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which *you heard from us*, you accepted it *not as the word of men* but as *what it really is, the word of God*, which is at work in you believers."

Start with the end of the verse and work backwards. This Word was *working* in these believers. Then Paul tells us *why* this was so. These people heard the Word from Paul and his team. They saw and heard these *mere men* teaching. But that's not where they set their hearts. They didn't focus on the *men* teaching them. They didn't focus on the *means*. They saw and considered much more. They focused on the *original nature* of the Word they heard. They heard *God* talking to them. Not just Paul.

There was a power - a dynamic - a transformation taking place. This is what we all want and need. And for that to constantly happen - for the Word to *go to "work"* in ways that overturn our meager expectations - we must constantly look beyond the parts of this church service we see. God is here. And it's more than just a song title.

5) THERE ARE THINGS I MUST DO AFTER I HEAR THE WORD TO PREVENT DULLNESS OF HEARING

The question here is, "*Did I really hear what I think I heard?*" And the reason that's not a silly question is the Scriptures call us to ask it. Apparently it's possible to hear without actually learning a thing - **2 Timothy 3:7** - "*....always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.*"

So there's a *kind* of hearing that doesn't really learn. It *looks* like hearing. Everyone else thinks I'm hearing. Perhaps even I think I'm hearing. But there's no knowledge of the truth carrying over from all my hearing.

Consider an obvious case study from the lips of Jesus:

Matthew 25:24-29 - "He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, [25] so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' [26] But his master answered him, 'You *wicked and slothful* servant! *You knew* that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? [27] *Then you ought to have* invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. [28] So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. [29] For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. *But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*"

As Jesus tells it, the strange feature of this parable is this judged servant *knew* how his master works. He had *knowledge* of his master's desire for profit. But what this servant *knew* didn't *register*. He seems to have had as much knowledge of his master as any of the other servants. Only their knowledge *motivated them to act in accordance with what they knew*.

Here's the take-home lesson. To hear without dullness - *to get benefit* from what you have heard from God - truth must be *retained* by immediate application. Truth is learned *morally* in addition to *intellectually*.

And as if to underscore the importance of this truth Jesus adds something unexpected. It's not just that we lose some added little spiritual tickle if we don't retain what we hear. No. It's much more serious than that. We will lose all that we *had* learned up to that point.

So the closing lesson is any hearer of the Word is bound to hear much that will collide with self-interest and inclination. There will be much to hear that will seem difficult and costly. But that's only the judgment of first appearance. The *real* cost is in hearing the Word lightly. Dull hearing will cost me my soul.