

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

Sunday, July 2nd, 2017 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #1978

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DULL OF HEARING AND UNSKILLED IN THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (continued)

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."

Like many in the early church, these "hearers" to whom our writer writes came out of a Jewish background. And, as would be the case in almost any religion, those whom they left in that religion were concerned about these departing converts to Christianity. They wanted them back.

So our writer recognizes there is a strong pull on these Jewish believers away from gospel grace. He wants to strengthen them in their commitment to Jesus, the Christ. But there's a problem. We began analyzing it last week. These Jewish Christians weren't able to "hear" the truth they needed in order to stand firm. It wasn't that there was any lack in solid truth in which they could stand and find their faith strengthened. There was truth aplenty available. And our writer of Hebrews was anxious to teach them the truth they needed to hear.

But something was going wrong. It wasn't a **truth** problem. And it wasn't a **teaching** problem. It was a **hearing** problem. These Christians had "....become **dull of hearing**" (5:1). And we started considering last Sunday how that had happened. We considered the marks of a **healthy hearing process** when it comes to God's Word. We considered what needed to happen **before** hearing the Word in preparation. We considered what needed to happen **during** the actual hearing of the Word. And we considered what needed to happen **after** hearing the Word to **retain** benefit from it.

Today we see that our writer isn't finished with this subject. He can't just move on to **declare** the truths these Christians need to hear in order to stand firm. Just adding more content to the truth pile won't fix anything. The hearing problem must be solved **first**. And our writer is determined to deal deeply with this issue.

There are **three aspects of concern** in today's text. Our writer brings these Christians into account for **the amount of time that had passed since they had first come to Christ**. Then our writer describes **two marks of mature hearing of the word**. We'll look into each of these today:

1) **THESE CHRISTIANS FAILED TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE NUMBER OF YEARS THAT HAD PASSED SINCE THEIR INITIAL CONVERSION**

Hebrews 5:12a - "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...."

For now just consider that simple, brief phrase - "**...by this time**." What's so striking to me is the way our writer considers the spiritual condition of these hearers. You and I might just look at their **present profession of faith**. They hadn't **denied** Christ. They seemed to be relatively holy and attending worship together. And so one would simply **analyze where they presently were in their doctrines and beliefs** and form a conclusion on the soundness of their faith. They hadn't departed from the gospel so they were still doing well. That's how many of us would have assessed the situation.

But here we find something completely different. Our writer assesses these Christians on a different basis altogether. He doesn't just consider where they **are** in their faith. He assesses where they **ought** to be and where they **could** be given the amount of time they have had hearing the word since their conversion.

"**For by this time....**" How was this time span being measured? We can't know for sure, but let's just take the conversion of many of the Jews in Jerusalem on that first Day of Pentecost. Thousands came to Christ at that time. Surely at least **some** of our writer's audience were converted then. And that would mean they had been hearing the Word for about 35 years. And now, after 35 years, they were in danger of being drawn back into Judaism? This may have been understandable after six

months. But 35 after years?

Our writer is pressing his first readers with more than just sweet words and a pat on the back. He's telling them there is clearly something very wrong in their growth process. This is made even more clear by the fact our writer *tells* them he has important things to teach them but they couldn't generate the slightest interest or understanding in any of it - **Hebrews 5:11** - "**About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.**"

We know these people had been blessed with much opportunity. This letter *tells* us such was the case. These people are being warned about neglecting all the life-giving truth they had received - **Hebrews 6:7-8** - "**For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. [8] But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.**"

"**For by this time....**" How long have you been coming to church? How long since you came to faith? "**For by this time....**" I find those hauntingly humbling words. They're calculated to deepen repentance - not just for *immoral deeds* but for *missed opportunity*. We're accountable for what *could* be. God has this picture of *what Don Horban ought to be by now*.

Our text is depicting a *false resting in grace* in these Jewish converts. Does salvation by grace mean I'm not answerable for these years? No. The days, the weeks, the months, the years since conversion - these are the *talents placed in our hands by the Master*. It is not enough not to *lose* what was given. Talents are not multiplied simply by *not* denying Jesus. We've been given time - precious time for growth! These are moments to be *multiplied*. These are moments requiring a time of *accounting*.

Now we need to face the tough question. *How had this situation of dullness of hearing - this addiction to spiritual infancy - developed?* What was the cause of this *stinted spiritual maturity?* And what was the solution?

2) **DULLNESS OF HEARING IS DRIVEN OUT OF US ONLY BY APPLYING THE THINGS WE HEAR IMMEDIATELY TO OUR CIRCUMSTANCES**

Hebrews 5:13-14 - "**...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.**"

The important idea in these verses revolves around that phrase, "**...unskilled in the word of righteousness....**" (13). And the opposite condition would be that of being "**skilled in the word of righteousness.**"

But the skill being described isn't linked to hermeneutics and a parsing of sentences and meanings. Our writer describes spiritual maturity as being *skilled "in the word of righteousness."* Or to say it a bit differently, *skilled using the word in relation to righteousness*. And the way he makes this idea even more pronounced is the way he describes using the word in the *practice* of *doing good* and *avoiding evil* (14).

So being *skilled in the word of righteousness* means applying the word heard to *doing righteousness* and *abhorring evil*. Or, to say it a bit differently, *skilled in the word of righteousness* isn't just a *doctrinal correctness*. That, of course, is very important. But if that's what our writer had in mind at this point, *skilled in the word of righteousness* would be related to discerning between what is *true and false*, not *good and evil* (14b).

So now we see the problem with the *dull hearers* in our text. They are unskilled in *applying what they hear to issues of good and evil in their lives and in their culture*. They're in church. They listen to the word read and preached - perhaps agreeing with everything they hear. But they do all of this without *stopping what is evil* and *obeying what is good*. And this, says our writer, keeps them from learning anything important and transforming from the living God through His Word.

Look again carefully at **verse 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.**"

What a forceful reminder! Mature hearers of the Word have been "**trained by constant practice**" to hear the Word with *moral ears*. They "**practice**" this by never letting themselves hear the Word without asking, "**What must I stop doing as a result of this text?**" It is so easy to justify what seem to be slight sins. Am I hearing every warning this text offers? Skilled

hearers **practice** these questions.

On the opposite side skilled hearers never let themselves hear the Word without asking, ***“What must I begin doing right now as a result of hearing this text?”*** Is there a command or example or exhortation I’m skimming over too lightly? Do I assume God is happy just to have me **admiring** this example without **duplicating** it?

Remember, these skilled hearers weren’t **born** with a better inclination to the Word than others. They **“practice”** this kind of hearing. They know their own sinful hearts. And they cooperate with the Holy Spirit by **training themselves to act against sinful desires and moral laziness.**

This is heart-searching truth for all of us. Dull hearing abounds. Consider the person who **knows the doctrine of the Second Coming and the final judgment but refuses to forsake some secret sin.** Consider the person who **knows the Word says his or her body is the temple of the Holy Spirit yet justifies sexual immorality.** Consider the person who **prays every Sunday night, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” and yet carries a grudge against a brother in the church.** Consider the person who **knows the Word commands he seek first the kingdom of God first and yet spends the vast majority of his wealth on self-consumption rather than kingdom ministry.** Consider the person who **knows God’s Word claims for itself to be the bread of life and the seed of all Kingdom life and yet spends every restful moment on the internet, playing empty video games or watching television.**

In **not one** of these cases is there a **knowledge problem.** There’s a **dullness of hearing problem.** And it’s death-dealing. So our writer urges these hearers to **train their spiritual senses.** And the way he illustrates this is instructive. All through today’s text he compares dull and skilled hearers with infants and adults.

The point, of course, is an infant has the same five senses you have. And yet if you put baby food and poison in front of the infant they will **both** go into the mouth. The issue isn’t just **having** these senses. The issue is **training** these senses. Get a picture of that infant with those untrained senses. See the danger there. That’s how countless Christians will hear the Word in church today.

I said earlier we would close looking at the **two signs of mature Word-hearing** in our text. The first was mature hearers **train themselves to be skilled in using the word to obey righteousness and abhor evil.** Now on to the second:

3) **DULLNESS OF HEARING IS DRIVEN OUT AS WE PUT TO USE WHAT WE RECEIVE FROM THE WORD FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS**

Hebrews 5:12 - **“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....”**

Remember where we are in this text. Our writer is still laboring to instill the great danger of **dullness of hearing.** This isn’t a **hypothetical** danger - **“...you have become dull of hearing”** (11). And he loves these dull hearers too much to let them think to continue in this condition, thinking it would be without consequence.

That’s the reason for those frightening words we’ll soon study in **Hebrews 6:7-8** - **“For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. [8] But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”**

The gracious answer to this danger is to become **mature hearers** - hearers **skilled “in the word of righteousness”** (13). And then our writer gives a second picture of what this mature hearing of the Word looks like - **“For....by this time you ought to be teachers....”** (12).

Dull hearers of the Word detach **their own** spiritual growth from their **ministry to others in the body of Christ.** They isolate their own growth in Christ and consider it only from a **personal reference point.**

This is incredibly common in the church. **“I’m growing spiritually,”** means I am learning to manage my temper. I’m avoiding those embarrassing internet sites. I’m finally establishing a consistent pattern for daily devotions. I’m starting to consistently attend church as though it really is an important life commitment.

And you'll get no argument from me that all of those are important steps. My only point here - and I think our text bears it out - is these are a tragically **incomplete** assessment of where one is spiritually. Something is being totally omitted from a New Testament picture of a maturing hearer of God's Word. And it's a tragic and costly omission that's all the more dangerous because it's almost universally accepted in the North American church.

You cannot become a mature Christ-pleasing disciple apart from your ministry to others in the church. The clear assumption of our text is the passing of time since these Hebrews Christians had come to Christ was proof positive they should have been in ministry. And the fact that they **weren't** was proof positive they hadn't been hearing the Word in a mature fashion - ***"...BY NOW you ought to be teachers...." (12).***

A ministry to others isn't an **add-on** to a mature Christian life. It's the **source** of a mature Christian life. And growth in Christ is **impossible apart from it**. Your ministry in this church isn't a **job**. It's a **doorway of grace**. It will change the way you hear the Word of God. It will produce fruit in even the personal areas of your walk with God. How long since your conversion? Studying the whole of this great text how should you be **hearing** the Word by now? This matters eternally. What are you waiting for?