



The Deadly Danger of Dullness

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

June 5, 2016

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The more I read and study this letter to the Hebrews, the more I see the pastor-heart of the writer. This man, whoever it was, has a pastor's heart. He loves this little flock of Hebrew Christians in Rome deeply. You can see it in the way that he seeks in this letter to lovingly feed their souls, to protect them from danger, to exhort them to faith and perseverance, and to confront them when it is necessary. He is intentional and deadly serious in his desire to lead them to faithfulness to Christ by himself being faithful to Christ and carrying out his calling in a way that points them to Christ and not himself – to Christ and to no one else.

He is not concerned with being a comedian, or a politician, a relational therapist, a professor, or an actor. He's not going for cheap laughs, preaching for votes, speaking sweet nothings, simply passing along information, or trying to win accolades. Like a shepherd, his heart is to lead Christ's flock to feast upon Jesus, to find their joy and strength in the words and works of Christ, to stand firm in the face of persecution and hardship, and the trial and the temptation to return to the stale water and dead ground of their old lives. Rather, he desperately wants them to be gripped with a transcendent vision of Jesus Christ that will bolster and strengthen their flagging faith. Quite simply, he wants them to complete the race and endure to the very end, not to be tossed to and fro by emotional extremes, trial, difficulty, or failure, but to keep their sights focused on Christ, who forgives sin and empowers faithfulness and who alone satisfies the human soul, so that they will endure regardless of the circumstances. He knows that their spiritual lives are hanging in the balance and that their endurance was dependent upon them growing in grace and focusing their hearts and minds up upon the glory, majesty, excellence, faithfulness, power and worth of Jesus.

He sees things very clearly. He is a man who, like it is said of the sons of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, were **“men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought**

to do...” (1 Chronicles 12:32, ESV) Like Paul, though he may not have established this church, he had a **“a divine jealousy for (them), since I betrothed you to one husband, to present (them) as a pure virgin to Christ.** Like Paul, he could say, **But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”** (2 Corinthians 11:2–3, ESV)

The writer of Hebrews had a keen sense of what was going on, the real threat that was facing the Hebrew Christians in Rome, and what was truly at stake. Yes, these Hebrew Christians were facing severe obstacles to remaining faithful to Jesus Christ. Persecution by the Roman government for their faith in Christ, being disowned by their Jewish families for believing in Christ and for following Him as Lord, rejected by friends who thought them fools, and marginalized and mocked by the pagan society. That was all true, but the real threat to them, the real threat to their enduring faithfulness and perseverance was this – they had become dull in their hearing, sluggish and slipping in their spiritual growth, preferring milk to meat, unskilled in the word of righteousness, and lacking in discernment. The real threat was not from the outside. Jesus said to His disciples, **“...in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”** (John 16:33, ESV) The real threat is not from the outside; it is what is going on inside of them. The real threat is dullness of hearing.

Now the writer of Hebrews has not come out and said it until now, but there was something wrong with the brothers and sisters to whom he is writing that was causing them to be tossed to and fro, that was causing them shrink back, that was causing them to question whether it was really worth it to follow Jesus Christ. He has given several admonitions along the way as we have read this letter. In 2:1, he says, **“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”** (Hebrews 2:1, ESV) In 3:1, he says, **“Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,”** (Hebrews 3:1, ESV) In 3:7-8, he says, **“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,”** (Hebrews 3:7–8, ESV) In 3:12, he says, **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”** (Hebrews 3:12, ESV) In 4:1, he tells them, **“Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.”** (Hebrews 4:1, ESV) In 4:11, he says, **“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”** (Hebrews 4:11, ESV) In 4:14, he says, **“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son**

of God, let us hold fast our confession.” (Hebrews 4:14, ESV) And then in 4:16, he says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16, ESV)

In all of these warnings and exhortations, you get the sense of real pastoral concern, don't you? These are not just idle words, not just spiritual clichés – this is serious and deep stuff, the stuff of life and death. He's truly concerned for this flock, not because of the external circumstances they are facing, but because of their spiritual condition – they are dull of hearing and as a result they were spiritually immature and weak. The writer of Hebrews is going to speak frankly and directly to the hearts of the Hebrew Christians in this text today and I want to take what he says here, these strong and confrontational words, and turn them into a series of five vital exhortations for us, exhortations we need to hear and to take to heart. So let's get started. The first exhortation for us is this:

Do Not Become or Remain Dull of Hearing (11) Now look what the writer of Hebrews says in verse 11. ***“About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” (Hebrews 5:11, ESV)*** Now, what is he talking about? Well, like Eddie preached so powerfully last week, he has been talking to them about the transcendent glory of Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest. He's told them a great deal that ought to encourage them. He had painted a picture for them of how Jesus is the Great High Priest, far greater than Aaron ever was, how Jesus is perfectly qualified in way that Aaron never could be, and how His atonement for our sins is eternal and that He makes intercession for us and that through His holiness and power He enables us to persevere and that seeing Him like this stokes our heart's desire to follow Him and give us spiritual backbone to trust Him and cling to our faith and to persevere to the end and motivates us to faithfulness. He shows how Jesus has it all over Aaron and then says how He has been ***“designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 5:10, ESV)***

The author of Hebrews has a lot more to say, much more to explain about how Christ is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, an incredible OT character, meat for their souls, truth that will nourish and strengthen them – and he will get into it in chapter 7 – but here he just stop and says, ***it is hard to explain.*** But the issue is not the subject matter itself, or the writer's ability as a teacher to communicate the truth; the issue is their dullness of hearing. He says in effect, “I have much more to say about Jesus, riches of divine truth, truth about Christ in all of His glory and sufficiency that will make you bold to press on in

spite of opposition, persecution, and temptation, truth that will give you fresh assurance and courage, truth that will empower and sustain you in your spiritual life, that will make you strong in Christ, but I fear that it will be lost on you, because you have become dull of hearing.”

That word for “dull” is a word that means sluggish, slow, lethargic, and lazy. The writer of Hebrews is concerned that the word of God is going in one ear and out the other. When they hear the Word of God, there is no passion for it, no embrace of it, no cherishing or treasuring of it, and therefore no benefit from it, no growth in faith, no growth in spiritual strength and character. In other words, the issue wasn’t physical or intellectual – they heard and understood what the Word of God was saying to them, it just wasn’t having the effect that it should.

They were listening to the Word of God in the same way that an inattentive husband hears his wife, or the way that you hear the background music in a dentist’s office, or that you listen to a flight attendant as they go through the emergency procedures before you take off on a plane. They were dull to the Word of God. It wasn’t awakening their souls as it once did. It did not produce the fruit that it should. They were hearing without effect. That’s a serious issue – serious and dangerous for the individual and for the whole church. Do not become or remain dull of hearing so that you can...

Take Your Needful Place in the Flock of God (12) Notice what the writer of Hebrews does next. After he diagnoses their dullness of hearing, he exposes the diseased fruit of that dullness saying, **“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,” (Hebrews 5:12, ESV)** He says to them, you have been believers long enough that you ought to be teachers. Understand what he is saying. He is not saying that each of them should be a pastor or a Sunday School teacher, or be leading a Bible study. That’s not his point. Rather, his point is that by this time they should have matured to such a point that each of them should have the ability to teach other people about the basics of the Christian faith, about God, about man, about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how to walk with God by faith.

And here's what he is getting at, failing to mature in Christ is not just dangerous for you, it is damaging to the body. Fathers and mother should be able to teach their children. We should be able to encourage and exhort and correct one another from the Word of God, to help each other to remain faithful, to keep our heads screwed on straight. All of us, in the words of Peter, should always be **“prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you...” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV)** You cannot take your place in the body, be a benefit to the flock of Christ, or be fruitful for the Lord, if you are not maturing in Christ. The issue is not merely that they were not benefitting from the Word of God personally, but that others were denied the help that they might have received from them had they been strong and maturing in their faith, rather than immature from dullness of hearing. The result was that the whole body suffered and was weak. They could not take their needful place in the flock of God. Do you see that?

In fact, the shocking reality was that not only were they incapable of teaching others, but he says, **you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.** He's chiding them and telling them that their understanding of Christ and of the gospel essentials was so weakened as a result of their dullness of hearing, that they needed someone to teach them the basics – literally the ABC's of the faith – all over again. They had regressed in their faith and all of the body was suffering for it. He compares them to nursing babies. They were like adults still nursing from their mothers. Yuck, right? That's pretty awkward and shocking, not a pleasant mental picture, but it's meant to be that way.

Now look, he's not saying the basics are bad. That's not his point. The basic principles of the oracles of God must always be the foundation upon which everything else is built, but the foundation is never the place to stop. No one builds a foundation and calls it a house – it isn't. It is incomplete. What were the basics of which the writer speaks? HE tells us in chapter 6 at the end of verse 1 and then verse 2 where he describes the foundation of the elementary doctrines of Christ as, **“repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.” (Hebrews 6:1–2, ESV)**

He describes them in pairs. He talks about repentance from dead works and faith toward God. Repentance is at the very heart of the beginning of our walk with God. It's very basic. Turning from sin, turning from unbelieving spiritual works as a way to make yourself right

with God is absolutely necessary because they result in spiritual death. But hand in hand with repentance is faith toward God, right? Repentance from dead works and faith toward God are at the heart of the gospel (Mark 1:15). You cannot separate the two. You cannot trust Christ as Savior without turning from sin. That's basic.

He talks about washings and laying on of hands. That's kind of cryptic and hard to understand, but what he is talking about is first is baptism. Literally the word for "washings" is baptisms. The Hebrews in particular were familiar with a variety of baptisms, but what they needed to understand was Christian baptism and its difference, say, from John's baptism or the baptism of a convert to Judaism. They had been instructed in the true meaning of baptism – its picture of regeneration, cleansing, death of the old man and the resurrection to eternal life. In the laying on of hands, he's talking about the picture of the receiving of the indwelling Holy Spirit and of spiritual gifts from the Lord –again, basic.

Then he talks about the resurrection from the dead, the eternal judgment before God resulting in eternal life with God for some and eternal hell for others. Again, this is basic Christianity.

The point that he is making is that they had regressed so far, were still so immature, that they had never moved past these foundational truths to the meat of the Word – to the stuff of real strength and spiritual vitality and power stuff like: the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, the priesthood of the believer, the various aspects of justification, the growth of Christian graces in the believer's life, the doctrines of grace, the mortification of sin, God's sovereignty over the whole world and every situation, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit for sanctification, the doctrine of suffering, church discipline, cross-bearing, the various aspects of Christ's atonement, the nature of good and evil – these are examples of the meat of the Word of which the writer is speaking. It's these doctrines, these truths that make us strong, that make us solid, which make us to stand, and make us fit to take our rightful place in the body, able to teach and encourage others. But these very things are lost to us and we are weakened and the church is weakened, when we remain immature in Christ.

Beloved, let me ask you, how is your spiritual progress? Don't compare yourself to someone else – that's not the point. I'm asking you, what kind of progress are you making in growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? The truth for me and for you is this: our level of living, our constancy, our passion for Christ, our holiness exposes our maturity level. It reveals the work of the Lord in us. And that is why we must

Become Skilled in the Word of Righteousness (13) The writer of Hebrews, in verse 13, says, **“for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.” (Hebrews 5:13, ESV)** His point is this, if you are stuck on the basics of the gospel, stuck on the basic truths that should be foundation upon which you should build your life, your life is going to show it. You will be unskilled in the word of righteousness. Being dull of hearing, stagnating at the basics of the gospel, keeps you from being skillful in the word of God. That is, your ability to grow in righteousness, in gospel stature, in spiritual strength, is severely limited because of lack of biblical understanding and truth. You cannot apply what you do not know.

This idea of being skilled in the word of righteousness is the idea of applying the word. Application of the word of God, becoming skilled in the word of righteousness, is the difference between strength in Christ, wisdom in the way that you live – spiritual maturity – and weakness and immaturity. Personal application is necessary to keep the hearing sharp and to become seasoned in handling the word of God and being able to apply it to every situation in which you find yourself. Sermons are not meant to entertain, or to fill the mind with information, or to fill up the allotted time in the worship service. Sitting under the preaching of the word of God in church is not a magic talisman to ward off evil or a token that you earn for an easier next week. Preaching is a dynamic thing, where the word of God is being preached and the Holy Spirit takes that word and illuminates it to your heart so that your life is impacted and you are no longer the same as when you came in these doors. Listening to the Word of God preached is to be an encounter with God Himself and no one who encounters God is ever left the same. The Hebrew Christians had forgotten that. We can't. Bible doctrine, the meat of the Word of God is intended to lift your eyes to Christ and to make you a more godly person, so that **“we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes, but rather... to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” (Ephesians 4:14–15, ESV)** And that is why we must

Be Hungry for the Meat of the Word, Not Just the Milk (14) The writer of Hebrews goes on to say in 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.”** (Hebrews 5:14, ESV) In other words, the writer of Hebrews is saying that growing up in Christ, hearing and applying the Word of God, is natural progression but it is not automatic and it is hard work. It doesn’t just happen. The word “trained” is an athletic term. No athlete excels by dabbling at his sport and likewise, no Christian grows to maturity, no Christian becomes strong by piddling at being a Christian. An athlete has a goal and he puts in the work every day to reach it. He denies himself other pleasures that would hinder him in the pursuit of His goal. Our goal is maturity in Christ, godliness, endurance, faithfulness, steadiness, and holiness.

The mature are trained by the Word of God to distinguish good from evil. You may think that is easy to do, but it isn’t. Learning to discern good and evil requires effort and training from the Word of God. We live in culture that bombards us with immoral behavior as if it were neutral or desirable. We have the most wicked President in the history of this country, a man who laughingly claims to be a Christian and who quotes the Bible to justify all manner of wickedness and depravity, from abortion to the homosexual agenda to the transgender agenda. It’s breathtaking. Of our society truly can it be said, **“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”** (Isaiah 5:20, ESV) We need the clarity of the Word of God.

Every day we are faced with moral and ethical decisions – what our eyes will see, what our ears will hear, where our feet will go, who we will be involved with, what we will approve or disapprove, what our minds dwell on, how we spend our money, what political position to take, how to discipline our children, how to relate to other people, where to place our allegiance and trust, how to lead our families, how to live righteously, how to persevere and be faithful to Christ, what we will engage as entertainment, what music we will listen to, how we will use social media... for our own glory or Christ’s – the list is endless. Real wisdom doesn’t just happen. You must be hearing and applying and living by the Word of God. We need the meat of the Word, solid food, for just that. We must be hungry for the meat of the word and not satisfied with milk alone. The Hebrew Christians were not hungry for the meat of the word as they should be and it was showing in their lives. They couldn’t discern good from evil; they were weak because they were dull of hearing and so, spiritually immature. So what were they to do? The writer of Hebrews tells us. He says we must

Press on to Maturity, By God's Grace (6:1-3) Listen to his words to us here, ***“Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”*** (Hebrews 6:1-3, ESV) Taking out the section that describes the basics of the faith that we already looked at – the milk of the Word – it reads like this. ***“Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity... And this we will do if God permits.”*** (Hebrews 6:1-3, ESV)

Now what is he saying here? You would expect that he might say, “Alright, let’s start over again from the beginning and I’ll explain this all to you again...” but he doesn’t. He expects them to take responsibility for what they have already heard. He expects them to take responsibility for the level of instruction, knowledge, and experience that they already possessed. He knows that going back and rehashing the basics isn’t what they really need from him. They don’t need babied and coddled; they need challenged.

Again, he is not saying that you just forget the basics. We have to preach the gospel to ourselves and remind ourselves of who we are by faith in Christ every single day or we will forget. His point is that we must mature. We must move on to maturity and build lives of substance and strength on the foundation of the gospel. These foundational truths are vital and they need to be practiced. We must never abandon them, but it would be a grave mistake to never advance beyond them. And his hope is that they will grow to greater maturity and not be so easily tossed, ***“if God permits.”*** Leon Morris says of these words in his commentary on Hebrews, ***“We should take the words not simply as a pious nod in the direction of God but as coming out of the author’s realization that without divine aid the plan he was suggesting was impossible.”*** And that takes us right back to Hebrews 4:16, ***“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*** (Hebrews 4:16, ESV) We need God’s mercy and grace and the empowering of His Spirit to grow in maturity, indeed to endure and persevere to the end in our Christian faith.

Perseverance and maturity do not come from an emotionally based Christian life or from a head full of truth with no heart application. You cannot survive on emotion gained from

Sunday mornings, or a head full of spiritual knowledge, or good intentions that fade. The mature build their lives on the Word of God and grow up in grace. They hear the word with a sharp mind and keen heart and they grow in maturity and faith. That's the heart of what the writer of Hebrews is saying to the Hebrews in this text today. He sounds just like Jesus. After Jesus preached the parable of the soils and He was talking to His disciples, He said: **"Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."** (Luke 8:18, ESV) Jesus gives a solemn and stern warning: take heed how you hear, be careful how you listen, not only to the gospel message but to every word of God because the stakes are high. Beloved, to the one who hears with faith, to the one who understands, to the one who receives the truth, more will be given. But from the one who does not receive the word of God – all that he thinks He has – faith, understanding, and truth – what he thinks he has, it will all be taken away. Is this not what the writer of Hebrews was saying to the Hebrew Christians? Their problem, the root issue, was that they had become dull of hearing. We cannot become or remain dull of hearing, so how do we listen so that the Word of God dwells richly in us? How must we pray and respond? How should we approach the throne of grace?

Pray that God would give you a soft and receptive heart, a humble and meek heart, a fruitful heart. Come ready to hear from the Living God, not taking God's Word for granted, but in anticipation of the truth that He has for you, with a desire to be instructed, exhorted, convicted and corrected. Come to the Word of God, desiring to have your heart stirred up for Christ and to receive the Word mixed with faith. Determine humbly to obey what you hear. James tells us, **"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."** (James 1:22, ESV) It does no good to hear the preaching of the Word of God if it is not accompanied with a determination to do that which the Word of God instructs, to actively apply it in your life. To enter God's house merely to have our ears entertained, and not our hearts reformed, is both displeasing to the Most High God, as well as unprofitable to ourselves. Prepare your hearts by a humble disposition, to receive with meekness the Word of God with a desire to obey it.

Come to the Word of God with teachability. Paul described the Thessalonians as those who received Paul's message **"not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."** (1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV)

Come with a teachable heart, ready to receive the Word of God. If we come thinking that we have it all figured out and have nothing to learn, we will remain ignorant of the truth. If we humble ourselves before the Word of God, we will hear and grow and bear fruit.

Pray that God's Word would do its work in you. Pray that God would convict you, fortify your faith, show you areas of sin, that He would grant you a higher and clearer view of Christ, a deeper and fuller understanding of the gospel, that He would give you a deeper understanding of His ways, that God would use His Word to cause the entire body to treasure Him more fully. Pray that God would use the word to break down fleshly resistance and to create in our souls a greater faithfulness to Him.

Fight against the tendency to let the dew of the sermon dry up before you have left the sanctuary doors. Allow the words to penetrate and refresh your soul by engaging all of your mental faculties, your alertness, but especially your heart, during the preaching of the Word.

We must embrace God's words with the whole of our lives, with all of our heart and soul and strength, and receive them as they are – as the all-encompassing, comprehensive, commanding, convincing, authoritative Word of God. We must not be dull of hearing.

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