



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Spiritually Stagnant

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Hebrews 5:11-14

Clint Pressley

¹¹ 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.

(Pastor prays)

There is something profoundly wrong. You can feel it in the air, you can hear it at school, and you can see it at work. You can even experience it in the laws that govern us. When the highest court in the land is receiving a justice that can't (or won't) define what a woman is, you know we've reached a new, debased level.

But lest we come off as hypocritical, we need to recognize there are some things wrong with the church as well. As we reach for the speck in the eye of others, let us pay even closer attention to the log that is in ours. When 20% of the people do 80% of the work— and even more than that if you look at the giving— when attendance on a Sunday is a fraction of the membership and when there are so many professing Christians that live like practical atheists, there is a problem. It's a real problem of being absorbed into the *zeitgeist* of the cultural moment. It's becoming more and more like the fallen world we live in.

It's a danger now and it was a danger when the letter of Hebrews was written. Here is a pastor writing to a church like this one with members who live in a world that was just as fallen and

dangerous as ours. In the words of John Piper, there is something wrong with the Christians he's writing to. You can feel it all throughout the letter. So far you see it in Chapter 2:1 Where it says *pay close attention lest you drift*. In Chapter 3:1 it says *consider Jesus*. In 3:8 it says, *don't harden your heart*. and in 3:12 we see, *take care lest you have an evil heart of unbelief*. Chapter 4 starts out with, *fear lest you fail to enter God's rest*. And 4:11 it says, *be diligent to enter God's rest lest you fall by disobedience*. And 4:14 says *hold fast our confession*. Piper writes, "now in chapter 5 the preacher is finally telling us what the problem is. The people have become "spiritually stagnant." I want to use this passage today to help us come out of that and to avoid a shipwreck of our faith.

To Fix the Problem, We need to Recognize the Problem

Recognize the spiritual neglect

Let's read verse 11 and hear him pause in mid-thought. ¹¹ *About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing*. He is talking about Melchizedek being a type of Christ. The preacher says, "you have become dull of hearing." But before I get to the "dull of hearing" part, let's look at the "you have become." You once were something else but now you are like this. What happened? Let's see what it says in Galatians 5:7 ⁷ *You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?*

There was a time when your heart was captivated by grace; when you heard the Gospel and couldn't believe that you could be forgiven. When you heard that God is holy and you are a sinner, your heart was convicted and the Bible pointed you to Christ, who lived perfectly, died on the cross in your place. God raised Him from the dead and the Holy Spirit convicted you and you believed! You were so thankful.

There was a time when you listened to the Word with eagerness. The preacher is saying, something happened; you have *become*. Do you ever wonder what happens to some people who used to be in church, used to be faithful, used to be Sunday school teachers or leaders? What happened? There are several things that can happen. Sometimes people just get their feelings hurt. Church hurt is a real thing because you get saved and come to church. You think church is where all the "nice people" are. You come to church for a little bit and find out. You come in and think that all the nice people are supposed to be here, but you get here and you

find out it's not really like that. Sometimes that's enough to make people who believe the Book stop coming. Church hurt is a real thing.

Sometimes people get involved and get close to the leaders, some of the pastors, and you find out, you know, their feet really are made of clay. Or you come to church and are struggling in a marriage, and if divorce comes you feel like you were not supported. Or a lot of times you've gotten to the point that you have some extra money and can travel on the weekends so you are out of church. Maybe you are following kids around playing weekend tournament sports. Sometimes it's just inconvenient; you've had a packed week and it's nice to just have a day. And over the last couple of years, COVID came out of nowhere.

Sometimes, it just fades away. And this morning I'm asking believers to recognize, has there been some spiritual neglect in your life? And if so, would you just have the humility to repent of that? To turn from that? Ask God to help you to change. Maybe you need to initiate another step, to try something different and to commit your life to honoring God. You see, to fix the problem, we've got to recognize the problem. And the first thing we need to recognize in verse 11 is spiritual neglect. But there is a sister to that. We need to...

Recognize spiritual apathy

Let's go back to verse 11 and read it all the way through. ¹¹*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*

What a darkly poetic way to phrase the problem. The preacher says, "Look, I can't even keep teaching. I've got a whole lot of information I want to give you that would be good for your soul but the problem is, it's hard to explain. It's not because I don't have the words; the problem is you." Look, if you have been a Sunday School teacher or a preacher or a schoolteacher, you have been in the classroom and giving information and have seen people's eyes glaze over and they just don't get any of it.

Sometimes on Sunday morning I feel like the sermon is so boring that I just need to close the Bible and go home. One time I was preaching and I could see a guy. (By the way, you would be amazed at what I can see from up here. It's a miracle that I can keep preaching sometimes.) I saw a guy that was struggling. He was on the nods. You could see he was fighting it. His eyelids

were coming down and finally he just gave up the ghost. And the sleep was so sweet that there was one short burst of a snore that startled him awake. It startled me. It startled everybody. And I thought that is probably how everybody is feeling about this sermon, right now anyway.

Dull of hearing. That phrase means *sluggish* or *lazy*. Or in other words, you just couldn't care less. It used to be that worship aroused your attention and the Bible captivated your thoughts. Theology piqued your interest. You were actively engaged, you were hungry for the Word, you were intentional in your walk with Christ. But now it just doesn't affect you. Sin doesn't hurt you. Grace doesn't excite you. And worship doesn't move you. This is a tough and dangerous place to be. This is where men and women get confused about their salvation.

Chapter 6 is another warning, and it's really where a lot of those who don't believe in eternal security go to and say, "see you can lose your salvation." We don't believe that but it gets so foggy. It gets so confusing. If you've given your life to Christ, you are baptized and yet there's nothing. It's confusing for me to do a funeral for someone who is a member of this church but hadn't been in 10 years, or to any church. There's no fruit in his life and that has to do with him. I mean it's very confusing because people who love this person are holding on to the fact that he once joined this church. And it seems to be what the preacher is saying here is "I've got so much I want to give you. I've got so much I want to teach you. I've got so much I want you to learn. It's hard to explain; not because I don't know how to do it, but something has happened to you. Something has happened in your life that you just don't care anymore." Look, if you are lazy in worship, then you will be lost in the world. As Christians, this is what we've got. Everything else is against what you believe. And this preacher is warning the people in this hostile world about the lukewarm condition that their souls have slipped into. This is where Jesus says, if you are lukewarm, I will spew you out.

It's a strange condition of indifference that threatens the very course of your life and the existence of joy. The preacher is framing a warning and he is saying, "Brothers and Sisters, this is not how it's supposed to be." Maybe you feel some of this in yourself and you would be willing not to be prideful but to be humble and to say, "I need to turn from that." Or even where you are sitting right now ask God to give you grace to change. I would say you need to be joining a community group where you have other brothers and sisters who can speak into your life and carry you when you struggle. To fix the problem you have to recognize the problem. We

need to recognize spiritual neglect. We need to recognize spiritual apathy. But there's something else. We need to...

Recognize spiritual immaturity

Let's read verses 12-13 and identify the marks of immaturity. 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.*

What the preacher is saying here is that sufficient time has passed and there should be a change. You should be more advanced. You should be a contributor and serving and invested. But you have remained like babies when you ought to be adults. You remain like pupils when you ought to be instructors. You remain in need of help when you ought to be helping others. You remain in a stunted condition when your life ought to be bearing fruit. It's taxing on the leadership and you can feel the exasperation in this pastor. Last Sunday I saw that a preacher friend of mine just resigned. He was tired. New Christians aren't the problem, they are a joy to teach.

Growing Christians are not a problem, they are joyful. They ask questions. They hold me accountable. The challenge is this immature Christian that grinds the pastor to a fine powder. Let's read verse 12 again. 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,* Verse 12b says they have forgotten the essentials of God's word. You need to get a grasp on the essentials. Get a grasp on the ABC's again, basic Christianity, foundational truths.

The start date, 1517, of the Protestant Reformation where magisterial reformers, when they gathered the people in churches, found out they didn't know anything because before the Reformation people in the church weren't reading the Bible. So they decided to come up with something called catechism to teach people the truth of scripture. And what they typically use as the primary tools for the catechism would be: The Apostles Creed, a short statement of orthodox Christianity; the 10 Commandments and The Lord's Prayer. Those three things became what every new Christian believed. And the preacher is saying here that you don't need

to be some first-class theologian, but you need to be a person who has a grasp on the basic truths of Christianity.

Then he uses a food metaphor that every parent would understand. He says you are drinking milk when you ought to be eating solid food. It's the same thing that Peter says in 1 Peter 2:2. *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—*

Then he completes his description of the problem in verse 13. ¹³ *for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.* Now you had it in verse 12 the oracles of God. That is simply the tone, *logion tou Theou*. The word or oracle of God. But now he goes a different way. He says it is the word of righteousness. It takes time to teach and effort to learn.

There is something that we are all going to need to be duly informed. We need to have a good grasp on what the Bible says about God and His holiness and His love and His expectation and His judgment?

What does the Bible say about mankind and womankind? What does the Bible say about who we are? Are we born good and then turn bad because of the environment? Or are we born with a sinful nature and already under condemnation? What does the Bible say about the image of God in each of you? What does the Bible say about sin and how it comes about? How does it affect us and how does it affect others? How does it affect God? What does He expect? What does the Bible say about judgment? Who stands under judgment? What does the Bible say about Christ, the definitive Christ, the meditative Christ? What does the Bible say about the life of Christ, death of Christ on the cross? What does the Word say about the substitution of Christ? What does the Bible say about how you receive the imputed righteousness that God gives us because of Jesus? What does the Bible say about the finished work of Christ, His dying in the place of sinners, the Resurrection? What does the Bible say about the lordship of Jesus over your life? You ought to know those things and then be able to talk about them. The preacher says you ought to be teaching, but you are still drinking milk.

It's what Peter was getting at in 1 Peter 3:15. ¹⁵ *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the*

hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, Do you see the problem? To fix the problem we must recognize the problem. We must recognize spiritual neglect. We must recognize spiritual apathy. We must recognize spiritual immaturity.

There is one last one and maybe it's the most relevant. We must...

Recognize spiritual fog (and come out of it)

I'll show you where I get that. It's in verse 14. Here is the danger we are living in. 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.* We are actually living in a world that calls evil "good" and good "evil." Let me just pick a topic. The world will not understand what you say as a Christian about what it means to actually be a woman. Biblical femininity. What does it look like to follow Christ as a woman, to serve Him as a woman? To live your life as the Bible describes womanhood? And to be joyful doing that.

What does it look like to define Biblical masculinity? I don't mean the weird macho stuff. I mean, what does the Bible say about masculinity? What does it look like to be responsible and to serve and to lead with humility? What does it look like to have integrity or to be productive or to live in a Christlike manner? And the preacher says in verse 14, you need solid food. Milk is great but it gets to the point where you've got to start eating something. And the Bible says here that the meat, according to verse 14, is there for a reason. Solid food is for the mature, for those who are having the powers of discernment. You need solid food to fuel the training. Have you ever tried to train for anything physically, done a marathon or contest? You understand some of this. Paul picks up the imagery in all of his writings. My favorite verse. 1 Corinthians 9:27. ²⁷*But I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.* Or in the book of Philippians Paul says in 3:14 ¹⁴*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* The whole point of this verse is that immature believers are so easily led astray. Ephesians 4:14 says, ¹⁴*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.* If you are not careful, you can casually drift into a low standard of Christian life, minimalizing the life-giving importance of worship, community and Biblical instruction. The end of verse 14 brings the command forward and shows us how to fight against spiritual immaturity. ^{14b}*powers of discernment trained by constant practice to*

distinguish good from evil. Here is the steady application of the spiritual disciplines so that, although we live in a fallen world, we can forge a new way of life that emanates from God's word. This is great doctrine providing a skeleton so that the spirit makes us live ethical lives that provide social glue of being together and forming the church. Together, all kinds of sinners from all walks of life redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I want our church to be spiritually hungry, spiritually passionate, spiritually mature, and spiritually clear. I want to see us coming together as the church of Jesus in the city of Charlotte for the glory of God. And I want you to be in every bit of that. I want your powers of discernment trained so you can live in this confusing world. I want you to be fed by God's Word and be able to distinguish good from evil and live your life joyfully for the glory of God and for the good of the Kingdom. To fix the problem we've got to recognize the problem. We've got to recognize spiritual neglect, spiritual apathy, spiritual immaturity and spiritual fog. We must commit to change, ask for help, and take the right steps.

(Pastor prays)