

**Sermon by Todd Mitchell**  
**Bethel Fellowship Church**  
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**Introduction**

Just imagine what it must have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples, like Peter and Andrew. They were fishing when Jesus called out to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mat 4:19).<sup>1</sup> They dropped everything to follow him.

Jesus was a great teacher. By the age of twelve, he had already amazed the teachers in the temple with his "understanding and answers" (Luk 2:47). When Jesus began his teaching ministry, he taught his disciples like they were in school. They listened and learned as he lectured them, questioned them, rebuked them, exhorted them, and warned them.

The day finally came when they graduated from this school, when Jesus left them on earth with the promise he would return one day. On graduation day, what did he tell them? Jesus told them to go make new disciples, teaching them all they had learned from him. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mat 28:19-20).

That is exactly what they did. When the church was born, the first thing we are told about the members of the church is that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Act 2:42). But it didn't take long for some of these church-members to get lazy.

How do we know this? We know it because of what we read at the end of Hebrews 5. Please open your Bibles to Hebrews 5. I'm preaching on Hebrew 5:11-14, but to understand what is going on here we need to start reading in v. 10, where the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus has been "designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." Now, I'm not going to preach on this verse. If you don't know what this means, I want it to hang in the air like a big question mark this morning as I preach on vv. 11-14.

"A high priest after the order of Melchizedek." That's quite a thing to say. What does it mean? The writer of Hebrews has a lot to say about it, but it's like he can see his readers nodding off, bored out of their minds with all this heavy teaching – and so, beginning in Hebrews 5:11, it's as if he claps his hands to wake them up, rebukes them for being lazy listeners, and challenges them to do better!

Hebrews 5:11-14 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Here we see:

- A stinging rebuke: you've stopped learning
- A high standard: you should be teachers by now
- An inspiring challenge: you can grow

First, a stinging rebuke!

## **Exposition**

### **I. A stinging rebuke: you've stopped learning**

Let's start with v. 11. "About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

#### **A. The author has much to say**

"About this we have much to say." About what? About Jesus being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek! A lot of folks might ask, after the order of *what*? I know I did, the first time I read it. Only two other places in the Bible do we see anything to do with Melchizedek. Once in Genesis 14, and once in Psalm 110. In Genesis 14, Melchizedek appears out of nowhere, blesses Abraham, and disappears. Then in Psalm 110:4, we read, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'" The Psalmist doesn't even explain what he means by that. Those are the only two places in the Bible that we see anything to do with Melchizedek – and yet the author of this letter to the Hebrews has "*much to say*" about this!

The writer of Hebrews wants to teach sound doctrine about Jesus, and so he teaches from the revelation God has given us in the Old Testament. Not only that, he pays attention to the smallest details in God's Word – and he expects his readers to, too. They are huge details, because they are the very words of God himself – never to be skipped over, never to be ignored, always to be read and savored and understood and taught to others.

You might think, *A high priest after the order of Melchizedek?! What does that have to do with my life right here, right now? What does it matter? When will we ever use this in our lives?* But that's like elementary students complaining about learning multiplication tables because they can't imagine why multiplication tables matter. Some stuff you just have to learn before you know why it matters, and some of that stuff can be pretty deep.

The Bible is deep. It is not simple. Just when you think it is, along comes the writer of Hebrews and says, "About this we have much to say." The Bible is deep, and full, and rich. And some of it is hard to understand. The Bible even says so! When Peter wrote about Paul's letters, in 2 Peter 3:14, he wrote, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand." God hasn't given us a children's storybook. He has given us a rich book that has everything in it from stories that children can understand to things that take years and years and years of work to

even begin to understand. And all of this, from the simple stuff to the hard stuff, from Genesis to Revelation, from the brief references to the big stories, is for you and for me.

But the problem for the writer of Hebrews is that his readers aren't ready for it. That's why he says, in v. 11, "it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

## **B. The author has a hard time explaining it to dullards**

That word "dull" can also be translated, "lazy" or "sluggish." The writer of Hebrews has much to say, but he's going to have a hard time getting his message across because his readers have become lazy listeners. What a stinging rebuke!

What could make *us* lazy listeners? Let's be humble and think about this. We can be dull of hearing, can't we? When the Bible tells us not to gossip, not to lust, and not to dishonor our parents, we can be experts at plugging our ears. When the Bible tells us to do something we don't want to do, like exhorting one another or forgiving one another or being patient with one another, we can let God's Word go right in one ear and out the other.

Even worse, Paul warned Timothy, we can surround ourselves with teachers who tell us what we want to hear instead of what God's Word says:

2 Timothy 4:3-4 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Then there are distractions. Why read the Bible when watching TV seems more relaxing? Why delve deeper into the Bible when I have so many other things I've been meaning to do? I am not asking you any questions I don't ask myself all the time, my friends.

But perhaps the most terrible thing that can make us lazy listeners is overconfidence – thinking we know more than we do. Modern psychologists write books about this. What they tell us is that this is especially a problem for us when we are just beginning to learn something. We learn a little, and we think we know a whole lot more than we do. No wonder Paul tells Timothy that a pastor "must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1Ti 3:6). Beware of arrogant overconfidence – thinking you already know more than you really do – that you already know so much you don't need to study very hard after all.

We must be careful not to become dull of hearing, not to become lazy students, much less stubborn people who refuse to listen. God holds us to a very high standard. We are supposed to be teachers!

## **II. A high standard: you should be teachers by now**

That's what we see in the next verse. Take a look at v. 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." Two things we see in this verse. Christians should be teachers – but Christians can't be teachers if they aren't learners.

### **A. Christians should be teachers of the oracles of God**

Let's look at the first part of this. Christians should be teachers of the oracles of God – *all* Christians. He isn't just writing to pastors. In fact, later in this letter, in Hebrews 13:17, we read, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Clearly, he's writing to the people in the pew. He's writing to you and to me. And here in 5:12, he says, "By this time you ought to be teachers."

But how does that work? Doesn't the Bible also say, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness?" (Jam 3:1). How then is it that all of us are supposed to be teachers?

The answer is that there are different levels of teachers. Deuteronomy 6:7 shows us that parents are supposed to teach God's Word diligently to their children all the time, "when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." And don't forget Titus 2. Older people are supposed to teach younger people. And all of us are supposed to exhort one another, we read in Hebrews 3:13. We're all supposed to become teachers of some kind, even if we're not all pastors or seminary professors.

Not that all are equally able to teach. One of the qualifications for a pastor is that he be "able to teach," the Bible says (1Ti 3:2). Some are more able than others, and you're supposed to figure out if a fellow is a good teacher before making him a pastor. But if all Christians are supposed to be teachers, then all Christians are supposed to be the best teachers they can be. We are supposed to do the best we can with what we have. We ought not to be Christians who refuse to delve deep into God's Word.

And that's what it takes to be a teacher – you have to delve deep. To be a teacher requires that you have more knowledge than your student, that you know at least some of the right answers. To be a teacher of the "oracles of God," the revelation of God, the *Bible*, requires that you read it and meditate upon it and understand it as much as you can.

This is huge. It is a massively important thing we have before us here, because it utterly destroys the notion of "Christianity-light." It explodes the idea that it's good enough just to claim Jesus as your Savior without being his disciple, learning as much about God's Word as you can. It burns away the idea that Christianity is only a small part of life. It vaporizes the foolish notion that a *childish* faith is the same thing as the "childlike" faith Jesus commanded us to

have. (Jesus commands us to be humble like children, not to be childishly ignorant.)

Not all of us have the same amount of time to devote to study. Not all of us are equally capable. But all of us are expected to use what God has given us – and few do.

To use what God has given us, to be as mature as we can be in our understanding of the Bible, requires effort. But ask any mature Christian, and he'll tell you that nothing is more rewarding. The more you learn, the more things will “click,” the more things will make sense to you in your life and the world around you, and the better you will be able to live for the glory of God.

Imagine a little child who sits down at a piano. He has heard grown-ups play the piano beautifully, and he wants to do it, too. But when he starts banging on the keyboard with his clumsy, untrained hands, it doesn't sound the way he wishes it would. You might think that little child has free will, that he is perfectly free to play that piano any way he wants. But the truth is, he will not have that kind of freedom, that kind of liberty, until he spends years and years in training. Only when he learns a great deal, trained by constant practice, will he finally attain true freedom to play that piano beautifully. Until then, he is held captive by his ignorance.

That's how it is for us in this life. When you are held captive by your own ignorance, you cannot live the way you wish you could. You'll just keep banging away in frustration at the keyboard of your life.

If you want to be all you can be in this life God has given you, you need to learn what is in this book God has given you. These things are infinitely more worthy of our time and money and desire than all the toys and hobbies and social media “likes” and clothes and whatever else in this world tickles your fancy put together.

Is this as convicting for you as it is for me? God holds us to a very high standard. Christians are supposed to be teachers of the oracles of God, but we can't be teachers if we aren't learners first.

## **B. Christians can't be teachers if they aren't learners**

Take a look at v. 13: “for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.” It is not right for Christians to be like this. The writer of Hebrews wants to say more about Jesus being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, but that is too advanced for his readers. It is like trying to feed a piece of steak to a little baby who can only drink milk.

Think about how sad it is for a church to need milk instead of solid food – easy teaching instead of difficult teaching. It ought to be hard for us to even imagine. It ought to be inconceivable to us that a person could profess faith in Christ for years, yet still need shallow teaching because he can't handle deep teaching. It ought to be as hard to imagine as all of us lining up for lunch just to drink baby

formula out of baby bottles. Can you imagine that? How silly! That's how ridiculous it is for us to never grow, day after day, Sunday after Sunday, long after coming to faith in Christ. This is the problem the writer of Hebrews faces with his readers. But the problem hasn't gone away.

By all appearances, it is even more of a problem than ever. You would think that of all generations, we would be the best-educated, the most learned, the most mature Christians in history. After all, once upon a time, many Christians could not even read, and even if they could, the only Bible to be found was kept in the cathedral – and it wasn't even in their own language! But not only can we read, we have the Bible in our own language. Most of us have more than one copy. Here in America, we have more leisure time than ever in the history of the world. We have more libraries and Christian bookstores and colleges and seminaries and music publishing companies than ever. Yet as my mentor, Dr. Bauder, points out:

American Christians have chosen those practices and even doctrines that appeal most to themselves. The result is that what passes for church in America today is an insipid religious pretense that lacks the power to command souls or transform lives, let alone to challenge the unsaved world with respect to issues of sin, righteousness, and judgment. We are left with a shallow religiosity in which more and more people are won to less and less Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Ours is a generation of shallow Christians, Christians who deliberately choose to remain ignorant, dull of hearing, demanding the milk of the Word instead of solid food. And before we are too hasty in pointing our fingers at others out there, let us examine ourselves. We are products of the same culture they are. And all too often, we ourselves may fail in the same way.

Brothers and Sisters, this must not be. There is something wrong with us if we profess faith in Christ year after year but still need the milk of the Word, just the basic gospel, just the simple stories, and not the solid food like the writer of this letter to the Hebrews has to teach us.

Now, don't misunderstand me. As I've already pointed out, we do not all have the same ability. Some Christians can learn faster than others. Christians who have learning disabilities may have to work very hard to learn even a little. But most Christians can learn a great deal more than they think. They just choose to be immature. And what a terrible choice it is, because *immature* Christians are *incompetent* Christians, “unskilled in the word of righteousness.”

If you are unskilled in understanding the Bible, you are not only drifting along in ignorance, you are helpless if somebody comes along with false teaching. That's why Paul wrote to the Ephesians that we must become mature, “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” (Eph 4:14). If

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin T. Bauder, “Understanding Conservative Christianity, Part 5: The Rejection of Innovation,” *In the Nick of Time* (Mar 6, 2009). Online: <http://www.centalseminary.edu/publications/20090306Print.pdf>

you are immature, you are incompetent, unskilled, helpless, defenseless – sitting ducks for the wolves to tear apart. Paul wept for those Ephesians as he tried to prepare them for that day, and he told them:

Acts 20:29-30 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

If you are unskilled in the Word, what will you do when false teachers come? If you are unskilled in the Word, how do you know whether or not you have already been deceived by one of them? Brothers and Sisters, we must not rest. We must not be content to let others do all the thinking for us.

There is much to learn. God holds us to a very high standard. Christians are supposed to be teachers of the oracles of God. If you grow up, you can help others grow up. But if you don't, if you remain immature, you can't even help yourself. That's the embarrassing, ominous truth we are left with at the end of Hebrews 5:13. But the truth that follows in v. 14 is inspiring – it shows us how to grow.

### **III. An inspiring challenge: you can grow**

Take a look at v. 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.” Let us begin with the first part of that verse: “Solid food is for the mature.”

#### **A. Mature Christians eat solid food**

This is the normal Christian life. This isn't just about some special class of “super-Christians.” This isn't just about pastors or seminary professors. If you have faith in Christ, then this is about you. You are supposed to grow into mature Christians – and mature Christians eat solid food. They hear and meditate upon and understand and love and obey the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, from the brief references (like the ones to Melchizedek) to the big stories, from simple ideas to complicated doctrines. Mature Christians eat the most solid food they can, no matter how old they are.

Being a mature Christian has little to do with how old you are. Whether you are 10 years old or 90 years old, what really matters is how well you understand and love and obey God's Word. That's what makes you a mature Christian. I have met young people who are amazingly mature Christians, hungry for the solid food of God's Word. And I have met older people with sound minds who have professed faith in Christ for years, yet are so immature they choke on anything but the simplest teaching, the most basic milk of God's Word.

So don't wait until you are older to eat the solid food of God's Word. Don't think that this is just for older people. And older people, don't think that just because you are older, you are therefore mature. Be good students of the Bible. When you do, you will grow.

## B. Mature Christians are trained Christians

That's what we see in the rest of v. 14: "solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." Here is the big difference between the mature Christian and the immature Christian, the Christian who can digest solid food and the Christian who can only digest the milk of the Word. Mature Christians are skilled in the word of righteousness. They are competent because of constant training, constant practice sorting out what is good and evil, right and wrong. That's what discernment is – sorting out good from evil, right from wrong, and even better from best.

The first time I ever preached in a church was a lot like today. The pastor was gone that Sunday, and he invited me to take his place at the pulpit. When the pastor got back to town, I spoke with him. I said, "Wow, you sure were trusting to let me preach to your flock without even being there yourself. What if I made a mistake?"

His answer shrunk me right down to size. He said, "I trust the members of the church. They will know whether or not your sermon is true to the Word of God."

Exactly the way it should be! We should all be like the people Paul and Silas preached to in the city of Berea that we read about in Acts 17:11. "They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

"Examining the Scriptures daily." Maturity is not something that happens in an instant like flipping on a switch. It certainly doesn't happen just by walking down the aisle, throwing a pinecone in the campfire, or having a "mountaintop moment" in worship. It is a never-ending process, a constant process. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, your powers of discernment are trained by constant practice, constant hearing, constant meditation upon God's Word.

And don't miss something in our passage today that is so obvious we might miss it – the word "teachers." Whatever teachers you and I become, we become teachers by *listening to other teachers teach*. The Bible says God "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11–12). If you stop listening to teachers, you stop growing, you stop maturing.

You might say, "My teacher is the Holy Spirit. That's the only teacher I need." And when you study the Bible all by yourself, it is right and it is good for you to pray for the Holy Spirit's help in understanding what you read. But if that's all you do, if you don't listen to teachers, you're doing it wrong. The Holy Spirit tells us so, right in the words of this God-breathed book. We're supposed to listen to teachers as we search the Scriptures. That's one reason we're all supposed to be here in the assembly of the local church – so we can hear preachers preach and teachers teach.

Now, stick with me as I explain a little more about what this means. I hope we can all agree that just because our pastor is gone today, we don't forget the truths he has taught us. When he dies, we won't throw away his sermons just because he no longer walks this earth. We don't start from scratch every time a teacher dies. Whatever a teacher teaches, if it is true, we hang on to it. We build on it.

How many teachers have gone before us? It has been a couple thousand years since the writer of Hebrews wrote the passage we're studying this morning. A lot of Christian teachers have lived and taught the church over all these years, building on the teachers who went before them. A lot of them wrote down what they taught. If you and I are supposed to learn from teachers, shouldn't we pay attention to what they taught? Shouldn't we read what they wrote? Yes, we should, if we can.

Imagine someone walking in here right now, right at the end of this sermon, and sitting down next to you. He leans over and whispers, "Excuse me, but what passage is he preaching?"

You hold out your Bible and point to our passage this morning. He opens his Bible to read Hebrews 5:11-14 for himself, right at the very end of my sermon. What do you think? Does he have any idea what I've been teaching? No. The only way he would know would be to do some homework – to read a copy of my sermon or to listen to a recording of my sermon. If he doesn't, he hasn't heard a word I've said so far.

That's exactly what we do when we ignore the teachers who have gone before us. After thousands of years of Christian teachers, we were born on this earth quite recently, like walking in at the end of a sermon. The only way we can find out what these teachers have been teaching is to read what they have written.

When you read a passage in the Bible, do your best to understand what it means – but then, as much as you can, go find out what teachers have been teaching about that passage over the centuries. That's what Bible commentaries are for. That's what these books are for that we study in our small groups and in our men's meetings.

The teachers who have gone before us have already studied that passage in the Bible you are studying. They have discussed it with one another in a great conversation that has been written down in books. Whatever you think that passage means, these teachers will tell you, "We've already talked about that." They will tell you the various ways that passage in the Bible has been interpreted over the years, and they will tell you which interpretation they think is correct. Then it's up to you to exercise your own discernment.

"Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." How are your powers of discernment? Are you "trained by constant practice?" Discernment is like a muscle – you have to exercise it to make it stronger. The more you exercise your

discernment, as you study and listen to Christian teachers, the stronger you will get and the more mature you will become – if you do it well.

Now, I will say once again, this is going to look different for different people. We each have different abilities and different responsibilities. Some of us have more leisure time to study than others. The question is, are you doing the best you can with the ability and the time God has given you?

### **Conclusion**

This week, as you go about your daily routine, ask yourself when and where you could study more, and ask yourself how you could study better – not just because you *have to* study, but because you *get to* study. You are part of a story, God’s story, that is much bigger than yourself. Embrace your role as a disciple of Christ, and rejoice as you learn!

Study God’s Word!

Find time to study God’s Word, and do it. Some of you are hard-pressed to find the time, I know. But most of us could find a little more time if only we turned away from the TV or smartphone or whatever it is that competes with the holy Word of God Almighty. I know I could.

So study God’s Word!

Listen to what Christian teachers are teaching about it, read what Christian teachers have written about it, and become mature Christians who feast upon the solid food of God’s Word “that is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Brothers and Sisters, study God’s Word!