

Arrested Development

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • PART 11 • Hebrews 5:11-14

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It is good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakeschurch.org/visitor. Or, you can use the cards in the pews this morning – not just if you are visiting with us, but also for special questions and prayer requests. You can put those in the box on the wall in the entryway or give your card to me on your way out this morning.

This morning, I'd like to start with some good news of a slightly different variety than we are accustomed to. And really, it's something of a follow-up to something I shared back in November 2020, when Victor Glover, a Christian brother, a member of the Lord's church, served as the pilot for the first crewed mission to the International Space Station by the Space-X Dragon. He made history at that point as the first Black astronaut assigned to a long-term mission. Well, just a few days ago, NASA announced that Victor will pilot a crew of four on the first manned mission to the moon in more than fifty years, scheduled for November 2024. At the announcement in Houston last week, he said, "I pray that God will bless this mission. But I also pray that we can continue to serve as a source of inspiration, for cooperation and peace — not just between nations but in our own nation." Amen to that, and let's be praying for Victor as he prepares for this mission.

We are here this morning to worship God and to preach the good news that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son to take our place as a sacrifice for sin; he was buried, but then he was raised up on the third day. We obey that good news by believing it, by repenting of our sins (by having a change of heart), by confessing our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And we've had many examples this week – from Alabama, Georgia, Washington State, South Carolina; from the Philippines, from India, from Romania, and I wish we could share all of these, but due to our limited time together, I'll just share will just share three examples this morning, starting with an update from Shadrack Cheluget, who preaches in Kenya. He says, "Why order the chariot to stop? It's so that they could go down to the river for baptism. Viola ordered the chariot to stop today. [And] after a fruitful discussion, Viola was added to Emmanuel church of Christ today morning." So good to see this!

And then we have an update from the Newburg Church of Christ in Louisville, Kentucky. They say, "Celebrate our new brother Walter Pinchbeck, Jr. with us as he was baptized into Christ this afternoon with the help of some faithful members!" Walter is in a wheelchair, but that is no barrier to obeying the gospel.

And then, this final example comes to us from the Mt. Juliet Church of Christ, just east of Nashville, Tennessee. They say, “It was such a joy to see Justin give his life to Jesus yesterday and be raised in newness of life!” This is one of the happiest pictures I think I have ever seen. But we share all of these to help illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. Whether you live in Kenya, Kentucky, or Tennessee, God loves you and wants you to be saved. And if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship today or reach out using the contact information on the website or on the bulletin, and we would love to study together.

This morning we return to our study of Hebrews by looking at the last few verses of Hebrews 5. Last week, we compared and contrasted the priesthood of Jesus alongside the priesthood of Aaron, and we learned that anything Aaron could do, Jesus could do better! Jesus is not only better, but he is the perfect high priest. And the author just barely introduces the idea that Jesus is a priest according to the priesthood of Melchizedek. However, right at the end of that paragraph, the author sees that he’s losing his audience, and he almost seems a bit frustrated.

And this brings us Hebrews 5:11-14 as we take a detour. Starting in verse 11 and continuing through the end of Chapter 6, we almost have a giant parenthetical statement. He will get back to Melchizedek in Chapter 7, but first, he has to correct these people. Any good teacher can probably sense when he or she is losing the class (it is not a good feeling), but that seems to be what’s happening here. He’s got this nice juicy steak of a lesson, but he realizes that these people can’t handle it. So, we have the reference to Melchizedek in Hebrews 5:10, and we pick up today with Hebrews 5:11-14,

¹¹ Concerning him 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 have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

So again, we have the reference to Melchizedek in verse 10, and then we have this – basically, a rebuke, a “You can’t handle the truth” moment. Now, as a preacher I’ve been taught that it’s never good to insult the audience. And yet, the author of Hebrews comes pretty close, doesn’t he? You people are infants! So, this is significant. This is rather unusual. This morning, then, I’d like for us to take a look at the rebuke in this passage. The problem is: These people need to grow up, but they haven’t. And that’s why we’ve titled today’s lesson “Arrested Development.” Yes, that was the name of a show on television, but medically, the term describes a child who suddenly stops growing for some reason. That’s a huge problem, isn’t it? But as bad as this can be physically, it can also happen spiritually. And the consequences can be devastating. Notice, please, in verse 11, that the permanent immaturity of the audience here is holding up the progress of the gospel itself, ***“Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain.”*** In other words, there’s some stuff we need to learn, but your “arrested development” is keeping me from continuing! Your intentional immaturity is making my job as a preacher more difficult than it needs to be! So I’d like to take the rest of our time together this morning to notice three symptoms of spiritual immaturity. What is the issue here? And as we study, let’s try to very honestly look out for these issues in our own lives.

I. And we start in verse 11 as we find that these people have become DULL OF HEARING.

The word refers to being “lazy” or “sluggish,” as some translations have it. In the ancient world, the word was used to refer to slaves who refused to listen and to athletes who were out of shape. The word apparently goes back to a word indicating “no push.” These were people, then, who had stopped hearing; they had stopped pushing themselves. And I hope we notice that when he says *“you have become dull of hearing,”* he’s saying that they weren’t ALWAYS dull of hearing, but that they had *“become”* that way. So, at one point, these were pushing themselves to listen; at one point, these people were constantly learning, constantly growing, but they had become lazy. They were slacking. This tells us, then, that there are times when it is okay to be immature. New Christians have a way of saying some really weird stuff sometimes. We are not to attack them for that, but we are to answer gently. These people, though, at one time were listening, but now they were not, and that’s a problem. They had become *“dull of hearing.”*

Another quick side note on this: Sometimes others can see this in us before we can see this in ourselves. And this is the value of coming together as a body. If I’m off somewhere “home churching” myself, I may never diagnose this in my own life. Sometimes I need somebody else to keep an eye on me. And that’s what’s going on here. As the author of Hebrews is preaching to these people, he sees a problem, and it’s a problem they may not have recognized on their own.

And the danger here is that we may lose our hearing and not even realize that we are losing our hearing. Doesn’t this happen literally? My wife and I met for breakfast after swimming this week (on her way to work), and after the server came to our table, she said something and left, and then we looked at each other and basically said to each other, “What in the world did she just say?” It was English, but it was fast, and it was mumbled. And then I think it was my wife who said, “Maybe we’re just old.” Maybe we are losing our hearing! It happens. Some of you know that my great-grandmother lost her hearing at only 19 years old. She went on to have seven children, and never heard her children cry. She was a piano teacher, by the way, and continued teaching piano, even while completely deaf. Her hearing loss happened rather quickly, but sometimes it happens so gradually we don’t even realize it. Over time, people have to repeat stuff. Over time, people complain that we have the TV too loud. But we realize that sometimes we suffer from selective hearing loss. A kid may not hear the call to turn off the video game and take out the trash, but they do hear the freezer door open and show up for ice cream. In our society, we have a way of only listening to what we want to hear. We live in the age of the mute button. We live in the age of the “skip ad” button on YouTube. What we might not realize is that people have been doing this spiritually since the beginning. Eve heard what she wanted to hear. God warned the prophet Isaiah that he was being sent to preach to people with *“dull ears”* (Isaiah 6:10). Jesus and Paul both quote that passage several times as they make the same accusation. Sometimes we refuse to listen. *“For the time will come,”* Paul says, *“when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The first symptom of arrested development, then, is when we become *“dull of hearing.”* And we need to be aware of it. If we aren’t interested in the word, that’s a concern, a sign of danger, a sign of arrested development.

II. The second symptom of spiritual immaturity is when someone either LOSES (OR NEVER DEVELOPS) THE ABILITY TO TEACH.

In verse 12, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”* When he refers to the *“elementary principles,”* he uses a word referring to the basics in any field. In reading or

grammar, this would refer to the ABC's. In math, this would refer to the 123's. In chemistry, this would refer to the periodic table. The basics, the fundamental teachings or very basic principles in any field. So, the symptom we are discussing, then, is an inability to teach other people. Even though they had been Christians for quite some time, these people were not able to reach out. They had no ability to teach. They weren't able to give any spiritual advice to someone who might have been struggling with some special concern. They couldn't point an outsider to the Lord, because they themselves were stuck on the basics.

And not only that, but instead of leading, these people had to be taught – and not just taught, but they had to be taught the *“elementary principles,”* over and over again. And yet, by this time, they *“ought”* to have been teachers. This doesn't mean that every Christian needs to lead a class or preach publicly, but all of us *“ought”* to get to the point where we can share what we know. *“Ought”* is a pretty strong word. So, as I see it, there's no middle ground here: We are either teaching in some way or another, or we need to be taught the ABC's again. There's no coasting. We are either teaching or we need to go back to preschool. I remember reading about a college student who was having trouble with his studies, so he went to the professor to ask for a tutor, but the professor said that instead of a tutor, what this student really needed was a student of his own. The professor understood that we often learn a lot more when we teach than when we listen to somebody else. In the same way, when we share what we know about the Lord, we get challenged. People ask questions we've never heard before; we dig in, and we learn. We grow. And again, this teaching may be very informal. I think it's safe to say that I learned just as much from my dad in the garage as I learned from him preaching every Sunday. Teaching is not limited to a pulpit.

And then at the end of verse 12, he adds that these people *“...have come to need milk and not solid food.”* Imagine regressing from solid food back to a diet of only milk. Most of us went from milk to solid food, but these people have gone back! When children are first born, it's just milk – 24/7! But after a while, we eat all kinds of weird stuff that used to come in those little jars (maybe in little pouches now, who knows) – but stuff like squash in a blender. They eat that until they turn orange, and then they move on to green beans in a blender (one of the most disgusting things our kids have ever eaten). And then they move on to Cheerios here and there, and then they quickly move on to eating whatever we eat. And then they eat more than we eat. And then they end up cooking on their own and cooking for us. I love that phase! But let's imagine this regressing. Imagine going from solid food back to milk. How depressing! I love steak! I've spent several nights in the hospital with my dad this week, and on the way home one morning I stopped at Lane's Bakery on Park Street for a cronut, a cross between a donut and a croissant. Well, they had a regular cronut and then they had a cream-filled cronut. I obviously needed both! Amazing. Well, the next day on the way home from the hospital, I had to make up for the carbs, so I figure I needed to grill a steak for breakfast. You can do that when you're an adult. So, I stopped at the Pick-n-Save on South Park Street and got a two-pack of tenderloin filets, on sale for \$9.99. I only ate one and saved the other for Keola. Cheaper than breakfast at McDonald's! If you smelled steak grilling on a charcoal fire Wednesday morning around 8 a.m., that was me. Now imagine stepping back from solid food to nothing but milk. Here in Wisconsin, I need to say that milk is good. But we weren't designed to drink nothing but milk from here on out. Imagine heading down to the lunchroom at work or maybe the teachers' lounge, and one of your coworkers (maybe a guy in his 40's) takes a bag of breast milk out of the fridge and starts sucking it out of a bottle. That's repulsive, isn't it? I think I'm heading to a different table! This became a thing in the weightlifting crowd a few years back. They started wheeling and dealing in breast milk, thinking it would help them lift. Not cool! And yet, that's the picture the author paints for us in verse 12. By this time, they ought to have been teachers, but they have come to need milk and not solid food. These people are spiritual babies! And this isn't a compliment! Their condition does not match their age in the faith. Some time has passed, and it's time to grow up.

You know, I think every time I've ever been to the doctor, they have always asked my date of birth. Obviously, that helps confirm who I am (there are so many Baxter Exums out there, you can never be too careful), but the medical reason for this is that doctors (and in my case my nurse practitioner) can expect certain things of me depending on how old I am. When our kids were little, the pediatrician would always plug their height and weight into the growth charts. Those were all age-dependent. And as we grow, our age continues to be important to our physical health. Our age is tied to our BMI recommendations as well as our blood pressure and blood work. I hit 50 this year, so now they're concerned about a whole new list of things!

I'm just saying that just as the time we've been alive is connected to our physical health and development, so also the time we've been Christians is also connected to our spiritual health and development. So, if you've been a Christian for 5 or 10 years and haven't read through the Bible at least a few times (but you've seen every episode of the Office), what's the problem? The problem is "arrested development." Paul had to get on the church in Corinth for the same reason. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, he describes them as "*infants*," and he says the problem is that they are "*fleshly*," that there is "*jealousy and strife*" among them. And so he had to go back to giving them milk to drink, not solid food. They were immature for their spiritual age. And it was a problem. Instead of helping others, they needed help themselves, and it was holding the church back. Paul had to deal with jealousy and strife among members instead of reaching the lost. They couldn't grow, they couldn't teach others, because they had to keep going back to the ABC's themselves.

So, a lack of teaching, not having influence over others, is a symptom of not growing as we should. Before we move on from this, I would just ask: Right now, who benefits from you being a Christian? Is somebody learning from you? If not, that's a problem, and I would encourage all of us to look for ways to teach; look for ways to share what we believe; look for ways to influence. And this may be as simple as sharing on social media. We have a new introductory video on the front page of our website, just a few minutes long, introducing the congregation: www.fourlakeschurch.org. Maybe we could just tune in to the Wednesday class on Genesis with a non-Christian spouse, or maybe our kids or grand-kids. Or when we have a religious discussion at work, maybe we could follow up with some research at www.christiancourier.com or from www.apologeticspress.org, and then share an article from one of these sites. We have these cards illustrated the gospel enacted and the gospel reenacted. There are so many ways to share, but we need to be teaching in some way, and if not, then the rebuke in this passage is for us.

III. The third and final symptom of spiritual immaturity is closely tied to this one, but the author wraps it up by explaining that when someone is stuck on the basics, they are "UNACCUSTOMED TO THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS," which leads to an INABILITY TO DISCERN GOOD AND EVIL.

Basically, they don't know their Bibles, which means that they really have a hard time distinguishing what is right from what is wrong. We think about babies. When babies are first born, they have no idea what's right and what's wrong. They have no well-defined sense of danger. They don't know the difference between a grape and an olive. They'll learn that, though, won't they? There is a difference! And so, we teach and we train, and hopefully those kids grow up with some sense of discernment. They develop some judgment. And after a while, you can't give them an olive and tell them it's a grape, because they know better! They can discern between the two. Their knowledge has become practical.

Well, in a similar way, when we study Scripture, and as we mature, the Bible shapes the way we live. Scripture has a way of changing us. It changes the way we look at the world. It changes the way we raise our children. It changes the way we look at politics. It changes how we live in a world surrounded by evil. It changes the way we deal with conflict at work. It changes how we handle health challenges. It changes how we confront a

brother or sister caught up in some kind of sin. It's one thing to start to read a few very basic Bible stories, but it's something else when those stories start changing the way we live. And when we are stuck on the milk, when we are *"unaccustomed to the word of righteousness,"* we lose this, we don't get that practical guidance. And that absence of familiarity with the word of God keeps us from judging between good and evil. Here (in verse 14), the author flips it to a positive, *"But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."* When we are accustomed to the word, we are familiar with it, and over time we train ourselves to judge, to *"discern."* And so, when we face something, we may not need to go look up a verse to figure it out, because we already know. Society may throw us some bizarre new scenario, and based on our previous knowledge of the word, we're able to say, "Nope, that's not right!" The alternative to that is that we are *"tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine"* (as Paul warns against in Ephesians 4). The alternative to being accustomed to the word is to flip-flop all over the place, to be constantly restudying and recalculating what we believe on everything.

As I was preparing today's lesson, I came across a good reminder from a preacher who says that, "Mature Christians do not redefine Biblical truths or adjust their beliefs based on the prevailing opinions of the culture. Mature Christians know what the essential doctrines of the faith are and have drawn a line in the sand that they dare not cross. Mature Christians are those who base their believe on 'chapter and verse' rather than societal pressure." That's discernment, being able to judge and to be able to say with confidence: This is right, and this is wrong.

And so, we may tune in to a preacher on the internet, and after a few minutes we are able to judge. We *"discern,"* either this guy is speaking the truth or this guy is lying to me. Somebody described this as "sanctified intuition." When we know the word, and as we mature in it, discernment becomes almost like an instinct. We need this in the world today. You know, we live in a world where gender transition surgery for children is called *"good,"* while somehow a commitment to a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman is not. As the prophet says in Isaiah 5:20, *"Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"* We need discernment. Otherwise, every new thing we hear sounds right to us. Those who do not grow up, though, never really develop this. They are *"infants."*

Conclusion:

There's more to say about Melchizedek – we'll get to that in Chapter 7, but for now, we are taking the "detour of rebuke" as the author of Hebrews corrects these people for being *"infants."* They are *"dull of hearing,"* they are unable to teach (since they are stuck on the basics themselves), resulting in a lack of discernment since they are not accustomed to the word of righteousness. Several years ago, we got a new word in the English language, "adulting." I'm not a fan, but it was nominated for "word of the year" back in 2016. It's often used as a hashtag, and it's the idea of "behaving like a responsible adult, especially in the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks." In light of what we've studied this morning, I would have us close by asking: What does spiritual adulting look like? And if we think about it, I think we'd conclude that it's pretty much the opposite of what we've just studied.

- First of all, a grown-up Christian will be quick to hear the word of God. That's the message of James 1:19 where in the context of God's word, James says that we are to be quick to hear (the word of God), we must slow to speak (out against it), and we must be slow to get angry (with what God has said in his word). Being quick to hear is the opposite of being *"dull of hearing."*

- Secondly, adulting as Christians means that we will push ourselves to the point where we can teach the word of God to others. Instead of being stuck on the basics ourselves, we learn, and we practice sharing what we learn with others. Instead of relying on pre-chewed food, instead of relying on milk alone, we dig in to the meat of God’s word. Yes, we may study Adam and Eve, and Noah, and Jonah, and Peter, but we also dig in to the book of Job, and we dig in to books like Romans and Revelation and even Hebrews. Maybe we try copying scripture by hand. Maybe we set aside a special time of day to pray and to read. I’ve heard of some people making a “prayer closet” somewhere at home, a quiet place where they can kneel in prayer and read the word of God. Maybe we discuss Sunday’s class or sermon with our families over dinner. We don’t need to have “roast preacher” for lunch on Sunday, but sometimes at lunch on Sunday we will ask, “Is there anything we know now that we didn’t know before we went to church this morning?” We’ve emailed and passed out a good article from Chantelle Marie Swayne that addresses some ways to get to the meat of the word – it’s aimed at women, but she has some great ideas there for all of us. I hope you can read it, but we need to push ourselves to dig into the word of God, even to the point where we can teach it to others.
- And then finally, growing up as Christians means that we become so familiar with God’s word that we allow his word to sanctify us. We move on to solid food, we mature, and we train our senses to discern good and evil, to judge between the two with confidence. We get to the point where we can say, “This is good,” and “this is bad.”

Next week, we hope to move into Chapter 6 with one of the most terrifying passages anywhere in scripture. Before John leads us in a song to prepare us for partaking of the Lord’s Supper, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You have spoken to us this morning through your word. Thank you, Father, for blessing us with the ability to read and to learn. We are thankful for the simplicity of your word, but we are also thankful for those passages that are challenging. Thank you, Father, for telling us the truth, even when it’s difficult. We trust that you know what’s best for us and that you love us.

We come to you today through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com