

Stunted Hebrews 5:11-14

Introduction

A good parent knows that children need instruction, encouragement, and comfort. But a good parent knows that children also need timely rebuke and discipline. Love does not abuse others, but it also does not neglect to confront them when it's needed. Just as abusive behavior reveals self-centeredness, so does passive neglect. No good parent lets a son or daughter continue behavior that is physically, mentally, or spiritually destructive.

So when God talks to His people, He not only employs words of instruction, encouragement, and comfort. In His perfect love He also confronts, rebukes, and corrects us, as any good parent should do.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 4:1-2

¹ I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in

season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

The difficulty for us, children or adults, is to receive words of rebuke as good for us every bit as much as words of comfort. If anything, receiving words of rebuke can be more urgent, because often such words address something in our lives that will destroy us if we do not correct it. That is the kind of passage before us this morning.

After his comforting instruction about Jesus as our great high priest who understands us and intercedes for us, the writer of Hebrews suddenly stops as would a teacher breaking from the lesson to deal with an inattentive student. He rebukes his readers for what can be a common failure among those who've had significant exposure to God's Word.

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.

1. Being Dull of Hearing (11)
2. Failing to Teach Others God's Word (12a)
3. Lacking Skill in Using the Word (12b-13)
4. Not Practicing Discernment (14)

Stunted: Marks of Spiritual Immaturity

1. Being Dull of Hearing (11)

¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

There was much more to explain about Jesus' high priestly role that the writer will get to later in the letter, but there is an obstacle to his readers gaining from his teaching what they could.

There's a saying that if a student isn't learning, the teacher isn't teaching. Sometimes the problem is that the teacher doesn't communicate well. Every teacher knows that there is always significant room for improvement in effective teaching.

But sometimes the problem is on the receiving end. The students aren't paying attention. Sleepy. Distracted. Bored. Resistant. Aloof. Critiquing rather than actually listening.

If we're not really paying close attention to God's Word when it's taught, we not only miss what is being said, we limit what we could learn that builds on what we're missing now.

Notice that this dullness came upon them gradually. They have "become dull of hearing." Back in the days when there was a lot of talk about making preaching accessible and interesting to the unchurched, I made an unexpected discovery. It was typically not the first-time visitor who rarely came to a church service who showed signs of inattention and boredom. It was the professing Christian who had heard a thousand sermons who glazed over and did not take in the Word, even sleeping during the sermon. I'm not sure how many sermons such people ever heard. They sat in a pew. They had ears. But they were not really listening.

The other thing I noticed was how often those who paid the least attention happened to be the ones who had voiced rejection of key doctrines. Their failure to listen was rooted in an unwillingness to listen because they had already rejected the truth being taught. Sometimes people don't have the liberty to duck out of services. It would embarrass them in front of friends and family. So they sleep through the service. Or use their smart

phone to catch up on correspondence or surf the net. Or they daydream. Or they critique the preacher's performance. Anything to avoid having to deal with what God is saying to them through the Scripture text.

At this point in our culture multiple generations have been crippled in their ability to think for more than a few seconds about anything at all. We are addicted to constantly changing images, quick tweets, short blogs. We rarely meditate. Or analyze. Or evaluate. Scientific studies have demonstrated that such ongoing behavior is actually changing our brains, crippling them from being able to think clearly and long. And we wonder why we have a society so vulnerable to manipulation and falsehood.

Not everything can be adequately dealt with in a sound bite. But we can be sucked into building our whole worldview on a collection of soundbites, emotional appeals, and eye-catching images.

What can you do to increase your ability to listen well, to think clearly, to take God's Word into your soul and live it out in your daily life?

Create white space in your calendar each day. Listening and meditating take uninterrupted time. That means you're going to have to

remove some less important items from your day.

Find a quiet place where you can concentrate.

Take notes when you're being taught the Word. It will help keep your attention, and it will enable you to revisit what you've heard to meditate on it.

Pray before you read or listen to the Word. That God would open your mind and heart to what He is saying to you.

Pray after you read or listen to the Word. That God would help you obey and live in line with the truth you've received.

Talk with others about what you've learned and what they've learned. Pray for one another to live it out.

2. Failing to Teach Others God's Word (12a)

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.

A disciple learns in order to teach others. We reinforce what we've learned when we teach it to others.

We know this, right? If you know you have to give a presentation on a topic to others, you work harder at learning it yourself.

God's truth is not meant for you to hold just to yourself. Good news isn't news till it's shared.

Sometimes we think that because some people are better at teaching than others, that we have no teaching duty ourselves. A little reflection would disabuse us of that lie.

How can parents teach their kids the things of God the way Deuteronomy 6 talks about if we aren't taking what we've learned and passing it on?

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This command comes right after the greatest command of all—to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We think about what/whom we love. And we talk about what we think about. The people who live with us know that.

Ephesians 6:4

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Men, how can you do this for your children if you are not a man learning the Word, teaching the Word, and living the Word in front of your family? Why would you leave spiritual pursuits just to your wife as if you're some kind of spiritual Neanderthal?

Do you think Christian truth is just for women and children? What Bible are you reading? What God do you believe in? Lead. Lead with wisdom and love. Lead others well because you are committed to letting Christ lead you.

Ephesians 5:25-27

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,
²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,
²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

If Christ uses the Word to sanctify and grow us, should not a husband who truly loves his wife be using the Word in his care for her?

In reality all of us are teaching others in some way or another. You may be in junior high, but the way you respond to God's Word impacts your peers for good or evil. The way you react to sin does too. You are teaching by your example and by your words whether you are 9 years old or 90. When you speak are others benefited? Do your words build them up or tear them down? Do they align with biblical truth or contradict it? Do they promote righteousness or wickedness? Do they proclaim the gospel or obscure it?

3. Lacking Skill in Using the Word (12b-13)

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.

Milk—what Hebrews 6 will call “the elementary doctrine.”

Repentance from dead works—sinful deeds that produce death in people

Faith toward God

Instruction about washings

Laying on of hands

Resurrection of the dead

Eternal judgment

What he lists falls well within basic OT Judaism, and as such point toward greater fulfillment in Christ. The first recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were under great pressure to go back to the old ceremonies, the types and symbols, and not to push on toward what Christ offers.

We live in a different era, but it would be like our being stuck in most basic religious ideas like the existence of right and wrong, rewards and punishment, worship service forms, cultural norms and the like, without pressing on to Christ-centered thinking and living.

Fact is, although other cultures have come in from elsewhere, Greenville has had a longstanding religious culture of church-going and basic morality. Much of it however has been form without substance, cultural politeness without internal transformation. As such is powerless and not surprisingly, vulnerable to being deceived into adopting unbiblical thinking and practices.

We live in a time when even the foundational doctrines are being questioned and discarded. Timeless Scriptural authority. Human dignity and identity as male and female. Sexual purity. Universal sinfulness of man, not just certain groups. Rescue only through Christ not through some kind of penance. So-called evangelical churches (including Baptists and

Presbyterians!) are adopting critical race theory in an effort to seem woke and ease their guilt, or welcoming unrepentant sexually immoral individuals into membership and even pastoral leadership in the name of showing love.

If leaders and denominations are confused about such basic doctrine, how in the world does the average church member make wise decisions that conform to biblical teaching on all the day to day decisions and activities of life that flood our way?

We must beware lest we become children, unskilled in applying the Word of God to the issues of our times and our everyday lives.

Ephesians 4:11-15

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 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. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

2 Peter 3:16b-18

16b There are some things in them [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. **18** But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

After years of Sunday School and church services, thousands upon thousands of Bible lessons and Sunday messages, do you have enough grasp of Scripture that you can use it to make wise and skillful life decisions?

4. Not Practicing Discernment (14)

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.

Spiritual maturity is not so much about your powers of intellect or what information you have amassed through your reading. Some of the smartest people I know of are the least discerning and the most proud. Spiritual maturity means that you are perceptive and discerning. Such practical discernment comes through exercise and training, like what an

athlete does to reach peak form for a competition. *You can tell the difference between good and evil because you keep asking, "what does God say about this idea or that way of thinking?" Not so much what WOULD He say, but what DOES He say. You're not enamored with your own heady ideas. You're in submission to His.* You aren't fooled by the trendy rhetoric of the day no matter where it comes from. You aren't blinded by the encrusted traditions of the past either. Your eyesight is clear because you are looking through the perfect lens of Scripture.

We value the counsel and insights of those who are veterans of life, brothers and sisters who have been through the battles, who have proven faithful through thick and thin, whose wisdom has been honed by constant use. They don't have to guess. They've been there, done that. They are aware of what they don't know and how weak they actually are. They are dependent on Christ and His Word. They pray. They hold fast in faith. They show self-sacrificing love. They keep on course. They provide an example to others to follow. They can say with the apostle Paul, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Not "Do what I say, never mind what I do."

Your church family, your world, needs you to be such a person. A light in the darkness, a guide to the lost, a helper of the broken.

What are you waiting for? When will you grow up? When will you wake up? When will you step up? Why are you on the planet?

Conclusion

You don't have to be among the stunted, your life marked by spiritual immaturity. You can start taking action even today to grow into maturity. From our text this morning, here are four action steps for you.

1. Listen Attentively.
2. Teach Others God's Word.
3. Develop Skill in Using the Word.
4. Use Practical Discernment.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do you seek to keep your heart open to God's Word even when it comes to you with rebuke, and why is it critically important to do so?
2. What have you found tends to make you inattentive to the Word and what strategies have helped you maintain attention?
3. What opportunities do you regularly have to share what you've learned from God's Word with others, and who are some of the people to whom you pass on truth—or could do so?

4. What are some ways you consciously bring Scriptural truth to bear on everyday matters so that you're not just drifting along with the current of your times and subculture?
5. What are some examples of poor discernment in the Christian community that you've witnessed in recent years, and what do you think led to the problem?
6. With so many confusing voices around us, in what ways do you train your mind and heart toward godly discernment?