

## HEB 5:11-14—I'M A CHRISTIAN—NOW WHAT?

**INTRO:** Last week we talked about the difference that Jesus makes. He knows what we are going through; he alone has the power to give us what we need and innately long for; he has the character we can trust; and he has our best interest at heart.

What if we recognize all that? Most of us here at least claim to recognize that and claim to have repented of our sins and turned to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. So what? IOW, we say that Jesus makes all the difference, but does he really?

You can look at it like this: If Jesus is who he says he is, namely, the SOG who rose from the dead and is alive today, then he is not like anyone else who has ever lived—of course he makes all the difference. That is objectively true, but is it existentially or experientially true in our lives? That's the question. Does Jesus make a practical difference in our lives? Or, to put it another way, what are we doing about Jesus?

This is a matter of great importance, both for Christians and nonChristians. Why? You may have heard of David Kinnaman's book entitled *UnChristian*. That book draws on three years of research by the Barna Group to show that large numbers of people in their late teens to early 30s believe Christians are judgmental, antihomosexual, hypocritical, too political, and sheltered. In short, large numbers of younger Americans believe that professing Christians, in their attitudes and actions, are essentially *unChristian*. How professing Christians act can either draw people toward Christ or push them away from Christ. Our lives are matters of profound importance.

How do Christians feel about their own faith? Many Christians, I think, secretly if not openly, can sympathize with Peggy Lee's song "Is That All There Is," which I mentioned last week. In the song, she talks about going to the circus as a little girl but then thinking, "**I had the feeling that something was missing. I don't know what, but when it was over I said to myself, is that all there is to the circus?**" She talks about falling in love with a wonderful boy, but then he left. She thought she would die, but she didn't, and said, "**And when I didn't I said to myself, is that all there is to love?**" Sometimes as Christians do we ever think, "Is that all there is to Jesus?" "Is that all there is to Christianity?" "Is that all there is to faith?"

Today's passage—**Heb 5:11-14**—will point us to how we can get out of that trap. How our faith and our relationship with Jesus can come alive so that we experience a greater depth and meaning of this life of faith, and that others will thereby see us as authentic Christians, not as hypocritical, judgmental, shallow Christians. **[READ]**

**PROP:** In this passage **Christ calls us to maturity**. Why? Because it is the mature Christian who *experiences* depth and meaning of this life of faith; mature faith animates all of life; IOW, the mature Christian *is* the authentic Christian.

**O/S:** Today's passage is a study in contrasts: **vv.11-13** describe the marks of spiritual immaturity; and **vv.13-14** describe four keys of spiritual maturity.

### **I. vv.11-13: The Immature Christian**

Look at the descriptions of the immature Christian: "dull of hearing"; "needs to be taught even the basic or elementary principles of what God says"; "needs milk, not solid food"; "is unskilled or unaccustomed to the word of righteousness"; and "is a child or infant."

Some people might think that being a child is not so bad, because Jesus said in **Matt 18:3**, "**Unless you are converted and become like children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**" However, the context of **Matt 18** is completely different from the context of **Heb 5**. The issue in **Matt 18** was who is the greatest in the kingdom. In **Matt 18:4** Jesus describes what he means about becoming like children when he says, "**Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**" Jesus was pointing to one's character: true followers of Christ—IOW, mature believers—have a character of humility, not arrogance; they know they are dependent on Christ and receive from him just as little children are dependent on and receive from their parents; they are not self-sufficient people who are judgmental, hypocritical, and lord it over others. IOW, mature Christians are not at all the way those young people in David Kinnaman's book think Christians are, but are really just the opposite.

In Hebrews, however, the comparison to children or infants is a damning account of immature Christians. Everyone starts out as a baby, both physically and spiritually. The difference is that physical maturity is simply a matter of aging and growth. So a 5 year old is vastly bigger and stronger than a 5 week old; a 15 year old is vastly bigger and stronger than a 5 year old.

Not so with spiritual maturity. There are some people who have been Christians for 5, 10, or 15 years—but they have never grown in their faith; they are still spiritual infants. Why is this so bad? Let me give you an example. My oldest daughter had a baby boy 1½ months ago. I can tell you from personal experience that little Enoch is the cutest, nicest little boy there is. If you have little children or grandchildren, I'm sure they are very nice but, I'm sorry, little Enoch is the best. Think about it: It's Sunday, this is a church, I'm a Christian, I'm preaching for crying out loud—therefore, I cannot lie.

But consider this: if my little grandson didn't grow up—if he is still the same height, weight, etc. when he is 5, 10, or 15 years old as he is today—that would be *monstrous*. It would reveal that he has some terrible pathology—not just some little, minor problem, but a HUGE problem. His parents, his sister, Nancy and I would be distraught. We would all do everything we could to try to discover the reason for the problem and correct it.

That is the comparison that the writer of Hebrews is making. The damning nature of the comparison he is making is the fact that, throughout the Christian world there are people who have been Christians for 5 or 10 or 15 years but they are still little babies. Their attitudes and actions are just like they were when they first professed to believe in Christ—yet they don't see anything wrong with this, and their brothers and sisters in Christ don't see anything wrong with it either. No one is distraught as we would be with someone who never physically matured. Is it any wonder why the church has so little influence in the world today?

So what's the answer?

## **II. vv.13-14: The Mature Christian**

Look at the description here: the mature Christian eats solid food, as opposed to milk; the mature Christian is “mature,” not an infant. But what is it that makes for spiritual maturity? The answer is found in the last part of **v.14**. The ESV puts it like this: mature believers are **“those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”**

What is going on here? There are four keys to spiritual maturity that are discussed in **vv.13-14**—and all of them are connected. They are: (1) “solid food”; (2) “practice” or “constant practice” as the ESV puts it; (3) powers of discernment; and (4) the ability to distinguish good and evil. Let's take a look at these:

(1) Solid food. **v.13** equates the one who partakes only of milk as being unskilled in the word of righteousness. **v.14** begins with the word “But,” which is showing a contrast, and then talks about “solid food.” Both “milk” and “solid food” are metaphors that stand for skill or lack of skill in handling the “word of righteousness” referred to in **v.13**. The “word of righteousness” is referring to God's Word—the Bible. That is made clear in **Psalm 119** and **Isaiah 45** which also connect God's word and righteousness.

Why is the Bible called the “word of righteousness”? Righteousness means holiness; perfection; rightness in all ways. For us human beings, “righteousness” deals largely with our ethical and moral conduct. When our conduct is called “righteous,” it means that our actions are justified; we are leading a life that is pleasing to God. The Bible is called the “word of righteousness” because God himself is perfectly righteous. It is also called the “word of righteousness” as a way of helping us see that God's Word is designed to transform *our* lives in practical ways and make *us* righteous, just, and holy, even as Christ is righteous, just, and holy.

Some people think that if they just attend Bible studies, fill up notebooks with Bible study notes, or read a certain amount per day, that makes them mature. We should read and study our Bibles regularly. But that's not what these verses are saying. **v.13** says that spiritually immature people are “unaccustomed to” or, as the ESV puts it, “unskilled in” the word of righteousness. By calling God's word the “word of righteousness”—IOW, by connecting the Word of God with righteous living, and by talking about one's skill in handling the Word, the writer of Hebrews is telling us that God's Word needs to become a part of us. The contrast between the spiritually immature and the spiritually mature person is one's ability to handle, digest, absorb, and apply the “word of righteousness.” When it becomes a part of us it begins affecting us and changing how we think, how we feel, how we act, how we treat people. It becomes living and real.

Think of the lawyer in **Luke 10** who asked Jesus, “How do we inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “What does the Law say?” IOW, Jesus pointed him to the Bible, the Word of God. The lawyer summarized the essence of the Law by saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “You're right; *do it* and you will live.” IOW, you will find life as you apply and live out what God says in his Word. But the lawyer said, “And who is my neighbor?” After all, suppose I showed love to someone and it turned out not to be my neighbor! So Jesus told him the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Rebecca Pippert says this in her book *Out of the Saltshaker*: In the parable, “**Jesus summed up life in terms of a love relationship to God, to our neighbor and to ourselves. Before any religious activity our lives are to bear the stamp of profound love. The priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan did not stop to help the victim, perhaps because he was on the way to temple. IOW, he thought more of religion than he did that man. His actions reflected his theology. It is always that way. Our sociology reflects our theology. The way we treat others reveals what we think God is like.**”

Yes, we need God’s Word in us. But we need it in us primarily to change us, to change our attitudes, to change our actions. God’s word reflects who he is and his will for us. If we love God we will want to please him and be like him. As his word becomes a part of us, the HS will take the word and work in us so that, slowly by slowly, we will start thinking and acting like Jesus himself. IOW, the “word” (what God says) and “righteousness” (how we act) go together. When they are in conformity, it is a joy.

(2) That leads to the second key: “practice” or “constant practice” as the ESV puts it. The Christian faith is holistic—it is designed to affect every area of our lives. Please turn to **John 3**. In **John 3:36**, John says, “**He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.**” John has done something very interesting; the same kind of thing that is going on in our passage in Hebrews. In the first part of **John 3:36** he uses the common word for “believe.” But then notice. In the second part of the verse he doesn’t just say “but the one who *disbelieves* will not see life.” Instead, he uses a word that is talking about disbelief but is mainly conveying the idea of disobedience. IOW, real belief in Jesus is not just something that takes place in the mind—although that is very important. Rather, real belief affects our life; it affects how we act; it affects how we treat people.

That’s why **Heb 5:14** talks about our “practice” or “constant practice,” IOW how we live our lives. This again shows us the contrast between babies and mature people. Babies are very cute, but they don’t do anything except eat and sleep and poop. They are takers. They don’t “practice,” because they can’t. Mature people are not like that. Mature people work, they give, they help, they practice what they preach.

Rebecca Pippert says, “The first Bible many people will read will be your life. We are called to mirror the love of God—a love that is so extravagant the we must never keep it to ourselves. We must spread it around. It is not a mushy love, all sentiment and no action. Jesus’ love drove him deeply into the lives of people. He cared for their wholeness. When he went out into a day he did not ask himself, ‘Is this my social action day or do I give them the salvation message?’ Jesus cared for people as he found them. So must we care for their wholeness—spiritual, social, psychological, you name it.”

How this plays out is as varied as there are people and circumstances in our lives. Here at Community Church we are going to be starting a bicycle repair ministry to reach out to our neighbors. I hope this will be the beginning of more intentional outreach for us as a corporate body. As we get to know our neighbors, new opportunities will naturally arise. And the same is true for each of us individually as well. The interesting thing is that practice—doing what the Bible says—leads to joy. We see that it works. And more than that. In **John 14** Jesus promised to reveal or disclose or manifest himself to those who actually do—practice—what he says in his word.

This leads to the third key to spiritual maturity.

(3) The third key to spiritual maturity points beyond our “practice” or what we do, and talks about our “powers of discernment.” Babies don’t do—they don’t “practice.” Why? Largely because they don’t *know*. They don’t know how to do anything except eat and sleep and poop. They have to learn.

This again is where what we know, what we believe, is intimately connected with how we live. What I mean is this: **v.14** is telling us that the important thing is not just knowing a lot of things. Knowing a lot, of course, is a good thing. But **v.14** is talking about “discernment.” IOW, *wisdom*; judgment; understanding; the ability to distinguish and apply what we know.

Discernment, wisdom, judgment can only come as we learn what God says in his Word, think about it, meditate on it, and then apply it—IOW, *do it* (just like Jesus told the lawyer in **Luke 10**). Sometimes we may make mistakes, but we grow. We become more mature.

(4) But what are we to discern? This is the fourth key. **v.14** tells us: we are to learn to distinguish “good from evil.” Ultimately, that’s the bottom line—but this is deeper than you may think. What do I mean? I mean there is both *substantive* good and evil and *procedural* good and evil. What in heaven’s name do I mean by that?

By “substantive” good and evil I mean some things are right or wrong, good or bad, in and of themselves. Murder and abortion are evil. Why? Because to do that is wrongfully taking the life of an innocent person, a life that God gave, the life of a person made in the IOG. Showing love to people is good. Why? Because “God is love.”

That may be very basic, but in order to discern right from wrong and good from evil, we need to know God and we need to know his Word. Why? Because in order to determine whether anything is good or evil, right or wrong, moral or immoral, there needs to be a standard for deciding—and the only adequate ground and standard is God. Even non-Christian philosophers recognize this. Non-Christian philosopher Richard Taylor says, **“The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, without noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well. . . . The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God.”**

IOW, if right and wrong, good and evil are merely social or cultural constructs, then there is no basis for saying that anything the Nazis did or anything the Islamic jihadists are doing is wrong. A Nazi or a Muslim would simply say, “But that’s just our Nazi or Islamic culture—don’t lay your liberal, Western, imperialist, post-Enlightenment notions of right and wrong on us.”

But there is also what I call “procedural” good and evil. For example, **Eph 4:15** says that we should **“speak the truth in love.”** “Truth” is the substantive part—things are either true or they’re false. But “love” is the procedural part. My mother always used to say, “It’s not what you say, it’s the way that you say it.” Have any of you seen “The Last Lecture: Achieving Your Childhood Dreams” by Randy Pausch? It is wonderful. You can see it on YouTube. One of the things he talks about is when he was in graduate school, he was sort of a self-centered, arrogant jerk. His mentor took him for a walk one day, put his arm around his shoulder, and said something like, “Randy, some people perceive you as being a little arrogant, and that perception is going to end up hurting you in your life and your career.” He could have said, “Randy, you’re a self-centered, arrogant jerk.” He conveyed the same information but in a kinder way. And it got through. That mentor spoke the truth in love.

God cares about people. Again to quote Rebecca Pippert, she says, **“Jesus’ life was a constant demonstration that there were only two things that really mattered in this life—God and people. They were the only things that lasted forever.”**

That is why in today’s passage Christ is calling us to maturity. The maturity he is calling us to is not merely knowledge or intellectual sophistication. Instead, he is calling us to spiritual discernment arising out of constant obedience to and practice of God’s will.

**CONCL:** People are hurting. They are trying to find meaning, purpose, love, and acceptance in all kinds of things that will never ultimately satisfy and fulfill them. They do not see that Jesus alone can give them what they are longing for, because they do not see Jesus in the lives of the people who name his name. The reason why they don’t see Jesus in people who call themselves Christians is because many of those Christians themselves have never fallen in love with Jesus.

When you fall in love with someone, you naturally want to please your beloved. It’s the same in our relationship with Jesus as it is with our husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend. When we get God’s Word into us—when his values, his priorities, his character become our values, our priorities, and our character—our lives will be transformed. We will naturally start practicing what we say we believe. And as we do that, our powers of discernment will grow. We will instinctively know both what to do (substantive good) and how to do it (procedural good). And people will be drawn to Jesus because they see him in us.