

Appetite and Aptitude for God's Word | Hebrews 5:11–6:12
To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers
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If you've ever bought an old house, and done work on it, you've likely experienced this tension. It's tension between the aesthetic improvements you're excited about—painting, buffing floors, landscaping—and the structural improvements you're dreading—is the foundation leaky? Are there joists rotting? What about the pipes and plumbing?

But, like a river needs riverbanks, and a body needs bones, a vibrant house needs more than vibes; it needs a solid structure. Structure, the things that often lie out of sight, but give a thing its solidity.

The Bible imagines life this way, as a house that needs a solid structure:

By wisdom a house is built," says Solomon (Prov 24:3). Jesus teaches, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matt 7:24).

Aesthetics need underlying integrity; good vibes need solid structure.

Our fall sermon series is interested in this image—life as a well-built house. Its title is ***To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers***.

Over the months ahead, we'll consider some of the basic structure of life as God designs and desires it. What are the load-bearing truths of a Christian life? What's its basic structure? What does it mean not merely to assent to Christian truths as abstractions, but to embody them as the very form and structure of my life?

A particular cultural issue is on my mind as we enter this series—the phenomenon of deconstruction. Deconstruction is taking our house apart, with the hopes of building a better one.

In his book, *Walking Through Deconstruction*, Ian Harber (who himself deconstructed then reconstructed his faith) defines deconstruction as

a crisis of faith that leads to the **questioning of core doctrines and untangling of cultural ideologies** that settles in a faith that is different from before.¹

¹ Ian Harber, *Walking Through Deconstruction: How to Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith*.

I appreciate how his definition identifies how both doctrines *and* ideologies can be involved in shaping our lives. I often wonder if one reason for some deconstruction today is poor construction. Perhaps the Christianity we were offered included a few beams made not of truths from Scripture, but assumptions from our culture, or misapplied Scripture. When life gets hard, and these beams rot or break, we all benefit from some re-building.

My prayer as we enter this series is that it will prove for all of us a time of *building* or *re-building*, even if it involves taking out some bad timber.

How should we begin a series like this?

There is a passage in Hebrews that I believe properly orients us for this kind of searching inventory of our convictions. In Hebrews 5:11-6:12, the author of that book is addressing Christians who have fallen into *spiritual sluggishness*—they’ve lost both the appetite and aptitude for God’s Word. This not only stunts growth but warrants a warning about “falling away” (6:6). We turn to this passage to have our own appetite and aptitudes for Divine Revelation re-invigorated.

The passage unfolds in three movements, which we might organize as: **(1) Evidence of Spiritual Sluggishness** [5:11-14]; **(2) Dangers of Spiritual Sluggishness** [5:14-6:8]; and **(3) Get Serious about Growing to Better Know Christ** [6:9-12].

I. Evidence of Spiritual Sluggishness

We get the word sluggish from verse 5:11, where it is translated “dull”:

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become **dull of hearing** (5:11).

It will come up again in 6:12. It comes from a Greek word that literally means “**no push**,” and conveys the idea of being lazy or indifferent.

In the case of our readers, it is a *spiritual sluggishness*, because it pertains to receiving teaching about Jesus Christ.

Our author is in the middle of an important teaching about Jesus’ role as our High Priest—in this case, a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (5:10). But he breaks off in 5:11-6:12 because he senses his readers are not up for something that is, verse 11, “hard to explain.” They want, “milk, not solid food” (5:12).

Defining Spiritual Sluggishness

Spiritual sluggishness is not merely a matter of a lazy mind; it also involves a disengaged heart. We know this because of the metaphor used is not about “enlightenment” but “appetite” and “digestive ability.”

They have lost their appetite for divine revelation. They are not eager to hear God's Word when it is taught.

That lack of appetite, then, adds to itself a lack of aptitude. Aptitude is the mind's ability to take in deep or complex truths, break them down, grasp them, and apply them. Like when a child grows from milk to solid food, the body learns to take in, digest, and use more complex foods. So too when a Christian matures, they can receive and apply more and more of God's Word.

Here, then, is our definition of spiritual sluggishness: ***lack of the necessary appetite and aptitude for taking in God's Word.***

This can come upon all of us. And it often does so gradually— notice, the passage reads “**you have become dull,**” implying they were not always that way.

Do we know whether we've become spiritually dull? What would be signs that we have? Our author notes two.

First, we stop listening eagerly. We no longer crave more knowledge about Christ; we think we know all we need to, or we balk at the work required to take in teaching that is, at first, “hard to explain.” Or, we don't listen with a heart of submission, where we are eager to obey and apply God's Word. All we want is milk, because all we can digest is baby food.

The Gospel is simple enough for a child to grasp: God created us. We rebelled in sin. Nevertheless, God rescues us in Christ.

But the Gospel is also about the eternal God, the nature of man, the profundity of salvation, the implications of total transformation—these are truths that we'll spend an eternity plumbing.

How is your spiritual appetite as we enter this fall? Are you hungry to get in shape, to do well in school, to excel at the job—but indifferent about taking in God's Word? Are you listening eagerly, when you read your Bible, when you hear a sermon?

That's the first sign of spiritual sluggishness, *we stop listening eagerly.*

The second is when we stop working the Word into our relationships. We don't, or we can't, teach others:

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 (5:12).

If you're new to Christianity, you're in a season of learning not teaching. But if we've been around for a while, there's an expectation we are teaching others—notice the phrase, “**ought to be teachers.**”

And this is not addressed to pastors, but the whole body. To be sure, God gifts and appoints some in His church with unique responsibility to teach. But the broader picture in Christianity is that we all can teach one another.

If you participate in women's ministry, or men's, or a small group, are you the type of person who spills over with the word of God? You are grasping it so clearly, and living it so deeply, that you can't help but share the lessons? It takes time, and care, to "rightly handle the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15), to properly read, mark, and inwardly digest the Bible. But when we do, we can't help but share what we find.

This passage opens with a sting—but it's meant to wake us up from spiritual lethargy. Two evidences of which are when we no longer engage God's word earnestly, and it no longer works its way into our relationships with others.

Next, the writer turns to the *dangers of spiritual sluggishness*.

II. Dangers of Spiritual Sluggishness

The writer points out two dangers of spiritual sluggishness.

The first is Stunted Growth. This comes from the memorable metaphor of milk and food in verses 12-14:

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 (Heb 5:12b-14).

The image here, of milk versus solid food, is not flattering. But the reality it reveals is encouraging—which is, God's intention for us to mature.

Maturity here is not being smarter; it's being wiser. It's being able to take in God's word, grasp its meaning and implications, and apply it to life with discernment. And this is a skill cultivated over time:

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 (5:13-14).

"Powers of discernment" speak of our faculties of receiving information and knowing how to apply it. "Constant practice" means this skill develops not overnight, but over time and by habit. "Distinguish good from evil," means that a mature Christian not only recognizes truth from falsehood, but has the skill to not apply truth in an evil way, the skill to attach falsehood in a good way.

Maturity, then, is a good balance between head and heart. Stunted growth may look like someone who is a brain on a stick: they know a lot but can't apply it correctly. Or it may look like someone who is all heart with no head: they feel passion or sympathy all the time but lack discernment and wise judgment.

God's design for us, however, is to be mature. This happens when we give ourselves to a community of wise people; we watch how those more mature than us take in the Word and apply, walk in love and truth. And we slowly grow up.

The next danger is more serious, and I'd call it **Starting Down a Path of Apostasy**.

Hebrews 6:4-6 is a sobering warning against "falling away"—and eventually finding yourself in a state where it is impossible to be "restored to repentance" (6:6).

⁴ For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt (Heb 6:4-6).

Christians interpret this passage differently—but I don't think Hebrews is teaching that those truly united to Christ can be snatched out of his hand.² Rather, God uses warnings like this as one of the very means by which he keeps us in His hands.

And notice how quickly the author reassures his readers that this is not their case, there in 6:9:

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. (Heb 6:9).

Personally, I have always been so comforted by the assurance of Jesus' words in John 10:27,

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. (Jn 10:27).

But our author does introduce this warning about "apostasy." Apostasy is not asking hard but honest questions; it is an ultimate rejection of Christ. The New Testament speaks of it as something fearful, horrible, and of enormous gravity. Here, it is likened to "re-crucifying of the Son of God" (6:6).

² See John 10:27. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."

If you've been around long enough in the Christian world, you've seen people fall away. But perhaps like me, you also know of people who have returned—after decades away, after devastating pain or loss, they discover the flame never finally went out.

I want us to see how this warning is functioning in the author's overarching argument—and what it has to do with spiritual sluggishness.

Jesus is Better

First, in the context of the argument of the larger letter, this warning is part of the writer's central argument, which runs as follows: He is writing to Jewish Christians who are in a time of great trial. They are tempted to go back to Judaism—the ways and laws of the Old Covenant, the Old Testament—things like the Temple sacrifices for forgiveness. This would make their momentary social and political lives easier.

But it would also be a disaster. Because it would be like opting for a road sign rather than the destination it's pointing to. What our author is insisting throughout this letter is that no matter the costs, ***Jesus is better***. That's his driving point, *Jesus is better*.

This is not the same as saying "Jesus is easy." Rather, it is an utterly serious claim that when you exchange anything for following Jesus, you are making a devastating mistake.

Jesus is better than riches. Jesus is better than sex. Jesus is better than the best marriage. Jesus is better than the momentary relief of an alternative lifestyle. In the end, put up against every alternative this world or the devil can offer, *Jesus is better*. So don't fall away!

Spiritual Sluggishness is about treasuring something other than Christ

And here, then, is how this warning against apostasy applies to the danger of spiritual sluggishness.

Inasmuch as spiritual sluggishness involves a waning interest in Jesus, it also involves a growing interest in someone, or something, else. We will look for a savior, or glory, or satisfaction, or hope, in something. And when we do so, our heart is subtly saying, *this is better than Jesus*.

We don't become spiritually sluggish because Christianity becomes intellectually difficult. We become sluggish because something else begins to look more beautiful, more helpful, more trustworthy, more necessary *than Christ*.

Friend, when it comes to your soul, your destiny, your ultimate joy, everything and everyone will let you down, except Jesus.

[T] Those are the evidences and dangers of spiritual sluggishness. Thankfully, our author's main purpose is to stir his readers toward spiritual hunger and growth. And so, we turn to our third point, Get Serious about Spiritual Growth.

III. Get Serious about Growing to Better Know Christ

I want to show us two keys to serious growth, and then close with a few questions.

The first key: enjoy the gift you've been given. It's there in verses 9-10; God has already given them Christ.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do (Heb 6:9-10).

"Things that belong to salvation" is a loaded phrase. It means the saving work of God is already the foundation of their lives. And if this is true for us, then they've been given Christ. And the engine of spiritual growth is not fear of punishment or falling away, but rather the thrill of opening and enjoying the greatest of gifts.

One of my favorite birthday gifts was a basketball hoop. But when I received it, it wasn't assembled. My dad and I had to dig a hole, mix concrete, set the base, and put the whole thing together. Then I had to learn how to use it. And the more I used it, the more I loved it.

Sometimes enjoying a gift requires effort—not to earn the gift, but to enjoy everything you've been given.

The Gospel is like that. God freely gives us his Son. We don't work to earn Christ. But having received him, we spend a lifetime knowing him, walking with him, and discovering His worth and power in our lives.

And our Father doesn't leave us alone in that work: through His Word and Spirit, he continually opens our eyes to the glory of His son.

Friend, there is no better gift than Christ. You will never exhaust his love for you. You will never outspend his mercy and forgiveness. You will never say a prayer he will not hear. You will never shed a tear he does not understand. You will never graduate past Christ.

What has begun to look better to you than Christ? That is the root of our spiritual sluggishness; and treasuring Christ is the remedy.

Second, **don't settle for spiritual vibes, but have a structure to your walk with Christ.** Our passage emphasizes "basics" of the faith and "doctrines of Christ":

"the basic principles of the oracles of God" (5:12); **"the elementary doctrine of Christ"** (6:1); **"laying a foundation"** (6:1).

It spells out some of these basics in 6:1-2.

repentance from dead works and of faith toward God ... instruction about washings and the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (6:1-2).

This tells us that we get to know Christ on His terms, not ours; we meet him according to His revelation, not our own ideas.

This means knowing core doctrines, basic truths, of Christianity. Not so we can pass a test; but so we can deeply know our Lord, humbly obey His Will, and become the type of structure His Spirit loves to indwell.

A few questions to close with, as we prepare to not be *spiritually sluggish* but *spiritually eager* this fall.

Are there parts of my house, weight-bearing beams, that feel shaky? Be honest with a Christian friend about these areas. Humbly ask God if the beam is a man-made plan or part of knowing and trusting Christ? Ask God to do work on this part of the house this year.

Is there a truth about Christ, or His Word, that I have stopped hearing, stopped wanting to understand? Will you re-engage Jesus on this matter? Will you trust that this truth is there to shore up your life, not weaken it?

What has become more exciting to me, more important to me, than Jesus? What do I research voluntarily, think about in bed, spend money on with delight, turn to when sad? What type of appetite do I have for knowing Christ right now?

Who is stronger in Christ because I am in their life? Hebrews says by now I should be teaching—so who am I teaching?

A house needs more than aesthetics; it needs a foundation and structure. And so do we. But solid structure for us is about more than memorizing facts about the Bible. It's about eating and living upon that Word that brings us closer and closer to Jesus Christ. It's when the truths about Christ become both the form and vibes of our lives that we become a truly solid and truly beautiful human being. More than a strong house; a grown-up man or woman of God, like one of **"those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."** (Heb 6:12).

Small Group Questions

1. **Where might you be experiencing spiritual "dullness" right now?** Hebrews says, *"you have become dull of hearing"* (Heb. 5:11). Is there a truth about Christ or his Word that you've stopped wanting to hear, understand, or obey? What might it look like to re-engage with that truth?

2. **What would spiritual maturity look like in your life right now?** Hebrews describes the mature as those whose *“powers of discernment [are] trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil”* (Heb. 5:14). Where do you especially need greater biblical discernment, and what kind of “constant practice” might help you grow there?
3. **What is currently competing with Christ for your appetite and attention?** Hebrews urges believers to *“leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity”* (Heb. 6:1). What do you naturally get excited about, research, spend money on, or turn to for comfort? What does that reveal about your present appetite for knowing Christ?
4. **Who is stronger in Christ because you are in their life?** Hebrews says, *“by this time you ought to be teachers”* (Heb. 5:12), and later calls us to imitate those who *“through faith and patience inherit the promises”* (Heb. 6:12). Who could you intentionally encourage, teach, or help grow in Christ this fall—and who is someone whose faith you want to imitate?