

The Spiritual Declension of the Soul

by Michael Durham

Michael Durham's sermon emphasizes the reality of spiritual declension among Christians and the necessity of revival to restore a vibrant relationship with God.

Duration: 1:07:17

Scripture: Psalm 119:67, Hebrews 5:8-13, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Declension"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having a Biblically balanced knowledge of God. He explains that we need to know God as He has revealed Himself and not overemphasize one truth about Him over another. The speaker also highlights the need for a personal reality of knowing God, citing Hebrews 5:14 which talks about discerning good and evil through the exercise of our senses. The sermon then shifts to discussing the priesthood of Jesus Christ and how He is our high priest after the order of Melchizedek. However, the speaker notes that further explanation is difficult because the audience has become dull of hearing, indicating a decline in their love for God. The sermon concludes with a call for revival and the importance of constantly practicing and cultivating a deeper understanding of our own hearts and spiritual patterns.

Transcript

This is the cry of our hearts that we need you. We need you more than we realize. And we are amazed at your majesty and greatness this morning.

For you to come to us, you must humble yourself because you're so vast and infinite and beyond us. And when we come to you, we must humble ourselves because we're so proud and arrogant and self-sufficient. That we would cry out, oh, who are you that you would be mindful of us? Visit us now through thy word, thy word is truth.

Let the spirit, the wind of the spirit blow. Breathe on me, oh Lord. Let me be thy rod in thy hand.

Do your perfect will. I pray for this, my hearers, that they too would receive the gust of the spirit. That they would know your nearness.

That they would know that they are in the presence of almighty God. That you would come and make this ground sacred because of the manifestation of your glory. Oh God, visit us here in this hour.

Transform it, Lord. Change it from just the routine Sunday morning and sanctify it with something divine, heavenly, holy. Oh Lord, we call upon you now.

For if you will not work, our labor is in vain. What I do, Lord, will have no merit, no work, no power, no lasting quality about it. But our hope is in you.

As we've just heard, you will not break a bruised reed or you snuff out the smoldering flax. You're kind, you're good, you're compassionate. You care more about us than we care for ourselves.

You love us with a love that's boundless, immeasurable, immense. Surely, Lord, you see our need of you this hour. And our need pulls your heart closer towards us.

Oh, even now, Lord, let those billows of love from your heart flow into our heart. Holy Spirit, come for the glory of the one who sits at your right hand, Father. For his sake, come and magnify him, I pray.

In Jesus' name, amen. The text I pray the Lord be pleased to speak to us from is Paul's epistle, if you're reading from the King James Version, Paul's epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 5, verses 8 through 14. The epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 5, verses 8 through 14.

I want to speak on the theme this morning, spiritual declension, spiritual declension. Hebrews, chapter 5, beginning with verse 8. I'll be reading from the New King James Version this morning. Though he was a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.

And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him. Called by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, of whom we have much to say and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God, and you've come to need milk and not solid food.

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Verses 8 through 10 of our text is a continuation of a discussion on the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

It begins in the fourth chapter, verse 14. And so, verses 8, 9, and 10 of this, our text, is only the continuation of that same discussion. He's teaching that Jesus is our high priest, and that he's not after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek.

And then in our text, verse 11, he abruptly changes. He turns on a dime and says, I want to explain further about this great priesthood of our high priest, but I can't right now. It's hard to explain, not necessarily because it's such deep spiritual truth, but because you've become dull of hearing.

The problem is not the doctrine. The problem is the hearer. You've become dull of hearing.

I wish I didn't have to take necessary time to answer the question, but I feel like I must. Is spiritual declension possible for a Christian or for a local church? The reason the question needs to be addressed is because there are some today who believe and teach that revival is not necessary among the people of God. Spiritual declension is not a possibility, and they say this for this reason.

God has made a covenant with you. He's made a covenant with His people, and that covenant states that He would rid us of all of our idols, He would cleanse us of all of our filthiness, that He would so work in our hearts to cause us to walk in His statutes and to do His judgments. He is a wonderful, kind bridegroom who nurtures His bride.

He washes her with the water of the Word. Therefore, no, she is in a perpetual state of sanctification. And besides that, backsliding, that old Baptist term, is not a New Testament word at all.

It's an old covenant term dealing with a people unregenerate for the most part who kept backsliding, sliding backwards into idolatry and away from God. And then He would send a righteous leader and they would be a revival back to the one true God. And once again, they would slide backwards into idolatry.

You don't even find the word backsliding in the New Testament. Is this correct? And I say to you, our text argues strenuously, no. Spiritual declension is possible.

In fact, I feel rather safe in saying some of you are in its grips even right now. In Psalm 119, verse 67, the psalmist says, Before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now I keep Your Word.

In other words, there was a time He was walking obedient and then there was a period in time in which He was walking in disobedience. But because of the discipline, the loving hand of God in His life, now He's been brought back. There's been revival.

He's been restored to obedience. Ah, but you see, you say, that's an Old Testament text. My dear friends, the New Testament, while the word backsliding may not be found, its principle is all through the pages and chapters of our New Testament.

For example, in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus, listen to what He says to that wonderful, solid, orthodox, and may I be so bold to say, reformed church, Ephesus. Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Now, this is not an average church.

This is a cut above the average. This is an early church, a New Testament church, who had, if I can say this reverently, some celebrity pastors. The apostle Paul planted, started the church and was its first pastor.

In fact, he stayed longer in Ephesus than he did any other place where he planted a church, three years. And then his successors aren't too shabby either. Timothy followed him there and pastored that church.

And last but not least of all, the immeasurable, the wonderful, the beloved, the apostle John, was a pastor at the church of Ephesus for years. Well acquainted with these people. And now he taps this St. John on the Isle of Patmos, exiled for his labors in the ministry, and says, I want you to tell them, they've done wonderful things in their doctrine, their labors I am commending, but they have missed it in the most primary area, their love for me.

They've declined. They've gone backwards. They don't love me like they used to love me.

And I don't know about you, but I cannot read James chapter 4 without hearing the necessity for revival. James chapter 4, verse 4. Listen to this salutation. To a local church or churches, adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Now, that's not applicable to the sinner. If you're not a Christian here, my friend, I want you to understand, you have not become an enemy of God. You are and always have been.

You're against Him, not for Him. But here, the context is clear. He's writing to Christians who have chosen to become more friendly with the world and automatically that makes them an enemy to God.

What's the answer? Verse 7, therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. That's not the counsel to the sinner.

No, that's the counsel to a Christian who's in spiritual declension. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Listen to this.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up. That's the promise to God's people. Humble yourself and I will lift you up.

So, yes, spiritual declension is not only in the New Testament. It's alive and well today and it's possible that some of you are in that state and the answer is a revival. Now, this word revival has come because of use and abuse upon hard times.

When we use the word, we normally think of this great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, this extraordinary work where if hundreds, if not thousands, are brought into the kingdom in a short duration of time. And certainly, that is an amazing work of God. But the truth be known, the word revival doesn't have much to do with the lost man, the unregenerate person, because they don't need revival.

They need another R word, resurrection. You can't revive something that hasn't been alive. Revival is for the Christian.

It's for the individual or a local church. A revival, what does it mean? Well, here's how I define it. Revival is simply a return to normal New Testament Christianity.

That's all it is, all it's ever been. A return to normal New Testament Christianity. What does that look like? Walking in the Spirit continuously, consciously aware of the presence of God.

That's all that means. That's normal New Testament Christianity. And anything less than that is subnormal, abnormal.

Is it possible we have become so accustomed to the abnormal that it's become the norm? I say as I travel around preaching, I often repeat this statement wherever I go. You can have as much of Jesus as you want, and you will always have as much of Jesus as you want. How much do you want of Him this morning? Are you content to remember better days in your relationship with Christ? Has a lethargy seized your heart? Has there been for you what was true of the church at Ephesus? A departure, a departure from love that was fervent, full of vigor and vim.

Can you remember those days? And are they only a memory and not a vital reality today? Oh, spiritual declension is very possible. And there are common mistakes that I think that we as God's children make that leads to this spiritual neglect of our own souls. There are many.

I don't have time to give you all that I could this morning, but let me give you three. The first is a low view of sin, particularly the sin of spiritual declension, spiritual decline, going backwards rather than progressing in your relationship with God. The first thing you must know and believe about spiritual declension is that it's the betrayal of the Christ who lives within you.

It's no less severe than the denial of Peter and the betrayal of Judas. It is of the same essence, my friend. Now Judas, he was not regenerated, but Peter was and therefore his treachery was all the more reprehensible.

Peter's denial began long before a servant girl confronted him and accused him of being a follower of Jesus. No, that was the culmination of his spiritual decline. Even Jesus, our Lord, witnessed and saw it before it happened and warned Peter.

It is this spiritual declension, this process of decay that we don't think rightly about. We believe all is well so long as sin is not manifested. As long as there's no violent or flagrant transgression of commands or prohibitions or scripture, things are okay.

Maybe my relationship has been better, my devotional life may have been more fervent, but I'm not in disobedience. I'm therefore walking with God. But in the eyes of Him with whom we have to do, the seed is no less poison than the fruit.

The seed is as venomous as the sin which it produces because it is sin. It is. No matter the degree or the demonstration of your declension, it is sin.

And oh yes, at first the decline may not seem to be difficult or hard, but it's the same spirit that influenced Peter to swear he knew not the Lord. Spiritual declension is of the same essence as the sin it produces because it is sin. It's not a small matter.

Spiritual declension even in its initial and embryonic form is the spirit of betrayal, the betrayal of the one that loves you most. And because we don't see the problem as being an act of betrayal, we tolerate the causes, the causes of spiritual decay. We tolerate them.

We even nurse them. We quickly dispel any notion that the beginning of rot is the same disease that brings destruction, like a cavity in the tooth. As long as you ignore it, it will eventually destroy the tooth.

Not too long ago I met a man who had just left the doctor having a tooth extracted. And I said to him, what happened? He said, well, I had a cavity. Well, of course, then I asked the natural obvious question, well, why didn't you go to the doctor and have it taken care of long before now? He said, that was the funny thing about all of this.

I didn't even know I had a cavity. And then I began to feel a pain. I immediately went to the dentist and he said, I'm sorry, but it's too late to save the tooth.

The rot is too pervasive. And that's just what spiritual declension is like. We pay it no mind.

We think it no great matter until it's too late and we have shamefully sinned and brought reproach upon our dear Lord. Let me ask you some very tough questions, but don't avoid them, apply them. Do you not realize that even if you haven't yet publicly brought discredit upon Christ, that by your lack of spiritual zeal, Christ already feels wounded? Do you think He doesn't feel your departure from first love? Are you sure

that your little affection does not hurt His heart? Are you so sure that you would continue to be negligent in the care of your soul? And so I say, a low view of this heinous spiritual problem is a severe mistake and it has no good outcome, dear friend.

Has no good outcome. You've got to see and believe that any, any heart departure or decline is grievous to the Lord Jesus. It is sin.

It is sin because it violates the greatest commandment. To love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and all thy strength. There is no way to excuse it in light of that word.

A second common mistake we make. We either do not know or we have forgotten that God's activity of grace must be cooperated with. God's activity of grace in you must be cooperated with.

God's grace in your sanctification does not do all you need it to do, but it supplies all you need. Doesn't do all you need, but it supplies all you need. God's grace does not rule out our cooperation.

It enables cooperation. I travel a lot, as you know, and I'm talking about good, orthodox, sound churches. Most Christians in churches today are either in one ditch or the other when it comes to the role of God and the role of man in the Christian life.

The majority are confused. God does command me to repent. Yes, God commands me to obey Him.

And yes, God commands me to trust in Him. But God's not going to do my repenting, obeying, or trusting. He does give me the desire and the power to do all of the above.

And the power is in my spirit and it lies within my will. But dear friend, I must exert that will. I must exert myself.

I'm the one that has to buffet my body. I'm the one that must put on Christ and make no provision for the flesh. God requires cooperation.

But grace also supplies both the desire and the power to cooperate with it. And yet many professing Christians are just simply lazy. They've been made lazy by a misunderstanding of the preserving quality of grace or they're just by temperament lazy.

But either way, they're lazy. We want God to do everything for us. Some believe grace energizes us like a battery.

And so they just passively watch God do His thing through them. And I no doubt there's someone here like that this morning. You're waiting for the thunder and the lightning called grace to hit you today and thereby change you and make you a super saint.

You're praying, begging, Oh God, do something. Give me this kind of experience that somehow solves my disobedience problem forever. It doesn't work that way, friend.

Or you passively just simply do your own thing thinking that grace is some kind of liberty where you do the best you can and excuse the rest. That's how some people define grace these days. They view the Christian as nothing more than a forgiven sinner and grace manages his sin problem by merely canceling out the penalty.

They do not believe grace has anything to do with growing in holiness. I've had people confront me, insult me, hackle me even while preaching when I introduce the subject of holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. They say we're saved by grace and works has nothing to do with it.

Yes, sir, but where in this book does the Bible say that grace is against works? It says it's against the idea of earning but it's never against the idea of effort. It enables effort. I believe all unbiblical views concerning grace is a problem and here it is namely separating the grace of God from God.

Here's where the problem stems. Here's the root. God's grace is not a commodity dropped into a person's heart.

It's not some impersonal force like the force in the Star Wars movies. Absolutely not. Grace is nothing like that.

Nor is it just God's undeserved love toward us. No, instead, grace is God's undeserved love toward us that motivates Him to intervene in our lives. The grace of God and all of the graces of God are God's activities within you.

It's God Himself acting on your behalf. For example, when we speak of the grace of regeneration we don't mean some abstract impersonal force that changes the heart of the sinner. Absolutely not.

We say that's God Himself active, working within the human soul. It's God doing it. It's a demonstration of His undeserved love for you.

It's He giving Himself to you in this wild and extravagant and incomprehensible love. It's God Himself working in you. That's what grace is.

It's God's work. And therefore, because God is a person we must engage Him. We must interact with Him and His activity as the work of a person.

This engagement is the very means of relationship. It's what we would mean by the words practicing relationship. Our relationship with Christ now listen carefully, is not self-sustaining.

It's not perpetual without our engagement. In other words, no relationship works when only one party is working. And grace given to you, the activity of God means you must engage yourself not with some inanimate impersonal force but with the reality of Jesus Christ.

How real is Jesus to you, friend? This is what we're talking about. The reality of Christ lived out daily. Are you engaged with Him? Are you cooperating with Him? And since God's grace is His activity then we've got to learn how to interact with God and the more you interact with this Christ who dwells within you the more of His grace you are experiencing.

Does that make sense? Does this make sense? You can pray and ask God for grace but what you're really asking is God to get involved in your life and you to get involved in Him. That's what you're really asking for. And I pray you're asking for that.

I pray you're asking for that. The final common mistake I want to deal with is that we wrongly assume that the Christian soul is not hostile to grace. We assume now that we're a Christian, my soul is a wonderful environment for God's activity and His work.

But the truth really is, according to the Scriptures, your unperfected soul is not a friendly environment for His activities or His work. Not only are the assaults on grace from without, they are also coming from within the soul. We either do not know or we have forgotten that every Christian has within him or her the makings of the worst possible backsliding.

The devil's not required for a spiritual fall from fellowship with God. The seeds, listen, the seeds of such a fall have all they need within you already without the cultivation of Satan. Listen to what James 1, verse 14 says.

But every man is tempted and drawn away by his own lust. There's enough corruption in me to deter me and swerve me from Him, and I don't even need Satan's help. I can do it all by myself.

Your soul is not the best place for grace, but thank God He is gracious to remain nonetheless. Now, the most significant problem with backsliding, spiritual declension, decline, whatever you want to call it, is that in its earliest forms or its initial stage, it's really hard to detect. It's very difficult to recognize.

Most Christians have not learned how to detect the very early stages of spiritual declension, and that's why we find ourselves in it. It's tough to detect. In fact, because of your human makeup, your inherent pride, a man or woman can go far into spiritual declension before they even realize it.

And when do they normally realize it? When a sin happens. Just recall Samson. Samson, who had the Holy Spirit's power on him while he was consorting with the enemies of Israel.

Listen to what Delilah says to the compromised champion. The Philistines are upon you, Samson. And the Bible says he awoke out of his sleep and said, I will go out as other times before and shake myself.

And then comes those sad, sad words. And he knew not that the Lord was departed from him. He knew it not.

The stealth of declension is so destructive that if you don't know how to guard yourself, you will fall prey to it eventually, sooner rather than later. You've got to learn how to recognize it. You've got to learn how to spy it out, discern it, know it, know its tactics.

And so therefore, I want to direct your attention to the detection, detection of spiritual declension. How can I recognize it in me before it's too late? Someone here this morning, you're already within the grip of spiritual decline and you don't even know it. But if you're God's child, I believe this message has been sent to you in order to show you, to help you.

It's His way, it's His grace, it's His means of reaching out to you, calling you. Here I am, come, draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you. One of the reasons that spiritual decay is hard to detect is it doesn't require, now listen, it doesn't require a violation of God's commandments.

You don't have to break a command. You don't have to violate a prohibition of Scripture in order to be in spiritual decline. Look at our text.

Hebrews chapter 5. These dear Christians had not violated any known commandment. I would argue, according to chapter 12 and other passages, that they have been doing a wonderful job testifying of the grace and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because they are a persecuted church.

In the 12th chapter, the writer to the Hebrews says that this persecution is God's loving discipline chasing it in your life. Friends, when the world hates you enough to persecute you, it must recognize something's good in you. Something of Jesus is about you.

There is no known violation. There's nothing like we read about the Laodicean church here, about these churches in Judea, or wherever this letter went. There doesn't seem to be any doctrinal declension.

They don't seem to be less orthodox or accurate in their theology. What's the problem? Verse 12. The problem was they were not growing in maturity.

They were not progressing in their sanctification. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God. And you've come to need milk, not solid food.

Notice the grammar. You've come to need milk and not solid food. Which means what? Grammatically, they had been enjoying a little more solid nourishment.

But something has happened. There's been a declension. There's been a decline.

And now they're back on the milk. And please, please pay attention. I want to be as practical as I can and helpful as I possibly can by God's help.

You don't have to fall into some scandalous temptation to lose your spiritual vigor and strength. Most of the things we associate with backsliding don't have to happen for a Christian to backslide. And that's why it's hard to detect.

Another reason it's hard to spy out in the beginning is that all that's required to spiritually decline is to do nothing. Just do nothing, and you will decline. As a young person, I used to, growing up in the Ozarks of the southern, southwest part of Missouri, I used to swim a lot in rivers.

And there was one famous river we liked to swim in, camped beside the James River. And it had a good little current, and we would swim upstream. And the moment I flipped onto my back to float or tread water, guess what happened to me? I lost ground automatically.

That's what happens when you just simply do nothing. Oh, void prayer. Neglect the prayer meetings.

Neglect serious meditation of Scripture, and your spirit will automatically shrivel. It can't help it. It's the way it's designed.

Be concerned more about good things rather than the primary thing. And what is the primary thing? To maintain your fellowship with Christ. That's the main thing.

It doesn't take the place of ministry. Excuse me, ministry doesn't take the place of that. Nothing does.

Just do nothing to keep your spirit desperately depending upon the Lord, and you will not go forward even though your circumstances seem to progress. I'm ashamed to tell you, but you need to know this. I've experienced many times the blessing of God on my ministry when my heart was not as engaged or engaged at all with God as it had been.

Do you hear what I'm saying? There were times in my ministry, preaching, praying, serving the church, where I actually saw successes. I saw people saved. I saw answers to prayer.

And I knew that my heart was not in full flame for Christ. Just do nothing to maintain and cultivate fellowship with God, and my friend, you're going backwards rapidly, and you don't even know it. There's another reason why spiritual declension is hard to detect in the beginning.

It's because your character and your behavior does not change in the beginning of spiritual declension. Did you hear me? There is no noticeable change in your conduct or your behavior. You still love the things of God.

You still love the people of God. You still love Providence Chapel. You love the work of God.

And because you still do, you think everything is proper when everything may not be proper and well. You don't detect any behavioral changes because there are none even though your heart is ailing. You will condemn the sin of others when that same sin's seed is sprouting in your own heart.

It's so invisible, friend. So invisible. That's why this spiritual disease is so damaging, and it's why the church languishes.

I think it's one of the reasons why we don't see as many people converted as we pray and want to see. The manifested presence of God is not at work because we are not walking in fellowship with Him. In the lightest, He's in the light.

But we think we are. You can function in your ministry gifts while being infected with this malady. You can continue to pray and read your Bible, come here, worship with the saints of God while your heart is languishing, feeling very little, if anything at all.

And although the believer is not submitting to the will of God, the life of Christ remains in you. Now, this is the tricky part. God has promised to never leave you nor forsake you.

And if God's grace is His activity in your life, it's very possible, in fact, frankly, it does work this way, that there are still graces being evident in your life. There's still evidences of God's activity and work in you. There's glimpses of God's favor.

You see now and again, the grace of God has not left the child of God and it will never leave the child of God. But the child can fall from grace. And all of this occurs without your consciousness of it happening.

You need to learn how to be aware of it. Because to the untrained heart, the decline is so gradual that it's imperceptible. It's not noticeable.

And you just kind of merely continue your way until your decline reaches a certain stage and then you can't deny it because now you are violating commandments. You are walking and living in such a way that brings disrepute to the gospel you proclaim. How many times I've heard people sitting in my office, lamenting, crying, I don't know how I got here.

I remember one pastor coming to me, wanting to confide in me of great sin in his life and he said with tears streaming down his face, I don't know how I wound up in this situation. And he was being honest. He didn't realize it because he'd never learned his own heart and to recognize its driftings.

In the last two or three years, I've known at least three pastors who have fallen and many of them who I have trusted and I've reached out to them and they basically say the same thing. It's just, I don't know how I got to this place, but here I am. If we are to detect spiritual declension in its initial form, and that's where you want to see it, we've got to rightly define it.

So what do I mean by spiritual declension? What is our definition? Well, here it is. This is the best way I know how to define it. It's helped me.

When the Lord showed this to me, spiritual decline is defined as any lessening, any lessening of the heart's fascination with our Lord. Now, what do I mean by the word fascination? Well, that shouldn't be too hard to illustrate. If you're married or about to be married, remember what happened when you met your prospective spouse.

What happened to your heart? Was it not captured? Was it not obsessed with that person? That's fascination. Fascination is to be enamored by something to the point that it almost feels like a spell has been cast over your heart. To be fascinated with Jesus is to be so in love with Him that He is your obsession.

What happens to the mind when it's no longer concentrating on the task at hand? Where does the mind gravitate to? To the obsessions of the heart, the fascinations of the soul. You know what I'm talking about. Don't sit there like, these are algebraic equations.

This is not high math or high science. This is where the rubber meets the road, if I can use that terminology. You know your heart's fascinations.

You know if Jesus has the obsession of the soul or something else, because if it's not Christ, it will be something else. What has your heart? Is it Christ? Do you wake up in the morning with the first thoughts? Him? With the joy and excitement that you're going to be able to spend the first moments of your day alone in communion with this glorious, great, and majestic, and holy, amazing God? Do you engage Him through the day? Do you walk with Him? Are you fascinated? Just take any curxed or curricular hobby or something. When you first come onto something like that, man, what do you do? You get on the internet and you research it out.

You study it. You're just thinking. You're obsessed with it.

That's fascination. Any lessening of the fascination of your heart towards Christ is spiritual declension. That's it.

And so the remedy is that you have to go on self-watch. Here in verse 14 of our text. He says, But solid food belongs to those who are of full age.

That is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Your ESV, the Bible probably most of you have open now, says this, But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained, by constant practice of distinguished good from evil. Not bad, but not best.

Because the word senses is the literal word. I would wish they would have done a more literal rendering. Senses, not powers of discernment.

What are your physical senses? And what are they for? Well, they're the faculties of perception. You perceive stimuli outside and from within the body through the sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. It's how we gather in information.

The author to the Hebrews is using this word purposely. He wants you to understand that as there are physical senses, there are spiritual senses as well. You have spiritual faculties by which you can discern good and evil.

Not just bad doctrine from good doctrine, but even the fluctuations and the rhythms of your own heart. He uses another word here. It's the word exercise.

Having their senses exercise. This word comes from a word from which we get our English word, gymnasium. What's a gymnasium for? It's a place of strenuous activity, discipline.

A hard place where you work out, getting in shape, or preparing for some athletic competition. And then he says, by reason of use. Here I think the ESV does an excellent job in translating.

He means being trained by constant practice. Beloved, if you are to understand spiritual declension and know it in your life, you are going to have to constantly practice getting acquainted with the rhythms of your own heart. You're going to have to learn by practice.

Over and over again to detect the degree of fascination in the heart. That's what we've got to do and that's what mature people do. They learn.

They don't get discouraged if they fail because practice excludes failure. That's part of practicing. You continue to cultivate this.

You begin to watch your heart. The patterns. There are always patterns.

You're too much a creature of habit. There are patterns to your spiritual life. Learn those patterns.

Learn to see those things. We'll talk more about that in just a moment. But let me say before I give you some help, your first and primary responsibility in life is to care for your own soul.

It is not the first and primary responsibility of our elders to care for our souls. That is not biblical. Their first and primary care and responsibility is to care for their own souls or they're no good to us.

And the task is no different whether you're an elder or not, a deacon or not. Your primary task is to wake up every morning and to ensure that your spiritual health is full of vim and vigor, that your walk with God is as good as it can be to the degree of knowledge you have at this point. That's your primary responsibility.

How are you doing? How are you doing, physician of your own soul? Are you medicating? Are you applying attention? Is your dietary requirements being fulfilled? And let me give you four things that I think your soul's health depends upon to keep you from spiritual declension or to recover from it. Number one, you need a biblically balanced knowledge of God. A biblically balanced knowledge of God.

I start here because there is nothing far, there's nothing greater to know than God. That's why I gave you a brain to reason, meditate, and think upon Him and to know Him. That means you have got to become a student of this book.

You say, I was hoping something a little different. I already know that. Yes, that's the problem.

Spiritual declension has already taken place. Has it not? Because of your neglect of the book. I don't have time to get into it today, but as I mentioned to the hermeneutics class yesterday, there's a reason why you read your Bible and there's reasons why you shouldn't or you shouldn't read the Bible in that manner.

We read to know the God of this book. This is how He's revealed Himself to us. Through information, through the written Word.

You've got to know God if you're going to be able to walk with God. I've got to know my wife in order to walk with her. To grow with her.

It's a relationship. This is no different, friends. You're dealing with a person.

The greatest person, of course, in the whole universe. The omnipotent, divine, eternal one, yes. But He's still a person.

You've got to know Him. And He has shown you what He's like and what His purposes and His will and His ways are right here. So you've got to know the information.

And you need to know it in a biblically balanced way. You can't overemphasize one truth about God before another. You've got to know Him as He's revealed.

Secondly, not only do you need a biblically balanced knowledge of God, but you need a personal reality. You need personal reality of the knowing of God. Now what does that mean? It means that what you know about Him informationally is becoming real experientially.

God did not give you this book so that you can all become theologians and then stop right there. Martin Lloyd-Jones said he spent half of his ministry trying to teach people that doctrine was essential. The other half of his ministry, that doctrine wasn't everything.

What's the other thing? It's this very thing. To grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. So said the Apostle Peter.

And he didn't mean just academically. He meant experientially. He meant to know God in relationship, learning by conscious awareness of His presence through the Holy Spirit by faith in this book.

That's what he meant. And that's the way you know God. What good is your information about God if you don't practice God's presence? What good is it? The Pharisees had great knowledge of the Scriptures.

Jesus even commended their doctrine at one point. Do what they say but don't do what they do. But knowledge alone is not enough as we see in their case.

Nor is it in ours. We need to experience this living God, not weekly in the worship service alone, but daily, multiple times. Enoch walked with God and was not for God took him.

He walked with Him. And that's what God wants to do. That's why He saved you.

Yes, sin has to be dealt with. Yes, His righteousness has to be satisfied. But that was done on the cross so God could know you personally and love on you and show you His magnificent kindness.

That's why He saved you. To reconcile you to Himself. Thirdly, I'm hastily going through these things.

Please forgive me. Not only do you need a biblically balanced knowledge of God, a personal reality of the knowing of God, but you need a biblically balanced knowledge of yourself. Of yourself.

You can't know you till you first know God. But after you know God, now you begin to see you. The real you.

Not the religious facade that you and I both, we all do that. I told somebody at church not too long ago, I want people to think I'm more spiritual than I really am. I do, don't you? But that's not good.

That's not good at all. None of us are as we appear to one another. We all know that.

That's why we live by grace. And the only way to know the real you is to know God. And once you know that, you can know God.

Now you can know you. And what I mean by a biblically balanced knowledge of you is to understand what this book says about we. Men.

Women. Our nature. Our propensities.

You need to know that before Christ found you, what you were. A rebel. An enemy of God.

A hater of God. Impossible for you to see the kingdom of God, much less enter into it. But then you also need to know what God has done to redeem you.

To save you. He sent his son to die on the cross. To take the penalty of your sin.

You see, as he's hanging there, he's hanging there in your place. It's you. Me.

Should be there. It is I who should be receiving the wrath of God and his holy vengeance. But it's not me hanging there.

Thank you, Jesus. I'm not there experiencing the divine wrath of almighty God. You are doing that for me.

You lived the perfect life. You fulfilled all righteousness for me. So that if I simply trust in you, and that's what happened, isn't it? Where did that come from? Where did the faith to apprehend the gospel, to believe in it, and to be transformed by it, where did that come from, my dear friend? Because you're intellectually smarter than the person sitting beside you? Is it because you grew up in a good church and was theologically and soundly trained? No, sir.

It's because God took mercy on your soul. That's why. You're a product of God's electing love, and that's all.

That's the only thing that separates you and the people out there in the world lost this morning. That's what you need to know about yourself. And now you need to know who you are in Christ, in union, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.

You need to know that you're no longer a criminal but a child. You need to understand that you've been seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. You need to know that this is who you are, justified.

And those whom he called, he justified. And those whom he justified, he glorified. That's how God sees you, accepted in the beloved.

That's your standing with God now so that I can say, without fear of being argued or proven wrong, that for now, from this moment on, into the eternal ages to come, all I can be is a sinner rejoicing in the grace of God. And when I understand that, when I've really understood that, not just intellectually, but it motivates the way I live, now I can desperately depend. I know who I am and what I am, and I know who he is and what he is, and I need him.

I need him. And then fourthly, you need a personal reality of the knowing of yourself. You see, just like God, you just don't need to know academically, intellectually who you are as the scripture has depicted you.

You need to know personally you. You don't need to know Michael Durham. You don't need to know Charles Spurge and D.L. Moody and all of their character traits.

You need to learn you. And you need to be well accustomed and knowledgeable about your own heart. And this is where many of us are failing because we don't hear things like this in some places, in some avenues.

We've not been taught. You've got to learn and discern your heart and its heart's rhythms. You see, I have learned after numerous failures.

I cannot tell you how many failures I have made in trying to learn how to walk with God. But those failures have been my blessed teachers. I have learned about my heart that I can detect the first movements of declension in my soul.

I can. And here's the decision I have to make at that moment. When you've discerned the rhythms of life, the rhythms of your heart, and you're beginning to detect you're drifting.

Now the decision is, what am I going to do? Am I going to say as I have miserably done? We'll talk about that tomorrow, Lord, when I have my devotions with you. Or do you tremble, fearful, and get at that moment alone with God and deal with your heart until heaven's love is poured into your soul? My dear friend, I know we're all work. I know we're all busy.

But as soon as possible, you've got to get alone with God and wrestle with your heart and the depletion of your love for God. The depletion of your fascination with God. You've got to deal with it then.

Don't wait. Because the longer you wait, the more you drift backwards. Spiritually, you are drifting at all times.

If you're not progressing, you're digressing. Know yourself. Know your strengths.

Know your weaknesses. Know your besetting sins. Learn them well and learn that Jesus is there with you.

And He will help you. And He will keep your heart and mind in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Him. Well, I hope with confidence in God that I've alarmed some of you to the point of arousal.

But remember, if you do nothing with this alarm, you will digress. And so I ask you, has the Spirit of God diagnosed your spiritual decline today? Are you not as well as you thought when you first came here this

morning? If so, then God is interacting with you. His grace is being bestowed to you right here, right now.

It's given to you to cooperate with Him. It's He who will enable you to engage with Him. Brothers and sisters, please quit neglecting your souls.

Please, I beg you. If caring for the souls of others has led to the neglect of your own soul, then withdraw from men and draw near to God. I know it's customary that on this Sunday we will break and have lunch.

But as feeding the physical man is important, as feeding the inner man, is your spiritual condition so well, so good, that you can simply dismiss everything I've said and go right to the line and proceed with eating lunch? I'm not trying to be melodramatic. I'm just trying to put this thing, what I think is actually stark spiritual realities. Draw near to Him with the certainty and the assurance of His promise, draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you.

Do you not hear the Lord standing at the door of your heart, knocking and saying, if any man will hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him and I will dine with him and he with me. Have you been missing the table of the Lord? Oh, is there not something in your soul right now, crying like a little baby, yes, yes, I've neglected my father's table. Oh, I want to come back.

Then come, draw nigh to God. He will draw nigh to you. I know that I have not really addressed the sinner in this congregation.

I wouldn't want you to leave without the gospel, the good news. But I have to tell you though, you can't hear the voice of God calling you. You don't have the heart that God puts in the child, who believes and trusts in him.

Your heart is dead in trespasses and sin. It's as hard as a rock. In fact, God says your heart is just that, a stone, impenetrable, inflexible, not sensitive to him or his ways.

You're like Lazarus, dead for days. Corruption consumes you. You cannot know the voice of God.

But, but, but, someone here this morning will say something's happened while you were preaching. Something within my heart fluttered. I felt something that I have never felt before.

Something strange is happening right now. I actually feel some desire to be drawn near to God. My friend, let me give you good news.

That's God. That's the Holy Spirit. That's God himself drawing you, working in you.

He has come to your cemetery of sin and nature's night. And he stands at the tomb with the great rock, pushing it back. And like Lazarus, he's calling you to come forth.

He will take your death clothes and he will replace them with the robes of his righteousness. He will make you a child. He will show you his loving kindness.

You will be given the mercy of God. Come to him. Follow that stirring.

Don't ignore it. Please don't shut it down. Please come, come, come to Christ.

He will not reject you. He will receive you. For he saves only the ungodly.

In due time, without strength, Christ died for the ungodly. He's calling you. Come.

Why will you die? I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Turn and live. To my brothers and sisters, to you who have strayed and wandered far, like the song we sang earlier, I feel my heart prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love.

Listen. He stands calling you. Don't argue.

Don't consider it for a moment. Will he or will he not receive me back? My spiritual declension has led to terrible sin. Oh, my friend.

No, he will receive you. He'll remove your filthy rags and give you his royal robes. He'll give you the signet ring of assurance.

He will restore your assurance in the fold of God. He will banquet and feast and call you to his table. Come.

His lips will not chide you. He will not despise you if you come back. No, no.

Those lips will smother you with his kisses and loving kindness. Come. He is here, ready to receive us.

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Amen. Let us pray.

Our Father, thank You that You show us that You so love us that You will not chide us when we have wandered and we return. We will not hear any ill words from Your lips. We believe, Lord, that we will hear, welcome back.

I've been here all the time. Welcome. You'll wash us again and cleanse us.

Lord, we do want revival. We need it. I live in constant need of it.

Would You visit us? Lord, I don't know what You want to do here. I just know that You want to heal us. Blessed be the God who forgives us of all of our iniquities, who heals us of all of our diseases.

I know that that's what You want to do. You want to forgive and You want to heal. So, Lord, we turn this service over to You to do what You have ordained to do.

Oh, let mercy reign here to this day. Let people trust in the goodness of Your lovingkindness, to trust in God that He is good. Help us, I pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen. If God has spoken to you in any shape, form, or fashion after the service has concluded, especially if you're not a Christian this morning, but God has spoken to you, I know four men here, elders and myself, we would love to talk to you. I don't care if I don't get to eat lunch.

I want you to be talked to. I want you to be prayed with. You come.

Talk to one of us. Talk to a mother, a father, but you talk to someone and tell them something's going on. I don't know what it is, but please help me to discern what is this I'm experiencing right now.

Don't leave this place without that. If you're a believer, you know what to do. Where you're seated right there, turn it into an altar and meet with God.

May God give us the grace to obey Him. Amen.

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