



# COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIANITY

## Hebrews 5:11-6:12

There's an old illustration for testing Biblical truth from the world of counterfeit money. John MacArthur explains this classic story. "Federal agents don't learn to spot counterfeit money by studying the counterfeits. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they see the bogus money they recognize it." Tim Challies, a popular blogger and pastor from Canada actually checked this out at the Bank of Canada and discovered it was true. The best way to discover counterfeit money is to study the real thing. He was taught four tests: touch it, tilt it, look through it, look at it. Even with modern technology and sophistication, apparently it's virtually impossible to pass a counterfeit bill if you know what you are looking for.

The same is true for Biblical truth. The best ways to recognize false teaching is to study sound doctrine. You judge truth in this way but can you apply the same tests to a believer? In other words, can you spot a counterfeit believer by comparing him or her to the Biblical standard?

This morning we are taking a break from Colossians to jump into the book of Hebrews but under the same topic of spiritual maturity. Hebrews 6:1 says, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity." Do you remember the Greek word for maturity? Telios. Completeness, maturity. This is what the author of Hebrews is aiming at but in the process, we will see three sets of people.

1. The Immature Believer
2. The False Believer
3. The Mature Believer

### **The Immature Believer—5:11-14**

*<sup>11</sup> About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. <sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

Verses 11-4 of chapter five was the foundation for the first paper I wrote in seminary. The first year Karen and I were married I started taking correspondence courses through Western Seminary. This was old school. The seminary sent me a huge box of VHS tapes. I watched all of

the tapes and took the tests and then mailed the enormous box of videotapes back to the school. Crazy. Anyway, I was assigned this text to write a paper and it's had a profound impact on me ever since.

1. Time and teaching are supposed to produce spiritual maturity.

The author states it quite clearly. *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.* The assumption is that over time you will experience growth in your spiritual maturity. In this case, some of these people should have grown to the stage where they could teach others. We don't know how long they had been believers, but the point is, there had been more than enough time for them to have progressed in their faith. The text does not say five years or ten years. There's no exact time attached to this principle because we all grow at different rates and that's OK. But the expectation is that we do grow. That we bear fruit, much fruit.

So here's an opportunity for self-examination. How long have you been a believer, roughly speaking? Not everyone can pinpoint the exact time of his or her conversion, but you can get pretty close. How long have you been a believer and how much have you grown. Can you teach others? Are you able to take a younger believer and disciple them, help them take the next steps in their walk of faith. If you are able, have you done so? Has sufficient time gone by—sufficient time for you, that is—that you have grown to the level of being able to disciple others? I find this principle to be both encouraging and convicting. If you are a younger believer, it is encouraging because you are allowed to have time to mature in your faith. God does not expect great maturity to be developed over night.

That's not to say that you can't grow quickly. In 1996 I led a missions trip to Guatemala. Back then, the dad in this photo was about 20 or 21 years old. Cory was a really nice guy but he didn't make a big impression on me in terms of his spiritual maturity. But since he was older than all the high school students, I considered him my co-leader on the trip. After two weeks serving in Guatemala, Cory decided to go back for two years with the same organization. He was stateside for about a year after that but ever since he has been travelling the world serving with YWAM. So Cory seemed to grow quickly in his young faith.

Some people grow very quickly and some grow less quickly but the principle remains the same. The combination of time and teaching is supposed to produce spiritual maturity.

2. Maturity is the ability to distinguish good from evil.

*But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* There's a whole lot going on in this one verse. The first thing it does it help us to define maturity. The very fact that we can discern good from evil tells us that there IS good and evil. You see how important this is in our pluralistic society, right? Much of society would tell us that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Every person decides what is right or wrong for them personally. There is no absolute standard which can tell us that this behavior is right or that behavior is wrong. It's no surprise that the Bible has this standard, but it is a good reminder that every day of our lives we are faced with a long list of small decisions that are either good decision or bad decisions. Certainly, not every decision in

life is strictly black and white but there is an objective standard that comes from God alone. It's not your truth and my truth. There is only *the* truth.

3. Spiritual maturity is measured by what you do, not by what you know.

Not only is there good and evil but our powers of discernment can be trained to distinguish good from evil. But did you notice how this happens? "By constant practice." Here is where we make a huge mistake as believers. We think that discernment happens within the realm of knowledge. In other words, the more you know the, more discerning you will be. There is some truth to that. As we said with the counterfeit bill analogy, if you want to recognize false teaching then you first need to know sound doctrine. The more doctrinal knowledge you possess, the more discerning you will be in recognizing false teaching. In that sense you can grow in your ability to distinguish good from evil.

But that's not quite what this text is talking about. It's talking about knowing the right choice to make and then making the right choice. Most of us know the right answers but it doesn't change our behavior. We gain more knowledge but we do not gain more spiritual maturity. The missing ingredient is constant practice.



I saw this photo on Twitter posted by theologian James White with the following caption.

A shot from my Go-Pro while climbing Mt. Evans from Summit Lake this morning, around 13,700 ft. above sea level. I've lived with a fear of heights my entire life—so this was a big victory for me!

Tell me—has this man conquered his fear of heights? Absolutely not. He was understandably proud of his accomplishment, but he has hardly conquered his fear. That could only be done by

constant practice. If he did the same thing over and over again, most likely his fear of heights would get better if not go away completely.

I don't have a fear of heights, as Brent Madison can tell you because we just went rock climbing two weeks ago. But I have had a fear of swallowing pills. I had a sensitive gag reflex which had always made it really hard for me to swallow anything larger than an ibuprofen. Years ago we bought these multivitamins that were pretty large and solid. I couldn't swallow them so I bought a mortar and pestle on Ebay so I could smash the vitamins into powder and mix them in water. That idea was disgusting so I gave it up. In the last two years we discovered this wonderful anti-inflammatory that was helping both Karen and me with various aches and pains. Side note: I have recommended this to at least a dozen people and every single one of them said it helped them. It's just a curcumin combo we get on Amazon. It



worked great but the pill was still too large for me to swallow so I squeezed out the contents and drank it. That was even messier and more disgusting than crushing the hard pills.

Finally I had enough and decided that I needed to do something about this. I started to train myself to swallow pills. Before this, I had trouble with a single medium sized capsule. So I trained myself to swallow one capsule. That became easy so I trained myself to swallow two capsules. Then three and then four. These are my morning supplements and a few months ago I swallowed all ten in one gulp. I don't recommend you try this at home but I found it necessary to train myself to swallow pills so I could take various supplements. I trained myself by constant practice to learn to swallow pills so I could receive the benefits of what is in the supplements.

Now if I can do that with something as meaningless as vitamins, why can't we apply this to our spiritual lives? You see, it's not about knowing the word of God. It's about practicing the word of God—constant practice. When you “practice” the word of God you increase your obedience muscles. You get what I mean, right? It's hard to follow Jesus. It's hard to do the right thing. But when we do, something happens within us. We discover that obedience is possible. We discover that obedience is better for us. We discover that obedience ultimately brings us more lasting joy than the fleeting pleasure of sin. Obedience builds up more obedience muscle for the next time. This is what happens when you “constantly practice” the Word of God. Obedience will remain hard in many ways because we are still fighting the unholy trinity of the world, the flesh and the devil. But obedience can be strengthened, otherwise spiritual growth can never happen. Spiritual maturity is measured by what you do, not by what you know.

James 1 is very clear about this truth.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:22-25).

Maturity is not just knowing the facts. Anyone can grasp the essence of the gospel without it making a lick of difference in their lives. Tim Farrell was telling me about witnessing to an old friend of his recently. Apparently, this guy's life is quite the mess with very few things going well. Tim shared the gospel with him and explained how trusting Christ would make a huge difference in his life. After Tim was done sharing all of this, his friend said to him, “All of those things you described? I need all of those in my life. I want all of those benefits but without the God part.”

That's what knowledge without obedience can look like. We may not be quite so honest as Tim's friend, but the end result can be similar. We get knowledge and understanding without obedience, because obedience requires the “God part.” Obedience requires that we recognize God's standards and then we must also submit to God's standards.

4. If you take in spiritual truth but do not practice it, you will regress.  
*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*

How did these people become dull of hearing? Verse 12 again. *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.* Enough time had passed that they should have progressed to being able to teach others. Again, we don't know how long that had been, but the author knew it had been plenty long for knowledge and obedience to have grown together. To use discipleship language, they should have progressed from being a disciple to becoming a disciple maker—someone who can help others move along in their faith. They should have become a disciple maker but instead, what did they become? They became dull of hearing. They didn't start that way. They started off as people who wanted to learn and grow. They may have even been eager learners at the beginning, sort of like the seed that shot up when it hit the rocky soil. At first this person may have looked like they were growing but time showed a different picture.

This is what happens when you don't move forward. It has often been said and this passage proves it. There is no such thing as a stagnant Christian. You can't just stand still. Either you are moving forward in spiritual maturity or you are regressing.

This is what happened all throughout Israel's history and it culminated in Jesus' death. I love Acts chapter seven because it gives this wonderful summary of Israel's history. If you haven't read it in a while, I encourage you to check it out soon. At the end of chapter six, Stephen was arrested and made to stand before the High Priest. At first, Stephen drew them in with a history lesson. The religious leaders would have loved this part. For fifty verses Stephen recounted all of the glories of their history. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; the twelve tribes; Moses and the Law, David and Solomon, the builder of their great temple. As he talked the religious leaders must have begun to think, "Maybe this guy isn't so bad after all." At least until he got to verse 51.

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you...who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."  
(Acts 7:51,53)

They received the Law but did not keep it. They learned but did not practice. They heard the word but did not do it. They became dull of hearing. This is an extremely dangerous place to be. You may have seen the news that Josh Harris divorced his wife of more than twenty years and a few days later made this announcement. "By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian." How do you go from best selling author and megachurch pastor to a divorced atheist? He used Hebrews 6 language saying he had "fallen away." Next week I will talk about that story and its relation to Hebrews 6. But for now...

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