

Spiritual Maturity

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When I was still in college, it was pretty well recognized among my family and friends that I was an immature kind of guy. I talked far, far too much, I liked to play the class clown and otherwise make jokes that were often inappropriate, I was frequently rude to others and inconsiderate of their feelings, I never knew when to let an argument drop, and to top it off, I was toweringly insecure. Now, it may well be that a lot of you are thinking, "So what's changed?", but believe me, as bad as I am, I'm much better than I was. After several disasters, I recognized that many of the things I was doing were counterproductive, and I did my best to work on changing them.

Most of us, if we're honest, will have similar stories to tell about the way we were in our teens and early 20s. Young adults start off with a lot of rough edges, and time and experience have a way of smoothing those down. We understand that this is a normal process, and we make allowances for it. When we're talking with a 19-year-old, and he or she blurts out something ill-considered, rather than slapping the speaker down, we take a breath, remind ourselves that we used to be 19 too, and we address the situation in a gentle, patient fashion. However, when we're talking to someone who's 39, and he's still acting like a teenager, we don't make the same allowances for someone who should know better.

The same principle holds true in the spiritual realm. No wise Christian is going to expect the same level of behavior and spiritual accomplishment out of every brother or sister in the congregation. Just like teenagers, and often as teenagers, Christians begin as spiritually immature people. God expects them to be there, but He doesn't expect them to stay there. We need to grow out of those early problems. Let's look, then, at pressing on to spiritual maturity.

Signs of Spiritual Maturity

In our lives, there are spiritual mileposts that we need to be looking for, things that are signs of spiritual maturity. The first of these is **GROWTH**. Look with me at Ephesians 4:14-15. I don't know whether it's true or not, but the urban legend is that crocodiles never stop growing. The older they get, the bigger they get. Christians need to be the same way, not in a waistline sense, but in a spiritual sense. Day by day, year by year, decade by decade, we need to be putting more and more of the Bible into practice in our lives. This isn't something that happens by accident. Instead, it requires an awareness of where we are and a determination to become better. If we can't point to evidence of growth in our lives, it is quite likely that we have never grown, that we've remained at the same stunted level of spirituality we had when we first obeyed the gospel. Brethren, we need to move past that point. After we've been a Christian for five or 10 years, we shouldn't still be struggling with making it to services three times a week. We shouldn't be associating with the same immoral people who were our friends when we were in the world. We shouldn't be a useless bump on a pew when it comes to participating in the Lord's work. That's not acceptable. It's a tragic waste of the life God has given us.

Instead, if we are maturing spiritually, our lives will reflect our **LIKENESS TO CHRIST**. Jesus Himself points to this in Matthew 10:24-25. Jesus is the model for what we should be when we grow up, so we can measure our level of maturity by comparing ourselves to Him. This is not a comparison that is going to be good for the ego. Every single one of us is far from being the titanic servant of God that Jesus was, and if we don't see how far away we are, that itself points to a lack of maturity. When I think about the way that Jesus lived and compare it to the way I live, the difference intimidates me, and it should intimidate all of us. For one thing, Jesus was perfectly righteous. He never sinned in anything He did, anything He said, or even anything He thought. He never lied, He never gossiped, and He never allowed Himself to become unjustly angry. He controlled every aspect of His life with perfect self-discipline. Similarly, Jesus was perfectly devoted to God. He handed His life to His Father and said, "Here. Do what You want with it." He didn't claim any corner of it for Himself. It was all about God. The more we mature, the more we will become like that.

Most of all, though, Jesus' spiritual maturity showed itself in His **LOVE** for others, and our spiritual maturity will display itself in the same way. In fact, Jesus commands this in John 13:34-35. The central fact of His life was that everything He did either showed love for God, love for His neighbor, or both. Jesus commands us to show this same overwhelming, life-consuming love for one another. This isn't something we can do and cross off. It's not like "Thou shalt not steal" or "Thou shalt not commit adultery." We never completely fulfill our responsibility to love one another. Instead, this is a commandment that calls us on to greater and greater levels of love. As we strive to make the love of Christ evident in our lives toward our brethren, it's constantly going to have us doing things we didn't do before. Maybe we wouldn't have gone to visit a shut-in two years ago, but now we do. Maybe we wouldn't have noticed that a sister has been absent from services for a while, but now we do. Sadly, large numbers of Christians, both in this congregation and across the country, do none of these things, nor any things like them. Their contact with their brethren is limited to five minutes of conversation after services. So-called "Christianity" like that is nothing less than a rejection of everything that Christ stood for. If that's where we are, it shows our lack of maturity and our desperate need to grow.

Finally, spiritual maturity displays itself in **TEACHING** others, both Christians and non-Christians. The Hebrews writer makes this precise point in Hebrews 5:12. One of the primary ways that the love of Christ manifested itself was in His desire to teach others what they most needed to hear. None of us will ever teach with the masterful skill that Jesus showed, but every one of us should have the same motivation that He did. The more we teach others about Him, the more we express His love. Tragically, many disciples of Jesus have a pattern of teaching that is more an expression of fear than an expression of love. They're afraid to volunteer to teach a Bible class because they worry that they'll mess up and not do a good job, or that they won't enjoy it. They're afraid to tell outsiders about their faith because they worry that they'll be rejected. They keep the gospel to themselves with a level of secrecy that would do the CIA proud. John's comment on people like this in 1 John 4 is very telling. He notes that the one who fears has not been perfected in love. Christians don't have a fear problem. They have a love problem. The more we mature, the less we fear, the more we love, and the more we teach. That's the pattern of growth that God expects to see from us.

How to Mature.

If maturity is this spiritually critical, then clearly, we need to learn how to mature. Once again, the Scripture provides us with the answers we need. First of all, every spiritually mature follower of God got that way because of his **DETERMINATION** to mature. We see an example of this in Ezra 7:10. Ezra was one of the great Old-Testament leaders of God's people, and one of the things that made him great was his resolution to grow. As the Scripture tells us, he set his heart both to learn God's will and to obey it. If we want to grow, we are going to have to share that same resolve. Ezra may have made his decision at a young age, but if we haven't been growing like we should, it's never too late for us to determine to change our ways. I can think of no better example of this than our brother O.J. Many of you aren't familiar with O.J.'s backstory, but I can tell you that even though he obeyed the gospel in his teens, he spent most of his adult years living a life that was quite frankly wicked. Thankfully, just a few short years ago, he determined that he was going to change all that, and because of that determination, he grew more in just a short period of time than I've ever seen from any other Christian. It's never too late for any of us to grow. Let's resolve to grow today.

Second, if we want to mature spiritually, it must involve **LISTENING**. Paul explains the Scriptural pattern of teaching in Ephesians 4:11-13. Obviously, we don't have apostles and prophets today, but God still gives us men who are evangelists and men who are pastors and teachers. In this congregation, I'm an evangelist, and Joe and John are pastors and teachers. However, according to this text, our role is not to go out and do the work of the congregation. Our role is to equip the saints so that they can do the work. No matter how dedicated we are, we can't do this by ourselves. Not even Jesus could use the word to equip someone who wasn't there to be equipped. In order for any of us to be equipped and built up as much as possible, we must be here every time the doors are open. This is one of the easiest possible ways for Christians to grow. I spend hours every week working on figuring out what God's word says and explaining it in the most clear and applicable fashion I can. Independent study is like butchering your own cow; listening to a sermon is like having the waiter bring the steak to your table. It's so much easier! And yet, there are dozens of brethren in this congregation who neglect these opportunities for easy growth on a regular basis every week. Christians who make that choice are practically guaranteeing that they will remain spiritually immature. Let's make the choice for growth instead.

Third, if we want to grow beyond that, we must **STUDY** on our own. The Psalmist describes the usefulness of study in Psalm 119:30. I love the language here. 3000 years ago, of course, God's people didn't have Bibles in book form like we do. Instead, God's word was contained in scrolls, and the Psalmist says that as he unfolded those scrolls, he was enlightened. It's all well and good to show up for services and be spoon-fed, but if we want to really mature, we've got to do some unfolding on our own. Recently, I've been having a conversation with Jake Scroggins on Facebook about preaching. His goal is to write a sermon on his own and preach it to the congregation. Let me tell you, friends, I'm proud of Jake. He was only restored just this year, and yet his desire to be more like Christ is already evident. However, Jake's example makes me wonder why more men here aren't approaching me about preaching. Where is their desire to spend hours in private with the word of God so that they can build up the congregation? I guarantee that whatever Jake has to say to us, he is going to learn the most. Each one of us can learn in the same way, but only if we study.

Finally, we mature by doing **WORK**. The Scripture commands us all to work, as is clear from 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Every Christian needs to be in the trenches, encouraging his brethren and building them up. Along these lines, there's one thing in particular that I want to mention. A couple weeks ago, I was going through the church directory in my office, putting in Jeff and Paula's most recent update, and it got me to thinking about the congregation. I went through, looked at the different groups we have here, and then looked at who was doing well and who wasn't. I was astonished to learn that the group in this church that is struggling spiritually the most is single women, especially young single women. A lot of our young sisters are in terrible danger right now, and what they most need is help from the other women of the congregation. I and the other men don't dare form close relationships with those sisters who need help, but women, especially older women, can and should. Rise to the challenge, ladies. See what you can do to do good.