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Spiritual Maturity

Let us . . . continue
progressing toward maturity.

HEBREWS 6:1 WILLIAMS N.T.

God has a clearly defined objective for each of His children—that they might be “conformed to the image of his Son.” He exhorts us to “go on to perfection,” or that spiritual maturity of which Jesus was the perfect example.

What is the goal of the Christian life? Paul left the Colossian Christians in no doubt as to his view of the subject: “We are proclaiming Him . . . in order *to present to God everyone mature through union with Christ*” (Col. 1:28 WILLIAMS N.T.). He set the goal clearly before the Ephesians: “Until we all attain . . . *to a mature manhood* and to a perfect measure of Christ’s moral stature” (Eph. 4:13 WILLIAMS N.T.).

So then the goal of the Christian life is to attain in

ever-increasing degree the standard of spiritual maturity which was seen in perfection in Christ. John said with keen anticipation: "When we see him, we shall be like him." Could there be any higher glory? In a word, spiritual maturity is Christlikeness. In every life situation our Lord reacted in a mature way. Coleridge was right when he claimed that "beyond that which is found in Jesus Christ, the human race has not and never will progress."

Christ set the standard in everything. He was never petulant, always calm; never rebellious, always obedient; never fearful, always courageous; never vacillating, always resolute; never pessimistic, always cheerful; never subtle, always sincere; never grasping, always generous; never acting from expediency, always from principle. He is the pattern of spiritual maturity.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL MATURITY?

It is not an automatic process which takes place by mere passage of time. We have to press on to it. Moral earnestness and endeavor are involved if the goal is to be attained.

It is not merely a mental apprehension of spiritual things or the ability to do spiritual work. It is primarily concerned with our attitudes to God and our fellow men. It is the ability to meet the demands and emergencies of everyday life in a mature and not in a childish way. Our Lord commended the childlike spirit but nowhere encouraged a childish attitude in life situations. The spiritually mature Christian is one who is able to function happily in any circumstance. Perhaps a consideration of the marks of *spiritual immaturity*

will highlight its opposite. The spiritually immature person meets adult situations and tests with childish and immature reactions. This always produces tension and strain with all the attendant problems. When sorrow strikes, he is inclined to indulge in an orgy of self-centered emotion. If financial reverses occur, he is at a loss to know why this should come to him, and he blames God. When hopes are dashed, he loses heart and drops his bundle. When adversity overtakes him, he is swallowed up in self-pity. In domestic difficulties he indulges in tantrums or sulks and creates an atmosphere that mars home unity. When placed with other difficult people, he falls prey to censorious criticism and “gives as good as he gets.” When his will is thwarted by God or man, he becomes rebellious and bitter.

So then our spiritual maturity or immaturity is seen in the manner in which we react to the changing circumstances of life. It should be noted, however, that spiritual maturity does not come to anyone naturally. It has to be learned. Is it not striking that it is recorded of Christ that “though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:8–9)? He alone was fully mature. The rest of us are “going on to maturity.” In all of us there are some expressions of our personality in which we react immaturely instead of as mature men of God.

MARKS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Dr. A. W. Tozer has enumerated some of these marks, and we can classify ourselves by bringing our lives alongside

this measuring tape. The spiritually mature Christian is characterized by:

A desire to be holy rather than happy. Holiness is attractive only to the mature. A child is far more interested in being happy than in being good. The child has to learn by painful experience that true happiness comes only by way of goodness. Christ was happier than any of His contemporaries because He “loved righteousness, and hated iniquity” (Heb. 1:9).

An attitude of giving rather than receiving. A child prefers receiving to giving. He has to be taught the joy of giving, that sharing is a much happier thing than mere selfish enjoyment. The only authentic saying of our Lord outside those recorded in the Gospels is this: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b). He knew this because His was a life of self-giving.

A preference for serving rather than being served. A child enjoys having everyone shower attention on him. Rarely does he think of serving someone else unless he is prompted. Our Lord said: “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister” (Mark 10:45).

A joyous personality. The morose and lugubrious person indicates that he is spiritually immature. His very gloom is an evidence of inner conflicts. Christ was so joyous that He was able to bequeath His joy to His disciples.

A fruitful life as opposed to a barren life. The mark of a mature tree is that it reproduces itself. Fruit is the evidence of maturity. Jesus said: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24). Only the mature Christian

is willing to fall into the ground and die, and only he is spiritually fruitful.

Acceptance rather than evasion of discipline. It is a childish reaction to shun the disciplines of God. While not necessarily enjoying it, the mature Christian does not run away from God's chastening but adapts himself to it. Paul said: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Phil. 4:11). He disciplined himself to accept divinely permitted chastening.

A life of love. The highest manifestation of spiritual maturity is love. We are only as mature as we are mature in love. John says that a person who is fear-ridden is immature in love. "There is no fear in love . . . but full-grown (complete, perfect) love turns fear out of doors and expels every trace of terror! . . . he who is afraid has not yet reached the full maturity of love [is not yet grown into love's complete perfection]" (1 John 4:18 AMPC). Christ's perfection was manifested in the fullness of His love.

How do we fare when we bring our lives alongside these tests? Are we making satisfactory progress toward spiritual maturity?

There is another possibility in the Christian life. Spiritual maturity is not maintained automatically. Strange though it may seem, it is possible to degenerate into immaturity again. There is such a thing spiritually as second childhood.

MARKS OF SPIRITUAL DEGENERATION

There is a spiritual equivalent to physical dotage and senility which is not a matter of mere age. It is a solemnizing fact

that we can “unknow” truth which we have once apprehended, and which once gripped and enthralled us. Any Christian who has seriously backslidden is very conscious of this.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes this possibility. “*Ye are become* dull of hearing. When for the time ye ought to be teachers, *ye are become* such as need someone to teach you” (Heb. 5:11–12, lit. trans.). They were not always dull of hearing, the correct tense of the verb suggests. Once they were responsive to the truth, but now they have degenerated into spiritual senility.

The divine diagnosis of those who have thus degenerated indicates three realms in which this is evidenced.

Dullness and sluggishness in hearing the Word of God. They are sluggish in achieving spiritual insight. They have become lazy and unwilling for the discipline necessary if the deeper things of God are to be understood and mastered. The writer to the Hebrews was bursting to share glorious and deep spiritual truths with them, but they were preoccupied with elementary truth. “I have much to say to you about Him, but it is difficult to make it clear to you, since you have become so dull in your spiritual senses” (Heb. 5:11 WILLIAMS N.T.).

It is a grand thing to love “the simple gospel,” but this can be a mark either of spiritual immaturity or of degeneracy. God forbid that we should ever cease to love *the gospel in its simplicity*, but we must not be content to stay there. We must go on to appreciate increasingly *the gospel in its profundity*. We will rejoice in the truth of the cross as substitution, but we must go on to appreciate our identification

with Christ on the cross. "So then let us once for all quit the elementary teaching about Christ and continue progressing toward maturity" (Heb. 6:1 WILLIAMS N.T.).

Inability to teach others. The mature Christian is always seizing opportunities of taking in and imparting truth. He is always on the lookout for occasions to teach others and share his own discoveries in the Word, whether he does it formally or informally. These Hebrew Christians had lost that zest to teach and were content to receive all they could for their sluggish, overfed souls. They had become spiritually self-absorbed. Teaching others what we have learned is one of the best ways of stimulating our own appetite for the truth of God.

Reversion to infancy. "You actually need someone to teach you over and over again the very elements of the truths that God has given us, and you have gotten into such a state that you are in constant need of milk instead of solid food" (Heb. 5:12 WILLIAMS). The new convert must of course be indoctrinated with the ABC of the gospel. The milk of the Word is the only food appropriate for him. But when a Christian of some years' standing who has known and experienced some of the more advanced teachings of Scripture loses taste for meat and reverts to milk, it is a sign of spiritual degeneracy.

The writer to the Hebrews insists on the necessity of constant progress in the Christian life. There is no such thing as static Christianity. We will not give up any of the elementary teaching about Christ, but we must move on to the next class. "And let us be borne onwards to full

maturity; for we cannot be laying the foundations all the time.”¹

The divine prescription is that instead of slipping back, we go on to perfection or full maturity, and this demands deliberate and decisive action. Maturity requires full obedience to the conditions of discipleship laid down by our Master. The terms may seem hard, but they are no harder than He fulfilled Himself. We can count on God doing His part in giving the help of the Holy Spirit, but there is a part for us to do as well. There are four elements in the divine prescription for spiritual maturity.

Get to know Christ as High Priest. This is the whole thrust of chapters four to six of the Hebrews letter. Get to know Him as the One who is able to succor (Heb. 2:17–18), to sympathize (Heb. 4:15), and to save (Heb. 7:25). We know Him as our Savior who brings pardon and peace. That is the ABC of the gospel. We must go on to know Him as our High Priest who secures access for us into the very presence of God, who maintains us in constant fellowship with God, who presents our prayers by virtue of His own merits, and ever lives to make intercession for us.

Engage in teaching the truth you know to others (Heb. 5:12). Unused powers tend to atrophy. When Charles Darwin was a young man, he was passionately fond of poetry and music. But he became so fascinated with his scientific studies and research that for many years he had

1. Hebrews 6:1, William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: The St. Andrew Press, 1955), 50.

no time for his former pursuits. When he retired and once again took up poetry and music, he discovered, to his dismay, that he had lost the taste for them. His powers of appreciation of music and literature had atrophied.

If we pass on what we know by letter or conversation as well as in formal Bible teaching, this will develop both capacity and desire. “To him that hath shall be given” is a spiritual principle of perpetual relevance. The more we teach, the more we will understand.

Exercise your spiritual faculties. “Solid food belongs to full-grown men who on account of constant use have their faculties trained to distinguish good and evil” (Heb. 5:14 WILLIAMS N.T.). We are to engage in spiritual gymnastics if we would reach the goal of spiritual maturity. Prayer, meditation, communion, witness, and study of the Scriptures all develop our spiritual faculties. This is our responsibility.

Count on the enabling of the Holy Spirit. “Let us be borne along to maturity,” is the injunction. And who will carry us along? Paul gives the answer: “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image [of spiritual maturity] from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).