

16 – GROWING INTO MATURITY

When a baby is born, parents are excited. They are also anxious to know if the baby is healthy, with ten fingers and toes, two arms and legs, and all the other vital parts in place. Over time, parents look for their children to crawl and sometimes fall, to walk and talk, to run and have fun, to pray and obey, and to love and receive love.

They long for their children to grow up into healthy and mature adults, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. However, many things can slow down or even stop that growth:

- Some children are born physically or mentally handicapped.
- Accidents or diseases can disable or even paralyze people.
- Unhealthy lifestyles can promote disease, damage the mind, and stifle emotional and spiritual growth.
- Abuse can hinder healthy emotional and spiritual development.
- Clinging onto pride, rebellion, bitterness, immorality, or selfishness will also prevent emotional and spiritual growth.

Everyone recognizes the importance of babies wearing diapers. However, if a teenager is still wearing diapers, we know that something has gone wrong physically. Toddlers may throw temper tantrums during the “terrible two’s.” However, if a teenager or adult is still out of control, we know something is wrong emotionally and spiritually.

Jesus is not only interested in forgiving our sins and qualifying us for heaven, He wants us to experience spiritual, emotional, mental and physical healing (1Thessalonians 5:23,24; John 10:10).

WHAT DOES A SPIRITUAL INFANT LOOK LIKE?

1. How did Paul describe Christians in Corinth? 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

It seems contradictory for Paul to describe them as carnal and as babes in Christ at the same time. He acknowledges that they had accepted Jesus as their Savior when he refers to them as “babes in Christ.” However, they were allowing their selfish nature to be in control.

2. How does Paul describe them in 1 Corinthians 1:2?

Because of what Jesus has done for the whole human race, Paul was able to describe them as “sanctified in Christ Jesus.” (Compare with Hebrews 10:10.)

In the phrase, “called *to be* saints,” the words, “*to be*” are in italics in the New King James Version. That means they were added by the translators. Paul actually wrote, “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints.” He was able to refer to them as “saints” because of Jesus’ perfect life and death, not because they had grown into maturity.

3. What convinced Paul that the believers in Corinth were spiritual infants? 1 Corinthians 3:3

Jesus said, “By their fruits you will know them” Matthew 7:20. They were manifesting the fruit of the flesh, rather than the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-23).

Evaluating fruit is different than judging. In Matthew 7:1, Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” He used the Greek word, *krino*, which also means to condemn. To condemn someone is to think of them as lost, without hope of salvation. We don’t have the right to make that kind of judgment, for we don’t have all the facts.

We can, however, evaluate the fruit of a person’s life so we may better understand what a person needs and learn how to love them in ways that bring healing and hope.

Evaluating fruit can also help us understand how much we should trust a person, for trust is something that is earned. Jesus did not trust everyone. He knew many would turn away from Him when they didn't get what they wanted (John 2:23-25; 6:66).

THE REWARD FOR GROWING INTO MATURITY

4. How did Paul try to correct the divisions in Corinth? 1 Cor. 3:4-9

The Christians in Corinth were dividing into two camps. Some followed Paul; others followed Apollos. Paul reminds them that they were on the same team, not working against each other. While God had a different assignment for each of them, they were working for the same goal.

5. Paul changes the illustration from farming to building. What is the foundation we are to build our lives on? 1 Corinthians 3:9-11

When we build our lives on Jesus, our "houses" will not collapse when the storms of life beat against us (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus came that there might be good news to share. Paul was handpicked by God to explain the good news to the world (Acts 9:15; 26:14-18). Through the inspiration of God, he wrote over half of the New Testament.

6. Read 1 Corinthians 3:12,13

A. What building materials are referred to in this illustration?

B. What will test the work of each person?

Fire will destroy wood, hay and straw, but not the gold, silver, and precious stones. (Fire is used to purify gold and silver.) When we are building our lives on Jesus, we want something that will last for eternity.

7. Read 1 Corinthians 3:14,15

A. What happens to the one whose work endures? 14b

B. What happens to the one whose work is burned up? 15a

C. What can still be experienced by the one whose work is burned? 15b

D. Thought question - What is the reward the first one receives?

Notice that people may still be saved even if their work is burned up. They will suffer great loss. They would miss out on the blessings Jesus wanted to give them on earth. But if in the end they choose to trust in Jesus and remain on the gospel foundation, they will experience eternal life. The thief on the cross is an example of this (Luke 23:40-43). This means the reward for the first person must be different than eternal life.

Paul is writing to spiritual infants. A Christian who remains an infant can have a negative influence on others, even leading some to turn away from Jesus. While the Christian would rejoice in being able to live with God and others throughout eternity, the loss of others would be felt.

When Christians grow into maturity, their loving influence will lead people to Jesus. Sharing eternity with people we have had a positive influence on will be a wonderful reward.

Experiencing a living relationship with God on this earth is also a great reward. God told Abraham, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" Genesis 15:1. May we all grow up into maturity that when people see us, they may be drawn to Jesus and desire to receive Him as their personal Savior.

8. What will happen if we refuse to grow into maturity and choose instead to defile the temple of God? 1 Cor. 3:16,17; 2 Peter 2:1

Those who persistently and continually resist the Holy Spirit are saying they do not want Him in their lives. They defile the temple of God when they resist the Holy Spirit. They will try to satisfy their selfish desires in unhealthy ways (1 Peter 2:1; Galatians 5:13-21) and begin to:

- “Call evil good, and good evil”
- “Put darkness for light, and light for darkness;”
- “Put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” Isaiah 5:20.

When they attribute the convictions and work of the Holy Spirit to the enemy, there is nothing more that God can do for them. Jesus referred to this as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22-32).

When they defile the temple of God in this way, they bring destruction upon themselves (2 Peter 2:1). They would not be happy living with God and would rather die than come face to face with Him. So God will honor their choice and they will perish (Revelation 6:14-16; John 3:19).

9. What can lead us to turn away from Jesus? Matthew 13:18-23

A. (v. 21)

B. (v. 21)

C. (v. 22)

D. (v. 22)

The immature person will find it easy to be distracted from Jesus and focus on the pleasures of the world, the problems of life, the faults of others or their own faults and weaknesses. Instead of trusting Jesus during difficulties, they may seek quick fixes that promise immediate relief, even though it includes disobeying God. If they persist in that pathway, instead of repenting, they will eventually turn from Jesus.

FEEDING ON POISON, MILK, OR SOLID FOOD

10. What kind of food did Paul say he fed them? 1 Corinthians 3:2

The best food for babies is mother's milk. As children are able, it is healthy for them to eat solid food in order to grow into maturity. The believers in Corinth were remaining spiritual infants, unable to eat solid food. Some people remain spiritually immature for a long time, even though they have been Christians for many years.

11. Read 1 Peter 2:1-3

A. What "poison" did Peter encourage Christians to lay aside? (1)

B. What does he want them to feed upon instead? (2)

Peter said we should long for the pure milk that we may grow. If babies don't drink milk, they will never be able to eat solid food. Instead of drinking "the pure milk of the word," some baby Christians get sidetracked and feed on "deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking."

Deceit and hypocrisy refer to people pretending to be something they are not. Instead of growing into maturity, some try to rush the process and focus on outward performance instead. They will eventually become frustrated and begin to envy the genuine experience that others have. This emptiness and envy often leads people to criticize others in order to make themselves feel they are just as good as everyone else.

12. Read Matthew 23:23-28

A. What were the scribes and Pharisees neglecting? (23)

B. How does Jesus describe what they were really like? (24,25)

Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites because they looked righteous on the outside, but they were full of selfishness.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “You may fool all the people some of the time, you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time.”

We could add, you can fool God none of the time, you can fool yourself much of the time, and rationalization is the art of fooling yourself.

Fooling ourselves is much easier than we think, for “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” Jeremiah 17:9. Maybe that is why we think we can get away with fooling God or others.

When we stop feeding upon “deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking” and choose to feed upon the gospel, “the pure milk of the word,” we will begin to grow. For it will provide the emotional and spiritual security we need in order to grow into maturity.

13. Read Hebrews 5:12-14

A. What are babies unskilled in? (13)

B. What are the mature able to discern? (14)

Babies are “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” Before a person understands the gospel, the focus is often on what is the least I can do in order to be accepted by God. After a person experiences the grace of God, the focus is on what is the most I can do to serve and honor God.

Building on the solid foundation of the gospel, growing Christians will study the Bible to seek a fuller knowledge of truth. The “solid food” will enable them to understand God’s will for their lives (Romans 12:2) and help them to discern the difference between good and evil.

14. What does the grace of God teach us? Titus 2:11-14

The grace of God has appeared to all. Jesus took the initiative to save the world from the wages of sin and redeem everyone from the curse of the law. His unconditional love draws us to Himself and teaches us to deny ourselves and serve others for the glory of God. Our love for Jesus will lead us to avoid anything that would draw us away from Him. Having the assurance of salvation, we will look forward to Jesus' return.

RUNNING THE RACE WITH JESUS

15. Hebrews 12:1,2 compares the Christian life to running a race.

A. What are we encouraged to lay aside as we run the race? (1)

B. How are we encouraged to run the race? (1)

C. What is the secret to running the race? (2)

D. What enabled Jesus to endure the cross? (2)

We are encouraged to lay aside anything that might hinder us from keeping our eyes on Jesus and following His will. Even good things can weigh us down and hold us back from doing His will. We are to forsake any known sin and remove anything that easily tempts us into sin.

We are called to run with endurance. The Greek word is *hupomone*, which means to abide under. In John 16:33, Jesus told His disciples, "In Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." In the midst of tribulation, it would be easy for people to give up or cave into the pressure.

Our focus instead is to be on Jesus. As we behold His sacrificial love for the human race, we are reminded that He alone is the One worth living for and even dying for. Our confidence in Jesus will grow as we learn He is faithful and trustworthy in all He says and does. He will lead us to be so settled into the truth of His love and plan of salvation that nothing will be able to turn us away from Him (Revelation 12:11).

It is easy to compare the Christian life to running a marathon. Finishing a 26.2 mile race takes focus, preparation, training, and discipline. If a person chooses to run a marathon, they will need to:

- A. Spend many hours jogging to get their body in shape, laying aside many other activities, even good ones, in order to have the time.
- B. Lay aside food that is high in fat and sugar and low in fiber.
- C. Eat more fruit, vegetables, legumes and whole grains. These provide the best nutrition for strength and endurance.
- D. Drink plenty of water.

The person who has chosen to run a marathon will be willing to make these lifestyle changes in order to accomplish the goal. In the same way, Christians are called to lay aside anything that would distract them from Jesus and keep them from fulfilling the mission He has given them.

When running a marathon, the goal is clearly defined: 26.2 miles. In the race of life, the goal is Jesus! “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. . .” The Christian race is not about trying to get to heaven, but about knowing God and experiencing a living relationship with Him. Jesus prayed, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” John 17:3. In other words, those who are abiding with Jesus and letting Him abide in them are experiencing a taste of eternal life with God (John 15:4,5; 5:24).

Paul prayed that we might be “rooted and grounded in love;” that we might “know the love of Christ which passes knowledge” so that we will want to be “filled with all the fullness of God” Ephesians 3:17-19. Learning to trust Jesus in every situation is the most important lesson we can learn in life. The song, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” says it well:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

16. Read Matthew 11:28-30

A. In this passage, who does Jesus invite to come to Him? (28)

B. What will we experience when we come to Jesus? (28b,29b)

C. What two things does He invite us to do? (29)

a. _____ b. _____

D. How does Jesus describe Himself? (29)

E. How does He describe the yoke and burden He gives us? (30)

Jesus invites everyone to come just as we are, with all the heavy burdens that we carry. Sin is the heaviest burden that we bear. It comes with guilt, shame, and many painful consequences, like broken relationships, insecurity, emptiness, and hopelessness.

Since Jesus has already carried our iniquities to the cross (Isaiah 53:6), He invites us to give our sin and other burdens to Him. He will take the heavy load from our shoulders and give us rest and peace. He promises “rest for our souls,” rather than a life of ease.

Jesus invites us to take His yoke upon us. The yoke He refers to is a wooden bar or frame that joined two animals so they could work together in pulling a wagon or plow. When we take His yoke, we are working with Jesus. He is providing the love, wisdom, and strength we need to carry out the mission He has for us.

Jesus also invites us to learn of Him and from Him. (The Greek can be translated both ways.) The more we get to know Him, the more we love Him and enjoy working with Him. He even describes His yoke as easy and light when we work together with Him.

A PARABLE - THE HARD WORKING FARMER

Early one morning a farmer got up to work. He had a load of hay on a trailer that he wanted to put into the barn. Knowing he would need lots of energy, he had a good breakfast. Saying good-bye to his wife, he went out to begin his work.

Putting his hands on the back of the trailer, he began to push with all of his might. He strained and grunted. Pretty soon sweat began pouring down his face. This was indeed hard work. After awhile he looked to see if he had made any progress. The wheels hadn't moved an inch. This was going to be harder than he thought.

Again he began to push as hard as he could. After several hours, his energy was almost spent. While he hadn't gotten anywhere, he had certainly worked hard. Needing more energy, he went back into the house for lunch. The rest was also helpful.

In the afternoon he again tried to move the heavy load. After awhile, the neighbor saw his hopeless struggle and decided to offer some help.

“Would you like to hook your trailer up to my tractor?”

“That would be wonderful!” the struggling farmer replied. When the trailer was connected, the struggling farmer put the tractor in gear, increased the throttle and the trailer moved forward effortlessly.

FINDING JOY IN SERVING OTHERS

Life with Jesus is like trying to move a full trailer with a tractor. God provides the power, we make the choice. He invites us to partner with Him in ministry (Isaiah 40:28-31; Matthew 11:28-30).

We will find meaning and fulfillment in life when we:

- Rest in Jesus' love and salvation.
- Serve others out of love and not think we have to change them.

- Learn to wait upon God, trusting in His promises and providence.
- Serve in an area that God has given us a passion for.
- Serve in an area that is consistent with our personality & maturity.
- Maintain a spirit of cooperation with others in the body of Christ.
- Maintain balance in life in our health and relationships.

We will experience true joy as God uses us to be a blessing to others. His yoke will be easy and light when we are connected with Him and know that our service is making a difference for eternity.

A THOUSAND WAYS TO PROVIDE

“Love for God, zeal for His glory, and love for fallen humanity, brought Jesus to earth to suffer and to die. This was the controlling power of His life. This principle He bids us adopt.”

“There are many whose hearts are aching under a load of care because they seek to reach the world's standard. They have chosen its service, accepted its perplexities, adopted its customs. Thus their character is marred, and their life made a weariness. In order to gratify ambition and worldly desires, they wound the conscience, and bring upon themselves an additional burden of remorse.”

“The continual worry is wearing out the life forces. Our Lord desires them to lay aside this yoke of bondage. He invites them to accept His yoke; He says, 'My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.' He bids them seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and His promise is that all things needful to them for this life shall be added.”

“Worry is blind, and cannot discern the future; but Jesus sees the end from the beginning. In every difficulty He has His way prepared to bring relief. Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us, of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service and honor of God supreme will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before their feet.”

“Learn of Me,’ says Jesus; ‘for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest.’ We are to enter the school of Christ, to learn from Him meekness and lowliness. Redemption is that process by which the soul is trained for heaven. This training means a knowledge of Christ. It means emancipation from ideas, habits, and practices that have been gained in the school of the prince of darkness. The soul must be delivered from all that is opposed to loyalty to God. . . .”

“It is the love of self that brings unrest. When we are born from above, the same mind will be in us that was in Jesus, the mind that led Him to humble Himself that we might be saved. Then we shall not be seeking the highest place. We shall desire to sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn of Him. We shall understand that the value of our work does not consist in making a show and noise in the world, and in being active and zealous in our own strength”

“The yoke is placed upon the oxen to aid them in drawing the load, to lighten the burden. So with the yoke of Christ. When our will is swallowed up in the will of God, and we use His gifts to bless others, we shall find life's burden light.” *The Desire of Ages*, 330, 331.

OBEDIENCE FROM THE HEART

“All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.” *The Desire of Ages*, 667, 668.

THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM TO GROW

BY CLINTON MEHARRY, @ 2004,2015

When Jesus came to live on earth
To show us how to love;
He taught us there's a better way-
To live for God above.

He loves us freely as we are,
But wants us all to know,
There's so much more
 He's planned for us,
There's always room to grow.

Be wise enough to realize
You still have much to learn;
Mature enough to understand,
Respect and trust are earned.

Prayerful enough to follow truth
In a world of sin and fraud;
Humble enough to recognize,
Your constant need for God.

Careful enough to guard the heart
And thoughts that fill the mind,
Keeping what is pure and true,
And also good and kind.

Thoughtful enough to appreciate
All that the Lord has done;
Thankful enough to share His love
With each and everyone.

Caring enough to listen
to understand each other;
Seeing everyone, "in Christ,"
As your sister or your brother.

Treating others in the way
You would want them
 treating you;
Loving one another
Just as Jesus has loved you.

Loving enough to look beyond
Their faults and see their need;
Secure enough to give what's best
And not give in to greed.

Content enough with who you are
And what the Lord can do
To bless the ones around you
With the gifts He's given you.

Joyful enough so others will
Enjoy you being near;
Trusting enough in Jesus,
So His love may cast out fear.

Be patient with your family,
Yourself and others too;
Accept and give forgiveness,
For God has forgiven you.