

Growing in Christ

Part 4: 'Stages of Spiritual Growth'

In our last message we were confronted with two key questions which hit at the heart of our purpose in life. Who am I becoming? and What am I doing? I wonder if you have grappled with those questions at all this past week and whether the Lord has given you some answers. Maybe you have even made some decisions and some different choices as a result. I hope so.

In this sermon I want us to continue our journey together as we look at the process of spiritual growth and the stages through which we are meant to pass as we grow in Christ. Let's look at a couple of Scriptures first.

1 Peter 2:2 *"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation .."*

Ephesians 4:13-15 (Amplified Bible) *".. that we might arrive at really mature manhood and womanhood - the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ's own perfection - the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found in Him. So then, we may no longer be children . .*

Rather, let our lives lovingly express truth in all things - speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly. Enfolded in love, let us grow up in every way and in all things into Him, Who is the Head, even Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one."

THE BABY STAGE

We are born into the Kingdom of God as babes in Christ. Whether we come to know the Lord when we are 8 or 80 - we still enter our spiritual pilgrimage as a baby. It would not be normal for a baby to be born, and the same day begin to walk and talk. Babies must go through many stages of development before they are physically and mentally able to do these things. But a baby is expected to grow and develop. For instance, if a four-year-old child is still not walking, there would be cause for great concern.

As it is with the natural world, so is it with the spiritual world. When we come into the Church of Jesus Christ, we all have much to learn. We are not yet ready for the 'meat' of God's Word. We must stick to our 'milk' for a while. Peter tells us that like *"newborn babies, (we) crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it (we) may grow up in our salvation .."* (1 Peter 2:2). Milk is good – at the beginning.

Hebrews 5:12-14 *"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."*

The Bible sees the 'milk of God's word' as the 'first principles' if you like and then lists them in Hebrews 6:1-2.

First Principles (milk):

1. repentance from dead works
2. faith toward God
3. doctrine of baptisms (water and Spirit)
4. laying on of hands
5. resurrection of the dead
6. eternal judgment

The letter of Hebrews refers to these six principles of the doctrine of Christ as the very foundation of our Christian experience and life. That is what a newborn babe needs - a good, solid foundation upon which he can build his life for Jesus! The newborn babe does not need to understand all the mysteries connected with the books of Daniel and Revelation.

He needs to understand and be persuaded of the truths that brought him into his new relationship with Jesus Christ (faith toward God, repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit). He needs to have an understanding that there is life after death and that some day all men and women will stand before God.

Besides these truths, the new Christian needs to be taught important principles that lead to spiritual growth: prayer and fasting, faithfulness to God and His body, worship, giving ... etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BABIES:

1. Natural: Newborn babies are totally dependent upon our parents for all our needs. We cannot sit, crawl, walk or run. We cannot feed ourselves, or change our nappy. All our needs are met by other people. We often make those needs known by crying, as we have no other way to express them.

2. Spiritual: A new convert must be taught how to study and read the Bible. We do not have the ability to feed ourselves. We must be taught how to communicate with God, just as a natural baby must be taught to communicate with people. We must be taught how to walk with God, the same as a natural baby must learn to sit up, stand and eventually walk and run.

The natural baby will often fall, until its muscles are more fully developed. It is the same with the spiritual. Therefore the saints and leaders must have much patience as the new convert gradually develops their spiritual muscles.

Unfortunately, sometimes we bring people to Church, and after they are converted, we expect the Pastor to do all the 'mothering.' If you bring someone to Jesus, do not forsake them after they are in the body of Christ. They will still look to you for further guidance, help, and understanding. If it was love that compelled you to witness to them, then that same love should still manifest itself toward them after they are in the Church.

THE CHILD STAGE:

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN:

Ephesians 4:14-15 *"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."*

Matthew 18:2-4 *"He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

From those verses of Scripture in Ephesians and Matthew we can see that there are negative and positive things connected with the nature of a child. Jesus points out to us that children as a whole are humble, trusting and obedient. They will normally do anything you ask them to, trusting that whatever you say is correct. They are not too proud to humble themselves before God and men. They have not yet learned (at least in most cases) to be stubborn, wilful, and rebellious. In that way we can learn from children. That is the positive side of their nature.

On the negative side, because they do believe everything they hear and trust everybody without question, they are easily led astray. That is why Paul warns us to *"no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves ... blown here and there by every wind of teaching."*

While children can walk, run, feed and dress themselves and do many things, they still occasionally stumble. They still need others to guide them in many things. They are not aware of many dangers that exist in the world, and must be constantly warned. They have no idea what proper food is, and most of them would be happy with nothing but hamburgers and french fries, or perhaps cake and ice cream, if they always had their way.

So it is with the spiritual children. Guidance is still needed in the spiritual diet, also. Even much religious material that is available in bookstores can be harmful to the Christian who is not fully rooted and grounded in the truth. Some books may look very interesting and yet be filled with false doctrines and slander against the truth! As it has always been, there are many false religions and false prophets who will lead people astray, if they can. Jesus and the apostles warned us concerning this. (See Matthew 24:11; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Just as natural children are full of energy, so is it with spiritual children. The energy must be channelled in the right directions. Zeal without knowledge is like a runaway horse! Knowledge is learned, not just by studying the Word of God, but also by walking with Jesus Christ over a period of time, and learning those things which enhance or hinder His Kingdom growing among us.

It is attained, not only by glorious experiences, but also by hardships, persecutions, temptations and trials. All these help a spiritual child to grow up and become a mature Christian. Also, Christians still in the child stage, tend to rely on the blessing more than the One Who blesses, Jesus Christ!. They have not learned that the greatest joy of being a Spirit-filled Christian is the relationship we have with Jesus Christ.

THE YOUTH STAGE:

1 John 2:14 *"... I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."*

This is the stage in which the Christian starts to become an 'adult' in terms of their spiritual strength and faith in God. This is where we learn how to 'take hold of God' by prayer and fasting. We learn how to assert and use our God-given authority over the enemy of our soul, the devil.

There are, however, some dangers to avoid. Young people tend to believe that they know more than their elders and they crave their independence. It is often difficult for them to be subject to authority. Often they don't appreciate anybody correcting them.

Sometimes there is the same tendency with those in the 'spiritual youth stage.' They pray and fast much. They feel they are spiritually strong, but they may still lack maturity. They may feel that because they hear from God and enjoy God's blessings, they do not need to submit themselves to authority or correction. This can be extremely dangerous, because the Bible admonishes us:

Hebrews 13:17 *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

THE MATURE CHRISTIAN:

Ephesians 4:11-13 (Amplified Bible) *"His gifts were (varied; He Himself appointed and gave men to us,) some to be apostles (special messengers), some evangelists (preachers of the Gospel, travelling missionaries), some pastors (shepherds of His flock) and teachers. His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints (His consecrated people), (that they should do) the work of ministering toward building up Christ's body (the church), (that it might develop) until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the full and accurate knowledge of the Son of God; that (we might arrive) at really mature manhood - the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found in Him."*

As I said in the previous sermon, heaven is not our goal - it is our destiny. Our goal is to grow up and become mature - to become more like Jesus Christ. This was what Paul was referring to in this passage:

Philippians 3:12-14 *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

In all things, Paul seemed to be a mature Christian. He could write *"for me to live is Christ .."* How many of us could make such a statement. Paul also wrote:

1 Corinthians 2:15-16 *"The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ."*

Despite his close walk with God, Paul was not satisfied! Had he lived in our day, he would probably have loved the old hymn:

*To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus, on earth I long, to be like Him,
All through life's journey, from earth to glory, I only ask, to be like Him.*

The sad truth is that some people remain in the 'baby stage' year after year. There is no spiritual growth in their walk with God. They are in a spiritual rut. They are going nowhere. This is not the will of God for any of us. Paul said it beautifully in this verse:

2 Corinthians 3:18 *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*

That is God's will for you my friend. His plan and purpose for you is to grow up into Christ. He wants you to have the dependency and innocence of a baby - but He does not want you to remain a baby. He wants you to have the faith, the humility and trust of a child but He does not want you to stay a child. He wants you to have the enthusiasm and passion of youth and the commitment to life and ministry - but He does not want you remain a youth.

He wants you and I to progress through these stages as we mature in Him and unless we are making deliberate choices to progress through these stages of growth, we will never find spiritual maturity in this life. It is not automatic and it will not be our experience unless we make the right choices. There are spiritual babies in the Church who have been Christians all their lives and have never learned to stand on their own two feet. It is amazing really. We would be beside ourselves with worry in the natural world if our child could not walk and talk and dress themselves after only a few years.

Yet there are thousands of spiritual babies dribbling their way through life in the Church year after year, needing to be spoon fed every week. Even more still have progressed to the child stage and can manage to get around on their own and dress themselves and feed themselves - but they remain addicted to milk and are permanently malnourished, weak and spiritually starved.

It's time to be honest with ourselves and God. If we are not learning more about God every day; if we are not facing new challenges in our spiritual journey every week which force us back onto God to trust Him to get us through another learning experience, then we have stalled in our journey and we are not maturing at all. We are not becoming more like Jesus. We are just living a version of yesterday and not seizing the day and embracing the power and reality of tomorrow.

As parents, if we had a child that stopped developing and growing at an early stage in life then I know we would stop at nothing and take them to any and every specialist to find out what was wrong with them and what could be done to help them grow up as normal people do. And yet we have thousands of spiritual children who are in the same boat in Churches across the nation. Their normal development in the Lord stopped at some point many years ago and they are spiritually retarded and very little is being achieved in that Church because so few people see this truth.

While ever we can find one person who knows less than us or who has experienced less than us - we think we are mature! That would be funny if it was not so serious! Instead of comparing ourselves with other babies, we should look at Jesus as our only valid comparison and role model. We are to become like Him in every way and that is our goal and that should drive us to our knees every day and press us forward in our quest to grow up into Him.