

Growing in Christ

Part 12: 'Marks of Maturity (2)'

Corrie Ten Boom in her book, *The Hiding Place*, relates an incident which taught her a very important principle. She and her sister Betsy had just been transferred to Ravensbruck, the worst German prison camp they had seen. Upon entering the barracks, they found them extremely overcrowded and infested with fleas.

Their Scripture reading that morning had reminded them to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Betsy told Corrie to stop and give thanks to the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters. Corrie at first flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted. She finally succumbed.

During the months spent at that camp, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible studies and prayer meetings without any interference from the guards. It was several months later when they learned that the guards would not enter the barracks because of the fleas.

Do the circumstances you face change your attitude, or does your attitude change the circumstances? The real answer is that neither is true. But your attitude will change how you deal with your circumstances and determine the impact those circumstances might have on you. God will often use those circumstances to do a work in your life. You see, God is not after your comfort - He is after your maturity. Hello? Did you hear that? God is not concerned about your comfort - He is concerned about your maturity.

How would you describe those characteristics of Christian maturity that every Christian should possess? In our last sermon, I outlined five marks of maturity that the Apostle Paul possessed:

A Thankful Attitude, a Servant Heart, a Prayerful Concern, a Submissive Will and a Gracious Spirit.

In this sermon I want to add five more marks of maturity to that list. It should be noted, however, that all of these ten marks of Christian maturity come from a life that has been seasoned and tested through the tough times. Before I share these next five marks of maturity, let me read the next few verses in the passage from Romans we looked at last week:

Romans 1:12-16 " ... that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

We learn the most from the difficulties we face. It is in the fire that we are refined. It is on the wheel of adversity that our character is moulded and shaped. When we can thank God for the fleas, then we have taken a great step in the right direction. Then we begin to really understand what God is looking for in our lives. Then we start to really grow in Christ. Let's look at our next mark of maturity.

6. A Humble Mentality

One of the greatest stumbling blocks in the Christian life is pride. Pride keeps us from admitting that we have a need. Pride also keeps us from being in a position where we can receive from God. Pride keeps us from experiencing what God desires for us in our lives. Paul had learned both the destructive power of pride and the constructive value of humility. As a result, he had adopted a humble mentality.

Paul talks to these inexperienced Roman Christians about being mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Here was the great Apostle, the one who had accomplished many mighty works in the name of Jesus Christ, telling these young Christians that he could receive from them. He not only wanted to give some spiritual gift to them, he declared that he needed to receive from them out of their storehouse of faith. This indicates a genuine humility in Paul.

When we find ourselves in the frame of mind which leads us to believe that no one can teach us anything, we are in a very dangerous place. In fact, we are deluded. We are very much like those Christians Paul described in the Church in Corinth. They had divided into various groups based on the teaching of a particular person. Some were following Paul, others Apollos, still others Cephas (or Peter), and finally, some claimed they followed Christ.

What some fail to understand, however, is that all of those groups were wrong. Not only were those wrong who claimed to follow the human teachers, but so was the group who claimed to follow Christ. You see, they were all claiming that their way was right based on fringe issues. They were all puffed up in the pride of their position. Paul pointed out to them the error of their divisive spirit. Pride has no place in the body of Christ. Christ is not divided. When we are, we are not walking in humility.

We must be open to hear Christ speak to us through whomever He chooses. The youngest believer in Christ can be an instrument through whom Christ speaks. We all can learn from one another. In fact, we must. This is how we grow in our faith and it is through a humility of mind and spirit that we will be always open to receive from one another. This is the kind of attitude Paul maintained. This is the kind of attitude that is a mark of maturity for all believers.

7. A Purposeful Determination

While Paul maintained a humility of mind, he was far from passive. In fact, Paul had many plans which motivated him. He was possessed by a purposeful determination to accomplish the Lord's work. One can see this clearly in verse 13 when he says, *"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."*

Paul understood that God had a plan for the way He was going to seek and save His lost children and so if Paul wanted to be part of that mission, he should make plans in harmony with the plan of God. He told the Roman Christians that he planned many times to come to them. His life had direction. He made plans and so should we.

Like Paul, our plans should not be simply pulled out of the air. We should never just make plans and ask God to bless them. Our plans should always be based upon our understanding of God's ministry in our midst at every point and that understanding is gained through prayer and the Word. Paul prayed and knew that God desired to use him to reap a harvest of people for the Kingdom. He understood clearly what God was doing. Christ was his example here – remember Jesus' own words when he said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* (John 5:19)

Therefore Paul could confidently assure the Christians in Rome that God desired for him to reap a harvest among them, just as he had done among the other Gentiles. Paul had a purpose. That purpose was the purpose of God at any given moment in his life. He was driven by that purpose. That purpose guided what he did and didn't do.

It is a mark of maturity when we have a purposeful determination that guides our life and ministry. Of course there may be many purposes, but all of them need to be birthed in prayer and study of His Word as we seek God's agenda in every area.

8. An Obedient Intent

Not only did Paul have a humble mentality and a purposeful determination, he was guided by an obedient intent. He understood fully just what God had done in his own life. He knew where he had come from and where he was now. He had been delivered by the power of God from a life of religious zeal without spiritual reality. He had possessed something of the knowledge of God but without the power.

Meeting Jesus Christ had changed all of that for Paul. Now he could serve Christ as one who could never repay the debt of love he owed and because of what Christ had done in his life he felt obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and to the foolish. This obligation was to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people. This is exactly what He meant when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:16, *"Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"*

There is a very real sense in which our obedience to Christ is not simply a choice. It most certainly is a choice to be made, but it is more than that. It is the fruit of the life of God within us. Because Jesus Christ has deposited His life in us, we are moved and motivated by that life. We are changed by that life. That life stirs us, challenges us, changes us and compels us. We are talking about more than an intellectual decision here. To encounter Christ - really encounter Him - means that we cannot leave that encounter without being changed. Christ makes all the difference in our lives.

Obedience begins as an attitude of mind reflecting the mind of Christ. As we are being conformed to the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we begin to think like Him and anyone who thinks like Jesus will desire to please God and submit to His will at all times. So our obedience is more than an intellectual choice on our part, it is an unavoidable result of a real relationship with God. It was for Paul. It is for us, as well.

9. An Eager Expectation

The great Apostle continues to reveal his heart by telling these Christians in Rome that he was eager to preach the gospel to them. A characteristic that marked Paul's life was an eager expectation. He made plans. He desired to be obedient to Christ. But he approached his task with an eagerness based on his expectation that God was at work. What an important characteristic to have. What a significant mark of maturity.

Are you eager? All of us are eager about some things. We are eager to go to the beach, or to the mountains, or on holidays. But when we look at our own lives as Christians, how does the term eager describe us? Are we eager to serve? Are we eager to see the Kingdom of God enlarged, when it will cost us our time, energy, money and convenience? Our eagerness is a reflection of what we love. When we are in love with God, we will be eager for God's work to be accomplished and His will to be done. That eagerness will create an expectation that as we step out in faith we will see God at work.

10. A Bold Faith

One final characteristic in our text that marked Paul's life was a bold faith. He says without hesitation that he is not ashamed of the gospel. A mark of maturity in Christ is a boldness and confidence in Christ. It is an important lesson to learn. As Christians, we should never be on the defensive. Rather, we should be on the offensive. The Bible tells us that demons tremble before the power of God. Let the demons tremble – not us. Over and over God said to Joshua, "*Fear not. Be of good courage.*"

The reason why we do not have to fear is the same reason why God could tell Joshua not to fear. It is because God is with us just as He was with Joshua. God's power is just as real today as it was in the days of Joshua, and in the days of Paul.

Let remind you of those ten marks of maturity which should emerge in your life in Christ:

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| > A thankful attitude | > A humble mentality |
| > A servant heart | > A purposeful determination |
| > A prayerful concern | > An obedient intent |
| > A submissive will | > An eager expectation |
| > A gracious spirit | > A bold faith |

Let me close by sharing a declaration made by one mature Christian disciple many years ago. I will pray that you and I can embrace this powerful testimony and make it our own. Maybe you could print it and put it somewhere in your home so you can read it every single morning. I can just imagine what the Spirit of God might do in you and through you if you proclaimed this every day:

I am part of the 'Fellowship of the Unashamed.' I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. The decision has been made. I have stepped over the line. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure.

I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity.

I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on His presence, love with patience, live by prayer and labour with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few, my Guide is reliable, and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, let up or slow up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up and spoken up for the cause of Christ.

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till everyone knows and work till He stops me. Then when Jesus comes for His own, He will have no problem recognizing me. My banner is clear: I am a part of the "Fellowship of the Unashamed."