



“Marks of Maturity”

Kevin Presley

Living things are generally expected to grow, at least to a stage of maturity. If they don't, we assume that something is wrong. We mark the physical and mental milestones of our children by their achievements, such as being able to sit up, roll over, then crawl, and within a year or so, we expect them to have taken their first toddling steps. Before you know it, they walk, then run. You blink your eyes and they're grown. We measure their growth along the way with marks on the wall or doorframe, by the everchanging size of their clothes, and by what the scale tells us about their weight or size.

But if our child isn't reaching those milestones when he/she reasonably should be reaching them, we grow concerned and visit the doctor. Before the doctor enters the examination room, the child will be measured and weighed, and those numbers tell the doctor a great deal from just a quick glance at the chart.

Did you know that God is just as concerned about our spiritual growth? Christianity is not merely about conversion; it is also about growing thereafter. It is not only about entering into Christ through salvation from sin; but over time, conforming to the image of Christ in how we think and live. That's called *spiritual growth*, and it is just as concerning when a child of God fails to grow and reach maturity in the faith as it is to see our own child never physically grow. Can you imagine that you have a child that you assume is healthy, and at five or ten years of age, you're still feeding them from a bottle? Or changing their diaper? It's just as pitiful to see children of God who should be advanced in the Christian faith barely existing on the milk of the word, having to be cared for and tended to the same way as a small child.

The writer of **Hebrews** expressed that very concern. In chapter 5, he introduces the high priestly work of Christ, which was after the order of the Old Testament character, Melchizedek. But the Hebrew writer wasn't able to explain the relationship as he wanted to, because those to whom he was writing were not able to conceive it. Their spiritual growth had been stunted. He writes, speaking of Melchizedek:

Hebrews 5:11-14 “Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

He says they were *dull of hearing*, and the time had long past when they should've not only been able to understand certain things, but even be able to skillfully teach them to others. Unfortunately, many Christians find themselves in the same condition today. Are you a mature Christian? Are you really growing in Christ? How can you tell? We'll look at some marks of maturity in today's study.

Some psychologists and sociologists say that we have a problem in today's society, and that is that young people are refusing to grow up. In a recent article I read from the UK, one author pointed out that our culture is filled with telltale signs that we have a generation that never did grow up. It's seen in the fact that young people are taking longer and longer to move out of their parents' homes compared to yesteryear. That's the same in this country as there. They're taking longer to establish stable careers. It's even seen in the things that younger folks find amusing today, the music they listen to, and even the way young adults dress in public nowadays. The author stated that all these things are signs of an immature culture. Signs that a relatively easy life for people in western Europe, according to the author (although the same could be said of the United States as well over the past several generations) has caused us to lose the ability to mature. We've not faced real hardship compared to generations past. I think there's some truth in that, and I think the same truth applies to why many people don't grow or mature spiritually either.

In another 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, writer Julie Beck says that we are living in an age when the line between childhood and adulthood is blurrier than ever, causing experts to question what really makes people “grown up” anyway. In one survey I saw, some young people said they don't believe they really become adults until as late as forty years old!

I Corinthians 13:11 “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

In other words, we grow up! That's how it's supposed to be.

II Peter 3:18 “but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...”
II Corinthians 3:18 “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

That means that as we look into the mirror of God's word, the glory of the Lord is reflected back upon us, transforming us into His image. It does so from one degree of glory or Christlikeness to the next. So, the Christian life is, therefore, a continual and gradual life of successive growth—more and more like God and more and more like Jesus.

Sometimes it's hard to immediately tell if we're growing; it's often a gradual process. Parents don't see their child grow right before their eyes, but perhaps after a brief separation or looking at an old photograph, they are startled by the growth that has taken place. That's the way it ought to be when we open God's word and look at the span of our own Christian life. We should see marked growth and

development from where we were to where we are and to where we're headed. There are marks, both physically and spiritually, by which we CAN measure our growth.

What are some of the marks we look for in the growth and maturity of our children physically, emotionally and mentally? One thing, of course, is their diet. Very early on, we see them move from milk to meat. We bring them into the world and we feed them on milk, many times from a bottle. What happens? Well, they reach a point where they're able to eat small portions of soft foods from the table, until finally they can eat food just like everybody else. We worry if they don't progress to that point within a reasonable amount of time.

When our children grow, we hopefully see them needing less corrective discipline. We never can do totally without discipline in our lives, but as we grow older and more mature, we don't need our parents to impose punitive measures upon us as they did when we were younger.

A third mark of physical maturity is when children begin to choose their battles. Young children can be very, very petty. They get upset over the smallest things and those things are of great importance in their world. Perhaps it's the end of the world to them. But the older they get, things fall into perspective and they learn to choose their battles and focus on things that are a little more weighty and important in the big scheme of things. Hopefully, as we age and mature, we acquire wisdom and discernment when confronted with difficult choices in life.

Young children also have to be very carefully monitored, guided and assisted in making choices in life because they don't necessarily know what is good for them and what is not. But as we grow older, we apply the training that we've learned and look back on the experience that we've gained, and begin to have some principles that anchor and guide us into applying that wisdom to more successfully make choices in life. That's all a part of maturing.

When a person matures they also take on more and more responsibility. They become more independent, more accountable. They also view time differently. In other words, when we're very young, we're impetuous. *I want what I want NOW. My need has to be met NOW.* If it's not, there is often a temper tantrum or it's the end of the world or some conflict breaks out. But what happens as we grow older? We begin to think on a larger scale. Perhaps we think more about the seriousness of what lies ahead and we don't worry so much about what's going on right at this moment, but to plan for the future. We begin to lay plans for life. That comes along with maturity.

Did you know that those very same standards can measure spiritual growth and maturity in a Christian?

I. A mark of maturity is to move from milk to meat.

That's what the Hebrew writer tells us in our text.

Hebrews 5:12-14 "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age..."

It is, frankly, alarming to see the lack of basic Bible knowledge that exists among many Christians today. Even many who call themselves disciples of Christ, it's appalling how little even basic

knowledge of the Bible they possess. Many of them would have a hard time even defining—much less defending—the gospel. They have a very limited understanding of what the gospel is and is about. Some have occupied pews in the assembly of the church all of their lives—many years—and yet, struggle to define some foundational concepts from the Bible. Concepts such as *redemption, regeneration, sanctification, holiness*. Paul said that this is the very reason that some in the Corinthian church struggled so with sin and idolatry, why they were so self-centered, jealous and petty with one another.

I Corinthians 3:1-3 “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?”

Many never master, much less move beyond the most elementary and first principles of the faith. That is not to minimize those first principles; I love to hear the first principles of the gospel taught and we need to be reminded of them on a regular basis. But we do have to move past those things, building upon them. Some cannot understand, nor will they receive the stronger meat of God’s word. Notice I said that not only can they not understand them, but they don’t want to understand them either in some cases. They don’t want to seek the stronger meat of God’s word because they’re content with milk. They reject what the Bible says about how they should live because there is no basic understanding or foundation in their hearts of the authority and lordship of Christ in their lives.

You see, everything within God’s word is built upon one foundation or another, one level or another. There is nothing to be ashamed of when a baby only drinks milk. That’s natural. That’s all they can drink. There’s also nothing to be ashamed of when a person who is a newborn babe in Christ doesn’t understand very much at all about the Bible. But something is terribly wrong when one remains on milk and never develops the ability to digest normal food. They never develop an appetite or capacity for that which makes them stronger because they are satisfied with milk. Friend, appetite is a sign of health. A healthy, thriving child of God craves a richer understanding of the Bible and a deeper relationship with Christ.

Psalms 119:97 “O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.”

Commentator Albert Barnes says that expression, “*O how I love thy law*” in the original language is written in such a way as to imply such intense love that the writer is astonished by the fervor of his own emotion. But does your Bible sit dusty on a shelf or coffee table? Do you really love the law of God? Would you rather feed on the news and literature of the world than the Good News from heaven contained in His word? Do you have an appetite for spiritual things? Are you growing in the knowledge and understanding of the truth? Do you know more about the Bible today than you did a year ago? Do you know much more about the Bible than you did when you became a child of God? You see, that is a mark of maturity.

II. A maturing Christian requires less and less discipline.

We never reach a point where we don’t need discipline in our lives, but the older and more mature we become, the more we practice self-discipline, and the less rebuke, censure and punitive

measures are necessary. Again, the church at Corinth was a spiritually immature group of Christians. Therefore, Paul warned them thus:

I Corinthians 4:21 “What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?”

He would have to come to them with a rod of correction if they didn't repent. In his second letter to them, he wrote that he feared that he would find them still living in their sin and fraught with envy, gossip and strife, so that he would have to inflict punishment upon them (**II Corinthians 12**). You see, his hope was that they would have grown in the faith, that he wouldn't have to come to them in that way.

A godly preacher doesn't desire to rebuke people for their sins, but he knows that he sometimes has to in order to please God. But he desires to see change and growth because that's what God desires to see. The more a Christian grows into the image of Christ, the more dross and impurity is purged out of him. The less one has to be rebuked and reminded of their basic duties to Christ because he becomes mature in those things.

III. When we mature, we have the ability to choose our battles.

Like in our list of physical marks of maturity, it is also true spiritually. We learn to discern between the things worth fighting for and the things NOT worth fighting for. There are some things a Christian must fight for.

Jude 3 “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

That underlined phrase means *to agonize over the faith*.

I Timothy 6:12 “Fight the good fight of faith...”

...But not everything is worth fighting over. The church at Corinth was fraught with controversies: wraths, strife, backbiting, tumults, personal jealousies one against the other, and so on (**II Corinthians 12:20**). Why? Remember what Paul wrote in his first letter:

I Corinthians 3:3 “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?”

You see, along with spiritual maturity comes the ability to distinguish between matters of *truth* and matters of *opinion*; the ability to fight for those things that are germane to our salvation, versus those things on the other hand that perhaps pertain to our own spiritual development or even our own preference. I'm not minimizing these things that we often differ over, but Paul did teach that in matters of indifference or personal liberty, we are to *be patient and practice forbearance with others* (**Romans 14, I Corinthians 8**).

The Bible teaches by *command*, by *example*, and by *necessary inference*. Those things are not liberties, but rather are enjoined upon us by God. But there are matters in one's spiritual

development and spiritual discernment that are categorized by Paul as matters of liberty. Children will fight over any and everything; some of the most petty things imaginable. But, hopefully, we grow out of that. (I'm still working on that with my two girls at home, but as they get older, it gets better.) The fights become centered on things of greater consequence. That is a mark of spiritual maturity.

IV. With maturity comes the wisdom to make right and difficult choices.

Our children need to be told what they can and cannot do. They need to be carefully watched and trained and guided. Their hands have to be slapped from time to time when they try to touch the oven or get too close to the fire; they don't understand the consequences. They don't yet understand that we love them and that their safety and wellbeing is at stake.

But as they grow, the training that we gave them along the way, along with the experience that they've gained, helps them to develop wisdom. There comes a point when we trust them to do the right thing and make more mature choices in life.

Hebrews 5:13-14 "For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

You see, the same is true with the child of God. As we mature, we are able to better discern between what will please the Lord and what won't; what is better for us spiritually as opposed to what may harm us spiritually. We better understand the subtleness and craftiness of sin, and are better able to watch out for the dangers of the haphazard Christian life. Our lives are marked more and more by piety and holiness. We make wiser spiritual decisions. We live on a higher plane. That is a mark of maturity.

V. As we mature, we take on responsibility.

We realize a greater sense of accountability. The articles that I spoke about earlier noted the increasing number of millennials who remain at home longer, depending on mom and dad to pay their bills and provide the necessities of living. Many have no sense of personal responsibility—not all, but many. Certainly, there are those who have no sense of personal accountability for the choices they make in life. But with maturity comes independence and responsibility. No longer do mom and dad pay our bills and provide us with a place to live. It's not up to them to make our way in life and raise our family for us; that becomes our responsibility, our job, and we're accountable if we fail to do it. We face consequences in life if we fail to do it.

Hebrews 5:12 "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again..."

God's plan is for the saved to convert the lost, then the lost who are converted become the ones who go out and convert the lost. Then they grow in their knowledge and faith so that they mentor and develop a faith and maturity in others.

II Timothy 2:2 "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

That is God's plan of passing it on. Do you have to be reminded, coaxed, coddled, begged or threatened to come to the services of the church? Do you have to be constantly reminded and warned about some sinful behavior? Do you have no more vital role in the work of the church than you did when you were first baptized into the Lord's body? A mark of maturity is responsibility and accountability.

VI. A mark of maturity is having a different perspective on time and its relationship to eternity.

When we were young, didn't the time pass so slowly that we thought we would never be a teenager, never graduate from school, never be an adult? Brother, doesn't that change. They say the older you become, the faster time flies. It sure seems that way, anyway. But along with that comes a perspective on the importance and value of time that we didn't have before. When we grow up and face the burdens, hardships, and responsibilities of life, we think differently about time and we begin to think about life as a whole as we watch it quickly slip through the hourglass of time and eternity.

Psalm 90:12 "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

We may live for the moment when we're young, but when we mature, we live for what is to come. Those are the marks of maturity.

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