

# 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. They needed to surrender their will to the Holy Spirit and grow spiritually.

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

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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.) They were “called saints” because of Jesus’ perfect life and death, not because they had grown into maturity.

In the phrase, “called *to be* saints,” notice that the words, “*to be*” are in italics. That means they were added by the translator.

## **3. What evidence does Paul point to in order to help them understand they were still spiritual infants? 1 Corinthians 3:3**

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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.

Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). The Greek word for judge is *krino*. It is also translated, condemn. To condemn is to think of someone as lost, without hope of salvation.

Instead, we are to evaluate their fruit in order to help us understand their need and to learn how we can effectively share God’s love with them. Evaluating the fruit also gives us a better idea of who we can trust.

Jesus said, “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). He did not trust everyone. He knew they could turn away from Him if they did not get what they wanted (John 2:23-25; 6:66).

## **THE REWARD FOR GROWING INTO MATURITY**

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

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The Christians in Corinth were fighting among themselves and dividing into two camps. Some followed Paul; others followed Apollos. Paul tries to direct their attention toward God. He reminds them that he and Apollos are on the same team, not working against each other. God had a work for each of them. He planted and Apollos watered, but God was the One who produced the fruit of righteousness (Galatians 5:22,23).

### **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**

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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. What building materials are referred to in this illustration? What will test the work of each person? 1 Corinthians 3:12-13**

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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)

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

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

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

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Notice that people may still be saved even if their work is burned up. They will suffer great loss. They would miss out on blessings Jesus wanted to give them. But if in the end they choose to trust in Jesus and remain on the gospel foundation, they will have eternal life. The thief on the cross is a perfect 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 people and even turn them away from Jesus. This would be a great loss to the person who is saved in the end.

When Christians grow into maturity, their loving influence will draw people to Jesus, leading them to experience salvation from sin. Sharing eternity with people we love and have had a positive influence on is 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 to us if we refuse to grow up into maturity and choose instead to defile the temple of God? 1 Corinthians 3:16,17**

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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, fill their lives with evil 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 (John 3:19; Revelation 6:14-16).

## **9. What dangers did Jesus warn against? Matthew 13:18-23**

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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**

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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, 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)

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

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Peter says 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 aren't. Instead of growing into maturity through believing the truth, confession, repentance, and renewing the mind, 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 Pharisees neglecting? (23)

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B. How does Jesus describe their true character? (25)

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C. What did Jesus call the scribes and Pharisees? Why? (26-28)

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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 at? (13)

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

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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. This means that everyone is equally loved, redeemed, and legally qualified for eternal life (John 3:16,17; Romans 5:18; Colossians 1:12-14; 1 John 5:10,11). Instead of condemning others, we can choose to love and forgive them, just as we have been loved and forgiven (John 15:12; Ephesians 4:32).

When we experience the unconditional love and grace of God, we are drawn to Him (John 12:32; Rom. 2:4). We long for the day when Jesus will return so we can be with Him face to face. Our love for Him will lead us to want to avoid anything that would draw us away from Him.

Out of appreciation for what Jesus has done for the human race, we will have a desire to live for His glory and be His ambassadors on earth to invite others to experience His love and grace (2 Corinthians 5:19,20).

## **RUNNING THE RACE WITH JESUS**

### **15. Read Hebrews 12:1-3**

A. The Christian life is compared to running a race. How are we encouraged to run the race? (1)

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

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C. What influence does Jesus have on our faith? (2)

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

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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, the author and finisher of our faith. As we behold His unconditional and sacrificial love, we realize we can trust He has our best interest in view. The more we grow in our relationship with Him, the more we will see Him as Someone worth living for and even worth 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 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 that provide the necessary complex carbohydrates the body needs for fuel.
- 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 (John 15:4,5) are beginning to experience a taste of what eternal life is all about.

Paul prayed that we might be “rooted and grounded in love” and 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. One song 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)

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B. What does He promise that they will experience? (28b,29b)

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

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b. \_\_\_\_\_

D. How does Jesus describe Himself? (29)

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E. How does He describe the yoke He wants to give us? (30)

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Jesus’ plan is wonderful. Peace comes before victory. For Jesus has already defeated Satan and redeemed us from the curse of the law. He earned this victory for the human race.

As a result, we can experience inner peace and freedom from guilt, shame and fear. He then promises to transform us from within and give us victory over our slavery to sin.

Many people think victory comes before peace. So they try hard to gain victory so they can have peace. This way of thinking leads to the selfish motive of trying hard to be a good Christian so we can be good enough to go to heaven.

For those who are very conscientious, this burden can be overwhelming, for the goal is impossible. Others try to gain God's acceptance by lowering the standard of righteousness to a level they can reach on their own.

Jesus invites us to consider a whole new perspective. He invites us to come to Him just as we are and find rest. Instead of focusing on trying to perform, He invites us to focus on knowing Him. He promises to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. When we abide in Jesus and let Him abide in us, the Christian life becomes easy and light, rather than hard and heavy.

## **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). Our service will invigorate us, rather than drain us, when we:

- Seek to be a blessing to others purely out of a motive of love.
- Learn to trust God and let Him lead us in our ministry to others.
- 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 a 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 value of our work is in proportion to the

impartation of the Holy Spirit. Trust in God brings holier qualities of mind, so that in patience we may possess our souls.”

“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.

## **THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM TO GROW**

By Clinton Meharry, © 2004

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.

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

Gentle enough to understand  
The wounded hearts that grieve;  
Caring enough to help those  
Who are willing to receive.

Content enough with who you are  
And what the Lord can do-  
Blessing others with the gifts  
That He has 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.

## OBEDIENCE FROM THE HEART

“‘In My name,’ Christ bade His disciples pray [John 14:13,14]. In Christ's name His followers are to stand before God. Through the value of the sacrifice made for them, they are of value in the Lord's sight. Because of the imputed righteousness of Christ they are accounted precious. For Christ's sake the Lord pardons those that fear Him. He does not see in them the vileness of the sinner. He recognizes in them the likeness of His Son, in whom they believe.”

“The Lord is disappointed when His people place a low estimate upon themselves. He desires His chosen heritage to value themselves according to the price He has placed upon them. God wanted them, else He would not have sent His Son on such an expensive errand to redeem them. He has a use for them, and He is well pleased when they make the very highest demands upon Him, that they may glorify His name. They may expect large things if they have faith in His promises.”

“But to pray in Christ's name means much. It means that we are to accept His character, manifest His spirit, and work His works. The Saviour's promise is given on condition. "If ye love Me," He says, "keep My commandments." He saves men, not in sin, but from sin; and those who love Him will show their love by obedience.”

“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.