

Spiritual maturity



Babies are immature - they have no option. Adults on the other hand, may be physically fully-developed but they can still be immature in their emotions and behaviours because they have not been in an environment that has helped them to grow and they have not learned from their experiences. (Of course, this may not be their fault, though, as adults, they are responsible for their own behaviour.)

The same process occurs in a spiritual context. Where the environment is not conducive to growth and there has been an absence of learning, a person, who has been a Christian

for a long time may still be immature in their spiritual life, whilst a relatively new Christian can mature rapidly, given the right circumstances and willingness to learn. Indeed the parallel between our spiritual development and the way we conduct ourselves in the emotional and behavioural areas is often inextricably linked.

New Christians have to be looked after. Like new babies they cannot look after themselves. If they are neglected, they will struggle and frequently become disillusioned and fall away.

The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.
Luke 8¹⁴

Babies and adults can be identified by their characteristics:

Babies

- Need a lot of attention, feeding, changing
- Cannot eat solid food
- Believe the world revolves around them
- Are not experienced or skilled
- Believe everything they are told
- Cannot tell what might harm them

Adults

- Need less attention
- Can eat a balanced diet
- See themselves as part of a wider world
- Have learned by experience
- Know the truth (most of the time)
- Can distinguish between what is harmful and what is not

What stops us from being mature

1. Worldliness

Failure to mature can be attributed to continuing to operate in the same way as we did before we became Christians. The New Testament has frequent references urging Christians to put on the "new man" and to abandon the old way of thinking.

I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. **1Corinthians 2³⁻⁶**

Paul was unable to communicate with the Corinthians about deeper spiritual matters because their worldly behaviour was preventing them from growing. Their immaturity was evident from their worldly behaviour.

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? **1 Corinthians 3¹⁻³**



2. Failure to learn

True learning always involves putting things into practice. God is into “on-the-job” training! If we are slow to learn the lessons of our life experiences and of applying God’s word, our spiritual growth will be retarded.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 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. **Hebrews 5¹¹⁻¹⁴**

Another characteristic of mature people is their ability and willingness to teach others by sharing their own experiences and the lessons that they have learned. Babies, natural and spiritual, do not have this capability nor can they distinguish what is beneficial from that which is harmful.

3. When our actions and words do not match up to what we say we believe

Jesus had a word for this - he called it hypocrisy. Every day we have to make choices whether to live the life we profess or to carry on behaving in ways that will not help us (or the rest of the church) to grow up. This process of dying to self is sometimes called sanctification. It is the process of growing up spiritually.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.¹ He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **Ephesians 4²⁵⁻³²**

Note how many of the above involve keeping control over the things we say. What proceeds out of our mouths, not only betrays what is in our hearts, but can also be creative or destructive². It can build up or cause division.

¹ Hurts between one another can give the devil a foothold. In the same way that maggots are attracted by wounds and cause them to become infected, the devil will be drawn to hurts and they will fester. Hurts need the cleansing antiseptic of repentance and forgiveness to undo the damage that has been done.

² When God created the universe, he spoke it into being. Being made in his likeness, we too have the capacity to create or destroy with our words.

Becoming mature (and staying that way)

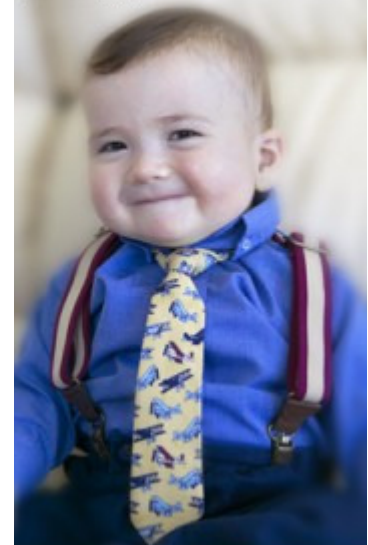
1. Rest assured

Our growth has to be built on firm foundations. If we have no assurance about whether we belong to Jesus or not, if we are not sure that our faith is real, we will not grow as Christians. In fact we will be anxious and keep going over the same ground time and again. We need to settle the matter and move on.

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

Hebrews 6¹⁻²

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. **1Peter 2¹⁻³**



2. Keep on keeping on

Our faith is proven over time. We face different challenges throughout our lives and our decision to press on and not to give up will facilitate our spiritual growth.

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **Philippians 3¹⁴⁻¹⁵**

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. **Colossians 4¹⁵**

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. **James 1²⁻⁴**

When the going gets tough we need to persist. Our level of maturity will be directly proportional to the trials we face.

3. Maintain unity

Keeping unity³ is a major means of becoming mature. Preserving unity helps us to become tolerant of one another without losing our integrity. We grow as individuals and together as a church.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4¹⁻³

To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

³ Unity is having a common purpose, not all being the same, which is conformity. God made us all to be unique and delights in our diversity but is grieved by our disunity.

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. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. **Ephesians 4**¹²⁻¹⁶

In verse 14, immaturity is characterised by instability in our knowledge of God and his ways. We do not know what the truth is. In contrast, when we speak the truth (being real) in love (not offensively nor judgementally) we will grow.

4. Learn from those who are more experienced

We need spiritual parents in the same way as we need natural parents. Imitation, in this sense, is not simply pretending to be like the parent/teacher, it is learning by experience and apprenticeship to develop into someone who knows the ways of God for themselves, not just intellectually, but in their hearts. It is being teachable and staying teachable.

Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. **1Corinthians 4**¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. **Hebrews 13**⁷

We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. **Hebrews 6**¹²

Laziness is a characteristic of those who do not take responsibility for themselves. Those who are mature have learned through their experiences, including how they overcome setbacks, to take responsibility for themselves.



Child-like - not childish!

Jesus wants us to remain as children in the sense that we need to retain characteristics like wonder and trust. This part of us should never “grow-up”.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 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. "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. **Matthew 18**¹⁻⁶

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. **Matthew 19**⁵⁻¹⁴