

“Christian Maturity”

(1 John 2:12-14)

Introduction

➤ In the passage before us this morning (1Jn.2:12-14), we find the apostle addressing three categories, or groups, of Christians. While they are labeled “*children*”, “*young men*” and “*fathers*”, they are not intended to be exclusively for (or restricted to) a “male” audience – the book of 1 John is clearly written to all Christians. Each of these categories represent a stage of the Christian life, or a three-fold progression of the Christian’s spiritual growth [note: a Christian can be chronologically old, and yet spiritual a child in the faith; conversely, a Christian does not have to be chronologically old to be mature].

In a sense, every Christian is found to be in one of these groups and has progressed – or needs to be progressing – through stages. Christians are to be ever-growing in Christ. That is, as Christians, we are to be always striving for a greater godliness; becoming more righteous, more holy, more loving, more faithful ... more Christlike. As long as we are alive, we are to be pursuing – never coasting, never quitting, never becoming complacent.

Heb 5:11-6:1 ~ “About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. ¹Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity [*teleiōtēs*; completeness, perfection] ...” (cf. Matt.5:48)

Phil 3:12-14 ~ “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect [*teleiōō*], but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Col 1:28 ~ “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature [*teleios*] in Christ.”

1 Cor 14:20 ~ “Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature [*teleios*].”

➤ Although perfect in Christ, Christians do not live perfect lives for Christ. But that is our goal – for our good, but supremely for the glory of Christ. While we are ultimately dependent on God’s saving and sanctifying power within us – through the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit – we are responsible to do our part to become more and more like Christ (see Phil.2:12-13).

Spiritual growth does not happen by osmosis; it takes conscious and proactive work on our part. While we are saved by faith alone, we are not sanctified by faith alone. We cannot grow apart from the enabling power of God’s holy Spirit, but we will not grow spiritually unless we submit to the work of God’s Spirit in our lives. To put it bluntly, you are responsible for your own spiritual maturity. No one grows spiritually by accident, nor will they grow spiritually against their will. “You can drift into sin, but not into righteousness” (Leon Morris).

Eph 4:15 ~ “... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”

1 Peter 2:2 ~ “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation”

2 Peter 3:18 ~ “... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ...”

➤ Therefore, as we consider each of these categories/stages of the Christian life, may we be compelled to grow up in our salvation. Conviction can always accompany any discussion of maturity (and sometimes quite necessary). But John's words here are intentionally and fiercely encouraging. There are no words of correction, warning, or rebuke in this passage. He is reminding them of the spiritual blessings they have in the Savior Jesus Christ; He is reminding them of the enable power of God's Spirit within them; He is reminding them that God is loving and gracious Father. He is writing to these Christians as their spiritual father, encouraging them – assuring them – in their faith in Christ as each group uniquely experiences the Christian life.

1. To those who are **NEW** in the faith

➤ John used two different Greek words to identify those who are “*children*” (vs.12, 13) in the faith. The first is found in verse 12, translated “*little children*” (*teknion*). This word generally refers to a little child, and can even be more generally (literally or figuratively) used to describe any “child” or “offspring.” We find this word used several times in the book of “1 John”, always in the figurative or spiritual meaning – describing that Christians are children of God – and always in a tender and endearing way (e.g. 1Jn.2:1, 28; 3:7; 4:4; 5:21; cf. Jn.13:33).

The second word translated “*children*” (*paidion*) is found in verse thirteen [note: some versions (e.g., NET, HCSB) have vs.13c as vs.14a]. This word refers more specifically to a child who is an infant or baby. It seems as though both terms are used here to describe those who are new in the Christian faith – spiritual newborns or young children – not biological children.

➤ As such, these terms are used positively of those who are simply new Christians – every Christian starts out as a new believer. Their knowledge and understanding are limited, and their faith is oftentimes naïve and small. They are weak and fickle, and can be especially vulnerable to temptation and false teaching.

Yet, there is a beauty and innocence with those who are spiritual babies and toddlers. Their joy can be infectious, their passion for the Gospel revitalizing, their love for the Lord exhilarating, and their hunger for the Word can be convicting.

✓ Illust: “The testimony of Charles H. Spurgeon to the nature of his conversion is a good illustration of this point. He had been converted suddenly at a fairly early age after several years of conviction of sin. In these years he had known great misery, but, having come to Christ, he found all things changed.”

“When my eyes first looked to Christ, he was a very real Christ to me; and when my burden of sin rolled from off my back, it was a real pardon and a real release from sin to me; and when that day I said for the first time, “Jesus Christ is mine,” it was a real possession of Christ to me. When I went up to the sanctuary in that early dawn of youthful piety, every song was really a psalm, and when there was a prayer, oh, how I followed every word! It was prayer indeed! And so was it, too, in silent quietude, when I drew near to God, it was no mockery, no routine, no matter of mere duty; it was a real talking with my Father who is in Heaven” (James M. Boice, *The Epistle of John*; 1Jn.2:12-14).

➤ So how does John encourage the new Christian? He meets them right at their level of understanding: “*your sins are forgiven*” (vs.12). Sometimes this is all the new Christian knows – that they have been forgiven – and what a joyful and life-changing knowledge that is. Many of you can remember the exact moment you first believed, and many of you can still remember what was like to be a new believer (for others that is more difficult). Some of you may still be a new believer.

One thing all new believers know is that their “*sins are forgiven*” (vs.12). This is part of their conversion to Christ. They, like the tax collector, have recently cried out, “*God, be merciful to me a sinner*” (Lk.18:13). They, like king David, have prayed, “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*” (Ps.51:1-2).

They have felt the weight of their sin against the holy God and, knowing that they could not save themselves, called out desperately to the Lord to save them. The Spirit of God has recently convicted them of their sin, and drawn them to the Savior with lovingkindness. They believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and the only Savior from God.

➤ Notice the added phrase *“for His name’s sake”* (vs.12; or “for/through/because of/on account of His name”). The *“name”* (*onoma*) here refers to the character, authority, and will of Christ [as we often close our prayers by saying, “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”]. Christians are not forgiven for the sake of their own name. They do not deserve God’s forgiveness, nor can they earn or repay God for His forgiveness. God’s saving grace comes, first and foremost, for the sake of His name; that He would be glorified in every soul that is saved!

Ps 25:11 ~ “For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.”

➤ One of the first aspects of being a child of God is knowing God as *“the Father”* (vs.13). Only Christians are children of God – adopted into God’s family through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (see Gal.4:5; Eph.1:5; contrast Jn.8:44; 1Jn.3:10).

1 John 3:1 ~ “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

John 1:12-13 ~ “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Rom 8:15-17 ~ “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Gal 4:6-7 ~ “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

✓ Illust: “*abba* is an Aramaic word that means “father”; it is a term of endearment used within the family circle (not unlike our word “dad”); its degree of familiarity toward God was unknown in Judaism” (Mounce, W.D. *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; “Abba”).

➤ What a glorious, magnificent, awe-inspiring, and humbling doctrine. We who were enemies of God are made the children of God, because the Son of God died (a sacrificial and substitutionary death) on the cross for our sins. Jesus bore the full penalty of our sin so that the blessing of salvation would come on all who would ever believe – the blessing in which God says to those who believe, “You are Mine. You are my child.”

➤ It is interesting to note that while every new Christian is a “infant” in Christ, he/she is not expected to stay that way. In the Bible, we that new Christians are addressed with tender, endearing and encouraging words. However, when a Christian (willfully) remains immature he/she is rebuked and/or disciplined by God in order to yield the *“fruit of righteousness”* (Heb.12:5-12; cf. 2Tim.3:16-17). God is not amused by longtime Christians who are, or act like they are, still baby/immature Christians.

1 Cor 3:1-3 ~ “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. ...”

Heb 5:12-6:1 ~ “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. ¹Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity ...”

- While children can be cute, a childish adult is never cute. Christians are called to be ever-growing, ever-maturing, in Christ. We are not to stay “new in the faith” for long.

2. To those who are YOUNG in the faith

- While having the same standing in Christ as all Christians, those who are young in the faith have unique characteristics and unique struggles. Simply put, this group represents those Christians who are no longer spiritual newbies. Spiritually speaking, they are no longer “children”, and not yet “fathers.” They have naturally progressed into a state of spiritual adolescence or young adulthood.

In this passage of Scripture, we see them identified as “*young men*” (*neaniskos*; vs.13, 14). As our English translation reveals, this word describes those who are in their youth to young adult life. Again, John is not writing to those of a certain chronological age, but of a Christian’s spiritual maturity (you can be physically old, and spiritually young).

- Different from that of spiritual children, this group represents Christians who have grown in the Christian maturity (but still have a ways to go). They are no longer as naïve as they were, they are not novices in the faith. They are no longer having to drink spiritual “milk”, and have now moved on to solid food. They have Christian experiences; they have had to overcome trials and temptations; they have more discernment and a deeper faith; they are no longer weak, and they are not as naïve. They have been seasoned a bit by life’s hardships, and sobered by their own struggles and failings. They know enough to know that they do not know enough.
- John encourages those in this stage of spiritual maturity by identifying three defining characteristics of those who are young in the faith.
- First, and twice, we see that they “*have overcome the evil one*” (vs.13, 14). Notice that it read “*you have overcome*”, not “you will overcome” or even “I hope you will overcome.” This is not meant to imply that a young Christian’s fight against evil (or “*the evil one*”) is done, but that the victory has already been won in and through Christ (1Cor.15:54-57). In them, because of Christ, the evil one has already been defeated. These young Christians have already demonstrated – though not perfectly – the veracity of their faith in Christ as they have resisted temptation and the devil (see Eph.6:10-15).

James 4:7 ~ “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

1 Peter 5:8-9 ~ “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

Like young Daniel before the fiery furnace (Dan.3; with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego); like young Joseph who was sold into slavery (Gen.37-50); like young David when Goliath was defying the army of God (1Sam.17); like young Mary (and Joseph) as she was called upon to give birth to the Messiah (Matt.1; Lk.1); and like young Timothy whom the apostle Paul entrusted with the ministry to the church in Ephesus (1Tim.4:12) – these spiritually young Christians have shown the ability to stand resolute in their faith, and not be overcome by evil.

- Second, we see that these spiritually young Christians “*are strong*” (*ischuros*; vs.14). This imagery is of a young man (probably in his twenties or thirties) who is in the prime of his life (Matt.19:20, 22), as physically fit, energetic, and strong. Here, of course, John is referring to their spiritual strength. He is encouraging them to see themselves as they truly are in Christ, with the power and presence of God’s Holy Spirit enabling them to accomplish God’s will for their lives.

1 John 4:4 ~ “... he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

Eph 6:10-11 ~ “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

Col 1:28-29 ~ “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

➤ Third, and lastly, spiritually young Christians are noted for the fact that *“the Word of God abides in [them]”* (vs.14). This is no doubt why they have overcome evil, and are spiritually strong. For the Word of God is living inside them (Heb.4:12) – teaching, reproving, correcting, and training them in righteousness (2Tim.3:16). They have put on the armor of God, not forgetting the *“sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”* (Eph.6:17).

1 Tim 4:12-13 ~ “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

2 Tim 3:14-17 ~ “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

Col 3:16 ~ “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Psa 119:9-11 ~ “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. ¹⁰With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! ¹¹I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”

It should not be surprising, then, to know that this is one way Satan attacks Christians – perhaps especially those who are spiritually “young” in the faith. Satan desperately wants to keep them from the Word of God; to keep them from putting on the sword of the Spirit; to keep them from being trained in righteousness by the Scriptures.

Today – with mobile phones, social media, video streaming, the internet – it is a tremendous challenge for young Christians (and all Christians for that matter) to spend time in God’s Word. Some wrongly think that Scripture memorization is only for baby Christians, and Scripture meditation is only for old Christians. It is easy for us to put off God’s Word – thinking we will read/study it later, perhaps when we have more time or “nothing better” to do. We must take the encouragement found in this passage as resolve to have the Word of God abiding in us.

3. To those who are MATURE in the faith

➤ The last stage listed is for those who are mature in the faith (and yes, the opposite of “new” is “mature”). It is obvious, and important, to note that the instructions to *“fathers”* is almost identical [the only difference being the verb tense of *“I am writing”* (vs.13; present; see vs.12, 13^{2x}) and *“I write”* (vs.14; aorist, i.e., “I have written”; see vs.13, 14^{2x})].

➤ The repetition here is intentional, and must not be overlooked. Implicit in these verses is the faithfulness of the mature believer – they *“know [God, or Christ]”* (vs.13, 14). The Greek word translated *“know”* (*ginōskō*; vs.13, 14) can be used to describe the most personal, most familiar of knowledge – even the intimate relations between a husband and wife (Matt.1:25; Lk.1:34). The mature Christian has a special and personal knowledge of God. They do not merely know about God, they truly know God.

That is, through the many difficulties and sufferings of the Christian life the mature believer has remained in the faith. They have weathered various trials; they have overcome countless temptations; they have persisted through many afflictions; they have wrestled with doubts and despair; they have

endured numerous hardships; they have rejoiced through painful sorrows; they have remained steadfast in persecution; they have walked with God through all the valleys and mountaintops of the Christian life; they have fought “*the good fight of faith*” (1Tim.6:12).

2 Tim 4:7-8 ~ “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

- The mature Christian not only knows God, but knows “*Him who is from the beginning*” (vs.13, 14). This is, once again, a reference to the self-existing eternity of God – God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. Here, the word “*beginning*” (*archē*) does not refer to the beginning of Jesus’ life/ministry, or the beginning of the creation of the world, or even the beginning of time. Rather, this seems to be a reference to “eternity past”, the time before the creation of the world – the time before time began (see Ps.90:2; 102:25-27; Jn.8:58; Rom.1:20; Rev.1:8; 16:5; 21:6; 22:13).

1 John 1:1-3 ~ “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – ²the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – ³that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

John 1:1-2 ~ “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.”

- This strongly implies that the mature believer has a deep knowledge of God. Whereas “*children*” know God as “*Father*” (vs.13), the mature believer also knows God as the self-existing, eternal, and sovereign Creator. Those who are spiritually mature love and long to know God more and more (1Thess.4:10). They are never satisfied with a certain understanding or knowledge of God. They hunger and thirst for the Word of God. They spend ample time in Scripture – reading, studying, memorizing, meditating on, and applying God’s Word.
- This is not advocating for a stagnant Christian existence. Mature Christians are not commanded to merely (passively) remain a Christian, or to coast in their Christian walk. This is an all-too-common trap for many Christians. They become complacent about biblical truth (satisfied with their current knowledge/understanding, or bored with spiritual things. This is not so for the mature Christian who is always seeking to grow in spiritual maturity – to be more and more “*conformed to the image of [God’s] Son*” (Rom.8:29; cf. 2Cor.3:18).

2 Peter 3:18 ~ “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

Eph 4:11-15 ~ “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood [*teleios*], to the measure of the stature of the fullness [*plērōma*] of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...”

Eph 4:13 ~ “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God – a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ’s full stature.” (NET)

Conclusion

- By way of practical application, it is important to examine our own spiritual maturity – to honestly assess what stage of the Christian life we are in, and to prayerfully seek to grow spiritually. We must never be satisfied with our present state of Christian maturity. We must never grow complacent or become apathetic in regard to biblical truths or spiritual blessings. We must never take God’s patience and love for granted. We must be vigilant, in the grace and power of God, to *“press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil.3:14).
- ✓ Illust: “As little children, knowing the Father by ever-fresh experience of his rich and free love in forgiving you for his Son’s name’s sake; as fathers, entering intelligently and sympathisingly into the Father’s knowledge of the Son as being from the beginning in his bosom; as young men, strong in him who is the Lord your righteousness, and therefore the Lord your strength; fortified by his word always abiding in you richly; bold and brave in asserting the victory over the wicked one that is already yours as it is Christ’s; by all that is simple in your childhood, by all that is godlike in your fatherhood, by all that is divinely strong in your manhood; be persuaded to give heed to what I write or have written; to love the brotherhood; and not to love the world” (John Stott; *An Exposition of 1 John*; p.63).