

MARKS OF MATURITY

Phil 3.15-16

Maturity is expected

Last Sunday morning, we were celebrating Pentecost together - the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on the first followers of Jesus. We thought about the new life they received – God's very own life, living within them, to make the presence of Jesus real to them, day by day.

- And so, this morning, it is very appropriate that we are going on to think about that new life growing to maturity, because maturity should be the goal of every 'born again' believer. Our new life is for growth.

This is a principle we learn from nature.

Illustration. If we go to our local nursery to buy a plant, we will expect it to grow!

- If it's a small plant, we will expect it to grow and produce flowers for us.
- If it's a vegetable plant, we will expect it to grow - to produce our dinner for us!
- If it's a fruit bush, we will expect it to grow and produce fruit for us.
- If it's an apple tree, we will expect it to grow and produce apples for it.

The principle of growth from life is built into the very fabric of nature. And it's what God expects from every 'born again' believer. He expects us to grow to maturity, to produce fruit for him.

Illustration. When a newborn baby is delivered, its parents will expect it to grow to maturity. Something will have gone seriously wrong if it remains in its infant state for the rest of its life.

And so it is in the spiritual realm. When God grants us new life by gifting his Holy Spirit to us, he looks for that new life to grow to maturity. It's what Epaphras was concerned to pray for, in **Col 4.12**. *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus ... is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, **mature** and fully assured,* Paul writes.

So how does our growth to maturity come about? In two ways, principally.

1. TWO KEYS TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY

First, by us

1.1 Feeding on God's word (1 Peter 2.2-3)

Turn to 1 Peter 2.2-3 for a moment. Peter writes, *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.* The *pure spiritual milk* we are to crave is God's Word, written for us here in the Scriptures. We are to develop as healthy an appetite for God's word as a baby has for its mother's milk, so that we can grow to maturity, spiritually speaking. But having a good working knowledge of the Scriptures, whilst essential for our growth, is not sufficient for our growth. It's what we *do* with the information we read, that really counts.

So the second key to spiritual growth is

1.2 Putting God's Word into practise (Heb 5.14)

Turn back a few pages to Hebrews 5.14. *Solid food is for the mature,* the writer says, *who, by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* We grow to maturity, not simply through knowing what God's Word says, but through using it to train ourselves to distinguish right from wrong. In other words, as we read God's Word, we must try to grasp how it applies to our every day lives – how it should effect our family life, and the way we go about our work; how it should shape the way we relate to other people – the way we speak to them and the way we treat. God's Word must be allowed to shape our goals and ambitions; it must correct our assumptions and preconceptions. It must determine our values and attitudes. It should be the biggest influence on our lives – much bigger than television, or the society we live in, or even the family we've been brought up in. *Don't conform any longer to the pattern of this world,* Paul writes in Romans 12.2, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Allowing our mind to be shaped by God's Word, is the key to growing to maturity.

And this is where some people go wrong. You'll remember the parable Jesus told, in which he spoke about

2. THREE COMPETITORS TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Turn to Luke 8.14 for a moment. It's the parable of the soils. And about the seed of God's Word that falls into cluttered soil, Jesus says, *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.* It's as people go on their way through life – having heard God's Word, notice – that all sorts of competitors arise, clamouring for greater attention and affection. And if these competitors are pursued, they will choke individuals from putting God's teaching into practice – with the result that these people never grow to the maturity God intended for them. So what are the competitors clamouring for our attention and affection as we make our way through life? Jesus mentions three. First,

2.1 Worries, that is to say, being *overly concerned about the wrong things in life*. Jesus defines what he means by *life's worries* in his Sermon on the Mount. Keep a finger in Luke 8 and turn back to Mat 6.25-33. Jesus says here, *Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? The worries of this life are fashion and food – designer clothes and celebrity diets! Think how much time and attention people in our own day give to these two rather trivial aspects of life. Being preoccupied with how we look and what we eat can choke God's Word out of our lives. And so Jesus goes on to say to us, "Learn a lesson from nature. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. If we make it our priority to seek God's kingly rule over our lives, all these other things will assume their proper place, and God will ensure that we get what we need for carrying out his will – including having enough to eat and wear.*

Now turn back to Luke 8.14; for the second competitor to maturity that Jesus speaks about here is

2.2 Wealth, or more specifically *riches*. *If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that*, Paul writes in 1 Tim 6.8-11. *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, Paul tells Timothy, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.* If our goal is to get rich, God's Word will get choked out of our lives. If our ambition is to have an ever-increasing standard of living, God's Word will get choked out of our lives - *for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*, Jesus taught us in Mat 6.21. If our heart is set on money, wealth, riches, it won't be set on God or his Word. It's as simple as that.

The third competitor to maturity is our own personal

2.3 Well-being, or *pleasure*. And I guess that it's this, rather than anything else, that is the greatest competitor to spiritual maturity in our own day and age. *"The purpose of life is to have fun,"* people will say. *"So long as you are enjoying yourself, what does it matter what you do?"* That's the philosophy most people live by today. It's the philosophy of the playboy, the hedonist, the pleasure seeker. The goal of life is to have a good time. It's why people find it so hard to come to terms with suffering and pain, hardships and disappointments. If the unspoken assumption is that life should be pleasurable, fun, enjoyable, these robbers of pleasure are deeply resented. But, of course, if our goal is to serve and glorify God, through whichever route he chooses to take us through life, everything can be meaningful to us.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, James tells us (James 1.2-4) because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its work **so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything**. Trials are necessary for our growth and maturing. Without challenges to overcome, our faith will forever remain infantile.

So having looked at two keys to maturity, and three competitors to our spiritual maturity, let's turn back to Phil 3.10-16 to identify

3. FOUR MARKS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

In verse 15, Paul writes *all of us who are mature should take such a view of things* – the view of life that he has just been outlining.

And that begins back in verse 10 with him declaring that the truly mature Christian

3.1 Wants to get to know Jesus better.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

Here is the over-riding mark of spiritual maturity – an insatiable hunger to get to know Jesus Christ better. It's what one person has called "*Paul's magnificent obsession*". You see, we should never get beyond the point of wanting to get to know our Lord and Saviour better. Whatever other directions our Christian life may take us in, this has to be at its very core.

- We will want to get to know more about Jesus' life on earth – the amazing miracles he performed and the wonderful truths he taught.
- We will want to get to know Jesus' character better – what made him tick; how he related to other people; how he cultivated an ever-deepening relationship with his Father God.
- And we will want to get to know better him as our living Lord and Master in our every day experience – personally and interactively, our constant guide and companion through life. It's good to get to know lots of things *about* Jesus from his days on earth. But here Paul is speaking about something far deeper. He's talking about getting to know Jesus personally, interactively, in our every day lives. That was his burning ambition in life, his magnificent obsession.
- He speaks about the joy of Jesus' **resurrection life** flowing through him, empowering him.
- And he also speaks about experiencing deep fellowship with Jesus in times of **suffering**.

Illustration. I was saying to someone this past week, "If we are living for pleasure, if our goal in life is maximise our fun, we will never be able to cope with suffering of any kind, or disappointment, or pain, or hardship, positively. We will see these things as robbers, depriving us of what we have set our heart on. But if our goal in life is to get to know Jesus better, these are the very things that will help us to do so. In Isaiah 53.3, Jesus is foreseen as *a man of sorrows, whose closest acquaintance would be suffering*. So if our lives are free from all pain and hardship, how can we possibly expect to get to know Jesus well? It's in the times of our suffering that we are drawn into our deepest appreciation of what his life on earth was like – and we experience a 'partnership' with him in his suffering, true fellowship.

- How could we ever know what it must have been like for Jesus to be **mocked**, unless we are sometimes laughed at for being a Christian?
- How could we ever tell what it must have been like for him to have been **rejected**, unless we are sometimes cold-shouldered by people?
- How could we know what it must have been like for him to have been **betrayed**, unless we are sometimes let down by other people, or maligned by them?
- How could we know what it was like for him to have been **abandoned** unless we are sometimes deserted by our friends?
- How can we know what it must have been like for him to have been **spat at**, unless we are spat at – something that happened to me here one Friday night a few months ago?
- How could we ever imagine what **physical pains** he bore, as he hung from the cross, except for those moments when we find ourselves in agony – in the dentist's perhaps, if nowhere else?

The thing about being a Christian is that God can use *every* experience he takes us through, to help us get to know his Son better. And that should be our over-riding ambition in life.

The second mark of maturity Paul points us to here is that the fact that the truly mature Christian is

3.2 Forward looking (vs12b-14)

He talks more about the future than the past. He doesn't live in the past, or dwell on the past. He lives in the present, but for the future. *I press on*, Paul tells us in verse 12, *to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

Two weeks ago, we thought about some of the things a mature Christian leaves in the past.

- Old **regrets**, about things we have done wrong, that would otherwise drive us to despair.
- Past **hurts** about wrongs done to us, which, if we cling onto them, would cause us to become bitter.
- And former **achievements**, which may have been praiseworthy in their time, but which would cause us to wallow in waves of nostalgia if we don't move on from them.

We have to turn our backs on all of these things to see and embrace what God is doing in the present. For the tragedy of glancing backwards to what has been – let alone dwelling on the past, or living in the past – is that we end up facing in the wrong direction, and so fail to notice what God is doing in the present right under our very noses! And we fail to notice what he is calling us to in the future. We reminded ourselves of those stirring words from Isaiah 43.18-21. *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. Look, see - I am doing a new thing! Even now, it is springing up; don't you perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland ... to provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise.*

The truly mature Christian appreciates the past and learns from the past; but he or she lives in the present, and for the future. A mature Christian is a forward-looking, ambitious sort of person.

Thirdly, verse 16 tells us that a truly mature Christian

3.3 Lives out what he knows to be right

Let us live up to what we have already attained, Paul urges us – in other words, *let's live out the truth we've received*, our knowledge of Jesus and his ways.

- There's a great danger in equating spiritual maturity with the extent of our Bible knowledge. We tend to look up to those who know their Bible well, as 'mature' Christians. But knowledge alone isn't a mark of true maturity (indeed, it can be a great snare if we view it as such). Maturity has to do with how much of what we know to be right and true we are living out in practise. The mature Christian is someone who has trained himself to put into practise what he hears in church on a Sunday and reads for himself during the week.
- Jesus reminded us of such in his parable of the two builders (Mat 7.24-27). *Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*
- The test of maturity is not how much we know, but how much of what we know is being lived out in our everyday lives.
- Rick Warren puts it like this in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* (p191f). *Receiving, reading, researching, remembering and reflecting on God's Word are all useless if we fail to put these things into practise. We must be doers of the Word, not just receivers of the Word. This is the hardest step of all, because Satan will fight it so intensely. He doesn't mind you going to Bible studies, as long as you don't do anything with what you've learned. Actually, we can be so busy going to the next Bible study or seminar or conference that we have no time to implement what we've heard. We forget it on the way to our next study! ... The best way to become a doer of the Word is to write out an 'Action Plan' every time we hear, or read, or study God's Word. The Action Plan should be personal (for me); it should be practical (something I must do); and it should be provable (I need to set a deadline for carrying it out.*

DL Moody once said, "The Bible wasn't given to increase our knowledge. It was given to change our lives."

And that takes us onto to the fourth mark of maturity that Paul mentions here. The truly mature Christian realises he has

3.4 A long way to go before he is fully like Jesus.

Glance back to verse 12 where Paul writes, *not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.* The truly mature Christian focuses on his character development rather than on his service achievements. We tend to think of a mature person as someone who has achieved all their lifetime ambitions. They've reached the top of their chosen profession perhaps.

- But Paul indicates here that the truly mature Christian is someone who realises that God's goal for our lives is to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. In Eph 4.13, Paul defines maturity as *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* – nothing less than the complete character of Jesus having been formed in every part of my being. That's spiritual maturity. And by that measure, all of us still have a mighty long way to go.
- "Why does spiritual maturity take so long for us to achieve? Rick Warren asks rhetorically in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (p219). The answer lies in this definition of maturity. It's so ambitious.
- Besides, ***we're slow learners***, Rick Warren points out. "Nothing is properly known until it has been experienced firsthand," someone has said. The problem with most of us is that we're strong on knowledge, but short on experience.
- We also have ***a lot to unlearn***, Rick Warren points out. We're creatures of the culture we have been raised in, our upbringing and our social environment. A lot of bad habits and false assumptions, erroneous preconceptions and wrong values have to be unlearned. It's like a cricket coach taking on a young player who's taught himself how to play. All sorts of bad habits have got to be unlearned.
- Sometimes we're ***afraid to face up to what we're really like***. We excuse ourselves to readily (it's the way I'm made, the way I've been brought up). We turn a blind eye to habitual faults (I can't help the way I am after all these years).
- ***Growth involves pain***, Rick Warren reminds us, because there's no growth without change; and change involves loss (the loss of what we used to be like); and loss causes pain.
- ***Good habits take time to develop***, like fruit taking time to ripen.

This is why the truly mature person realises he hasn't got there yet. There will always be plenty of progress to be made until we are fully like Jesus. But what counts is that we're moving in the right direction. We may not have arrived, but we need to make sure we're on the right tracks.

We need to be reading God's Word for ourselves, to see how God wants us to be living.

And we need to live up the truth we already know, with the help of God's Spirit within us.

Then we will be able to say with Paul, in 2 Cor 3.18: *we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [or contemplate] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*