

**TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY**  
Ephesians 4:1-16

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MVAC, Kitimat, BC

Today's message is one that I had actually planned to share this with you earlier but there had never been an opportunity. This is actually a message that developed some time ago as I considered the question of what it means to be a mature disciple of Jesus Christ.

*What does it look like for a person to become a mature disciple of Jesus? Can we be specific? And I think the answer is "yes!" (Part of my interest is to help define reality. That's what leadership is: leadership is all about seeking to define reality. And nowhere is this more important than in the life and ministry of the church.)*

In Ephesians 4:11, 12, we read, *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ might 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."* But how do we know? Consider also Colossians 1:29, 29 where Paul says his work is to proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ...

As I said, several years ago I asked myself the question: what does a mature disciple look like? Is it possible to measure whether a person is growing in spiritual maturity? Over the years there have been various schools of thought among Christians about what makes a truly spiritual person, a mature Christian, a true disciples, one who is Spirit-filled, about being truly sanctified, or being a saint.

Some emphasize:

1. Discipleship – (Luke 9:23) I myself was much influenced by this school of thought during my later teens through a group called, the Navigators. They were the ones who taught me about basic obedience to the Scriptures and getting out into the world to share the Gospel.

But over the years, I have encountered other very important perspectives concerning spirituality:

2. The importance of the ministry of the Spirit. For a short while I went to a

3. Pentecostal Church and have had many friends from a more Pentecostal background. And within the Alliance itself there has been a large emphasis on the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit – what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Luke 11:13
4. But there are others who spend a great deal of time speaking about the significance of one's identity with Christ. There was a time I was much influenced by the writings and ministry of people associated with Major Ian Thomas and the Torchbearers from which we have the origin of Capernwray schools. Their emphasis is on understanding the significance of our identity with Jesus – of what it means to be one with Jesus in His death and resurrection (Galatians 2:20).
5. Then in recent years there has been a big interest in what is known as *spiritual formation* and how this takes place (Romans 8:29, Galatians 4:19). This has to do with cultivating the presence and reality of Christ through meditation and prayer, on reflection, and a whole lot of other spiritual disciplines.

So it is that in recent years, I've tried to put all of these together and say that that they are all important. I have come to see that they are all part of the Stages of Spiritual Maturity. To serve as a guide I developed what I came to call the Plot line of Christian Spirituality. And the idea was that just as a person develops physical maturity over the years, so it is possible to see and develop spiritual maturity.

1. **Spiritual Birth.** John 3 – being born again...

Sometimes referred to as regeneration based on what Peter speaks about in 1 Peter 1:23 This is a supernatural act of grace... Romans 10:9, 10 – “ That if you confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. No body is born a Christian. It is the conscious realization that you have met Christ. Sometimes a person may not recall exactly where and when this happened, but the reality is...there is a beginning, a time when someone comes to the realization that they are now consciously confessing Christ...

Being baptized in water confirms this confession... Technically, baptism is not a requirement. But sometimes baptism is associated more with the 2nd Stage of Spiritual Maturity.

2. **Infancy.** What is the most common characteristic of infancy? The baby is trying to relate to its surroundings. In infancy the child becomes aware of the world around him/her; one's parents; one's family identity. In actual life experience, this is a very important stage of development because it is then a person forms feelings about self. Most of this comes from interaction with family members – parents, siblings, aunts and uncles... And of course this can be potentially very destructive.

For a Christian these early days are extremely important. Often we struggle with all kinds of things because we don't realize who we are. We tend to base our perception of self on the kind of things that happened in our childhood. We need to become aware of the fact that we are not merely the product of our human inheritance with all of its problems.

The Bible says, you are none other than a fully adopted member of God's family, sharing the DNA of your heavenly Father just as Jesus did. You are Christ's sister or brother, and you have all the rights and privileges of belonging to God's family. See Ephesians 1:3-14...

3. But then we come to the third stage which is **Childhood.** This is about the primary years in school.

It is all about becoming a learner, a time in which we learn how to read and write and also about what it means to pay attention to authority in our lives. From a Christian perspective, it is what I call the **discipleship stage** of our spiritual maturity. And it is very important.

Every person who comes to recognize who Jesus is and puts his or her trust in Him, is also being called to the life and experience of discipleship.

Christianity is discipleship. It is being in the School of Jesus – learning what it means to follow Him in everything.

Discipleship is living in relationship to Jesus Christ --taking up his cross daily and following him. It means getting to know God's truth in His Word and applying it to your life. Jesus said, "If you continue in my Word, then you really are my disciples" (John 8:31, 32). It is about learning to take seriously what it means to go and make disciples...

If you've been a believer in Christ for any reasonable length of time, I hope you've come to terms with the Discipleship Stage.

4. Later we come to what is known as the **Adolescent** stage – the teen-age years. Distinctives? If you are one, or you've been one, or if you've had

some, you will certainly know. This is often a turbulent stage in our growing up years. It is both very exciting but can also be very confusing. We become aware of our feelings, romantic feeling, mixed emotions.

I relate this stage to getting to know about the ministry of the Holy Spirit -- who the Holy Spirit is and how He works. It is very important that we learn to know about the ministry of the Spirit – that He is able to minister to us just as Jesus did to His disciples. John speaks of him as Counsellor and Guide, the one who gently woos us to understand God’s truth and points us to Jesus. He is the One who prays for us and in us and gives us the power to live and serve God.

But just as the teen years are often times of struggle and feelings of failure, so it’s possible during this stage to wrestle with various ups and downs in our spiritual lives. Sometimes we are way up and sometimes down – sometimes close to God and sometimes far away. And so it is that we have to come to the place where we yield our lives completely to the control of the Spirit of God, where we by faith trust Him to fill us completely. And this could be an experience accompanied by many wonderful manifestations and emotions. But we have to recognize that His filling is also a daily experience.

Ephesians 5:18 speaks of being continuously filled with the Spirit. We learn what it is to live in the Spirit (Romans 8, Galatians 5). You can’t mature in the Christian life without getting to know the Holy Spirit.

**5. Young Adult** This is about a young man or woman who is just graduating from high school and getting ready for the real world of work or study. The Bible says it is a good thing for a young man to bear the yoke in his youth (Lamentations 3:27). It’s good for the young adult to learn that life is hard work and requires all kinds of discipline – to learn that good comes from suffering and toil.

In recent years there has been a lot of interest in what is called the Christian disciplines/spiritual formation. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Many of the great saints of Scripture and history committed themselves to various disciplines that helped them receive the work of the Spirit in their lives. These are “means of grace” because as God leads us to practice them, they open us up the ministry of the Spirit in some wonderful ways.

Scripture reading and meditation  
personal prayer  
perhaps fasting  
private and public worship  
fellowship with other Christians,  
Communion  
journaling  
suffering  
contemplation  
Sabbath rest

It's important to recognize that these are not human works of righteousness; rather they are ways to hear His voice and to get to know Him and when this is so, amazing things happen

6. **Adulthood** In this stage people are getting serious about relationships and about taking on responsibility for themselves and others, about getting work and about earning money and entering into deep personal relationships with others – getting married, having a family. But sometimes marriage is not the dream we thought and having children isn't always romantic either. It's then we come face to face with the reality of our own emotional and spiritual deficiencies.

From a biblical and Christian perspective, it is in the difficult experiences and relationships of our lives that we come face to face with ourselves and our need for God's grace. Our souls cry out for genuine love, joy, and peace. We need to the difference between living self-centered lives and the discord and pain that comes from that and experiencing the wonderful fruit of the Spirit.

As we go through life we all suffer from relationship failures. But these are opportunities to discover the sweet fruit of the Spirit that enables us to bless those that curse us and to pray for those that spitefully use us. We need the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:23, 24.

You know you've run into a mature Christian when you meet someone who can handle the uglies of life with real grace. The gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit is not a good thing! This was the case with the Corinthians.

**7. Maturing Adult.** In actual life we're thinking here of someone who is getting well-along in life, perhaps in their mid 30's. People getting to the place where they are discovering who they are and what kind of things they are able to do.

This is that place in life where we discover that life is really about serving Christ with the particular gifts of the Spirit that He has given us for ministry. The Bible makes it clear that knowing your ministry gift and using it is a very important part of what it means to be a Christian. (I Corinthians 12:1-11). *“To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good – wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues.”*

Romans 12, mentions other gifts – serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, and leading, showing mercy...

(It's important for us to discover what our gifts for ministry are. This may happen earlier in a person's life, but if so, it sure takes maturity to know how to use them, so that a gift doesn't become a source of pride and division in the body of Christ. Sometimes this aspect of Christian experience can be especially divisive and confusing.) Nevertheless, it is a wonderful experience to be able to discover what God made you for in the body of Christ and how you can use your gifting to build up the church.

**8. Senior Adult** As a person gets older and really matures, hopefully they get to know themselves well enough to see that they have a very particular contribution to make to life. These are those wonderfully satisfying years in which you live and work with confidence and fruitfulness.

It is a wonderful thing to come to that place in life where you are really confident in who you are in Christ and you know in what way you can serve Him best. For Christians there should come a time in which we see what our particular contribution to the work of Christ's kingdom. This was true for Paul, and the other apostles... At first they were just ordinary men, but then God showed them what he called them to do. Maturity is getting to the place where you feel good about who you are...

So there you have it – a way to diagram spiritual progress. I realize it's not quite as regular as we see it here... Where are you? And is there a place to

use this graph as a plot-line of progress in the church or as a way to plan for ministry development?