

Are We Spiritually Growing Up?

Series: Core Values #5 Spiritual Maturity
Scripture: Galatians 3:1-5, 5:22-26,

Modesto CRC
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We've been talking together on these Sunday mornings about **core values** – our core values as Christians and as a church. These are God's expectations. We have heard the Bible call us to make our spirituality a priority: **to strive for unity**, and to **love with a love of another kind**. We've seen the inseparable relationship between worship and caring for the poor and oppressed. As we studied the prophets we saw God turn his back on worship when people did not care about the poor. Love and unity come together in **disciplining ourselves**, following Christ's prescription when we deal with conflicts, sins and offenses that occur among us. **I hope you have sensed with me how critical these core values are, and how easily they slip off our radar.** They challenge and stretch us, and we need to make these a part of who we are.

Our 5th core value is really again pulling them all together and adding a dimension. It was stated by the Apostle Paul when he said that his goal was to present people **mature in Christ.** **Our core value is Christian maturity.** Our Lord expects us to grow up spiritually. It is crucial for us to understand the biblical teaching here, so I would like to ask the following questions:

1. What is spiritual maturity?
 - what does spiritual mean?
 - what is spiritual or Christian maturity?
2. What prevents spiritual maturity or keeps Christians immature?
3. What demonstrates spiritual maturity? How do I know?

I. WHAT IS SPIRITUAL MATURITY?

First we need to define **spiritual**. That word means so many different things to different people. For some it just means the opposite of materialism, the opposite of only "things" being important. This is a greater emphasis on relationships and community. Others thinks of Eastern religions or New Age spirituality. The only **common thread** is that being spiritual always connects us to something bigger than ourselves. **Christian spirituality means that we are connected to God, aware of ourselves as creatures.** **The spiritual life of being connected to, in relationship with God, gives all the rest of life focus and purpose.** True spirituality permeates our relationships with each other, defines our self-concept, and inspires stewardship.

Maturity here refers to the reality that becoming a Christian, entering our relationship with God is the beginning, and we spend our lives growing up, becoming more like our Lord and Savior. The Apostle Paul always talks about our **growing up into Christ**, becoming more Christ-like, displaying the attitudes and behaviors that emulate Jesus. He is the model of spiritual maturity. At his ascension Jesus commanded his church to the core value of making disciples – creating mature, fully-devoted followers. ***Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing, and teaching them all that I have taught you.***

Jesus commanded his church to make disciples. That is what we are about – building mature followers of Jesus Christ. Our vision or purpose statement is essentially that we ***love God, care for each other, and serve the world***. Spiritually mature disciples or Christ followers do those three things. That is the goal of maturity – growing in our love for God, in our love for each other, and in serving in Jesus’ name. Life is going to school – to God’s school for spiritual growth and maturity. This is the opposite of an all too popular idea: “I’ve made up my mind, don’t confuse me with the facts.”

II. WHAT PREVENTS SPIRITUAL MATURITY? KEEPS US IMMATURE?

What prevents this growing up, this maturing? We understand that if parents never teach their children how to make decisions for themselves, never promote their becoming independent, prevent them from thinking for themselves and questioning, that they are likely to have a self-centered, narcissistic 40 year old child. This is a picture of preventing maturity. What prevents spiritual maturity? One answer is **what happened in Galatia**.

The Apostle Paul has harsh words for the churches in Galatia in the 3rd chapter. He begins ***“You foolish Galatians!”*** That, incidentally, is the mildest translation possible. He is clearly very upset. ***“Who has bewitched you?”*** **What happened in Galatia?**

Galatia was the area in Asia Minor where Paul established several churches on his first missionary journey in cities like Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. These churches had many Gentile, or non-Jewish Christians, along with some people called **Judaizers**. Judaizers were Jewish Christians; although Paul often questioned whether they were Christians at all. They believed that some Old Testament rules had to be followed in order for non-Jews to become Christian. This was about circumcision,

keeping the Sabbath, and dietary laws. In other words, **Ceremonial law replaced the gospel.** The Judaizers said that Paul was not a true apostle because he removed the legal requirements, making it all too simple, and too much a gift from God. Paul responds in Galatians 1:6:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

Strong language!

The Galatians had a spiritual disease which prevented people from growing up, from spiritual maturity. It kept them spiritually immature. It is as common among Christians as the common cold. It has continually recurred through the history of the church. Paul said to them (3:1-2):

“Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” (Is it about rules, structures, hierarchies, or faith?)

In other words, *‘we made it perfectly clear to you that your salvation, that your relationship with God is based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which is a gift to you. You accepted that by faith, so why now are you acting as if your salvation is dependent on something else?’*

What else were they dependent on? In order to really get this *you need to work with me a bit here.* **They got it all backwards, so they remained spiritual children.** One way to say it is this: it is not knowing the difference between revelation and religion. (repeat) We talked about that on our first evening teaching service.

Revelation comes from God. It is the truth about God and our relationship with him. It informs our spirituality. *“Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified.”* This is revelation. **Religion** on the other hand, **is what people do in response to God.** Religion’s goal is to open people up to the revelation, to the spiritual. For example, this worship service is a religious experience. It is what we do in response to God, and the **goal** is to take us beyond religion to intimacy with God. **Religious activities always have a purpose beyond themselves** – to take us to the spiritual, to take us to God. **The goal of true religion is spiritual maturity.** For example, if we sing in our worship and do not think about the meaning of the words or music as praise to God, the religious act becomes an end in itself. We have all been there. It did not take us further, so it has become an end in itself, a sort of idol. The

Judaizers had over 600 rules that captured their religion – an end in themselves, a way of buying God off, a religion that became an idol because it lost its power to bring people to God. It is what happens when people think maintaining a relationship with God is too hard – so we just do some stuff.

The **goal is spiritual maturity**. It is a deeply personal, vital relationship with God. Disciples grow in their love for God, deepen their care for each other, and more and more use their gifts to serve the world in Jesus' name. Worship – caring for each other in community, serving the poor all flows from loving God. It is all very concrete. The truth is that there are some very religious people who are not very spiritual. Religion quickly becomes an end in itself, an obligation we fulfill, a ritual we go through, **a process that may guide our behavior but does not transform us.** **This kind of religion prevents people from growing up, from spiritually maturing.** It is about “*don't think, don't question, don't grow up – just do it.*” The Pharisees of Jesus day were constantly criticizing him because he was not religious enough. (Interesting reaction to the Son of God) He, in fact, was so spiritual, so connected to God, that some of their religion was offensive to him. They, in turn, seemed to be very religious without being spiritual, without the intimacy with God.

So what happened to the Galatians? They met Christ: the gracious gift of God, their Savior and Lord. They believed the love God had for them, received his grace; but then someone came along and said: ***watch out! Here is the right religion! You have to follow these rules and these traditions if you are going to please God so you can be saved. If you don't you are clearly not saved. You have to be religious enough to be a Christian. We judge you to be inferior to us if you do now follow our rules.*** Does this sound familiar? What is the goal then? Getting people to do it our way? Converting people to our idol? Isn't idolatrous religion what most church splits are about? Isn't this what modern, “Christian” fundamentalism is all about? Rigid, “right”, exclusive, legalistic, dominated by a few?

Of all the religions in the world, **grace** is unique to Christianity. Grace means we did not find God, search God out, do enough to impress God and win God's acceptance. **Grace** means God comes to us, because he decided to. In every other religion it is the other way around – we have to do certain things to find or appease God. Paul said to the Galatians: ***“Christ was revealed to you as on a huge sign, so clear***

was it to you that he was crucified as a gift to you.” How did they receive the gift of salvation? Forgiveness? Eternal life? The indwelling of the Holy Spirit? **Through faith!** ***“Are you now so foolish,”*** he asks, ***“after beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”*** Isn’t this happening all the time among Christians now too?

Grace is really hard for us. Over and over in the history of the church, starting already in the first century, **people decide that the grace of God is too good to be true.** We want to earn it because deep down we question whether God could really love us freely. We are taught to be “self-made” people. We are sometimes like 2 year olds, stomping our feet and shouting at God ***“I do it myself!”*** I’ll be religious enough to impress God. I will follow all the rules, even if I made them up, then God will have to save me. I will be so successful that God will think he can’t get along without me. Beside that, if people are really free with grace, won’t they sin more and be out of control?

Religion, as an end in itself, destroys our relationship with God! It was the problem with the Pharisees. It was the problem in Galatia. It was the problem in the church at the time of the Reformation. It is the problem of modern fundamentalism. **Religion that replaces spirituality instead of producing it is still the problem. Spiritual maturity is the goal.** We need to hear this. Moralistic, judgmental, rule oriented religion – even if it is in a church of 30,000 people singing praise songs WILL NOT SAVE US! Religion as an idol is so appealing because we do not have to change, do not have to think, do not have to look very deeply inside, do not have to know the pain of vulnerability with God. All you do is keep doing the same stuff – whether taking comfort in something totally traditional that you have always done or something so spectacular that it competes with NFL football games. It is not worship style first of all, it is what is in our hearts. The question is this: is it empowering us to grow spiritually, to become spiritually mature, to grow up into our head which is Christ? Or, is it just making us feel good without the discomfort of transforming us? It is crucial that we answer that question.

It is so appealing to do it ourselves, to follow an idol called religion, and not really deal with God. That is equivalent to the joke of a well-known comedian about his annual check-up at the doctor’s office. He was referred to a surgeon. *“The surgeon*

wanted me to have a \$50,000 operation,” he says, “but I saved myself the trouble and money. I just had them retouch the x-rays.”

III. WHAT DEMONSTRATES SPIRITUAL MATURITY? HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM GROWING SPIRITUALLY?

We’ve defined spiritual maturity. We’ve asked what prevents Christians from growing spiritually. **How do I know if I am growing?** What demonstrates spiritual maturity? Of course, we are really asking the profound question: WHAT DO WE REALLY WORSHIP? IS OUR RELIGION OUR SECURITY? ARE WE REALLY WORKING WITH GOD SO WE ARE BEING TRANSFORMED TO BE LIKE OUR LORD?

In Galatians 5 Paul defines spiritual maturity in terms of our attitudes and behaviors. Here is the way to judge if we are growing up, spiritually maturing. It is all about fruit in our lives. (Galatians 5:22)

“But the fruit of the Spirit (in our lives) is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Look at this list. Spiritual maturity is demonstrating attitudes and behaviors of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The model for all of this is seen in Jesus dealing with the people around him – his compassion with people who were unacceptable to the religious establishment.

Recently someone sent me an email as an illustration. An old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “*My son, the battle is between 2 wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.*”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

It is **God’s goal for us**, and therefore our core value to make disciples and be spiritually growing people, people maturing so that the attributes of Christ begin to flow out of our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. How are we doing? Are we spiritually growing up? Are we teachable enough to grow?