

FOCUS TEXTS

Hebrews 5:11-6:3 (ESV)

¹¹About 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, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ²and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And this we will do if God permits.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The Lord wants us to grow up (1) to be no longer spiritual children, but (2) spiritual adults and (3) He also teaches us how to grow so spiritually.

INTRODUCTION

Christians can sometimes, like any other person, **stare into the exteriors**, the religious, the do's and don'ts. And then **neglect the spiritual**.

It can last for many years.

You can be dealing with a person that has been in the church his whole life and who understands all the religious aspects, but one day you realise that his thoughts and actions are **spiritually immature** and even **childish**.

It isn't so that a Christian grows spiritually as his/her body grows older. A person can be 80 years old but still be a spiritual baby!

How so? Because our body need bodily things to grow, and our spirit needs spiritual things to grow. And if a Christian feeds his body for 80 years but neglects his spirit, he will never achieve spiritual maturity.

The Lord wants us to grow spiritually. This is one of the reasons why the Lord wants us to be part of the **local church – to grow spiritually together** and finally achieve spiritual maturity.

We read in Ephesians 4 that it was God's intension – that we grow to maturity in Christ!

Thus, tonight we focus on the idea of “spiritual growth”:

- (i) the spiritual **growth process** and also
- (ii) **how** you and I grow spiritually

1. THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH PROCESS

When the Bible speaks of the process of spiritual growth, the Lord mentions in His Word, amongst other things, these three spiritual states in which one can be:

- He is initially spiritually **dead** or
- He lives spiritually, but he is spiritually still a **child** or
- He is a spiritually mature Christian.

1.1 SPIRITUALLY DEAD

We have heard out of the Ephesians sermon series what it means to be spiritually dead. Someone can physically be alive but be spiritually dead.

It won't help to give Christian advice and council to someone who is spiritually dead. Maybe you have a friend who says that they are Christian but when it comes to the Lord's Word or when you give Christian advice or council it's as if it goes in the one ear and comes out of the other. There are **no positive reactions**. On the contrary, there might even be somewhat of a **hostility**.

Maybe that person just doesn't listen. Maybe you don't communicate in the appropriate manner. But it is possible that, that friend of yours, that says they are a Christian, is not truly a Christian but **is still spiritually dead**.

To guide someone through Scripture and teach them how to forgive or how to behave as a Christian steward or how to have a Christian marriage will only have **temporary** and **external** consequences if that person is spiritually dead.

There are **no lasting, living consequences**. It's like putting a band-aid on a corpse! You waste your time and your band-aids!

Now you shouldn't cut ties with that person. No! On the contrary, now you have a special opportunity to **evangelise** - even if it's your close friend / family member!

You simply must share the Gospel with that person and encourage him / her to **believe** it! The **Gospel message of Christ is how the Lord calls people out of the spiritual grave!**

If that friend of yours truly grasps and believes the Gospel and confesses Jesus as their Savior, then you know the **rebirth** through the Spirit has taken place!

I hope that you who listen and participate in the worship service tonight, believes and confesses the Gospel of Christ! I believe, hope and trust, that I am preaching to born again Christians tonight! For spiritually living Christians!

Each one of us must be born again through the Holy Spirit, otherwise we will not see the Kingdom of God!

1.2 SPIRITUAL CHILD

Now, everyone who has been raised out of his spiritual death, is like a newborn baby – he is **spiritually very young**. The Bible calls them, spiritual “**children**”

And it is such a wonderful time. A time where you as a young Christian are intensely aware of the Lord’s closeness. You search for the Lord. You want to know more about Him. You take in everything that you read, hear and see about the Lord and the Bible.

It’s so wonderful to see how someone that is still so young in faith, holds onto the Lord with childlike trust and knows him in such a childlike manner!

But all babies must grow. A person grows in concern if a toddler doesn’t grow and develop!

Likewise, spiritual children must also grow spiritually. Otherwise, it is cause for great concern!

So it may be that many Christians truly are born again and truly believe the Gospel, but they remain **spiritual toddlers for the rest of their lives.**

An example: so many Christians that confess their faith and afterwards stop growing spiritually. That person stays on that spiritual level because he **accepts this as sufficient**, and no further growth takes place.

This slowness to grow is why the writer of Hebrews is so worried and why he quarrels with the congregation in Hebrews 5:

“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,” (Heb.5:12)

In other words, the members have **been Christians for so long**, have been in the church for so long, they must have reached spiritual **maturity** by that time! They must have been able to be teachers in faith themselves!

Everyone is a spiritual child at one point in time and that is good and right and very special. But it's problematic when you **remain** a spiritual child!

Let me name **a couple characteristics of spiritual children**, as we find them in the Bible:

First characteristic: Spiritual children are inexperienced

According to Hebrews 5, spiritual children are still inexperienced in the “**word of justice**” – in other words, inexperienced in the **basic Christian teachings** of our salvation through faith in Christ.

They are still **unhandy** with the Word and are **struggling** to articulate the basic Christian principles and doctrines and are **still learning** to understand them.

The writer of Hebrews says, they don't yet understand the basic doctrines of sin, of our salvation, of our baptism, of rebirth, and of Judgment Day.

Spiritual babies' spiritual habits are also still **underdeveloped**.

For this reason, Paul also says in Ephesians 4, spiritual children fall regularly for every other teaching. They are **tossed around** from one heresy to another.

Peter says, in 2 Peter 3:16-18 that spiritual children often believe all sorts of **distortions of Scripture** and especially of the **Second Coming**. They often believe doctrines where texts are used out of context.

Young Christians need a lot of help, attention and love from people that are spiritually “older”!

Second characteristic: An inability to distinguish

Hebrews 5 also teaches spiritually immature Christians especially have an **inability to distinguish between right and wrong**. They don't have experience in it yet and haven't yet made a **habit** of it. They are uncertain whether something is right or wrong. Lack of Wisdom.

For this reason, their lives are usually still full of **worldly and sinful behaviour**. They can't yet distinguish when something is sin and when not. Or, they can distinguish but don't know how to **break away** from it.

The Corinthian congregation at that time thought they had progressed very far spiritually, but Paul says the fact that there is still so much **strife** and **jealousy** in the church, is a sign that they are still **spiritual infants**.

So, Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, when there is **bickering, strife, jealousy and especially factions (groups)** in a congregation, is a strong indication that the congregation is spiritually immature.

Third characteristic: Necessity to learn

Children in general want to learn and need to learn a lot of things, to be able to grow-up. In the same way spiritual children must and want to **learn**.

There probably are also phases where they can learn a lot and even very quickly.

Spiritual children often have a lot of **unanswered questions**. They are uncertain about a lot of things and must therefore **receive a decent diet from the Word** and be under the watchful eye of faithful Christian leaders!

Ironic enough, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, that spiritual immature Christians are quite inclined to think that **they know a lot!** It may indeed be so, teaches the apostle, that someone knows a lot and even knows about the Bible, but if he does not **love** it, it's clear that more growth is needed:

“¹Now concerning offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” (1 Cor. 8:1-3)

So ... someone who would say, "I think I'm quite spiritually mature" still has a long way to go!

It's clear that we can't remain spiritual babies. It's necessary for us to grow-up! In a moment we will also hear just how we can grow.

But first, let's see what spiritual maturity looks like:

1.3. SPIRITUAL MATURITY

In Ephesians 4 we learn that the Lord gives gifts in the congregation, so that we as a congregation can help each other to grow spiritually. We want to help one another in reaching spiritual maturity!

“¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” (Eph. 4:13)

Yet I cannot place the responsibility to grow spiritually right in front of the congregation or church council’s door. Each of us must take responsibility for our own growth!

When we have moved out of our spiritual childhood phase and have learned to learn and grow ourselves, the responsibility now also rests on us as spiritual young adults, zealously grow to maturity.

It is my own responsibility to become proficient in Scripture. My responsibility to fight and overcome and grow in the power of the Holy Spirit!

Okay, but what is spiritual maturity? What does the life of a spiritual adult look like?

NB: Spiritual maturity is becoming more and more like Jesus Christ! To grow toward Him in every aspect of our lives.

Let me give you four characteristics of the spiritual adult:

First characteristic: Proficient with the Word

That is, they are no longer babies, but can already stand on their own two feet spiritually. They take it very seriously to **study and know their Bible**. They are

proficient with the Word and are becoming more and more proficient in working with Scripture, getting answers, and giving answers.

Hebrews 5 says, **Christians must reach a point where they can teach at least the basic doctrines of the Christian faith to someone else.**

You will also experience, that you grow a lot spiritually, especially when you have to answer someone's questions about God and His Word.

Spiritual adults are also **eager to learn more**. And they are becoming more and more mature because they are willing to listen and learn!

Second characteristic: Walk with the Lord

Spiritual maturity, very important, does not happen immediately either. Just like a baby does not suddenly become an adult.

Time passes.

Spiritual adults have been walking a path with God **for some time**: from spiritual babies they have not stopped growing over the years but have **continued to diligently follow the Lord**.

They can now be characterized, as people with wisdom and a good witness among the people. They have a **reputation**, that they are people who walk with the Lord and are **full of the Holy Spirit**.

The spiritual adult is not only proficient and familiar with Scripture, but he **knows the Author**. He **knows the Lord!**

They now, unlike spiritual babies, have a trained instinct to **distinguish** between right and wrong, good and evil.

Third Feature: Loving Mentors

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11: 1, that the congregation should follow him, just as he follows Christ. Paul, a spiritual adult, therefore, presents himself to other Christians as a **mentor**.

Spiritual **adults allow other Christians to learn from them**, to follow them in the ups and downs of daily life. They want to take other Christians, especially those who are spiritually younger than them, "under their wing". They are good and **worthy examples** for other Christians.

They do this not because they are conceited, but because in love they also want to help **other Christians to follow the Lord**. They serve the other brothers and sisters in love! They are like spiritual fathers and mothers to other believers. They understand and live the love of Christ!

They have the ability, through the work of the Holy Spirit and spiritual experience, to forgive, guide, comfort, and exhort people in love.

They are **loving parents of faith, giving their lives to other children of the Lord**.

Fourth characteristic: Concerned with the unbelievers and the churchless

In 1 Corinthians 14:20, Paul says the Corinthian church was turned inward. They are terribly concerned with each other's gifts and the one with this gift actually wants to rank a little above that one with that gift.

They too have, as I said at the beginning, degenerated into **selfish religiosity**. They have **completely forgotten why they are church** and why they received gifts from the Spirit.

They were more concerned with who spoke in tongues and who could interpret the tongues, than they **reached out to the unbelievers and the churchless**. Paul says, this is another proof, that in fact they have not yet reached spiritual maturity.

A church that is spiritually immature will not evangelise! Or to put it another way: Evangelism will hardly be a priority for them!

Someone who is spiritually mature is not selfishly turned on himself or in his own congregation. He / she is **concerned with the unbelievers**. He is **worried about the churchless**.

The **spiritual adult wants to carry out the Gospel** and make it heard and he wants to fetch the lost sheep!

Okay, so now we have clearly heard, that we need to grow out of our spiritual baby shoes into maturity. But how does this happen? How do we grow spiritually?

2. HOW WE GROW SPIRITUALLY

Now remember what our goal is. Our goal is Christ. We want and must become like Him. We must grow towards Him in every way - the Lord commands it (Eph. 4:15).

NB: To grow spiritually is to progress spiritually towards Christ.

We will **never** be **perfect**. We will **never** be **sinless** like Christ. But we must grow in our **sanctification**. We must become more and more like He is. **It's about the direction we take** and maintain - always **towards Christ. Follow Christ!**

2.1. HOW WE WON'T GROW

All right, we will definitely **not progress spiritually if we are slow to listen**. In other words, lazy Christians will not grow spiritually. This is what happened to the congregation in Hebrews (Heb. 5:11).

Nor will we **grow spiritually if we are constantly engaged in worldly relationships or unbelieving company**. "Bad company corrupts good morals". (1 Cor. 15:33).

This does not necessarily mean that we can no longer be friends with these people, but we must understand, that we can not become like them. We are called to minister the Gospel to them!

Nor will we **grow if we neglect our faith disciplines**. You can expect to become a spiritually mature Christian if you do not live in the Bible and in prayer. We will not grow if we do not partake of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Word.

We **certainly won't grow if we grieve the Holy Spirit with a sinful lifestyle**. Don't expect the Lord to use you compellingly in His service if you are preoccupied with the things that anger God.

2.2 HOW WE WILL GROW

We will grow spiritually when we **long for the pure milk of the Word**, says Peter in 1 Peter 2: 2.

Growth occurs when, as Psalm 1 says, **we constantly meditate on the Word**.

We grow towards Christ when we **pray continually** (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Lord also gives the church and fellow believers to help each other grow. The Lord gives the Word, the fellowship of the saints and the sacraments. Be there, be **part of the church to grow spiritually to Christ!**

Finally, we will grow up when we **walk in the Spirit**. In other words, not live as our own flesh wants to live, but when we live and think according to the things of God's Spirit - go read Galatians 5 again.

Beloved, may God grant that we as a congregation will continue to follow Christ with new diligence and **grow up to Him in every way**.

AMEN!

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