

Mentoring Maturing Believers



One of the biggest challenges to properly thinking about this third spiritual stage of growth, described by John as 'fathers', is that it has culturally become improper to describe oneself or others as a mature believer. This mindset portrays a false sense of humility and prevents His people from having a much needed biblical approach to life. Do you know any fathers that deny themselves being a father, "Oh, you think so. But I really am not a father."? This scene is rather ridiculous (especially

when you see his two little boys pulling at his trousers requesting something) for being a father is a normal stage of life—nothing to be shamed about.

Properly handling pride

The problems of pride and the snare of thinking that we ‘have arrived’ is certainly a great problem, but if we get a proper look at the father stage, we will discover that the biblical perspective has its own way of dealing with pride.

Comparison is a problem with sinful mankind. Man’s tendency is to want to think of him or herself as better than another. The biblical view, however, has us:

- (1) Increasingly adopt God’s standards and goals
- (2) Seek God to continually mentor us in godliness
- (3) Be trained to better help those around us.

Can you see the difference? By seeking growth, we admit that we have room for growth and further maturity. By focusing on serving others, we no longer compare ourselves to others. This is the proper spirit behind this third stage of the fathers. If anything, we should be crying out for those many Christians around us have not become fathers but ensnared somewhere along the way.

Jesus said it was fine and proper to think of oneself as mature. “The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head” (Mark 4:28). This last stage is where we should expect to bear fruit. In contrast, how tragic our lives are when we produce no godly fruit because of self-indulgence, perhaps by wasting time watching videos or playing games. There is, perhaps, no greater sin than for a father to disregard his children’s needs while using his money and time to lavishly treat himself. It happens, but what a tragic affair.

In the first stage we saw how the little child was very dependent on the parents, even for the basic needs of life. In the same way, we find it only proper that each believer grows in Christ until maturity where they lead others to Christ and help them in their spiritual walk. If no one cares for the new and young believers, they will flounder in their faith. This is the spirit of fatherhood—caring for those around you, and at a minimum those that you lead to Christ.

This third stage is where we train believers to learn to properly care for others. Included in this, while developing a foundation for serving, is understanding how to cultivate a deeper and more intimate life with God. As fathers, men and women of faith, mature in these things, they develop into leaders who are willing to oversee the needs of the church as a whole, as well as minister to other individual believers around them.

From a parent's perspective

I have eight children with a range between the oldest and youngest of 22 years. Right now, I have four teens; this trend will continue for a number of years yet! Some are getting close to graduating from high school while others still haven't settled into their adult lives. We are not in a hurry, but we do constantly pray that they would get the needed education that allows them to find a good job so that they in turn can care for their own family. As parents we desire more for them than anyone else.

God as our 'Parent' likewise desires us to move on into full maturity. Maturity rings with a sense of fulfillment with respect to what God has designed for our lives. The third stage of spiritual development is unlike Hinduism whose most spiritual detach themselves from their family and the 'real' world, spending the rest of their lives seeking spiritual enlightenment. Quite the contrary, the mature Christian believer seeks further intimacy with God so that he or she can properly engage and serve others.

People in the world perhaps serve just to receive a financial or emotional reward. God's people serve because they have been overwhelmed with appreciation to God for His work in their lives. They seek to please Him and care for others. Some Christians are called to pastor, but all believers are meant to grow up caring for others.

The pastors equip everyone to serve (Ephesians 4:11-12).



With a heart to serve

How does perspective of serving fit into our lives? The vision of service should be deeply integrated in the mind and heart of the believer. This is a big challenge in the various societies throughout the earth where those in authority feel that it is now time to be served. This selfishness is subtle but very real in our post-modern world. We look forward to retirement where we get to indulge in our own pleasures, without any sense of responsibility to others.

Paul rebuked those who focus on their own spirituality without concern for others, "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Learning to effectively train

How does this fit into our training? The vision of service should be deeply integrated in the mind and heart of the believer. This is a big challenge in the various societies throughout the earth where those in authority feel that it is now time to be served. This selfishness is subtle but very real in our post-modern world. We look forward to retirement where we get to indulge in our own pleasures, without any sense of responsibility to others.

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As trainers we need to carefully observe what is needed by those around us and provide whatever specialized training is necessary. Some churches are looking for discipleship programs. Programs are typically regimented and stiff, often not allowing for God’s individual leading and input. Good resources are important, but time must be spent with individuals to see how the Lord is leading the person. Many resources such as video training seminars may be utilized, but we must always also include special times alone before the Lord.

Just this morning, during my quiet time before I wrote this, I was seeking the Lord about

preparations for an overseas training trip. The Lord prompted me to write a note to some of my brothers there to clarify some issues. When I got to my computer, the issue had been confirmed by an email from our coordinator there stating the very same thing. God nudged my heart and then confirmed it. The decision had financial demands, but because God was in it, I can trust that He will provide the need. This way my faith was built up for greater and greater things. Most of these heart lessons are learned in private with the Lord.

The goals for mature believers

Train mature believers how to:

- ➔ Seek intimacy with God
- ➔ Dive deeper in His Word
- ➔ Wrestle with deep personal struggles
- ➔ Persevere when others have given up
- ➔ Be believing when others doubt
- ➔ Be pure while living in an impure society
- ➔ Demonstrate God's love through serving others.
- ➔ Kindly confront others as needed

The genuine believer never dares to stop growing. We grow in our relationship with God, aspiring to

be like Jesus and better serve others. As a trainer or mentor, we are always looking to God on how to best foster development in one or more areas of our lives.

Lesson

- Believers should dream of being spiritually ‘grown up’, where they can be close to God and empowered by Him to serve those around them.
- God does want to bear fruit through our lives. This largely happens as spiritually mature believers see God’s Spirit wonderfully working through their lives.
- Our training must not only instill this full vision for the believer but equip him or her to stay close to God and serve others.

Memorize & Meditate

1 Corinthians 14:20

Assignment

- ➔ Are you a mature believer? What evidence do you have to back up your answer?

- ➔ What challenges do you have to stay close to God?

- ➔ Have you ever experienced 'burn-out' where one feels spiritual dry and unable to serve as one used to? How did you handle it? How would you advise another to deal with this situation?

Equipping Mature Believers



Training those in the third stage of a Christian's spiritual growth is significantly different than in the first two stages.

Clarifying the goals for the fathers

The focus of the first two levels is to help the believer pass through those stages. According to John in 1 John 2:12-14, there is no fourth stage here in our earthly experience. This fact changes the way we approach growth at this level. So while in stages one and two, the believer focuses on

goals that enable him or her to step onto the next stage, the believer in the third stage adopts goals for ongoing spiritual development within that stage.

Some dangers exist at this level. We might think of the elder who has been in control for twenty or more years at his church and is spiritually 'stuck' in his spiritual growth. Or consider the believer who thinks being faithful means sitting in the same pew for thirty years. And of course, there is the heavy discipline that Moses received from the Lord for striking the rock rather than speaking to it (Numbers 20:11-12).

These problems can be solved by properly understanding growth at this third level of Christian development. Spiritual development will continue to unfold as we seek ways to maintain and grow in our intimacy with God through Christ. Even adults grow in their maturity, wisdom, compassion and in the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Let us be aware, however. It is always much easier to train a new believer up to the third level than to retrain those, stuck in their ways, who think they are grown up.

Maintaining our growth

Although the word 'maintain' does not conjure up words of development, it does refer to consistently prioritizing certain spiritual disciplines in one's life. Prayer for instance, that close intimate discussion

with God can and should grow. Like personal Bible study, it needs to continue deepening.

These points where we are tempted to waver, slide into lukewarmness or disobey also serve as the places where we further develop our commitment to God's purposes in our lives. Those at this third level are repeatedly being asked by the Lord, "What or who is most important in your life?" Our responses reveal whether we are seeking Him with all of our heart, or not.

The test of perseverance

There are a few kings who did well early on in their service but later became prideful and idolatrous. These dangers, however, also are the very opportunities to affirm our commitment, make the right decisions and keep on the path. There are many verses exhorting us to 'hold' on to the measure of growth that we have experienced:

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23).



“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

“But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 2:15).

“I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown” (Revelation 3:11).

The mature believer should be careful to keep a fervent heart for the Lord. This is difficult. He or she will face times of disappointment, abundance, doubt, power, depression, fame, bitterness, grief, suffering and perhaps persecution. Each becomes a situation in which we need to take the truths of

old and again commit ourselves to live out God's ways.

Growing further

The great thing about spiritual life is that there is no end to the potential in growth. Paul expresses it well:

“Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12).

Paul realizes that his spiritual development and remaining life is not only for himself but for the Lord to work His purposes out through his life for others (Philippians 1:22-24). He wants to obtain all those large and small things that the Lord has planned for him.

Integration at the third level

When we think about John's exhortations in 1 John 2:12-14 for each of the three levels, we begin to more clearly focus on the growth that takes place during that stage of spiritual growth. This is also true with this third stage of Christian living. We are not just being religious, though from the outside it might look that way. We renew our purpose of knowing Christ and have Him live out His purposes through our lives.

Burnout occurs if we are not careful. Service becomes routine and dry if we do not often refresh ourselves in the Lord's presence. Notice how Paul

reminds the Christians in Rome, “Not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11).

The purpose for which we carry out these things must not be forgotten, either in our busy lives or desperate situations. Jesus is the ultimate example, showing the relationship between devotion and service:

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Notice the theme of life in Jesus’ words: vine, branches, abides, bear and fruit.

Each word reminds us of the intimate relationship that we must maintain if we are to continue to see the life of God worked out through ours in a purposeful way.



A look at training materials

Training at this stage requires developing more insight as to how Satan cleverly tempts believers, as well as fostering an intimate relationship with the Lord. From this comes both increased devotion and fruitfulness. In many cases believers simply have not been able to maintain regular devotional times. As a result, they become 'apart' from Christ and cannot grow, becoming listless. Good training helps:

- The process of always having significant quiet times
- The way to restore good quiet times after a lapse
- The path to gain insights from difficult passages
- The means of listening to God from the scriptures

Many of these processes are simply not focused on in typical church or seminary training. We put the blame on people for not knowing how, rather than providing the great training our Lord would love to give them.

Special focus is also needed on the whole area of fruitfulness. Maturity produces fruit. Jesus not only expects us to bear fruit but that it remains (John 15:16).

In most cases we measure our ministries by their fruitfulness. This is good, but it is important to keep a broader perspective of growth at this third stage. Just remember that fruitfulness is not always seen at every segment of this stage of Christian growth, such as when one is enduring hardship. The fruit from Jesus' sufferings only became apparent later after His resurrection.

There are many good books to foster Christian fervency and optimize our service. This is a great blessing in our age where we can 'meet' another strong believer through their training, books and now videos and audios. We can require books to be read, studies to be done, but as we move up into deeper intimacy with Christ, we will see that many of the most important lessons cannot easily be tested or graded. This, no doubt, is one reason they often are neglected in schools.

A practical look

Mentoring at this stage is best when in small groups or one-to-one, a place everyone can openly share. The great aspect about discipleship is that even when a believer might be traveling a lot or in a church that does not do discipleship, he still can easily disciple another.

For example, on this third level, just find one or two brothers (or sisters if you are a sister) and find one common need. Often I ask the person what area he would like to grow in and I also share how I would like to see him grow in another area (e.g.

listening to God, exploring a Bible book, etc.). Time is split between praying, sharing and discussing the two areas. One can meet practically anywhere and at any time!

In the following chapters, we will reflect further on this development and what it means in formal training institutions, as well as informal ones such as churches where there are no degrees (but neither is there tuition!).

Lesson

- This third level of spiritual growth differs from the prior ones because its goal is to thrive within this stage rather than pass through it.
- Dangers that threaten our growth can be avoided by focusing on what God is doing through our lives at any given stage.
- The trainer equips each believer to carry out God's preplanned works He has for him, remembering that they can be done only through a growing intimacy with Christ and through God's grace.
- Christian training must do much more to prepare believers to grow in this third area of development.

Memorize & Meditate

Philippians 3:12

Assignment

- ➔ Write down three Christian life stories (yours or others) that have helped you in your spiritual growth. Explain how each helped you.
- ➔ Have you ever faced burnout, a dried up faith, etc.? Pick one and reflect how it came about. How was it finally resolved?
- ➔ Are you at the third level of maturity? Explain.
- ➔ What are your biggest challenges to maintaining a vibrant faith?
- ➔ Have you mentored anyone at the third level of spiritual development? What did it look like?