

EVIDENCES OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” (1 Corinthians 16:13, 14)

Are you a bad egg? C. S. Lewis said, “It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

What does God expect of His redeemed human “eggs”? Does He expect us to remain in a state of infancy in our shells or does He desire that we grow up to spiritual adulthood? Of course He expects us to grow. Consider these growth statements:

Psalm 92:12 - “The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall *grow* like a cedar in Lebanon.”

Ephesians 4:15 - “*Grow* up in all things into Him who is the head even Christ.”

1 Peter 2:2 - “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may *grow* thereby.”

2 Peter 3:18 – “*Grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

What is the definition of maturity? Maturity is the state or quality of being fully grown or developed. What is immaturity? Immaturity, conversely is not fully grown or developed. This is true in the spiritual realm as well as in the physical. The writer of Hebrews prods us saying, “Let us go on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1). If we don’t go on, we will go bad!

How then, can I gage my level of spiritual maturation? How can I know whether I am growing and making progress in the Christian life? The journey to the destination of maturity, is not achieved easily or immediately. Every journey begins with the first step and continues step by step.

In 1 Corinthians 16:13,14 there are five steps or evidences of spiritual maturation by which we can gage our progress. They are evidences that we have “hatched”, come out of our immature “shell” and are growing to spiritual adulthood. Look at the texts again: ***“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”*** (1 Corinthians 16:13,14)

The first evidence of spiritual maturity in the verse is:

1. **Vigilance** – “*watch.*”

The Greek word used here, *grēgoreite*, is a military term and means, to keep awake, to be vigilant. Believers have many enemies. We cannot risk letting down our guard. Therefore, we are warned repeatedly to “watch”. Some of the encouragements to vigilance are as follows:

a) **Watch for the coming of the Lord:**

Matthew 24:41 – “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.”

b) **Watch against temptations:**

Matthew 26:41 - "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

c) **Watch, that is, be on guard against false teachers:**

Acts 20:29-31 – "I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among you men will rise up, speak-ing perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

d) **Watch or guard your prayer life:**

Colossians 4:2 – "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving."

e) **Watch against spiritual lethargy:**

1 Thessalonians 5:2 & 6 – "The day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober."

f) **Be watchful about everything:**

Paul counseled Timothy to: "watch in all things" (2 Timothy 4:5).

We are to watch with the same vigilance that is required of a soldier on guard in enemy territory. Peter admonishes believers to "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith" 1Peter 5:8, 9).

To be vigilant is to be awake, alert, attentive; conscious, careful and cautious. There is a shocking nonchalance, a careless attitude demonstrated by many Christians today. They live totally unguarded lives and when they are defeated by some of their many enemies they are surprised. Casual Christians become casualties!

We need to wake up and wise up! We have a determined enemy. We live in dangerous territory—the devil is the god of this world—he is bent on the overthrow of every child of God. That means constant vigilance is necessary. Eternal vigilance is the price of victory and we must pay the price if we desire the blessing. What Patrick Henry said, in a military context, is true relative to one's walk with God. He said, "The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant."

The second evidence of spiritual maturity in our text is:

2. Perseverance – "stand firm in the faith"

The Greek word translated "stand firm in the faith" is "stay'-ko" and means "to be stationary, to persevere."

My home-made definition for perseverance is: Keep on purring regardless of how severe the situation may be. Abraham Lincoln, who knew a thing or two about perseverance, said, "Be

sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm.” He was not speaking specifically about biblical truth, however, his advice is apropos. To stand firm is to persevere.

Where do you stand relative to *the faith*? Paul wrote to the Corinthian church saying, “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you *stand*...” (1 Corinthians 15:1). How does one perseveringly “*stand firm in the faith*”? May I suggest four ways?

a) We persevere by standing faithfully upon the foundation of truth.

Unless we are standing upon the right foundation we will surely fall. The foundation of truth is the only enduring and secure faith foundation. John Rippon’s hymn, “How Firm a Foundation” underscores that fact:

“How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?”

Likewise, the gospel song, “Standing on the Promises”, reminds us of our faith foundation:

“Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.”

- R. Kelso Carter

Standing unwaveringly *upon* biblical truth is to “stand firm in the faith.” One’s stand is only as credible as the foundation upon which he stands. Upon what are you standing?

b) We persevere by standing up fearlessly for the truth.

Standing firmly “*in the faith*” is to stand *up* for the faith—to be counted where and when it really counts—in the arena of everyday living. To stand up for truth, means, among other things, that we:

- Commend the truth with our lives;
- Extend the truth by our witness;
- Defend the truth against error.

The admonition to “*stand*” indicates that there is opposition. This military term communicates the context in which we live. The truth has enemies led by the chief foe, the devil, and we are constantly bombarded by his untruths. Therefore, we are exhorted to “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11).

The Christian’s armor, listed in Ephesians chapter 6, includes both defensive equipment as well as offensive equipment. The weapon for defeating the devil is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). Jesus, in His wilderness temptation experience, demonstrated the power of the Sword of the Spirit, when three times He thrust the Sword at him, repulsing the devil by quoting the Word of God to him saying, “It is written.”

Many Christians are wide open and unguarded against the onslaughts of the devil and never stand up against him. James tells us to “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James

4:7). “Resist” means to stand up against the devil and his “wiles”—that is, his schemes and strategies. Let us live so that when the devil comes calling he will find us on guard, standing *up* for the truth!

Illust. In 1521, Martin Luther was called before Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, “diet” meaning a formal meeting. The meeting was in Worms, a city south of Frankfurt, Germany. Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to defend the truth that he had taught and written. Charles V would only accept an ironclad recantation. What Charles V got was Luther’s defiant “Here I Stand” speech. He said that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and that he could not go against conscience. Luther saw himself as a sworn teacher of Scripture who must advocate the right of all Christians to hear and live by the gospel. At the end of his defense, Luther spoke the famous words, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.”

Throughout the ages, men and women have hazarded their lives and some have been martyred because they stood up for truth. A good question for us to ask ourselves is in the words of the hymn, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross”:

“Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?”

Thirdly, Christian maturity is evidenced by:

3. Competence – “act like men” (ESV) “be brave” (NKJV)

Competence means = “To possess faculties and abilities that are developed to a responsible level of fitness; to possess the quality of completeness.” The Greek word means “to act manly.” That is, “Be maturely competent.” The mature ones are the competent ones.

To “act like men” is to be competent—that is, be spiritually fit and complete—ready to face whatever life throws at you. King David challenged his son Solomon to act the man. When David was on his death bed he said to Solomon, “I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways....” (1 Kings 2:1, 2).

Secular companies have Competency Tests for their employees. From one web site that gives guidelines for Competency Tests is the following: “The test should include structured interviews, cognitive ability tests, job knowledge tests, measures of customer service, and social skills, etc.”

From another web site is a more specific Competency Test for employees testing the following areas:

- Familiarity with employees manual
- Interpersonal relationships
- Team work
- Impact and influence upon others
- Adaptation to change

Analytical & strategic thinking
Attention to detail
Initiative & self-motivation
Resilience
Stewardship of resources

Those are only a few of the expectations in the secular world. Some of you have taken this or similar tests at your place of employment. What if we were given that same competency test as pertains to our level of spiritual competence? How about it? Could you stand to grow some in one or more of these areas of Christian competence?

We can and should engage in some serious soul-searching regarding our walk with Christ. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to allow the Holy Spirit to rivet our attention on one or more of the core competencies listed above. And, as you do, keep this thought in mind: For a variety of reasons, Jesus wants you to possess these competencies even more than you do!

Paul said to the worldly and incompetent Christians in the Corinthian church, “In understanding be men.” (1Corinthians 14:20) That is, “Engage your minds!” Understanding is a mental process. Christian inspired thinking and values are needed more than ever in our churches and in society in general.

The writer of the book of Hebrews has some straight forward words for the Hebrew Christians to whom he was writing. He was explaining the high priestly ministry of the Lord Jesus and he paused in his discourse and said:

“I have a lot more to say about this, but it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby's milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God's ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong.” (Hebrews 5:11-14 Eugene Peterson's *The Message* rendition:).

There are two principle explanations for incompetence among Christians: Ignorance and/or laziness! Let us get our minds into living out the life of Christ which is in us. Focus and follow-through is what we need. Incompetence in the life of a child of God is a slander against the heavenly Father!

A fourth evidence of spiritual maturity is:

4. Potence – “be strong”

Impotence is, of course, the opposite of potence; weakness is the opposite of strength. We are to grow from impotence and weakness to strength. Mature believers are strong in the faith and for the faith. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Ephesians 6:10) is Paul's admonition to the Christians in Ephesus and to Christians today.

Theodore Roosevelt was a man of action. On the slopes of San Juan Hill he was the Rough Rider but he also was known to speak gently and carry a big stick. His favorite chapter in the Bible, not surprisingly, was the first chapter of Joshua. There God encouraged Joshua when he became the successor to Moses saying to Joshua repeatedly:

“Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6);

“Be strong and very courageous” (1:7);

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”(1:9)

We’ve all heard the cliché, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” In context, the words: “the going gets tough” mean “the situations” we find ourselves in from time to time.

The words: “gets tough” mean “becomes difficult”; “the tough get going” means “people who are strong, resilient or enduring.” Taken together, the meaning of the phrase is “When the situation becomes difficult, the strong will work harder to meet the challenge.”

There are several characters in the Bible who exemplify toughness in times of trial. I think of:

- Joseph who was thrown into a pit by his brothers and sold as a slave into Egypt, yet later he said to his brothers: “You thought evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20).
- Caleb, who at age 85 said, “Give me this mountain stronghold where the giants live.”
- Young David who faced and killed the giant Goliath.
- The prophet Jeremiah who was rejected by people who claimed to know God and was thrown into a dungeon.
- There was Stephen who prayed for his enemies while they stoned him to death.
- Who would not list the indomitable Apostle Paul in their list of “toughies” for God?

The poet J. G. Holland has given us this poetic portrait of a potent person of God:

God, Give Us Men!

God, give us men! A time like this demands
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands;
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;
Men whom the spoils of office can not buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;
Men who can stand before a demagogue
And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty, and in private thinking.”

The world today needs men and women who would dare to be audacious for God. We should be audacious in fighting for Christian principles and overcoming moral and spiritual enemies; people who are “strong in the Lord and the power of his might” (Ephesians 6:10); persons who are victorious, triumphant Christians!

Why not resolve today to take heart, be of good courage, be brave, fear no enemy; the need is great, God is our strength—live in the power of the Holy Spirit and be a potent power for God!

Illust. In the family devotional time, it was the adolescent boy’s turn to read the Scripture selection for the day. The reading contained Joshua 1:7 which is: “Only be strong and very courageous.” However, the boy read the verse as follows: “Only be strong and very **CONTAGEOUS.**” The Mom and Dad smiled for the son had unknowingly expressed a needful emphasis. Those who are living powerful lives for God are not only *courageous* but they are also *contagious* as they touch the lives of others. That is infectious fortitude, a potent witness!

Last, but not least, is the evidence of:

5. Excellence – “*Let all that you do be done with love.*”

The great love chapter of the Bible is 1st Corinthians 13. The preface to the chapter is in 1st Corinthians chapter 12 and the last verse: “I show you a more excellent way” (verse 31), then follows the classic love chapter. Love is the more excellent way

The church at Corinth was full of factions, contentions, and divisions. The corrective prescribed by Dr. Paul was “*Let all that you do be done with love.*” Love for Christ is to be the fountain from which springs all other attributes and actions of the child of God. We are not only to believe correctly but to behave charitably. Ill-tempered, grouchy, irritable, grumpy and edgy Christians are poor advertisements for the way more excellent. The oil of Christlike love will prevent a lot of friction among the saints for true God-like love reduces friction to a fraction! That’s the way of excellence. That’s love from above!

The essence of practical Christianity is God’s love expressed in the lives of Jesus’ followers. Love is not a character trait we can acquire simply because we are told that it is a good quality to have. We cannot put on the attractive attribute of love just as we suddenly put a smile upon our face. It is not something that we add to our public persona. Genuine love is the by-product of being loved by God and accepting that love in the person of Jesus Christ. When we accept God’s love we are transformed from the inside out. This love is not superficial, it is supernatural!

Our deportment and deeds are to be motivated and regulated by the love of God. Love impelled Christianity is not interested in social standing, racial origins, intellectual attainments, financial ratings or political position. It is a love that is shared with all equally.

The church will advance when fueled by love for one another. As Jesus said:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34, 35).

Illust. Charles Spurgeon, the well-known British pastor, was visiting a friend who had a weather vane atop his barn with the words, “God is love” on it. Spurgeon chided the friend because the weather vane was always changing directions and he said to the friend, “That is not an appropriate statement about God to be on the ever changing weather vane for God’s love is unchangeable.” The friend replied, “Oh, but it is, for it means that God is love no matter which way the wind blows!”

Who do you need to express God’s love to today? Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to come alongside of? Who do you need to serve or to reach out to? An ounce of love is worth a pound of advice.

Summation

Our text contains 5 evidences of spiritual maturity: “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” In other words, spiritual maturity is demonstrated by our: Vigilance, Perseverance, Competence, Potence and Excellence.

However, without spiritual life, information and motivation is useless. Do you know that you have God’s eternal life offered in and through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? If you have His life there will be the desire to grow in His likeness. If you do not have that desire, you do not have His life. Growth is one of the essential signs of life in both the physical and the spiritual realms.

If you have His life His design is for you to grow to spiritual maturity. Are you growing? If you are not, or if you are dissatisfied with your rate of growth, be sure of this: God intends every Christian to grow to spiritual maturity. His Word commands us, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). That’s God’s expectation and our obligation and privilege.

Spiritual growth is simply matching up our practice with our profession and position. Our position in Christ is super-elevated: God has “... raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). God wants us to reflect that position in our practice. That mature Christians will do.

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