

As a parent, one of the greatest joys is when you see your kids are healthy and thriving. And one of the greatest burdens and concerns is when you see one of your kids struggling, not developing the way they should. I have three young children, and I've been on both ends of the spectrum with this. When our first child was about nine months old, we took him to his normal checkup. He was walking already at the time, and his doctor said, "He's one of the youngest kids we've seen walk. He's pretty advanced." I felt proud as a dad. When we took Addie in for her 18 month checkup, she was talking in full sentences. Her pediatrician said, "It's rare to see a kid so young talk so much; she's really advanced." Again, I was encouraged. With our third child, Luke, every time we took him to the doctor, we got the exact opposite report. He started out in the 15th percentile for weight, then went down to 11, then down to 9, then down to 6. We tried many ways to increase his weight, but none of them worked. We got to the point where the doctor said, "If he doesn't start putting on weight by his next visit, we are going to have to refer him to an endocrinologist to see if there is something wrong with his metabolism." No parent wants to hear the words, "Your child isn't growing; your child isn't maturing in the way he should."

What is true at a physical level is also true on a spiritual level. Nothing brings our heavenly Father greater joy than when his children are maturing in their faith, growing to look more and more like Jesus, loving him, loving others, living a life on mission. Few things bring greater concern to God's heart than when his children stagnate in their faith and live immature, spiritually undeveloped, or underdeveloped lives.

That is at the heart of what Paul is getting at as he opens the final section of Colossians 1. To summarize, Paul says, "My deepest desire for you as a church is that you would grow in your faith and become fully mature!" Listen to how he says it in Colossians 1:28-29: "Jesus is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me." Paul says that with every last drop of energy he has, he is strenuously contending to present everyone fully mature in Christ. Today I want to make the message as clear and simple as possible: God wants you to be fully mature in Christ! That is his hope and goal for you. No question. No doubt. That is what he wants. That's what I want for you. That is what this church wants for you! That is the goal. But all the research, research of hundreds of thousands of people in the major denominations, shows that only about 20% of Christians actually come to a place of maturity in their faith. If you are a Christian in this country, statistically speaking you only have a 1 in 5 chance of becoming spiritually mature. That is tragic. We want to defy those odds as a church. So today we are going to talk about how to know if you have stagnated in your faith, how to know if you are truly growing in your faith, and finally, what steps you can take to put yourself on the path toward consistent growth.

Let's begin by talking about signs of prolonged spiritual immaturity. I highlight "prolonged" spiritual immaturity because there is nothing wrong with being immature in the faith if your faith is brand new. If you come over to my house for dinner, you aren't going to be surprised to see my one-year-old drinking milk out of a bottle. If we sit down for dinner and I pull out a bottle of milk and start sucking on it, you'd have questions and concerns. There is nothing wrong with a person who just came to Christ exhibiting spiritual immaturity. There is nothing wrong with someone who has only been following Jesus a short time being immature in their faith. But we can't stay in that place!

What are the signs that a person has stagnated in their growth and is experiencing prolonged spiritual immaturity?

1. Lack of discernment, which basically means an inability to understand what truly pleases God. If you are a really good barista, then when a customer comes into your coffee shop day after day, before long, you learn to anticipate what they are going to order. Sometimes you get it started before they even pay for it. But imagine if you walked into a coffee shop and the barista said, “Would you like your usual?” You nod. You pay, but then they hand you something you did not want, something you would never order even in ten lifetimes. You wouldn’t question the good intentions of the barista, but you would doubt the discernment. They haven’t taken enough time to truly get to know who you are. The same happens in the life of many Christians. They have not gotten to know God’s character enough to truly know how he wants them to think and live. “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 6:13-14). I love that phrase “constant use,” because ideally, the more time you spend with God, the more reps you have with him, the better you get to know him.

2. Unwillingness to repent of sin. I don’t think any of us are ever going to get to a stage in life where we don’t make mistakes. That’s part of living in a fallen, imperfect world. An unwillingness to repent of sin is when you know something is wrong, you know it doesn’t honor God, and you decide to do it anyway. In the book of Numbers, God instructed the priests how to atone for the sins the people committed unintentionally; these sins were not purposeful. But listen to what God says about intentional sins: “But anyone who sins defiantly blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them” (Numbers 15:30-31). We are in a different covenant in which the blood of Christ covers all our sins, but you can see God responds differently to sins that are incidental that we try to correct with his help, than to sins that are intentional, where we despise his Word and chose our way rather than his. Whether it is sexual sin, greed, gossip, materialism, alcohol dependency, you name it—Jesus is holy, and unless we are willing to repent of that sin and grow in holiness, we will not be able to mature into his image.

3. Focusing on behavior modification rather than heart transformation. You don’t have to spend time around the church for long to realize that there are certain behaviors that are celebrated and others that are frowned upon. Some behaviors gain the respect of others, and some lose the respect of others. Sadly, it is an all too common reality for people to learn the social norms of a religious community and, like a chameleon, try to conform their outward behavior to that which is expected or celebrated by their community. If not done from a heart motivation of love and worship, Christian behavior can devolve into a legalistic checklist or a self-serving pathway to personal gain. Jesus called out the Pharisees for this very practice: “On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matthew 23:28). This is counterintuitive, but if religious behavior doesn’t flow sincerely from a transformed heart, that religious behavior is actually a barrier that separates you from God, not a bridge that closes the gap.

Those first three are somewhat obvious. These final two might be a bit more challenging and require you to dig a bit more beneath the surface.

4. Independence. America trains us in rugged individualism—the less people you depend upon, the more successful and accomplished you are. That is not how it works in the kingdom of God. God created us from community, for community. If you were walking down the road and saw a human arm lying on the ground, you would probably be shocked and highly concerned. You would immediately call the authorities: “Something is not right; there is a part of a body severed and disconnected here.” What alarms us physically should alarm us just as much spiritually. Ephesians 4:16 says, “From Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part

does its work.” You can no more grow spiritually than an arm cut off from a body can grow physically. You must be connected to a church and to other Christians in relationships of accountability, encouragement, love, and mutual submission. There is no other way.

5. Pride. A hallmark of immaturity is the default assumption that you are always right, that your opinion is correct, and that you know more than other people. This week Hudson and I were talking about different kinds of animals. He said that the flamingo was the second largest bird in the world. I said, “That’s not right buddy.” His immediate response was, “Dad, I know so much more about birds than you do!” He’s four. He has taken a few trips to the zoo and watched a couple Planet Earth episodes and all of the sudden he thinks he’s a zoologist! The sad thing is, I know exactly where he gets that overconfidence. I can’t tell you how many things I was absolutely certain of in my teenage years and early twenties. Now, 15 or 20 years later, I am willing to look at them from another angle. James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” If pride dominates our lives, God will set himself in opposition to us and we will not be able to grow. How can we know if we are proud? Here are a few questions to ask:

- How often do you let others talk first, without interrupting?
- How quick are you to develop and express a negative opinion of someone?
- How frequently do you acknowledge that a previous opinion of yours was wrong, and are you willing to share your error with others?
- How sensitive or defensive are you when someone points out a weakness of yours?
- How freely do you celebrate the strengths and accomplishments of your peers?
- How easy are you to lead?
- Are you living out of your own resources, or do you tangibly sense the power of God at work through you?

Pride can take a thousand different forms. But pride in any area of your life will inhibit you from growing more and more into the image of Jesus.

Those are signs of spiritual immaturity; what are signs that a person is progressing beyond infancy or adolescence into genuine maturity? Spiritual maturity is the heart of what Paul is writing about in this passage. He wants us to be fully mature in Christ, which means, as Dallas Willard has said, that we find ourselves effortlessly doing what Jesus himself would do if he were in our situation. That’s the goal we are shooting for. Luke 6:40 says, “Everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.” We want to live like Jesus and respond like Jesus in any and every situation in life. How do we know if we are making progress toward that end?

1. Awareness of weaknesses. Many consider Albert Einstein to be one of the smartest people to ever live. With all of his intelligence he is quoted as saying “The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know.” It’s counterintuitive, but a mark of spiritual maturity is being mindful of how much more maturity you need. Romans 12:3 says, Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” Mature people are able to see the enormous gap between where they are and where God wants them to be. But they aren’t aware of it in a “kicking the dust, chastising themselves, always frustrated with themselves” kind of way; but rather they trust God, that in his grace and in his timing, as they stay humble, available, and eager, God will continue to do his work.

2. Your reaction when mistreated. How do you respond when someone treats you poorly, when someone doesn’t give you the respect you think you deserve, or gossips about you, or steals from you, or hurts a person you love? Human instinct, as well as the instinct of many Christians, is to be angry, defend yourself, lash out, retaliate, hold a grudge. That is not the way of Jesus. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus told us to love our enemies. In Matthew 18:22, Jesus said, “Forgive your brother not seven times, but seventy-seven

times.” Even as people nailed Jesus to a cross, mocked him, and spat upon him, he prayed for God to have compassion on them. Christian maturity always looks like grace and love when we are wronged—not through gritted teeth, but effortless and spontaneous grace and love.

3. Contentment. American society convinces us that more is always better—more money, more cars, more square footage, more clothes, more vacations, more friends, more hair. More, more, more. A sign of sincere spiritual maturity is that you are content with what you have. Paul said when he was in prison, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:11) In John 3:27, when John the Baptist was losing all of his followers and some of his closest disciples prodded him, telling him he should be worried and respond to bring them back, John said, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.” A mark of true maturity is when you look at the life God has given you, the provision that God has given you, and you can say like David in Psalm 23:1, because “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Like the last two signs of spiritual immaturity, the last two signs of spiritual maturity are the most challenging.

4. Sustained intimacy with God. For most people, early on in their faith development they focus on setting aside time for God in their day and week. I have a devotional time in the morning, I say a prayer before I eat, I come to church on Sundays. And it’s almost as though people toggle back and forth from normal life to spiritual life. True maturity occurs when the line between the secular and the sacred dissolves and you learn to see every second as sacred, every moment as holy, because you are meeting with God all throughout the day. Paul said in Ephesians 6:18, “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions.” God wants to meet with you as you discipline your child, when you are having a disagreement with your spouse, while you sit in traffic, when your boss gives you a new assignment. Spiritual maturity looks like meeting with God and relying upon God in every moment of life.

5. A life of abundant love. The Bible says that God is love, and the ultimate sign that we are living our lives in God and that God is living his life in and through us is that sincere, selfless love becomes the dominant hallmark of our lives. 1 John 4:11-12 says “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” Those who live this life of love have been set free from focusing on themselves and advancing their own well-being, and now, they find their greatest joy in enhancing and enriching the lives of others, with not even a passing concern for self. The research shows that less than 2% of Christians ever mature to this stage. But when you meet someone who is living in this reality, who Christ is living through so completely and so beautifully, you see the fingerprints of God all over their life and you somehow feel closer to God and desire God more, just by being in their presence.

It could be easy to listen to these lists and feel discouraged, thinking there is still too much sin in your life, too much independence, too much pride, too little contentment, too little love. You could say, “I guess I’m just part of that 80%” and kick the dust. Obviously, we would all love to be further along than we are. The important thing is that wherever you are today, you don’t stay where you are today, but you open your heart and mind, your entire life, to God, and you say, God, whatever it takes, help me grow to maturity in Christ. Everyone knows the old adage, “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago; the second best time is today.” The best time to have done all this spiritual formation work was twenty years ago. You can’t go back in time, but you can start today!

Let’s talk about the pathway toward maturity in Christ.

1. Embrace Scripture. In every study that I have seen that tracks the most helpful tool for people in growing in the faith, Scripture ranks as #1, and there is no close second. God speaks to people and changes people through his Word. This is what Paul says in our passage: “I have become a servant to the church by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness...Jesus is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:25-28). Paul’s desperate desire, the commission God put on his life, was for these people to be fully mature in Christ, and toward that end he labored to present to them “the word of God in its fullness.” The word is the pathway to maturity. You will never get there without it. Paul says he admonishes and teaches everyone with all wisdom. On our own, our minds are oriented toward sin and deceit. Every single time. We need God’s word to teach us, correct us, rebuke us, train us in a life of righteousness.

2. Relational prayer. Relational prayer is quite a bit different from transactional prayer. Transactional prayer is oriented towards petition—“God, here are my needs, the needs of my family and friends and community; please provide for our needs and take care of us!” Transactional prayer is important and good. It’s encouraged all throughout Scripture. But relational prayer takes people to greater depth in God. Relational prayer occurs when, instead of focusing on your needs, like with your best friend, you simply enjoy being in God’s presence. “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere” (Psalm 84:10). That’s the heart of someone who simply wants to be in God’s presence. Instead of jumping into your prayer time, reading down the list, then getting on with your day, linger with the Lord a little longer, go on walks and talk with him, sit on the deck, watch the sunset, and reflect on the day with him.

3. Serve in selfless ways. This is something that Jesus had to teach his disciples again and again. They were constantly arguing with one another about who was the greatest. They kept posturing and positioning to get to the very top. Jesus said the kingdom of God isn’t found at the front of the line, but the back; it’s not the top of the pyramid, but the bottom. In Luke 22:27 Jesus said, “I am among you as one who serves.” Then he stooped down and washed their feet. Because Jesus is someone who selflessly served, there is no way to become like Jesus that does not involve a life of selfless service. We need to press into the selfless part. There are ways to serve that are fun and exciting. I serve by preaching, but I love doing it. It’s joyful and worshipful for me, but the service that is formative for me comes not on Sunday mornings as I’m preaching, but at 2 a.m. on Monday morning when someone has to take care of a sick kid in our house. That’s when it’s sacrificial. One of the things that most impressed me about Keren when I was getting to know her was her investment into the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. She had a little sister assigned to her who had a very rough life. She didn’t have a bed to sleep on. She didn’t have shoes to wear. Keren spent time with her almost every week for six years. When I saw the way Keren served this young lady in the inner city, I saw Jesus in her. Serving in selfless ways matures us into the image of Jesus.

4. Proactively seek discipleship. Because I don’t know how to play the piano, if I wanted to learn I would ask someone who does know how to play if they could teach me. I would meet with them on a regular basis and ask them to train me in this new skill I want to acquire. What is true for the piano is just as true, if not more so, for our maturity in Christ. We need people who are further along than we are in our faith to guide and coach us. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” I was having lunch this week with a 63-year-old man, a retired minister, and he said, “I am so glad that God recently brought a mentor into my life.” That is so wise, humble, and mature. If you want to mature in Christ, have someone whose example you can follow and who can help you grow a disciple.

5. Meet with God in your brokenness. Every single one of us faces profound hardships and pain in life. You are single and you want to be married and the weight of the loneliness is crushing. You experienced

physical or sexual abuse. You got fired from your last two jobs and you are facing financial burdens and questioning your self-worth. You lost a loved one. You never had a father in your life. You've gone through a divorce. You have shame from decisions you made in the past. Every person goes through pain and heartache. If you want to grow into maturity in Christ, it comes not from trying to put that behind you and move on, it comes from meeting God in that place and letting him put you back together again. David said, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4). "You are with me." No matter the brokenness you are facing, invite God into that place. Some people, unwilling to do so, end up disillusioned and walk the path of deconstruction. But those who meet God in their pain, those who, like Jacob, stay up all night and wrestle with God and refuse to let God go until they know he has blessed them, those are the ones who truly mature in Christ.

We live in a world of instant gratification; we want everything to come to as fast as it possibly can so we never have to wait. But spiritual maturity cannot be microwaved. It takes time. But it is worth it. Paul said, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). If you keep your heart open, if you stay rooted in Jesus, he will bring it through to completion! Don't give up hope!