

October 28, 2012

John 15:1-17 / II Corinthians 13:5-11 / Ephesians 4:14-16

Christian Maturity Defined and Described

Maybe I should begin by asking everyone: What does a mature Christian person look like? / If you were to describe such a person to me, or list the characteristics of such a person, what type of individual would you describe and what characteristics would you include?

---

Because, you see, that's essentially what Paul gives us in our passage for this morning: The definition or description of a "mature" Christian. In fact, that's what he's been doing throughout this chapter, beginning in v. 2 where he gave us the first three traits of a spiritually mature person which were:

- 1.) Being completely humble.
  - 2.) Being completely gentle.
  - 3.) And patiently bearing with one another in love. And as I mentioned when we went over that verse -- all three traits were displayed to their fullest perfection in Jesus.
- 

Yet they weren't just traits of a mature Christian. They were also traits that are absolutely indispensable to achieving the goal of God for His Church - **UNITY**. Because you can have neither mature Christians / nor church unity / when their opposites -- pride, anger, and irritable impatience -- reside unchallenged and unrepented for in the hearts or the lives of God's people. That's why he shares those three traits before going on to talk of church unity - because they make church unity possible.

Then, after focusing on that need for unity in vv. 3-12 / Paul returns in vv. 13-16, to the topic of Christian maturity and what it looks like. Which means that what we find here in vv. 14-16 is a glimpse into what Paul would have given as his answers to the questions I started with. Because what he does in vv. 14-16 is describe for us what a mature Christian person would look like.

So, let's look at what Paul gives as the **FOUR** necessary characteristics of Christian maturity -- in addition to the other three we already looked at.

Because all seven are necessary not only to bring about maturity / but the goal toward which Paul is calling us / which is unity in the Body of Christ.

---

And as we consider them, let's begin **FIRST** with v. 12, because it's there that the whole discussion of what Christian maturity looks like, begins. In v. 12, Paul has told the leaders that their gifts are to be used to prepare or equip God's people to do the work of ministry, ***"so that the body of Christ may be built up..."***

And in v. 13 he gives us the kind of growth which that building up will bring about where he says: ***"Until we ALL reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become MATURE -- attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."***

So, what do we see? We see that in the context, the last part of v. 13 is Paul's definition of the word "mature." Maturity, according to Paul, is: ***"Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."***

In fact, a literal rendering of this verse in the Greek would read: ***"Until we ALL become A MAN of complete maturity, THAT IS, one who arrives at the whole measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."*** The last phrase being Paul's personal definition of a mature Christian.

---

And here, it is necessary to point out the change between the plural "we" / and the singular "a man" / since its critical to understanding this verse. He goes from using the plural (until we) / to the singular "become a mature man." He doesn't say: "Until we all become mature men (or people)."

---

And what's his purpose in doing that? The word "mature" in the Greek is actually "telios." / It's the same word that Jesus uses when he says, "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." / Same exact word - "telios."

It can also be translated: "Complete," / "lacking nothing," / "blameless" -- and is even used of a sacrifice that is, "without spot or blemish." And yes, it can also be translated "maturity" -- as it is here. But the point is this: As a maturity that arrives at or displays the fullness of the perfection of all Jesus is, it is NOT a maturity that is attainable by isolated individuals.

That's Paul's purpose in going from the plural **"until we all,"** to the singular, **"become a mature man."** The whole measure of the fullness or completeness of Christ is only attainable as the group acts as one!

Since Jesus embodied perfect, complete, divine manhood, there is too much of Christ for any one limited human being to ever attain to the full measure of who He is. Be it in terms of Christ's character, or His power, or His gifts, or His love, or any of His communicable attributes.

Yet this is Paul's point: What an individual could never attain to / the Body can - made up, as it is, of many members / where each person exercises his or her unique God-given gift / and each person displays some unique Christlike trait or characteristic.

When all that each person possesses is put together / pooled, so to speak, like ingredients thrown into one mixing bowl / the potential of imaging forth the full measure of the stature of Christ becomes possible in a way that it will never be (nor can ever be) in the lives of isolated individuals.

---

In fact, that's what the word "full stature" (or in the NIV, "whole measure") means. Full stature refers to a fully grown individual. / It refers to a person who is no longer an infant / or a child / or a teenager / or even a young adult / but a fully grown person of mature age -- often referring to a person with grey hair. Full stature refers to their body, age, and knowledge.

And what Paul is saying is that that whole measure of the fullness of Christ, can **ONLY BE ATTAINED** or **DISPLAYED** as **ALL** the gifts / and **ALL** the divine graces / and **ALL** the godly characteristics / of **ALL** God's people / are joined together as one!

For instance, a Church is a place where one person has the gift of helps and serves as Christ's hand reaching out to those in need (as Jesus did) / and another has the gift of empathy and serves as His caring ear to listen to peoples burdens (as Jesus did) / and another has the gift of evangelism and serves as His foot running to share the good news with the lost (as Jesus did) / and another has the gift of compassion acting as His heart which moves the body to

deeds of charity (as Jesus did) / and another the gift of giving, displaying His generosity and lack of attachment to earthly things (like Jesus) / and so forth and so on.

No one person has them all, since no individual can possibly possess or display all the varied perfections of Jesus! But together as a group we can at least begin to approach it, as each individual displays the grace or the gift Christ has given to them.

---

In fact, God wants us to KNOW that its only as a group that we can even come close to displaying the fullness of who He is. Because if each individual could be all that Christ is, we wouldn't need Him, or each other. For instance -- I'm almost embarrassed to say it -- but at various times in my life as a pastor I have earnestly wished I could do it all. / That I could play the piano like the best of concert pianists / and the guitar like Phil Keaggy / or sing like the late Keith Green / or have a mesmerizing preaching voice like George Whitefield / or a mind like that of Jonathan Edwards.

That I could have the wisdom of a Solomon / the evangelistic zeal and moral integrity of a Billy Graham / speak 11 languages fluently like my theology professor Roger Nicole / preach like Tony Evans (and not Jeff Evans!) / have the administrative or leadership gifts of a John Maxwell / the gift of healing like Francis MacNutt / write profound books on theology like J. I. Packer / have the prophetic insights of an A. W. Tozer / the piety of a John Murray / a ministry of intercession similar to that of Reese Howells or Leonard Ravenhill / and even tell jokes like the Christian comedian Mark Lowery (so that when I did people would actually laugh -- without having to tell them it was a joke)!

---

But you see, that's the whole point. God purposely put the body together in such a way that no one person has them all and we would need each other! In such a way that for us to reach the whole measure of the stature of Christ we would have to pool all our graces and gifts and work together! He didn't want any one person to have all the gifts! For if someone did, that person would never see their need to rely on the Lord or work with others in the body. We'd have a lot of "one man shows" and a very weak and disunified Church.

He purposely limits and apportions his gifts as He sees fit -- giving to others gifts we don't have / and to us gifts they don't have / so we'll see our need for each other. And the need for "each individual member to do its part." That's why there's no such thing as one individual who can -- alone and by themselves -- attain to the whole measure of the stature of Christ.

---

Then **SECONDLY** Paul says: "***Then we will no longer be infants...***" And here again it is somewhat unfortunate that the NIV made v. 14-16 a new paragraph, and in doing so broke a train of thought that was meant to be continuous. For as these verses are arranged, one could easily be led to think that the new paragraph starts a new theme or idea, when in reality, what Paul's really doing is simply continuing to define or describe what Christian maturity is!

That's why I re-read for you verses 11-13. Because Paul's argument goes this way: "***Until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. THEN we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching or doctrine.***"

---

So, what's the next aspect of Christian maturity? It's growing up beyond the characteristics evidenced in infants, or very young children. And by connecting v. 13 back to v. 12 with the word, "***Then,***" and going on to speak about, "***every wind of teaching or doctrine,***" we know that the maturity he's speaking of is a maturity in knowledge. A maturity in one's understanding of Jesus / or the Gospel / or the content of the Bible / or the faith in general.

And in that regard, what are the characteristics that infants lack and mature people have? Paul seems to suggest two. **1.)** Emotional and spiritual stability or steadiness. / And along with it, **2.)** Spiritual discernment.

**1.)** In reference to emotional and spiritual steadiness or stability Paul suggests that Christians who are immature / or in the "infant" stage (or the little children stage) are "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of doctrine..." That is, they can't stay firmly planted / or fixed in one place. They lack staying power, we could say.

And listen: It doesn't take a big wave / or a huge gust of wind / to carry a little child back and forth on a wave / or blow him around here and there. Because an infant lacks the weight / and the substance / and the stature / and the strength / and the coordination (or the staying power) that a full grown person has / who can dig in against an oncoming wave / or brace himself against a strong gust of wind.

Little children, precisely because they are so small, and weigh so little, lack the ability (the stability and steadiness) to stand firm.

And of course, in this case it means the stability to resist or stand firm against, "every wave, or wind of doctrine." Every novel teaching about Jesus or odd interpretation of the Bible. / Every strange, newfangled, avant-garde, never-thought-of before idea about the Christian faith -- put forth by people who love novelty, and chase after every latest fad, and want to be thought of as ingenious and admired as innovators.

People who jump on the bandwagon of any new idea simply because its new, without any thought of what it will do to the health and well-being Church God so dearly loves and sent His Son to redeem.

As Barclay says, ***"In every church there are those... who are like children; they are dominated by a desire for novelty; they are always under the influence of the last person they talked to; and they have a childish inability to concentrate on the essentials of the faith."***

They are like "infants," who always want to be entertained and get fidgety and whine or cry when they are not allowed to "venture off" wherever and whenever they want! Always wanting new stimulation and more stimulation and getting bored rather quickly with the old or ordinary.

In fact, little children, because they are so little and don't have enough knowledge or reasoning skills or life-experience to know otherwise, are susceptible to believing whatever someone tells them -- as was the case with me and my grandfather!

One time (when I was in the 1st grade or so) I was under the barn helping him shovel manure into the manure spreader. And he paused, called me over, bent down, looked me straight in the eye, and in all seriousness told me that the reason he had such a hairy chest (the sign of true manhood) was because (like the fields we were about to go spread the manure on so the grass could grow) he had rubbed manure on his chest. And low and behold, about a week later -- when no one else was around -- guess what I did. :) It's true. I got had!

---

People do it all the time with children -- the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus, and so on. And they do it because they know a young child's knowledge and ability to reason has not grown or matured to the point of being able to know better.

And that's Paul's whole point. The Christian who is not well-grounded in the basics of the faith / or good sound theology and doctrine / will always remain immature in their faith.

---

And as people who are immature in the faith, they will remain susceptible to, **"the cunning and craftiness of men,"** who **"in their deceitful schemes,"** lead people astray.

The Greek word for "cunning" is "kubeia," from which we get our English word "cube" or "dice" -- "kubeia" meaning **"a person who is skilled in manipulating the dice."**

And in their skill of manipulation, they will toss the immature back and forth and all around / until they don't know what they believe / thereby destroying the unity of the Body / and leading people away from the Church. Like the gathering I saw advertised not long ago which ended with these words:

**"Gather with us to contemplate and meditate on the Word of God. Jesus without dogma. Spirit led, no preaching. Honoring the inner pilgrimage."**

It was led by a "spiritual director," not a minister or pastor.

2.) That's why we also need the other characteristic of a mature Christian -- discernment. Because, although, as Barclay notes: **"There are always those who by clever and ingenious arguments seek to lure people away from**

***their faith,*** I believe it is also true that there are probably few times in all of church history where the faith of so many has been assaulted by the teachings of ***"cunning people"*** (skilled dice-throwers) who are putting forth so many clever, novel and ingenious arguments to lead people astray. It's everywhere -- books, movies, the internet, colleges, and even seminaries and churches -- you name it.

And Paul says that the ONLY REMEDY is being solidly grounded in the basics of the faith, and growing in our knowledge of Jesus. It's the weight and strength that comes from a regular healthy diet of good, meaty, solid doctrinal instruction in the essentials of the faith -- which, interestingly, is the very thing many churches are now avoiding.

---

As Os Guinness says in his book "Dining with the Devil" (and I concur): ***"If I had a nickel, for every time someone trounced the need for good theology or doctrinal instruction in the church, I'd be rich."*** It's true. The call phrase of many is: "Don't teach doctrine." A phrase which is completely contrary to the Bible, but makes complete sense in a post-modern culture that believes there is no such thing as truth.

And as a result the Church is paying a huge price, as it sees people wandering off into all sorts of faddish gimmicks. ***"Heresy,"*** as the Puritans used to say, ***"is like fish -- you have to swallow it quickly or it begins to stink."***

***"When it comes to a preacher or teacher of the Bible,"*** as my professor Nigel Kerr once said, ***"I'm not so sure novelty is a good thing."***

Or as J. I. Packer put it, commenting on the contemporary sermons of today which are short / pithy / lacking-in-good-solid-doctrine, and filled with jokes and humor: ***"Sermonettes make Christianettes."*** (And in this age of skilled dice manipulators, that's not what we want to be producing!)

---

And then LAST we come to the last two characteristics of a mature Christian: Which besides active involvement in some type of ministry (vv. 12 & 16) is, ***"One who speaks the truth in love"*** (v. 15) and ***"builds others up in love"*** (v. 16). Mature people whose lives are characterized by a deep love for one another.

They don't merely speak the truth or rudely bash people over the head with their Bibles (as many have in the past), they speak the truth in love. For to proclaim truth in an unloving or insensitive way is not in accord with either Christian doctrine or Christian practice.

Maurice Boyd is right when he says: ***"Sometimes, sadly, the truth of the faith has been denied by the manner in which we have declared it. This is to our shame. We have not been content to say what we believe; we have not been satisfied, in the splendid words of John Wesley, "to offer them Christ." We have done it in a way that denies the Spirit of the Christ we offer them. We have preached love lovelessly. We have declared the Gospel of grace gracelessly. We have spoken of the Divine mercy mercilessly, and have [thereby] become a reason for unbelief."*** Who could disagree?

And so I say: **Until love for others fills your heart, saturates your words and governs your interactions with others (both inside and outside the Church) Paul would say, you are NOT spiritually mature.**

For the greatest sign of maturity is NOT any one gift -- be it prophecy, tongues, miracles, visions, or anything else. It is a love which:

- 1.) Aims at unity in the Church.
- 2.) Saturates the words we speak.
- 3.) Yearns to see others (or each individual in the Church) built up in Christ.