

Only the Beginning

Rom. 8:29; Eph. 2:10, 4:11-13; Heb. 5:11-14; 1 Cor. 3:1, 14:20.
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For the last several weeks all across the country, there have been ceremonies marking the achievement of graduation. Many of them have featured special speakers who stood before the gathered graduates and told them that the event is called a commencement ceremony for a reason: graduation is not really an ending, but a new beginning. The ceremony encourages graduates to commence living a new chapter of their lives.

Every year graduates experience the same or similar ceremonies, and every year they hear the same or similar advice and encouragement. Why do graduating students go through the same ceremonies and listen to the same speeches year after year? Because they need it. Because for every class there are always some who are going to get “stuck.”

I can best tell you what being “stuck” means by sharing what graduation season was like when I was still a student at Sparta High School. Every year, there were always some graduates who just couldn’t move on from high school. Back then, there would be very obvious clues to which seniors were going to be “stuck.” Typically, about a month before graduation, these seniors would be the most vocal about graduating, saying things like “I can’t wait to get out of this place!” or “When I graduate, I’m never coming back here!” You would find them decked out in “Class of” whatever year it was clothing and jewelry. And in the final days leading up to graduation, their excitement would be nearly uncontrollable, as they screamed and ran through the halls, high-fiving each other and taunting the underclassmen.

But an interesting thing would happen the week after graduation. Those seniors who had been running through the halls wildly celebrating their release and vowing that they’d never return to the school *came back*. On the east side of the high school was Union Street, and every afternoon there’d be a parade of those seniors who couldn’t wait to leave now driving slowly past the school, looking longingly in the windows, and playing their heavy metal music really loud.

They were “stuck.” Graduation was supposed to be a new beginning for them, but they didn’t want to leave high school behind. Consequently, many of these “stuck” students failed to move on.

Of course, it isn’t just graduates who get “stuck.” Any of us can find ourselves “stuck” in a moment that we seem unable to move beyond. That moment might be marked by pain or even achievement, but whatever the specific case might be, we find ourselves unwilling to move forward in our lives, trying to justify why we’re standing still.

Unfortunately, we can even become “stuck” spiritually. A particularly frequent “sticking point” for Christians is conversion, when we receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.

I’m not up here this morning to diminish conversion. When a person becomes a Christian, he or she is responding to an incredible work of God. It should be celebrated, and the Bible teaches us that heaven does just that when someone accepts what Jesus has done for him or her (Luke 15:7). Conversion is so

significant that Jesus says it is a matter of crossing over from death to life (John 5:24). We should absolutely celebrate and applaud and thank God for His saving work in our own or another individual's life.

The problem is that, while there are “next steps” to the Christian life, they don't really come with the fanfare and attention that becoming a Christian entails. As a result, many folks never even attempt to move beyond this point. They figure that since they are saved, there really is nothing left for them, or that moving to that next stage of spiritual maturity is optional. According to the Bible, they figured wrong.

Turn with me to Rom. 8:29:

²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

It's interesting that Pastor Leo tied the verse just previous to this—And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.—to the overarching story of the Book of Ruth. He explained that while we may not be sure of why certain things happen in our lives, we can be sure that God is working through them for our good. Verse 29 tells us what that good he is working for is: being “conformed to the likeness of his Son.” Through all things in our lives, God is working for our good, so that we become like his Son, Jesus.

Now turn to Eph. 4:11:

¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ 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.

Jesus provided for spiritual leaders—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—so that, ultimately, we can all become “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” The goal for us as Christians, then, is not simply for us to place our trust in Jesus, but to actually become like Jesus. Our goal is Christlikeness.

With this goal in mind, I want us to look at three reasons why becoming a Christian is only the beginning of our life of faith. Additionally, I'm going to share some clues that might help you determine whether you are “spiritually stuck.”

The first reason why we should mature in our faith is simply because we are supposed to. Growing toward spiritual maturity is—or at least should be—a natural part of being a Christian and becoming like Christ.

In John 3, Jesus tells one of the leading Pharisees, Nicodemus, that he must be “born again.” Even today, there are Christians who refer primarily to themselves as “born again,” meaning that they have been made new through the work of the Holy Spirit by trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Using Jesus'

metaphor, it stands to reason that if a person can be “born again,” then when that person is saved, he or she is a “spiritual baby.”

Let’s think for a moment about babies. We love them, don’t we? Nothing is better than a baby dedication to get people all smiley. Even though they’re wonderful, we don’t want them to stay babies, do we? Getting up at all hours. Filling their pants at the most inopportune moments and leaving us to clean up the mess. Burping up what we wish would’ve remained down. Crying.

As much as we get sentimental about babies passing milestones like crawling, walking and so on, we’re happy about them as well. We do not want them to stay incapable of caring for themselves. Imagine our disappointment if our babies did not grow up. They are supposed to grow up.

This explains the frustration of some of the Bible’s writers. The author of Hebrews complains that his readers are still babies when they should be much more mature (Heb. 5:12-13). Paul, in 1 Corinthians, tells his readers he must address them as infants, and later advises them to “stop thinking like children” (1 Cor. 3:1, 14:20). The point is that we are not meant to remain spiritual babies. We are supposed to grow up.

The second reason we should mature in our faith is because we need to. Staying a “spiritual infant” leaves us helpless; the process of growing up in our faith helps us gain the tools we need to live a Christian life.

Again, we can compare our spiritual lives to our physical lives. A baby does not come out of the womb walking. It takes months of stretching and strengthening the leg muscles, gaining a sense of balance and plenty of falls before a baby can walk. And even when the baby can walk, it still takes time for the baby to get good at walking. In fact, they’re often not really considered babies anymore when they can walk well.

Or think about riding a bicycle. I don’t know anyone who jumped on a two-wheeler the first time and rode it like pro. It takes falls, scrapes and running into all kinds of objects before we can ride a bike anywhere near well.

The Christian life is similar. It takes the kind of practice that growing up in the faith brings. Recently, I was talking with a friend who was upset about struggling with sin. He was feeling poorly about himself because he believed he was constantly letting God down. I told him he should not be so hard on himself because living a Christian life does not come naturally to us. In fact, it’s sin that comes naturally. Living the Christian life requires practice.

We have already briefly looked at these passages, but turn with me to them so that we can study them a little more deeply. First, in 1 Cor. 3, note how Paul is able to determine that his readers are not mature:

3 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among

you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

Paul admonishes the Corinthians because they are returning to old ways of behavior. They are still spiritual babies because they need to *unlearn* ways of interacting and thinking. Jealousy is apparent among them. They are itching for an argument. They *aren't* acting like mature Christians.

They say that “old habits die hard,” and when it comes to sin I would definitely agree. It is difficult to leave behind old patterns of thought and behavior and incorporate new ones. It takes practice.

Let's also look at Hebrews 5:11-14:

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Verse 14 stands out because it speaks to something we need to know: we need to be able “to distinguish good from evil.” If we are to honor God with our lives, we definitely want to do what is good. But if we cannot tell good from evil, this becomes a problem for us. Verse 14 tells us that this knowledge isn't something that is innate to us. It requires training. Listen to what commentator Donald Guthrie writes regarding this verse:

The power to distinguish between good and evil has been sought ever since the times of Adam and Eve, but the facility to do so does not come easily even for those with some knowledge of Christ.

Living out the Christian life requires us to incorporate whole new ways of thinking and doing. The only way we get there is through practice: being in God's Word, investing in relationship with him, and putting our faith to work every day in our lives. But if we refuse to engage in the process of growing up spiritually, we will never get the practice we need to truly become more like Christ.

The third reason we should mature in our faith is because we find fulfillment there. When we remain spiritual infants, we are easily influenced. In Eph. 4, Paul compares it to being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind.” It is difficult for us to find our footing, or to be at ease with who we are because every little thing can put us into a tailspin. As we pursue spiritual maturity, however, we find increasing security and assurance because we finally begin to grasp God's purpose for us. What is that purpose? Service.

Back in the Ephesians passage we already cited, Paul writes that Jesus gave us spiritual leaders “to prepare God's people for works of service... (Eph. 4:12).” Moreover, earlier in the book, he tells the Ephesians and us that “...we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard stories from people who went off to serve, believing they were doing a major favor, only to find that the serving did more for them than it did for the particular person or effort being served. When we truly engage in service, when we give ourselves over to it as a call from God, it is inevitable that we will find great joy and satisfaction in it. We are doing what God created us in Christ Jesus to do, and we follow the example of our Savior, who fed the hungry, healed the sick, and washed the feet of his disciples. We are living like Christ, which is the goal of being a Christian to begin with.

We need to pursue spiritual maturity. We need to grow up in our faith. But if you are thinking that you must do this in your own power, let me reassure you that you do not. Only God has the power to change us, but we must be willing partners in his work. He is ready to guide you through the process like a parent holding the hands of a child taking his first steps, but you have to take the steps. He can't do that for you.

Finally, I'm sure there are some here this morning wondering if, in fact, they are "spiritually stuck." I came across three indicators that were put together by a Pontiac-area pastor that might help you determine where you're at spiritually. I've turned them into questions that you can ask yourself.

First, are you concerned with self rather than service? If "me" comes before "others" most of the time, you might be stuck in spiritual infancy.

Second, are you concerned with argument rather than action? A healthy debate can be a good thing, but constant critique and argument more often lead to strife and division instead of doing something productive.

Third, do you look to people rather than the Master? Using an example from earlier, whose hands are you relying on to help you as you practice your Christian walk? Are you relying on a scintillating sermon from the pastor, or a dynamic time of worship, a special Christian event to keep you upright and moving, knowing that any one or all of them probably will fail you at some point? Or are you relying on God and his power and guidance to give you balance and to help you up when you fall?

Wherever you are at as you assess yourself with these questions, I encourage you to pursue spiritual maturity. You are supposed to grow. You need to grow. You will find fulfillment as you grow. Being saved is only the beginning of what can be an incredible life of faith.