

Spiritual Maturity

Exercising Righteousness

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Every week I receive an email newsletter called, *The Barna Report*. Many of you may be familiar with the Barna Group. It is a company that specializes in religious and cultural polling and research. It is led by a man named George Barna. The churches of God have been quoting him somewhat for the past 25 years or so, as well as in *The Plain Truth*, and the *Good News* magazines back in our Worldwide Church of God days. The *Good News* used to have an occasional interview with him too. The reason, of course, is that he talks about happenings, ideas, and movements in this world's Christian community.

What they do is extensive telephone interviews of people all across the country of every demographic stripe. Just a few weeks ago, they had an interesting survey that really struck me. It was titled, "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity." Their findings were summarized, and I want to read extensively to you from it.

America may possess the world's largest infrastructure for nurturing human spirituality complete with thousands of houses of worship, thousands of parachurch organizations and schools, and seemingly unlimited products, resources, and experts. Yet a new study from the Barna Group identifies an underlying reason why there is little progress in helping people develop spirituality.

Many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or outcomes of that process.

I hope that as I was going through the quote that you were listening to the language—not just what they were saying, but how they were saying it. Later on in the report, the study pinpointed five challenges to helping people to grow spiritually.

1. Most Christians equate spiritual maturity with following the rules.

There is truth in that. They are calling it a challenge; and it can be a challenge if you do not know what the rules are.

2. Most churchgoers are not clear what their church expects in terms of spiritual maturity.

3. Most Christians offer one-dimensional views of personal spiritual maturity.

What they mean is that they do not have a good grasp of it. They have only one thing that they think tells if they are spiritually mature or not. Usually it is something along the lines of, "I pray so often," or "I give so much to charity," or "I study the Bible every day, and I attend classes every week with my little study group," or other such things. It is only one dimensional—one thing. It can get whacky, too, among New Agers, "I do my yoga," or some other such thing that we would think to be far out.

4. Most pastors struggle with feeling the relevance, as well as articulating a specific set of objectives for spirituality, often favoring activities over attitudes.

So, if you attend the potluck, and you bring your famous covered dish, then you are spiritually mature. But if you did not, well then, you are not. That is a bit extreme, but if you attend the church activities and help with the Sunday school, and whatnot, then you are spiritually mature—whether you know a lick about the Bible or not, or whether you actually perform anything that the Bible says to do.

5. Pastors are surprisingly vague about the biblical references they use to chart spiritual maturity for people.

In this study, they said that most of them would refer to something rather idiotic like, "the Bible." Well, of course the Bible is our rule for spirituality, but they could not pinpoint anything more specific than that. A few would also have to say, "The New Testament," "the Gospels," or "the Epistles." Though it is getting a bit better, it is woefully inadequate.

There was a very small percentage of pastors who could maybe offer one chapter that defines spiritual maturity, like Ephesians 4, or maybe Galatians 5 and the fruit of the spirit. But most of these pastors could come up with only this huge generality about what spiritual maturity entails. If these people do not know, how are their parishioners supposed to know where to go to find out what spiritual maturity is?

Finally, the study's director, David Kineman, the president of the Barna Group, gives his

conclusion:

America has a spiritual depth problem partly because the faith community does not have a robust definition of its spiritual goals. The study shows the need for new types of spiritual metrics.

One new metric might be a renewed effort on the part of leaders to articulate the outcomes of spiritual growth. Another might be the relational engagement and accountability that people maintain.

Of course, spirituality is neither a science nor a business, so there is a natural resistance to ascribing scientific or operational standards to what most people believe is an organic process. Yet, the process of spiritual growth is neither simplistic nor without guidelines, so hard work and solid thinking in this arena is needed.

I find this fascinating, if not disturbing. And I do really find it greatly disturbing. The Barna Group, if you know anything about the Barna Group, is composed of what the world calls "Born Again Christians." And these people are supposed to be among the most spiritually attuned Christians in this nation. Yet, they are talking about spiritual maturity in terms of charting? And metrics? And scientific and operational standards?

It sounds like they are using science or business to come up with some sort of way to quantify spiritual maturity so that it would look good in their poll. It is reminiscent of Paul's statement in I Corinthians 2:

I Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

In other words, the Barna Group, and many others like them, is trying to measure spirituality with physical tools. That is an utter impossibility! You cannot make a chart and say that you have done fifty percent or more of this, and can then say that you are spiritually mature! It just does not work that way. You cannot find a metric for it, because that metric (if you can call it that) is in the mind of God and nowhere else. We cannot measure God's mind physically, or even the things that come from God's mind. Those things are spiritually discerned.

Obviously, I will be speaking about spiritual maturity today from the Bible's point of view. This is going to be a very basic sermon for us in the churches of God. It is not difficult at all. Spiritual maturity is not a hard concept at its base. It just so happens that spiritual maturity has a very significant connection to the Feast of Pentecost, because that is what this feast is all about—becoming spiritually mature. It is always good to be topical.

I would like to give you a few scriptures on the day so that we can use it as a touchstone.

Exodus 23:14-16 "Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. . . . and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field.

I want you to pick up the name that it is given there, "*The Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labor*". Notice the connection there.

Exodus 34:22 "And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest.

Even though the name has changed, *the Feast of Weeks*, it still has to do with harvesting firstfruits. Both of those concepts are there in this verse.

Leviticus 23:15-17 And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath [that is today]; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD.

Leviticus 23:20-21 The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

Here we have three passages in the Pentateuch in which the holy day is mentioned. It is given two different names—the Feast of Harvest in Exodus 23, which speaks specifically of the harvest of the firstfruits, and Exodus 34 calls it a different name, the Feast of Weeks—but the idea of harvest and firstfruits remains unchanged. Then Leviticus 23, strangely, does not give it a name at all, but it certainly implies the Feast of Weeks by the counting of the seven weeks from the Sabbath day within the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Nevertheless, even though the name of the holy day is not mentioned, the ideas of firstfruits and harvest are certainly there. So, they are integral to the meaning of this day.

There are also three places in the New Testament where this holy day is mentioned. We will not go there this year, but there is Acts 2:1, “when the Day of Pentecost had fully come.” Then, there is Acts 20:16 where Paul said that he wanted to get back to Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost. And then, I Corinthians 16:8 is another mention of wanting to do something by the day of Pentecost.

Of course we know that in the Greek, Pentecost is simply the word that means “to count fifty,” meaning, to count the fifty days needed to find Pentecost each year. It reflects what is there in Leviticus 23:15-16.

In the New Testament, this idea of harvest and firstfruits seems to be absent; however, it is there in a roundabout and subtle way. It connects the fifty days/seven weeks with Wavesheaf Day, which is the offering a sheaf of the firstfruits—the first of the firstfruits—and Pentecost and the wave loaves of the firstfruits. So, the counting of fifty days connects these two very important offerings.

We know by the types that the offering of the first of the firstfruits on Wavesheaf Day is the acceptance of Christ before God; He is the First of the firstfruits. If you look in I Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter, He is specifically named that—“Christ, the firstfruits.” And then there are those who are changed at His coming. I believe that is all found in verse 23.

It is a little bit of a stretch to say that in the term “Pentecost” the idea of the firstfruits and the harvest is there. But, the idea of connecting these two very important offerings is there.

The important point to understand is that this holy day describes the harvest of firstfruits who are holy to God. We see in Leviticus 23 that those two wave loaves with leaven

represent those whom God has called in this present age. And we can see a little proof of this by going to James.

James 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

Like Jesus Christ, who is the First of the firstfruits, we are a kind of firstfruits of His creatures, His creation, because He is going to continue to harvest more fruit. In Revelation 14, it is made clearer, and we can see the connection with Christ and the 144,000.

Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

Revelation 14:4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

In the time order of all this, it shows that these were the ones redeemed from among men during the 6,000 years of man's rule over this earth. And when Christ returns, these will be the ones resurrected and changed at His coming. These are the firstfruits. We have understood that this Day of Pentecost shows that process of all these people being redeemed from the earth. I have not gone into anything that has stretched your mind at all. I do not think I will today, either. This is basic for those of us in the churches of God.

We will begin to build on this by turning to Mark 4, because this idea of firstfruits is significant in the concept of spiritual maturity. This parable we do not read very often, because it is not in Matthew 13, nor in those ones in Luke that are so different. Believe it or not, this parable is only given by Mark. I do not know why the other apostles did not have it in their versions. Maybe they thought it was too self-evident. Regardless, this one is unique to the book of Mark.

Mark 4:26-29 And He [Christ] said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by

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day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Obviously, this has similarities to the Parable of the Sower. Just about every commentator I looked at in studying this mentioned that. That is their explanation for why the other gospel writers did not include it in their works, because it seemed so similar.

I do not buy that. This has a totally different teaching than the Parable of the Sower. It is similar to the parables in Matthew 13 only in that it is a Kingdom parable. And the form of it is very similar to those other ones found there in Matthew 13. As a Kingdom parable, it is an explanation by metaphor to Christ's disciples of how God's Kingdom works. That is what a Kingdom parable does. It is Christ Himself telling his disciples in a kind of code how they should expect the Kingdom of God to work.

The Kingdom of God that He is speaking about, however, is not what we normally think of as the Kingdom of God. We usually think of the Kingdom of God in terms of Christ coming back after the Great Tribulation, and the Day of the Lord, and He sets up His Kingdom on earth, and we all have this wonderful Millennium.

That is not what Jesus is talking about here. These do have a future aspect to them, but in most of these Kingdom parables, He is speaking about the present reality and on into the future of the church of God, not necessarily the Kingdom of God as it will be after He returns.

You may remember in Colossians 1, Paul says that we have already been transferred into the Kingdom of the Son of His love. What this means is that spiritually, we are already under the dominion, reign, and rule of God while members of His church. We have been called out of this world, and given citizenship in the new world.

What Kingdom parables show is how the true church and true Christianity functions in this world—for the most part. He will deal with things much differently when He brings the Kingdom in its fullness in the Millennium. But these are to help us now, not later. Really, what good would they do for us, if this was how it is going to be after we are resurrected into spirit anyway? It is not going to give us a great deal of understanding and help. But these show how the Kingdom works among men on the earth now in its present spiritual manifestation. You must understand that He is speaking about the now,

and how things work now.

In this parable, Jesus explains how spiritual growth occurs. It is very simple. It is a process, He says, just as the growth of a seed into a full-grown food-producing plant is a process. It happens invisibly; and it happens somewhat mysteriously too.

Since the Enlightenment, we have taken the mystery out of it somewhat through science. We understand a great deal more than the people of the first century church understood about how a seed put into the ground becomes a sprout. To them, they would sow seed out there, and the rains would come, and they would wait. And in a few days, there would be sprouts of whatever was sown out there coming up—a kind of miracle—it is a miracle! But to them, they did not have the scientific basis to understand how this all works. It was just as miraculous to think that this seed, which has now become a sprout, would develop and grow, and not only produce one other seed, but many other seeds, which when combined together produces a great crop and yield.

Jesus said that is how one becomes spiritually mature. It is the same type of process. Notice that He says here that the sower sows this seed on the ground, and goes his way, sleeping and rising, and watches how things are going, but he really does not know how these things work. He knows they happen. And Christ is talking about the human sower, not Himself. Christ knows how these physical things work.

Notice He does not say, “The Sower goes out to scatter seed,” but rather, “A man goes out.” It is very general. In other places, especially Matthew 13, He was very specific who the sower was, while this is general—a man.

Most people think, and I agree with them, that this man is the man that God uses to sow the seed, and not necessarily Christ Himself. He scatters the seed, and then goes about his other tasks. He has a job to do that God has given him, and suddenly in a few days the seed has sprouted, because of the resources that God provides. It is not what the sower did at all. All the sower did was to speak a word, or write an article, or preach a sermon, or whatever. And this other person picked up on it. God did the work.

In terms of a minister, we might have preached a sermon in 1999, and it is sitting out there on the Internet, and we have no idea. We have gone on and preached many more sermons since then, and written many other articles since then, but that one certain 1999 sermon may be the one that God uses to get somebody’s attention. We do not know, as ministers, how that happens. We are not aware of all the ways that God is working behind the scenes to bring somebody to the knowledge of the truth.

We understand that He does it, but we do not understand the mechanics of how God opens another man's mind to all that, and how He turns him to the truth and way of thinking so that he can begin to accept those things. We just go to bed at night, and get up the next morning and continue to do our work. God does the rest. It is like putting a seed into the ground, and it just sits there. But then at a certain time, God supplies the light, warmth, water, and the nutrients, and that seed then sprouts. God is working behind the scenes. All we see later is the sprout out in the field or garden when we go out to inspect it.

This is what Christ is saying here. The servant who goes out and scatters the seed is doing a fine job and wonderful work. But He Himself is really the One who is doing the work, all of it behind the scenes.

As it is said in other places, the sower, the servant will receive his reward for the work that he has done. But God is the One, the prime mover in all this, working invisibly, and mysteriously to bring forth a plant. He has His mind on something beyond just a plant. It is far beyond just to see that little sprout come up, because He also wants to see, as Jesus says here,

Mark 4:28 . . . then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

He does not only want the beginning blade coming up, but He wants the full head of grain or fruit—spiritual maturity—the ripened, finished fruit.

Mark 4:29 But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

I do not want to go into verse 29 very much, however, we should not think of this in terms of individuals. When a farmer plants a field of grain, he does not harvest each head by hand individually. He harvests the whole field for its crop all at once.

If you want to tie this in to prophecy, He is speaking about the time when the 144,000 are complete, and He can then say, "Now! Go!" And there you get the end of Revelation 14 where He sends His reapers, and they reap the harvest of the earth. He does it all at once. He has a crop He wants harvested when all the crop is fully ripened and ready for harvest. And when they are all ripe, then He can give the word. (This is especially so with a crop like wheat or barley.)

A Christian develops spiritually in the same way as this analogy with the plants. As I said, God uses something like a sermon, telecast presentation, or even a magazine article as the seed. I remember a story about a Plain Truth magazine that fell out of a window from some upper-floor apartment, and it hit somebody in the face down below on the sidewalk. God will use whatever method He chooses to get somebody's attention. It might be something small that we might not think would catch anybody's attention, but God uses it, and gets his attention through it, and leads him to the truth.

Even that servant does not know how God will work with the new Christian. The minister can be highly instrumental in feeding and cultivating the individual, but he cannot—*he cannot*—see the invisible, spiritual ways that God is developing that person for His Kingdom. He may have a long experience in the churches of God and be able to discern some of those things; however, it is not necessarily the case that the minister will be able to see someone's spiritual growth in minute areas.

In the same way as the parable, we may be able to see the sprout rise out of the ground. We may be able to see the head of grain beginning to swell the boot of the stalk. We surely can see the head changing color as it ripens. But those, in effect, are crude gauges. We do not see all the little works that are going on in each individual person's life. We are not with individual brethren all the time. We can only see it in a very general way. This is what Christ is getting at.

I love to plant things, especially shrubs and trees. I made the mistake of going out and inspecting them every day. And, do you know what? Every day looks about the same as the day before!

But, what is amazing is when you go and plant something, and you do not come back for about a week or two later, and then when you check on things, you are just amazed at how things grow. That is how a minister sees the brethren. If we were on your case every day, we would never see any growth. But after weeks or months, it becomes a bit more obvious when we remember how you were compared to how you are now. That is what Jesus is getting at. You only see the big stages, not necessarily all the little in-between stages.

Even so, the minister is fully aware that each Christian does grow in stages. We cannot expect someone who is newly baptized to be able to produce self-control to the same degree as someone who has been in the churches of God 20, 30, or 40 years should be able to produce self-control. That is just the way things are. Jesus said that it is like a growing seed. You cannot expect a sprout to produce ripe fruit right away. It must take some time. It is going to come only after a series of stages of growth has taken place.

I hope that is comforting. But, I also hope that it sets a goal for each one of us, that even if we are a sprout, we all want to become the “Green Giant” (an American canned vegetable producer) in that analogy. You do not want to stay like a little sprout. You want to be “Ho, ho, ho! Green Giant!” by the end of your spiritual life. That is the idea we are getting at.

The important point is that spiritual growth is a process of maturity that takes some time, that takes feeding and cultivation, and God, supplying what is needed and moving the process along according to His time and way, oversees all of this.

It is not as Barna and his research group would try to tell us, a process that is easily quantifiable. We can see growth somewhat crudely in its various stages, but most of the actual mechanics of spiritual growth are beyond understanding. They are God’s mysterious ways of working in us—as mysterious as it was to understand how a grain kernel becomes a sprout. So, we must accept that.

God is working in His people and will continue to work because He has the goal of having His crop ready for harvest. He is going to make sure that every plant that He has chosen for His field is going to make it and produce the right fruit.

We have all that on our side, but there is more to it than that. I believe that Paul must have drawn upon this parable from Mark. I cannot see how he could have ignored it when he was writing this analogy.

I Corinthians 3:6-9 I planted, Apollos watered [this is the same analogy], but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one [being united in their work], and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers [the ministry]; you [the brethren] are God's field, you are God's building.

He changes the metaphor to God’s building because he is headed toward the part about us being the temple of God, which we should not defile. The idea here is the same as in the parable, that God gives the increase to His plants in His field. The ministry is there to help things along as God’s servants. And He will reward His servants as He sees fit for the jobs that they have done. But, He is really trying to raise a crop in that field, and He is going to give whatever is needed—the best possibilities for growth, and the resources needed to achieve it.

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There is a part here that seems to be missing. Paul does not bring it out here, and only a little bit in the building metaphor which follows, where it says in verse 10,

I Corinthians 3:10 But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

He is speaking specifically to the ministry here, but it does also include the individual. What Paul and Christ are showing is that the plant has some work to do also. The plant does not just sit there, and do nothing, even though God provides the water, nutrients, and other energy. The plant has to take those things in and use them. It then grows. It puts out roots. It puts up a shoot. It puts on height. It eventually pushes up a head out of the stalk. It begins to ripen and mature the grain in the head—the fruit.

God provides the atmosphere, the environment, the energy, all the gifts, and whatever else is needed for these things to be done, but there is always the response from the plant to these things. God could spend an eternity supplying these things to the earth, His field, and His plants. But, if the plant never responds to these things, it would never sprout to grow up, and ripen a crop of grain/fruit. There has to be a response from the plant. And each person must take care how he responds.

I cannot overstate this point—God does a great deal for us, and we are very grateful and happy that He supplies us grace, gifts, and help at all times. But, we still must do something with them; otherwise, we will rot. That is what happens to a plant if it does not use the things that God provides for it. It eventually dies and withers.

Obviously, an analogy like this can be taken too far, but it holds up pretty well and pretty far. There must be some response to God's labors to promote growth in us. What He wants is for us to respond to the point where we become spiritually mature, producing the fruit of righteousness.

We will be spending most of the remaining time in Hebrews 4 and 5. I want to start in chapter 4 and show you in simple terms why Paul is writing what he does by the end of chapter 5. Paul is leading up to something, but by the end of chapter 5, he just cannot do it.

Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.

He is saying that there is this goal in front of us. It does not appear as if anyone in the

past, other than a very few luminaries, have come to the point where they could enter that rest. Certainly, Israel failed to enter that rest, just as he goes on to explain. And now, after he has explained that,

Hebrews 4:9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

He says that it is still out there for us. When the Israelites came into the Promised Land, they did not enter that rest. It was not the Kingdom of God; at best, it was a type. But the people were disobedient. We could tell by the activity of the people of Israel that they did not enter that rest. They did not cease their wrongdoings, their rebellions, and their disobedience.

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God,” who have already begun to cease from this world’s way of life. And when we go into the Kingdom of God, which is a type of the Sabbath day, we will cease altogether doing what the world does, and we will do what God does, because we will be changed into spirit and become like God is. We will have ceased being human and doing all the things that humans do, which are just so much anti-God.

So, he says, “It’s out there! The big goal is still there. The flashing neon light is lit, and we’re moving straight toward it.” Right? We hope!

Hebrews 4:11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

This is a warning! The warning is, that just as Israel failed to enter that rest, there is a possibility that if we are not diligent, we could also fail, even though the big neon light is still blinking, even though the goal is still before us, even though we have been called to it; if we are not diligent, we could fail to enter.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This is how we are going to make it, by coming boldly before God, and establishing and growing in the relationship with God, so He can supply us with everything we need to enter that rest. We must be diligent to enter that rest, laboring and striving, pressing forward toward the mark of the high calling of God.

We also must be bold before God. He is our best friend. Normally, we do not have problems asking our best friends for help, because we know that they, being our best friends, are willing to help. And so, he says to be bold before God, and ask Him for what you need. He is going to give it to you because you are on the same wave-length that He is on; you both want the same things. He will give you the grace and help, especially in the times of need.

He does not want you to fail. He has planted you in His field. So go! Go forth! Go before Him! Go get the help!

Going on into chapter 5, he begins to give us a little bit of instruction that we need to understand.

Hebrews 5:5-6 So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He [the Father] who said to Him [Christ]: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Obviously, Christ as the Son has this exalted position. He has already attained that exalted position. It seems on first inspection that it might be easy. Maybe God said, "Son, I have put you on the throne, and You will be a priest forever." That sounds like all of God's decree, does it not? But no, go on to verse 7:

Hebrews 5:7-11 [Speaking of Christ] who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear. Though He was a Son, yet He **learned** obedience by the things which He suffered. And **having been perfected** [a passive verb form that shows a process that was done to Him], He **became** (not simply was) the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

And now, here in verse 11, we are starting to get to the problem of why Paul is making this huge run-up explaining so painstakingly this whole thing. He is giving them what they need to understand as he goes into this next section. He has prefaced all this by saying, "Look, we've got a goal, and here's what you must do to be able to attain that goal—be diligent and get God's help."

The Son, the First of the firstfruits had to suffer. He uttered vehement cries and shed tears. He had to suffer death. And He had to learn obedience. He had to be perfected. It simply was not a walk in the park without any problems. No.

If He is the author of our salvation, as it says in Hebrews 2:10, and He had to go through these things, what about us? Are we going to be allowed to just sweep in on His coattails? It is easier for us because of what He did, and it probably will not be to the same terrible extent that He experienced. We will never be able to say that we had to go through more and suffer more than He did. But even so, because He is the Master and we are His servants, we are going to go through similar sorts of things.

He is the Leader, and we are the followers. We have to tread the same path, the same process. That is the gist of John 15:20, “The world hates you because of Me, and you will suffer persecution, because they persecuted me.” That is just the way that things work. “If you follow Me, and believe the same things that I believe, and do the same things that I do, then the world will also react to you, the same way it reacted to Me.” That is just the way it works. All those who are godly suffer persecution, just as Paul said.

There are going to be trials and tests; it is all part of the same path to spiritual maturity and salvation—the path to glory. We all have to go the same way. What we see, then, is that even though God does a lot, and maybe He does 99% of the work for us, there is still that 1% that we have to do. He requires of us, as He required of Christ, some commensurate effort on our part.

But the recipients of this epistle, the Hebrews, had become spiritually lethargic, and they had stopped growing. That is why Paul talks this way to them.

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Far from being the spiritually mature persons Paul expected, able to handle some of the things that Paul was teaching them, these Hebrews regressed somehow to being spiritual babies again. In the parable’s metaphor that we saw there in Mark 4, they

became seedlings again.

This does not happen in nature, where as it grows and is maturing fruit, a plant starts reverting back into a seedling again. But, spiritually it can happen. That is why I said that the analogy breaks down after a while. People normally do not do this either. They grow up and stay grown up. They do not become little babies again.

But they had regressed so far that they could not understand the deep principles that Paul wanted to explain to them, because it would have helped them to understand and give them a boost toward the Kingdom of God. They would have certainly become spiritually mature if they had followed that teaching.

As a matter of fact, the way that Paul phrases it here is that they could not even understand at this point any of the elementary principles and basics anymore. They had to go back and learn them again from the very beginning—the ABCs of it all. He says that they have to be retaught the first principles. That is going really far back. Who knows? They had gone all the way back to the very basic things that they should have learned at or near their baptism. They had gone back to square one. That is where Paul felt that he had to start, back at square one—back to the drawing board. To bring these people back up to speed, he had to start back with the very basics. That is really a very sad critique of these people.

What he says in verse 13 is because they had regressed so far, they had become unskilled in the word of righteousness. This is going to be our leaping off point. In the Greek, the word *unskilled* means “inexperienced.” This is funny, in a sad sort of way, because these people may have been in the church of God for 20 or 30 years. But he said now they were inexperienced, as if all they had gone through so far had counted for nothing. It had counted for no practice at all, no experience at all.

The word can also mean, which is even worse, “untried.” They had reverted so far, that it was like they were “green,” like a horse that had not been broken to a bridle for pulling a plow. They were untried. This word has the connotation of having being unskilled or untried in an activity. Let us say that someone wanted to become a runner in a marathon, but he had never run a marathon before. He was inexperienced. He was untried, if you will, in running a long race.

This word also refers to “a lack of ability.” They were not able. We are starting to go way back—how bad this must have been! The connotation here is that they had this lack of ability because of their negligence or inactivity. They had done nothing.

Remember, in Hebrews 2, Paul basically accuses them of negligence. They had let things slip. They had dropped the ball and not done anything for quite a while. Because of this, they had reverted and regressed to the point that they were spiritual babes who were unskilled, inexperienced, untried, and lacking all spiritual ability. That is dire!

The activity that they had become unskilled in was the word of righteousness, suggesting that these Hebrews (1) (found in verse 12) no longer had the spiritual acuity to understand God's Word, and (2) (found in verse 14) no longer had the ability to apply the principles of God's Word. They go together, do they not? If you do not understand God's Word, you certainly will not be able to apply it. They had lost both through negligence and inactivity.

If a person cannot understand what God requires, then he will not be able to respond to it. He will not be able to apply it in his life. If it is just black letters on a white page and meaning very little more than that, he is not going to see how it affects him and why he should do something. The metaphor here is that they had to relearn the ABCs. All they were recognizing was that they were letters on a page. They could not seem to put the letters together into words and phrases and thoughts. They needed to go back and learn how to read again—according to Paul's analogy.

Regarding the elementary principles of spirituality, they had to go back all the way to the beginning. Maybe I am exaggerating this, but it sounds pretty dire to me, once we start unpacking some of the ideas here in the chosen words of this passage. They had gone far and away backward. Verse 14 amplifies this thought of not being able to apply things.

A *maturing* Christian can be taught deeper principles of God's way of life. Why is he well on his way to spiritual maturity? What are the factors that allow him to be on his way to spiritual maturity? Well, it is really one big factor, after you count in God's involvement. Because *he has put into practice what he has already learned*. That is why a true maturing Christian can be taught more, and learns more, and grows more. He has put into practice what he has already learned.

It is like building blocks. You cannot have a top or a second story to your block building unless you build the first story first. Once you learn how certain blocks go on top of other blocks, then you can learn other principles of block-building to be able to go further in the making of your little block house or fort. But, if you do not apply those little principles of block building with the first blocks you have, all you will ever have is scattered blocks on the floor.

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You have got to use what you have learned. Then you can build some more, just like blocks, one on top of the other, to come to a deeper understanding of whatever it is you are trying to do—in our case, become spiritually mature—to be like Christ.

A maturing Christian has applied the commands and the principles of God's Word in his everyday life. In fact, a maturing Christian has made God's way habitual.

It is not like he is saying, "Okay, what do I need to do today to grow. Let's see, perhaps I'll pray. And then I'll study. And maybe I should take dinner to those people over there who are going through a bereavement. And, hmmm, this is tough—coming up with things to do—maybe, I'll pray some more."

That is the sort of thing somebody who is not a mature Christian might have do—write everything down and figure out what it is that they need to do. It has not become habitual yet. They are still in the process of learning things by rote. But a maturing Christian just does what he has learned. Because he has put it into practice, he has made it a part of his life. Every day, he begins to think along those principles, and he does not have to necessarily and consciously decide to do something that he knows is right.

What do we call this? What did Herbert Armstrong call this for those sixty years of his ministry, and the churches of God have continued to say for the past 23 more years? Grow in righteous character! Do you remember what Herbert Armstrong said that God was trying to do? He is trying to inscribe His way on our hearts. That is what growing in righteous character is all about. He is doing this to the point that it is so much a part of us, that we automatically, like God Himself, do what is right. We should be beginning to have those inscriptions written on our characters.

God does not have to think about being loving. He just does it. He is love. It is so inscribed on Him that He cannot be any other way but love. He has practiced love for all of eternity. He cannot do anything but love. He is the ultimate example of what I am talking about. He is the most spiritually mature Being in the universe. Why? Because He lives what He believes perfectly.

Psalm 111:10 A good understanding have all those who do His commandments.

When we put God's Word into practice, we gain understanding because, just as it says in verse 14 of Hebrews 5, it exercises our senses. He is not talking about our physical

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senses, but rather he is talking about our faculties of judgment and discernment. We have to exercise those faculties of judgment and discernment every day, all the time. And doing this, practicing God's way, sharpens our ability to evaluate what is godly and what is ungodly or worldly. That is how we come to know good and evil. We practice making good decisions all based on the word of righteousness. This is why Paul says, "I can't explain these things to you right now. You can't make the discernments or judgments! Because you're not practicing enough of God's way of life, you've lost the ability to understand, and to apply the word of righteousness. You have become unskilled, so I'll have to start at the beginning again."

When you get down to it, when you begin to daily exercise your faculties of judgment and discernment along the lines of God's Word, then you begin to make better choices (see my sermon "[Overcoming is a Choice](#)").

Here we are, zeroing in on the definition of spiritual maturity. A spiritually maturing Christian is one who has spent a long time (and it takes time) practicing God's Word and is becoming more skilled at making proper godly choices. In other words, the ultimate in human and godly spiritual maturity is always doing the will of God. If you want to be spiritually mature, do the will of God. Jesus Christ is the most spiritually mature Person who ever lived on this earth, and He reveals His secret to us in the book of John.

John 5:30 "I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

John 8:28-29 Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."

Notice that Christ said that He always speaks what the Father taught Him and that He always does what would please Him.

John 8:30-31 As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed."

Jesus is a perfect paragon of spiritual maturity. He was always able to make perfect judgments because He always did God's will. He just did it. He did God's will. Not just that He agreed with it, but He did it too. He always put God's instruction into practice in His life. He gave His entire life over to God and allowed God to work through Him, speak through Him, and live in Him—all the time. His every thought was to please the Father in everything—every thought, every word, and every deed. That is how He was so spiritually mature. His whole life was given over to imitating His Father.

Notice the instruction in verse 31, "If we abide in His word, we will be truly His disciples." I can put it another way—If we do what He did, we will be spiritually mature. Why? Because, we will be doing exactly what He did! That is what we are called to do. Are we not Christians?—meaning, are we not followers of Christ? If we do what we are called to do, we are going to become spiritually mature. That is simple, is it not? But it is true nevertheless.

My definition is "spiritual maturity is imitating Christ, and conforming perfectly to the will of God."

The people of this world try to quantify or measure spiritual maturity, and they come up with physical ways to attempt it. To them, it is whether one listens to Christian praise music or attends the spiritual retreat or refuses to dance or play cards or say so many Hail Marys or take vows of celibacy, poverty, or silence for Christ. Some of them of different religions pray toward Mecca or fast every Ramadan or set off a suicide bomb and kill infidels. Or of yet another different religion, rocking back and forth while one prays or refusing to trim their beard or wearing tassels on the corners of their garments. These are all false trails as far as spiritual maturity goes. None of them measures spiritual maturity. They are all just physical acts that may have religious overtones, or they may not. Most of them have nothing to do at all with true righteousness.

I have not tried to be thorough in explaining all the ins and outs of spiritual maturity. In effect, I purposely tried to shoot an arrow at the bull's-eye today. Spiritual maturity is walking as He walked, as the apostle John tells us in I John 2:6.

I want to close today in Philippians 3.

Philippians 3:8-15 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

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that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind.