

Spiritual Stages of Growth

Purpose: This session is intended to challenge you to a greater understanding of the state of your spiritual life and motivate you to deepen your intimacy with God.

Objectives: After this session, you should:

1. Be able to define the different stages of spiritual growth.
2. Understand the importance of growing spiritually.
3. Desire deeper fellowship with God.
4. Be able to recognize your stage of spiritual growth and take steps toward greater spiritual maturity.

Key verse: Ephesians 4:14-16

I. Introduction

There are a few universal characteristics of all living things. They reproduce. They eat. They are made up of cells. One other characteristics of all living things is that they grow. Further, that growth occurs through stages. This is the way that God has made things, to grow through stages.

Ephesians 4 tells us that the gifts were given to the Body so we could grow up to maturity in Christ and that we are no longer to be like children. Peter tells us to “long for the Word like newborn babes” (1 Peter 2:2). Spiritual growth is often put into terms of human psycho-social development in the Scripture. Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:40, 57).

In this session, we want to look at how we grow spiritually. To do that let’s first look at a biblical pattern of growth. Then we will draw some application from the Apostle’s pattern of growth as revealed in the gospels.

II. Spiritual Stages of Growth

John gives a three-tiered pattern of growth that aligns with the universal pattern of human social development. Look at this model in I John 2:12-17. This passage will help you begin to identify the pattern to spiritual maturity. Read the verses and then jot down any additional insights you have as you look at the pattern of growth that each of us goes through. A number of things are already listed, but **write down additional things you can think of, like characteristics you might see in each level, the struggles they might be dealing with, activities they may be involved in, or things they might be discovering, learning, or applying in their Christian life.**

Note to instructor: Have the students get into groups of 3 or 4 to discuss what they wrote in each of the three stages of I John 2:12-17. After about 10 or 15 minutes, have groups share additional things they came up with.

There are 3 primary levels of spiritual growth, each with distinct characteristics:

1. **Little children.** The “Basic-awareness” stage.

Just as infants and toddlers must learn to trust people, especially mom and dad (always asking questions like ‘Will they feed me?’ and ‘Will they come back for me?’), new Christians must learn to trust Jesus. They become aware of their distinctiveness from a former way of life. They are aware of God’s great love for them. They rejoice that their sin has been forgiven by Christ. People here are learning to deal with their sin. Their Christian lives are characterized by immaturity. They have great days and bad days. They are learning how to walk in the Spirit. Their enthusiasm is contagious for older Christians who have forgotten how great God’s grace has been toward them. They can have a deep affection for God, yet, act immaturely in their life style. They are aware that they have fellowship with God. They understand that they are now God’s children. Identity with Christ is crucial for our spiritual development.

Little children must gain confidence in the security of their relationship with God. Like toddlers during the terrible two’s who need to learn that they are individuals, they are still in need of reassurance that they can trust Jesus. This group would also include people who, for some reason, continue to be immature in their Christian faith, the “babes” Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 3:1.

Additional characteristics, struggles, activities, or discoveries one may see in this stage:

2. **Young men.** This is the “External-growth” stage, and is manifested in 3 areas:

- Personal - relates to what I do and discover about myself.
 - Corporate - relates to my interactions with the Body of Christ.
 - Spiritual ministry - exercise of gifts and doing battle to advance the kingdom of God.
- a. These are people who are actively living the Christian life, who desire to grow closer to Christ. This is the conscious dedication stage of spiritual growth. They choose to no longer remain a “babe in Christ”, to no longer be primarily a taker (as little children are), but a giver. Others’ needs become a priority. Work in the Kingdom becomes the priority. What they do for God and His Kingdom is foremost in their daily activities.
 - b. They are learning how to be victorious in spiritual battles and sin in their lives.
 - c. They are showing maturity and effectiveness in the Christian life. This phase is characterized by continued spiritual growth. The individual is dealing with his sin, obeying Christ, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, serving God and the body of Christ,

actively involved in furthering God's Kingdom through service to the body and service in increasing God's Kingdom - evangelism and discipleship. Young men are characterized as "walking in the Spirit, becoming more like Christ."

- d. They are in the prime of their Christian life, so the responsibility and duties of the church rest heavily on them. Their focus is on ministry. They take the initiative to get ministry training, they put that training into practice, and as they mature, they choose to become leaders and develop their leadership potential. They are industrious. As they see needs of others, they seek and create ways to meet those spiritual needs.

Additional characteristics, struggles, activities, or discoveries one may see in this stage:

3. **Fathers.** This, then, is the "Internal-growth" stage, and is characterized by being settled and satisfied in 3 areas:
 - A deeper awareness of God's sovereignty and love, which results in rest.
 - Deeper communication with God.
 - Deeper fellowship with God – they have relationship for relationship's sake, not for what they get or need [from Him.]
- a. These are mature, wise Christians. They have ceased striving to pay God back for His kindness toward them. They no longer see the success of God's work as resting upon them. Instead, they focus attention on helping others succeed. They give of themselves so that others (especially Little Children and Young Men) can be all that God wants them to be, and aren't concerned by their own status and success. They rest in His provision and don't fear losing His care, protection and provision. In many ways, these things are no longer any consideration. They are content and satisfied with themselves.
- b. They have experienced and continue to experience deep communion with God. They understand who He is and live in His presence. Fellowship with Christ is their way of life.
- c. They don't struggle as much with spiritual battles as do young men. Fathers experience true rest in God. They have released ownership of their lives to the Lord. They have integrity – they are on the outside what they are on the inside; their public lives and their private lives are one.

Additional characteristics, struggles, activities, or discoveries one may see in this stage:

John's paradigm for spiritual growth -child, young man, and father - correlates with the normal phases of human psycho-social development [and maturation, from infant and toddler through senior citizen]. Further, it is consistent with the pattern of growth in discipleship the Apostles went through with Jesus, where they were repeatedly challenged to greater steps of faith and correspondingly given more ministry responsibility. Again, from looking at Luke 2:40 and 57, we should expect that we can learn from the physical world how things work in the spiritual realm. Growth is a universal characteristic in all living things. Now let's take a closer look at what the Scriptures say about spiritual growth.

III. How Does Spiritual Growth Take Place?

- A. The Three Primary Instruments of Spiritual Growth. (These instruments by themselves will not produce the growth. They are like tools.)
1. Instrument #1: **The Holy Spirit**
We are commanded to live a Spirit-filled life, one that is controlled, directed and empowered by Him. As we do, we learn how to deal with the spiritual battles that we face everyday (Ephesians 5:18). John 16:8,13,14 give us a clear picture of the Spirit's purpose in our lives.
 2. Instrument #2: **The Word of God** (Hebrews 4:12, Colossians 3:16)
We can see from the Scriptures that God is the Word and that the Word is truth. If we know God's Word, then we know Him (Colossians 3:16). Lack of knowledge of God and His Word lead to destruction (Hosea 4:6, 14c).
 3. Instrument #3: **The Body of Christ**. We grow when we participate in God's activities.
 - a. God has given us one another to help in our growth (Ephesians 4:4-16; Hebrews 10:24,25).
 - b. We protect one another from the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13)
 - c. Our leadership is responsible to shepherd us (I Peter 5:1-4).
 - d. Our prayers for one another build one another up (Colossians 1:9-12)
- B. The Means of Spiritual Growth: Growth is a function of faith and obedience and in response to the preceding three instruments, it develops spiritually as it does psychologically and socially.
1. Jesus clearly stated that we are truly disciples of His only if *we obey* Him (John 14:15). James states that faith is demonstrated through action (James 2:17-22).
 2. We are told in Romans 6:13,19 *to live righteously*, which is what God wants from us.
 3. Hebrews tells us *to imitate and honor our leaders* (Hebrews 13:7, 17) and Philippians tells us to follow the example of those who are walking with Christ (Philippians 3:17).

4. Romans 12:1-2 tells us *to present our bodies* as a form of worship to God.
5. We must recognize that maturity does not happen overnight; spiritual growth takes place over a lifetime. So, we *need spiritual endurance*, as the writer of Hebrews tells us in 12:1-3.

IV. Self Assessment

What are you doing to deepen your own fellowship with God? Look at the stage descriptions as listed above. Where would you place yourself according First John? What is God doing in your life right now to mature you in this stage? What new perspective, what settled conclusion about God and the way He has created things, do you need to acquire to enter the next stage? This is His doing, it begins at the cognitive level (knowing basic information and understanding), but comes to a conclusion at the affective level (valuing this and having it characterize us) and only He can create that. But, if we know what He is about, we can certainly join one another in prayer for each other's growth.

Evaluate where you are in your walk with God and in your ministry, and make plans how you can move toward the next stage of growth. Be prepared to discuss with your mentor his or her assessment and how you can effectively implement your plan of action to grow. Also, be prepared to discuss this in class.

Note to instructor: Have the students discuss this in their groups of 3 or 4.