



The Journey Toward Spiritual Maturity

“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.” -James 1:4

Scripture teaches us that Christian growth, “*sanctification*”, is a developmental process (*Eph. 4:13, Phil. 3:15, Col. 4:12, Heb. 5:14*). We are to develop toward maturity over time. One helpful model of this process is from *The Critical Journey*, by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (1995). It divides the process into six stages or seasons.

- The stages are progressive and all necessary (you can’t skip one completely).
- They are not linear or compartmentalized (you can’t finish one, and check it off forever).
- We move at different rates through the stages, and may even regress, cycle; or get stuck at a stage.
- God is encouraging us and pushing us to grow, but we retain the ability to resist Him.
- It takes work to grow spiritually toward holiness in a fallen world.
- Only God (and maybe an honest individual) knows where we really are on our journey.

1. THE CONVERTED LIFE (Being)

- From the old nature of rebellion (“I am my own God,” Or, “I will choose my own God.”), the Holy Spirit changes us into New Creations.
- We experience the “new birth” of faith in Jesus.
- Often we feel wrong, unworthy, or weak in this stage.
- This is where we begin our journey as pilgrims.
- Examples of this stage are: Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Lydia (Acts 16:11-15), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-11), and the return of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17-21).

2. THE LEARNING LIFE (Knowing)

- Sometimes called “*The Discipled Life*”, this is a time of learning and belonging.
- Knowledge about God becomes most important to us, and we are often attracted to strong leaders who will teach us.
- This can be a very legalistic, black and white stage. We want to know and obey all the rules.
- We can cultivate a “*we versus them*” mentality. Those inside the rules are “*good*” while all others are “*bad*.”
- In this stage, the goal is to know it all and obey it all. This stage is run by should, must, and ought.
- Some examples are Timothy under Paul (*1 & 2 Timothy*), Ruth as mentored by Naomi (*Ruth*), and some of the N.T. Pharisees.

3. THE ACTIVE LIFE (Doing)

- This is the “roll up your sleeves and get busy” stage.
- The focus of faith is working diligently for God. We are praised for “doing that,” “serving there,” or “accomplishing such-and-such task.”
- The emphasis here can be on external things, i.e.: *success through converts, programs, attendance, or dollars*.
- In this stage, spiritual maturity is defined as involvement or productivity. Unfortunately, we can do work for God *without being close to Him*. This can leave us empty, resentful, and exhausted. However, to move on we must face a time of crisis (see below) so we may get stuck here.
- Some examples are Simon Peter’s bold, impulsive leadership (e.g. Matthew 26:31-35), Demas (2 Tim. 4:1), and the Prodigal Son’s older brother (Luke 15).

----- A TIME OF CRISIS AND CHOICE-----

- Between Stage 3 and 4 lies a time of Crisis.
- It is a time of searching, disappointment, confession, vulnerability, pain, and uncertainty.
- This crisis has been called “the wall” or the “dark night of the soul.” It may include mid-life issues, personal loss, or spiritual burn-out.
- According to most authors, much of the American church is stuck at level 3.
- Why are we stuck? Well, we must choose to go on. Activity and productivity are a part of our culture. Some refuse to enter the pain, and so remain at stage 3. Some will decline to surrender control to God fully. Others will start, but feel too alone and too afraid and so return to immaturity.
- But, by God’s grace and the movement of the Spirit, many go on to the Inward Life.

4. THE INWARD LIFE (Being)

- The journey turns inward at this stage, almost always precipitated by and occurring during a time of crisis.
- In stage 4, we search for inner meaning rather than “pat” theological answers.
- We may pull away from Christian “activity” while seeking God in a more intimate and personal way.
- To grow here, we must learn to surrender again to the Lord. We must let God be bigger than the box, and trust Him even if we can’t understand Him or earn His love.
- Often, we need guidance from a mentor to grow -- someone who has walked this road ahead of us.
- The goal in this stage is to surrender and just be quiet as “God’s Beloved Child.”
- Sometimes we can become “vertical people” who crave solitude and only relax in faith upward to God.
- Some examples are Elijah after Mt. Carmel (1Kings 18-19), Simon Peter’s confusion-denial-restoration process (Mark 14:66 ff.), and the disciples on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-35).

5. THE OUTWARD LIFE (Knowing and Doing)

- After the transforming inward journey is launched, Christ directs us outward again.
- We reconnect with the active world with a new sense of purpose.
- We study, learn, attend, and serve again - but not to gain God’s favor. It is what we are.
- We can seem careless about “important” things like creeds, rules, numbers or production.
- We are hungry to fulfill God’s purposes for us, and to walk in the good works He has prepared beforehand for us to do.
- We use our spiritual gifts not out of a sense of duty, but with patience, freshness, and inner calm.
- We can rest even as we work on those things God has given us to do.
- Often, a mentor or guide is very helpful in helping us find out where we are gifted and called to serve.
- Some examples from Scripture are the Servant (Isaiah 42:1-4), Daniel in the lion’s den (Daniel 6), a mature Paul (Acts 13, epistles), a mature Peter (1,2 Peter)

6. THE LIFE OF LOVE (Integrating Being, Knowing, and Doing)

- In this stage, we act in Christian maturity
- Living becomes selfless in love. We can sacrifice for others.
- We can do what Jesus did because we are dependent on Him. We can love the unlovely, be kind to the rude, pray for our enemies, and hold our tongue when we are wounded.
- We worry little about reputation, personal success, things, or comfort, but instead desire to spend ourselves for others.
- We have peace in the midst of struggle, and can do more than we ever thought possible because Christ is made perfect in our weaknesses.
- Examples include Jesus (incl. Phil. 2:6-11), the “Blessed” person Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), and Paul in his love for the Jews (Rom. 9:2). Perhaps Mother Theresa, William Tyndale, Corrie Ten Boom, Henri Nouwen, Hudson Taylor, Watchman Nee, or Vernon Grounds?

(Compiled and modified by Dr. Bruce Demarest and Rev. Brad Strait/Denver Seminary, South Fellowship / 4-02)