

**RESOLVE TO MATURE IN CHRIST**  
**Ephesians 4:11-16 (AFBC 1/29/17)**

**<sup>11</sup> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> 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.**

**<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.**

During this first month of the New Year, we've been looking at some important resolutions for us to make in our lives—resolutions that relate specifically to our life together in Christ.

We've talked about "Being a Witness," "Setting the Right Example," and "Seeing Each Person"—as in truly seeing them and not settling for our preconceived notions about them.

Today, we consider one other resolution that's vital to Christian living, although it may not get as much attention as it deserves. I'm talking about "Maturing in Christ"—allowing our Lord to grow us into the people He wants us to be. Of course, doing so will help us to accomplish everything else we've talked about this month—other things fall into place as we mature in Christ.

When Calvin and Hobbes were still in the funny papers, Hobbes approached his young friend one New Year's Day and asked, "Are you making any resolutions?" Calvin's response was immediate and forceful, "From now on, no more change!"

Even though some Christians seem to have made a similar resolution when they were also only youngsters, so to speak, those who are maturing in Christ understand that our commitment To Him involves us in a lifetime of change.

So with that, I have a list of questions to pose to us this morning that might help us determine if any growth is happening in our Christian walk. There are eight of these, so we won't get to spend a lot of time on each one; but together, they should help us determine if any spiritual maturing is taking place in us.

Here's question one: **1. HAVE WE GROWN IN HUMILITY?**

Humility seems out of vogue today, but we should value it more than we do. One of the early church fathers, St. Augustine, was asked, "What is the first thing in religion?" He replied, "Humility." And the second? He gave the same answer. And the third? Again, the old saint said, "humility."

Why is this so important? Because God can do very little in the life of a proud person. Jesus was always having run-ins with the Pharisees. They were always quite proud of themselves, harping constantly on the sins of others, while conveniently ignoring their own. As Christians, we understand our unworthiness and find our only hope in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Charles Fox pointed out "The Five Human Weaknesses of God's Army." He said we must be: a) foolish enough to depend on God for wisdom; b) weak enough to be empowered by His strength; c) base enough to have no honor but God's honor; d) despised enough to be kept in the dust at His feet; e) and nothing enough for God to be everything."

By its very nature, our decision to follow Christ is humbling, friends. We admit our sinful condition, we recognize that our only hope is in the mercy of God in Christ, and we forfeit the compelling need to point an accusing finger toward the sins of others.

Growing up in Christ means breaking away from the grip of pride on our lives. It's owning up to our complete dependency on God. It's being on guard against thinking too highly of ourselves or too lowly of others. So, have we grown in humility?

Now, a second question: **2. DO WE GRIEVE MORE BECAUSE OF SIN?** I mean this in the sense of feeling genuinely sorry over failing God. Only a deep sorrow ever leads to repentance.

We take sin so lightly today—"we're only human, after all." And that's true. We all sin—before, and after, our decision to follow Jesus. We should still be able to see the ugliness of sin, though.

The fact that sin still entices us and, at times, overcomes us should grieve our hearts. It was the horror of our sin, after all, that sent Jesus to the cross.

Every time we read or hear the news, the results of sin in this world should weigh on us. I don't know if this is getting worse or we're just more informed than ever before—but the sins that inflict us, and those that inflict our world, will hurt us more deeply the more we mature in the Lord. Let's continue:

**3. ARE WE MORE GENTLE?** Fellows, this is not just for the women. Gentleness is a mark of Christian discipleship, but some expressions of the faith today are hardly recognizable as having anything at all to do with Jesus—who was described in Scripture as being “gentle and mild.”

I'm fairly gentle, except when I'm not. I may try to defend my “un-gentle” moments by saying that Jesus was not always gentle either. But I also need to understand that Jesus was supremely better than me at deciding when bluntness and harshness was called for. And, he was also better at this than you.

We would do well to heed this bit of advice: “Keep your temper. Nobody else wants it!”

Some of us love a good argument, I realize; but if this is destroying the peace and happiness of others, if important relationships are being threatened, it's time for us to grow up!

Early in ministry, I was asked to visit with an attractive middle-aged woman who was in the hospital with a broken jaw. She and her husband both had Masters degrees in counseling—but in a fit of rage, he hit her, and broke her jaw. “He's a good man,” she told me, “he just sometimes loses his temper.”

There's a place for anger; but if we find ourselves easily angered or quick to lose our temper, it's time to very intentionally ask God to forgive us and help us become more gentle.

**4. DO WE STRIVE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT?** We are constantly confronted with decisions in life. Most of these decisions have right and wrong answers. But right and wrong get so confused today. When I was growing up, TV shows and movies had good guys and bad guys, and it was usually clear who was what—but not so much anymore.

Often we're manipulated to pull for the crook; the hero is the one who "gets away with it." Coming out on top is valued more than keeping one's integrity. If cheating and lying help, then by all means, cheat and lie!

You and I are supposed to know what's right and wrong. We know from the laws of God, from the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, and from a conscience informed by the Holy Spirit. Still, do we always strive to do what is right, and lend our support to those who seek to do the same?

As followers of the Righteous One, we strive to do what's right. John Tillotson was Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 1600s. He wrote this:

"When we have practiced good actions for a while, they become easy; when they are easy, we take pleasure in them; when they pleasure us, we do them frequently; and then, by frequency of act, they grow into a habit."

Paul said to the Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good..." (6:9). Do we desire to do good in this world—even more today than when we first began our Christian journey. May we never get tired of doing what is right and good. Well, we're half way now. Here's question number five:

**5. ARE WE MORE MERCIFUL?** We use that word a lot, so what does "merciful" mean?

Merciful means basically that we are willing to forgive someone who's in debt to us. Rather than getting even, we "cut them some slack." Mercy goes beyond the demands of fairness. Fairness is to be expected. Mercy goes beyond what's expected.

To be merciful is to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, to see things as they see them, to feel something of what they feel.

It's not easy to be merciful in such an ego-centric society. So much focus on me and mine makes it difficult to focus our concern on the other person. The more different from us they appear to be, the easier it becomes to dismiss them, to view their lives as unimportant—or, at least, less important.

But as followers of Jesus, we're called to be merciful. And the longer we find ourselves on this journey, the more merciful we

should become. Mercy always has an outward focus, and it seeks for ways in which to put kindness into action for others.

In one of His best-known parables, Jesus turned a Samaritan into a hero as he told of this good man's merciful deeds on behalf of the one who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. When we are merciful, friends, we demonstrate that we understand that, as Christians, we have first of all received mercy from God.

Are we growing in mercy? Do we forgive others, or hold grudges? Are we compassionate and kind toward those who are going through difficult circumstances or who've never been given a chance in life? Are we more merciful?

**6. ARE WE MORE SINCERE?** There are two ways that we try to present the Christian lifestyle to the world. We can try to be "real good"... at least, when someone is watching. Jesus was quick to point out those who tried this with Him.

In Luke 11:39, He issued this strong warning: "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and platter, but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness." Jesus could see it better than most, but insincerity has a way of becoming obvious in time.

How much better it is for our goodness to come from within, the result of a transformed life. "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord...?" asked the Psalmist. "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol, or swear by what is false." (Psalm 24:3-4)

Charles Dickens observed: "A man can never be a true gentleman in manner until he is a true gentleman at heart."

None of us is without sin; but as Christians, there is within us something like a compass needle that keeps pointing us back in the direction of God. It's not an external motivation, as in "who's watching," but an internal compulsion to please our Lord through our thoughts and actions. We aim to grow in sincerity.

**7. DO WE DESIRE PEACE?** Most of us know that beautiful prayer of St. Francis of Assisi: "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace." This should be our prayer. We're to be instruments of God's peace while living in a world that's increasingly characterized as "us against them."

I've told you before that I saw this lived out before me in the person of my father. In my home church, business meetings got rather contentious at times. As a child, it was kinda' fun to watch—but it was obviously not fun at all for those involved!

My father was often the one who would try to bring closure to these disagreements before they got out of hand. He would point to the merits of what both sides were saying and assure everyone there was common ground to be found in the dispute.

Now, Dad was as principled as anybody, and didn't hesitate to take a stand when he needed to; but he genuinely understood the importance of reconciliation in the Christian life. He sincerely sought to be a peacemaker—at church, and in all other relationships of life.

I'm not as good at this as he was, but hope something of this has rubbed off on me! And by the grace of God, I hope to do better.

Finally, **8. ARE WE WILLING TO SUFFER FOR OUR FAITH?**

Most of us probably don't think of suffering as being part of our faith experience, but if we seek to live the Christian life in a sinful world, this will bring with it a degree of suffering.

There will always be things about this world that "go against our grain" as followers of Christ. I won't try to name them for you—you have a list already. You know what I'm talking about.

We need Christians that will stand up and be counted for God, but doing so in ways that reflect the graciousness, compassion, and concerns of Christ. It's easy to wax prophetic on an issue when everyone around you already agrees with what you're saying. We see and hear this all the time, right? Even at church!

One of the early church fathers was named Tertullian. A man came to him saying that he often found his business to be in conflict with his Christian convictions. "What can I do?" he asked. "I must live." Tertullian looked the man squarely in the eye and asked, "Must you?"

Who or what gets in the way of our allegiance to Christ? We can say, "But I must keep my friends, get that promotion, make this purchase—regardless of what this does to my loyalty to Christ and my witness for Him." But...must we—really?

When our choice is between anything and Christ, we are to remain loyal to Him. And at times, this may bring hardship and suffering. But seriously, when did Jesus promise us that following Him would always be easy?"

Are we willing to stand up for what we know to be right even when it costs us? Do we count it a privilege to suffer for Christ?

Well, we've come to the last of our eight questions. Next Sunday, we'll begin looking at another Foundational passage: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. // Last fall, we considered the Ten Commandments—also foundational to what we believe and how we live. For Christians, however, those ten commandments find their fulfillment in what Jesus said in this sermon.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with eight beatitudes. At some point in the future, we'll look at them individually. But for now, let's review these questions concerning our Christian growth:

- 1. HAVE WE GROWN IN HUMILITY?** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
- 2. DO WE GRIEVE MORE BECAUSE OF SIN?** "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."
- 3. ARE WE MORE GENTLE?** "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."
- 4. DO WE STRIVE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT?** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
- 5. ARE WE MORE MERCIFUL?** "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."
- 6. ARE WE MORE SINCERE?** "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."
- 7. DO WE DESIRE PEACE?** "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
- 8. ARE WE WILLING TO SUFFER FOR OUR FAITH?** "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

**Dear friends, may we all resolve to keep on growing toward maturity in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.**