

**Sermon for Sunday, August 19, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Maturity**  
**Philippians 3:8-16**

*<sup>3:8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us who are mature think this way; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

### **Labeling our concepts of maturity**

Jackson Landers wrote an article titled, "Do you want to help the environment?" that begins like this: "One night in the Texas Hill Country, I looked out my cabin's window and saw about half a dozen wild pigs grazing in the moonlight 20 yards from the door. In an instant I was on my feet and running full-tilt into the herd, my hand reaching for the knife that never left my belt. The sensation of something soft and squishy, a lump of pig dung under my foot, was followed by a clump of thorns in the other foot. Apparently I was running barefoot. When I was right on top of the shocked pigs, they started running. But I had the momentum. I singled out a smaller one toward the back of the pack and went for my knife." Landers didn't kill a wild pig that day, but he kept chasing them; "turning around early might show weakness. A big boar could easily kill me if it realized I was bluffing."

Is this a case of maturity or immaturity? A couple years ago Landers stopped eating pork because he decided pigs are too intelligent and social to eat. But he cares about the environment, and feral pigs are an invasive species. They destroy gardens and woodlands, eat eggs, ground birds, amphibians. They taste good and they're always in season, so Landers hunts them, and urges you to hunt them too. Landers has convictions, he's considered the alternatives, changed his mind as necessary, and he's solving a problem.

Isn't that maturity? There are lots of notions of maturity, many of them age-specific. A two-year-old will be all grown up when she can wear big girl clothes all day and night. A boy is mature when he's allowed to ride his bike alone to friend's house. For some, maturity is a cell phone, then a driver's license.

A teen is mature when he goes to college or moves out and lives on his own. She is mature when she graduates and gets a full-time job, with benefits or when she is ready to think about marriage or children.

At work, a man is mature when he finally manages something. When he has a seat at important meetings. A woman is important when someone reports to her. We think we're mature when we make the most of our abilities, when we are the best at something.

Emotionally, we seem mature if we have self-control. When we can silence our tears on command. Silence the voices of terror. Silence the voices of accusing parents, teachers, and coaches. When we can make decisions without asking, "What would my mother or father say?"

Economically we're mature when we can buy a ticket, gas, a car, a house. When free of debt. There are a lot of ideas of maturity. But which ones measure up against God's word? Well then, let's be sure we know God's definition of maturity. The best notion in Scripture is this: We are mature when we are like Christ.

### **Knowing God's goals for maturity (Romans 8)**

People should still seek maturity when they are mature. In our sixties, we should aim to finish our working years well. In our seventies, we should still have goals. Indeed, we have lots of goals, but one goal should unify all of them:

At any age, we're mature if we are like Jesus. As we grow in maturity, we become more like Jesus in character, in the inner person. We can become more like Jesus even now. Our life style should be more and more like Jesus'. Good news: this is more than an ideal or command; God promises that it's a believer's destiny.

Romans 8:28 says God "predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son." That means we are like his character – love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus also tells us to follow his example. In Paul's words:

- Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Eph 4:32).
- Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (5:2).
- Husbands, love their wives as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, to make her holy (5:25).
- We put others first, just as Jesus put us first (Phil 2:3-8).
- Jesus said, "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).
- Disciples should be like the teacher. After Jesus washed his disciples' feet, Jesus says we should wash each other's feet (John 13:1-16).

This is a dazzling privilege. Imagine if Michael Phelps said, "I want you to swim like me, you *can* do it." Or if Usain Bolt said, "You can run *like me*." We will never be as loving and strong as Jesus, but Jesus told us we can be kind and loving like him. He commissioned the disciples to do his work (Matt. 10:8). And "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (John 15:20, 1 Pet 2:18-25).

Jesus said, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matt 10:24-25). So, Jesus was loose with possessions and urged his disciples to have a loose grip Luke (9:57, 12:13-34). Jesus was willing to break with his family (Matt 12:47-50) and said we should be ready if necessary (Matt 8:22, Luke 14:26). That's our destiny – to be like Christ. Jesus sets the example to follow. What does that mean?

People who have been here a while know we joke or comment about my dislike of hospitals and hospital visits. It's partially true – here is why: Some hospitals smell bad. It takes a long time to drive there and find parking and find the right room – they're labyrinths! Above all, the people are suffering. And it's hard to watch. The first time I visited someone who was sick – with lots of tubes and fluids, I came this close to passing out: "Focus, breathe, stand up. Lord, you *cannot* let this happen." But I go, and have done so hundreds of times. Why? It's my duty, it's expected. Why? Because people *rightly* expect

their pastors to be *somewhat* like Jesus. How so? Jesus held three offices: prophet, priest and king. A king leads. A prophet speaks. A priest cares for people. He is tender and merciful. People expect spiritual leaders to do all three because Jesus did all three.

He expects all three of you too. There is a span of life when our work is kingly. We build and rule. We build skills, make a home, start a family, start a career.

Again, prophet, priest, and king... Prophets teach. Parents teach and teachers teach, but as we gain experience and wisdom, everyone should become a prophet, with wisdom to impart to others. Paul said, "I'm convinced... that you are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Rom 15:14).

Priests take care of others. They are kind, sympathetic, and understanding. They are there in the hour of need. This is the role of parents, of people with gifts for taking care, but priestly work is required of all of us at times.

Again, Jesus fulfilled all of these. He is a prophet and teacher. He is a king – he announced, "The Kingdom of God is at hand" and he brought that kingdom...

Jesus is a priest. Hebrews 5 says a priest will "deal gently" with those who stray. And they offer sacrifices for sins. That's exactly what Jesus does. He is gentle with us when we stray. He restores us and atones for sins. In fact, he is the great priest because he offered the perfect sacrifice for sins. He offered himself for us.

My friend Joe is studying Christian leaders to see why some finish their careers well and others do not. He finds that those who finish poorly don't want to embrace all three roles. Specifically, they want to hold on to power, to be king, too long. They want to be prophets, boldly declaring the truth, after people have heard them, and aren't listening any more. They don't want to be priests even though it's time for that role. They don't want the quieter role, coming alongside people, granting their presence, care, encouragement and support.

They are immature because they still want to be king (and prophet), but not priests. They want to lead and talk, but not offer humble help. They want to be like Jesus in *some ways*, but not others. They don't want to be prophet, priest and king, like Jesus. What do you think?

Where are you? Jesus was a prophetic teacher, kingly ruler, and tender priest. Most of us are happiest, at ease, with one or two of these roles, but we need all three if we want to be mature. Remember our goal, our maturity: "Those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

If we want to be mature like Christ, we need to embrace all three roles - prophet, priest and king. You may not be comfortable with each role. I understand. But was Jesus comfortable? As prophet he taught people who didn't want to listen. As king, he led people who didn't want to follow. His work as priest required that he suffer and die on the cross. Jesus is the standard for maturity because he fulfilled all three, at great cost. Yet he brought boundless good to us when he did.

And remember, we're not doing this on our own. Romans 8 doesn't say, "Go be like Jesus." It says God predestined us for this. He ordained that Jesus be the first of many brothers. You are not alone. His Spirit is making us more like Jesus.

## Reaching maturity – our responsibility (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Hebrews 5 says something interesting about the search for maturity. Hebrews focuses on Jesus, especially his work as priest. The topic is complicated and he wants to press on, but he pauses because he wonders if his audience is listening. He interrupts himself to address this in 5:11-14:

*About this we have much to say and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food... But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

The people aren't learning. Though they should be teachers by now, they need to rehearse the essentials. They are "unskilled in the word of righteousness." Do they want solid food or not? Hebrews 5-6 mentions three kinds of listeners.

In 5:2, he said some people stray in ignorance. Treat these gently, he says. When children learn to wash dishes, they may break a couple of dishes. Be gentle. It's an accident; they're learning.

A second group, in 5:11, is dull. They barely grasp the fundamentals. They could be teachers by now, but they don't use what they know. They can't distinguish good from evil. They're like college students who are still don't know the difference between a star and a planet. They should know.

But the mature "have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice. John Gottman researches marriage relationships. After watching an hour-long conversation between a husband and wife, Gottman can predict whether that couple will be married in fifteen years with 95% accuracy. He knows that respect and rapport give life. He knows that contempt and disrespect kill. Gottman knows what to look for, his discernment trained by constant practice. What about you? Are you staying sharp ethically and spiritually? Are you practicing your skill at living right? Do you use and practice what you know?

Think of some places where you'd like to be more mature. For example: if you have strong political convictions, can you discuss them in a constructive way with someone who disagrees? Or do you become angry and dismissive? When you disagree sharply, do you want to call the other person evil, stupid, dishonest? Do you know: It's possible to have dialogue, to learn as you talk, and find that you disagree *more* than you thought. This guy's ideas are worse than I feared! Yet you can still grow in respect and affection for each other? Is that an attractive idea?

The first Christians disagreed sharply about things. Errors had to be corrected. But when Christians argued about small things - meat and holy days, Paul said, "It's between you and Lord – study, come to conviction, practice your conviction. But don't despise or condemn your brother" (Rom 14:1-10).

Remember there are three kinds of poor listener: ignorant, dull, and one more - they reject the truth with full self-awareness. They are in danger of receiving God's curse if they don't repent (6:4-8, 10:26-31).

Illustrate: When we drive on a new road, we may drive the wrong speed due to ignorance. The road seems like the speed limit is thirty-five miles per hour. But no, it's thirty. Till he sees the sign, the driver strays *in ignorance*. A *dull* driver is on phone all the time, always over the speed limit, driving too close, drifting into other lanes. A careless driver never gets better. Still, one driver is worse. He deliberately

breaks the law. He goes the wrong way down a one way street by *design*. It's a shortcut. That's like the person who deliberate rejects the truth.

Group one strays in ignorance. Be gentle. Group two strays because they're careless. Tell them to wake up! Group three plans to rebel. Warn them! Am I describing you? If you err through ignorance, it's easy to change! But if you are dull, wake up! And if you consider deliberate sin, hear God's warning.

Principle: If you stop using a skill, you lose it. We forget our Latin, our guitar chords. The same is true morally and spiritually. If you don't pay attention to God's word and apply it, you'll regress. You'll fall back toward infancy. Evaluate yourself! Do you practice discernment? Do you apply your knowledge to new issues? Practice makes us strong. It's how we grow.

### **Paul describes God's goals for our maturity (Phil 3)**

Paul had climbed high in the world of rabbis. Then one day he met Jesus, the risen Lord. As a faithful rabbi, he had a heritage, a status of legal righteousness. Yet, he said, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). I give it up, he said, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul didn't reject his heritage in itself. But he didn't want to see it as an achievement that obscured his need for the grace that comes by faith alone, through Christ alone.

Paul says, "I want to be found in him, know him, and share in his sufferings." He wants a union with Jesus that makes him more *like* Jesus. When a couple has a long, happy marriage OR when two people work together well daily, they begin to think alike, talk alike, finish each other's sentences. Paul wants to be united to be like Jesus. He wants to know Jesus' power, his capacity to suffer, his resurrection. If we are united to Christ, we become more like him.

Then Paul describes his quest for maturity. First, he says he has not arrived – "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect" (3:12). Second, he has reason to press on confidently. He says, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Paul strives to take hold of Christ, because Christ took hold of him.

He forgets his past and strains forward, toward God's future, always pressing for the goal, God's call. If you want to travel successfully, you need to know the destination. This is Paul's: To know Jesus, to receive his righteousness by faith, to gain the resurrection, to be perfect, to be mature, to be like Christ. This sounds like many things, but it's one.

Paul hasn't obtained this, but he strives for it. The image: a runner, straining to reach the finish line, and the prize awaiting the winner. He blocks everything out, as he strains to finish. He forgets what lies behind – past failures - and presses forward. The prize, the call Paul strains toward is union with Christ and Jesus' righteousness. These are his as a gift, but he also wants to *make them his own*.

Paul addresses us directly: "Let those of us who are mature think this way." This is the right goal. The mature know it and aim for it: to be united to Jesus and be like him in righteousness – in the roles of prophet, priest and king.

He knows some have different goals. Maybe you do too. People have so many goals. Many seem sound: To be happy. To be loved. To be accepted. To be popular and respected. To be financially secure. To have a happy family. All of these are good. Better than other goals: to crush a rival, get revenge.

They are good goals, but not ultimate goals. Aim higher, Paul says. And if you can't agree with him today, at least be open to God. He "will reveal that also to you" (3:15). And wherever we are, let's "hold true to what we have attained." Don't slip back, lose your heritage, the way you lost your German or your violin.

So let's aim for true maturity, to be like Christ. May we share his roles – striving to rule well, as kings, to know and speak the truth, as prophets, to be gentle and take care of others, as priests.

Let me share a case....

Augustine was bishop of Hippo, in North Africa for about thirty years. He was a prophet, teaching Sundays and other days. As overseer of the one church, he had kingly influence. People sought his direction. But he also met with people one by one, as a priest.

Late in life, the Barbarians sacked Rome, then swept through North Africa toward Hippo. Friends urged him to leave, to save himself. No, he said, he must stay with his people. If they had to stay, he would stay and console them, as a tender priest. And he did stay, till his last breath. How Christ-like in his endurance, his sacrifice. And yet, not quite, for Jesus' death was unique. He atoned for sins. He rose again, as King over death. As prophet, he told us what it all means and bids us believe. I hope that you do and that that gives you a noble goal for life.