

How do I know if am really growing?
Ephesians 4: 11 – 16
Life's Tough Questions, Part Six
July 12, 2009

It is usually very easy to gauge whether a child is growing. First, there are the unofficial family tests: those ubiquitous pencil marks striped up the molding of a doorway to document how tall a child is at intervals of life. Second, there are the official tests: the pediatrician's chart to measure height and weight against a standard; or the standardized advancement tests such as the infamous FCAT in Florida.

But it isn't so easy to determine if I am growing spiritually. For one, there aren't periodic exams; the Holy Spirit doesn't show up and announce, "Attention! There will be an inspection in the Dining Room at 1800 hours. All documents pertaining to progress of individuals in the areas of ethics, deportment, and decisions making must be available and in proper order."

There is no doorway molding to back up to, so the Father can draw a line on the paint and praise us: "Wow! You're six inches taller then last Spring. I guess you have been eating your vegetables after all."

But fear not. God actually does provide a standard to measure our spiritual growth against. It is located in the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, Chapter Four, Verses Eleven through Sixteen. It is an important standard for Believers, because our Heavenly Father has birthed us into the Family in order to grow into spiritually mature individuals who use their spiritual gifts to compliment the gifts of other members of the family as we all cooperate together for the common benefit.

Lets examine this passage of Scripture and discover the...

Signs We Have Grown Spiritually:

1. I am doctrinally stable about what I believe (Ephesians 4: 4).

A. A maturing Christian's beliefs are not changing from season to season. He has a settled knowledge about what he believes.

1. Oh, the methods he employs to do things may change, but his beliefs stay intact.

B. I tell people the most critical class I ever took in my higher education journey was a course I took in my freshman year at Cumberland College, a small Baptist school in Kentucky. In those days, the college had a large, thriving Ministerial Training Program – 135 students in total my first year. One of the required courses for a Religion Bachelor of Arts degree was entitled, "Orientation to Baptist Life." The professor was Dr. Leon Simpson, one of the directors of the program.

1. The first day, Dr. Simpson went around the class, and asked each of the 35 students, "Why are you a Baptist?" I confess I had a brief answer: "I attended the church my wife had attended from childhood – which just happened to be a Baptist church – made my profession faith there, was baptized in that church, and was trained under the pastor of that church. When I felt called to the ministry, my pastor said, 'Dan, you need to go to a Baptist college and seminary if you want to be pastor.' So, here I am!"

C. You may laugh at my naivete, but compared to the responses given by others, my answer seemed downright professorial! Some were “called” by a family member to carry on the family tradition; others chose the ministry because, in Eastern Kentucky, college graduates of any stripe were rare and valuable people (and a Religion degree seemed relatively easy). One girl – honest lass – confessed she had been told by a deacon in her church that there were many eligible “preacher boys” on campus, and she always wanted to marry a preacher! Obviously, she didn’t ask a preacher’s wife what the life of a preacher’s wife entailed.

D. Then, Dr. Simpson closed the class session by saying, “The final exam for this course will comprise one question: ‘Why are you are Baptist?’ If you answer the question the same way you have just done, I assure you, the grade you receive will be a failing one.”

1. And so we launched on a four month odyssey, immersing ourselves in a study of Baptist history, doctrine, and amassing Scriptural references to substantiate and support every doctrinal position.

2. By the end of the semester, the class was reduced to about 20 from the original 35. As I recall, several decided they were actually closer to other denominations doctrinally; a couple decided they were unsure if they were even Evangelical doctrinally; one fellow went so far as to create a mini cult on campus espousing a radical philosophy incorporating Eastern mysticism (this was the early Seventies, after all).

3. But I can say without a doubt, I emerged from that course with a clear understanding of what believed about my doctrinal convictions. And nothing I have encountered in 35 years since – even ultra-liberal seminary professors – has changed my concluding statement of that final exam: “I was saved providentially in a Baptist church, given basic instruction in a Baptist church, but today I choose to remain a Baptist because what I understand about my relationship with God. If and when someone can show where my beliefs differ from Baptists, I will cease being a Baptist.”

E. How stable are you in your beliefs? The danger of not having your doctrine nailed down is that it is fairly easy to deceive you.

1. Remember, the first recorded act of rebellion in the Bible was as a result to the serpent’s temptation of the first man and woman in the Garden.

2. I have a genuineness about myself, and it I exhibit it in my relationships (v. 15).

A. One of the striking things in the Sermon on the Mount is how many times Jesus attacked the sin of being a phony. He talked about people who were all show; people who hypocritically prayed loudly in public to be heard by men; people who gave an offering with fanfare so they would be seen and praised for the act of giving.

B. Instead, Jesus desires we display a genuineness in our relationships.

1. It isn’t easy being genuine. Some churches are uncomfortable when people are genuine in their relationships. They have fewer problems to deal with if you keep up a mask to conform to an image of perfection.

2. I don’t have to deal with any problems if, every time I see you, you proclaim, “Pastor Dan, everything’s great!”

C. But if that is the superficial nature of our relationship, how can I obey the admonition to carry one another's burdens?

The third evidence I am spiritually growing is...

3. I actively participate in my church (v. 16).

A. Maturing Christians understand they need to be part of a local body of believers.

1. Notice three important words in this verse: "Whole;" every;" and "each."

2. There is an unmistakable interdependence in the body of believers. I cannot become all I am intended to become in my spiritual life without the interaction I experience within a church family.

B. Yes, just as in biological families, there are times when friction and aggravation can complicate our lives. But growth happens in adversity and trial.

1. And how can I know if I am making progress in my spiritual life if no one is around to celebrate that progress?

The fourth and final evidence of maturity is...

4. I have an increasing capacity to love (v. 16).

A. Paul speaks of an ever increasing capacity to love. It is ever growing.

B. For example, someone new visits the church; a less mature Christian holds back, uncertain if that newcomer is worthy of their trust and friendship.

1. Human nature seeks familiar, comfortable faces. It withholds acceptance pending further scrutiny.

C. A maturing Christian does not react that way; rather, he draws upon his relationship with Christ and extends a welcome.

2. The Fire Marshall tells us our maximum capacity is 195. Jesus tells us our capacity to love whoever comes our way is unlimited!

Mature believers are like this: they are unshakable in their beliefs; there is a genuineness in their relationships; they participate in a local church; and there is an ever growing capacity to love.

Now, the question is: Are you growing? What does the standard of God's Word tell you?

Let's pray!