

How Do I Grow To Maturity?

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[0 : 00] Father God, we thank you so much that you are a speaking God, that you've made yourself known to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray, Heavenly Father, that you'll give us heads that can understand your word this morning and hearts that are willing to change and follow you.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, I've just got a video to start us off, one that I love because it's so reminiscent of experiences in our family life. This is a family in the play park, and mum goes off to fetch the ice creams.

Now, why did that go so wrong? You've got to blame the dad, haven't you, of course, but dad would inevitably blame the kids. He'd say, I just, I don't know what they were doing, I don't know what they were thinking.

And obviously, it's the dad's fault, but that's because children need guidance, don't they? Children need help, they need looking after, and they also, there comes a time, children need gradually to grow up.

And our two-year-old Rachel is now at the point where, looking at her older sisters and looking at grown-ups around her, what she really wants is to grow up. So what happens in a two-year-old's life is then they stop being willing to be helped.

[1 : 14] So she won't accept help to put her socks on, or her shoes on, or fasten her coat. And she can't do it. So we can't get anywhere on time. But this is the sort of natural part of being an infant.

Now, we're in a series as a church in this book, Ephesians. We're looking at it on Sundays. We're looking at it in growth groups as well, midweek as a church family. And Ephesians is all about the church.

The Apostle Paul, an early Christian leader, wrote this letter to churches in an area around Ephesus in modern-day Turkey. And Paul says something quite surprising in chapter 4, verse 14.

If you just have a look down and see what he said in verse 14, he says, Then, looking ahead to what we'll look like if we put all this into practice, then we will no longer be infants.

I think that's an extraordinary thing for Paul to say. If Paul is an infant in the Christian life, including himself, we will no longer be infants. We, us guys, we're still in nappies if Paul is an infant.

[2 : 19] And it's good to remember that if we experience or encounter immature behavior among people in our church family. If people are a bit rotten, or they let us down.

We shouldn't be altogether surprised by that. We shouldn't tolerate it in ourselves. But we shouldn't be surprised by it in other people, because we're a spiritual creche as a church.

It's easy to forget that, isn't it? It's easy if you've been a Christian a long time, or perhaps if you've been at St. Silas a long time, to think, I've got somewhere now. I'm a grown-up in the Christian life. But judging by Paul, one of the key marks of Christian maturity is to realize how much we have still to attain. How much we're still babies in the Christian life.

And Paul tells us that to humble us, and to make us strive and aspire to grow up a bit ourselves. To become mature. That's a word used several times in this passage. To become mature.

[3 : 18] So how do we do that? Well, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in this passage in Ephesians 4, and gives us three clear commands. The first one is, growing Christians aim for gospel unity.

Now we've already had a sermon on that, on verses 1 to 6, just before Christmas. So I'm not going to spend long on it. But the key command comes in verse 3. He says, So the Spirit of God has given Christians a unity, and we have to make every effort to preserve and maintain that unity.

And we do that because Paul is saying we have to be who we are. Paul himself, in the Christian life, had gone for it, and was facing great cost for being a Christian.

And he reminds us of that in verse 1. So just have a look at verse 1. He says, So what is that calling?

Well, we've heard about it in chapters 1 to 3 of Ephesians. Just to remind us what's been happening, in chapter 1 of Ephesians, we heard that God is acting in all things for his glory.

[4 : 35] God's glory is like his brilliance, how brilliant he is. And God is acting in the universe today to show how brilliant he is. And in chapter 1 verse 10, we heard that one of the ways he's doing that is he tells us the future is that everything will be brought together under Jesus Christ.

There will be a unity in heaven and on earth under Jesus Christ. That was chapter 1 verse 10. So in chapter 2, he tells us that because that's the future, God is acting in the present to give a foretaste in the world today of what that glorious future is going to be like.

And that foretaste comes in the church. So through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled a people from all different backgrounds to himself and to one another in the church. Chapter 2 verse 10 said, we are God's craftsmanship, God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do.

So that's going on in the present to give people a glimpse of the future. And then in chapter 3 verse 10, Paul told us why God has done that, why he has set the church going in the world.

[5 : 49] Chapter 3 verse 10, the church is God's trophy cabinet. Verse 10, God's intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Amazing. So God shows the angels and demons in the heavenly realms how brilliant he is and how brilliant his eternal plan is by the church, through the church.

It displays what he is going to do and what he is doing in the world. God could have chosen anything to be in his trophy cabinet to display his brilliance. Anything you've seen on planet Earth 2, God could have chosen.

Anything we see through the Hubble Space Telescope, he could have used. But he chose the church. Ordinary people from any background, putting their trust in Jesus Christ, being reconciled to God and one another.

However, the angels and demons look on and they marvel at how amazing God is. So that means the church is the big thing that God is doing in the world today.

[6 : 54] Not the United Nations, not the NHS. The church is the big thing God is doing in the world. And on Earth, we might come into our local church, our little representation of that.

And things might not feel like that at all when we meet one another. So chapters 4 to 6 tell us how we can experience that heavenly reality for ourselves.

And we do it firstly by making every effort to be united. To do that, we'll have to keep the commands of verse 2. If you have a look at what Paul says so that we're united.

Verse 2, be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. It's very challenging words.

Especially if you're a middle class person. In the middle class in the Western world, one of our core values is to be assertive. To push to get what we want.

[7 : 51] But God calls us to repent of that if you're a Christian. Instead, we're to seek the best for others. To raise our opinion of them and lower our opinion of ourselves.

To accept other people's faults and mistakes. Forgive their sins. But to be acutely aware of our own faults and mistakes and our own sins. So we tend to think of church a bit like Morisons.

I was at Morisons last week at Anisland. I go there now and again now because there's a new cafe at Morisons. And I saw Hannah Yar, who's over there in our church family. She was at Morisons. I said to Hannah, what are you doing at Morisons?

You've got an Asda near you. She said, yeah, but our Asda doesn't have the party section. You see. That's the new Morisons at Anisland. That's their trump card since they did out Morisons.

It's got a party section if you're having a party. Okay. And Morisons has had to do that because it's trying to attract us because we're consumers when we go into Morisons.

[8 : 52] And if we don't like it, we'll go to Asda. It's my choice. And it's about me being satisfied. So no wonder when it comes to church, we have the same mentality sometimes.

We think that church is about me. I'm here and I want to be satisfied. But the Holy Spirit says, no, God's here. And this is about him being glorified.

I remember an older lady at a church who said, you know, I can't stand the music here anymore. But I love being here.

I'm happy to be here because I can see God's at work. There's all these new people. Some of them have come to faith for the first time. So I'm happy to keep coming if I can encourage them and rejoice in what God is doing.

That's the kind of humility we're called to as we strive for unity. But it's not unity at all costs. It's unity centered on God's truth.

[9 : 54] So Paul then gives us these seven ones in verses four to six. Wands that every Christian shares. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

And those key articles of faith are what unites us as believers. They're established for us by the word of God. We get them from the Bible. And our one Lord, Jesus Christ, rules his church as we guard that truth and we obey it ourselves.

So you don't strive for unity by becoming broader in what you believe as a church. No, we strive for unity by standing on what God says in his word and living it out and teaching it and growing in it.

So where we can be, we want to have a big hearted generosity towards all believers everywhere and especially believers in our own local church. Big hearted, loving generosity.

But if people depart from the truth in the Bible, then even if they're still saying they're Christians, they break their unity with us. And I think churches just so often we get the balance wrong.

[11 : 05] So in some churches, it seems the leadership won't make any decisions because they're worried that it will be divisive. Or they stop teaching the hard bits of the Bible, the bits we find difficult in case anyone gets upset.

And it holds back the church in growing in the gospel and reaching out with the gospel. But other churches, it feels like there's division about everything. People fall out like mad about the music style or the color of the carpet that people are choosing or the style of the chairs.

Everything is a battle. And the growing church aims for gospel unity. What's our second command? Well, the second thing that's described, verses 7 to 13, is growing Christians commit to ministry.

Paul has just said what we have in common, those big ones. But now he tells us how very different we are. And what makes us different to one another is that we've all been uniquely gifted by the Lord Jesus.

Let's just look at verse 7. But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, when he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

[12 : 16] Then he explains in verse 9 that what he's describing here, he's quoting from the Old Testament from a psalm about God in victory. And what he's describing is the way Jesus came into the world to win a victory over the devil by dying on the cross.

And when he ascended into heaven, it's a bit like he was heading back to his home country in a victory march. And in the ancient Near East, when kings went off to fight, and if they won a victory, what they would do is they would go back into their home city, and they would have captives behind them in their trail, prisoners of war, if you like.

And they get back to their city, and they divide the plunder among their home country from where they conquered. And as Jesus heads back into heaven, he's conquered the evil forces in the spiritual realm.

If you like, the devil has been taken captive by what Jesus has done in dying for us on the cross. And then he divides the plunder by giving gifts to his church.

So what are the gifts that he gives out? What is Jesus' gift so that we have everything we need to grow to maturity? It's preachers and teachers, people who have speaking gifts for the church.

[13 : 35] So just look at verse 11. Really foundational verses these for a church. Verse 11. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.

Now I think the first two mentioned there are about first generation people in the early church. Now don't mishear me on that. I think there is an ongoing gift of prophecy in the church today.

That every Christian has the spirit living in them. And we're all called to have a prophetic gift by the spirit for God's people today. So prophecy is an ongoing gift.

But when Paul here in Ephesians talks about apostles and prophets, he's already done it twice before in Ephesians. He's put those together. He seems to be referring to something at the very beginning of the early church.

The apostles were the first 12 who Jesus commissioned to have authority to share the great news of his resurrection. Then Paul was added to that number. And the prophets were with them as they laid the foundations for the first churches and as they got the Bible written for us today.

[14 : 45] But the next three gifts are continuing ones. Evangelists, pastors and teachers. And those people carry on today what the apostles and prophets in that first century set about to do.

But their gifts in teaching are essential to the church growing to maturity. Otherwise, we'll just stay as babies. But they're not the full story.

So let's read on in verse 11 to see how maturity comes to a local church. Verse 11. Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach maturity.

And then he describes the result, a mature church, in three ways. Unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God become mature and attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

In other words, Jesus wants his church to grow by knowing him better and becoming more like him. That's the target. It's all about Jesus and us guys looking more like him.

[15 : 57] So he provides pastors and teachers to teach the Bible faithfully so that they equip all God's people for works of service. And that word service is the word ministry.

Every one of us is a minister for God, a servant. As we obey the teaching we hear on Sundays and in midweek groups, at growth groups or at roots, we're all called, every one of us, to respond obediently to serve God.

And we serve God by obeying him, serving other people, serving God's people in our church family and serving our city. Can you see what a radical picture this is that God's giving us of the local church?

It is so different to how people understand church today. Sometimes people think going to church is like going to a football match. A crowd of people arrive to sit in the pews.

They're the spectators. They're just here to watch, perhaps to do a bit of cheering along. And they come to watch the team play. The team are the expensive professional players, perhaps the minister, perhaps the musicians, the person who does the prayers.

[17 : 08] They're doing their ministry of preaching and leading. In fact, it's even been said that a church is like a football match. There are 25,000 spectators who could do with a bit more exercise. And there are 22 players who could really do with a rest.

But Paul says here, the picture is completely different. Bible teachers are given by Jesus to his church to equip the people for works of ministry so that by their works of service, their body is built up.

So if you go with the football analogy, every member of the church is a player on the team. The pastors and teachers are like the player coaches, if you like. The spirit uses them to motivate and equip and direct the players on the pitch.

The game we're called to play isn't to run an hour and a half on a Sunday morning. Well, that's not the game. The game is to devote our whole lives to loving God, loving each other, and loving the city.

And the opposition to that, we've heard about in Ephesians 2, are the world, the flesh, and the devil as they stand against us. And the spectators, as we play, as we live out our call, it's the watching world.

[18 : 22] It's our friends, our neighbors, our family, who are not yet believers, looking on as the church does works of service together. There are so many implications of that, aren't there?

It means that your gifts, whatever they are, they're not for you. Church is not about you showing off your gifts.

They're to be used in humility to serve other people, to build them up. It means that however gifted somebody ever says you are, anything, it should never make you proud.

Because the gifts are just given to you freely by Jesus. Nothing to boast in, being gifted. But what God will reward us for when he meets us isn't giftedness, it's godliness.

And so often in church, we confuse giftedness with godliness. So that giftedness gets pedestalized, and we marvel at people who seem to be so talented, and godliness gets ignored.

[19 : 32] The hard work of trying to just be more like Christ, whatever our gifts are, it gets underplayed. It's challenging. But these verses are also hugely positive.

They mean that whatever your gifts are, however undervalued they might be by other people in your church, you should never feel inadequate. If your gifts are less about upfront things, like the preaching or the music, or perhaps a highly esteemed professional job out in the world that people really respect and marvel at, if your gifts aren't like that, if they're more in behind the scenes, less noticed things like cleaning or administration or stewarding or visiting the sick or serving the coffee or private intercessory prayer, if your gifts are different, they're still vitally important for your church growing to maturity together.

We must never feel inadequate, and we must remember that we all need each other if we're going to grow. I remember playing football in a five-a-side team a few years back, and we normally had seven players, so you could swap in and out.

One week we knew we were going to be short, but we had five guys. We'd all agreed we were going to turn up, and then Boiler didn't turn up. And I remember realizing Boiler wasn't turning up, and we started playing this game, four of us against five people with their subs.

And my mate Bob, as he ran frantically around the pitch for the next hour, every time he went near me, he looked at me and went, Boiler! Because Boiler hadn't turned up, and we needed him.

[21 : 10] Well, in the same way, we should think about our local church. We used to have a phrase at school about people, a negative phrase, about if someone was quite full of themselves, he wanders around as though he thinks he's God's gift.

Well, Ephesians 4 says you're all God's gift. God's gift to your local church, to serve other people. If we're going to grow, we personally have to be willing to commit to ministry.

So the Spirit commands us, growing Christians aim for gospel unity, growing Christians commit to ministry, and thirdly, this morning, growing Christians are plugged into their church family.

See, Paul now gives us two pictures of, well, pictures of two different churches, the immature one and the mature one. And the immature one, the first picture, is clueless.

If you have a look at verse 14, he says, Then we will no longer be infants, what do they look like? 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.

[22 : 22] So the immature church, one of the marks of it is it just gets blown around. They're always looking for the next big thing, the next answer to growth and vitality, and so they become gullible.

And we see that today in evangelical churches. We want to stay fresh. We want to keep up with the times. And often there's a new fad for us to buy into. Often it's blowing across from the Atlantic, or, you know, from a church in North America, or from another UK city, where we hear about this new thing that you've got to do.

It's the silver bullet. That's the way forward. That's what we've all got to be doing. That's what we've been missing. It mentions new doctrine there in Ephesians 4. And today we see books coming out all the time by people who were once respected evangelical church leaders changing their minds about things the churches believe for 2,000 years.

So in recent years we've had the emerging church, we've got the inclusive church, the new perspective on Paul, and the danger is that we get blown around by it all.

So what's the alternative? How can we be rooted? Well, it comes in verse 15. Have a look. Verse 15. 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.

[23 : 44] 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. It's a great picture, isn't it? I was listening this morning on the radio.

They're already looking ahead to the Australian Open. And I don't know whether you've seen recently the way that often when you're watching tennis, the producers will use this super slow motion as you see a great tennis player play a shot.

And you have this amazing picture of an athlete where it feels like every muscle is working towards the same goal of playing the perfect shot. People like Roger Federer and Andy Murray.

And that's the picture that we should have of the church working well. Every part working together to move things forward. And in the church's case, the goal is to be growing more and more like Jesus Christ.

So what's the key to that, to working together like that? Well, instead of listening to the latest fad from elsewhere, do you see what we do? We speak the truth in love to one another.

[24 : 49] Not just the senior minister, not just the preaching team or the growth group leaders, all of us are called to speak the truth in love to each other with the aim of making each other more like Jesus.

So do you see what that means? You cannot grow to maturity as a Christian by yourself. As long as you keep treating St. Silas like your local supermarket, you'll still be in nappies.

I'm not saying you're all doing that, but if that's our mentality, we won't grow. You have to plunge yourself into a community of Christians if you want to grow.

Growing Christians are plugged into their church. Plugged in Sunday by Sunday because they know they need it and the church needs them. Plugged in midweek to a growth group or to roots where so often there's that opportunity in a smaller group for these relationships to grow more deeply so that we can speak the truth in love to one another.

Some people are good at speaking the truth, but they don't do it in love. You might be able to think of people like that who come across quite harsh or unkind or critical. Other people are good at the love bit, good at loving other people, but they never really get around to speaking the truth to challenge them.

[26 : 08] I love people like that because they're great to be around. They're so affirming. But the reality is they're not loving you enough because they don't love you enough to speak the truth to you even when that risks harming your friendship if they think there's something you need to be challenged about to grow more like Christ.

I remember a friend of mine, Mark, when I had just become a Christian, we were both working in London as lawyers. He met up with me one night and we were catching up and I thought he'd just be full of warm encouragement.

I hadn't been a Christian very long. And he challenged me that when I was going out with my mates, I was drinking too much. And I was really surprised. I was quite angry when he challenged me about that.

But after time, I realized that that was an amazing thing that Mark had done. He was speaking the truth in love to me because his desire for me to become more like Christ mattered more than never taking a risk of offending me.

It was a wonderful thing. I went on a stag do a year or two later, about 11 o'clock at night on this stag weekend. Mark texted me, are you still sober? Brilliant accountability for me.

[27 : 22] Could you be that kind of friend to somebody at St. Silas? To perhaps a couple of other Christians who you pray with together in a prayer triplet so that you have that kind of accountability and love and truth?

Maybe the people in your growth group as you get to know them better. And as we do that, let's remember that Jesus Christ first spoke the truth in love to us.

He is our example. He spoke the truth that we would never have wanted to hear, that we're more wicked than we ever dared imagine, that we cannot be good enough for God on our own.

But he spoke that truth as he came in love to die on the cross for us so that he could resolve our problem and bring us back to God.

More wicked than we ever dared imagine. More loved than we ever dared dream. So do we want to grow up to become more like him? Well, God tells us how here in Ephesians 4.

[28 : 23] It's a community project. We aim for gospel unity. We commit to ministry, serving one another. And we get plugged in to our church family.

Let's pray together. Have a moment of quiet to let us reflect on God's word. And then I'm going to pray the prayer at the end of chapter 3 of Ephesians for us.

Father in heaven, we long to grow. To grow up in our salvation. Not to be infants, but to become the mature body of the Lord Jesus.

And so we pray that out of your glorious riches, you will strengthen us with power through your spirit in our inner beings so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.

And we pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

[29 : 22] And to know that love that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.