

INTRODUCTION

Are you a fan of Jesus, or are you a follower? A fan is an enthusiastic admirer. Our churches are full of people who admire Jesus and are even enthusiastic about their faith, but Jesus is only one element of their busy lives.

I've been a fan of the Beatles since I was in elementary school. I think I could name John, George, Ringo, and Paul before I could name Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In 1967 they released a song entitled, "When I'm 64." At the time, I thought that 64 was such an ancient age that none of the Beatles would still be around at that age. Of course, 64 is sounding younger than it used to! John and George didn't make it to 64, but Ringo is 72 and Paul is 70 and they're both still going strong.

I still like the Beatles and have over 100 of their songs in my iTunes library. Sure, I'm a fan of the Beatles, but I would never dedicate my life to spreading the music of the Beatles. I would never even consider dying for them. I know about Paul McCartney, but I don't know him personally. I've never met him. If somehow I got Paul's cell phone number and called him, I'm sure I would come up as "unknown" and would be sent straight to voice mail and chances are he'd never call back. And to be honest, my life will be just fine if I never meet Paul.

When it comes to Jesus, I'm not a fan—I'm a follower. I don't just know about Him, I know Him personally. I spoke to Him this morning, and He didn't send me to voice mail. And I've dedicated my life to spreading His fame around this world. If it came to it, I think I would be willing to die for Him. I'm not a disciple of the Beatles, but I am a disciple of Jesus. Are you? We've declared 2013 to be the Year of Discipleship. Our theme verse comes from Luke 9:23. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

How do you know if you're a real disciple or not? During this series on the DNA of Discipleship we're examining five genetic markers of a disciple. The first marker is the gathering gene. If you're a disciple of Jesus you'll show up to worship with other disciples. In the last message, Tim Roberts talked about the gifted gene—you are a gifted child. A real disciple is one who serves up sacrificially. Today we're going to talk about the growth gene, and in the final two messages we'll examine the group gene and the generosity gene.

In this message we're going to talk about the growth gene: a disciple grows up spiritually. There are many verses in the New Testament about spiritual growth, but one of my favorites is found in 2 Peter 3:18. The Bible says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!" (2 Peter 3:18)

Age has nothing to do with emotional maturity. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Everyone grows old, but not everyone grows up." The same is true spiritually. How long you have been a Christian may not be a reflection of your spiritual maturity.

Usually you take a test after the class, but I want us to take a test before the class today. I'd like to give you a basic Bible study quiz in order for you to diagnose your need for spiritual growth.

Bible knowledge isn't the only indicator of spiritual maturity, but it can be a good diagnostic tool. Let me ask you seven basic questions about Bible knowledge and let's see how you do.

1. Who said, "Am I my Brother's Keeper?" (Cain)
2. Who were the two sons of Abraham? (Ishmael and Isaac)
3. Who was the first king of Israel? (Saul)
4. Beside the Gospel According to Luke, what other book did Luke write? (Acts)
5. Who said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John the Baptist)
6. Name the river where Jesus was baptized. (the Jordan River)
7. Is the verse, "God helps those who help themselves" found in the Old Testament or the New Testament? (Neither. No, that's NOT in the Bible.)

If you missed all seven questions, that's okay—that just means you're still in kindergarten spiritually. Keep on attending and learning. If you got three or four questions right, you're probably in the 3rd Grade spiritually. If you got five or six correct, then you're on your way toward a good understanding of the Bible. How many of you got all seven right ... and are guilty of the sin of pride by raising your hand? See you've got some room to grow, too!

In this message I want to talk about five different stages of spiritual growth and then talk about how any Christian can grow toward maturity. In preparing for this message I read a great book on discipleship by Jim Putman entitled, *Real-Life Discipleship*. If you want to know more about these five stages and how to move from one to the other, I suggest you read this excellent book.

Stage 1: Spiritually Dead. The chief characteristic of this stage is UNBELIEF

This describes a person who isn't a Christian at all. This person is an unbeliever. Unbelievers range all the way from the most vocal atheist to a person who is seeking to learn how to become a Christian. There was a time in all of our lives when we were old enough to be accountable for our sins and we had not yet placed our faith in Jesus. At one time all of us were spiritually dead. The Bible says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." (Ephesians 2:1-2)

In 1999 there was a good movie called "The Sixth Sense" starring Bruce Willis and Haley Joel Osment. Haley Joel Osment was a troubled young boy who saw the souls of people who had died. His famous line was, "I see dead people." Bruce Willis plays a child psychologist who is trying to help him. But here's a spoiler alert, so if you haven't seen the movie, cover your ears. Bruce Willis thinks he's alive, but he's really dead.

That's just a clever movie plot, but there are people all around us who don't realize that they are spiritually dead. They may be healthy and happy, but their spirit is dead, because, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, they have never been born of the Spirit.

Spiritually speaking, wouldn't it be cool if we could do what the kid on Sixth Sense could do? "I see spiritually dead people." We could look at someone and KNOW immediately whether they

were really believers or not. Well, we can't look at them, but there are ways you can recognize them. Just listen to what they say. Jesus said, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart." (Luke 6:45)

A person who is spiritually dead makes statements like these: "The Bible is just a bunch of myths." "Religion is just a crutch." "How could anyone believe in a God who would send people to hell?" "I'm better than most of the people who go to church."

There's only one thing a dead person needs, and that's life. We were all spiritually dead until we heard the gospel and we accepted God's free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. At that point we were born again. And we entered stage 2.

Stage 2: Spiritual Infant. The chief characteristic of this stage is IGNORANCE

There is a legitimate period of spiritual infancy. When you first become a Christian, you are like a spiritual baby. And like a newborn baby who is brought home from the hospital, you must be fed if you expect to grow. The Bible says, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." (1 Peter 2:2)

But one of the problems we have in our churches today is spiritual immaturity. People stay as spiritual babies and never grow. For instance, if I showed you a picture of my favorite grandson, Grant David when he was first born and then showed you the same picture but said it was on his second birthday, you'd be wondering, "Is something wrong with that child?"

How do you recognize a spiritual infant? Here are some of the statements a spiritual infant may make. "I believe in Jesus but I don't believe I have to go to church." "I tried reading the Bible, but it's too confusing." "I believe that Jesus is one of several ways to get to heaven." "I believe in heaven; but I don't really think hell exists."

Stage 3: Spiritual Child. The chief characteristic of this stage is being SELF-CENTERED

Again, there is a legitimate spiritual childhood we all pass through. But the problem in our churches is many people never graduate from spiritual elementary school. They keep failing the third grade. Try to picture this. It's a third grade classroom with desks designed for that age child. But in the middle of the classroom in a 35-year-old man, who is stuffed into the desk. Spiritual babies should have learned enough to move on, but they get stuck in the third grade.

The writer of Hebrews addressed the problem of spiritual immaturity when he wrote, "By this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness." (Hebrews 5:12-13)

There are no chronological ages connected to these stages. You could be an adult and still be a spiritual child. The main way to recognize a spiritual child is their self-centeredness. Children are basically selfish people. They don't want to naturally share their toys. One of their favorite

words is, "Mine!" Spiritual children are the same way. When they attend church, their evaluation of everything is based upon how it makes them feel.

If you want to recognize a spiritual child, they make statements like: "I love my small group; but I don't want anyone new to join us." "Who are these people coming to my church? They aren't like me!" "I'm not being fed in my church: I'm looking for a place that meets my needs." "I didn't like the music today; If only they would sing ..."

Years ago, Amy Grant recorded a song about spiritual babies. The lyrics said, "I know a man; maybe you know him, too. You can tell, he might even be you. He knelt at the altar and that was the end. He's saved and that's all that matters to him. His spiritual tummy it can't take too much. One day a week he gets his spiritual lunch. On Sunday he puts on his spiritual best and gives his language a spiritual rest. ... He's been baptized, sanctified, redeemed by the blood. But his daily devotions are stuck in the mud. He knows the books of the Bible and John 3:16. He's got the biggest King James you've ever seen. He's just fat, fat, fat, fat, fat little baby. He wants his bottle and he don't mean maybe. He sampled solid food once or twice, but he says doctrine leaves him cold as ice."

Are you still a fat spiritual baby? Is it time for you to grow up into Christ?

Stage 4: Spiritual Young Adult. The chief characteristic of this stage is SERVICE

This stage of spiritual growth is like graduating from high school, you move from a learning stage to a working stage. One of the main ways you know you have grown from being a spiritual child to a young adult is that you are now serving others.

The Bible says service is a sure sign of spiritual growth. Paul wrote that the job of pastors is "... to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up... Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching... Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:12, 14-15)

I've often said we have two basic kinds of people who attend Green Acres. There are the spectators and the participators. And if you're new to our church, it's okay for you to come and check us out for a while. There's nothing wrong with being a temporary spectator. But if you've been attending this church for more a year and you haven't joined and found a place to serve the Lord, then you are a chronic spectator. Church isn't like attending a sporting event or a musical production at the Cowan Center. God doesn't want you to just come and sit and watch and go home. He brought you here to get on the field and play. He brought you here to join the action.

Take worship music an example. If you're a spectator, then your idea of worship is that here are the performers up on stage here in Celebration, Crosswalk, and at the South Campus. These performers are praising the Lord, but they're the performers and you're the audience—for that reason your participation is optional. If someone does a good job you clap loudly. If they aren't that great, you don't clap, or you just clap quietly.

But you've got it all wrong. When we worship, these aren't the performers and you aren't the audience. We're all part of a choir and we're singing to an audience of One. And the only applause we are listening for is the applause of the nail-pierced hands. And the Bible says in Psalm 47:1, "Clap your hands all you people, shout to God with cries of joy." But you aren't clapping as approval for whoever just sang, you are offering a clap offering to God. So when you applaud, it should be an ovation worthy of His holy name!

How can you recognize a spiritual young adult? They make statements like this: "Wow! Look at how many people are at church today! I had to walk three blocks from my parking place!" "Randy and Linda missed class this week because they both have the flu. Let's take meals to them this week. I'll do Monday night." "I think we need a ministry to help our widows with household repairs. I'll enlist some people to help me start one." "I'm really exhausted. I called all sixty people in my class this week to make sure they would be in church!"

You may be in this stage, and I'm glad you are serving the Lord on a regular basis. But this isn't the pinnacle of spiritual maturity. There's another stage.

Stage 5: Spiritual Parent. The chief characteristic of this stage is REPRODUCTION

The word disciple basically means, "follower." A disciple is someone who follows Jesus and does what Jesus did. Jesus made disciples. And He taught His disciples to make disciples. One day Jesus walked by a bunch of fishermen tending their nets. He said, "Come, Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." (Mark 1:17) Jesus disciplined these men, and they in turn disciplined many others. Jesus reproduced His life in them.

God's command to the first parents, Adam and Eve, was, "Be fruitful and multiply." As followers of Jesus we are to reproduce our Christian life in others.

The Apostle Paul modeled this idea of spiritual parenthood. He wrote, "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me." (1 Corinthians 4:15-16) He said "I fathered you in the gospel. Now imitate me. Be spiritual parents yourselves."

When Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy he addressed him as, "To Timothy my true son in the faith." (1 Timothy 1:2) All disciples are disciple-makers. This stage is very simple to identify. Can you point to a least one person in your life that you have personally led to Christ and you spent time with them helping them grow to the point where they can lead someone else to Christ and teach that person to reproduce themselves spiritually?

Through the years I've had the joy of mentoring ten to twelve young men who have gone into the ministry. All of them except two are currently serving as senior pastors and those two are working in their local churches.

What kind of statements do spiritual parents make? Here are a few examples: "I've been sharing with Jim for several weeks. I'm thrilled that he has trusted Christ, and I'm bringing him to be baptized next Sunday." "Sherry, welcome to our church. Can I meet you for coffee this week to

talk about how you can get plugged in to our church?" "There's someone in my group who is passionate about children. Can you have someone in the Children's Ministry contact them?"

So, which of these five stages best describes where you are spiritually? Through the years I've had a number of people come to see me and say, "Pastor, I'm not happy with where I am in terms of spiritual growth. Can you give me some tips on how I can grow as a Christian?" I always tell them there are four things you need to do every day, and you will grow in Christ. To make it easy to remember, these four actions spell the word GROW.

1. GET on your knees regularly

In other words, pray every day. Prayer is both an act and an attitude. Paul wrote, "For this reason I kneel before the Father." "Pray continually." (Ephesians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:17) In order for Paul to kneel, that meant he was focusing all his attention on talking to God. He prayed alone and he prayed with others. James, the half-brother of Jesus, who wrote the Epistle of James, carried the nickname, "Old Camel Knees." Tradition says James spent so much time kneeling in prayer that thick calluses built up on his knees. The problem today is the seats of our pants are wearing out faster than the fabric over our knees. We spent too much time sitting and not enough time on our knees.

If you want to experience a quantum leap in your personal prayer life I suggest you set aside time every day to get alone with God and talk to him. Get a notebook and write a prayer journal. Write out your prayers to God like you are writing Him a letter.

But prayer is also an attitude. When you pray without ceasing, that doesn't mean you spend 24/7 on your knees in prayer. It means that wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you're so aware of the presence of God that you can break out in silent conversation with Him. It's like having your satellite heart radio constantly tuned in to only one station WJESUS. Want to grow? Get on your knees.

2. READ your Bible daily

One of the greatest ministry to children we have at Green Acres is AWANA. These kids are being trained to learn and memorize more scripture than many adults. AWANA may sound like a strange word, but the initials stand for Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed. This is based on what the Bible says in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

The biggest complaint I hear from baby Christians is that they tried reading the Bible but they couldn't understand it so they quit. If you want to grow as a Christian, don't start reading the Bible in Genesis because once you get to Leviticus and Numbers you're going to bog down in the genealogical mud. The best suggestion I've given young Christians is to take a short book of the New Testament and read it every day for a month. Take Philippians, which has only four chapters, and try reading it every day for thirty days. Then pick another New Testament book like Mark, which has sixteen chapters, and read four chapters a day for a solid month. When you

read the Bible repetitively, it gets better and better. You'll hear God speaking to you in passages you've already read a dozen times before. Try it.

3. OTHERS need your ministry

Every day, look for an opportunity to serve someone in the name of Jesus. Stop focusing on your own problems and start giving your life away to others. The Bible says, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13)

When you read God's Word and pray, your soul gets saturated with the love of God like a sponge. As we go out every day, we should squeeze the love of God out to be a blessing to others. Bill Bright, who founded Campus Crusade, used the example of breathing. When we read the Bible and pray, it's like inhaling. It's great to inhale, but if that's all you ever do, you'll hyperventilate. Exhaling is giving away the life of the Spirit who lives in us. A healthy Christian is someone who has found the rhythm of receiving God's love and sharing God's love.

4. WITNESS about your changed life

Witnessing isn't about memorizing a sales pitch for Jesus. It's simply telling people how Jesus has changed your life. A witness in a court of law is only asked to relate what they saw and experienced. The early Christians couldn't stop telling everyone they met how Jesus was alive and had changed their lives. The Bible says, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all." (Acts 4:33) Are you in the habit of regularly telling people about Jesus?

CONCLUSION

If you were filling out a job application you might be asked about your highest level of education. You would know whether to check high school, college, graduate degree, and post-graduate degree. If you had to check your state of spiritual maturity, which level would you check? The main difference between education and spiritual maturity is this: You can graduate from the schools of this world, but in the school of Christ, you are always a student. If you ever have the attitude you have arrived, then you are in trouble. The process of spiritual growth involved being continually shaped and molded into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The main genetic marker for spiritual growth is whether you are becoming more like Jesus every day. A few days ago I was leaving a local restaurant after lunch. My dad taught me to be a gentleman, so I stopped and held the door for two ladies who were leaving behind me. As the first one walked out into the cold rain she glanced at me and said, "Thank you. Jesus, it's cold outside!" I couldn't pass it up. I said, "You can just call me David, but thanks for the compliment!"

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes