

The Maturity of a Spiritual Leader

by J. Oswald Sanders

A spiritual leader must prioritize leading others into a mature Christian experience and strive for a quality of life that reflects the fruit of the Spirit.

Duration: 43:13

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Romans 12:11, Ephesians 4:11-16, Colossians 1:28-29

Topics: "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having someone behind us pouring on oil to keep us moving and generating power in our leadership positions. He encourages leaders to be kept at boiling point by the Holy Spirit and to serve the Master faithfully. The speaker then focuses on the qualities of a leader, particularly in the areas of speech, life, love, faith, and purity. He highlights the significance of setting an example in these areas, as it will make people listen and follow, regardless of age. The sermon concludes with a discussion on how to react to dashed hopes, adversity, and sorrow, emphasizing the need to trust in God's sovereignty and maintain a mature and Christ-like attitude. The sermon references Paul's letter to the Ephesians, specifically chapter 4, to support the teachings on leadership and maturity.

Transcript

The theme on which I am about to speak is the maturity of a leader. And I would invite you to read with me from Paul's letter to the Ephesians chapter 4. And we'll read from verse 11. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up 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.

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 men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head, that is, Christ. 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.

And then in Colossians chapter 1, verse 28, where Paul tells us the objective he has in view in his ministry, verse 28, he says, We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy which so powerfully

works in me. This verse enshrines the goal of the Christian ministry.

The last clause gives the leader clear guidance concerning the road he is to travel, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. And it is good for those of us who are preachers to ask ourselves, Is my preaching calculated to secure this end? Is it producing mature Christians? You'll notice that it is a blanket instruction, everyone. The leader is to be concerned for the growth and development of everyone who is in his group or in his congregation.

He must aim at leading everyone in his group, old and young, new Christian or aged saint, into an increasingly mature Christian experience. The corollary is, of course, that if I am to lead others into a growing spiritual maturity, I myself must be making progress along the same road. An immature leader will never produce mature followers.

The leader need not be perfect in the absolute sense, and who is, but he must be conforming to the exhortation of Hebrews 6.1. Let us continue progressing toward maturity. I remember Bishop Horton telling me that whenever he was looking for a man for a leadership position, the first question he asked himself was, Is this man growing? And it's a good question to ask ourselves, Are we growing in spiritual maturity? The growth in maturity must be visible to his followers. In his first letter to Timothy, chapter 4 and verse 15, Paul, after giving wise counsel, said to Timothy, Be diligent in these matters.

Give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. You would have thought that Paul would have said, so that you may see their progress, because that's what a leader is looking for. He's earnestly desiring that those for whom he has responsibility will be growing, and he's looking for their progress.

But Paul turns the question back, and he says, So that your followers may see your progress. His progress in maturity must be visible to others. I find this tremendously challenging.

We who are leaders spend a lot of time telling others from scripture how they are to become mature. But are we ourselves growing in maturity, or is our experience static? I remember Dr. Sprogge on one occasion giving an address which the title was, Stuck Between Easter and Pentecost. He pointed out that many Christians knew what Easter stood for.

They knew that Good Friday stood for the fact that Christ died for our sins. They knew that Easter Sunday stood for the fact that Christ rose for our justification. But he said, Very many Christians never get as far as what God intended them to experience through the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

And it's good for us to challenge ourselves as leaders and see whether we are stuck in our Christian experience, or whether we are growing in likeness to Christ. I would suggest an exercise that I myself have found very salutary. Take the nine manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, 22, 23, and ask yourself such questions as this.

Am I a more loving man than I was three months ago? Has it been visible to those I live with? How has my love found expression? Who has been the beneficiary of it? Am I a more joyous man than I was three months ago? Or am I still not very wonderful to live with or to work with? Am I enjoying more of the peace of God and manifesting more of the peace of God than I did three months ago? Or is my experience static? When we ask these questions, I think we'll all be convinced that there is room for much growth in these areas. Nothing will forfeit leadership more quickly than when a leader reacts in an immature manner

in a time of crisis. And it's the unplanned situation, the situation for which we've had no time to prepare ourselves, it is this situation that tests our maturity and reveals the degree in which we are mature.

The possession of spiritual gifts is very important because it is through spiritual gifts that the body of Christ is built up. But the possession of spiritual gifts is not to be equated with spiritual maturity. In writing his powerful letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul dealt with serious disorders in that church, he said, you do not lack any spiritual gift.

Obviously, every spiritual gift was in exercise in the church at Corinth. And yet, surprisingly, he went on to say to the same people, I could not write unto you as spiritual, but as worldly, mere infants in Christ. That's a startling statement, possessing spiritual gifts and yet mere infants in Christ, not spiritually mature.

I think this is a clear indication that one may possess a variety of spiritual gifts and yet be spiritually immature in our actions and reactions. This is a sobering thought. The problem Paul faced at the church in Corinth was not heresy, it was spiritual immaturity.

The possession of spiritual gifts is not the measure of our spirituality. The Corinthians had these, but they were tragically lacking in the fruit of the Spirit. And this is the true proof, the true measure of our spirituality.

As we've seen, spiritual gifts can be counterfeited, but you cannot counterfeit the fruit of the Spirit, you cannot counterfeit love, you cannot truly counterfeit joy or peace. No, these things cannot be counterfeited. It is when the fruit of the Spirit is being produced in our life in an increasing luxuriance that we see the way in which the Holy Spirit has been working in our lives.

The degree of our maturity as leaders is evidenced in our actions and in our attitudes, but also preeminently in our reactions, the way in which we react in different situations. And this was true of the church at Corinth. Listen to what Paul says, You are still worldly, for since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere men? You see, the leadership in this church had broken down.

They were tolerating blatant immorality. Believers were resorting to litigation against one another before the heathen in heathen courts. There were disgraceful disorders at the Lord's table, and these were manifestations of spiritual immaturity in both leaders and congregation.

They had failed to keep progressing toward maturity. If we are going to make a real impact for God in the service of the kingdom, it means that we must keep on growing. My wife died of cancer, but about 10 days before she died, I was attending to her and trying to make her comfortable, because she was in a good deal of pain.

When she turned to me, she said, Dear, don't make things too easy for me. I must not get fussy at this stage. I must keep on growing.

Well, she might very well have been occupied with her own pain and the fact that she knew she had only a few days more to live, but instead of that, she was concerned that she might continue progressing toward maturity right to the very end. Have we got a passion like that? Have we got a desire like that? The Lord wants us to keep on growing. Our maturity is evidenced even more clearly in our reactions in unstudied and unexpected situations.

The leader is always under the microscope. People are always looking at him or at her. The leader is not a private person.

He lives in public and under public scrutiny. And people watch how we react in difficult circumstances. We are models to our followers.

And for that reason, we need to be very careful how we act, how we react. And of course, the reactions are very often unstudied. We haven't had time to prepare ourselves for it.

How do we react, for example, when our hopes are dashed? When we've been expecting something and hoping for it and praying for it, and then suddenly our hopes are dashed. How do we react? Do we drop our bundle? Do we lose heart? Or do we pick up the pieces and go ahead and move on? How do we react when adversity overtakes us? Do we blame God or blame other people? Or do we say, as our Lord did, even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight? How do we react when sorrow strikes? Do we indulge in an orgy of self-centered emotion? Or do we turn our eyes outward? Do we turn our trouble into treasure and turn our sorrow into song? Many years ago, I was traveling in Asia with Mr. Fred Mitchell, who was the British Director of the China Inland Mission. We had lovely fellowship together.

We concluded our tour and at Singapore, I bade him goodbye as he got on a plane to return to England. He had traveled only as far as Calcutta when the plane blew up and everybody on board was killed. His widow was a delicate lady and, of course, it was a tremendous shock to her.

She was expecting to have breakfast with him the next morning, and instead of that, he was taken from her side. And for quite a while, she was laid low. But when she had recovered, she told me her experience.

She said, I thought, now, how could I use this experience in some way that would bring glory to the Lord? And she said, it occurred to me, why, you're only one of thousands of widows who are in exactly the same position as you are. You've experienced the Lord's help wonderfully in your sorrow. Why not, when you hear of another widow, why not write to them and share with them your experience of my goodness? And so she said, I began, when I heard of a widow, I began writing.

And before long, quite a considerable correspondence sprang up. And then when I'd read in a newspaper of a tragedy and somebody left a widow, I would write to that person. And you know, she had a marvelous ministry to people in sorrow.

She turned her trouble into treasure. She turned her sorrow into song. Is that the way we react? How do we react when we've been unjustly treated? Isn't there a temptation to pay the person back in kind? And yet, is that what the Lord wants us to do? Or instead of doing that, instead of retaliating, do we demonstrate an invincible love and love them more in spite of what they have done? How do we react when a crisis arises, a crisis coming totally unexpected out of the blue? Do we panic or do we remain calm? I believe that the way in which a leader reacts in time of crisis says a tremendous amount to his followers.

And when they see that this man is relying upon God, and in the midst of devastating circumstances, he maintains his integrity and his walk with God, that does more to cement the leadership link than anything else. These are the kinds of situations that test the maturity of the spiritual leader. Leadership should not be entrusted to the immature.

That's a principle that should be always acted upon. Paul made this crystal clear in 1 Timothy chapter 3, verses 5 and 10, when he said this, he must not be a recent congregante, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. Then verse 10, they must first be tested.

These are important principles in the development of leadership. Tremendous problems have arisen when people who are naturally gifted are too quickly elevated to leadership positions. And this is a tendency which is very common in our present-day climate.

A prominent person is converted who may be very gifted and competent in their own sphere, and then they are suddenly thrust into a spiritual leadership position for which they have had no training and are not competent. And many problems arise from that. I remember going to conduct a campaign in a church, and I found when I got there that the church was in terrible turmoil.

The reason had been that they appointed to one of the leadership positions a man who was very gifted, but had been converted only nine months. He hadn't had time to mature, and the decisions he made would have perhaps been all right in a worldly situation, but they wrought havoc in a spiritual situation. I think we need to be very careful before we elevate a person to positions of leadership.

Paul says concerning deacons, they must first be tested. Give them responsibility if a person is competent. Give them limited responsibility so that they can grow into it.

And if a person is not willing to take a lower leadership position in the church or in Christian work, they are not qualified to take a higher one. The word that Paul uses, not a novice it says in the King James, the word is the one from which we get neophyte, and it means newly planted. If a tree is to withstand the storms, it must have time to get its roots down deep.

The novice lacks the maturity to handle the tests to which the leader is constantly exposed, and the process cannot be hurried. Oh, it's possible to force plants, and sometimes you buy at the nurserymen's plants that look very wonderful, but they've been forced, and before very long they wilt and fade. They don't stand the test.

They're not robust. And sudden elevation to office often throws people who have not yet gained spiritual maturity off balance, and oftentimes they fail and are discouraged, and sometimes they drop out. Let them first be tested.

However, it must be said that age is not the prime factor to be considered. In fact, some young people are very much more spiritually mature than some old people. It's not a matter of age.

It's a matter of development. It's a matter of the degree in which they have followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit and have been obedient to the word of God. Timothy, to whom Paul was writing, was a comparatively young man.

He was young by the standards of those days, and then sometimes, as now, a young man was not listened to very seriously by the older men. But Paul didn't disqualify him on that account. And as you read Paul's letters, you see that Paul entrusted this young man with some very heavy responsibilities.

And he encouraged him. He said, now don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. You can't help being young, and time will look after that too.

Paul said to Timothy, you're young. The older men at Ephesus, where you're going, may not be inclined to listen to you, but I'll tell you how you can compensate for your youth. You can compensate for your youth by the quality of your life.

And then he told him how he was to do it. He said, set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, in purity. I think you'll agree that some of those things are points at which youth is rather deficient at times.

So he says, Timothy, if you set an example in these five areas, people will listen to you, in spite of the fact that you're young, because there is no answer to a godly life. We are to be models in a world in which there are too few models. And we need to be models that will represent Christ.

And if we are walking close with him, and being daily transformed increasingly into his likeness, then others seeing us will want to follow him too. Have you noticed the stress our Lord laid on quality of life as opposed to quantity of activity? For example, when Jesus gave the eight Beatitudes in Matthew 5, when he was announcing the manifesto of his kingdom, the eight qualities of character that he mentioned were not activist qualities. Now, we live in a tremendously activist age, don't we? We are laboring under the illusion that the more we do, the faster we go, the more noise we make about it, the more we achieve.

But is that really correct? Do we achieve more? No. Jesus would rather lay the emphasis in another direction. He didn't suggest new techniques that they could adopt, or new methods of Christian work.

He didn't tell them how they could engage in money-raising schemes. What did he do? He set before his followers the type of person he expected who would be the ideal citizen of his kingdom. And in the eight qualities of which he spoke, they are passive and not active qualities.

And we ought to take notice of that. What are the qualities he mentioned? Blessed are those who feel inadequate. Rather a strange quality, isn't it, for the person who is going to be successful in God's work.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who feel inadequate. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake. Every one of them, a rather passive quality.

You see, the Lord is emphasizing not so much quantity of activity as quality of life. Jesus made it clear that he wasn't looking for a bunch of workaholics, but people who reflected his own spirit. Now Paul had no different outlook from his master, although he himself was a great activist.

He knew that the quality of his work would determine its effectiveness. And so he stressed the same thing. If you take the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, 22, 23, and then analyze them, you will find that all nine manifestations of this fruit were passive.

Indeed, every one of the nine could be reproduced in the life of a paraplegic who couldn't move a muscle and couldn't do anything. These are qualities of character. And these are the things that the Lord values very highly in a leader.

They make one a mature leader. When we're living a quality of life, we'll achieve more even although we maybe seem to be doing less. The word Paul uses that is translated perfect or mature in our versions carries a dual idea.

First of all, it means the full development of one's powers, or the attainment of some standard or goal. Now our Lord perfectly fulfilled both ideals, did he not? All his powers were fully developed and integrated. He attained the standard God set.

He reached the goal his father had set before him. He perfectly fulfilled both ideals. And this is the standard he has for us.

He wants all our powers to be fully developed, to become mature, that we might have a fully integrated personality. He wants us also to attain the standard that he was set and how tremendously high it is. We may think it's impossible, but remember the exhortation of Hebrews 6.1, let us continue progressing toward maturity.

The question is not whether we have arrived, but whether we are moving forward. No one on this earth ever has or ever will attain absolute maturity in the sense in which our Lord attained it. But we can be progressing toward maturity and moving on toward it.

How can we rise to such a standard? None of us is perfectly mature, but there is something to encourage us. I used to have trouble with Matthew 5.48, which says, be perfect or be mature therefore as your father in heaven is perfect or mature. That seemed an impossible goal to have in view.

However could I become like God in maturity? But I was encouraged reading a book of Dr. A.T. Robertson, where he pointed out that the word for perfect or mature can be used of our Lord in the absolute sense, but not so of us. However, the word is used of the relative maturity of a child as compared with an adult. And here is hope for us.

Jesus is saying that we must press on from an infantile to an adult maturity. And this is what we should be doing. We press on.

Paul said, not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I press on. And this should be our attitude. Moving on from the infantile to the adult.

The spiritual maturity of a leader is not merely a matter of age or aging. We don't automatically grow more mature because we're growing old. There is no necessary link between gray hair and maturity as we see in some of us older people.

Now you can't measure our maturity by the calendar. No, it's not merely an aging process. It's not something that's instantaneous.

It's not final. No living thing matures in an instant. You never find a child who goes to bed an infant and wakes up an adult.

There is growth. There is development. No single decision will secure for us all the blessings of sanctification, although sometimes those crisis experiences give us a tremendous push forward.

But there has to be the progressing. Let us continue to progress toward maturity. It involves moral effort.

It involves discipline. It involves perseverance. In his wonderful poem St. Paul, F. W. H. Myers has this verse.

Let no one think that sudden in a minute all is accomplished and his work is done. Though with thine earliest dawn now shouldst begin it, scarce were it ended in thy setting sun. Spiritual maturity is not something that's automatic as a result of the mastery of scripture.

I would be the last to say anything against mastering scripture, but remember that our Bible study is of value only as its principles are worked out in daily obedience. Otherwise it's just an intellectual exercise. No, it must be worked out in daily experience.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made this perceptive statement. The difference between a mature man and a callow youth is that he finds his center of gravity wherever he happens to be at the moment. And however much he longs for the object of his desire, it cannot prevent him from doing his duty.

In other words, the mature leader will function wherever he is placed. The immature leader will want to be put somewhere where he likes or where he feels comfortable. The mature spiritual leader will function wherever he is placed.

And this is something we should covet and aim at. To the Greeks, the ideal frame of mind is enshrined in a word that occurs in Romans 12 and verse 3, a word *sophrosyne*, which means to think with sober judgment. They regarded this as the fundamental virtue, an ideal balance of mind.

You know, a virtue is a mean between two extremes. For example, take the virtue of courage. It is not difficult for it to slip off on one side and become rashness.

Or it can slip off onto the other side and become cowardice. Or take the virtue of purity. On the one hand, it can turn to prudery.

On the other hand, it could turn to impurity. But the virtue is the mean between the two. And this is the ideal.

Well, spiritual maturity, as we read it in the scriptures, is a very delicately poised quality. And both Paul and the writer to the Hebrews indicates that there are two extremes into which it can slip. On the one hand, it can be an unduly protracted infancy, not making progress toward maturity, stuck between Easter and Pentecost.

And many Christians are immature. They are still drinking the milk of the word, totally dependent on what they receive from other people. An unduly protracted infancy.

On the other hand, it could slip into an unduly premature senility. Many Christians have gone into this condition. Instead of progress, there has been regression.

And the writer to the Hebrews, speaking to people who are in that state, he said, you've been a Christian long enough that you ought to be teaching others. Instead of that, you need someone to come to you and teach you again the ABC of the doctrine of Christ. And this, these two possibilities face the Christian leader as well as the followers.

And we do well to realize this danger and guard against it. Make sure that we are not moving backward, but that we are moving forward, that we are not stuck in our Christian experience. Leaders can lose their

spiritual insight if they fail to maintain daily communion with God.

And the worst of it is that such regression is usually unconscious and painless. The leader sets the tone for any group. He enunciates the standards.

He provides the example, or the model. He imparts vision. He communicates faith, or he should do.

And he must be ahead of his followers in many areas, or he himself is a follower and not a leader. Now, I admit that these biblical standards of leadership are tremendously high, and we might feel discouraged. But is there a dynamic that can keep us on course in our pursuit of spiritual maturity? I believe there is.

In Romans 12 and verse 11, it says, not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Archbishop Harrington Lees has a translation of that middle statement that runs like this, not slothful in business, kept at boiling point by the Holy Spirit. Kept at boiling point, it's the present continuous tense, by the Holy Spirit.

We come to the boil, we get a warm heart, we have our experiences like that, but how easy it is for us to go off the boil. How can we be kept on the boil? Many years ago, I took my boy to one of the boiling lakes in the thermal regions of our country at Rotorua. We were standing with our guide, seeing the steam rising from the lake, and the guide said to my lad, take that shovel and throw a shovel full of sand into the lake.

Well, he did. And in a minute, the lake started to boil and seethe and bubble, and it kept on doing it, and we watched it. And I said to the guide, what's the explanation of that? Oh, he said, it's very simple.

The water in this lake is very acid. And the sand your boy threw in was iron sand, and all you're seeing is that down at the bottom of the lake, there is the chemical action going on, and you're seeing its manifestation on the surface of the lake. And as he said that, my thought went to this verse, kept at boiling point by the Holy Spirit.

Deep in our spirits dwells the Holy Spirit of God. His great desire is to advance the cause of Christ. He is there what for? To be to us what Christ could be.

And Paul says you can be kept at boiling point by the Holy Spirit who is given to you. You remember in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, when Christian reached Interpreter's house, he saw a fire blazing on the hearth, and a man pouring water on it. But to his amazement, instead of putting the fire out, he only seemed to make the flames leap higher.

And Christian was mystified until he went round the back. And there, what did he see? He saw a man pouring on oil, and he understood why the flames leaped higher. In our leadership positions, we'll get plenty of cold water poured.

But you see, when there's somebody behind pouring on the oil, the water will go off in steam. It will generate power. And my brothers, my sisters in leadership, here I believe is the dynamic that will keep us moving, not slothful in business.

Kept at boiling point by the Holy Spirit, doing bond service for the Master. Please turn the cassette over at this point for Mr. Sanders' next message on spiritual leadership.

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