

**The Discipleship Journey**  
**Pastor Joe Oakley - GFC – 6/12/22**

We are in the last section of our in-depth study of discipleship called Forward in Faith. So far we've taught on what it means to Follow Christ, Obey Christ, Reach others for Christ, Worship Christ, Abide in Christ, and Resist the enemy in the name of Jesus Christ. Now we are teaching on how to disciple others for Christ.

Today I am preaching on The Discipleship Journey. Before you begin this journey, you are an unbeliever. I know it's popular to believe that everyone is a child of God and everyone is going to heaven. But that is not what the Bible teaches!

In John 8 Jesus had a conversation with some people who did not believe He was the son of God. He told them in verses 42-44

*If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on My own; but He sent Me. Why is My language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.*

Everyone is part of one of two families: God's or Satan's. In Matthew 13 Jesus talked about good seed and bad seed. Verses 38-39 say:

*...the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil.*

Every human being was created by God but not everyone is a child of God. God wants a family, and He wants you to be a part of it. How do we become a member of God's family? All it requires to be part of Satan's family is to be born. But to be a part of God's family you must be born again! You must change kingdoms, change families, change fathers! 1 Peter 1:3-4 says:

*It is His boundless mercy that has given us the privilege of being born again so that we are now members of God's own family.*

Now we live in the hope of eternal life because Christ rose again from the dead. And God has reserved for His children the priceless gift of eternal life. The invitation to be part of God's family is universal, but there is no universal salvation – there must be a profession of faith in Jesus. Galatians 3:26 says:

*For we are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.*

The only way to become a child of God is through faith in Jesus Christ. John 1:12-13 says:

*To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to*

*become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, but born of God.*

When we place our faith in Christ, God becomes our Father, we become his children, other believers become our brothers and sisters, and the church becomes our spiritual family.

After you are born again through faith in Jesus Christ, you begin a life-long journey of growing in Christ called discipleship. The Bible teaches that we are all in different stages of discipleship. We see this in 1 John 2:12-14 which gives a great overview of the stages of spiritual growth. It compares spiritual growth to the stages of physical growth.

*I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.*

So we see here that the Bible was written to children, young people and grown adults. This is not actually talking about stages of physical life – but it is addressing people in various stages of their Christian walk.

It looks like there are 3 stages of spiritual growth – but it is actually 4. That's because there are 2 different Greek words translated as “children” in this passage. The word for child in 1 John 2:12 is teknon (tek-nee'-on); which means an infant. John used this word to address all believers as dear children. All Christians have been born into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, and their sins have been forgiven.

In 1 John 2:13 – a different word is used for child. It's the Greek word paidion (pie-dee'-on); which refers to a small child. Strong's Concordance says it means a half-grown child.

So – John gives us 4 stages of Christian growth. Newborns are the most recent converts. All they really know is that their sins are forgiven.

Little children are those who are able to walk and talk. They know God as Father.

The young adults are in the prime of their spiritual life. They are soldiers who overcome the enemy by the blood of the Lamb.

The mature adults are those with the most wisdom and experience and knowledge of God. These four groups make up the household or family of God. These are the four stages of spiritual growth in the discipleship journey.

Please understand that these stages of growth build upon one another. You don't forget what you've learned in an earlier phase as you mature. You just add to what you already know.

It's like math. You don't forget addition and subtraction as you move into multiplication and division. You don't forget algebra when you move into geometry. You don't forget trigonometry when you move into calculus. It all builds together and works together.

No one begins their Christian life as a full-grown mature believer. We begin as newborn children - but we must not stay that way! And spiritual growth does not automatically happen! Age does not equal maturity. There are many immature elderly people. You are only young once, but you can stay immature forever. Maturity is progressive and intentional.

So – let's look at these stages of spiritual growth that we must intentionally grow to and through to know God better. And let's look at the challenges Jesus gives us at every level.

### **1- Newborns are newly born again**

The first step to natural life is being born as a baby. And the first step to spiritual life in Christ is being born again. To be born again we must respond to the challenge of Jesus found in John 3:7 - *You must be born again.*

And to be born again you must respond to His challenge found in John 1:39 - *Come and see.*

This is how Jesus invited the first disciples into relationship with Himself. He invited them to come and see what He was saying and doing. And we need to be inviting people to Jesus. Sometimes that includes inviting them to church to come and see what the Lord is doing.

When they do come to Jesus in faith – they are newborns in Christ. Think about babies when they're born. They are helpless—hungry—thirsty. They make messes. They are selfish and when something doesn't go their way they express themselves in some pretty annoying ways! But thank God they don't stay babies forever! The truth is that many Christians probably fall into this category - and there is nothing wrong with that.

We all start out as spiritual babies. A newborn Christian doesn't know much about the Bible or correct doctrine, but they do recognize God the Father. What we need to do is love them – give them a place of security – feed them and clean up their messes. We also need to teach them the milk of the Word. 1 Peter 2:2-3 says:

*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

You will not grow apart from the Word of God! That's the key to growth in every stage. If you don't get in the Word – you get stuck in your growth!

The growth process begins as a newer believer takes in spiritual milk, which is the gospel of Jesus and the basics of the faith. We are here to help you with this! This is why we have our Grace Journey classes where we teach the basic fundamentals of the faith.

It's okay to be a spiritual baby when you are first born again. But you must grow up! To do that you must follow the second challenge to disciples that Jesus gave in John 1:43 - *Follow Me*.

## **2- Little Children are Learning to Walk with God**

Little children are not newborns – they have grown to the place that they are learning to walk and talk. Likewise - the Christian life starts with the new birth, and then progresses as we follow Jesus and learn to walk and talk with Him.

We must be willing to leave spiritual kindergarten and move on to elementary school and high school and college. Some people want to stay in kindergarten – it's easier and there's a snack and a nap time. But to do so is to choose to stay immature.

Children should grow in knowledge every year, just as we should be growing in knowing the Lord! 2 Peter 3:18 says

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Spiritual maturity will not just happen automatically.

You can't outgrow Bible ignorance. You can't just outgrow prayerlessness.

You can't just outgrow not being filled with the spirit. 1 Corinthians 13:11 says:

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

You will not automatically grow out of spiritual immaturity. Childish things are put away by being recognized, refused and replaced with mature thinking and the truth of God's word. The key is getting off the milk of the Word and getting into the meat of the Word. The author of Hebrews, when rebuking those who should have been mature, said in Hebrews 5:12—6:2

*In fact, though 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. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

*Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

Mature believers are abiding in the word and living righteous lives. The word of God is abiding in them because they study it and live it.

As we are following the Lord and growing in our faith – Jesus issues a third challenge found in Matthew 4:19 - *Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*

### **3- Young Adults are Learning to Work With God**

And as they mature in their faith, we see them start to sacrifice and take on roles of leading, giving and serving. Then they start reaching others for Christ and start helping disciple new believers to become mature believers.

In a church this size we should never have to say we need children's workers or teachers or small group leaders. But we do because so many people are in spiritual infancy. They've been saved but have not grown spiritually. It's time to grow up and start giving out!

Those who are maturing in the faith are those who are seeking to work with God. They want to put the word to work.

They want to discover their spiritual gifts and find a place of service.

They know you only grow through exercising faith.

You will never grow in knowing God if you take in and never give out.

If you want to build your faith without sharing your faith. 1 John 2:14 says

*I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.*

In order to grow in knowing God – you must become strong in the Word and you must overcome the enemy. Why? Because he wants to keep you in spiritual diapers!

That's why one of the first things you must overcome is the enemy's attempts to keep you out of the Word! Being an overcomer means that you're not backing down from the devil, but you're staying in the Word and prayer as you grow in knowing God!

By the way - I want to challenge you to make sure you are not just surrounding yourself with those that are like you. If you're a spiritual baby – don't surround yourself with other babies! Find some people with some spiritual maturity and hang out with them! This is the wonderful thing about being a multi-generational church.

It requires the whole family of God working together to accomplish the purposes of the Lord.

Once we've responded to the challenges of Christ to be born again, to follow Him and to be fishers of men, He issues another challenge. It's found in John 15:16 *I chose you and appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit.*

#### **4- Fathers – Mature Adults – Make Disciples who Make Disciples**

That is lasting fruit that goes on for generations. That's why Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:2

*You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other faithful people who will be able to pass them on to others.*

Spiritual parents are mature believers who have an intimate personal knowledge of God. As you develop spiritually, you go from learner (Spiritual Child) to laborer (Spiritual Adolescent) to leader (Spiritually Parent).

The basis of all spiritual maturity is knowing God. Spiritual parents gain wisdom by applying their knowledge of God to daily life. They not only know God through factual understanding; they know Him through personal experience.

Wuest Translation of I John 2:12 says:

*I am writing to you, fathers, because you have come to know experientially the One who is from the beginning.*

Spiritual growth does not happen by just merely understanding doctrine intellectually, but it happens when we truly come to know the Lord personally. That means we need spiritual parents – not just teachers. 1 Corinthians 4:14-16 says:

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand instructors 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.*

Once again Paul is saying – why haven't you progressed further in faith? Previously he wondered why more were not teachers. Now he's wondering why more are not fathers.

What are some characteristics of spiritually mature fathers in the faith?

They know God intimately and they share that knowledge with others.

You see – the word father means you have children.

Who are your spiritual children?

Who have you led to the Lord? Who are you discipling?

You become a father in the faith when you understand the father heart of God and you begin to see others through His eyes.

We become God's children when we are born again. We have our sins forgiven and we begin to know God as Father. Some people stay there.

We grow into spiritual young adults when we strengthen ourselves through the word and begin to wage spiritual warfare.

We grow into adulthood as we grow in the knowledge of God and then pass that knowledge on to others.

Do you know God? Where are you in your relationship with Him? Everything else you do and say flows out of that relationship. Spiritually mature people know the Father – they understand His love and they know His Word.

So – where are you in the discipleship journey? No matter what stage of the Christian life you find yourself in today, be encouraged. If you are a newer Christian, be encouraged that your sins have been forgiven and that you are in a growing relationship with the Father.

If you are a maturing Christian, be encouraged that God is teaching you through His word how to overcome the evil one.

If you are a mature Christian, be encouraged that you can help develop others into those who are also growing in knowing God.

Whatever stage of life you find yourself in - whatever generation of believer you are, be encouraged and continue to grow in knowing God and serving God through every season of life.

Plant seeds of faith in the spring.

Work hard in the heat of the summer when there is no visible fruit.

Work even harder in the times of harvest.

Overcome the cold of spiritual winter.

As you follow Christ in this discipleship journey, you will grow in the Lord in ever-increasing measure! From grace to grace, from faith to faith, from glory to glory!

And you will have increased joy because John said in 3 John 4

*I have no greater joy than to hear that my spiritual children are living their lives in the Truth.*

Just as parents have great joy when their children are walking in truth – we too receive great joy when our spiritual children walk in truth!