

Three Steps to Maturity

In the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, expresses his, and God's, desire for members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: Ephesians 4:14,15

God's will for all believers is that we would "grow up" and be mature saints. Toward that end, Paul gives us three distinct principles that will assist in our efforts to function like the adult sons of God that we have been made in Christ. These three operative principles of adult sonship in the Age of Grace are faith, hope, and charity.

Faith, Hope, and Charity

The maturing nature of these three operative principles of grace sonship can be seen by contrasting two of the assemblies to whom Paul wrote.

In Paul's letters to the church at Corinth we can see that he is writing to a very immature group of believers.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. I Corinthians 3:1,2

In contrast, in Paul's letters to the church at Thessalonica, he has nothing but praise for the saints that were a part of that assembly.

And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. I Thessalonians 1:6-8

There could hardly be a greater contrast between two assemblies than that illustrated above. The saints in one assembly must be dealt with as "babes in Christ" while the saints in the other assembly are "ensamples to all that believe". How would you rather be known?

What is the reason for this great contrast in the maturity level of the assemblies at Corinth and Thessalonica? The difference can be found in the extent to which the assemblies and the individuals in them functioned based on the principles of faith, hope, and charity.

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he encouraged them to move forward from the immaturity of the spiritual gifts into these adult sonship operating principles.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. I Corinthians 13:9-13

By way of contrast, when Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, he commended them for operating based upon these principles.

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; I Thessalonians 1:2,3

Clearly the "faith", "hope", and "charity" that were missing in the church at Corinth were present in the "work of faith", "labour of love", and "patience of hope" in the church at Thessalonica. It is these principles that made the assembly at Thessalonica a much more mature and properly functioning assembly than the one at Corinth. These principles are the principles that describe how mature Sons of God are to function in the Age of Grace and they are in marked contrast to Israel's principles of operation under the law.

The Work of Faith

In God's dealing with the nation Israel under the law there was an immediate, visible response from God that allowed them to know whether or not their service was pleasing to the Lord. This response took the form of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience. This principle of the law is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Moses'

instructions to Israel in Deuteronomy 28.

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God. . . . But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: Deuteronomy 28:1,2,15

A complete reading of the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy will reveal a very detailed listing of the specific blessings and cursings that would come on Israel. In addition, Leviticus 26 reveals five specific cycles of judgement that God would bring on Israel if she disobeyed and continued in that disobedience. In other words, at any given point in their history the citizens of Israel could determine, by observing their physical circumstances, whether or not their service was pleasing to the Lord. Based on the information in Leviticus 26 they could also determine exactly how far away from God they had gone. All of this is in perfect harmony with what Paul tells us about the nation Israel in his first letter to the Corinthians.

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: I Corinthians 1:22

Israel was a nation that required, and to whom God gave, signs and wonders. They constantly experienced visible affirmations of their faith. In contrast, Paul tells members of the Church, the Body of Christ, that our walk is exclusively by faith. We should not be looking for visible signs and wonders to confirm our faith.

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. II Corinthians 4:18

(For we walk by faith, not by sight:) II Corinthians 5:7

It is a serious mistake today to determine God's satisfaction with your service based upon your physical circumstances, and it is clearly not what Paul did in his life. Notice that Paul's physical circumstances did not affect his own evaluation of his service for the Lord.

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. II Corinthians 11:24-27

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: II Timothy 4:6,7

To look at Paul's circumstances, one would think that God was very displeased with his service. This would certainly have been the case if Paul was living under the law of Israel. Yet, Paul was able to say, "I have kept the faith". Paul's evaluation of his service was not based upon his physical circumstances. It was based upon comparing his service with the revealed will of God in His Word.

Doing a work of faith, not looking to circumstances for guidance or confirmation of our faith, is a principle that will allow us to function as the mature adult sons that God has made us in Christ.

The Labor of Love

As we begin this section it is important to note that in comparing I Corinthians and I Thessalonians we find the Biblical definition for "charity". Many new Bible translations change the translation of "charity" in I Corinthians 13 to "love". However, based on the Bible's own definition of "charity" we see that it is more than just "love", it is a "labour of love". Charity is the act that grows out of love. There can be no true act of charity without love and there can be no true love without it producing an act of charity.

In God's dealing with the nation Israel under the law, God motivated His people to service through fear, a fear of judgement and of the loss of blessing. This motivation by fear can be seen both in the nation Israel and in the Gentile nations that saw the mighty works that God did for the them.

Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it. . . . And the LORD said unto Moses, Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and this people will rise up, and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land, whither they go to be among them, and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them. Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide my face in that day for all the evils which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods. Deuteronomy 31:12,13,16-18

Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them [the armies of Pharaoh]. Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation. The people shall hear, and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina. Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away.

Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O LORD, till the people pass over, which thou hast purchased. Exodus 15:11-16

Notice that as the law was recounted to each new generation in Israel, it was to cause them to "fear". Also, God's warning to Israel was that when they disobeyed He would respond in "anger" and that He would "forsake" them and they would be "devoured". In addition to the fear that was generated in the nation Israel, the mighty works that God did in Israel were to bring fear to the Gentile nations. When God brought Israel out of Egypt with His strong and mighty hand it caused "fear and dread" to fall upon the Gentile nations.

In contrast to the fear motivation of the law, Paul makes clear to us that we are motivated to service by God's love, not by His wrath.

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: II Corinthians 5:14

Paul encourages us to serve the Lord, not because we *fear His wrath*, but because we are grateful to Him for having *delivered us from His wrath* by His grace.

This principle can be clearly seen in admonitions from Matthew and Ephesians concerning the act of forgiveness.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Matthew 6:12-15

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32

God's desire to have his people be a forgiving people has never changed, but His way of motivating His people to do so has changed. As Israel prepared for the kingdom they were motivated to forgive out of a fear that they would not be forgiven. As we forgive in the Age of Grace we are motivated to forgive because we have already been forgiven.

Performing a labor of love, a labor that grows out of gratitude and not out of fear, is a principle that will allow us to function as the mature adult sons that God has made us in Christ.

The Patience of Hope

In God's dealings with Israel under the law, He offered them an immediate hope of physical salvation. This immediate physical salvation can be seen as God prepared to deliver Israel from the hands of the Egyptians through the Red Sea. This event set the pattern for God's dealings with Israel throughout their entire history.

And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will show to you

to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. Exodus 14:13,14

There are two important points that must be made about the deliverance of Israel in this situation. First, it is a salvation that Israel could "*see*". Second, it is a salvation that Israel would experience "to day". When we combine these two facts it is clear that Israel had a very real hope of immediate physical deliverance from danger.

As with the other two issues that we have covered in this article we see a marked contrast between God's dealings with Israel and His dealings with the Church, the Body of Christ.

In the eighth chapter of Romans Paul speaks of how we are to view physical sufferings in the Age of Grace.

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:22-25

Notice that the terminology that Paul uses to describe our physical deliverance is exactly the opposite of that used by Moses to describe Israel's physical deliverance. First, Paul says that our physical redemption is something that "we see not". Second, our physical redemption is something that we "with patience wait for". Our lives in the Dispensation of Grace are not lives that are going to be marked with miraculous displays of deliverance from physical distress. Rather they are lives that must be lived enduring tribulation while patiently waiting for the deliverance of our bodies.

Living our lives in the patience of hope, not looking for immediate deliverance from our physical difficulties, is a principle that will allow us to function as the mature adult sons that God has made us in Christ.

Walk Worthy of Your Calling

In Paul's closing admonitions to the church at Corinth he once again returns to these three principles of adult sonship as he encourages them to push toward maturity.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work [work of faith] of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour [labor of love] is not in vain [patience of hope] in the Lord. I Corinthians 15:58

We, as individuals and as local assemblies, must follow the three principles of faith, hope, and charity if we are to walk worthy of our position as adult Sons of God.

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