Growing Up: It’s Time

Colossians 3:1-14

Grace Hills Baptist Church

July 31, 2016

 Lately, I’ve taken a greater interest in the behavior of children. Partly, it’s because I’m around them more, but mostly it’s because I’m curious about what is in store for me as a father. And I have noticed many wonderful things children do: like usually seeing the best in someone, rarely presenting a façade or hiding their true feelings, and showing compassion when someone is hurting or lonely. We adults could learn something from them! But one thing I’ve noticed of many children is that, at least sometimes, they aren’t the most mature. I know, this is the biggest newsflash of the century, right? We all know this – yet sometimes we are still surprised when we see this in action. A toddler who pulls urgently on your finger, trying to get you to do what they want RIGHT NOW! A preschooler who throws a tantrum because they were told no. A teenager who acts out because they aren’t receiving the attention they think they need from their parents. Each of these examples – and many more – are exactly what we should expect, even as we try to help children move past them. Why? Because children are children; they aren’t grown up.

 We who call ourselves responsible adults, however, are supposed to be grown up. We’re supposed to exhibit the virtues of patience, and respect, and self-discipline that we hope our children attain one day. Yet far too often, we don’t. I know I don’t all the time, at least. Put me in a car in a busy city, and I’ll show you how impatient I can be. Make me a little grumpy and tired, then keep me from getting my way, and I might just get a bit frustrated and annoying. And when I get all excited or – worse – hyped up on sugar? I might start acting a little immature. Most of us would, most of us do. There are plenty of times when we don’t exactly act like the grown-ups we are supposed to be. And while there might be times when it makes sense that we let our maturity slip a little bit – like when a neighbor flattens your car with a tree – I hope we all aspire to make those moments fewer and farther between than they usually are, because eventually we all get to the moment when it’s time to let our childhood insecurities and immaturity go. There comes a moment when we know it’s time to grow up.

 For a month, we’ve been working our way through Paul’s instructions to the Colossian church about the way to grow up in Christ. We saw his opening words inviting the new Christians in Colossae to take the first steps towards maturity in their faith. We were reminded that we don’t have to make the journey to mature faith blindly; we have a model to look towards, Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God. And just last week, Paul taught that we need to keep reminding ourselves of the importance of staying rooted in Christ, keeping his teaching and his example as our guide as we grow. And if we take these lessons of Paul’s to heart, we’re going to find that we do grow in faith, because as he said at the end of last week’s passage, we grow as God causes us to grow.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Yet if we aren’t careful, we can easily allow ourselves to slide backwards into immaturity. Just as a few minutes of stressful driving can cause me to start fussing and gesturing – marks of immaturity that cause my wife to shake her head in embarrassment – the stressors of life can lead us to act out and step back in our Christian walk of faith as well. This is true for us, and it was true for the Colossians as well. Paul knew this, and so in chapter 3 of his letter he has a simple message for his newly-committed brothers and sisters in Christ: it’s time to grow up.

 Paul starts by pointing out to his readers that there is no excuse for putting off the process of growing up in Christ. “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above…Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul doesn’t subscribe to the theory of a breaking-in or grace period. If we have honestly and fully committed ourselves to Christ, we have a responsibility to stay true to that commitment. That means, for him, adopting the grown-up ways of the kingdom – ways that he expects from all who claim Christ as Lord.

 I’ve noticed in my 34 years that we tend to not follow in his footsteps, at least when it comes to expectations of those who come to faith. We seem to have categories, or tiers, of maturity – and it’s ok to stay at a less-mature level. We rightly celebrate when a man or woman, boy or girl decides to publically declare their allegiance to Jesus. We clap when they walk the aisle and congratulate them on their baptism. Yet we don’t exactly expect a lot from them. We, like many churches, have a rather lengthy list of people who have joined our congregation – which requires them to be baptized believers – but whom we never or rarely see. Some, of course, have good reasons why they don’t come: they’ve moved away, or they have significant health issues. Yet many who are on our membership rolls do not make Christian community an important part of their lives.

Even among us who regularly find our way into the pews, it can be tempting to just coast along. I can’t tell you how many people in the churches I’ve attended have been content to show up most Sundays, plop down in their regular seat, and take it all in – and when you see them any other time, there is no evidence of Christian commitment. We seem to expect that pastors and deacons and Sunday School teachers adhere to the stricter tenets of the faith – like showing compassion, practicing forgiveness, and sacrificing for the kingdom – but many others are never expected to become more than babes in Christ. If Paul were writing to our church – or, indeed, most churches – he most likely would feel the need of writing the very words he’s writing here: if you’ve given your heart and life to Jesus, it’s time to mature, it’s time to grow up!

 But what does it look like to be grown up in Christ? Paul goes on to tell us in the next two paragraphs of our text for today. He starts, as a stern parent might, with a list of prohibitions. Just as it is often more common – and more urgent – for a parent to spell out what a child should not do, Paul says being mature in Christ starts with an awareness of what a follower of Jesus should not do. [READ Colossians 3:5, 8-10] This list of actions, technically called a vice list, is hardly surprising: we’d have a hard time imagining Jesus doing any of these things. Greed? Evil desire? Slander? These aren’t part of the way of Jesus – yet we often find ourselves giving into them and letting ourselves off the hook.

Even worse, sometimes we will engage in such behavior – consciously or unconsciously – as a way of acting out. We’re angry at God for the loss of someone dear to us? We might just begin adopting self-destructive behavior. We’re frustrated that God didn’t save our marriage? We might just throw our adherence to God’s call for sexual purity out the window. We’re haunted by fears about our future? We might let greed override generosity in our lives, holding tightly to what we have and denying our responsibility to help others. This, Paul says, is not acceptable for grown-up followers of Jesus – people who have claimed God’s promise of new life in Christ. While we all have moments of setback and temptation – even Paul did – and we must rely on God’s forgiveness, true maturity in Christ never accepts such setbacks as normal. Truly grown-up followers of Jesus do everything they can to flee from such behavior. We don’t embrace it; we flee from it. That’s just what we do.

But more than just spelling out what mature followers of Jesus shouldn’t do, Paul goes on to point out the actions that identify grown-up Christians. [READ Colossians 3:12-14] Here we find another list – technically, a virtue list – that shouldn’t surprise us. Is anyone here surprised that living like Jesus means showing compassion, exhibiting patience, offering forgiveness, and loving one another? This is assumed, this is the baseline for what it means to live like Jesus, this is what Paul – and, to be honest, what we – expect from a grown-up Christian.

And how wonderful it is when we encounter this kind of mature Christian! If we each closed our eyes for just a second or two of thought, we could all likely bring to mind a person or two who embodies the values that Paul lists here. They are the person who is the picture of compassion. They are the person who forgives wholeheartedly. They are the person exemplifies patience and humility. They are the person who brings people together in unity and love. Is it any wonder that they are also the person we likely see as the most mature Christian we know? Is it any wonder that they are who we consider grown up in Christ?

That pattern of behavior, that list of virtues, is what we are all to aspire towards. All too often, we skim it and think, “Oh, I do that. I’m a good person and all.” But when we look at the list more closely, we start to back off. We start to make excuses. We start to look for ways out. Why? Because it’s hard! Being a regular grown-up has its moments; in fact, one of the most popular trends I’ve seen on the internet recently is variations on this picture. Who hasn’t had those moments where they didn’t just want to go back to being that immature kid? Fortunately, most of the time we pick ourselves up and keep right on “adulting.” But being a grown-up Christian? It’s so much more difficult! Forgive someone who hurts us or, worse, our family? No, thank you – anger and vengeance is much easier. Express compassion and kindness to someone in need? That sounds like a lot of time and effort – and besides, how do we know they deserve our help? Adopting humility and patience instead of demanding our way and wanting our desires met RIGHT NOW seems to go against the prevailing spirit of our culture. Being a grown-up Christian means adopting these practices…and it is really, really tough.

In the movie *A Civil Action*, John Travolta plays the role of a lawyer for plaintiffs who sue a large corporation for pollution that is causing an outbreak of cancer in their community. This lawyer and his small firm are passionate and committed – but they don’t have the resources that the corporation can muster. Little by little, the corporation bleeds this lawyer dry and destroys his firm. At the end of the film, the lawyer played by Mr. Travolta ends up before a bankruptcy judge. [PLAY MOVIE CLIP]

That last line – “the things by which one measures one’s life” – is a challenge for us, because ultimately, that is what it means to be grown-up: to do the things by which we measure our lives. For the grown-up follower of Jesus, the measure is simple: be like Jesus. Money is not our measure. Success is not our measure. Power is not our measure. Personal feelings are not our measure. Our measure is how we let the grace of God make us grow, which finds maturity when we exhibit the actions Paul describes here, the actions of Christ.

So today, as we leave Colossians behind, I have a simple question for each one of us: have we grown up in Christ? Have we cast aside the earthly ways Paul warns about, the ways of anger and impurity, greed and slander? And have we chosen instead to take up the ways of Christ: humility, patience, compassion, and most of all love? Have we grown up in Christ? If we have, may we continue to grow day by day in the knowledge and imitation of our Lord and Savior. And if we haven’t…well, it’s time. Let us pray.

1. Colossians 2:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Colossians 3:1, 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)