

Spiritual “Child” Stage Ephesians 4:14-15

For the past couple of weeks I have been talking about different stages of spiritual growth that everyone who is seeking to follow Christ and become like him has to go through. Last week we talked about the difference between the first two stages. The difference between someone who is spiritually “unborn” and a spiritual “infant” is that they have been born again – they have been made alive by God in their spirit. They don’t just have the right religion. The Holy Spirit has turned the lights on and there is a new power at work within them. They see and understand the gospel in a whole new way. They trust in Jesus Christ with deep conviction. They have a new love for him and appreciation for what he’s done for them and a new desire to know him and live for him. They’re like a brand-new baby that’s just been born into a whole new way of life. So they need to learn the basics of Christianity and begin applying them to their lives. They’re just beginning the lifelong process of spiritual growth and development.

Now one of the problems in this process of growth is people get stuck at one of these stages and oftentimes it’s at the stage we’re going to talk about today. *(Originally I had planned to cover all three remaining stages today, but it became apparent to me that there’s just too much to cover in one sermon. So we’re just going to look at one stage today.)* The stage people often get stuck at is the spiritual “child” stage. I think people get stuck there and don’t even know it and even if they did, they might not think it’s a big deal, but it is. It’s not good to get stuck at this stage. And to show you why, I want to show you some pictures I found on the internet this week.

We all really enjoy when a baby is born. There’s just something so special about babies and we marvel at everything they do. But as wonderful as the baby stage is, we also have the expectation that it’s not going to last forever. We expect that babies are going to grow and develop and if they don’t it can be really quite alarming. I found some pictures of 10 people that all share the same thing in common – they never grew beyond the size of an average baby. The average baby is about 20 inches long when they’re born and they quickly grow to about 29 inches by the end of their first year. But not these people – none of them ever reached 29 inches... <http://www.masters-in-health-administration.com/10-shortest-people-in-the-world/>

- Stacey Herald – 28 inches
- Hatice Kocaman – 28 inches
- Edward Niño Hernández – 27 inches
- Bridgette Jordan – 27 inches
- Lin Yü-chih – 26.6 inches
- Khagendra Thapa Magar – 26 inches
- Madge Bester – 25.5 inches
- Jyoti Amge – 24.7 inches
- Junrey Balawing – 23.6 inches
- Chandra Bahadur Dangi – 21.5 inches

Now, none of us looks at these pictures and thinks, “What’s the big deal?” No, we’re mesmerized because we know something is terribly wrong. This is not the way things are supposed to be. Adults are not supposed to be the size of a baby. If you get stuck at that size you are going to encounter a whole bunch of problems as time goes on.

That’s the same thing that happens when it comes to our spiritual growth and development. If people get stuck they begin to encounter problems. They never get to the place that God wants them to be. They not only miss out on the joy God has for them in Christian maturity, but they’re also unable to glorify God as they should or do what he wants them to do. Not only that, but their stunted growth has a negative effect on their whole church family – especially if a whole bunch of people get stuck in the same place in the same church.

The elders don’t want that to happen here at East Lincoln, which is why I’m preaching about these things. We want to help you continue to grow. So today we are going to look at the spiritual “child” stage so we can become familiar with it and be able to see some steps to take to continue to grow and not get stuck. Please understand that there are no cookie cutter Christians and we don’t all fit into one mold when it comes to our spiritual growth. It’s going to look different in each of our lives. But there are certain characteristics we can look for that are commonly shared by disciples who are growing through these different stages.

In order to come to a better understanding of the spiritual “child” stage we are going to look at a letter in the New Testament that was written to a group of

Christians who were at that stage. We are going to look at the letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians because in it we will see what he expected of Christians who were at that stage and how he thought they needed to grow. I am actually going to walk us all the way through the letter because I think that will be the best way for us to get a biblical understanding of this stage. I'll only read parts of it, but I'll make references to the content in every chapter. Go with me to Ephesians 1...

In Chapter 1 Paul writes to them about some of the deeper aspects of salvation and Christian beliefs. You will notice that these are not the basics of the gospel anymore. You wouldn't teach these things to spiritual "infants" because it would go way over their heads. You have to know the basics first, which is what Paul would have taught them when he was with them in person. But in this letter, he's able to go beyond the basics and teach them about deeper things.

Read Ephesians 1:3-14.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

He goes on, but I think you get the picture. These are not things that you would teach to brand new baby Christians. That would be like trying to feed steak to a baby who's only ready to drink a bottle of milk. But for Christians that are further along and are spiritual "children," they need to begin to grapple with and understand these things – to understand God and the depth of his grace more fully.

To complete chapter 1, Paul writes about how he prays for them – he prays for greater understanding, enlightenment, and knowledge of God, his spiritual blessings and his power. (Read Eph. 1:16-19) He is expecting that God will take

them from where they're at and by the power of the Holy Spirit, grow them in all these ways. In the same way we look at a baby and anticipate all the growth they will experience in their upcoming childhood years; Paul anticipates the growth in the spiritual lives of these young believers as he prays for them.

That brings us to chapter 2 where Paul continues to teach some deep and rich theology. This time he dives into the glories of salvation in greater detail. He helps them to see that salvation is by grace through faith like it says in vs. 8-9, and this not of ourselves – it is a gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. This is a foundational doctrine that a younger believer needs to understand and experience in order to grow beyond the spiritual “child” stage. He also writes about how God not only saved them to reconcile them to himself, but to one another and united them in Christ for a common purpose. These are things that are so important for spiritual “children” to understand so they will be able to grow and not get stuck.

In chapter 3 he tells them about his own testimony and call to ministry by the grace of God and prays that they might know the fullness of the love that God has for them in Christ. It's not enough to just know it in your head – you need to come to experience it in your heart. So in all these things you can see expectation and encouragement that God is going to work in them and move them from where they were at to greater maturity – growing them in many, many ways. This is what it looks like to be at the spiritual “child” stage – lots of growth in learning many things and transformation deep inside.

In chapter 4 he turns a corner and begins to talk about growth in their character and behavior. He calls them to live their lives in a manner worthy of Christ and to join together in pursuing Christ so that they will grow into maturity together. Building Christian relationships is so important. In Eph. 4:14-15 he says, *“so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

¹⁵ *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”* You can see very clearly that he sees them as spiritual “children,” and they are still vulnerable to being distracted or led astray, so they need to grow. He expects them to grow from where they're at into maturity in Christ.

He goes on in chapter 4 to call them to pursue change in every area of their lives by the power of the Spirit by turning away from sinfulness and putting on their new self in Christ. This is one of the biggest characteristics of the spiritual “child” stage. It says in Eph. 4:22-24: you were taught *“to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* He then addresses what this should look like in how they treat one another and others in their community.

In chapter 5 he teaches the same thing – to flee from all kinds of sin and to pursue Christlike holiness in their lives. He teaches them what that ought to look like in their marriages, and as he goes on into chapter 6, he teaches what it should look like in their family and work relationships. He’s calling them to grow and change in every area of their lives.

Then in the last section of the letter he addresses the reality of the spiritual battle they’re in. That as they are going through this process of growth and transformation it will not be easy. They will run into barriers that appear to be natural, but they’re also spiritual – there is an enemy seeking to derail them. So he teaches them how to stand firm in the Lord.

So Ephesians is a great book to come to a good understanding of the characteristics, expectations, and growth steps for the spiritual “child” stage. And when you look at it as a whole as we have done, you begin to see the big picture. If I was to summarize these things for us today, I would come up with a list like this...

Common characteristics of the spiritual “child” stage:

- Knows and applies basic Christian beliefs and practices.
- Beginning to have a Christian worldview.
- Working on overcoming sinful habits.
- Learning more about many specific biblical issues.
- Focused on many areas of life transformation.
- Still primarily focused on themselves.
- Prone to being controlled by feelings and emotions.
- May be caught up in questionable popular preaching.

- Serves others mainly for personal benefit.

This is a major stage of spiritual growth that is vitally important for us all to grow through. This is a stage that covers years of our lives. We can't just go through a 12-week discipleship series and assume we've made it through. True transformation takes time. God is doing so much work in our lives through this stage, transforming the way we think and behave. His transforming work reaches into every area of our lives and it takes a lot of time. It's a stage we can't hurry through. But it's also a stage we can't get stuck in, though many often do. We must always seek ways to continue to grow.

How do we do that? For those of you who identify with this stage – and this will include many of us here in this room – the elders want to encourage you to take several possible steps. First, make sure you regularly attend the worship service and get plugged into a small group – both are vitally important and the teaching will focus primarily on ministering to those who are in the spiritual “child” stage. If you have a spiritual mentor, we encourage you to go through the Design for Discipleship Series that will be available in our church bookstore. Also at this stage it's necessary to grow in teaching yourself. Having a spiritual mentor will continue to be very helpful, but there are so many areas of your life you need to grow in, you are also going to have to learn to take your own initiative. We have information about how to start using online resources like RightNow Media or free online classes at BiblicalTraining.org. If you're at the spiritual child stage we encourage you to begin the practice of regular giving to church and other ministries God puts on your heart. It would be good for you to take membership class and make the commitment to join this church family if you haven't done so yet. We also encourage you to participate in general opportunities to serve, like Discovery Land, Recharge, Souper Sunday, Outreach events, etc., or go on a short term missions trip.

These suggestions are all steps you can take to grow at this stage of spiritual development. I mentioned last week that I will have literature and resources to help with this process and I'm going to continue to wait a few more weeks to provide them for you. The reason I'm doing that is I want to lay the groundwork for these stages and this process of spiritual growth first, so that when the resources are available, you'll know what the appropriate ones are for you or for the people you are trying to encourage in the faith.