

## **Spiritual Parent Stage** **2 Timothy 2:1-7**

After a great Sunday with MNTC we are back to the last two weeks of looking at the vision for East Lincoln that God has laid on the hearts of the elders. We've seen that the common goal that unites us all together with our different passions and gifts is following Jesus and becoming like him in our thoughts, character, behavior and mission – we are all on a journey together of becoming more like Christ in every way.

We've also seen that we are all at different places in that journey – different stages of spiritual growth. Some are just getting started, some are further along. We've identified different stages that Scripture speaks of that correspond with normal human growth and development:

- There's the spiritually "unborn" stage that includes those who are not truly Christians yet – they may claim to be a Christian, but they haven't been born again. Something's missing deep inside.
- There's the spiritual "infant" stage, which is where brand new believers are at – a stage where the lights have turned on and everything is new and there's lots of learning about Christian basics in beliefs and practice.
- There's the spiritual "child" stage, which is where transformation takes place in many areas and disciples go deeper in their knowledge of Scripture and how to become like Christ in every area of life.
- There's the spiritual "young adult" stage where the focus turns from a person's own spiritual growth and development to thinking and caring about other people – both inside and outside the church family.
- And today we will be looking at the spiritual "parent" stage, which is really the goal we are all to be aiming at – attaining to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

One of the things I haven't mentioned yet, but I think is really important in understanding spiritual growth and assessing where you're at, is that you never "graduate" or move on from previous stages altogether, as if you will no longer need to work on or grow in the aspects of those stages. Our relationship with God begins in the spiritual "infant" stage, but we always need to grow deeper in that relationship no matter where we're at. Knowing Scripture more fully and applying it more broadly characterizes the spiritual "child" stage, but we always need to

keep growing more and more in that way. And though the focus on putting others first really comes to the forefront in the spiritual “young adult” stage, we always need to grow more and more in putting others first. (DIAGRAM?)

So rather than checking things off and leaving them behind when it comes to spiritual growth, it’s more about adding more and more and increasing in measure. Peter says this very thing in 1 Peter 1:5-8: *“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Trying to assess where you’re at in these stages is not determined by reaching a point where you don’t need to grow any more in previous stages. It has to do with the new work of transformation God is doing in your life. So even though it may seem like the characteristics of several stages describe you, that doesn’t mean you’re stuck in every stage. What you need to look at is where you find characteristics that don’t really describe you yet – that’s the stage you’re probably not at yet and that helps you determine where you are at and what steps you need to take so that you will keep growing toward that next stage.

In your bulletin there’s a bookmark that gives a brief synopsis of each stage that can be used to help determine where you’re at and gives some suggestions for possible next steps to take. This morning we will be seeking to understand the Spiritual “Parent” Stage, which is the last of these stages.

Did you ever have a class in high school where you had to take care of a fake baby for a couple weeks? I’m thinking about those somewhat creepy robot dolls that actually cry, get hungry, and I think can even wet themselves... They’re meant to simulate an actual baby. I don’t know what the goal is for that class, but one of the things I hoped it would do was show teenagers the stark reality that they are not yet ready to be parents. Yes, they can do all kinds of amazing things – they are smart, knowledgeable, able to tackle difficult tasks, able to “conquer the world,” but if you put a little 10 lb. baby in their arms for a couple weeks, the vast majority of them will soon come to realize they are not yet ready for the parent stage. More growth and maturity needs to happen. They need to find their place

in life and become established before they're ready to start thinking about the responsibilities of supporting and raising a family.

That's a great picture of the difference between the spiritual "young adult" and spiritual "parent" stage. Spiritual "young adults" are full of knowledge, active in church ministry, and able to do many great things for the kingdom of God, but they are not yet fully mature in Christ. It's only when a disciple gets to the point where they are willing and eager to invest their life into the lives of other disciples to help them grow in their faith that they enter the spiritual "parent" stage and begin to reach what Scripture indicates is "spiritual maturity." So that's what we're going to look at today.

The Spiritual "Parent" Stage is where Paul was at when he was writing his letters to the churches in the NT. And some of his letters were written to people who were at that stage as well, including Timothy. Paul was well along in the "parent" stage and Timothy was just beginning, so we're going to look at a passage Paul wrote to him to see some characteristics and expectations of Christians who are in the spiritual "parent" stage.

Read 2 Timothy 2:1-7.

*You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>2</sup> and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.<sup>3</sup> Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup> No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.<sup>5</sup> An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.<sup>6</sup> It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.<sup>7</sup> Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.*

In verse 1, Paul imparts a blessing on Timothy – that he would be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. If you think about what Paul would have had in mind when he wrote that, there is an incredible depth to those words. As a mature believer, Paul had a deep understanding of God's grace for us in Christ because he had experienced that in a deeply personal way in his own life and it was that grace that gave him the strength that he needed to keep pressing onward every day. He writes about that in 1 Timothy 1:12-17: *"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,<sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor,*

*and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,<sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.<sup>15</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.<sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.<sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

Paul had deeply and personally experienced God’s grace in his life. He knew deep in his heart that even though he had been the worst of sinners, he was completely forgiven through faith in Christ. God no longer held his sin against him because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Furthermore, he knew God’s ongoing approval of him wasn’t based on what he did or didn’t do, it was based on what Christ had already done for him. So Paul lived and walked in God’s grace every day – it’s what gave him strength. It’s what grounded him. It also gave him a humble and realistic view of himself that we saw in this second passage that wasn’t too high or too low. And in writing to Timothy he imparts the same blessing on him as well – that he would be strengthened by God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

So, for the disciple who is at the spiritual “parent” stage, they not only know what grace is in their head, but they have experienced it deep in their heart so that God’s grace gives them the strength they need to keep moving forward and straining toward to goal. God’s grace is the bedrock and firm foundation in the life of the mature believer. It keeps them anchored, gives them solid ground to stand on, and a firm foundation to go forth from. It allows them to understand God more fully and how he sees them. It gives them a balanced humility, so they don’t see themselves too high or too low.

A spiritual “parent” also knows that God’s grace applies to others who are in Christ as well. They can be patient with others because they know they are not going to be anyone’s savior or solution – only God is. They know that just as God’s grace has brought them to be where they are, his grace will carry others to where they need to be. They are free to come alongside others with appropriate expectations, looking for the Holy Spirit to work. Knowing what God has done for them, they don’t look down on other people, nor do they put them on a pedestal. They realize that God is working in each person’s life, growing them in spiritual maturity.

So the first defining characteristic of someone who is at the spiritual “parent” stage in this passage is that they are marked with a balanced humility and strength that comes through experiencing God’s grace. They are able to be patient with other Christians who don’t “have it all together,” because they realize they are who they are because of God’s grace.

Now let’s look at verse 2: *“and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”* This is another of the key characteristics of a spiritual “parent.” They embrace the responsibility to invest in the spiritual lives of others to pass on the faith to the next generation. Paul was doing that with Timothy and others, and now he was calling Timothy to do the same. A spiritual “parent” wants to invest their life in the spiritual well-being of others for their sake and for the sake of the mission. They have a thorough understanding of Scripture from years of personal study and application and feel compelled to come alongside others who are younger in the faith to help them grow wherever they’re at in the journey. They are ready to be a parent. In verse 1 Paul refers to Timothy as his “child” in the faith and now he is calling Timothy to become a parent to spiritual children of his own.

I want to be clear that Jesus didn’t intend for this kind of thing to be for just pastors and church leaders; this is something every follower of Christ is to strive for. This is embedded in what it means for us to be followers of Christ. Followers of Christ have been called to make disciples like Jesus did. And God wants you to grow to the point where you come alongside other people in a personal way to help them grow. If you’ve been a Christian for decades, but have not yet become a spiritual parent, this is your opportunity to move forward into a whole new area and begin to really grow again.

I have had wonderful examples of this in my life. My dad has taken the responsibility to help me grow spiritually throughout my life by engaging with me in conversations about the Lord, about his own struggles and growth, and about the things I’ve gone through. My mom has been a faithful example of one who seeks to live a godly life and continues to grow in a personal relationship with God. I had a youth pastor who met with me on Friday mornings in high school to help me grow in my faith. In college, one of the professors met with me every other week for three years to help me move forward in spiritual formation. When I was a young pastor I met regularly with an older believer here in Amery who

talked with me about spiritual things and challenged me to memorize Scripture. For the past 10 years I've met with a mentor from Superior who shares his life with me and challenges me in my own spiritual formation. These are just some of the many people who were spiritual "parents" to me, and their influence has had a profound effect on me.

God wants us each to grow to that point, and for some of you, that's the green light you have needed to see even though you maybe didn't even know you needed to see it. This is something we want to encourage more and more at East Lincoln Alliance Church. Many of you are ready to take this step and have probably been ready for a long time. Making disciples isn't just about getting together on Sunday morning to go to church. It's about growing in this process of spiritual maturity to the point where we are investing personally in the lives of others – older believers mentoring newer believers. God has already positioned each of us where he wants us to make a difference. We have people in our own circle of influence that God can use us to reach out to, to point them to Christ and encourage them to grow in their faith, and some of you are ready and need to take that step.

Paul points out another important characteristic in the last few verses... *"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. <sup>5</sup> An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops."*

The examples Paul uses show us the kind of person that has grown in spiritual maturity to the point where they have wholly surrendered their life to Christ and his mission. They're all in. This is what characterizes a spiritual parent – they're all in.

1. They are like a soldier – willing to suffer personal loss for the sake of the mission. Life is no longer focused on "civilian pursuits" like our own comfort, ease, and advancement; it's about joining Christ in his mission.
2. A spiritual "parent" is also like a devoted athlete – careful to compete according to the rules so that they receive their crown. God has the race marked out before us – he wants us to grow to become like Christ in every way – and the spiritual "parent" is careful to follow that course so they receive the prize. Paul writes of his own example of this in 2 Tim. 4:7-8: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."*

*<sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”*

3. Finally, a spiritual “parent” is like a hard-working farmer whose life is devoted to bringing in the harvest. Their life is marked by straining forward in that direction. Paul says in Php. 3:12-14: *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

So a spiritual “parent” is a disciple who has grown to the point in their maturity where, like the soldier, athlete, and farmer, they are all in. They’re completely committed to Christ and his mission. They’ve deeply experienced God’s grace in their lives and joyfully embraced the responsibility to invest in the spiritual lives of others. They’ve seen what this world has to offer and have found the rewards of following Christ to be far greater, so they’re all in.

So here’s a bullet list of common characteristics I think people will have who are in the spiritual “parent” stage:

- Using their gifts in joyful and effective ministry.
- Humble attitude deeply rooted in experiencing God’s grace.
- Realistic expectations of themselves and others.
- Embracing the responsibility to invest in the spiritual lives of others.
- Wholly devoted to following Christ and his mission.
- Looking to Scripture for guidance & depending on the Holy Spirit.
- Learning how to be a spiritual mentor.

If you think you’re at this stage, the elders encourage you to enter into the adventure of mentoring younger believers in the faith. If you’ve never done it before, or if you want to grow more as a spiritual mentor, we have several training resources to help you grow and several discipleship resources for you to use with a newer believer. Once you begin to see how God can use you in this way, look for people in your circle of influence that God has already put in your life – both inside and outside the church. Ask God to help direct you to those he wants you to begin investing your life in – coming alongside to help them grow in

their faith. Look for people who are responsive and eager to grow – people who want to meet with you and don't have to be prodded along. And then spend time with them. Encourage them. Pray for them. I especially want to help you in this process, so if you think this is where you're at, please get in contact with me so we can get you connected with some newer believers who need mentoring.

That completes our look into these stages of spiritual maturity and one of the goals of these sermons is that now you will be able to assess where you're at in the process. Once you know where you're at you'll also be able to see what steps you can take to grow. If you look in your bulletin you will find that flyer that summarizes these stages. I'd like you to carefully look through the descriptions to try to find where you're at and then what step you need to take to grow. I highly encourage you to talk to friends here at church or your small group to help you see where you're at in this process and how you can grow.

Next week I am going to wrap up this series by talking about the vision we have for how we think these things will affect everything we do in this church. We have a mission and a shared goal and we want to be strategic in everything we do to help you and others who join our family to continue to become more and more like Christ for our joy and for his glory. I also want to show you some of the strategic resources we have come up with that can help you in your journey. I have those resources here up front this morning and you can take a look at them later this morning. These will be the beginning of a new church bookstore meant to help us continue to move forward. As I've said in previous weeks, if you've missed one of the sermons in this series, please go back and listen to it so you have a good understanding of these concepts and so that we're all on the same page as we move forward together.