

Characteristics of saints in the three growth stages

(1 Jn 2:12-14)

I. Childhood--The emphasis is on receiving; thus the importance of spiritual parents (church leaders), big brothers & sisters in Christ, and a submissive teachable spirit toward them.

A. The Word: All future growth hinges on receiving the Word, for only what has been planted in a sincere heart, free from the distractions of *the cares, riches, and pleasures of life*, will produce mature fruit (Lu 8:14-15).

1. Preparation of the heart is extremely important, for it is the root of personality and wellspring of life or death. Spiritual babies have hearts like fallow ground which need cultivating by the Word and Spirit. This is how salvation began and continues. The heart is the womb of the soul: The implanted Word is made alive by the Spirit and speaks faith. *I believed, and therefore have I spoken* (2 Cor 4:13b). Speech is the spontaneous fruit and revelation of the heart (Mt 12:34), whether good or bad. In some way the heart, spirit, faith, and speech are connected.

2. The Word comes to spiritual children as law and rules, rather than fruit and life. This is normal, for God's commandments (OT and NT), if taken seriously enough, reveal one's inadequacy, create hunger, and convince the believer his own efforts are as good as dead without the Life of Christ. In practice, however, spiritual children tend to be either legalistic and judgmental, or permissive and worldly. Both errors deprive grace of its power and create many problems for spiritual leaders. Dealing with these issues and leading them to genuine faith and Life in Christ is an immense challenge for older members of God's family.

B. Correction/Chastening: If God loves us, He will correct us, just like any good father. Thus He allows *tribulation or persecution...because of the Word* (Mt 13:21). Through the testing of our faith God attempts to bring us out of legalism or lawlessness into Christ. The goal is not freedom from the law but relationship with God and His people.

1. The basis of all correction is the Word, which reproves, rebukes, instructs, warns, and keeps our path straight. Those who fear God and receive are prepared for the second half--accepting the "word" of correction and instruction from other members of the Body, the Church. In fact, Paul seems to imply it's our chief means of growing to maturity (Eph 4:12-16). Humbling

ourselves to receive God's Word from others, especially when it's difficult, gets to the "heart" of the matter, for it not only implants the Word, it conditions and cultivates our hearts so the Word will take root and grow, as in *good ground* (Lu 8:15).

2. Spiritual babes are not equipped to handle failure, falling easily into condemnation, especially when the law of reaping backfires on their sins and self-righteousness. Instability is the pattern--up and down--for lack of understanding the walk of faith and love. John encourages *little children, because your sins are forgiven*. Romans 3-8 is the foundation for the delicate balance of walking in the Spirit without falling into either carnal liberty or legalistic bondage in our freedom from condemnation.

3. It is just as difficult for spiritual babes to grasp the significance of tribulation when they have done nothing to deserve it. Thus they escape out of God's net easily, allowing their hearts to remain unbroken. Therefore the Word fails to move from head to heart. Those who habitually escape the dealings of the Lord eventually become like those without a father, for a father chastens his children in love (Heb 12:5-8).

C. Revelation: follows a proper response to affliction.

1. Affliction conditions the heart for the resurrection of the sown seed. Those who *endure chastening* experience the revealed Word, the rhema. "Walking after the Spirit" is walking in the strength of the "spiritual mind," renewed by the Spirit-quickened Word. The "carnal mind" wars against this revelation, for it is the basis of real faith. It is the "hearing" of the Word the Israelites could not endure at Sinai (Deut 5:24f). This hearing is the key to growing from childhood into the strength of *young men*. When revelation begins to produce ministry, one is growing out of the milk into solid food (Heb 5:12-14).

2. The tendency for spiritual babes, however, is to center their lives around the concepts, the blessings, and the great Bible teachers who teach them, instead of Christ. The revealed Word is designed to reveal Christ and what He has made us IN HIM. John reminds *little children* that they *have known the Father*, not the church fathers. Knowing the love of our Father through His Son develops deep inner security, setting us free from the need to find fulfillment by criticizing others.

The Corinthian believers serve as examples of this error of focus, but through it God gave us the love chapter (1 Cor 13). The proper channel and direction for faith is love and relationship.

God's hands (2 Sam 16:11-12, etc).

3. Persecution from brethren develops through envy, pride, and differences in understanding of the ways of God. As we mature, God prunes away dead works that impress the natural man, and at times leaves nothing in their place but naked branches, exposing our weaknesses. This leaves us open season for misunderstanding, and the temptation is to react in self-defense or carnal criticism of others. But it's an essential part of the maturing process, weaning us of peer pressure from *my loved ones and my friends* (Ps 38:11).

II. Adolescence--The emphasis is on relationships which invite expression; speech is vital to growth: *that we should no longer be children. . . but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things unto Him. . . .* (Eph 4:14-15) Adolescents will take every opportunity to minister and learn through the trial and error of giving what God has imparted to them through obedience.

C. Fellowship/Zion: We're lining up for God's ultimate purpose of gathering *in one all things in Christ* (Eph 1:10).

A. Ministry: the result of faithfulness to the Word and the testing of their faith (stage I). It is the spontaneous outflow of the revelation of the Word.

1. This is the age of strengthening themselves in the Word. *Young men*, John writes, *are strong, and the Word of God abides in them* (1 Jn 2:14). However, this strength can be misused to build kingdoms around powerful truths, ministries, and/or even their own personalities, instead of Christ.

1. As we mature out of reacting to people and instead see *no one but Jesus only* (Mt 17:8), God's people, no matter how they've treated us, can (in His will and timing) become a welcome place of rest and protection from all forms of affliction. Through it all we eventually learn to follow only what comes from our hearts by the Spirit, until we find our little part of ministry in His many-membered body. We become *laborers together with God* (1 Cor 3:9), not worrying about who gets the glory or the limelight. The key is where your vision is centered: on the people or on Jesus.

2. The other trait John mentions about *young men* is that they *have overcome the wicked one*. Their praying takes on the nature of "spiritual warfare" (Eph 6). Learning their authority in Christ, they may rise to great heights in teaching, evangelism, and other ministries. The danger is that they may mistake ministerial success for obedience to God. Jesus pointed out the danger of such success without walking in close relationship with Him (Mt 7:21-23).

2. As God chisels his "living stones" to make them fit together, they become at last the place of worship He created them for. There they *comprehend with all the saints* the incredible expanse of *the love of Christ* and enjoy *the fulness of God* (Eph 3:18-19), "ruling and reigning" *in heavenly places* through the dominion Adam lost.

B. Persecution/Percussion: It is the "noise" of two opposite kingdoms in collision as we get bolder in ministry. This is added to the normal afflictions begun in childhood.

1. Persecution or affliction because of one's mistakes will be a great purging to those willing to listen to *the reproof of life* (Pr 15:31). David responded so deeply, his prayers of repentance are some of our most precious Psalms (32,38,51, etc). Saul failed to grasp the seriousness of his sin (no fear of God) and lost his place in God's Kingdom, though he continued on in ministry many more years.

III. Adulthood--the emphasis is on giving. They have enough security in God, through identity with Christ, that they lose nothing in laying down their lives for those under their care.

2. Persecution because of obedience also purifies one's motives. God used King Saul to refine David's motives till he was finally ready for the throne. But the affliction continued throughout David's life as his enemies kept him before God's throne (Ps 69,70, etc). How tempting for men of God in ministry to avoid persecution by compromise or carnal counterattack. David always left himself vulnerable, completely in

A. Intimacy with God: the result of successfully surviving the pride and pitfalls of the ministry and of relationship with brethren. John writes to *fathers* as those who *have known Him who is from the beginning*. This knowing is much deeper than that of children knowing the father, though the same Greek word for "know" is used. It is a knowing that transcends my need for a father, because I have merged with the Father in His love of His children. It's a knowledge that transcends time, for many of the perplexities of children and adolescents are problems of our time/space dimension. When you "know" from heaven's viewpoint, all perplexities and paradoxes vanish in the face of Him whose *ways are past finding out* (Rom

11:33,36).

1. Revelation: The reward of ministering to others is closer contact with the One you're ministering. Moses placed God under obligation to reveal Himself in order to minister to and relate to the people, esp. in their rebellions (Ex 33:13). But ministry also makes one vulnerable, exposed. This will lead to greater intimacy with God, however, who "covers" the weak and naked with His righteousness and strength.

2. Identity: Ministry means representing God to the people and the people to God. You must come to know both until you become more and more identified with both human nature and God (Heb 5:1-2). (This is the benefit in living by faith and not self-effort: We get a sobering and continuous revelation of what we're like without the Spirit!) Identity implies and enables intimacy (Jn 17:21, Heb 2:11-12). Marriages and families are deeply enhanced to the extent each becomes identified with the other through understanding and empathy. Churches become loving and fellowship deepens when members begin to understand one another, knowing they walk in the same shoes. So it is with knowing God and the problems He faces in dealing with human nature. And identity with God leads to speaking on His behalf, as Elijah announced to Ahab *according to my word*. Because he "stood before" God in intimacy, God stood behind Elijah's word (1 Ki 17:1), for it was God's.

B. Rejection/Reproach: The glories of fatherhood are offset by the pain of rejection and reproach. But as the chastening of children transmutes Word into Spirit, and persecution mellows *strong, young* ministers into caring brothers, so rejection plunges *fathers* into a death with a Life-giving resurrection. It removes all grounds for glorying in their accomplishments and replaces pride with the deepest, self-sacrificing love, even for those who reject them.

1. Because more is expected of fathers. And because they carry greater authority and must use it, the more they are criticized for their faults. Yet God chooses and uses men because of their weakness, not their lack of them (1 Cor 1:27-29). The temptations at this advanced level of pressure are varied, if one doesn't simply buckle under the rejection: One may cover or hide or excuse his faults; he may compensate by building a big or busy ministry; he may fall into an illicit love affair, leave the ministry, or more commonly, avoid, react to, or turn bitter against those who reject him. Perhaps the most common response is to let it bother him just under his skin, eating away at his stomach, "nerves," and heart, sapping him of the profound joy otherwise

available through a mature response.

2. Fathers become the perfect scapegoat for the frustrations of their children under discipline and chastening. This is more painful than criticism from brethren, because the affliction comes from those they are laying down their lives for. Though they are more mature now, and should handle it as normal parenting, mighty men of God have buckled under its pressure, like Moses (Num 20) and Jeremiah (Jer 15).

3. The fellowship of HIS sufferings is the highest level of handing rejection, and it is doubtless this understanding that gave Paul such victory and made Moses *faithful in all His house* (Heb 3:2). Every conceivable facet of the sufferings of Christ are detailed symbolically in Exodus and Leviticus, and they include the whole gamut of affliction common to humanity (Heb 2:17). To know that these pains can be readily transferred to Christ, our Substitute, is to know all forms of suffering as glorious *fellowship* with Him in the experience of HIS Incarnation. Furthermore, these sufferings are in Christ for others, even as He suffered for us. (See Col 1:24, 1 Pet 4:1-2)

C. Agape love: One's need to be loved has now disappeared through complete identity with the God of Love. Why does one need love when he is one with the Source of it? *Love has been perfected among us...because as He is, so are we in this world* (1 Jn 4:17).

1. Intercession: All the wisdom, Word, training, and disciplinary chastening of Proverbs find its fulfillment in King Lemuel, the son of a diligent mother who vowed to give him to God (Pr 31:1-9). His total separation from the world unto God has one purpose: to intercede for those who cannot speak for themselves, those *appointed to die*, and the *poor and needy* (vv.8-9). Thus he opens the door in the spirit world for the harvest of righteousness and good works available to the virtuous woman (vv.10-31). The young in the Lord may not see this connection, but those who have experienced it easily see it as "the ways of God." This is the meaning of our role as *a royal priesthood* (1 Pet 1:9). It is what all the great intercessors in the OT did.

2. Dying for others. If spiritual children could see the reward for a lifetime of service--"dying daily" (1 Cor 15:31), they would remain babes, dreading the *cost* of growing up and the pain involved. But one's inner man is now developed enough to see the glories of the invisible, spiritual realm. And a life of self-emptying for the needy and helpless gives a far deeper pleasure than any outward form of comfort. It is the pleasure a mother gets from giving of herself to her children. So a

Let's Grow Up—Together

spiritual father sees past the temporary immaturity of his children's flesh (remembering his own weakness, Heb 5:2)) and gladly bears their burdens. And in this role he fulfills completely his identity with Christ, who suffered and for us, even unto death (Php 2:8; 3:10, Col

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1:24, Heb 13:12f, Rev 14:4). And if he has built his house on the right Foundation, there will certainly be glorious resurrection...in Christ!