

7. Learning to Serve People at Their Level of Spiritual Maturity

In our last topic, we talked about learning to be a leader who serves. In our topic today, we will be talking about serving people at their present level of spiritual maturity. One of the things I have found through the years is that most people can only understand one level of spiritual maturity beyond the level that they are at right now. As a result, we serve best when we recognize their present level of spiritual maturity and help them continue to develop at that stage of growth.

The New Testament talks about a variety of levels of spiritual maturity. These levels of spiritual maturity can easily be compared to the same levels of physical maturity because there are similar needs in the physical and the spiritual. Scripture talks about the following levels of spiritual maturity:

- ◆ The non-Christian – this is the person who has not yet become a Christian
- ◆ The newborn babe – 1 Peter 2:2 – this is the person who has just become a Christian
- ◆ The spiritual toddler – 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 13:11; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:11-14 – this is the person who started to grow and then stopped growing
- ◆ The spiritual child – 1 John 2:12-14
- ◆ The spiritual young man – 1 John 2:12-14
- ◆ The spiritual parent – 1 John 2:12-14; 1 Corinthians 4:14-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12
- ◆ The spiritual Timothy – Acts 16:1-3; 1 Corinthians 4:17
- ◆ The spiritual Timothy with faithful men – 2 Timothy 2:2
- ◆ The spiritual Timothy with faithful men who are teaching others also – 2 Timothy 2:2

Spiritual leadership means we can be effective serving the spiritual needs of all of the people who are above us on this list. A person who is a new Christian can serve the non-Christian by sharing the Gospel with him. A person who is a spiritual parent can serve the spiritual needs of spiritual young men, spiritual children, spiritual toddlers, spiritual newborn babes, and those who are not yet Christians. In addition, we can also be an encouragement to all, regardless of our present level of spiritual maturity. In 2 Corinthians 7:5-7, Paul talks about the tremendous encouragement Titus gave Paul by his coming to him.

To understand the needs of Christians at various levels of spiritual maturity, we need to understand the focus of a person at various levels of spiritual maturity. Below is a summary of the focus of Christians at different levels of maturity:

- The newborn babe – food – 1 Peter 2:2
- The spiritual toddler – my needs, my problems – 1 Corinthians 3:1-3
(this is the level where many churches focus today because contemporary trends have placed a focus on need-centered ministry)
- The spiritual child – growth – 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:13
- The spiritual young man – service – Acts 5:6, 10
(the young men served the church by burying the dead)
- The spiritual parent – care of spiritual children – 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12
- The spiritual Timothy – godly leadership development – 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2
- The spiritual Timothy with faithful men – indirect godly leadership development –

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2 Timothy 2:2

We serve a new Christian by helping him begin to understand some of the basic teachings of the Word of God. Among other things, we want to help the new Christian understand his or her new relationship with Christ and learn to build his or her relationship with God. We also want to help the new Christian begin to move from fear to love – 1 John 4:18. (A resource available to help focus on these things is the manual “New Life in Christ” which can be downloaded from the sveq website and copied for use with new Christians.) The new Christian also needs a spiritual parent who will spend time with the new Christian to help him grow. We serve the new Christian by either spending time with the new Christian on a regular basis or asking another Christian who desires to be a spiritual parent to spend time with him – 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:7-12.

The spiritual toddler is someone who became a Christian, but did not continue to develop. The key reason for this lack of growth is explained in 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, where Paul writes: “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do* not *have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” The Corinthians had many instructors or tutors but they had few fathers.

The word that is translated “instructor” spoke of the slave who was given the responsibility to raise a young boy by the Greeks and Romans. This slave often accomplished his task by using severe discipline. This word is only used three times in the New Testament. The other two times are in Galatians 3:24-25, where we read: “Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” In these verses, the word is translated “tutor” or “schoolmaster”. The law only punishes those who do wrong and does not provide an example of how to do right. That was why Paul said the reason the Corinthians had not grown spiritually was due to the fact that they had many who gave rules, but few who provided an example to follow.

This also demonstrates very clearly the difference between Greek education and Hebrew education. The Greeks taught by lectures and made little or no effort to build relationships. Christ demonstrates the Hebrew form of education. He invited people to spend time with Him so that He could show them how to live and teach them as He spent time with them. The focus of Christ was on building relationships in which godly living could be demonstrated and Biblical principles could be taught in love. The Hebrew form of education was to provide a model to follow rather than a lecture or rules. The Hebrew form of education helps people to grow in character, knowledge, and ministry, while the Greek form of education provides only knowledge backed up by punishment.

Much of the world today has patterned their education after the Greek form of education. As in many other things, the church has followed the pattern of the world instead of following the example of Christ. The result for the church is that the church as a whole has the same problems that were present in the church in Corinth. One of those problems is the fact that many Christians have not grown beyond the spiritual toddler stage, including many people who have been Christians for thirty or more years.

In order to develop leaders who are learning to minister to people at their level of spiritual maturity, we must place the focus on showing people how to live the Christian life by example rather than just telling them what to do and not do. This means developing healthy relationships between new Christians and more mature Christians so that the more mature Christians can become spiritual parents who are leading the new Christians by example. Most people who become stuck at the spiritual toddler level have never had a spiritual parent who developed a loving caring relationship. As a result, they may have gained Bible knowledge, but they have never been shown the way to walk (godly character) and they have never been shown the work to do (effective ministry).

The first step in helping developing leaders learn to lead people at their level of spiritual maturity is to show these developing leaders by our own example how to build godly relationships with non-Christians, new Christians and struggling Christians. Then, we show these developing leaders by taking them with us as we spend time with non-Christians, new Christians and struggling Christians. Christ often ministered to struggling, hurting people, but He had the disciples with Him as He ministered so that they were learning from His example. As we take people with us as we minister, they will become what we are whether that is good or bad. That is good, because it regularly causes us to examine our own lives to see if we are providing an example that we can encourage others to imitate.

The level of spiritual maturity of a developing leader should be that of a spiritual young man or a spiritual parent. They will learn how to be a spiritual parent to others as they see our example. May the Lord richly bless you as you show developing spiritual leaders how to become spiritual parents to one or more new Christians.