

Childhood

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

"I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name." (1 John 2:12)

A. The Stage In Which Christians Are Spiritual "Boys and Girls"

1. Those who are new Christians, or immature Christians, are often times referred to as "babes in Christ". This is not a negative term for EVERY Christian has been in this stage. The point is that no Christian should remain in this stage. Regardless of chronological age, these "boys and girls" in the faith are learning about Christ and are just beginning their spiritual journey. As spiritual children learn about Christ, they grow in their ability to win battles with temptation.

2. This can be a difficult time for both you and your mentor because:

a. Though saved, a "child" in the faith lives much like an unregenerate person, is childish, and is evidenced by a selfish, jealous and divisive spirit. Newborns are very much "worldly," controlled by their own desires:

"Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ." (1 Cor. 3:1)

Spiritual children are not yet spiritually healthy and mature. The evidence of infancy is:

- Quarrelsome, divisive, competitive, self-centered;
- Worldly attitudes, words, or behavior (controlled by their own desires);
- Not in tune with God's desires;
- Led by natural response (subjective feelings) more than the Holy Spirit.

b. Can be a source of anxiety for those trying to lead them along:

"My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you," (Gal. 4:19)

The apostle Paul led many people to Christ and helped them mature spiritually. Perhaps one reason for his success as a spiritual father was the deep concern he felt for his spiritual children; he compared his pain over their faithlessness to the pain of childbirth. We should have the same intense care for those to whom we are spiritual parents. Just as is true in the birth, growth and release of natural children, spiritual dads and moms are to stand by their spiritual children throughout life until Christ Jesus is fully formed in them.

c. Characteristics of those in spiritual childhood. These are the areas we will begin to address in later sections:

- Marginal desire for God's Word (very little Bible knowledge);

- Walks in the flesh; does not know the difference between walking in the flesh and walking in the Spirit;
- Few works of faith, i.e., no evidence of being filled with God's love to serve others, giving, etc.;
- Easily swayed or deceived by false doctrines;
- Stuck in the basics - no growth;
- Limited desire for fellowship with other believers; would rather pursue "worldly" activities;
- Strong desire for worldly possessions; selfish ambitions; spirit of competition;
- Difficulty in repenting/forgiving others;
- Lacking compassion for the lost;
- Not actively assisting in the spiritual development of others;
- Limited sense of God, His character or His will;
- Life filled with fear, anxiety, and absence of peace;
- Often covetous, boastful, prideful, manipulative, etc
- Ongoing financial difficulties; living far beyond means; out of balance debt;
- Seekers of pleasure;
- Lives marked by lack of discipline (physically, mentally, and spiritually);
- Partial victory over sin;
- Nonexistent or lackluster prayer life;
- Little or no time or sincere interest in worship;
- Not accountable to anyone for anything;
- Small degree of grace and mercy toward others or self.

d. Needs to focus on the "milk" of the Word:

"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness." (Hebrews 5:12, 13)

In order to grow from infant Christians to mature Christians, we must learn discernment. We must train our consciences, our senses, our minds, and our bodies to distinguish good from evil. The most important lesson at this point in your spiritual development is to understand your position in Christ - you are forgiven. Mentors, you should be teaching your student how they can begin to recognize temptation before it entraps them as well as being able to discern between a correct use of Scripture and a false one.

B. Nurturing & Encouragement:

1. Because their sins have been forgiven in Christ.

"I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name." (1 John 2:12)

a. Forgiveness is not based upon maturity or perfection.

b. Forgiveness is based upon the blood of Jesus and upon our willingness as Christians to confess our sins:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Confession frees us to enjoy fellowship with Christ. It eases our consciences and lightens our cares.

Most Christians at this stage have not learned how this works. They feel so "guilty" that they confess the same sins over and over; then they wonder if they might have forgotten something. Other new Christians believe that God forgives them when they confess, but if they died with unconfessed sins, they would be forever lost. These new believers do not understand that God wants to forgive us. He allowed Jesus to die just so He could offer us pardon. They must be instructed that when we come to Christ, He forgives all the sins we have committed or will ever commit. They must understand that we don't need to confess the sins of the past all over again, and we don't need to fear that God will reject us if we don't keep our "slate" perfectly clean. They must be assured that we should continue to confess our sins, but not because failure to do so will make us lose our salvation. They must fully realize that their relationship with Christ is secure. These should know that confession provides for maximum fellowship and joy with God and man.

True confession also involves a commitment not to continue in sin. We wouldn't be genuinely confessing our sins to God if we planned to commit them again and just wanted temporary forgiveness. We should also pray for strength to defeat temptation the next time we face it. If God has forgiven us for our sins because of Christ's death, why must we confess our sins? In admitting our sins and receiving Christ's cleansing, we are:

- 1) Coming into agreement with God that our sin truly is sin and that we are willing to turn from it;
- 2) Making sure that we don't conceal our sins from Him and consequently from ourselves, and;
- 3) Recognizing that our tendency is to sin - that we are truly dependent upon God and His power to overcome it.

2. Because they have "known the Father"

"...I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father." (1 John 2:13)

a. They have fellowship with the Father, which is John's definition of "eternal life":
"For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:2,3)

- Knowing God the Father Himself is realized through a living relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ.
- Eternal life requires entering into a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ.
- Christ's love lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

b. They may be "babes", but they have "eternal life" in Christ:

"And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:11,12)

- Whoever believes in God's Son has eternal life.
- Eternal life is not something to wait for; it begins the moment you believe.
- Don't work for eternal life, it is already received.
- Don't fret and worry about your salvation; you have been given eternal life by God Himself - it is guaranteed.

c. John wants "children" in the faith to continue to believe:

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13)

It is in this stage that a "babe in Christ" should receive from a more spiritually mature father or mother in the faith:

- Instructional nurturing/feeding upon the milk of the Word;
- An understanding and use of the cleansing power of the blood of Christ;
- Remaining in fellowship with the Father and sharing in "eternal life".

Life Application:

It is necessary that believers in this stage be taught and become thoroughly grounded in sound Biblical doctrine and that they learn that all teaching must be tested by God's inerrant, infallible Word. It must be understood that a person's character, behavior and future are all shaped by what a person believes to be truth (review Acts 2:42; 5:28; 13:12; 17:19). They must understand that they have been forgiven and are accepted by God.