

Part 7: Grow into an Emotionally Mature Adult

After becoming a Christian at the age of 19, I threw myself wholeheartedly into growing in Christ and serving Him. I attended the best leadership conferences available, graduated from seminary, read through the Bible each year, even memorized whole books of the Bible (short ones, of course). I preached sermons, planted a church in the inner city of New York and dedicated all my time, energy and money I had – to serve Jesus Christ.

One of the turning points of my life, however, was at the 17-year mark of being a Christian. God had been trying to get my attention, thru a variety of means, for quite some time at that point. But I was too busy – for Him of course – to actually pay Him much attention.

It was when I finally heard Geri – I mean really heard her. She shared about how lonely she was in our marriage, like a single parent, without our 4 girls, that she didn't feel valued or cherished by me. Even though I loved her, she didn't feel that from me.

By the grace of God- I finally saw it. I was an emotional infant leading a church. Here I was – Mr. Xian – and my own wife didn't feel loved by me.

WOW. I was embarrassed, ashamed, stricken. Of course, the quality of love inside the church is not really that different than the quality of love outside the church. I just had to look at me- the pastor. And I was so preoccupied with so many things on my mind, the people around me didn't feel much love coming out of me either. I was too busy going on my way.

God had my attention!

I was just another person who appeared to be growing in their love for God but not growing in their love for people.

In the first century, the Christians in the church in Corinth also failed to make that connection. They were zealous, diligent, and absolutely committed to having God as Lord of their lives. They had faith to move mountains, gave great amounts of money to the poor, and were incredibly gifted. But they did not love people.

They did not link loving God to loving people. They had, like many today, a disconnected spirituality. Paul wrote: *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...If I have the gift of prophecy... if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”*

Jesus always integrated the presence of God with the practice of loving people. He summarized the entire Bible for us in light of this unbreakable union: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

What Jesus says is that the essence of true Christian spirituality is to love well. This requires that we experience connection with God, with ourselves, and with other people. God invites us to practice his presence in our daily lives. At the same time, he invites us to “practice the presence of people,” within an awareness of his presence, in our daily relationships.

For this reason we placed this session between Daily Office and Sabbath and session 8 on going the next step to develop a Rule of Life. It is meant to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground. We are about both loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving people. They are inseparable.

Now, regardless of our chronological age, we are at different stages of emotional maturity. We can be in our thirties or forties physically, and yet be emotionally a teenager or infant. Here's a description of the 4 emotional stages we find ourselves in. See which of these you identify with most:

Emotional Infants

- Look for others to take care of them
- Have great difficulty entering into the world of others
- Are driven by need for instant gratification
- Use others as objects to meet their needs

Emotional Children

- Are content and happy as long as they receive what they want
- Unravel quickly from stress, disappointments, trials
- Interpret disagreements as personal offenses
- Are easily hurt
- Complain, withdraw or become sarcastic when they don't get their way
- Have great difficulty calmly discussing their needs and wants in a mature, loving way

Emotional Adolescents

- Tend to be defensive
- Are threatened and alarmed by criticism
- Keep score of what they give so they can ask for something later in return
- Deal with conflict poorly.
- Become preoccupied with themselves
- Are critical and judgmental

Emotional Adults

- Are able to ask for what they need, want, or prefer--clearly, directly, honestly
- Recognize, manage, and take responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings
- Can, when under stress, state their own beliefs and values without becoming adversarial
- Respect others without having to change them
- Give people room to make mistakes and not be perfect
- Have the capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the perspectives of others

When we accept Jesus Christ and become Christians, growing into emotionally mature adults is not natural. That requires intentional discipleship. Nobody would debate that a spiritually mature Christian is one who loves well. The problem is that few of us have learned practically how to do that.

This is one of the greatest gifts we can give our world -- be a community of emotionally healthy adults who love well. This takes the power of God and a commitment to learn, grow, and break with unhealthy, destructive patterns from our families and cultures—and in some cases, our Christian culture also.

We learn many skills to be competent in our careers and at school. We invest thousands of dollars and years of our time. We don't learn, however, the skills necessary to grow into an emotionally mature adult who loves well.

The Bible is clear what we are to do. But it does not give us the specific “how to's” that will change from culture to culture, generation to generation. Part of growing into an emotionally mature Christian is learning how to apply practically and effectively the truths we believe. For example:

- * be quick to hear and slow to speak
- * be angry and sin not
- * speak the truth in love
- * be a true peacemaker
- * do not bear false witness against my neighbor
- * get rid of all bitterness, rage, and envy

Many of us believe loving well is learned automatically, that it is just a “feeling.” We underestimate the depth of our bad habits and what is needed to sustain long-term, Christ-like change in our relationships.

Growing into an emotionally mature Christian adult means I experience each individual (including myself) as sacred, or as Martin Buber put it, as a “Thou” rather than an “It”. **PP** It requires learning, practicing and integrating such skills as speaking respectfully, listening with empathy, negotiating conflict fairly and uncovering the hidden expectations I have of others...just to name a few.

This belief led Geri and me, many years ago, to begin creating and gathering exercises and tools, so people could learn how love well-i.e. how to grow into an emotionally mature adults. We wanted to move people from defensiveness, reactivity, and fear, to openness, empathy, and vulnerability.

We realized people needed to experience a new, kingdom-way of relating that was outside their comfort zone. Practicing new skills like the one in this session will cause a level of discomfort initially. They are easy to understand but difficult to implement. But by repeatedly practicing mature, godly behaviors, we have seen people freed from lifelong cycles of emotional immaturity. They serve as a key link in moving people into becoming mothers and fathers of the faith.

This intentionality to grow into an emotionally mature adult, this commitment we made to learn skills to love well - transformed our marriage of course. It also changed our parenting of our 4 girls. We then brought this to our church body at New Life Fellowship. Singles learned skills. Married couples. Young Adults as well. This commitment to grow into emotionally mature adults actually has changed the entire culture of New Life.

Even now, at our staff meeting each week, we begin with an EH Skill that creates a wonderful atmosphere –We share an appreciation of the previous week. It is simple but wonderful way to create a culture of thankfulness and praise. As you probably can suspect, many people don't grow up in that....

How? We finally integrated the biblical truth that spiritual maturity and emotional maturity are inseparable. It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. **PP** As you will hopefully see, once you see this connection, it changes everything.

Jesus was aware of the need for the practical living out of a life of loving well. He knew that great messages to the multitudes alone were not enough for people to truly “get it”. So he chose twelve disciples, and with them, he modeled the practical application of his teaching. He had his disciples practice and he supervised them.

In this session you will take some first steps at breaking the power of our pasts and growing into an emotionally mature adult in the new family of Jesus. Practically walking out what we believe and building a countercultural community that relates maturely is truly one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves and the world around us.

So allow yourself to be stretched as you look at the famous parable of the Good Samaritan and then actually practice one concrete skill around the area of expectations.

While we focus on one exercise here, on pages 186-193, four different tools are introduced that you may want to look at.

Practically walking out what we believe and building a countercultural community that relates maturely is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children, young people, marriages the world around us.