

Ephesians 4:11-16

The Maturing Church (Part 3): The Increase of Submission to Christ

Some people believe that the grown up church is the church that leaves behind ancient paths in order to be more relevant to contemporary man. So, for popular churches that appeal to the masses, this means that the sermon is replaced by theatrics, such as the pastor dressed as Spider-man, descending from the ceiling and recreating the upside-down kiss scene from the Spider-man Movie. For more elitist churches this may mean replacing the proclamation of the Bible as God's Word in favor of a philosophical discourse scrubbed of any offensive ancient doctrines such as blood atonement for sin and the sovereignty of God over all things. For other churches it may mean discarding instruction altogether, and investing all energies into social services that improve living conditions in the here and now, but have no concern for life everlasting. But does growing up as a church mean becoming "modern." In Ephesians four, Paul gives us a very different picture of a maturing church. He says that a maturing church is increasing in loving service and increasing in unity around the Truth. In fact, the maturing church is less concerned with measuring up to the culture, and more concerned with measuring up to the stature of Christ. I sum this up in these words: The maturing church is increasing in submission to Christ.

Character submission (v. 13). Paul says that we are to grow into mature manhood, which he defines as "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The words "measure of the stature" continues the imagery of the body. Every boy wants to grow up to be as big as his father, or bigger. Caleb has already surpassed Renae. Now he's bent on overtaking me. As a church, we should be admiring the stature of Christ, and seeking to grow up into Him; after all, we are the body of Christ. But what does it mean for us to grow to the stature of Christ? It means to grow into His "fullness." Now, we've already seen this word "fullness" in Ephesians. In 3.19 Paul prayed that we would be filled "unto all the fullness of God." Even earlier in 1.23 Paul said that the church is "the fullness of Him who fills all in all." In 1.23 Paul says we *are* the fullness of Christ. In 4.13 He says we are to *attain* the fullness of Christ. Once again, Paul is telling us "Be what you are!" This is who you are in Christ, now act like it! But what is this fullness that we are and that we are to attain? When we asked in 3.19 what "the fullness of God" is, we said that it referred to the attributes of God. We noted that while we would never be like God in the essence of His being—in other words we will not be God—we are to be like Him in all holiness and godliness (2 Peter 3.11). The character of our lives is to reflect His character. As Jesus said in Matthew 5.48, "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

So, "to attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" means that our character is shaped according to His character. Jesus' relationship to God the Father is the paradigm for our relationship to the Father. Now, by saying this, I don't mean to imply that Jesus' relationship with the Father is not unique. He is the "only begotten Son" or the "one and only Son." His Divine nature is of the same substance with the Father, therefore, He is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We are not and never will be of one substance with the Father. In addition, Jesus has a unique relationship with the Father as the Messiah. All things, including us, are put under His feet as the reward of Christ's obedience and victory. Having made these qualifications about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, we must say that Paul does say that we share with Christ in His sonship to the Father. We are adopted by God and made heirs of the Father together with Christ (1.5, 11). We are "seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," and thus share in His reign (2.6). As the body of Christ we are united to Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King, and are made to share with Him in these offices. The church has a prophetic ministry of proclaiming the word of God. We are made to be kings and priests or a royal priesthood, as Peter says. Since all of

these things are in fact true by God's grace and calling, then we are to grow up into mature possession of these blessings. We are to live in this new reality.

Just as Jesus' relationship to the Father is to be our paradigm for relating to God, so His relationship with humanity is definitive for us as well. Jesus' relationship to the lost, to His disciples, and to the hostile world is to define our relationship in these spheres of humanity as well. In fact, Jesus told His disciples that not only *should* their relationships be defined according to His, but that they *would* be.

Speaking of the hostility of the world against God and His people, Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of My name, because they do not know Him who sent Me." In these verses, Jesus gives us a chain of relationships to help us understand where we stand in this universe. First, the world does not know the Father. Now this lack of knowledge is not innocent ignorance, but a willful suppression of the truth (Romans 1.18). In other words, the world is in rebellion against the Father. Therefore, the world hates Jesus and refuses to listen to Him, because Jesus was sent from the Father. So the second set of relationships Jesus highlights is that between Jesus and the Father and Jesus and the world. It is Jesus' relationship to the Father that makes the world inevitably hostile to Jesus. The third set of relationships brings this home to us. Since Jesus chose us out of the world, severing our relationship with those hostile rebels against God, He has given us a new identity in Him and with His Father. Consequently, the world's hatred of the Father and of Jesus whom the Father sent, is aimed at us. So how did Jesus and how are we to respond to the world's hatred. Jesus goes on to explain, "If I had not come and spoken to the, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. . . . If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both Me and My Father. . . . But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15.18-22, 24, 26-27). Just as Jesus bore witness to the truth embodied in His person, so we are to bear witness to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This witness leads to salvation for those who are chosen out of the world and so believe. It leads to condemnation for those who continue to rebel in the light of the truth.

Not only is our relationship to the world defined by Christ's, but our relationship to one another is also defined by Christ. Again, in the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13.34-35). The Apostle John drove home this point in his first epistle, "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love His brother. . . . We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. . . . Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of Him" (1 John 3.10, 14; 5.1). So Christians are identifiable by the love they have for other Christians.

Now let me ask you, with whom do you identify? Who are your comrades? Are you loyal to the crowd that raises their fists in the face of God and says, "I don't care what you've commanded! I'm going to run life my own way!" Or are you loyal to the crowd that says, "Oh God, I have sinned against you and deserve Your hot displeasure. Have mercy on me in the name of Jesus Christ who died for me. *Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach*

transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You" (Psalm 51:9–13). John warns us of our attachment to that world of humanity that is hostile to God: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2.15-17). James the Just is even more blunt with his warning: "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4.4). You cannot walk hand in hand with those who have declared their independence from the King and continue on good terms with Him.

This leads to the second observation about submission to Christ, that maturing moves toward **complete submission (v. 15)**. The words I'm focusing on in verse 15 are the words "in every way." God is not going to be "a part of my life." He is going to be all or nothing. He doesn't take up a small residence in our lives. He possesses every aspect of our existence. The word "church" is a beautiful word. It means "belonging to the Lord." Beloved, we belong to the Lord. We are to grow up into Christ "in every way." Our public life and our private life belong to Him. Some people have no problem with the public aspect of life belonging to God. They are glad to let their allegiance to Christ be known and try to have a walk that is consistent with their talk. But it is their private life that they struggle to submit to the Lord. Perhaps there are habits that are cherished above a pure heart. Many men struggle with pornography. Many women struggle with godless fantasies that give them an escape from their mundane lives. The prayer-life may be nil or you may be nursing a grudge against a brother or sister. For others, the private life is going strong, but the public life is wanting. Perhaps your ambition to succeed in work or school or just to be popular keeps you from openly declaring yourself for Christ. Maybe you're allowing intimidation to keep you from sharing the gospel with someone. Maybe your profession of faith is fine, but the way you treat others is not godly. We humans have a funny way of ignoring our weaknesses, trying to distract ourselves and others from them by shoring up our strengths. "Yeah, I need to work on X, but look at Y! Wow, I've really done well with Y haven't I?" "I know I can be really harsh in what I say and how I say it, and can hurt people with my gruff attitude. But I really take a stand for the truth. And you know truth is of utmost importance. You know some people are all sweet and syrupy and make people feel good, but they are devoid of truth. At least I tell it like it is!" Beloved, that kind of subterfuge may work in deceiving your own self and getting a pass from others, but "God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For the one who sows to the flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Galatians 6.7-8).

Is the character of your life submitted to Christ? Are you relating to the heavenly Father as a loving child? Do you want to do His will? Are you learning to say with Jesus, "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent Me?" "I always do what pleases the Father." Of course, we all sin in many ways, but is your life increasingly coming under the Lordship of Christ. Is your love for the church growing? Are you increasing in patience with your fellow Christians and maintaining peace with a forgiving heart? Do you find yourself more and more falling out of love with the world and loving the Lord and His people truly and affectionately? Now these questions have all been focused on your growth in Christ, but the emphasis in this text is actually not on the individual, but on the body of the church.

So, the third point about increasing maturity is that our submission is to be a **corporate submission (v. 16)**. The character of the *church* is to be submitted to the character of Christ. Paul says in verse sixteen, "from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." The whole body is to be growing up. The individual is not out of view of course. "Every joint" and "each part" speak of the vital importance of every individual member. And we will hardly be maturing as a congregation if each member is not growing. The individual is important to God and to the church. Yet as individual members we are to serve, not our own individual agenda, but Christ's agenda for the whole church. We are

to invest ourselves into the health and maturity of the whole body. Together, as a body, we are to mature, measuring up to the character of Christ.

Jesus said that He came not to do His own will, but “the will of Him who sent me” (John 6.38). The church should be characterized by this obedient attitude to the will of God. Even when Jesus’ whole soul recoiled at the thought of the cross, He prayed, “not My will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22.42). As a church we want to grow in this surrender of self-will to be able to say, “Whatever You want, Lord, that’s what we will do.”

In applying this, I want to pick up on the last point from last Sunday. We were called to unity around the truth. We heard the call to doctrinal unity and discernment. The last point, which we did not cover last week, was the call to declare the truth. Paul says we’re to be “speaking the truth in love.” Paul is not just saying that we are to be honest. “The truth” is particularly the truth of the gospel. We are to take what we know from God’s revelation of Himself and His will and proclaim it in love. Spiritual maturity is not found in merely owning the truth. The church’s maturity is demonstrated in the faithful and loving speaking of the truth. Where God has spoken we must not remain silent, but point each other and point our neighbors, indeed, point the nations to God’s truth. We must not allow what D. A. Carson calls “the intolerance of tolerance” to prevent us from saying “thus saith the Lord.” Carson says that the new tolerance insists that we must not simply allow people the freedom to have their own views. We are now told to affirm every view as equally valid and to deny that there is any absolute truth. To suggest otherwise, we are warned, is to be intolerant. We must not adopt this definition of tolerance, lest we grow silent so as not to be labeled “intolerant.” It is important that our motive and our manner is love. But we must speak.

There is a church in town that has on its sign “Voted the Friendliest Church in Fayetteville.” You are a loving and friendly congregation. I see the genuineness of your fellowship. But if we stand on the truth and for the truth, we will probably not be voted the friendliest church in Fayetteville. Jesus said that the world hates the light and refuses to come to the light lest their deeds should be exposed. But when you love people, you tell them the truth, even if they hate you for it. “Speaking the truth in love” is not just making sure that our official message from the pulpit and on the internet is sound. It also means encouraging the faint with gospel truths. It means strengthening those members who are weary in doing good with the life-giving truth of God. It may mean speaking a word of correction to someone who is speaking from carnal or worldly desires. It means helping that struggling Christian overcome temptation by giving clear instruction from the Word and support in prayer and accountability. If someone refuses to repent of a sin and is bringing scandal into the body and reproach on the name of Christ, speaking the truth in love requires rebuke and reproof. James says, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (5.19-20).

Sometimes “speaking the truth in love” is comfortable and pleasant. Sometimes it is uncomfortable and even painful. The person in need of truth is often settled in a warm blanket woven with lies and sins. And no one likes to be awakened by having their covers pulled back. They may not welcome your love and truth: “Just let me sleep! I don’t care if the house is burning down around me!” Because obedience to Christ can be difficult (like warning a person who won’t repent of sin) and we are often reluctant to stick our necks out, we, as a church, must be growing—maturing—in submission to Christ as our head.

Over the past three weeks we’ve considered the maturity of the church from these verses in terms of the increase of loving service, the increase of unity around the truth, and the increase of submission to Christ. We can’t pursue just one of these. Obviously they are all interrelated. We are all called to show mercy. We are all called to bear witness to the truth. We are all called to the obedience of faith. We have various gifts, and some will lead the way in mercy ministry.

Others will lead the way in proclamation of the truth. But we are all members of one body, and are to be working together for the maturity of the whole as well as of each individual part. What is your place in the body? Sometimes discerning spiritual gifts can be tricky early on in the Christian life. It can be a challenge to figure out where I fit. Some churches rely on spiritual gift inventories, which are really baptized personality profiles and skill set lists. While this may be helpful, I think conversations with more mature Christians will go further than such analysis. Being involved in the life of the church, participating in training and ministry, will help you and others identify how God has uniquely gifted you. Maybe you could start the conversation within your family. Then seek some counsel from one of the elders or from a mature Christian friend. Find your place and ministry in the body of Christ and find the joy of what Paul describes in verses fifteen and sixteen, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Benediction: Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13.20-21