

Study Reveals Big Percentage of US Christians Are Not ‘Spiritually Mature’

I would like to say I was shocked at the results of a study we conducted recently, showing that over half of U.S. Christians are not very mature spiritually—ranking somewhere equivalent to a toddler or younger when compared with physical growth stages. However, as a pastor, I have observed that many of us can tend to get stalled out in our spiritual journeys, so I wanted to share some keys for moving forward.

As Christians grow in spiritual maturity, it becomes necessary that we begin to take responsibility for our own choices. As we continue to feed on the Word of God, we’re likely to come across certain passages that call for major changes in our established habits and behaviors—and when our fleshly, immature “toddler” mentality kicks in, we may resist what we’re reading. We demand to know why, or we stomp our feet and say “No!”

A Toddler Needs Discipline

Unfortunately, some growing believers tend to stall out in this defiant “terrible twos” spiritual stage. Some don’t like to be told what to do or how to act. Some remain so focused on themselves that they stay blind to the rights and needs of others. Some just expect everything to be easy after committing their lives to Christ, and they’re ready to cash in their chips when they start hearing about the realities of suffering and sacrifice.

But a loving parent never gives up on a growing child, even though he or she can be quite difficult. Neither does God desert one of His children who acts in defiance. It’s persistent, continuing love that draws the child back to the

Father and the family of believers. This love, however, may also require some discipline. One truth of Scripture that needs to be emphasized is that spiritual discipline is motivated by love.

Just as a loving parent might impose a timeout for a defiant toddler to help her learn to control her emotions and listen to what mom or dad told her to do, God may allow His children to undergo occasional unpleasant circumstances for their own good. Godly discipline—like proper parental discipline—is always initiated with love, with the desired result of improved behavior and a more peaceful and fulfilling life for the child.

We also need to learn, as soon as possible, that God's disciplines are not always a result of our personal misbehavior. Sometimes, yes, we choose a wrong path or do something we shouldn't, and He tries to steer us back to safety again. But other times, discipline is used to make us stronger—to toughen us up for harder struggles at future stages of spiritual growth. Like a coach or trainer who pushes team members to do more than they thought themselves capable of doing, God uses events of our lives—sometimes very difficult or painful events—as a training exercise to develop our trust in His power and deliverance, and as preparation to help others who may be going through similar trials.

Learning Obedience as Children

As we continue to grow in spiritual maturity, reaching the next step I equate to physical childhood, we next need to learn obedience. An old hymn reminds us to “trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.” But Christian obedience doesn't involve God cracking the whip and forcing you to do something you don't want to do. No, no, no. When you begin to see how your life is being transformed by the Spirit of God working in you, you're glad to comply with whatever He asks.

But sometimes, if you're like me and almost everybody else I know, you'll find yourself resisting God's leadership at some points in your life. So, what can you do when you're unwilling? Here's a great prayer I've learned to pray: "Lord, I'm not really willing, but I'm willing to become willing." What an honest and powerful prayer! The Holy Spirit creates the desire to become more willing to seek God's purpose and God's presence.

God works in us first "to will"—to help us *want* to do as He instructs—and then "to act." That means to empower your obedience.

My Experience

I recall several specific steps of obedience that God led me to take during my early spiritual childhood. I won't say much about each step, but I want to show you that for me it was a period of significant change, commitment and personal growth.

A Commitment to Scripture

Jesus promised that if we seek first the kingdom of God, then everything else we need will be added (Matt. 6:33). We seek God's kingdom by learning His Word to discover His will, and I sensed God telling me, "Start every day with Me, Bill. Start every day in My Word." As a spiritual child, I learned how to feed myself in Scripture. Just like I know my kitchen and where to look for food when I'm hungry, I learned where to go in the Bible to find nourishment for my soul. The more I read Scripture, the clearer I heard God's direction in the following steps.

Baptism

One of my first steps of faith was being baptized as a declaration: "Christ is now alive in me and I'm following Him." In my spiritual journey, I had been a newborn, then an infant and then a toddler, but at the spiritual child stage, I

took the step of obedience to follow Jesus in water baptism.

Tithing

Next, I sensed God telling me, "Trust Me with your tithe. The first dime of every dollar, Bill, give it to Me. Why? Because where your treasure is, that's where your heart will be. Your heart will be more fully with Me when you trust Me with your treasures. Give and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over." (See Matt. 6:21, Luke 6:38.)

Seeking Forgiveness

I knew God wanted me to ask forgiveness and make amends for hurts I had caused. I went to people I'd sinned against, apologized and asked them how I could make it right. It was humbling, but it was necessary. These actions cleared up hurt, anger and fear, so the relationships could grow—and I found God to be faithful as I obeyed Him in this way. (See Luke 19:1-10 to see the story the Lord used to lead me in this healing work.)

Watching My Words

The Bible says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Col. 4:6). At the time, I was using some salty language ... but not in the biblical sense! At God's direction, I stopped using profanity and started using more grace-filled words to express myself (Eph. 4:29).

Respecting My Body

It's an awesome discovery to learn that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we now belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19-20). God showed me that spiritual growth requires physical commitments as well. He said to honor Him with my body: don't get drunk, don't abuse drugs and treat women with

respect rather than lust. Instead, I was to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

Telling Others

As I began to see positive changes in my life, God said, "I want you to share your story, to talk about My good news with others so they can know Me, too."

In all these areas, do you know what He was doing? He was teaching me obedience ... how to listen and follow ... how to turn the key of faith through the action of obedience so I could access His power to keep growing to become more like Him. Remember: obedience is aligning my choices and behavior with God's plan by God's power.

Obedience is God's way of growing us up in His love and showing us more of who He is. It enlarges our capacity to know Him better. I've learned this personally, but I can assure you I'm nobody special. God didn't treat me this way because I'm rare and unique. This is how He wants every one of his children to grow. {eoa}

Bill White is the Senior Pastor of Christ Journey Church in Miami, Florida. He is carried by the driving hope of Christ's powerful love to transform brokenness into new life and opportunity. Pastor White is the author of "Mature-ish: Your Mission from God, Should You Choose to Accept It." To learn more about the recent study, visit