

# 5 SIGNS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY...THAT ACTUALLY SHOW YOU LACK IT

By Carey Nieuwhof

The issue of spiritual maturity seems to provoke one of the super strange conversations in the North American and Western church today.

Here's the bizarre part: some Christians end up criticizing other Christians for not being 'deep' enough or committed enough to be 'real' Christians. (The fact that this may not sound bizarre to you is, in itself, evidence of how bizarre this has gotten.)

There is apparently a certain subset of Christian who have maturity figured out, and the rest of us, well, not so much. And yet often, what we call spiritual maturity...isn't. In fact, at least five of the common claims we make about having spiritual maturity actually show you lack it.

## THIS IS WHAT THE CONVERSATION SOUNDS LIKE

So, to be clear, how exactly does this issue surface in conversation?

In leadership circles, the dialogue often starts with a question such as "what are you doing to *disciple* your people?" (emphasis on *disciple*, often said with a deeper voice than normal) or a dismissive statement like "so you're *attracting* people, but then what?"

And it's almost always said condescendingly, as though some people own the maturity franchise and enjoy watching other fellow-Christ followers squirm while they try to come up with answers that will only show how immature they really are.

I've been on the receiving end of that conversation many many times, because, well, our church reaches a lot of people who ordinarily don't show up at church.

## 5 SIGNS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY...THAT ACTUALLY SHOW YOU LACK IT

Before I outline the list, please know I'm not claiming to be 'mature'. I'm not even claiming I understand the issue entirely.

I'm just saying there's something broken in our dialogue and in our characterization of spiritual maturity.

As for me personally, I would hope I'm *maturing*, but have I arrived? Not a chance.

Discipleship is an organic, life-long process. It has something to do with what the ancients called "sanctification". The process of becoming more and more holy, a term, which stripped from its strangeness, simply means to be 'set apart'. Basically, it means you're different than you were. And that process continues until you die. I've outlined a few of the markers of more authentic spiritual maturity in this post, and again here.

In the meantime, if you want to keep growing, here are 5 signs that pass for spiritual maturity in our culture that probably show you lack it.

## 1. PRIDE IN HOW MUCH BIBLE YOU KNOW

Since when was it a good thing to be proud of how much bible you know, and to look down on people who didn't know?

As Paul points out, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Clearly he knew what he was talking about.

Some Christians strut their biblical knowledge like it was an accomplishment. That's so wrong.

I won my share of sword drills (remember those?) when I was a kid, and I take time to read and study the scriptures pretty much every day, but as far as I can tell I'm supposed to use that knowledge to function as a bridge to people, not as a barricade showing everyone else how righteous I am. Because, incidentally, last time I checked I wasn't that righteous.

Use the bible as a bridge to the culture, not as a barricade against it.

To do otherwise puts us on the same ground as another religious group Jesus had strong views against. (Here's a list of the Top 10 Things Pharisees say today.)

And it was never about what you know or don't know, but about what God knows and who God loves.

## 2. TRUTH WITHOUT GRACE

In a similar vein, being all about truth is a problem as well.

I love how John phrases the arrival of Jesus: that Jesus came filled with truth and grace.

One of the things I love most about Jesus is that truth is never separated from grace, and grace is never separated from truth.

He was always grace-filled as he spoke what is true...in that the truth is always designed to lead toward grace.

Yet someone 'mature' people feel it's okay to land on one side of the equation.

*I'm a truth person, we tell people.*

No...maybe you're just a jerk. (And I say this as a guy who leans on the truth side of the equation.)

Whenever I am tempted to speak truth, I always have to come before God to ensure it is equally motivated by grace.

Could you imagine if we all did?

## 3. GRACE WITHOUT TRUTH

The opposite of course is also true. In the same way truth isn't truth without grace, grace isn't grace when separated from truth.

Some 'mature' people on the other side of the theological spectrum avoid the truth side of the equation as though love floats with no backbone.

No, grace has a backbone. We nailed it to the cross.

You cannot separate grace from truth anymore than you can separate truth from grace.

It is an incredibly difficult line to find, but we must find it.

Grace without truth isn't maturity any more than truth without grace is truth.

Clearly, we need a Saviour on this issue. And it's a good thing for us He embodies both.

#### 4. HARSHNESS TOWARD OUTSIDERS WHILE CUTTING INSIDERS SLACK

Many people who consider themselves spiritually mature love to talk about how awful the world is. And it is pretty terrible. Pick a headline almost any day. It's awful.

God identified that as early as Genesis 6 (and if you take our theology seriously, he *always* knew it would be this way, which is a little mind-bending if you think about it). The passage from Genesis is worth quoting:

*The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart.*

So what did God do? He started again. What followed was an ark and a rainbow. And ultimately God's decision on his heartbreak was addressed in Jesus who came, as our favourite but often totally-missed-the-point verse tells us, God so *loves* the world and gave himself up for it not to condemn it but to save it.

So why do so many Christians behave like God hated the world? Because the world is corrupt and sins, is the answer we hear back. But the truth of the matter, Christian, is that you are corrupt and you sin. But instead, we rail against the world's sins as though it shouldn't be sinning while cutting ourselves tons of slack on our moral failures.

What would happen if we started talking about church sins like gossip, gluttony, division and faction with the same conviction we use to talk about sexual sin?

I wrote about that in more detail here. (Perry Noble also wrote an great blog about why we turn a blind eye to a church sin like obesity but rail on about homosexuality.)

So...what if the church started to take its own sin more seriously than we take the world's sin? I think that's what we're supposed to do.

Finally, if you're still not convinced, study Jesus. You will discover he extended invitations to notorious sinners and outsiders, and reserved his harshest words for the religious people of his day.

We simply have it backwards. If God so loved the world, who decided we shouldn't? And if you were trying to win people to open their lives to a loving God, why do you think leading with judgment is a great strategy? Very few people get judged into life change. Many get loved into it.

## 5. TELLING PEOPLE YOU'RE MATURE

This one mystifies me.

I've had more than a few people pull me aside over the years and ask "So what do you do for spiritually mature people like me?" Stand back while people like you part the Red Sea I guess. Telling people you're mature is like telling people you're wise...it's kind of proof you're not. The most mature people, in my view, also tend to be the most humble. If you're strutting your maturity, it's pretty clear you've got some growing to do.

## HOW DO YOU GROW SPIRITUALLY?

My new book *Didn't See It Coming: Overcoming the 7 Greatest Challenges That Nobody Expects and Everyone Experiences* isn't supposed to be a spiritual growth book, but in the end, I think it ends up functioning as one.

Of all the journeys a leader takes, the internal journey is the most arduous. And leaders who are willing to look in the mirror, confess their shortcomings, and radically cling to the Gospel are the leaders who last longest, make the biggest impact (even if it's at home) and who end up growing spiritually.

So maybe I did write a spiritual growth book after all.

*Didn't See It Coming* tackles the seven core issues that take people out: cynicism, compromise, disconnectedness, irrelevance, pride, burnout, and the emptiness of success and provides strategies on how to combat each.

Why did I write it? Well, no idealistic 18 year old sets out to be cynical, jaded and disconnected by age 35, yet it happens all the time. The good news is, it doesn't have to be that way. The Gospel is so much bigger than that.

I would love nothing more than to see you thrive in life, leadership and in your walk with Christ. That's what *Didn't See It Coming* is all about.