

# Journey to Maturity

## Growth Chart

### **1 Corinthians 2:6–7; 2:12–3:4 (NRSV) —**

Among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. **7** But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. **13** And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. **14** Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. **15** Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. **16** “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. **1** And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. **2** I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, **3** for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? **4** For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

**Introduction.** Nearly every parent of an infant wants to know if his/her child is developing normally. Most have seen charts such as these which are designed to show where the child rates in comparison to other children in relation to age, size and weight.

As many of you know, our youngest grandchild was premature and weighted in at a whopping 2lb. 6 oz. Because of her early birth, not only did her periodic checkups involve looking carefully at her physical development, our daughter-in-law and son would take her for more extensive examinations that check her overall development – her control of muscle actions, how she responded to adults and then later her use of words. When a deficiency was detected, often she would have some physical therapies to assist in her development.

Well, Eleanor is nearly 4 years old. She is small for her age but she is advanced in terms of her determination, social and verbal skills. In a couple of weeks, she will be joining us to go to the beach. The other day I was talking with her about the beach and she informed me in no uncertain terms she was “going to the beach and would have skittles.” I guess she is a lot like her grandfather in dropping some less than subtle hints.

What if there was a growth chart for us followers of Jesus Christ to measure how we are doing in our spiritual development?

### **The Church at Corinth.**

Corinth was a thriving cosmopolitan city at one of the busiest crossroads of the world. There a vibrant church had been planted and from most external measurements was doing quite well.

The Church at Corinth was a lively congregation whose worship we would classify as Pentecostal. The people probably would have felt at home in the Church of God, Cleveland. Their worship was spirited and enthusiastic and seemed to have an attraction for many. Spiritual gifts were often exhibited in their worship. Many boasted in their exercise of their spiritual gifts, particularly speaking in tongues.

First Church Corinth could boast of having had two of the top preachers of their era – Apollos and Paul. Many in the church had sat at their feet and been nurtured in the faith by them.

Many in the church held strong, deep convictions about various matters. Because of the depth of these convictions, they often saw themselves as being in a superior spiritual place versus others. It seems many felt they had arrived. So as Paul wrote to them, he offered as it were a growth chart for them.

I don't know about you but I typically get a bit nervous when I am being measured. I remember how I felt when I was in HS and taking the SAT. I remember how I felt when I went before the committee to defend my doctoral project. I know how I feel when I go for my yearly or decade physicals and medical tests. I know how I feel when I take personality and performance inventories. I am typically nervous about the results. How about you?

In the matter of spiritual location, some may have little clue where you are. You may not know if you are making healthy progress or not. Some may have a sense of having arrived at a particular place and you feel rather good about it. Others may believe you will score rather low on a spiritual chart.

Identifying “where we are” is not intended to give a sense of accomplishment or to breed a sense of guilt. Rather it can be a great source to help us know where we are and take steps to move in the right direction with Christ. Will you go with me and examine Paul's growth chart and be open to allow the Spirit to show you where you are?

### **Paul's markers.**

Some years ago when I had moved into a new church as pastor, a long-time member who had significant influence in the church, particularly among his peers, came by my office to introduce himself. He told me that day if I needed anything he would let help me. He seemed like one of the spiritual leaders in the church.

As time passed there, I saw a very different side of this man. At crucial points for the church to move forward, this man often would be at the forefront of stirring dissension among those he could influence. It often proved to be very divisive. Many thought he was a key contributor but I learned that he virtually gave nothing to support the church. While I in no way doubted this man's faith in Jesus Christ, I experienced him as a person who did not seem to be mature in the faith. Even though he had been a believer and church member for many decades, how he lived out his faith in relationship to the church and others was not very constructive.

Paul as he wrote to the believers in Corinth, he used five words to mark three important locations of the growth chart. I want to share these with you in the order of a progression rather than the order Paul mentions them.

**Ψυχικός** – the first word is the Greek source for our word, *psyche*. It is translated various ways in different translations of the Bible – “unspiritual,” “without the spirit,” “natural person.” The better translations are those that refer to “natural person” or “natural humanity.” This is essentially the person who does not know and has not trusted Jesus Christ. She is the unconverted person. This person has not started the journey with Jesus.

Paul said the natural persons do not understand spiritual matters because it is necessary for the Holy Spirit to be present in their lives. The person is “natural” not “spiritual.” They are completely dependent upon human resources for understanding and living out of that understanding. The natural person could be fairly moral or rather immoral. The key is they are dependent upon their personal internal resources.

Perhaps you have a friend who is not a follower of Jesus and that person has a difficult time understanding your commitment to Christ and the church. They don't understand why you would get up on Sundays and go to worship in what they perceive to be a boring experience or one they perceive is filled with hypocrites. They do not know why you would give money or give of your time to serve others. They just don't get it. They don't understand why you would make a sacrifice to not be dishonest in ways that could bring you gain because of your convictions.

**Σάρκινος** – the second word is one Paul uses in a technical way. It is often translated as “flesh” or “carnal.” Paul here uses a metaphor to describe it – “*infant in Christ*.”

Essentially this describes those who are stuck in the spiritual development. They have received God's grace through Jesus Christ but have not grown in the faith. Their lives, actions and attitudes are hardly distinguishable from those who have not received Christ. Essentially these persons are influenced and driven by the human desires and drives which are the filters of their lives and decision making.

Paul pointed out that many at Corinth were controlled by their fleshly desires. They were given to quarreling and divisive behaviors. They argued over preacher loyalty – some for Paul and some for Apollos. They argued over whether they could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. It seems they were self-centered rather than God centered. They wanted their way.

In our church culture this is often seen not only in divisive behaviors and attitudes but also in consumeristic mentalities where many believers are always wanted to figure out how to benefit themselves. Paul said these folks are “infants.” He wanted to feed them solid food but they were still immature.”

Sadly, some people fall back into this category after being on the journey for a while. Often these persons have made progress but they slip back into this. To the Galatians Christians Paul wrote how they “*started out as spiritual but had reverted back the flesh*” (3:3). In Revelation,

John wrote to the church at Ephesus **that they had so loved Christ at first but had fallen away from the first love.** He said they had taken a deep fall.

This is an easy place for any of us to get stuck. We can slide back into this position. I essentially believe that when any of us stop growing and developing in Christ whether we have been a Jesus follower for six months or 60 years, the distance to be a believer controlled by the flesh is not very far.

**Πνευματικός – The third word is translated as “spiritual.”** It has as its root the word for Spirit. Paul parallels this word with the word translated as “mature.” Being mature is reaching the goal of what God intends. It is becoming the person God designed you and me to be. The spiritual person is moving toward this goal.

**Paul says those who are spiritual are able to process, examine and discern spiritual matters.** He extends this by saying they are able to do so with “all things.” The language use for this process has a judicial overtone. It is the attorney’s exploring the matters before the court with questions and research in an effort to get to the truth.

There are many things that make little sense to the natural human mind. Why would a God who wants to save us “die on a cross?” The cross makes little sense. Then there is this matter of “resurrection from the dead.” How easy is that to believe and process? How can God forgive us of our sins before we have done anything to merit that forgiveness? It takes the Holy Spirit working within us to make some sense of these things and accept them. Often it is an issue of not really understanding the things of God and the mysteries they present but having an appreciation for them. The spiritual person is able to accept without full understanding and is willing to live in that state of searching and tension. The spiritual people are unafraid and unashamed of asking deep and probing question and live in the mystery of not knowing completely.

These spiritual matters are not only those things related to God and God’s action in our world. **Spiritual matters relate to the very practical matters of life.** The spiritual among us explore, examine and discern how to love someone whose life style is offensive to us. They work through how to forgive one who has wounded them or someone they love. They find the way to respect someone whose beliefs are very unlike their own. The struggle through trusting God when things have really been rough and turned sour, times when it really feels God has abandoned them. These follow Christ into a calling that seems to make little sense and come with great sacrifice yet they are convinced it is what they are called to do.

UT loss – a look in their eye – to compete. He sensed they want to get better and improve. How about you – do you have the look in your eyes? Do you want to grow? Are you open to the Spirit leading you to a deeper place on the spiritual growth chart? Are you willing to do what it takes?

### **Where are you?**

So these are the three markers: the natural person who has not yet trusted in Jesus, the carnal person who has a relationship with Jesus but whose life is controlled by human drives and desires and the spiritual person who discerns and lives out the life God desires. It is at this third place where we experience the abundance of life God intends and make progress to become what God designed each of us to become.

What steps and decisions do you need to make today? Open your life for the Spirit to examine and take the steps God moves you to take.