

April 20, 1975  
Ephesians 6:1-20  
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### MARKS OF MATURITY

The other night I had a brief but interesting conversation with one of my children. I had gone to the kitchen for a late night snack when I confronted him doing the same thing. I had in my hand a book I had been reading, and spotting it, he asked me what it was. It happened to be a book our church school director, Nancy Smart, had asked me to read and was entitled Parents and Religion. My son's inquiry opened the door for me to suggest that he might like to read the book, as it was too late for me to use its advice in the education and training of my children. He responded that it was too early for him.

One could hardly have asked for a better opening and so I took it. I replied that it is often too late but it is never too early. My brief homily on the subject concluded by pointing out that the parental influence on a child begins at the moment the child is born, perhaps even earlier, and what that influence is going to be is in large part determined long before one ever becomes a parent.

We are all of us all of the time preparing for the future. It is unavoidable. We may be preparing very badly or very well, but we are always preparing.

Let me give you a striking illustration of what I mean. A Roman Catholic priest, Father John Powell, in a recent article on prayer points out that the habits formed in youth can become tyrants in old age. He recalls an experience he had in seminary, waiting in a corridor of the infirmary, while a fellow student was tucking in two aged and bed-ridden priests for the night. Let Father Powell tell what happened:

"One of them was bitter and complaining, completely ungrateful. The other thanked the brother and told him he would say an extra prayer for him before falling asleep. A sudden intuition gripped and frightened me. One day I would be one of those two priests: selfish and cantankerous, or loving and grateful. But I knew as I stood in the corridor of the infirmary that the decision would not be made in the twilight of my life. It would be made in the young, formative years. It was being made then. Our yesterdays lie heavily upon our todays and our todays lie heavily upon our tomorrows."

These 45 young people who have this morning declared their faith in Jesus Christ and become members of the Christian church have, during the past two years of study, determined in some way what kind of persons they will be during the balance of their lives. It was not the fact that they were in the Covenant Class alone that made the difference, but their attitude, their interest, their diligence in study, and now, the

measure of their commitment and dedication. All of this has strongly influenced their character, the kind of parents they will one day be, and eventually whether they will, in the twilight of their own lives, be selfish and cantankerous, or loving and grateful. That is a pretty serious prospect to consider.

Now I have entitled this sermon, "Marks of Maturity", and one of the first marks of maturity is the realization that everything we are today, and everything we do today, is going to have some kind of effect on what we are and what we do through all the rest of life. Life can't be cut up into sections so that we may say, "I'll be this kind of person while I'm young, I'll be a different kind of person when I am middle aged, and I'll be something else when I'm old." Life just doesn't work that way, and blessed is the young person who realizes that he will never be tomorrow what he is not preparing to be today. To feel that one can be and do anything he desires when he is young, and then suddenly one day be a completely different kind of person is the result of immature and infantile thinking.

## II

Another mark of a mature person is the recognition that he has been given life and has been put into the world in order to give and not just to get. No one needs to tell you that we live in the midst of difficult times. I am sorry that I cannot assure you of better times just around the corner. Things are likely to get worse before they get better. But I challenge you to accept the difficulties and problems of life as opportunities to give of yourselves and thus to achieve a measure of greatness in the sight of God.

These times remind one of a story told about General Creighton Abrams. When he was in charge of an armored division during the second World War, he one day found his unit completely surrounded by the enemy. The Nazi commander sent a demand for surrender. Abrams replied with a refusal and then called his men together. "Gentlemen!" he boomed, "we are faced today with a great opportunity. For the first time in this campaign we can attack the enemy in every direction!"

Today, no matter in which direction we look we can see problems and difficulties. We are surrounded by them. The mature person is one who recognizes that these problems and difficulties are also opportunities and that there is no meaning and no sense to life unless there is something to struggle with and to overcome. Don't expect life always to be good to you. Don't expect life to greet you with open arms and to say, "Come and take all you want of the good things." The really good things do not come without strenuous effort. Shun effort and struggle and you will go nowhere, gain little, accomplish nothing.

One of the boys in this class, I am told, recently got his driver's license. He's been bugging his dad for the car ever since. The other night when he wanted to drive two blocks to go to the drug store his dad roared, "You've got two feet, what are they for?" The boy knew the answer! "One for the brake and one for the accelerator!" That was the reply that grounded him.

If any of you have that attitude toward life, that it owes you a living, that everything good ought to be easy and free, then I feel sorry for you. If the society of which you are a part has that philosophy, I feel sorry for it. That kind of immaturity leads directly to disappointment, disillusionment, and the destruction of all traditional values.

### III

In this country we have always had an admiration for the go-getter. There is, however, a necessary happy medium between being a go-getter and being a go-giver. If we are mature persons our getting will always be matched by our giving. Surely that is a primary part of Jesus' message. Paul quotes Jesus as saying that "it is more blessed to give than to receive". (Acts 20:35) Many people have had experiences which will confirm that assertion. We're not just talking about money, although that may well be the first thing we think about today when the subject of giving is raised. There are people who would rather give their money than anything else. They have enough of it and to spare and they would rather give that than their time or their effort.

We're speaking now rather about the giving of the whole of life. We're talking about devoting our total being to the basic principles of the Christian faith. We're talking about giving our lives to God and letting him direct and order those lives. That's the kind of giving each of us needs in our kind of world and the kind of giving our world needs. That's the kind of giving that is the mark of a mature Christian personality.

In the last century there was a famous British general by the name of Charles George Gordon. He was apparently a very successful military man, but it is not his military career that primarily interests me. On one wall of London's St. Paul's Cathedral is a plaque placed there in memory of General Gordon. I have always been impressed by what it says and I commend it to your attention:

"Charles George Gordon:  
Who at all times and everywhere gave  
His strength to the weak,  
His substance to the poor,  
His sympathy to the suffering,  
His heart to God."

Those words are a glorious challenge and a worthy Christian goal for every one of us. The last line is the most important of all, for until we give our heart to God we will be unable to give our strength to the weak, our substance to the poor, our sympathy to the suffering. That is the supreme mark of Christian maturity. A man is truly religious and truly wise when he knows that he is nothing without God. I therefore beseech every one of us, young and old, to strive for that kind of Christian maturity which will fulfill God's expectations for us and enable it one day to be said of us,

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At all times and everywhere he gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God.

I hope that is what you have done this morning as you declared your faith in Christ and made your commitment to his church.