

## Fourth Mark of Maturity—Family Development

Years ago our church leaders asked themselves, what are some specific marks of Christian maturity with which we must equip every member of Lone Hill Church so that they both practice them and also are able to teach them to others? The result was the development of our “Seven Marks of Maturity.” Through 1999 I have been trying to expound our “Seven Marks of Maturity” in my Pastor’s Perspectives. There is a twofold purpose in this. First, to explain each of the marks so that everyone will understand what is each mark means. Second, it also enables me to put these explanations into print so that they may be referred to and used in a variety of ways. With this in mind here is our Fourth Mark of Maturity. “**Family Development**—*Daily prayer with and for one’s family, especially spouse and children so that they and your relationships with them are growing and maturing in Christ (Eph. 5:23; 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:4, 5; 5:4, 8; Col. 4:2; Eph. 6:18; Deut. 6:5-25; 17:19).*”

The Apostle Paul wrote to his young lieutenant, Timothy, with inspired wisdom. When you are looking for a man to lead God’s church, Timothy, look at how he leads his family. The character of his leadership, both his strengths and his weaknesses, will be revealed there. “*He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)*” (1 Tim. 3:4, 5). The Christian family is really the church in miniature with the father acting as the pastor of this flock. His responsibility is to do everything an elder or pastor must do to equip and mature the Church.

This teaches us all something fundamental about maturity. We are to practice basic spiritual growth in small ways and with smaller responsibilities, so that, as we demonstrate maturity, we are prepared to move on to greater responsibilities. Thus, leading one’s family well is not simply for the elite of the church, but it must be the goal for all believers—fathers for their families, mothers for their children, older siblings for younger ones, so grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. etc. Managing a household well has a very specific goal.

God has a goal for the families of His covenant people—“*a godly offspring*” (Mal. 2:15). This was one of the very specific reasons God instituted marriage and established families. God also gave some very basic instructions to achieve this goal. “*A godly offspring*” was measured, as all God’s people are measured, by obedience to God’s commandments. The “great” commandment and its complement commandment stood as a plumb bob to measure godliness. “*‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind’. . . The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*” (Mt. 22:37, 39, 40; cf. Dt. 6:5). The key to loving God and neighbor is obedience to the other moral commandments of God. For this reason Jesus taught His disciples, “*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*” (Jn. 14:15). It was by such that Jesus demonstrated His love for His Father, “*so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me*” (Jn. 14:31). Love for God, i.e. true spirituality, godliness, has a simple reality test—do you obey His commandments. If you obey, you love God, but if you don’t obey, your love is not real. You may be kidding yourself, but you are not kidding God. God taught that there was a fundamental practice that was foundational to achieving this goal in the family.

Jesus quoted the great commandment from Deuteronomy 6:5. The following verses reveal this “fundamental practice.” “*These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. . . . When*

*your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the Lord our God commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, ' . . . So the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today. It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God, just as He commanded us' (Dt. 6:6-9, 20-22, 24-25). What is the fundamental practice? It was parents who daily, and throughout the day, and faithfully, consistently, taught their children the Word of God. But even more, they walked it—"as it is today." Parents were to be "exhibit A" that God's promises were true! They were to be examples for their children of how to love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Dt. 6:5). Fathers bear the greatest responsibility to lead their families in this way. "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). They have been made heads and leaders over their wives. "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church. . . ." (Eph. 5:23). Therefore, they bear the greatest burden of this responsibility. Yet we are all called to read and obey God's Word, and we are all called to pray for one another. Therefore we all share this responsibility to one degree or another. We are all a part of families, and within that "household" we are to exemplify and encourage prayer and the reading and the obeying of God's Word. We are "to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). How do we begin?*

Well, our Fourth Mark of Maturity states the basic starting point. It is a minimum statement. We stated it minimally because there are families where one spouse is a Christian, and the other is not, or there are other combinations of believers with nonbelievers in a family. Prayer is a critical starting place (Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2, 3). We have found that consistency in daily prayer with and for your family begins a dynamic change in your life and their lives. They become Christ-focused, i.e. living in dependence upon His power instead of their own. They begin to see that God can change people, their dispositions, and their openness to the Lord. Once this goal is achieved with consistency, adding God's Word to it is much simpler. Praying with and for your family ultimately requires that you have a specific and consistent time, place and procedure. These basics are essential—a consistent time, place and procedure! Once these are in place add the reading of God's Word. Start with reading a chapter of a Gospel together, or a Psalm, or a chapter of Proverbs. Briefly ask each one what God's Spirit opened their eyes to in the chapter? Conclude by asking what does God's Word teach us to do today? Families with children of various ages must make the time age-appropriate. Add to this other times when you read Scripture out loud to your family. Use one of the "Read Through the Bible in a Year" programs. Further, you can add one of the catechisms. The Shorter Westminster Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism is excellent ways to teach the content of God's Word. Read a question a day and look up the Scriptural references.

Will you face problems developing this spiritual discipline in your home? Yes! But leadership is learning to pray and seek God's solution. It is easy to fall down on this responsibility, but leadership is picking yourself up and getting back on track.

The Apostle Paul also instructed Timothy to teach widows who were then to teach other women, "*they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family. . . .*" (1 Tim. 5:4). Generally he stated that "*. . . if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*" (1 Tim. 5:8). Paul's immediate application was physical provision, but secondarily, can one be considered any differently if he does not care for his or her family spiritually? I think not! The mark of Family Development is soundly rooted in Scripture from its beginning to its end. It is for everyone. It was to be a determination of one's maturity in Christ. So elders were to demonstrate it, or they were not ready to lead. As Christian marriage was to be an illustration of Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:23, 25, 32), so the family was to be the church in miniature. The father was to serve as pastor over his family discipling them in godliness, prayer, and God's Word.

For your development in developing your family, your Pastor.