

The First Mark of Maturity □ Your Personal Walk

“Daily prayer and daily time in the Word with the result that one experiences and ever-increasing awareness of Christ’s presence, is walking in the power of the Spirit, and has a growing personal knowledge of God and obedience to His Word (e.g. Mk. 1:35; 1 Thess. 3:10; Dan. 6:10; cf. Jn. 15:5-8; Acts 2:42, 46, 47; Ps. 5:3; 55:17; 27:4, 8; 89:15-18; 34:1-4; 119; 9:16).

Our Seven Marks of Maturity are a critical plank in our platform of ministry. I am challenged to keep them before us, before myself, and our leaders. Yet, their visibility is only a step and means to our end. We must practice them and grow in our practice. The final end is for each of us to be sharing with others the value of growing in these Marks and the how-tos of them, mentoring them.

The first Mark describes our daily **personal walk** with our Lord. There is a reason why it is the first Mark. It is the foundation of our “personal” walk. Years ago I remember talking to a man who explained his giving as “I pay my dues.” His very description defrocked his relationship with Jesus of any “personal nature” (let alone his failure to understand stewardship). He institutionalized it; he described it as a business arrangement. To the degree that his comment truly reflected his relationship with Christ, to that degree, he had removed the personal. In contrast, the goal of the first Mark is to draw you near, face to face with Jesus. “In The Garden” is a beautiful hymn which depicts a personal walk with our Lord. “He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own; and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” These words reflect the wonder of Adam’s personal fellowship with God before the Fall: “the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. ...the Lord God called to the man...” (Gen. 3:8, 9). Or the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. ...and they urged Him... ‘Stay with us.’...He had reclined at the table with them. He took the bread and blessed it and breaking it, He began giving it to them” (Lu. 24:29, 30). Again, it depicts the personal—two people, face to face, enjoying one another’s fellowship and One of them is the eternal God of creation (cf. Rev. 3:20; Ex. 24:9-11).

In brief, this Mark describes a daily time between you and your Lord not devoid of the personal but overflowing with it. It is described as a personal time of worship, and the means of that worship is daily prayer and daily reading and meditating

upon God's Word. I want to share with you my own growth and steps of learning along this path. For me it was a series of "AH-HA experiences." In reflection, I have gone through a four-step learning process (so far) in growing in this first Mark and each step was an "AH-HA."

"AH-HA experiences" are the unique moments in the time line of our lives when we "understand," really understand. They are the instants when what we never could understand or what we naively always thought we did understand "click." We mutter to ourselves, "AH-HA, now I understand."

First was the recognition and need to have a personal time with the Lord every day. This was implanted in me in my early teens by a single, but profound, little exercise with which my pastor challenged our youth group. "Each morning take 15 minutes and read God's Word." We were to do that for a week, but after that week I knew that the Lord wanted me to do that the rest of my life. At that point I did not discipline myself to this daily time, but the seed of desire had been planted. The discipline did not come for another 6 or 7 years.

Even after I had begun to practice the discipline, I met numerous dry times. There was a real roller coaster character to the consistency of my practice, as well as, the experience of joy. Those years were years when discipline harnessed my desire. The fruit was not so much the joy of the Lord, but keen insight into the mind of the Lord.

The second step consciously began with a letter. A cousin, having read some things I had written, sent me a letter when at first reading I took as a rebuff. Later, I realized the deep insight it reflected. She shared how she would spend her time with the Lord. Her description was quite different from mine. Mine was sometimes nothing but the drudgery of stoic discipline hammered out with teeth-grinding perseverance. Hers dripped with honey. She bathed in the joy of the Lord. She worshipped. I exercised. She walked with a friend. Mine was more a military drill. That letter planted another seed—the seed of desire for the joy of the Lord.

God has a way of stacking things one on top of another, and then we Our Seven Marks of Maturity are a critical plank in our platform of ministry. I am challenged to keep them before us, before myself, and our leaders. Yet, their visibility is only a step and means to our end. We must practice them and grow in our practice. The final end is for each of us to be sharing with others the value of growing in these Marks and the how-tos of them, mentoring them.

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It is in this light that the first Mark of Maturity states:

“Daily prayer and daily time in the Word with the result that one experiences and ever-increasing awareness of Christ’s presence, is walking in the power of the Spirit, and has a growing personal knowledge of God and obedience to His Word (e.g. Mk. 1:35; 1 Thess. 3:10; Dan. 6:10; cf. Jn. 15:5-8; Acts 2:42, 46, 47; Ps. 5:3; 55:17; 27:4, 8; 89:15-18; 34:1-4; 119; 9:16).

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God has a way of stacking things one on top of another, and then we insightfully think, “Isn’t that coincidental.” God taught me new lessons to begin to satisfy my new found hunger. He taught me to worship in new ways. I guess I had always experienced worship more as a place to be and specific things to be done, but worship became a “new song” to sing to Him, an experience to bless Him, to adore the majesty of the One and Only. I had fallen in love and worship was the language of my Beloved. I didn’t want to sing about God, I wanted to sing to Him. I didn’t want to find out something about God, I wanted to meet Him. In worship I found the joy of the Lord.

In the third step of my saga the Lord instructed me about prayer. Here are the two powerful principles I have learned. First, the Lord’s Prayer is not so much a prayer to be repeated as a guide for how we should pray. For example, “Hallow be Thy name” is the instruction to praise the Father, to make His name Holy. The second principle taught me how to “Hallow” His name. The way to “Hallow” the Father’s name is to pray Scripture back to Him.

This last principle launched me into a practice that I trust I will exercise for the rest of my life. Each day to pray a Psalm back to the Lord, thus guiding me in my praise and adoration of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Whatever verse I read, I ask the same question of it, “what does this teach me about God?” Or sometimes I ask, “what this writer of scripture believed about God to write this?” Then I take that truth about God and pray it back to Him, praising Him for Who He is. This has revolutionized my prayer life. The desire and the discipline of a daily time with the Lord gave way to a deep delight. What a wonder it is to worship day in, day out. The psalmist says, “I awake the dawn with my praise.” He cries, “that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,” or to put it another way, “that I might experience the presence of the Lord all the time.”

The fourth step was finally the “AH-HA.” My daily time with the Lord is to delight in Him, and in that daily experience my life is reframed. I began to measure my problems against the stature of Him who knows no measure. Anxiety and uncertainty are stilled by the beauty of His face and calm stillness of His voice. Fears have no access; they are driven back at the gates of Him who is my Fortress and Deliverer.

My pilgrimage began with that first time the seed of desire was planted; it continued through the drudgery of those first wobbly steps, through the discovery of those spiritual truths one after another, until finally I muttered to myself “AH-HA.” I trust as those words were overheard by the Spirit, the Father smiled, and the Son mused, “We have just begun, no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.”

This has been my pilgrimage of growing in my personal walk. Recently, in a conversation with a man, he represented Christianity as a good moral lifestyle. I corrected him that he had missed the whole point! Christianity is entering into a personal knowing of God in Jesus Christ, and from this relationship flows a moral life, but the lifestyle is a resulting flow of gratitude from this personal relationship. It is in this vein that Jesus teaches us, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me. ...for apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:4, 5). The Christian life flows from this relationship, and this relationship is the strength, the pulsating heart, of the Christian’s life.

Can you imagine, someone, because they had no car, walking to work, shopping, walking everywhere for years, scrimping and saving, until they could finally buy a car. Then parking their new car in the garage and continuing to walk? Until we mature in this spiritual discipline and joy of daily entering into the presence of God and delighting in Him, as Nehemiah said, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10), we are that person who bought a car, parked it, and continues to go everywhere in his own strength. Our life in Christ was never meant to be lived in our own strength. Such is impossible!

We have a workbook to help you get started, “Developing Spiritual Disciplines.” There are a few copies in the “Information Rack.” Or simply open your Bible and begin to read. Then pray what those verses teach you about God back to Him in praise. The goal of this first Mark of Maturity is that daily you enter into the presence of God. I think my most favorite song is “When I Look into Your Holiness” (Ps. 34:5). It depicts for me the wonder and delight of entering into God’s presence.

When I look into Your holiness,
When I gaze into Your loveliness,
When all things that surround become shadows in the light of You, when I
worship You.

The reason I live is to worship You.
When I found the joy of reaching Your heart,
When my will becomes enthroned in Your love,
When all things that surround become shadows in the light of You, when I
worship You.
The reason I live is to worship You.

All the other Marks of Maturity flow from this one. Your “Personal Walk” with our
precious and majestic Lord is the fountain of strength from which all the other
Marks flow. So start here!