

What does a Mature Christian Look Like?

Rich Nathan
January 21 & 22, 2017
Spiritual but Not Religious?
Matthew 6:1-18

A little over a decade ago, the Vineyard movement hired a third party administrator to administrate our health care plan for our movement. This third party administrator came highly recommended and was a leader in his church in Texas. Dozens of Vineyard churches signed up for the national Vineyard healthcare plan. To make a long story short, this so-called Christian third party administrator ended up embezzling all the premiums that the national Vineyard movement had entrusted him with – over \$1 million in premiums. He was convicted of grand theft, but the money was never recovered.

Back in the 1950's there was a famous gangster named Mickey Cohen, who supposedly became a Christian at a Billy Graham Crusade. He listened to the message from Revelation 3:20,

Revelation 3:20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Mickey Cohen came forward and prayed. Lots of Christians were really excited and the story began circulating that this famous gangster had given his life to Christ.

But with the passing of time, no one could detect any change in Mickey Cohen's life. Finally, Mickey Cohen was confronted by a few Christian leaders, who challenged him that becoming a Christian meant that he had to give up his old profession and his old ways. Mickey Cohen objected. He said, "Well, there are Christian football players; there are Christian cowboys and Christian politicians – why not a Christian gangster?"

Why not a Christian gangster? Or a Christian bank robber? Or an angry, nasty Christian? Or a dishonest Christian businessman? Or a Christian drug dealer?

Is there any expectation that a person who claims to be born again will, at some point, grow up? That they would become a mature Christian? One of the main objections that those who label themselves "spiritual but not religious" have regarding the church and every religious institution is that the people who are involved in religious institutions don't seem any better and are sometimes way worse than the non-religious. Shouldn't becoming a Christian make you a better person?

Jesus had a lot to say about what a person who followed him should look like after a period of time. We're going to talk about Christian maturity today in a message that I've titled, "What does a Mature Christian Look Like?"

Let's pray.

Matthew 6:1-6

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Let me just give you some background to this text. If you were to outline the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:3-12 are commonly called the Beatitudes and they concern a mature Christian's character.

Matthew 5:21-48 concern a mature Christian's behavior. These have often been labeled the "Do-attitudes".

So we have the Beatitudes and the Do-attitudes – mature Christian character and mature Christian behavior. Now, in Chapter 6, Jesus starts talking about mature Christian motivation – what we could call the "heart-attitudes".

With each successive section on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus drills in a little more deeply. Here's a description of what you should **be** like:

Now in Chapter 6, here is a description of what the heart of a mature Christian ought to be like – your motivations, the reasons why you do what you do. What does a mature Christian look like?

Here at Vineyard Columbus we have a mission statement which reads:

Our Mission is to develop a community of disciples who experience God, love one another and partner with Christ to heal the world.

Our mission is not only to get people to meet Jesus as an initial matter. That's the beginning of discipleship. We want people to mature in Jesus. We want people to grow. Trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord is a necessary first step. It's not enough to be physically born, we must be spiritually reborn. That's how we get on the path of following Jesus. We must welcome the Spirit of Christ to come live inside of us. But the Christian life is more than a first step. It's a walk – left foot, right foot, left foot. So what does a mature Christian look like?

Let's consider:

The marks of a mature Christian

The first mark of a mature Christian is that:

A mature Christian follows Jesus comprehensively

So, in what areas should a Christian obey God? Let me make this really simple. You know, many religions have a basic confession of faith. For Jews, the basic confession of faith is called the *shema*. It comes from the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

For Muslims, the confession of faith is called the *shahada*. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.

Is there a similar confession of faith for Christians? There is! The most basic confession for Christians is contained in three words.

Jesus is Lord

Here's what we read in Romans 10

Romans 10:9

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

So, in what areas should a Christian obey Jesus as Lord? For Christians, there's an old saying that "Jesus needs to be Lord of all or he's not Lord at all". In other words, the lordship of Christ needs to be over every dimension of our lives. We need to obey Christ in everything. Jesus is to be Lord over us *intellectually*. That means that I need to submit my thoughts to Jesus. Jesus asserts his authority of our minds when he says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."

We constantly need to submit our minds to Jesus. What we believe about God. What we believe about men and women. What we believe about the way of salvation. What we believe about the sacredness of life. About sexuality. About immigrants. About money. About politics. All of this is the result of submitting our minds to Christ.

We submit to Christ as Lord, not only intellectually, but *relationally*. The way we do our relationships in marriage and our commitment to our marriage. The way that we honor our parents. The way that we choose to forgive those who have offended us. The way we carry on our friendships. The way we relate to our customers and clients, our parents and colleagues. The way we relate to our boss. The way we relate to our co-workers. The way we relate to those in our small group. The way we relate to our church. The way we relate to our larger community. All of those things are governed by this confession, "Jesus is Lord!"

Intellectually, relationally and *vocationally*, Jesus calls us and we obey. He calls us to serve in his church. He calls some of us to leave our homes and our lands and go to another country, another place to spread the good news of the gospel. He calls some of us to different professions. To teach. To be a student. To medicine. To home repair. To homemaking. If Jesus is Lord then we need to obey his call to the vocations that he has given us as father, as mother, as son, as daughter, sister, brother, friend. If Jesus is Lord we're called to obey him morally, spiritually, financially. Again, if Jesus isn't Lord of all in our lives he is not Lord at all. A mature Christian follows Jesus comprehensively.

What is another mark of a mature Christian?

A mature Christian follows Jesus consistently

When I think about a mature Christian, I think about someone who has a steadiness to them. They are like the Lord Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Some people love roller coasters – I don't. When I get to the top of a roller coaster and then there's that pause where you're waiting for the roller coaster to have this free fall, I don't really enjoy that feeling in the pit of my stomach, either anticipating what's coming or the actual event of going down.

What makes a roller coaster so much fun for so many people are the ups and downs. That's what some Christians are like. They're super excited about Jesus. They've just been to a retreat or heard a teaching and they are "all in". Then something stressful

happens in their lives. Someone says something unkind. They go through a hard time. They're not sure they want to be a Christian at all. Up and down, in and out.

There is, on the other hand, a steadiness, a stability to mature Christians. They don't need to hear an inspiring talk to get them to spend time with God or to give. They're not like iPhones that need an external charge all the time. They have a consistent dependence on Christ that internally recharges them and enables them to walk through dry seasons, through boredom, through stressful times, through grief and disappointment.

Mature Christians follow Jesus comprehensively. They follow Jesus consistently. And...

A mature Christian follows Jesus convictionally

By convictionally I mean from the heart. Remember the Sermon on the Mount can be outlined as the Beatitudes, the Do-attitudes and then in chapter 6, the Heart-attitudes. Jesus is describing what a mature Christian looks like. Mature Christianity is not just a matter of our outward behaviors, it's a matter of the condition of your heart. What's going on inside in the core of your being.

In this chapter, Jesus expects that his followers would engage in at least three activities – giving, praying and fasting. Mature followers of Jesus are going to do these things. Notice that he doesn't say, "If you give" or "if you pray" or "if you fast." Jesus says when you give, when you pray and when you fast. Let me pause here and ask you – do you do these things – give, pray and fast? This isn't a Chinese restaurant menu – one from column A, one from column B. Jesus assumes his followers will do these three things.

But it's not enough to give or pray or fast. Mature Christians always ask themselves, "Why am I doing what I'm doing? Why am I putting money in the offering plate at church? Why am I sending a check to charity? Why do I get up in the morning and pray? Why did I just pray that prayer out loud in the way that I did in small group? Why did I take a day to fast?"

Jesus says that mature followers of his, will look at their hearts and examine their motives for religious activities.

The motives of a mature Christian

I've been assisted in grappling with Matthew 6 by Darrell Johnson who teaches Pastoral Theology at Regent College. Darrell Johnson says that there are several facts of life that we can draw from this text. I'm going to modify his brilliant insights only slightly.

But the first fact of life is this:

We are always acting

The words of Jesus in Matthew 6 come from the world of acting. From the world of the theater. Three times in this text, Jesus condemns hypocrisy.

Matthew 6:2

² “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:5

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:16

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek

Hypocrite = *hupokritai*

In Greek drama of Jesus’ day, the actors were called *hupokritai*. They were people who were wearing masks. To put on a mask and play a role is the essence of being a hypocrite.

There is a second word that Jesus uses from the world of drama, it’s found in verse 1:

Matthew 6:1

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

The Greek word there is *theathanai*. That’s where we get the word “theater”.

Theater = *theathanai*

So the question of motive is: are you just playing a role when you do your religious activity or are you being authentic? Is your activity coming from your heart?

Religious hypocrisy is far from dead. Jesus words spoken 2000 years ago absolutely applies to us 21st century church goers. Take going to church. Why do you attend church?

You know that folks have all kinds of motives for attending church.

- You are running for office and you want to get votes.
- You are selling essential oils or jewelry or home goods and church is a great place to find clients.
- You want your kids to have some religious education.
- You love God and want to grow in your relationship with him.

We're all actors in a grand drama, Jesus teaches. The question is are you play-acting a role when it comes to your Christianity? Is it just a mask? A veneer? Or are you for real? Do you really love God? Do you really care about what God thinks of your life?

Here is the second great fact:

We are always being watched

Matthew 6:4b

... Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:6

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:18b

... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Hebrews 4.13 tells us that we are always being watched.

Hebrews 4:13

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

We always have, at the very least, a divine audience.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, who was one of the greatest Bible preachers of the 20th century, said this:

God sees it all. He knows your heart; other people do not. You can deceive them, and you can persuade them that you are quite selfless; but God knows your heart. Our Lord said to the Pharisees, "You are they who justify yourselves before men; but God knows

your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

Now this is a fundamental principle for the whole of our life. I sometimes feel that there is no better way of living and trying to live the holy life, than to just be constantly reminding ourselves of this simple fact. When we wake up in the morning we should immediately remind ourselves and recollect that we are in the presence of God. It is not a bad thing to say to ourselves before we go any further: “Throughout the whole of this day, everything I do, and say, and attempt, and think, and imagine, is going to be done under the eye of God. He is going to be with me; he sees everything; he knows everything. There is nothing I can do or attempt but God is fully aware of it all.”

“You, God, see me” would revolutionize our lives if we always did this...For the one who starts with the true realization that God sees all will soon be seen flying to Christ and his cross, and pleading to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

How would your life change, friend, if you lived with the realization that God sees you?

Now it is important to remember who this God is that sees us. He is not a divine policeman waiting to pounce on you, looking for places to criticize you, or accuse you, or oppress you. God is not the assistant principal waiting to drag you off by your ear to detention because he caught you smoking in the bathroom. The God who sees you is a God who is constantly looking for opportunities to bless you. God is watching so he can protect you, provide for you, comfort you when you are heartbroken and influence you towards a better, freer, more satisfying life. He is your Father in heaven. Note, Jesus repeatedly reminds us of who the God who is watching us:

Matthew 6:4b

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:6

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:18

so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The one who watches us all day long, who knows our thoughts before they are formed is our Father in heaven.

Here is fact #3:

We are always performing for someone

It's not enough for Jesus that we give or pray or fast. Jesus cares about our motives – why we do what we do. He says, “Really, your religious activity can be performed for one of three audiences. First of all, you can do what you're doing for other people.” Jesus says this five times in this text.

For example,

Matthew 6:1

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Second, we can hide from others, but perform for ourselves and mull over what a wonderful person you are because you gave a check.

Matthew 6:3

³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

Or your audience can be God alone – not others, not ourselves. Rather to, “I just want you, God, to see.”

You know, we live in an age when the question of why we're doing what we're doing is massively raised by social media where there's almost no distinction between private and public. So people post pictures of the meal they're eating on Instagram. “I love the pasta at this new restaurant. Yum, Yum.” “Here I am, having a conversation with a friend.” All of this pseudo-transparency that we display on social media, where we pretend to be real, but we only show our best selves, our best photos, our happiest moments on vacation.

Sort of like those signs that you see parents put in front of their houses. “My child is in the Honor Society at Westerville South” or the bumper stickers that display some selective college so that you can tell the world that your child goes to MIT, Yale, The Ohio State University.

I have a friend who asked, “Why don't we ever see these signs in front of people's homes?”

My kids spend a lot of time in the basement playing video games
My kids always fight with their siblings
My kid is a regular in detention
My kid will sell his ADHD medication to your kid

We never see signs for the whole family like:

Separated and spending all of our money fighting a really messy divorce
Drowning in Debt

Jesus asks the question: since you are all actors in great drama for whom will you perform? This is a crucial issue in determining your motivation in whether or not you are a mature Christian. For whom are you always performing?

We can perform for others. How many of us here still struggle to gain the admiration and approval of parents, who have always been withholding of praise. Do you know, you can be 60 years old and still want to have your father or mother say: Good job! You are doing well! You've been really successful in your marriage, your family, your career. Many of us crave the approval of our parents.

Or we want the approval of other Christians, and this spills over into religion. Haven't you ever prayed so that other people would say: "Oh, that was a good prayer that you just prayed." Everyone involved in spiritual activity faces this great temptation. I need to ask myself when I get up to preach: Who am I doing this for? Is this so that people at the end will say: That was great! Who is the audience? Am I really preaching to an audience of one? Who am I seeking to please? Am I really seeking to please God? Whose praise do I want? Do I want this church to be built entirely on Jesus or around me and the other leaders here? Worship leaders face this all the time. Who is the audience that I'm performing for? Is it the congregation or is my audience and cheering section God?

Here's the fourth and final fact.

We always get the reward we seek

Christians fundamentally set their heart on being rewarded by God. Jesus mentions rewards seven times in this passage. Let me share with you a few of them:

Matthew 6:1

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matthew 6:2

²"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:4b

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Either we are rewarded by people because of our public display of spirituality or we are rewarded by God because he sees our secret acts. It's interesting that Jesus is not averse to holding out the prospect of reward for us. He doesn't say, "Listen, if you're a mature follower of mine, you ought to give and pray and fast for no other reason than it's the right thing to do. You ought to give and pray and fast for no other reason than you love me and I tell you to do these things. In the Bible, Jesus is not averse to regularly in the Bible holding out the prospect of reward as a fundamental reason for us to do what we do. He's not asking you or me to be so pure that we want nothing when we pray. Nothing from our giving. Nothing from our fasting. He says, "Your Father will reward you." And he holds out rewards as a reason to do these things.

So, let me close with these thoughts. What is the payment for a mature Christian? What is the reward? What do we get out of fasting and praying and giving? The reward for the mature Christian is we get more of Jesus. We get nearness to Jesus. We get a closeness to Jesus. All that closeness to Jesus brings – confidence regarding the future, peace in whatever comes our way, a sense of security, freedom from living by the opinions of others, stability, steadiness and maturity. God will reward us according to what we are seeking.

Let me make this really simple. When I was pursuing Marlene, I tried to be on my best behavior. I still do, but really, really tried then. I tried to be really nice. I tried to be kind. I tried to be a good friend to her. Why? What was I seeking as a reward? A new car, of course. I wanted a new stereo. I wasn't being nice to Marlene for any of those reasons. What I was seeking as my reward was for Marlene to like me. In fact, I wanted Marlene to love me. Marlene was my reward.

People do spiritual things like give and pray and fast, but the reward they are seeking is utterly unrelated to God. Of course, we all want answers to our prayers. Of course, I want a breakthrough because of my fasting. Of course, I want a need to be met because of my giving. But ultimately, the motive of a mature Christian in praying or giving or fasting or Bible reading or church going, the motive of a mature Christian is: what I want must is you, Jesus! I want nearness to you. I want more of you. This is the reward that the entire Bible holds out for real-deal followers of Jesus. Ultimately, in the end, do you know what you get? Do you know what heaven is? Heaven is the place where God is. Heaven is a vision of God.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Let me ask you, what do you really want? Why do you do what you do? Are you a mature Christian? Do you want to be a mature Christian? Is this something you would aspire to? Then set your hearts on wanting more of Jesus.

Let's pray.

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- I. The marks of a mature Christian
 - A. A mature Christian follows Jesus comprehensively
 - B. A mature Christian follows Jesus consistently
 - C. A mature Christian follows Jesus convictionally

- II. The motives of a mature Christian
 - A. We are always acting
 - B. We are always being watched
 - C. We are always performing for someone
 - D. We always get the reward we seek