

Mature in Christ

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The apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:28, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” This verse presents us with a summary statement of the Apostle Paul’s ministry, as it tells us of both the means he employed and the goal for which he toiled. The means was the ministry of God’s Word, described in detail for us in the book of Acts. Paul typically began by going into the synagogue, where he reasoned with people from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead (Acts 17:2–3; 18:4). When people responded in faith and repentance, Paul continued his ministry by reasoning with them from the Scriptures (18:11; 19:9–10). In Ephesus, he was able to continue this ministry for three years, and in that time he was able to declare to them the whole counsel of God (20:27, 31). At the end of Acts, we find Paul doing the same thing in Rome (28:23–31), just as Jesus was doing at the end of Luke in Jerusalem (Luke 24:44–49). It is this same ministry of teaching the Holy Scriptures that must be continued in the church today (1 Tim. 4:13–16; 2 Tim. 3:14–17, 4:1–5). It is by such teaching that we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3).

The goal of Paul’s comprehensive teaching of the Holy Scriptures was to present everyone “mature in Christ.” The word translated here as “mature” is the Greek word *teleios*. It is derived from *telos*, a word that means the goal, purpose, or end for which something exists or is performed. The one who is “*teleios* in Christ” is the one who, in union with Christ, has reached his or her *telos*, the end for which he or she has been made. It is God who determines our goal or purpose, for He is our creator. God’s purpose toward His elect has been revealed in Romans 8:29: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” So, we can see that “mature in Christ” is just another way of saying “conformed to the image of Christ.” This is the end for which believers have been made. We can reach this goal only in union with Christ, as branches united to the vine (John 15:1–11).

The journey toward maturity in Christ begins with receiving Christ, and we make progress from that point in the same manner as we began: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6–7). It is by “walking with Christ” that we may grow and mature in Him, becoming more and more like Him.

This image of “walking with Christ” provides us with a helpful way of surveying the whole Bible’s teaching about maturity in Christ. After the fall of Adam, sin and death entered the human race (Rom. 5:12). By the recurrent phrase “and he died,” the genealogy of Genesis 5 shows the reign of death that ensued among Adam’s descendants. But one man stands out from that pattern. Enoch “walked with God, and he was not, for God took him” (Gen. 5:24). The book of Hebrews makes clear that Enoch did not see death, for he was commended as having pleased

God (Heb. 11:5). This phrase “walked with God” receives further elaboration in the life of Noah. He “was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). Here we see that “walking with God” includes not only enjoying favor with God and being admitted to fellowship with Him, but also obedience to God, of walking in His ways.

Abraham was called to such faith and obedience: “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Gen. 17:1b–2). God’s covenant with Abraham required not only that he walk in obedience to God, but that he teach such obedience to his descendants: “For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (18:19).

God’s covenant with Abraham came to fuller expression in the days of Moses. He likewise called the people to walk with God: “You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess” (Deut. 5:33). When Joshua renewed this covenant with Israel, he also called them to walk with God:

Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Josh. 22:5)

From Joshua’s words it is plain that the kind of “walking with God” in view is not mere rule keeping and outward conformity. It is a matter of the heart also—“to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.” But if it is more than just rule keeping, we must also remember that it is not without rule keeping. Following the words of the great Shema in Deuteronomy 6, which call us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might (v. 4–5), we find these forceful words:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, 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. You shall bind them as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (vv. 6–9)

In harmony with the teaching of the law, the prophets who came after Moses called Israel to walk with God in such obedience. So we find in Jeremiah: “But this command I gave them: ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you’” (Jer. 7:23). We find it also in the oft-quoted words of Micah: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Further examples could be cited (for example, Ezek. 11:19–20; Hos. 14:9; Zech. 3:7).

As in the Law and the Prophets, so also in the Psalms:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom cries out to us:

Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight. . . . The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Prov. 9:6–10)
The New Testament continues this emphasis on the necessity of walking with God. It is especially prominent in Paul. The Apostle teaches that Abraham is not only the father of the circumcised but of those “who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (Rom. 4:12).

Paul commands us to “walk by the Spirit” so that we “will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). He is emphatic that we are not saved on the basis of our walk, on the obedience we give, but he also insists that those who are saved by grace through faith “have been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Formerly, we were darkness, but now we are children of the light; we must walk as children of the light (5:8). We are to walk in a manner fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10).

The Apostle John joins his voice to Paul’s. He says that we cannot have fellowship with God and walk in darkness (1 John 1:6). For the one who abides in Christ must walk in the same manner in which He walked (2:6). Doing so is walking in love. “And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it” (2 John 1:6). It has ever been this way.

Being mature in Christ is being conformed to His image, and therefore it is walking as He walked. As we have received Christ, so let us walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as we have been taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Col. 2:6–7).