**“Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”**

**—*Hebrews 5:11–14 (NASB)***

The American Poet Ogden Nash once stated, **“You are only young once, but you can stay immature indefinitely.”** Nash’s observation increasingly rings true with respect to men in Western society. In a provocative article entitled “Wimps and Barbarians: The Sons of Murphy Brown” (*Claremont Review of Books*, 4, no. 1 [Winter 3003/04]), historian and educator Terrance O. Moore summed up the alarming trend by asserting, “Today’s boys have little sense of how to be men.” The following excerpts from his article illustrate this assessment:

Manhood is not simply a matter of being male and reaching a certain age. These are acts of nature; manhood is a sustained act of character. It is no easier to become a man than it is to become virtuous. In fact, the two are the same. The root of our old-fashioned word ‘virtue’ is the Latin word *virtus*, a derivative of *vir*, or man. To be virtuous is to be “manly” . . . .

Too often among today’s young males, the extremes seem to predominate. One extreme suffers from an excess of manliness, or from misdirected and unrefined manly energies. The other suffers from a lack of manliness, a total want of manly spirit. Call them barbarians and wimps. So prevalent are these two errant types that the prescription for what ails our young males might be reduced to two simple injunctions: Don't be a barbarian. Don't be a wimp. . . .

Today's barbarians are not hard to find. Like the barbarians of old, the new ones wander about in great packs. You can recognize them by their dress, their speech, their amusements, their manners, and their treatment of women. . . . The ancient barbarians did little except fight and hunt. The modern barbarians do little besides play sports and pursue women. To be sure, they have other amusements. But these activities do not as a rule require sensibility or thought. . . .

At the other extreme from true manliness is the wimp. Wimps are in many ways the opposite of barbarians. We would be mistaken, however, to classify wimps as simply young men without muscle. . . . If barbarians suffer from a misdirected manliness, wimps suffer from a want of manly spirit altogether. . . .

My father used to tell me when I was growing up, “It is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog” that matters. Many of today’s young men seem to have no fight in them at all. Not for them to rescue damsels in distress from the barbarians. Furthermore, wimps vote. As Aristotle pointed out, to the cowardly, bravery will seem more like rashness and foolhardiness than what it really is. Hence political and social issues that require bravery for their solution elicit only hand-wringing and half-measures from the wimps. Wimps are always looking for the easy way out. . . .

A close look at the culture in which boys are raised reveals not only that they are no longer encouraged to become vigorous and responsible men, but also that practically every factor affecting their development is profoundly hostile to the ideals and practices of traditional manhood and the painstaking steps necessary to attain it. The demanding regime of physical and moral instruction that used to turn boys into men and the larger cultural forces that supported that instruction have been systematically dismantled by a culture that ostensibly enables all individuals but in reality disables men.

But as pervasive as this problem has become in recent decades, it is not new. It is as old as sin itself. Adam’s original sin has impacted the condition of all his descendants—men and women—to such an extent that each one inherently fights against conformity to God’s design for his or her life. And part of that design is to “grow up.”

The Bible does extol certain qualities exhibited by children. In Matthew 18, Jesus held up a child and stated, “Truly I say to you, **unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven**. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3–4). The Apostle Peter also instructed his readers that they were to be **“like newborn babies”** in that they were to **“long for the pure milk of the word”** and thereby **“growin respect to salvation”** (1 Pet 2:1–2).

**The Denunciation of Immaturity**

But while childlike behavior can be helpful for describing the virtues of unconditional trust and an obsessive passion, childlike behavior overall is never the picture of the Christian life. In fact, the Bible is unequivocal in its denunciation of a stagnant, non-maturing spiritual condition. In the same way human beings were never designed to remain infants but to develop into mature adulthood with all its responsibilities, so also Christians were never designed to remain childish or immature in the faith but to undergo constant maturation—from one degree of glory to the next (cf. 2 Cor 3:18).

In the Old Testament, the book that most extensively denounces immaturity is *Proverbs.* In Proverbs, the immature man is the *youth*,the *fool*, the *naïve one*, the *simpleton*, and the *sluggard*. If his condition is not improved, his path will lead inevitably to *strife*, *shame*, *poverty*, *chaos*, and *destruction*. Consequently, Proverbs is addressed directly to the immature one (cf. Prov 1:1–7)—to deliver him out of the snare of his childishness and onto the path of a maturing, wise way of life.

* **Proverbs 1:22a –** “How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?”
* **Proverbs 8:5 –** “O naive ones, understand prudence; and, O fools, understand wisdom.”
* **Proverbs 9:6 –** “Forsake *your*folly and live, and proceed in the way of understanding.”
* See the topics in last year’s study in Men of the Word: “Wisdom: Living Successfully in a Treacherous World.”

But the problem of immaturity is not limited to the Old Testament. It is a danger to the New Testament believer as well. For example, immaturity was an underlying factor in all the problems exhibited by the Corinthian church. The Apostle Paul describes this core problem in **1 Corinthians 3:1–4**,

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, **but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ**. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; **for you were not yet able *to receive it****.* Indeed, even now you are not yet able, **for you are still fleshly**. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, **are you not fleshly**, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ **are you not *mere* men**?”

Certainly, these Corinthian troublemakers were not *unbelievers* like the “natural” (ψυχικός, *psychikos*) man described in 2:14. Instead, they were men who still acted “ fleshly” (σαρκικός, *sarkikos*)—undisciplinedmen who continued to permit the sinful flesh to dominate their behavior. They were not “spiritual” (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) in that they failed to order their lives consistently around the rule of the Holy Spirit. To put it according to the analogy used above, some of the Corinthians were *barbarians*, stupidly forming factions in the church and then thumping their chests that they belonged to the better one (1 Cor 3:1ff), or selfishly consuming all the food and drink at the Lord’s supper before the entire church could arrive (1 Cor 11:17ff). Other Corinthians were *wimps*, childishly running from the fight against sin in the congregation (cf. 1 Cor 5:1ff). All of it was juvenile, and Paul denounced it. Later in the letter he would bring up this same analogy:

* **1 Corinthians 13:11 –** “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; **when I became a man, I did away with childish things**.”
* **1 Corinthians 14:20 –** “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, **but in your thinking be mature**.”

An even more serious denunciation of immaturity can be found in the letter to the Hebrews. Here the problem of immaturity was so bad that the writer questioned the very existence of saving faith:

Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, **since you have become dull of hearing**. For though **by this time you ought to be teachers**, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, **for he is an infant**. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. **(Hebrews 5:11–14)**

The recipients of this letter had heard the truths of the gospel and the supremacy of Jesus’ person and work so many times that they should have already been able to teach it to others. The writer’s indictment of their inability to teach does not mean he was addressing a group of church leaders. Rather, it is a reference to the fact that anyone who has matured in a subject is in a position to impart it to others—including Christians (cf. Col 3:16). These Hebrews clearly had not. They had shown such juvenile inattentiveness (being “dull of hearing”) that they needed they needed to hear yet again “the elementary principles of the oracles of God”—i.e., the ABCs of the gospel. They needed another course of “milk” because their stomachs were unable to accept “solid food.”

In drawing the connection between the immaturity of the Hebrews and our own, John Calvin writes,

This happens partly through our dullness and partly through our sloth; for though we are very dull to understand the truth of God, yet there is to be added to this vice the depravity of our affections, for we apply our minds to vanity rather than to God’s truth. We are also continually impeded either by our perverseness, or by the cares of the world, or by the lusts of our flesh. (*Commentary on Hebrews*)

The problem of remaining immature—of failing to pursue the path of disciplined Christian growth—is an ever-present danger all believers must take seriously. True, we must extend great patience to those who are newly converted. But there should be such a passion for Christ and sense of responsibility that we motivate ourselves and each other *to grow*. As Calvin again states, “We must indeed show some indulgence to those who have not yet known much of Christ, if they are not capable as yet of receiving solid food, but he who has had time to grow, if he till continues a child, is not entitled to any excuse” (*Commentary on Hebrews*).

**How must we respond?**

How can you keep from stalling in a state of immaturity? While always being mindful that “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure,” each believer must take responsibility to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12–13). A key part of the battle against immaturity is the establishment of what can be called a ***rule*** or ***pattern of discipline*** for life. As James E. White writes, “We must lay claim to our life before other things lay claim to it for us. . . . This is the nature of a rule—a set of disciplines, decisions, and impositions we make on our life in order to prevent the tyranny of the urgent from stealing time away” (*A Mind for God*, 82). The following seven principles are crucial in this regard:

1. **Listen.** Immaturity is characterized by a casual, inattentive response to teaching, or by an “itching ear syndrome”—a state in which the hearer only perks up when he hears something that tickles his fancy. To counter this trait, commit yourself to listening more attentively whenever you hear the word of God taught.

* Develop a plan to improve your Lord’s Day sermon intake. Prepare in advance for the hearing of God’s word by getting appropriate rest so as not to be weary and mentally sluggish during worship services.
* Get to worship services early to prepare yourself for listening. Put away distractions, like your cell phone. Follow the preacher or teacher as he reads through and explains the text to be studied. Take notes and actively add your own observations, questions, and applications. (A good resource here is *Expository Listening: A Practical Handbook for Hearing and Doing God’s Word*, by Ken Ramey.)
* Listening also relates to the counsel others give—not just sermons. Be intentional in issuing questions to men of wisdom and then listen carefully to their responses. Be attentive also when you are able to listen in on the dialogue between other mature men. Give attention to their questions and answers.

1. **Read.** Immaturity is characterized by a quest to put the mind at ease, to entertain it rather than to engage it. But *leaders* are *readers.* Commit yourself to give up something unnecessary (a form of entertainment, a useless hobby) in order to implement a plan to read more than you ever have before.

* Most importantly, develop and implement a plan for reading the Bible—one that accounts both for *breadth* (to survey major sections of both Old and New Testaments) and *depth* (to investigate specific passages). Be realistic—start small if you don’t already have a plan and as you gain momentum, slowly expand your goals.
* Establish a reading plan for Christian books that will expand and challenge your understanding. But don’t waste time or money on superficial, unsound books. As Solomon said, “my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body” (Eccl 12:12). Instead, aim for the books that matter. Ask other mature men and pastors for recommendations.
* In your reading alternate between theology, church history/biography, contemporary issues, and personal growth. Keep these books easily accessible (in your car, on the nightstand, on the desk) and in your line of vision to remind you they are waiting.
* Mark up these books—they are not meant to be heirlooms. A well-worn book is a well-studied book.

1. **Learn.** Immaturity is characterized by the illusion of mastery (“I already know that”) and the illusion of irrelevance (“I don’t really need that”). To flee such foolishness, take advantage of the abundant and easily accessible resources that exist for equipping the saints. Two opportunities include:

* On-line instruction: *Institute of Church Leadership* (<https://institute.tms.edu>).
* In-person instruction: *Grace Equip* (www.gracechurch.org/equip).

1. **Integrate.** Immaturity is characterized by the practice of keeping distant, unresponsible, and unaccountable. Immaturity thrives on the periphery. Pursue membership in the church that will provide the best context for life transformation and the best opportunity for you to invest your life in others. Life is too short, the world is too dangerous, and your soul is too valuable to play at church. As Joel Beeke has stated, “Association promotes assimilation. A Christian who lives in isolation from other believers will fail to receive the blessings as well as the maturity resulting from godly interaction” (*Assurance of Faith*, 407-408).
2. **Serve.** Immaturity is characterized by an approach which views oneself as always in need and others as created to serve those needs. Immaturity looks for what others must do “for me.” Instead, see yourself as created for the benefit of others. Your skills and spiritual gifts exist for the good of others and the glory of Christ—not self (1 Pet 4:10–11). As you look to step up your service, consider these principles:

* Don’t wait to be asked to serve. Proactively seek service opportunities; go and ask what can be done.
* Don’t focus only on opportunities that are public and noticeable. Embrace the small and the simple.
* Don’t try to do what everyone else is doing. Aim to do that which is lacking and unpopular.
* Don’t set out to do it your way. Follow instructions and receive correction humbly.
* Don’t be a flash in the pan. Follow through what you promise and finish what you start.
* Don’t do it to be made much of. Do it for the benefit of others and to the glory of God alone.

1. **Strain.** Immaturity is characterized by an aversion to all things difficult. But consider Paul’s practice of pursuing what was difficult (e.g., 1 Cor 9:26–27; 2 Tim 2:1–7). Maturing men are those who strain—who commit themselves to doing increasingly hard things, in their personal lives, in their families, at work, and for the church.
2. **Depend.** Immaturity is characterized by independence and self-sufficiency. Therefore, cultivate a conscious reliance on the Holy Spirit to grow you out of your immaturity. This requires continual prayer for grace and wisdom to steward what God has given you (time, knowledge, experience, opportunities). It also requires continual thanksgiving for the growth and fruitfulness that God provides. Maturing men will grow ever more humble in their recognition that God’s energy that is powerfully at work within (Col 1:29).

**For Further Study**

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 14:20.
2. Write a personal plan that includes practical steps for each of the seven “rules” for pursuing maturity listed above. Be ready to explain your plan and its rationality and invite others to encourage you in its implementation.

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

**Next meeting:**March 2, 7pm, Small Group Fellowship