

EMOTIONAL MATURITY

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, and I reasoned like a child.
When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.*

1 Cor. 13:11 (ESV)

Introduction

I grew up in Brooklyn smart, determined, and capable of accomplishing great things. Yet, when I became a man, I still held on to childish ways - my biggest fault remained a deep emotional immaturity. I had an erratic attitude, flipping between self-doubt/fear on one hand, and conceited arrogance, on the other. Yet, always the actor, I was a relentless self-promoter. But there's a saying in Brooklyn – *"my mouth would write checks my butt (or my character) couldn't cash."* Soon drugs and alcohol covered lingering self-doubts and immature shortcomings. Thus, as a young adult, I made emotional, snap decisions offering short-term rewards, usually resulting in long-term disasters. As Apostle Paul would later complain about the Corinthians -

To be perfectly frank, I'm getting exasperated with your childish thinking. How long before you grow up and use your head—your adult head? It's all right to have a childlike unfamiliarity with evil; a simple no is all that's needed there. But there's far more to saying yes to something. Only mature and well-exercised intelligence can save you from falling into gullibility (inexperienced, unaware, naive, unknowing.).

1 Cor. 14:20-21 (Msg)

The Problem - Immaturity

For most people, particularly recovering substance abusers, most dives into depression, and relapse can be traced directly back to our failure to competently manage emotions. Emotional immaturity has made sobriety, for all its desired benefits, a virtual landmine. Once we recover the ability to "feel" again, we discover an inability to appropriately manage painful feelings from our past buried for decades. Though we've endured and survived, our mechanisms for survival include blocking memories and the feelings/emotions attached. When you block or deny emotions, you fail to process or learn from them, pushing your brain into stasis¹ – a condition of remaining unaware/ignoring the impact of our past on the present. We can appear socially calm while covering painful emotions, leaving them unresolved and unprocessed. By covering unresolved trauma, and maintaining a socially acceptable exterior, we fail to grow emotionally, stuck in a state of awkward dysfunction. We are emotionally immature.

Characteristics of the Emotional Immature:

- We are unteachable. (*I thought knew it all!*)
- We are only happy/content when we get what we want. We can get jealous when others get what we want.
- We unravel quickly when confronted with stress/trials.
- We interpret disagreements as personal offenses. We are easily offended/hurt.
- When we don't get our way, we become sarcastic, complaining, withdrawn, manipulative, and vengeful.
- We endure loss and grief in a self-destructive manner.
- We never look inward at ourselves or our actions and motivations.
- We are inconsistent and indecisive. Denial is indecisive and indecision results in paralysis.

¹ Stasis means a period of inactivity, the stoppage of the normal flow and functions.

When reading the traits above, everyone can recall enduring people like this. Yet, maturity asks the question, "Do I possess some of these traits?"

Confronting our Brokenness²

Einstein once said, *"Every problem has a solution that is simple, logical, straightforward, and wrong!"* In our naivete, motivated by reactive emotions, we gravitate toward what is easiest. We cope with anxiety/stress by covering up, allowing problems to fester, often pulling us towards unhealthy, self-destructive behavior. Every day as a Chaplain, I watch broken people gravitate toward solutions that are "socially appropriate in public" without grappling with or confronting our fundamental brokenness. That is why sincere solutions tragically fail long-term.

Most persons can change, sometimes for tragic reasons, often without truly being healed or positively transformed. Unfortunately, many saints believe they've dealt with their "dark side," their old sinful nature, at salvation. They believe in the fantasy of a sanitized sanctuary, thinking those outside the church remain chronically needy. Yet, we know everybody struggles with feelings, things in our past we prefer to remain secret.

Realize God did not simply save us from our past. He saved us for our future. God wants us to deal with and repent from our past, such that we can enjoy a purposeful, meaningful future. Sooner or later, so-called "good" people will do "bad" things and then, in shame, try to cover it up. The Beautiful Church must be a safe, supportive place we can confront our past trauma. The Beautiful Church seeks to nurture and disciple wise, gracious, loving, forward-looking, and mature Christians.

Shame and the Mean-Spirited Church³

Unfortunately, many Christians have difficulty seeing themselves as combinations of light and dark. We make vitriolic attacks about conditions other people endure while secretly feeling shameful about our infallibilities. This focus on the sins of others can shield us from sober, mature self-evaluation. The Bible discourages rebellion, selfishness, shaming, and legalism. Yet, church members can be rebellious and selfish, shaming others while secretly enduring self-shame and practicing legalism. Outward shame has easy remedies, but inward shame is far more devastating. The more we shame our secret struggles, the more we drive them underground, away from the light of criticism and away from the healing of God. Jeremiah 6:14 (TLB) says, *"You cannot heal a wound by saying it's not there."*

The characteristic we want to change often is a wound from our past. Unless we heal that broken place, we can often switch addictions. Like cancer, if we only treat the symptoms, cancer will tragically re-emerge eventually. For example, I have struggled with replacing my unacceptable addictions with new, more socially acceptable compulsions, such as food, overwork, self-esteem, or even helping others.

The Mature Christian Man

Maturity is a far more common theme in the Biblical narrative than we realize. Mark 5:48 reads, *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* When the Bible speaks of

² Means, Patrick; *Dealing with your Dark Side*; National Association for Christian Recovery, Resource Center on Emotional and Relational Health

³ Scazzero, Peter L.: *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 2003, 2010, Zondervan

perfect, perfection, or “perfecting,” it means we are in a **process** of perfecting. The Greek word “perfect” is better translated as “mature.”⁴ Thus, the command is to be mature or in the process of maturing. Ephesians 4:11-12 says God gave the church Elders/Pastors for “*the perfecting of the saints.*” This process of perfecting and maturing is a very real priority of the church and Jesus.

*The Teleios Man*⁵, a concept of a mature man, was the standard Jesus taught his disciples during the final 18 months of his ministry. Today, in Men’s Ministry, we continue this work. There are too many emotionally mature women looking for mature men, complaining they find none! Why are my buddies and I often sadly labeled emotional infants? Maturity is when we stop making excuses and start making impactful personal changes for the long term. Maturity is not growing older. It’s growing wiser.

Definitions of Maturity:

- Maturity is the process of reaching full emotional and social development. Being complete or moving toward completeness.
- Immaturity, by contrast, means inconsistent, indecisive, insecure, non-committal, non-trustworthy, and unstable. Incomplete.
- Maturity does not come with age. It comes with the acceptance of responsibility and accountability. It emerges from a person’s **character**.
- Character traits are the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual.

Character traits are a particular individual's stable moral qualities, such as courage, honesty, trustworthiness, and loyalty. Character traits are enacted when no one is watching. *Character is made up of principles that do not change*, whether in public or private. Character is long-term investment. It is understanding that investment takes patience, sacrifice, and blood.

Nine Traits of a Mature Person

1. Character-based decisions rather than emotional, feeling-based. Take time to evaluate a situation before acting. What are the values that you live by?
2. Patience. You work hard to get what you want but realize that accomplishment takes time. “Patience is a virtue.”
3. Unafraid of vulnerability. Be honest and transparent with supportive groups and mentors about our feelings and struggles.
4. Visionary. Live for the long-term. Keeps long-term commitments and promises. When frustration, boredom, and distraction occur, we must never stop progress toward a long-term goal. Be willing to delay gratification.
5. Listen more and talk less. Listening is the most important skill and factor in achievement. Listening is the most important factor in communication. Understand active listening and deep listening.
6. Own our mistakes/faults and accept/recognize our needs. Admit we need help.
7. Humility. Mature people are not attention seekers.
8. Mature people are empathetic, open-minded, and not judgmental.
9. Mature people are self-aware and hold themselves accountable. They stop making excuses. They have little need to defend themselves.

⁴ The Biblical Greek words “*katartisis*” or “*teleios*” are translated as *perfect*, meaning something fitting or being in its intended function.

⁵ Titus, Larry; *Teleios Man, Your Ultimate Identity*, published by HigherLife Development Services, Inc. 2010