

BIBLICAL MATURITY: WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?

ABSTRACT: This paper is a study of the terms “maturity” and “mature” as translated in the NIV. The following aspects of what “maturity” entails were extracted from the texts: Note that maturity is a “state of being” not just a “state of producing”

1. Being able to produce fruit by being in good soil
2. Being able to guard against worry, riches, and pleasures choking out maturity
3. Being Christ-like in one’s thinking and not giving in to worldly thought
4. Being united with Christ and each other in faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
5. Being disciplined to press on to the goal God has for us.
6. Being able to let go of the past and grasping on to the future by trusting in God
7. Being able to distinguish good from evil by one’s constant training in the Word of God. It is being able to put into practice in one’s mind and daily life the advanced teachings of Christ.
8. Being able to have joy in the face of trials.
9. Being able to persevere through trials
10. Being able to gain wisdom from God
11. Being able to fight off doubt and embrace faith and trust in God
12. Having a heart to be able to truly love one’s enemies and persecutors like Jesus did
13. Being able to not let wealth get in the way of following Jesus and giving to the poor. Being able to not love wealth. Putting one’s security in God.
14. Giving one’s body as a living sacrifice
15. Having humility to think like God: Allowing one’s mind to be transformed into what God wants
16. Being able to (and actively participating in) seeking, testing, and finding God’s will for one’s life
17. Being able to make sober judgments about one’s spiritual gifts and being able to use those gifts for God
18. Being able to think maturely, seeing the need to speak in understandable words to appropriately instruct people in the ways of God.
19. Being humble and allowing oneself to be admonished and taught with all wisdom as to how to have Christ in you.
20. Understanding the importance of Christ, his tabernacle, and entrance into it.
21. Understanding that God only gives good gifts.
22. Understanding and being able to focus on the perfect (mature, i.e., Christ’s) law.
23. Being able to understand that we are not slaves under the OT law but those who experience freedom under Christ’s law, the law of freedom.
24. Having self-control to practice what you preach.
25. Being able to overcome fear through maturing in love, as perfect love drives out fear. Gaining so much confidence in Christ and the Day of Judgment that one is not controlled by any fear here on earth but by the love of Christ.

THE STUDY PROPER:

I. The terms “mature” and “maturity” in the NIV occur only in the following passages:

1. Luke 8:14. It is imbedded in the parable of the four soils:

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not **mature**”

The Greek term used here is *τελεσφορεω* (*telesphoreo*). It occurs only here in the NT and means, “bear fruit to maturity”¹. The NIV Exhaustive Concordance gives the definition of “to mature (to fruitfulness)”².

This word tends to mean that maturity produces fruit. In this parable the hindrances to that fruitfulness are “worries, riches and pleasures”. So to produce fruit one must be on guard against worry, riches and pleasures. Hence to become mature in this sense it would seem that spiritual self-discipline is necessary as well as knowledge of what those worries, riches, and pleasures are so one can fight against them. In this parable, it is not that the seed does not grow but that it does not mature to the point of producing fruit of some kind (cf. vs. 15 where the good soil produces a “crop”). It is a barren type of life, a choked life, which allows thorns to come rob it of the growth God intended it to have.

2. I Cor. 2:6. The term “mature” *τέλειος* is found in the following passage

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among **the mature**, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”

Here the Greek word is *τέλειος*. It has the meaning of “having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect . . . full-grown, mature adult”³. Here in this I Cor. Passage it is referring to persons who are full-grown or mature in Christ. It highlights a contrast between being worldly and Christ-like. Note verses 3:1-2 :

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Trans. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), 818, here after noted as *BAGD*.

² *Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance* by Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1999), 5399, hereafter known as *Concordance*.

³ *Bagd*, 816-817.

“Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere **infants** in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still **worldly**”

Comparing this with 4:8-10 and 14:20 Paul seems to be speaking in terms of “infants” and “grown-ups” in the spiritual realm. Gordon Fee notes:

. . . the usage is at least partly ironical. Those “in Christ” (1:30) are “the mature” and thus the Corinthians are included. But their behavior indicates that they are very much mere babes. Paul’s concern, as in 14:20 is to persuade them to adopt the thinking that goes along with being “mature” in Christ⁴.

Hence, the concept here of maturity seems to be the maturity in one’s *thinking*. It involves Godly thinking, not worldly thinking. It involves thinking with God’s wisdom, not the world’s wisdom.

3. This same word τέλειος is translated “mature” in the following passages by the NIV:

Eph. 4:11-14

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become **mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Here maturity seems to entail having unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Leaders listed in vs. 12 are to help people be equipped to do works of service so that the body will be built up to the point of (Greek is mechri) unity in faith and knowledge.

Phil. 3:13-15

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. 15 All of us who are **mature** should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you

⁴ *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 103

Here maturity entails discipline to press on to the goal God has for us. It involves mental discipline of forgetting certain things that are behind and focusing on that which lies ahead. It is a letting go and a grasping at the same time all the time trusting that God will make things clear if some “think” differently.

Col. 4:12. This has to do with a person who is working for the maturity of Others. He wrestles in prayer for their maturity.

12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

Heb. 5:11-6:2

11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the **mature**, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to **maturity**, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, {[1] Or from useless rituals} and of faith in God, 2 instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

Here “maturity” involves “constant use” and training in the distinguishing of good from evil. It involves going beyond the elementary teachings of God’s word to the solid food of his word. It involves going beyond the basic concepts of repentance from acts, faith in God, baptism, laying on of hands, the knowledge of the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. It seems to be saying, that it is a “training”, a coming to be able to discern or distinguish good from evil. It is putting into practice in one’s mind and daily life the advanced teachings of Christ.

The second maturity term in this passage (i.e. in 6:1) in the Greek is slightly different from τέλειος. It is τελειότης (teleiotes) and occurs only here and in Col. 3:14. It means “perfection, completeness . . . of maturity in contrast to the stage of elementary knowledge Hb. 6:1”.⁵

James 1:4. This passage states

⁵ BAGD, 817

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be **mature** and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. 6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

This maturity involves joy in the face of trials, perseverance, gaining wisdom, belief, and lack of doubt. Hence it seems to be saying that maturity involves not only the mind but the whole being being godly.

II. Other occurrences of τέλειος are found in Mt. 5:48 (2x); 19:21; Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 13:10; 14:20; Col 1:28; Heb. 9:11; James 1:17, 25; 3:2; I Joh. 4:18. We would do well to study them also with respect to maturity.

1. Mt. 5:48. Here the word occurs twice

“Be perfect (τέλειος), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (τέλειος)”

The context here is speaking of mature love, a love for everyone, even your enemies and persecutors. Hence a sign of maturity is when one can love even his enemies.

2. Mt. 19:21-22. It states:

21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect (τέλειος), go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

The context here is of the rich young ruler who had great wealth. His *love* for great wealth kept him from being mature. He supposedly kept all the commandments, but it got in the way of following Jesus.

3. Rom. 12:1-6. It states:

2:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual {[1] Or reasonable}act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect (τέλειος) will. 3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance

with the measure of faith God has given you . 4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us

The context here speaks of God's perfect or mature will for each individual Christian. Thus involves giving one's body as a living sacrifice, allowing one's mind to be transformed, testing and approving that will of God, making sober judgments about one's gifts or talents, and using those gifts for God (cf. vss 6ff).. Hence the maturity spoken of here is the ability to "approve" what God's mature will is. That means one will be able to test, seek, and find that mature will of God. Douglas Moo states,

"'Approving' the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view to putting it into practice. That Paul means her by 'the will of Go' his moral direction is clear from the way Paul describes it: this will is that which is 'good,' 'acceptable (to God),' and 'perfect'"⁶

An aspect of maturity specifically in the greater context of this passage involves discerning what God's will is for each individual with respect to their giving of themselves as living sacrifices in the use of their spiritual gifts or talents in answer to the heart question of "What can I do for you, God?"

4. I Cor. 13:9-10. It states:

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection (τέλειος) comes, the imperfect disappears.

Although this "perfect" has been argued to be the perfect (or complete) word of God, the context is about love. Perhaps it can extend to the perfection of the Word of God but since the context seems to be some aspect of love, I would like to suggest that this is talking about perfect or mature love. Where there is perfect love (as defined by Jesus and his word) there is no need for the special "sign gifts" such as prophesy and speaking in tongues.⁷

5. I Cor. 14:18-20. It states:

18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you . 19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. 20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults (τέλειος).

⁶ *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 757.

⁷ Please note: The meaning of this verse is very hotly debated, so please take what I have written here as my opinion and thoughts at this point.

Becoming mature (i.e. adults) involves maturity in thinking. Here the maturity seems to have to do with speaking intelligible words for people to be appropriately instructed in the ways of God.

6. Col. 1:28: It states:

27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect (τέλειος) in Christ. 29 To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me

Here the passage speaks of maturity as being perfect or mature in Christ. It involves allowing oneself to be admonished and taught with all wisdom as to how to have Christ in you.

7. Heb. 9:11. This verse states:

8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. 10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings--external regulations applying until the time of the new order. 11 When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, {[11] Some early manuscripts are to come} he went through the greater and more perfect (τέλειος) tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation

This verse contextually is speaking of the perfect (or perhaps mature tabernacle that was to come, cf vs. 10b) tabernacle, the fullness of what the old tabernacle pointed toward. Here maturity has to do with God fulfilling what the OT tabernacle pointed toward. This perfect or mature tabernacle is the one we enter now as Christians, not the old physical man-made tabernacle. We enter through the blood of Christ.

8. James 1:17, 25

17 Every good and perfect (τέλειος) gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect (τέλειος) law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.

These two verses speak of God giving only perfect (mature?) gifts and the perfect (mature?) law. Our minds and sight need to be focused on that

perfect mature law. The OT law was only a pointer and preparer to bring us to the law that gives freedom. Part of maturity would then seem to be understanding that we are not slaves under the OT law but those who experience freedom under the perfect law as explained by Christ.

9. James 3:1-2

3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.
2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect (τέλειος) man, able to keep his whole body in check

Here, self-control, living what you teach (practicing what you preach) is part of the mature man.

10. I Joh. 4:16-18

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect (τέλειος) in love.

Here the Scripture is speaking about mature (perfect) love. It is a love that drives out fear. A mature man or woman is one who is able to drive out fear (by having confidence in Christ with respect to the day of judgment) and not allow oneself to be controlled by it. Only in this way can love become mature and perfect.

III. Summary

In summary, Biblical maturity involves the following⁸:

1. Being able to produce fruit by being in good soil
2. Being able to guard against worry, riches, and pleasures choking out its maturity
3. Being Christ-like in one's thinking and not giving in to worldly thought
4. Being united with Christ and each other in faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
5. Being disciplined to press on to the goal God has for us.
6. Being able to let go of the past and grasping on to the future by trusting in God
7. Being able to distinguish good from evil by one's constant training in the Word of God. It is being able to put into practice in one's mind and daily life the advanced teachings of Christ.
8. Being able to have joy in the face of trials.
9. Being able to persevere through trials
10. Being able to gain wisdom from God

⁸ This is not an exhaustive list but only a list gained from the Greek words translated "mature" or "maturity" in the NIV. .

11. Being able to fight off doubt and embrace faith and trust in God
12. Having a heart to be able to truly love one's enemies and persecutors like Jesus did
13. Being able to not let wealth get in the way of following Jesus and giving to the poor. Being able to not love wealth. Putting one's security in God.
14. Giving one's body as a living sacrifice
15. Having humility to think like God: Allowing one's mind to be transformed into what God wants
16. Being able to (and actively participating in) seeking, testing, and finding God's will for one's life
17. Being able to make sober judgments about one's spiritual gifts and and being able to use those gifts for God
18. Being able to think maturely, seeing the need to speak in understandable words to appropriately instruct people in the ways of God.
19. Being humble and allowing oneself to be admonished and taught with all wisdom as to how to have Christ in you.
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24. Having self-control to practice what you preach.
25. Being able to overcome fear through maturing in love, as perfect love drives out fear. Gaining so much confidence in Christ and the Day of Judgment that one is not controlled by any fear here on earth but by the love of Christ.

LET US PRESS ON TO ATTAIN MATURITY THROUGH CHRIST