

Spiritual Tip

Real Spiritual Maturity Is Gradual

By Rick Warren

"We shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature." (Ephesians 4:13b TEV)

Discipleship is the process of conforming to Christ; your journey will last a lifetime. Every day God wants you to become a little more like him: "You have begun to live the new life, in which you are being made new and are becoming like the One who made you" (Colossians 3:10a NCV).

Today we're obsessed with speed, but God is more interested in strength and stability than swiftness. We want the quick fix, the shortcut, the on-the-spot solution. We want a sermon, a seminar, or an experience that will instantly resolve all problems, remove all temptation, and release us from all growing pains.

But real maturity is never the result of a single experience, no matter how powerful or moving. Growth is gradual. The Bible says, "Our lives gradually [become] brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him" (2 Corinthians 3:18b MSG).

People often build their identity around their defects. We say, "It's just like me to be ..." and "It's just the way I am." The unconscious worry is that if I let go of my habit, my hurt, or my hang-up, who will I be? This fear can definitely slow down your growth.

Habits take time to develop. Remember that your character is the sum total of your habits. You can't claim to be kind unless you are habitually kind — meaning you show kindness without even thinking about it. You can't claim to have integrity unless it is your habit to always be honest. A husband who is faithful to his wife most of the time is not faithful at all! Your habits define your character.

There is only one way to develop the habits of Christ-like character: You must practice them — and that takes time! There are no instant habits. Paul urged Timothy, "Practice these things. Devote your life to them so that everyone can see your progress" (1 Timothy 4:15 GW).

Talk It Over

- What are you doing to gradually but consistently grow as a disciple of Christ?
- Who in your life can help and encourage you as you work to develop a habit of Christ-like character?
- What are the character traits that you want to be known for? How can you develop those traits in your life?

Parenting Tip

5 Ways Babies Improve Your Marriage

By Sasha Brown-Worsham

It seems counter-intuitive that a screaming, drooling, all-consuming little being that destroys your genitals for a few months, steals all of your sleep, and demands all of your attention might actually improve your relationship with your spouse.

But oddly, they can.

The essay, *Having Children Made Me Love My Husband More on YourTango.Com* goes on to say just how. "15 years into parenting, I love my husband Marc more than ever," says writer Diana Landen.

I am with her. And the studies that suggest otherwise might be misleading, says Landen. Though studies have suggested that 38 percent of couples show a moderate decline in marital satisfaction during the first year and a half of parenthood, 30 percent of couples show no change, and 19 percent improve.

Additionally, the study is only looking at that first year, during the most intense "feet to the fire" part of parenthood.

What about the following 17+ years?

My husband and I were among the lucky ones who saw an instant improvement in our connection. The pregnancy with all its classes and prep work helped us bond over a shared project while the labor made me trust my husband in ways I never had trusted another human before. And then raising our child together just cemented it all.

For us, having children was an amazing boon to our marriage.

Here are Five Ways Babies Actually Improve Marriages:

- 1. A shared project:** I had been married almost four years when my first baby came along. My husband and I had traveled the world together many times, but he is a scientist and I am a writer, so our paths rarely crossed professionally. The baby gave us a shared purpose, something we were raising together (besides our relationship).
- 2. Seeing your partner as a parent:** Watching my husband carry our babies or rock them to sleep or read to them are some of the better moments in my life. It's truly powerful and shows you a whole other side of the partner and spouse you've only known in one way.
- 3. Gratitude for the help:** "I think it's just a matter of being in the trenches together," said Julia, a mom of two in Medford, Massachusetts. "Things get relentlessly challenging, so you have to work together to simply survive." True dat.
- 4. Less focus on little things/drama:** I'm a bit of a stress junkie, so I had been really good at creating that in our pre-kid lives. After the babies came, they brought enough drama and chaos to last a lifetime. There was no time for man-made versions of it.
- 5. A sense of "family":** Families come in all shapes and sizes. That said, the first time I held our baby between us, I had the strongest sense of "family" I'd ever had. It was what I (and then we) had always wanted and it was spectacular.

Marriage Tip

Why Men Don't Share Feelings

By David Murrow

In my previous post, I explained the many ways society forces men to remain silent about their true feelings. But here's the shocking truth: wives silence their husbands as well.

Most men do not tell their wives what they really feel because if they did, their wives would punish them for it. When men tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, their wives often become upset. Very upset.

I've spoken to lots of men who decided early in their marriages to open up and speak the absolute truth. And their wives freaked out, withdrew, cried, threw tantrums and plugged their ears. These men learned very quickly that their wives didn't want to hear the truth - and that the key to marital bliss was to carefully manage what they did and didn't tell their beloveds.

Men, imagine what might happen if you told your wife one of the following:

- I disapprove of one of your friends
- I'm thinking of quitting my steady job to open a restaurant
- I'm unhappy in our church
- I think you should dress differently
- I want to be faithful, but I'm being tempted by another woman
- I feel unsupported by you

- I think you're wearing too much makeup
- I'm feeling a little bored by our sex life and I'd like to try some new things
- There won't be enough money for the vacation you've been planning
- I want to buy a boat
- I wish you'd lose weight
- I feel you're spending too much money
- I'm struggling with pornography and I need your help and prayers

Honestly, what would happen if you said these kinds of things to your wife? Would she remain calm? (maybe) Would she smile at you and thank you for being honest? (not likely) Would she haul you into the bedroom and make love to you? (not for at least a week)

Most wives would descend into a funk upon hearing these kinds of things. Many would blame themselves - "I've failed him again." Some would cover their ears and go running from the room. Some would curse or even assault their husbands (it's more common than you think).

So what's a man thinking after his wife reacts this way to his truth-telling? "I've made a colossal mistake. I told her how I really feel and she's angry. So I'm never going to do that again. Instead I'm going to carefully manage what I say and what I don't say. And I'm going to keep the deeply personal stuff locked inside."

Congratulations, women. You've just trained your husbands to keep secrets from you.

Imagine you're housebreaking a puppy. Every time he soils the rug he gets a swat. But if he does his business outside you lavish rewards on him. Eventually the puppy does what he's trained to do -- not because he wants to, but because it's the only way to avoid punishment.

Now, imagine you're training a husband. Every time he tells you the absolute truth he gets a swat. But when he conceals his true feelings, you lavish rewards on him. Eventually he begins carefully managing what he tells you -- not because he wants to, but because it's the only way to avoid punishment.

If you penalize your man each time he reveals his true feelings, here's the message you are sending: "If you want your life to be hell, tell me the truth. But if you want things to go smoothly, lie to me. Tell me only those things that won't upset me."

Don't misunderstand: I am not blaming women for every communication glitch in marriage. Husbands do the same things to wives. I know women who can't tell their husbands the truth because they're afraid their men will explode. Women suffer too. I get it.

I'm simply asking women to open their eyes to the possibility that they are contributing to their husbands' silence. And I'm asking men to be more courageous in telling their wives the truth - no matter the cost.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

A few years ago my wife and I entered an intense period of counseling to deal with this issue. I was deeply frustrated because she would not hear my true feelings on a number of issues. Whenever I brought them up, she instantly shut me down. Wouldn't listen. Accused me of being controlling, suspicious or ungodly for even thinking such things.

But now she's learned to listen to what I have to say -- no matter what it is. No topic is off limits. Instead of carefully managing what we say to one another, we simply speak it out. Our marriage has never been stronger. The truth has made us free.

David Murrow is the director of Church for Men, an organization that helps congregations reach more men and boys. In his day job, David works as a television producer and writer. He's the author of three books, including **Why Men Hate Going To Church** and **What Your Husband Isn't Telling You**.

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