

Christian Maturity (1957)

Foreword by Stephen Harper

We have difficulty remembering long lists, but we can remember one or two things. Perhaps that's why the lawyer asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36.). There were likely 613 "commandment" options in Jesus' day, far too many to remember, so much so that the lawyer knew the most important one could get lost in the pile.

Jesus' response to the lawyer was even more interesting than his question. He did not say, "Oh, my! There's no way to pick one. They are all important." That answer would have been no answer. It would have perpetuated the lawyer's confusion—confusion which gave rise to his question in the first place. He would have been no better off if Jesus had answered in that way. The lawyer needed guidance. Jesus saw that and gave it to him.

Jesus did so in an amazing way—in a way the lawyer almost certainly didn't expect. Jesus said that all 613 commandments hung on two pegs: love of God and love of neighbor. All of them, every single one, is meant to teach us how to love. Love is the source and aim of every law, Jesus said. He was not inventing something new, but rather recovering something more than a thousand years old in the Hebrew scriptures: the singular command to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4) and to love others (Leviticus 19:8). Every other word the lawyer could think of in the Scriptures (e.g. life, redemption, covenant, exile/return, etc.) turned on the pivot of love. Become a lover of God and other people, Jesus said, and we will have incarnated the intent of every one of God's commands (Matthew 22:37-40). It is in this sense that Jesus earlier said that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it; that is, to "fill it full" with what legalism, judgmentalism, and retributive justice had drained from it—love (Matthew 5:17).

Similarly, E. Stanley Jones came to the same conclusion—the conviction that what is missing most from religion in general and Christianity in particular is love. Like

Jesus, Jones was responding to a question, “What is maturity?” And like Jesus, he realized there were many ways to respond to the question; perhaps 613! But to do that would be to leave people confused and unhelped—adrift with no central meaning for the concept of maturity. The list of definitions would be too long to remember, much less put into practice. E. Stanley Jones realized that to answer that way would be to answer not at all. Instead he wrote, “There are many suggested standards [of maturity] and they differ and differ vitally. And it matters which one you take, for the results register in you—in your very makeup. You become like that at which you habitually gaze and to which you aspire” (p. ??). Anne to find

Jones noted there are psychological and sociological definitions for maturity—maturity for the individual and maturity for the group. And he took note of some of them in his book. But Jones wanted to point beyond them to what he considered to be the ultimate definition—the definition given to us in Christ and through the Gospel. Like everything else, the incarnation made the Word flesh, giving us the picture we need to enact the principle. Jesus put a face on God and bore living witness to maturity. And after Jesus, the early Church lived in ways which continued to manifest the definition of maturity as love—love as Jesus spoke of it by highlighting the two commandments.

The power of this book is precisely in the fact that it taps into the deepest longing of our heart—to be loved and to love. It connects with the popular instinct that “all you need is love,” and our abiding sense that if we get love right, everything else will be and go as it should. One of E. Stanley Jones’ gifts as a servant of Jesus was to reveal our hunger for something more, and then to say, “You can satisfy that hunger in Christ.”

Jones knew that we are spiritually fed in much the same way as we are physically nourished—one meal at a time. So, he wrote many of his books to be read one page per day over the course of a year. He wrote *Christian Maturity* this way. You need not rush through it. Read it slowly, little-by-little, savoring the message, and taking the time to ponder the ideas which are most meaningful for you. Linger over each page like you do a good meal. You will be deeply satisfied.

The basis for this book is the Bible, specifically the First Letter of John. Brother Stanley chose it because he believed that it is “the capstone of the Christian revelation...the cream of the Christian revelation rising to the surface” (p. ??). He found. More particularly, the letter is a revelation of the essence of the Gospel—love, but not love merely as a concept, but love “worked out through life” (p. ??). Stanley Jones summed up maturity in these words: “you become mature to the degree that you devote yourself to God, respond to his grace, and work it out in life” (p. ??).

That’s not too much to remember, not too much to apply to your everyday living. To summarize the Christian life as the way of love does not reduce it, it releases it, so that it may not be lost under a pile of un-lived maxims. The way of love is the life of maturity because it is by love that the Word continues to be made flesh. Stanley Jones lived and wrote with this as his magnificent vision (incarnate in Christ) and highest hope (enfleshed in us), and in the pages which follow, we have the opportunity to make love real in our lives.

Reading this book is a double blessing—like hanging out with two saints: John and Stanley. I wish I could be there with you to see how your reading of this book affects your life. Reading it has surely influenced mine!

Christian Maturity (1957) **Afterward F. Douglas Powe, Jr.**

E. Stanley Jones offers us a path to become the mature Christians for which we were intended. He does so by focusing on one word, maturity. I imagine before reading this book most of us equated maturity with coming of age for adolescents. We live in a culture where discussions about maturity typically are connected to our children becoming responsible citizens. Jones helps us to return our gaze back to the ideal of growing into the likeness of Christ or maturity.

Jones has brilliantly led us day by day to engage Scripture and unpack the meaning of maturity. I hope having finished this devotional that you continue to be shaped by the two core Scriptures he names in the introduction, Hebrews 2:8-9 and Colossians 2:10. These texts should frame the way you intentionally go about seeking to grow into the likeness of Christ. Let me share three insights of how these texts continue to shape me after engaging Jones.

First, maturity is not something that happens by happenstance, but requires us to be intentional about our growth. This first point probably seems obvious, but it bears stating. What Jones has done in this book is to create a concrete means for us to be intentional about our growth. As you read daily about maturity a transformation will take place and you will start to live it out. The key is not to stop this transformation now that you have finished, but to continue in your growth. Everyday remembering the Hebrews and Colossians text can help you to continue the work God is doing in you.

Second, maturity is not about us, but about Jesus. This comes across in many of the devotions. For example, week 12 (Romans 6:22-23, Wednesday). Jones points out the emphasis is not about one's personal perfection, but it is about pointing to Christ's perfection. It is easy to get caught up in look at me and what I am doing. This is true even for Christians, bragging about our piety. If we are to become more like Christ, then it is not about us. We must be the conduits pointing others to Christ. You cannot read these devotions daily and not have this etched in your mind.

Finally, the key to maturity is love. Certainly, this is embedded in my two previous points, but it is important to highlight the importance of love for a mature Christian. We live in a world where love may be one of the most misused terms and this includes Christians. Jones throughout the book helps us to understand agape love. When we become mature Christians, it is exemplified in the way we love. It is not possible to become more like Christ and not to grow in love. The hymn stating, "They will know we are Christians by our love!" It is true as we mature it is evident in the way we love.

It is my prayer that you have benefited as much as I did in reading this devotion. It is my hope that you will not think about maturity the same. Maturity is about growing up, but it is about the way in which we grow up in Christ.