

8

Steps To

SPIRITUAL MATURITY

2 Peter 1:5-7

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All words spoken by Jesus Christ are in **red text**.

Introduction

This lesson is intended for those who:

- Would like to learn more about Jesus Christ.
- Are born again.
- Desire spiritual growth in Christ.
- Seek a greater understanding of themselves.

Jesus declared, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”**
Matthew 5:6

Those who are born again (and willingly yield to the guidance of the Holy Spirit) will experience a day-by-day step-by-step process of becoming spiritually mature (sanctification). The greatest prize (while we’re still in our physical bodies) is to become an unrestrictive vessel through which God may express His agape love in what we say and do.

2 Peter 1:5-7 provides us with an insightful list of 8 steps to spiritual maturity.

“Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.”

It is important to note the scripture begins with the words “giving all diligence.” Diligence is defined as a careful, earnest, dedicated, committed, and persistent effort. Diligence conveys more than a once-a-week church experience. Simply stated, for each of us, growing into Christian maturity is a daily, and sometimes moment-by-moment exercise of diligence; as He lovingly prepares our hearts and souls for eternity.



As you read 2 Peter 1:5-7 again, follow the steps in the graphic to the left (starting at the bottom with faith).

“Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance Godliness, to Godliness brotherly kindness, to brotherly kindness love.”

Note how each step builds upon one another, and each step supports the steps above. For example, consider the 4th step: self-control. It is very difficult for someone to persevere (5th step) in situations when they do not have self-control—especially when the flesh (our sinful nature) is screaming for some type of fulfillment (retribution, fulfillment of an addiction, and so forth).

Similar to a ladder, each step provides a means to spiritually elevate to the next step. Meanwhile, as we progress upward, we witness a radical transformation of our thoughts, our emotions, our desires, and our behavior—including how we look at ourselves, and how we view the world around us. What’s more, each step brings us into a closer relationship with our Lord as we become more like Him and less like ourselves.

Progression is facilitated by the Holy Spirit as we:

1. Make free will decisions to obey His guidance.
2. Internalize scripture.
3. Pray.
4. Interact with like-minded Christians.

But most important, those who spiritually grow do so because it is the desire of their heart.

There are additional aspects to the 8 Steps to Spiritual Maturity. For example, the 8 steps correlate to increasing degrees of maturity: from infancy to adulthood. A newly born Christian (an “infant” in Christ) will often lack the behavioral attributes of each progressive step. Whereas, a mature Christian (an “adult” in Christ) will exemplify the transforming power of God’s grace.

The steps also provide a means to evaluate our level of maturity. As the spiritual attributes of each step is explained, it will likely cause:

1. Remembrance of inappropriate thoughts and behavior.
2. Identification of areas for improvement.
3. Listing of transformational changes.
4. Determination of which step we are in our growth.



When we stand back and look at our lives from a distance (looking back over time), many of us will realize we have moved up and down the steps during various times in our lives as we responded to trials and tribulations. However, over the long term, many of us will also see how we have progressed into higher levels of maturity: evidenced by the fruit of the Holy Spirit emanating in our thoughts, desires, and actions.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Galatians 5:22-24

I’d like to add the steps should not be viewed as negative motivational tool, or a listing of thou shall and thou shall nots. These steps are not intended to point out our failures or weaknesses. Remember, we are all imperfect, and we are all forgiven because we have decided to believe and trust in God’s unmerited grace in Jesus Christ. Also remember...God is more interested in the desires and attitude of our heart.

Besides, consider our sinful nature and how we respond when someone attempts to “push” us up the ladder. We do not like being pushed. We may grudgingly comply, but our heart will increasingly struggle against whomever is doing the pushing.

But rather, it is His grace and His love that changes the desires of our heart as He compels us to move upward and towards Him. Each step is a free-will choice that results in transformational changes in our heart, soul, and spirit.

So, let start with the first step of faith: which may be simply defined as a belief in something without proof or evidence. Which gives rise to a quandary, in that our flesh relies upon the physical realm to verify the existence of something, usually by one of our five senses. For example, all of us can relate to the following: If I cannot see, hear, touch, smell, or taste it...how do I know it exists? Plus, I'll believe it when I see it!

However, faith, the type of faith described here, exists in the spiritual realm. Think about the following... God is asking us to believe in His son, Jesus Christ (who lived 2,000 years ago) gave His life and His blood as a sacrifice for our sins so that we may be forgiven. To some this may be incomprehensible, let alone impossible to validate with our physical senses.

“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” Hebrews 11:6

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

Believing in God, believing in His word, and believing in what He has done for us in His Son, Jesus Christ is the key that unlocks the door into the heavenly realms and everlasting life. For example, those who have placed their faith in Jesus will discover new spiritual senses: including what is seen, what is heard, and what is experienced. But what's more, they will also witness a radical transformation of who they are...for all things are possible for those who believe.

Jesus said, **“All things are possible to him who believes.” Mark 9:23**

Jesus spoke words that align with our earthly minds to reveal spiritual realities and truths. For example, Jesus said, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3**

First, with regards to being born again, He was not referring to a physical birth, but a spiritual birth. Second, Jesus said those who are not born again cannot see the kingdom of God. Conversely, those who are born again can see the kingdom of God. However, it is impossible to see the kingdom of God with our physical eyes because the kingdom of God is in the spiritual realm. The ability to spiritually see the kingdom of God requires Holy Spirit revelation while we are living on earth (including momentary and partial views of His glory). But what's even more important is from an eternal perspective: His words are a promise to the born again as to what we will see after we die.

Jesus also said:

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” John 4:23-24

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” John 6:63

Jesus correlated physical hunger and thirst with unfulfilled cravings and spiritual voids within our heart and soul. Jesus proclaimed:

“I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” John 6:35

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” John 7:37-38

Seeing the kingdom of God, fulfillment of hunger and thirst, and living water flowing from our heart are spiritual indicators of the transformational change that occurs as a result of believing in Him.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus declared and promised, **“I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”**

Each time He knocks on the door, and each time He speaks to us...it is not heard with our physical ears. But rather, it is heard by our heart, and our soul, and our spirit. Also note He knocks (and will never force His way into our lives). This is because he desires a relationship based upon a willing heart. So, He lovingly stands outside, patiently knocks on the door, and speaks illuminating truth that reaches into the depths of our heart and soul.

Meanwhile, as He knocks, those things that seem important, and those things that have a control over our flesh are illuminated from darkness by the light of Jesus Christ—thereby enabling us to spiritually see those things that are detrimental, destructive, and damaging to our physical lives and spiritual well-being.

Many of us can remember what we experienced when Jesus knocked on our door: the turmoil; the raging internal battle as Satan fought to keep us under his control; and the inexplicable joy and emotions we experienced—and tears shed—when we opened the door and let Him in, and as our Savior embraced us with His grace and love. When you transition from darkness to light, when you open the door to let Him in, and as you relinquish control...those who are born again will experience indescribable peace, joy, and fulfillment...because what occurs is spiritual.

Here is an interesting question: Did you choose Jesus, or did He choose you? Did you apprehend, or were you apprehended?

Think about what was going on in your life before you encountered Jesus. If you were like most Christians you were in sin, unable to see, walking around in darkness, trying everything possible to find fulfillment, and was absolutely lost. When you reflectively consider where you were and where you are now, it's easy to conclude we were not enlightened by our own efforts.

But praise God in that there was something...a redeeming quality deep within our heart and soul...that only He can see.

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.” John 15:16

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” 1 Peter 2:9

Exercising our faith in believing what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, and experiencing the transformational change of being reborn by the Spirit is the foundational step that supports all others. Once we have stepped upon faith, the next step is virtue.

Virtue

Internal Transformation: Integrity, Honesty, Morality

Once a person is reborn, they will see changes occur within their heart and soul. They will also begin to view and experience life from a different perspective—as the Holy Spirit continues the transformation process—for He was actively at work before the rebirth occurred.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17

“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” Ezekiel 36:26-27

This is when our hardened heart begins the healing and softening process, and our seared conscience begins to recover its influence—as we become more sensitive to the spirit as to what is right and what is wrong—and as we begin to make decisions based upon integrity, honesty, and moral virtues. This is also when we begin to learn how to trust, let go, and let Jesus Christ be Lord of our life—as we increasingly yield to the Holy Spirit. We also learn that it feels very good on the inside when we obey, and devastating when we disobey.

Knowledge

Internal Transformation: Understanding, Wisdom

The next step is growing in knowledge and understanding as the Holy Spirit unveils the magnitude and power of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

God’s gift of grace (our forgiveness of sin—past, present, and future) is offered to us because of our faith in what Jesus Christ did for us. This simple truth (which confounds the world) comprises the foundational hidden treasures of unfathomable knowledge and wisdom. It is a gift that can only be received and cannot be earned. Our salvation was bought and paid for by the blood Jesus as He died on the cross as the perfect sacrificial lamb.

To the world the concept of God’s love, forgiveness, and grace in Jesus Christ is a mystery. Their eyes are blinded by Satan, and their hearts are hardened due to a preference for sin.

“But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.” 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” John 3:19-20

Paul wrote:

“The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Colossians 1:25-27

“That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Colossians 2:1-3

What’s more, as a Christian grows in full awareness of the depth and breadth of God’s grace in Jesus Christ...a transformational revelation and realization occurs...in that all human-inspired delusional intellect, all worldly knowledge, and all earthly treasures are absolutely useless and vain.

For the remainder of our years on this earth the Holy Spirit will continue to glorify Jesus Christ, confirm we are God’s chosen children, forgiven by grace, called out of darkness, appointed as ambassadors of Christ, and heirs to the Kingdom.

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.” Romans 8

Self-Control

Internal Transformation: Discipline, Restraint, Will

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” 1 John 1:8

Although spiritually reborn, every Christian still lives inside their body, and still has a soul filled with impurities. As such, we must willingly confront, learn how to control, and actively deny the demands of their flesh. This is where the rubber meets the road; this is why we experience trials and tribulations; and this is when we learn to make free will decisions to seek and obey the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the process of cleansing can be overwhelming...but God promised we would not be tempted beyond what we are able to handle.

“God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.” 1 Corinthians 10:13

If we fail, it is because of our free will choice. However, if we continue to walk in the Spirit, He will provide us with the resolve and spiritual strength to overcome whatever is before us.

To become more like Him (and less like ourselves) we need to crucify our flesh. This will often require resolute heart-driven free will decisions to avoid those things in our lives that generate fleshly desires and destructive behavior. This also requires discipline, prayer, reading God's word, attending church, and sometimes seeking the assistance of a trusted like-minded Christian as an accountability partner.

One more thing...never forget the pain, the shame, and the dreadful feeling of being disconnected from God—including the consequential impact it had upon others. These memories will assist in overcoming the flesh and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

["I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Galatians 5:16](#)

As we learn to walk with and yield to the Spirit, He will strengthen our heart with the resolve and spiritual strength to overcome our flesh (body and soul). Simply stated, to become more like Him (and less like ourselves) we need to wash the impurities from our flesh. The spirit and life in God's living word is the water that cleanses each of us (and the church) of impurities.

["Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish." Ephesians 5:25-27](#)

["If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." Luke 9:23](#)

Perseverance

Internal Transformation: Steadfastness, Character

The next step is perseverance—which is bolstered by life's challenges and tribulations. Difficulties in life serve as a means to strengthen our faith. When we are in the midst of anxiety and unable to figure out what to do...is when we realize there is nothing we can do other than place our hope and faith in God. It is when the "dust settles" and we are able to reflect upon what occurred is when we realize He was in control the whole time. Meanwhile, our ability to steadfastly weather another "storm" and our character has been changed to be more Christ-like.

["But we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope." Romans 5:4](#)

Godliness

Internal Transformation: Righteousness, Goodness

Here is a question to ponder...What does godliness mean to you? Some may answer by describing one who is religious. Some may refer to persons who live in secluded places high in the mountains. Others may define persons who wear religious garments and follow prescribed rituals of worship. And some may describe one who is somewhat disconnected and separated from the "common people" as they perform their "holy" duties.

However, when we understand the nature of God...our definition of Godliness radically changes.

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory.”
1 Timothy 3:16

If you want to know what godliness looks like...look at Jesus...in whom God manifested Himself. To know and understand the nature of God (and godliness) look at the life and words of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I and My Father are one.” John 10:30

Attributes of Christ	Supporting Scripture
Servant	“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45
Compassionate	“But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” Matthew 9:36
Humble	“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” Philippians 2:5-8
Understanding	“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Hebrews 4:15
Obedient	“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” John 6:38
Forgiving	“And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’” Luke 23:33-34

The attributes of Christ (His godliness) exemplifies an intimate relationship with the Father, and reveals a desire to have a loving (agape) relationship with man.

Here is another truth about our sinful nature and spiritual transformation: we have a propensity to pridefully take the glory for the work He is doing in us. If at any time you perceive you’ve arrived; you’re at the “pinnacle” of your Christian walk; and “I’ve got this.” ...your perception is tainted by pride—the same delusional pride that resulted in Satan’s demise. But rather, humbly realize it is only by God’s grace you were saved and are being continually transformed into His likeness—which will continue until your physical body no longer functions. Meanwhile, realize everything you are in Christ is because of Him, and humble yourself before the One who saved you—for He alone is worthy of praise.

Kindness

Internal Transformation: Benevolence

Expressing kindness towards others; being friendly; doing or giving things to others (without expectation for reciprocity)—exemplifies Christian benevolence. This is when spiritual growth has reached a point where the Christian understands...It's not about me.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

As we are molded and shaped by the Holy Spirit, we will experience a deep and indescribable appreciation for our brothers and sisters in Christ...for they are also walking the same path to glory. This is when our spiritual cleansing enables us to look beyond each person's imperfections...because our soul is also tainted by impurities. This is when we strive to maintain harmony. This is also when we desire to help, fulfill needs, and become increasingly charitable...for we realize only those things done for His glory will last for eternity.

Love

Internal Transformation: Agape Sacrifice

The highest level of spiritual maturity is agape love—in that it is a reflection of the love God has towards us—and is expressed by what it does. In addition, agape love is not based on a feeling. It is a determined act of the will and a joyful resolve to put the welfare of others above our own.

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” 1 John 3:16

However, agape does not come naturally to us. Because of our fallen nature, we are incapable of producing such a love. If we are to love as God loves—*agape*—it can only come from its Source.

Pure agape love is exemplified in the words of Jesus Christ—as He hung on the cross—when He prayed for His executioners, **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34**

The foundational essence of agape love is sacrificial forgiveness, which flows from the Father through us when we reflect His unmerited grace and love He has given us through His son, Jesus Christ. This is where we will find the resolve to unconditionally love—because we are unconditionally loved by God.

And yes, because of our flesh it can be a challenge at times to express God's forgiveness and love towards someone—especially if they have done us wrong. As such, here are some reflective and heart-revealing questions to ask yourself when anger, pride, or other vain reasons get in the way. Look at yourself from a “distance” (i.e. think outside of the situation and finite awareness) by looking at the big picture from an eternal perspective. Then ask yourself the following questions:

- Was I lost in darkness?
- Did I understand the impact and consequences of my sin and behavior upon others?
- If I am forgiven, what right to I have to not forgive others?
- Is all of this frustration, internal conflict and turmoil worth it?
- What is the Holy Spirit saying and guiding me to do?

Peter also found it difficult to forgive—revealed when he asked Jesus how many times he should forgive.

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”
Matthew 18:21-22

You’d think seven times would be sufficient. After someone sins against us seven times, to forgive them seven times should be sufficient, and we’ve accomplished “our part.” We should be “good-to-go” and able to check this off our “to do list.” Compared to worldly standards, forgiving someone seven times far exceeds human expectations and we should be “legally free” to be done with them. What’s more, we should be able to rightfully hold onto non-forgiveness from that point forward. Besides, most persons would not forgive more than one time—which is reflected in the adage: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

But Jesus said no. Jesus said we should forgive seventy times seven, or 490 times. This is a huge quantity! No one in their right mind would continue to forgive someone these many times! However, these words of Jesus reveal more than the number of times we should forgive—they reveal God’s heart. Jesus would have never asked us to do something that He is not willing to do. The response by Jesus conveys the number of times God will forgive us—which extends beyond 490 times and beyond human comprehension—because His love and forgiveness is infinite. Even when we commit the same mistake over and over.

God’s grace—and His Love—is the powerful agent that cleanses our heart and soul of impurities. This cleansing process is magnified when the desires of willing Christian heart prays...

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Psalm 139:23-24

There are two additional aspects of the 8 steps. First, note how it is possible to divide the steps into three categories based upon the focus of the maturing Christian.

8 Steps to Spiritual Maturity	Transformation	Focus On
Love	Agape Sacrifice	Others
Kindness	Benevolence	Others
Godliness	Righteousness, Goodness	Self
Perseverance	Steadfastness, Character	&
Self-Control	Discipline, Restraint, Will	Others
Knowledge	Understanding, Wisdom	Self
Virtue	Integrity, Honesty, Morality	Self
Faith	Born Again	Self

The first three steps are focused upon self: placing faith in Jesus Christ, virtuous behavior, and growing in knowledge and wisdom. The next three steps transition the focus from self to others as the character of the Christian continues to become more like Jesus Christ; and as the Holy Spirit teaches the importance of willful self-control and discipline as we interact with the world around us. The top two steps are based upon the Christian’s focus upon others.

The second aspect is related to sin—which may cause us to spiritually step down some steps. When we sin, it is because we made a free will choice. We subsequently separate ourselves from God and experience the consequences of our sin: including painful feelings on the inside, guilt, shame, and attacks by Satan as to our unworthiness, our incapacibilities, our unworthiness, as peace is replaced by turmoil.

However, all of the negative consequences of sin are a good thing. In fact, it is a very good thing because it is God’s means of spiritual chastisement.

Do you discipline your child (based upon love) when they disobey—because you know the harm that may occur if they continue their behavior?

As God’s children...wouldn’t you expect the same?

Besides, did you have this type of experience when you sinned—before you knew Jesus Christ?

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” Hebrews 12:5-6

Once the spiritual pain begins to subside...and we realize God still loves us...unconditionally...and we're forgiven because of Jesus Christ...we have spiritually stood upon the step of faith so that we may continue our climb.



In summary, these 8 steps to Spiritual Maturity represent a process of sanctification... which is defined as a process of becoming holy and set apart for God's glory.

As we grow in grace, we become more like Jesus...and less like ourselves.

Each person's degree of sanctification is based upon the desires of their heart, and their willingness to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even Paul claimed that he had not reached perfection, but pressed on to obtain everything Christ desired for Him.

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." Philippians 3:12



I pray the 8 Steps to Spiritual Maturity provides you with a greater insight into yourself; you have an improved understanding of your stage of sanctification; and it is your heart's desire to continue to grow in grace and reflect God's agape love.

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of The Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Corinthians 3:18

All for His Glory,
Harold D. Thomas