

LifeStages: Growing to Spiritual Maturity – Part 4 of 5

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THE OWNER

Let's recap what we've learned so far about *Life Stages*: We began with the *Seeker*, that person that is searching for spiritual answers to the questions they have. Next, we discussed the *Follower*, that person who has had their basic questions answered and has come into a relationship with Jesus Christ. In this article we will discover the *Owner*, that person who has been a Christian for some length of time, who still shares some of the same issues as the *Seeker* and *Follower*, but has developed further in spiritual maturity. What I want to do in this article is examine some of the common traits found in those at the *Owner Stage*, some areas they need to watch out for, and some solid steps that will help them to move to the *Reproducer Stage*.

COMMON TRAITS

There are several traits that can be found in every *Owner* that I'd like to describe for you. If you think you're an *Owner* but you're not sure, my descriptions of some of the *Owner's* common traits should help you to clearly define yourself.

The Owner Feeds Himself or Herself

When you are at the *Seeker* and *Follower Stages*, those around you are basically feeding you with spiritual truth. That doesn't mean that you checked your brain at the door and just let people pour stuff in, but that you very much needed someone else to give you direction. While that never completely leaves you, you do become much more able to study and think for yourself the longer you are a Christian.

I remember very well the process we went through with all four of our kids. When they were first born they were totally dependent on us to feed them. But for each of them, there came a time when they refused to let us put the spoon to their mouth, and they took it and began to feed themselves. God uses this same process in our spiritual development.

Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right (Heb. 5:14).

The *Owner* stage is represented by those people who have been spending considerable time in prayer, in the Word, and in fellowship. By "constant use" they have trained themselves – they are off the bottle, spiritually speaking, and are learning more and more how to process God's truth on their own.

The Owner Solidifies His or Her Belief System

The *Owner* has reached the point of being solidly grounded in the basics of the Christian faith. This person is very secure in their knowledge about the Bible, the reality of God's presence, and many issues that once puzzled them. The *Owner* has taken the writer to the Hebrews instruction seriously:

So let us stop going over the basics of Christianity again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start all over again with the importance of turning away from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (6:1-2).

It's not that the issues of lifestyle, faith, baptism, and laying on of hands are unimportant, but that we should reach the point where these issues are settled and be moving on to other areas that will help us to mature in our faith. As disciples of Christ we are constantly learning to become more like Him. That learning process involves moving beyond what we already know to the next level of understanding.

The Owner Grows Closer to God

I remember when my wife first met me. She didn't want anything to do with me. In fact, she wouldn't even talk to me when I tried to make conversation with her. But eventually, she broke down and spent some time with me. Of course, once she got to know me, she just couldn't get enough of me!

Seriously, when we get to know God, we draw closer and closer to Him. The longer you are a Christian, the deeper that relationship should grow.

Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you (James 4:8).

There is a response factor at play here. It is not that God will ignore me until I start paying attention to Him, but that I will not experience God in the fullest sense until I begin to make a concentrated effort to draw closer to Him.

We will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church (Eph. 4:15).

This is simply the process of spiritual maturity. I am actually growing *into Christ*, that is, the stronger my relationship is to Jesus, the more dependent upon Him I become. I fully recognize Him as Head of the Church, as well as the Head of my life.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

There are some dangers particular to the *Owner* Stage that we need to be very careful about. Not every *Owner* deals with all of these issues, but they are very common. There are four danger signs the *Owner* must be aware of:

Becoming Overly Familiar

It is possible to feel like we know so much about God and the Bible that we begin to lose our sense of awe and wonder in His presence. At the burning bush, God reminded Moses, *"Do not come any closer... Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground"* (Exo. 3:5).

We need to be reminded, that while God calls us to relationship, and He is our friend and our Father, He is still God, and He is to be worshipped. Whenever we are in communion with God we are in the presence of the Most Holy. There is a danger of forgetting that, and contracting what I call the "God is my best bud" syndrome. God isn't your buddy. He's God!

Becoming Rule Bound

Sadly, some believers move from the joy and exuberance of accepting Jesus as Lord to becoming narrow-minded people who cannot accept the fact that God works outside of the box they've tried to trap Him in. Paul described some people like this: He quotes their legalistic mantra in Colossians 2:21 – *"Don't handle! Don't eat! Don't touch!"* The focus of the rule bound is always on "don't" rather than on "do". In other words, they are always looking for the negative commands of God, rather than focusing on obeying the positive. It is very easy to get caught up in all the things we should not be doing, instead of emphasizing the things that we should be doing. It is taking the positive commands of God and living them out in a negative way. It is trying to make rules in realms of opinion instead of celebrating the liberty we have from God – *this is the only Bible version that's acceptable, this is the proper way to worship, this is the way everyone should dress....*

People that allow themselves to get pulled into this non-Christian attitude begin to shrivel up inside and lose the gift of joy that God has given them. They come to church, not to worship, but to make a list of what is wrong with the church, and how it doesn't live up to their counterfeit standards. This is a real danger that has the potential to pull the life right out of a church.

Becoming Reclusive

If you're like most people, the longer you're a Christian, the less non-Christian friends you have. Part of that is to be expected. Most likely you're spending more time with Christian activities and with other Christian people than before. The danger comes

when we cut ourselves off from non-Christian people, or separate ourselves entirely from our culture. Paul said:

When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or who are greedy or are swindlers or idol worshipers. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that (1 Cor. 5:9-10).

The Apostle goes on to explain that what he wanted the Corinthians to avoid were not worldly people, but people who *claimed* to be Christians yet lived like pagans. If you don't spend any time in the world, how will you obey Jesus' command to win the world to Him? We are not called to separate from our culture, or to accept its values, we are called upon to live in and understand our culture, while following the Christian system.

While this might take you a moment to grasp, we need to understand that the Christian that cuts him or herself off from the world is not only disobeying Christ's command, but living in direct opposition to the Christian lifestyle they have been called to, while all the while they mistakenly think they are setting themselves up as a model of Christian holiness. The world is not our enemy; it is our mission field.

Becoming Proud

One hesitation I have in writing about Life Stages is that some would misunderstand and view the stages as some type of spiritual status symbol. "Hey, you're just at the *Follower* Stage, and I'm a ...nah, nah,...."

Pride is always the enemy of the Christian. The Proverb writer reminds us, *Pride leads to disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom* (11:2).

By the time you reach the *Owner* Stage, you've accumulated quite a bit of Scriptural knowledge and are able to discern many things in the spiritual realm. The problem is that we sometimes allow that knowledge to turn into pride, as if we have somehow attained this level on our own. The secret to aid us in not falling into pride is following Paul's instruction: *Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you* (1 Cor. 1:26). What's he saying? Remember that you reached this level by God's power, and by God's ability, so you have nothing to boast about whatsoever.

STEPS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

While the *Owner* Stage is a great place to be, we know that we will never be fully satisfied in our Christian lives until we reach the next level. Here are four simple steps to help you become a *Reproducer*.

Stay in the Word and Prayer

If you think you've outgrown the need for daily Bible reading and prayer you haven't grown nearly as much as you think you have. This is a non-negotiable in the Christian life. If you want to have God working in your life, you have to know who God is, and the only way to know who God is, is to spend lots of time with Him. As Jude instructs us:

But you, dear friends, must continue to build your lives on the foundation of your holy faith. And continue to pray as you are directed by the Holy Spirit (v. 20).

Your spiritual house is one building that will never be completed. You keep building and building and building upon the foundation, which is the Solid Rock of Jesus Christ. When you stop building, you stop growing as a Christian.

Focus on Personal Holiness

I know the word *holiness* has become almost foreign in our contemporary Christian vocabulary. In fact, most of the time it is used in a derogatory way. When my mom was growing up she attended a church where all the girls had to wear long dresses, couldn't cut their hair, no make-up or jewelry was allowed, and they were forbidden to go to the theater, or anything else considered a worldly establishment. The people in town referred to them as "holy rollers", because of the different way that they dressed, and also for the way they worshipped.

Both the townspeople and the people in my mother's church misunderstood what it means to be "holy." To be "holy" means to be set apart, not by looking different than everyone else and by drawing attention to yourself, but by living the life of Christ through our own persons. It doesn't mean to be self-righteous, or to try to stand out in the crowd; it means to live my life in such a way that God would be proud of me.

Try to live in peace with everyone, and seek to live a clean and holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

God is not going to bless my life if I am living in a state of continual sin. While He is willing to forgive me and make me whole, He isn't going to put me on first team until He sees I'm dedicated to doing the work He's called me to do. I cannot become what God wants me to become until I have set myself apart as a servant for use in His Kingdom.

View the World Through God's Eyes

An economist was once asked to talk to a group of business people about the recession. She tacked up a big sheet of white paper on the wall. Then she made a small black spot on the paper with her pencil and asked the man on the front row what he

saw. The man replied promptly, "A black spot." The speaker asked every person in the room the same question, and every person replied, "A black spot." With calm and deliberate emphasis the speaker said: "Yes, there is a little black spot, but none of you mentioned the big sheet of white paper. And that's my speech."

The economist's short speech has application to the way many of us view the world. The tiny black dot might represent ourselves, our family, our church, or if we're really perceptive, the community around our church. But many of us are missing the white sheet of paper! The fact of the matter is that there are literally billions of people who are going to die without a relationship with Jesus Christ and God is expecting us to do something about it!

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it" (John 3:16-17).

I want you to notice several facts about these verses: 1) The perspective of God is for the whole world, not just one class of people; 2) God loves the world and so should we; 3) God sent His Son into the world and expects us to go into the world too; 4) Jesus went into the world, and we go into the world, not with a message of condemnation, but of liberation, of salvation, of deliverance.

The person that desires to move from *Owner* to *Reproducer* doesn't look at non-Christians as people to be avoided, or look down upon them as if they were the refuse of the earth. They learn to look at non-Christians through God's eyes and love them. To move from *Owner* to *Reproducer* you must train yourself to have compassion for those who do not know Christ, no matter who they are, no matter what they look like or where they're from, and no matter what they've done. You learn to love them.

Accept and Celebrate Your Calling

To move to this next stage you have to be receptive to the fact that God is calling you to a higher level of Christian service. You need to accept God's calling upon your life to become a Christian that reproduces more Christians. It is time to put away any fears that you have, any hesitations, knock down any walls that you've erected, and simply rejoice in the fact that God has a mission for you. God has a purpose for your life. He wants you to be an integral part of His team. Can God make it without you? Sure! The question is, can you make it without God?

If you are at the *Owner* stage and you do not move on, you will find yourself simply going through the motions and never becoming the person God created you to be. Don't resist the conviction that God is placing in your heart. Accept your calling and rejoice in the fact that God wants to use you as a major player in the building up of His Kingdom.

One of my greatest joys as a pastor is to see people in the church growing through these various stages of spiritual maturity. I know that some of you reading this book right now are experiencing tremendous growth and realizing that God can take you to the next level. Knowing what God can and will do in your life overwhelms me and fills me with joy. I praise God that even though we might not know each other personally, we are on the same team. And I know that with God's direction, and with His power, we are putting together a spiritual army that cannot be stopped. But each of us must commit to moving to the next level, if we are going to be everything that God has created us to be.