

In many areas of our lives we graduate through different levels until we have reached our final goal. After four years of swim lessons, my son has almost received the last “achievement ribbon.” For those who play an instrument, we progress through Certificate of Merit until we reach level 10. For martial arts, we know we have arrived at our goal when we get a black belt. In our education, we finish when we get our degree, whichever one that may be. How do we know when we have fulfilled our goal spiritually? In 2 Corinthians 13:9 and 11 Paul states that his desire for the Corinthians is to be perfected. He invested his life for the sake of their perfection. But what does this perfection - this spiritual maturity - look like?

In chapter 13, Paul talks about plans for his third visit to Corinth. Before he visited in the past, he would receive reports about the state of the church in Corinth and the problems they faced. In v. 1 he quotes Deuteronomy 19:15, which is about the necessity of having more than one witness to confirm accusations in the court of law. Paul mentions this because on more than one occasion witnesses have reported the same kinds of issues going on in Corinth, and thus he feels he must exhort the Corinthians further to address what are confirmed problems in the church. Once again, he must repeat his warning to those who sinned before in order that they understand and repent. This is also for their perfection, as were all Paul’s efforts thus far. And we see in these passages that the first aspect of being perfected in Christ is recognizing that we are not yet perfect. This is difficult because of the “fundamental attribution error” we all have a tendency to make, which is the propensity to justify our own misbehavior while attributing those of others to their fundamental character. We cut people off while driving because we are in a hurry, but anyone who does it to us is a jerk. This self-centered way of thinking was even a problem in Israel. A few times in Judges the author writes that the people of Israel did whatever was right in their own eyes. We must not deceive ourselves, but rather we must be reminded of how we fall short of the standard set forth in Scripture. And this is what Paul does to help the Corinthians grow. In what ways are you incomplete? Are you dealing with anger, selfishness, or an uncontrollable tongue? You must internally reflect and examine yourself, as it says in v. 5.

Second, our spiritual maturation is informed by Scripture, which must take root and result in change in our walk. When we examine ourselves, we must look at our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. After we have identified our weaknesses, we must assess if we are being changed in

those areas. As James 2:17-26 says, faith without works is dead. Our spiritual growth is an indication of life. Paul went to great lengths not to be a burden to the Corinthians in order that they would grow. Our goal here also is to strengthen each other's faith so that we may grow in Christ. And growth is more than becoming older or being involved more in church; it is internal change. When Paul tells the Corinthians to examine themselves, it's more than a test of knowledge. We must evaluate internally whether we are growing in our relationship with God.

Finally, we must realize that we are not going to reach perfection until Jesus comes again. Therefore in the meantime, as Paul tells us in v. 11, we must be of one mind in helping each other endure and grow until He returns. This is our ultimate goal, not to die, but to remain faithful until Jesus returns and perfects us. We long for the resurrection of the body, whereby our sinful flesh is finally replaced with one that is incorruptible. Paul knows that growing in this world is difficult. There are so many distractions we face that pull us from Jesus. It's so easy to make church and Jesus second priority. That's why we must not stop meeting, instructing, and encouraging each other in faith. To maintain faith, we must have a community. Without mutual support, it's easy for Satan to pluck us off. We must stick together to remain strong. Palm Sunday is approaching, when we are reminded of how much Israel was unprepared for Jesus' first coming. Are you prepared for His second? There is nothing more valuable than our faith, and when He comes, we will see just how much it is worth. Let us be of one mind and encourage each other until that day.